

Benjamin Britten's vision on the Lullaby in *A Charm of Lullabies*

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Abstract: *His childhood experience is a source of inspiration for Benjamin Britten's cycle of songs A Charm of Lullabies. Concerned with discovering national musical and poetic treasures, he selected five poems from representative authors, from the Renaissance to Romanticism – William Blake, Robert Burns, Robert Green, Thomas Randolph, John Philip – interesting for the audience to be set to music. The songs illustrate the bedtime routine, when an adult expresses profound feelings of love and care for his child. The themes chosen present various moods and the performers should portray an authentic nighttime atmosphere, full of charm, using technical and artistic means of expression.*

Key-words: *Britten, lullaby, poetry, interpretation*

1. Introduction

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), a prominent figure of 20th-century English music, succeeded in establishing himself on the European stage through an unmistakable style that bore the stamp of nationalism in its purest and most elegant form. Constantly concerned with the discovery of national musical and poetic treasures hidden in the mists of time, a great admirer of Henry Purcell – whom he considered a consummate master, Mozart and Schubert, but grounded in the quotidian reality and sensitively influenced by the compositional style of his contemporaries, whom he also cherished, he succeeded in imprinting a fresh and vigorous breath on English music: *“One of my chief aims is to try and restore to the musical settings of the English language a brilliance, freedom and vitality that have been curiously rare since the days of Purcell”* (Ford, 1994, 1).

Born in 1913 into a musical family, Britten was influenced by the musical evenings when his mother, Edith Britten, would sing arias and lieder with piano accompaniment. Fascinated by his mother's voice, to whom he dedicated his first vocal miniatures, many of which remain in manuscript, he sensed the expressive power of this versatile instrument and made it a major part of his creative work. Britten, the

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adult child, lives and composes with the nostalgia of innocence in his soul. His aesthetic sense in elegantly combining music and text led him to a series of successful operas, beginning with *Peter Grimes* and continuing with *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring*, *The Little Sweep*, *Billy Budd*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Curlew River*, *Death in Venice*, to which he imbued the natural color of his mother tongue. "Everything – he said simply – is the result of hard work and technique..." (Holst 1972, 47). Benjamin Britten sensed the English public's need to approach this musical genre and developed a musical language accessible to both professional and amateur musicians, which sparked a veritable revolution in English opera music, reinvigorating it. Blessed with an uncanny gift for understanding the principles on which the human voice works and how it harmonizes with other instruments to best resonate with the human soul, Britten dedicated more than half of his work to the human voice. In addition, there are some 130 works for solo voice and piano or orchestral accompaniment of unquestionable value, in which the *art song* has a special place. His songs deal with a wide range of themes - love, nature, everyday life, death, war - including childhood, to whose innocence he feels very attached through his own experiences. Of these, the most successful were 12 pieces for primary school children, *Friday Afternoons op. 7*, and *A Ceremony of Carols*, op. 28, as well as the cycle *A Charm of Lullabies*. Concerning the latter, the music connoisseurs of the time criticized it as lacking unity, while the audience was drawn to it by the variety of attitudes and emotions so frankly and convincingly illustrated.

The lullaby is often found in Britten's works, not only in songs, but also in operas, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Turn of the Screw*, *The Little Sweep*, and in the instrumental works, such as *Suite for violin and piano op. 6, part IV* and *Two Lullabies for 2 pianos* (Marinu Leccia, 2023).

2. Material

The theme of childhood is treated by Britten in a very serious way, like the other themes he deals with, based primarily on the appropriate choice of texts, and with an educational purpose. His collaboration with librettist Eric Crozier on *The Little Sweep*, a children's opera, and *Albert Herring*, which includes children's roles, stimulated his musical thinking. A great admirer of the mezzo-soprano Nancy Evans, Crozier's wife, to whom he dedicated roles such as Lucretia in *The Rape of Lucretia*, Nancy in *Albert Herring* and Polly Peacham in *The Beggars' Opera*, Britten sensed the great singer's ability to approach the world of childhood with gentleness, and offered her the first performance of the five lullabies from the cycle of lieder *A Charm of Lullabies*, op. 41 (*The Charm of Lullabies*), written in 1947, which was performed in January 1948 in a recital in The Hague, with the Dutch pianist and composer Felix de Nobel.

Composed on the verses of valuable poets from different eras, the pieces contrast sharply with the rest of Benjamin Britten's art songs and capture different aspects of a mother's love and care for her child. They combine musical images full of lyricism, charm and cheerfulness, with terrifying, ominous ones that disturb the candor of childhood, foreshadowing dark times to come. *A Charm of Lullabies* conquers the hearts of the audience with the special color Britten brings to his music, in which the idea of *game* is the central element. Many years after the first performance in 1990, composer Collin Matthews (n. 1946), who made numerous orchestral arrangements of the works of great composers, such as Dowland, Purcell, and Berlioz, decided to orchestrate these lieder almost as a continuous sequence. The inventive arrangement by Matthews, who had been Britten's assistant, preserved Britten's style unaltered, convincing audiences and the chroniclers of the time of the undeniable value of his creations. In addition to the original version, voice and piano, this version is also preserved in the repertoire of some of the world's greatest orchestras.

The famous poet William Blake (1757-1827) – poet whose art belongs to the European Romantic cultural movement, from the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century – on the verses of whom the first song, *A Cradle Song*, was composed, introduces us to a serene atmosphere which Britten translates musically as *legatissimo e dolcissimo*. This creates the idyllic image of the child safe in his mother's arms, cradling him, singing softly to him and gazing longingly at his beautiful features, repeating the word *little*. The narrator is an adult who addresses the child in a serious, gentle manner, using words that induce relaxation and sleep. The voice evolves in parallel motion to the piano line, which murmurs a beautiful melody in the right hand and creates a swaying motion in the left hand – in E flat major, which suggests the swing. Occasionally, the two voices approach each other by the second, but never meet, a compositional device typical of Britten (Figure 1). Sounds seem to bump into each other, and the dissonance that disturbs the peace of the piece heightens the mother's soulful turmoil and relieves her fears about the hardships that will await the child in life and cause him to lose his innocence. “*In modern music, dissonance is a central aspect. [...] The concept of wrong notes is linked to Stravinsky's neoclassical output*”, points out Marinu Leccia in his article (Marinu, 2023).

Allegretto tranquillo *pp legatissimo e dolcissimo.*

Sleep! Sleep!.....

pp legatissimo. dolcissimo.

una corda con Pedale

Fig. 1. Benjamin Britten: “A Cradle Song” (excerpt)
The two voices approach, but never meet

The *little sorrows* of childhood do not wipe the smile from the innocent child's face, who allows himself to be pampered by the *soft desires* that his mother offers him, however the mother is disturbed by the unexpected situations that the future holds, which Blake calls *cunning wiles* and *dreadful lightnings*. She has a double vision in which her childhood friendships are interwoven with her life experience. The voice and piano expressively create the lexical games of day-night, peace-quietness, sleep-sleeplessness. The piano, with its swaying rhythm, its repetitive sequences that allude to the Baroque style, follows the expressive movement of the voice, and the music rushes and increases in intensity each time the mother's anxiety grows. Britten thus combines elements of modernity with Baroque elements in an elegant manner that lends uniqueness to his style.

From the moment Britten discovered the works of William Blake at the age of sixteen, when he composed *The Nurse Song*, Blake's writing has inspired him throughout his life, culminating in the song cycle *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*.

The *Highland Balou* is a Scottish Highland lullaby, according to the *Dictionaries of the Scots Language*, which unfolds in *andante maestoso*. The mother's feelings of deep affection for her child and hope for the best for his future are imprinted on the music by a particular rhythmicity that creates an elegant embroidery in the vocal line as well as in the piano (Figure 2).

The image shows a musical score excerpt for Benjamin Britten's "A Highland Balou". It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in a soprano or alto register, with lyrics: "Braw - lie kens our wan - ton Chief What gat my young High-land". The piano accompaniment features a repetitive rhythmic pattern in the right hand, creating an "elegant embroidery" effect. The score includes dynamic markings such as "piu f" and "f".

Fig. 2. Benjamin Britten: "A Highland Balou" (excerpt)
The rhythmicity that creates an elegant embroidery

The lyrics, which belong to Robert Burns, Scotland's most iconic poet, describe a picturesque landscape in *Carlisle* in the north of England. Marred by his disordered life, in which he abandoned his wife and child, he had little affection for children, and so the hypnotic state of sleep, which is depicted by the repetition of a single line: *hee, balou, ma sweet wee Donald* is interrupted by surprising images of the child becoming a little warrior, a skilled horseman, and a profiteer from the plunder of others. At these moments the punctuated, ostinato rhythmic design, together with the forte-pianissimo and accents, reflect the narrative and portray the playful atmosphere before sleep, and then, with the repetition of the word *balou* (a word

used in lullabies, similar to Romanian *nani-nani*), the calm returns. The voice-piano duet gracefully renders the specific atmosphere of this moment, and the vocal performer nuances the pronunciation in keeping with the particularities of the Scottish dialect, with the consonant *r* well rolled.

In the third song, *Sephestia's Lullaby*, based on the verses of the Elizabethan poet Robert Green (1558-1592), Britten succeeds in musically rendering the alternating joy and fear that are interwoven in the song with which Sephestia, the main character of the novel *Menaphon* (1589), in exile, lulls her child to sleep. Green's creation includes plays and novels, of which the most popular is the comedy *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, and his contribution to the foundation of English drama is essential. This novel, *Menaphon*, which tells the adventures of princess Sephestia, is designed with versified interludes.

The *piangendo* character imposed by the composer in the song is suggested in the line of the piano by short accents and *decrescendos*, but also by the interval of the augmented second (G-A#) - (Figure 3).

Fig. 3. Benjamin Britten: "Sephestia's Lullaby" (excerpt)

The simple melody, which the voice murmurs at the beginning, gains momentum in the following bars, the intervallic design turning into an up and down line (a rising diminished fifth followed by a sudden descent on a minor seventh), illustrating the contrasting emotional states the mother is experiencing. A cheerful *allegretto*, due primarily to the minor second climaxes and staccato, follows the slow part. The play of the voice with the ascending and descending quavers is suggestive and is based on the simple text - a juxtaposition of nouns that form a syntactic parallelism, at times antithetical: *mother's wag, pretty boy, father's sorrow, father's joy*. The transition from one state to another in the second section is followed by a large *crescendo*, charged with optimism, which is supported by the word *joy* for two legato halves, prolonged by the presence of a *poco allargando*. After this moment we return to the first slow section, unchanged, and then to the fast section, in which only the verses differ, seemingly more eloquent than the first time: *the wanton smiled, father wept, mother cried...* The *Allegretto* calms down conclusively in an *allargando* and a *crescendo* also on the word *joy*, which emphasizes that joy and pride are the feelings that prevail in the mother's soul, despite all the hardships she has encountered in

life. For the third time the first section returns, this time as a coda and climax at the same time. The performer's voice bursts out in forte on the E note in the high register, only to reappear in an almost whispered pianissimo on the interval of the eleventh, in the low register. The piece ends in *ppp.* with the staccato interplay of the right hand with the left hand in *allegretto*, which creates the sensation that everything quiets down as the child falls asleep.

An exceptional writer whose pen satirized human nature and the vices of society, Thomas Randolph (1605-1635) – who wrote *Aristippus*, *The Jovial Philosopher*, *Love poems*, *Sad Poems*, *Spiritual Poems*, *General Poems* – saw fit to invoke frightening characters from Greek mythology, of which he was passionate, in the lullaby of a mother in despair at her restless child and his stubbornness to stay awake. Randolph's text prompted Britten to add an atypical piece to this art song cycle, in which the tone is at times tender and at times ominous. The song *A Charm*, is a carefully crafted piece, which unfolds in a *prestissimo furioso* framed by two slow sections, creating a very strong contrast. It sounds more menacing than lullaby-like. The first section has a bitonal beginning, with a ninth chord (in D minor) in the left hand, while a seventh (in A major) appears in the right (Figure 4).

Fig. 4. Benjamin Britten: "A Charm" (excerpt)

The voice soars into a *sforzando*, almost shouted, on C#, saying the word *quiet*, descends a high seventh in the piano intoning *sleep*, then mysteriously ascends a step on the piano tremolo in *crescendo*, a moment that sets the stage for the explosion of fury in the *prestissimo furioso* (Figure 5).

Fig. 5. Benjamin Britten: "A Charm" (excerpt)
The explosion of fury in the *prestissimo furioso*

The play of pitches on the words *quiet-sleep*, the first always in the *sforzando* in a higher register, the second *piano*, the voice descending below the portative, is surprising and slightly comic (Figure 6).

Fig. 6. Benjamin Britten: "A Charm" (excerpt)

If *sleep* is always softly pronounced, *quiet* will find its most varied colors in the performer's voice due to a tumult of moods: anger, despair, fear or simply tiredness. Probably, after the adult used all means to calm the child and convince him to go to sleep, and failed, exhausted, addresses him imploringly, asking the child to be quiet.

The music unfolds relentlessly, in the same agitated rhythm of staccato, accents and counter-rhythms. The transition to the second strophe is made through a bridge in *fortissimo*. It returns to the slow section, with the tempo indication *largamente – ad libitum*, which allows the performer a certain freedom within this movement. Quiet is imposed by the mother's threats of frightening mythological figures from *Tartarus (Inferno)*, such as *Radamanthus*, *Tisiphone*, *Cerberus*: "She demands, "Quiet, sleep!" and threatens all manner of mythological tortures." (Woolstone 2004,150). The forte-piano fluctuation creates a heavy atmosphere, which dissipates with the alternating singing-spoken *quiet-sleep*, suggesting that it was all a game. At the end the voice whispers in pianissimo *quiet*, and the bridge in prestissimo turns to coda.

The cycle ends almost whisper-like, with a duet-like miniature, *The Nurse's Song*, the words of which belong to an 18th-century poet, John Philip (1676-1709), less valuable than the other four authors of the verses of this suite of songs, who stood out through the poem after *Cider* in two volumes and *The Splendid Shilling*, composed in 1704.

The text was selected from his book *The play of patient Grisell* published in 1565, based on Giovanni Boccaccio's play *Griselda*. The introduction to the piece is an unaccompanied recitative in *Andante piacevole, senza misura*, in which the

performer, in a gentle voice, murmurs a lullaby. In a pleasant, homely atmosphere, the nurse invents songs and words that she addresses to the child in a cadence that induces sleep. From time-to-time little hesitations on a *fermata* note give the impression that the music is stopping, but the melody seems to start more briskly and increases in intensity. The accompaniment seems to be an unfolding of harp chords, and the voice, barely whispered, descends below the portative repeating *lullaby baby*. Nanny hopes the baby has fallen asleep, or maybe she's tired of singing. The second strophe looms almost insouciantly and reaches its climax as the voice unleashes into a *forte appassionato*, on a high vocal fabric, marking the mother's exasperation (Figure 7).



Fig. 7. Benjamin Britten: "The Nurse's Song" (excerpt)

The mother's exasperation mirrored in the high *tessitura* of the vocal line

Suddenly the voice mechanically but briskly resumes the recitative, at first in tempo, as if nothing had happened, but as the song grows in pitch the tempo slows, the voice descends to the low register, and the last barely spelled words, *lu-la-by ba-by*, carry the nanny into a deep sleep (Figure 8). At last, the two have found peace in sleep.



Fig. 8. Benjamin Britten: "The Nurse's Song" (excerpt)

The cycle ends as it began, in a gentle atmosphere where the music induces peace and security.

3. Suggestions regarding Vocal performance

The approach of a particular repertoire requires scientific documentation prior to the artistic approach. In the case of *songs*, poetic text is the basis from which the

musical deciphering starts, in order to understand in depth, the message that the composer wishes to convey. Translating the text “word for word” is the first necessary step for the vocal performer. Even if a poetic translation would subsequently give more meaning to the overall vision of the piece, the appropriate expressivization of each word lends added authenticity to the art song, clearly outlining its character and giving it its specific color.

In this cycle of art songs, we see a rich palette of often contrasting feelings and emotions, which are conveyed through dynamic play, agogics, changes of register, onomatopoeic vocal effects and declamatory style. If in the first and last songs a quiet atmosphere prevails, which is easily interpretable through a soft, warm vocal emission, in the other three Britten forces the performer to become a singer-actor and to use the whole technical and expressive arsenal to be able to enter the proposed game. The way in which the words are spoken, gentle-soothing or harsh-threatening, or the syllable games, is achieved by the appropriate articulation of consonants and the projection of the vowels on a diverse timbral scale, from speaking to singing, from whispering to screaming. The performer is given the opportunity to use his entire polychrome vocal palette. The intonation of large leaps from one register to another requires perfect mastery of the air column in order to ensure vocal elasticity and accuracy of phrasing. Alternating the position of the sounds – some produced *chiaroscuro* in the manner specific to classical or operatic singing, while others are emitted in a rather theatrical manner – can make it difficult for the performer, if the breath is not properly trained. Mimicry and corporal attitude play a vital role in the most convincing expression of character pieces such as *A Charm*. Therefore, the performer tackling this cycle of songs will need to master the art of singing, and the art of declamation as well, in order to give the audience a clear picture of how Britten transforms lullabies into art.

4. Conclusions

In the book edited by E. F. Budd, *A Book of Lullabies 1300-1900*, the English lullabies are described as serious, adult poems written for educational purposes, which portray the peaceful atmosphere specific to the preparation of sleep, but illustrate deep feelings based on the experience of life: “*They are for the most part lyric songs which, under the guise of what has grown to be an established poetic convention, illustrate definite emotional or philosophic attitudes to life based on experiences which fall to the lot of the majority of human beings.*” (E. F. Budd 1930, 18).

It was precisely these aspects that Benjamin Britten observed and portrayed musically in the song cycle *A Charm of Lullabies* in a style bearing the mark of an original personality, easily recognizable and understandable, adapted to the feeling

of his people. His unique talent to observe and reproduce through innovative compositional means the particularities of the native language, discovering the rhythm of the consonants and the vibration of the vowels, his poetic imagination and extraordinary sense of harmoniously combining verse with music, led him to success, becoming one of the most important and appreciated composers of the 20th century. The lullaby in his vision bears the imprint of his childhood and depicts the child-adult play, alternating idyllic moments, when the mother protects her child, lulling him with sweet words, with frightening ones, imagining the inherent dangers that await him in life. Concerned with discovering national poetic values, aided by his exquisite taste in the choice of texts and his ability to understand the psychology of human nature, Britten succeeds in creating true musical gems in the cycle *A Charm of Lullabies*.

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