Oboe classics
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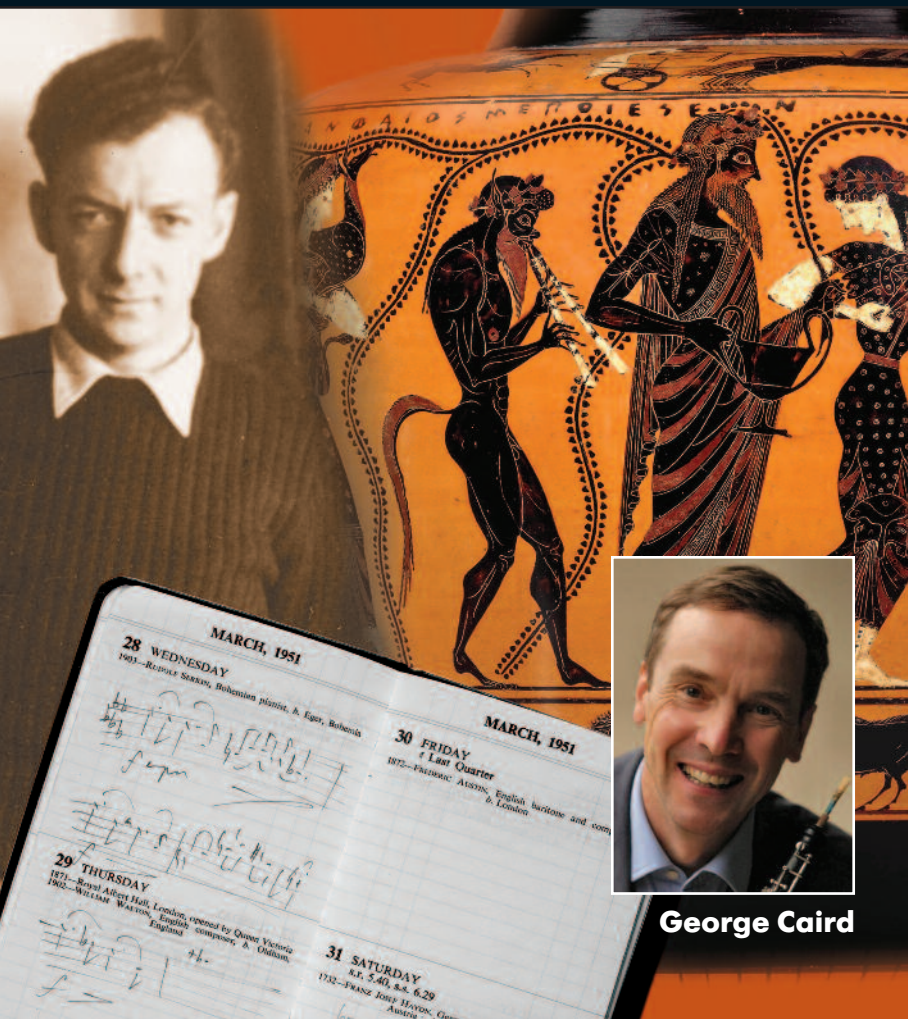
Britten

Six Metamorphoses after Ovid

Anatomy of a Masterpiece



George Caird

George Caird (oboe)

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Joy Boughton's performance is a recorded BBC (mono) broadcast from 3rd October 1952 (source: National Sound Archive)

Nicholas Daniel's performance is recorded live in the concert hall of the Musikhochschule, Trossingen, Germany, 11 October 2007
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Go to YouTube for a video version of this performance

Oboes by Püchner (Caird), Louis (Boughton)
Nicholas Daniel's oboe is a Lorée Royale 2004 supplied by Crowthers of Canterbury
Oboe image courtesy Howarth of London
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DDD ; AAD (Boughton);
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Britten

Six Metamorphoses after Ovid

Anatomy of a Masterpiece:

Total CD time 59:39

Benjamin Britten and his Six Metamorphoses by George Caird

1. General

Introduction

This recording sets out to provide a complete overview of Benjamin Britten's masterpiece for solo oboe, *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid,* Op 49. Not only is this work unique in the oboe repertoire but it is also one of the most distinctive examples of solo single-line instrumental writing from any age. It is hoped that performers, listeners, students and teachers will find it a useful resource for the understanding or preparation of such a wonderful work.

The *Metamorphoses* is, though, complex in vision and detail and there is much to discover about the work. From its enigmatic title and colourful movements to its remarkable instrumental writing and technical demands on the player, it holds a certain mystique and can even be baffling to understand. This recording has based itself on an investigation of the literary and artistic background that lies behind the work's creation, at the primary written sources in its composition, and suggests the reasons for Britten's interest in writing such a work. In addition, these notes will offer performance suggestions based on Britten's own remarks on the work, views and performances of players from its dedicatee Joy Boughton onwards, and the shared experience of teachers and aficionados.

My performances on this CD take all the original and subsequent evidence into account. They do not aspire to be definitive in any way but they do seek to be as true to Britten's intentions as possible. Joy Boughton's 1952 recording is an important source for all aspects of interpretation, and other recordings by artists whose playing Britten knew, including Sarah Francis, Janet Craxton and Heinz Holliger, are valuable sources. Evidence that Britten was very keen on accuracy to what he wrote influences this interpretation, but there is also an acceptance that Britten's own views on the work may have changed over time as he came into contact with performers. Perhaps most significantly, this recording also presents for the first time the sketch from Britten's pocket diary in March 1951, most of the material from his manuscript sources, and the original Boughton recording as a point of reference. To complete this study of the work, a recent recording by Nicholas Daniel provides a third performance for comparison.

Background

On 14 June 1951 at 4.30pm a madrigal concert was performed on The Meare at Thorpeness in Suffolk, England by the Cambridge University Madrigal Society under the direction of Boris Ord. The concert included a selection of English madrigals, Jacobean part-songs, and twentieth century music including the first performance of Benjamin Britten's *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid,* Op 49 for solo oboe. The oboist and dedicatee was Joy Boughton who played the work 'in a punt on the boating lake'[1] from the manuscript *Fair Copy* that is now owned by the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel. At one point the music blew into the water causing the ink to run on some of the pages and the stains can still be seen on the manuscript to this day.

[1] Special note on the cover of the Fair Copy

It is not known exactly when Britten composed the *Metamorphoses* but a beautifully written opening for *Niobe* appears in the composer's pocket diary on the week of 28 March 1951. This seems to indicate the likely time when Britten wrote the pencil *Composition Sketch,* held along with the diary by the Britten-Pears Library at Aldeburgh.

Because of Britten's performing engagements in April and May 1951 (these included the first performance of his and Imogen Holst's edition of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, a complete season of his operas at the Lyric, Hammersmith and a Wigmore Hall recital with Peter Pears), it is likely that the second and complete manuscript of the work, the *Fair Copy*, was only finished in the days leading up to the first performance.

Joy Boughton, photo John Vickers, courtesy Rutland Boughton Trust

Whatever the timing of composition, the work was certainly written only just in time to be referred to in the ground-breaking *Commentary* by Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller in which the editors wrote of this work:

> It is a real open-air piece written by way of relaxation during the creation of Billy Budd...Like in Ovid's poems, the movements present dramatic scenes in lyrical form, for which purpose the expressive tone, as well as the limited range of the oboe seemed most suitable. (Mitchell and Keller 1952, 211)

The *Composition Sketch* and *Fair Copy* demonstrate the composer's ability to write music in near-complete form (as is the case with *Niobe)* but the *Sketch* also contains many fragmentary ideas for *Bacchus* and a *Phaeton* with a very different concept of phrasing throughout.

Britten is renowned for his 'Mozartian' ability to compose music in his head and to develop highly detailed visual images for his work. Imogen Holst points out:

> The search for the right notes keeps Britten working very hard for hour after hour and day after day.....he listens in his mind's ear to the way the notes he has written that morning are taking their place in the over-all shape of the music. This shape may have been in his thoughts for many months before he began putting anything down on paper. (Holst 1966, 52).

Conversely, Colin Matthews' view is that 'Although Britten claimed that he would usually have everything in his head before committing himself to paper, the evidence from certain works makes it clear that this was not always the case'[2]. Given the busy schedule which Britten had in the spring and summer of 1951, the *Metamorphoses* could be seen to be one such work.

Britten's ability to visualise is described by Donald Mitchell in connection with *Billy Budd* (Mitchell 1993, 111-112). This accurate and vivid imagination surely places obligations on the interpreter of Britten's music. Nevertheless there is an ambiguity around Britten's visualisation

[2] Email to George Caird (personal communication)

no more apparent than in *Billy Budd,* where the 'surface' picture is subsumed within a much more profound musical 'meaning'. In the *Metamorphoses,* this leaves the oboist to handle such an ambiguity between simple depiction and more subtle musical and emotional realisation. Edwin Roxburgh, who studied the work with Joy Boughton, supports this view and feels that Boughton understood the sophistication of this ambiguity.[3]

It is true that Britten was always keen for his music to be played accurately. Boughton's advice to students points this out: 'Britten', Joy declared, 'knew what he was doing: it is all written down.....play what is there' (Francis 1994). Janet Craxton also reported this commitment to accuracy after her recording sessions of the *Metamorphoses* at the Snape Maltings, passed on to generations of her students in lessons.[4] Even so, the music requires freedom of interpretation and for this reason, there are many questions to ask about the relationship between accuracy and licence.

But despite the clarity of Britten's writing and the concept behind the work as set out in the published edition, the *Metamorphoses* seem still to have mysteries and questions which need exploration. As Mitchell and Keller (1952) state, the six movements are inspired by characters in Greek legend from Publius Ovidius Naso's great poem and are obviously depictions of these characters and the stories surrounding them. The characters are encapsulated in Britten's appended subtitles (for example 'Pan, who played upon the reed-pipe which was Syrinx, his beloved'). But what the exact characters are in relation to the stories and why Britten chose them from the hundreds available in the Ovid classic poses some interesting questions about the work as a whole.

Sarah Francis makes the point that the *Metamorphoses,* like most of Britten's music, was written for a specific person, in this case, Joy Boughton. Her personality and musicianship are integrally bound up with the work. Francis believes that Britten did not see the oboe as 'limited in range' and certainly not superficial as commentators such as Frank Howes (1951) did:

> It is a slight but pretty idea for its setting. The oboe's tone carries well in the open air. Miss Boughton is an accomplished artist, instrumental accompaniment could not easily be managed in mid-Meare and something unpretentious, faintly pictorial, goes well with the imaginative word-painting of Weelkes and his madrigalist contemporaries. (Howes, The Times 1951)

Joy Boughton was a 'star pupil' of Léon Goossens and was an obvious choice to join the English Opera Group at an early stage. She played with the group in many performances of Britten's works including the first performance of *The Turn of the Screw*. The distinguished oboist Sidney Sutcliffe recalled his impressions of her when she was a senior student on his entry to the Royal College of Music: 'Her playing always gave me tremendous pleasure. She was an inspiration to me'.[5] Francis has also pointed out that, as the daughter of the composer Rutland Boughton, Joy would have known her father's work including the operas written for Glastonbury with all their mythical and Arthurian content. Joy was a well-read, talented, sensitive though strong-minded oboist whom Britten clearly admired, the rightful recipient of this great work. Despite some intriguing letters (Boughton 1954-60) which reveal Joy's wonderful personality and insights into the subsequent recordings of the *Metamorphoses*, it is sad that no information has been found on the preparatory work which Britten and Boughton did

[3, 4] As reported to George Caird (personal communication)
[5] As reported by Sarah Francis (personal communication).

together, probably in the month prior to the first performance, save for assumptions about the alternative ending to *Arethusa* based on the source material to be discussed here. Nonetheless, with this close connection between composer and oboist explored, it is touching that the day of the première, 14 June, was in fact Joy Boughton's birthday.

It is worthy of note that the pre-publication score of *Billy Budd* had 'Op 49' as its opus number instead of its final 'Op 50' – could this indicate a late decision to publish the *Metamorphoses?* (Mitchell et al 2004, 664). *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid* was first published as Opus 49 in 1952 by Boosey and Hawkes in a yellow cover with red print and known to so many oboe players across the world. It was reprinted in 1968 in a paler yellow cover and subsequently in blue with white print with the added metronome marks and a clarification on notation in *Narcissus.*

Joy Boughton broadcast the *Metamorphoses* for the first time on the BBC Third Programme in a relay that went out on 3 October 1952 (tracks 30 - 35 on this CD). She broadcast them again live in December 1953 and on this occasion she was interrupted by the announcer before the end of Niobe. Her correspondence with Britten over this incident is in the possession of the Britten-Pears Library. The 1952 recording gives a good idea of what the first performance must have been like.

A work for unaccompanied oboe

Britten seems to have had a particular attraction to the oboe from an early age. He included the oboe in his early wind sextet (1930) and wrote his Phantasy Quartet, Op 2 for the greatest player of the day, Léon Goossens, in 1933 (Banks 1999). His letter to Sylvia Spencer in 1935 (Mitchell *et al.* 2004, 369) illustrates the composer's commitment to and understanding of the instrument. The tantalising comment in that letter that an orchestrated suite, based on the *Two Insect Pieces*, was on the way is especially of interest (Moore 1993). The *Temporal Variations* followed in 1936, a clear reaction to the rise of totalitarian power in Germany and a work of compelling strength. Note should be taken of the dedicatee, Natalie Caine's memory of Britten regretting that oboists seemed not to be able to play raucously enough in relation to her own rendition of the *Oration* in this work (Caine, no date).

The idea of writing for a single unaccompanied instrument is of course not unique to Britten. The character pieces for recorder, *Der fluyten lust-hof* by Jacob Van Eyck, and Telemann's *Fantasien* for solo flute are early genre works for comparison, whilst Britten will have drawn influence from Debussy's *Syrinx* for solo flute (1913) and more tenuously from Stravinsky's *Three Pieces* for solo clarinet (1919). The fact that Britten chooses the same Ovidian story as Debussy for his first metamorphosis, *Pan,* is interesting in itself and appears to be in keeping with the classical tradition of reworking old mythical stories as exemplified by Virgil's and Ovid's use of Homer (Graf 2002, 108-121). Mervyn Cooke observes that *Syrinx* can be seen as part of a French tradition of using Greek myths as subject matter, citing Roussel, whose stage works include *Bacchus et Ariadne* and *Aeneas*, as example[6]. Roussel's solo work for flute, *Joueurs de flûte* (1924) does contain movements entitled *Pan* and *Tityre,* but continues with wider inspiration in a third movement entitled *Krishna.* Julie McQuinn (2003) points out that Debussy made great use of the erotic power of the syrinx, not only in this solo work but also in the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'une faune*, the *Epigraphs Antiques* and especially in the *Chansons de Bilitis*. *Syrinx*, originally called *La Flûte de Pan* and written for Gabriel Mourey's

[6] Email to George Caird (personal communication)

play, *Psyche*, was only re-discovered in 1927. Britten would have been aware of Marcel Moyse's first recording of this seminal work (Walker 2006). This point will be of interest when discussing Ovid's influence on European art (Caird 2006). Gordon Crosse (1976) sees the strong influence of Bach in these pieces, especially in the arpeggiated middle section of *Niobe* and the opening of *Arethusa*. Britten would naturally be drawn to these greatest of all unaccompanied works, the cello suites and the sonatas and partitas for violin.

The choice of the oboe as the medium for a classically inspired work such as this needs some discussion. Britten must have known of the syrinx (bound rows of tube reeds) and its relationship to the flute in Debussy's solo work. But he may have been drawn to the qualities of the equally ancient single or double-reed aulos (as featured on the CD cover) which, argues Linda Ardito (1999, 67-72), represented the opposite of the sensitivities of Apollo's lyre and was associated with 'the Dionysian cult and accompanied dance, poetry, song and drama in rituals of praise for Dionysus (Bacchus), god of wine, fertility and mysticism'. Ardito goes on to say that Apollo's string music had a therapeutic power whilst 'the aulos, with its characteristic shrill and powerful sound, could draw its listener into the dark depths of the Dionysian realm where the elemental, random and impulsive mingle'. Frank Mulder (no date) associates the aulos as expressing 'ecstasy, emotion and unreason' in his programmatical analysis of the *Metamorphoses*. Furthermore, the aulos was associated with mourning according to Boethius; it led the procession of mourners and, more generally, was used to accompany Greek tragedies. The choice of oboe for the work could, therefore, be more to do with the weeping of Niobe and the central theme of Bacchus' story. But nonetheless, in keeping with Ovid's explanation that Pan was moved by the sound of the wind in the reeds, Britten may have drawn the connection with the reeds that grow by rivers and marshes in East Anglia, not least at nearby Minsmere, Snape or in Thorpeness, and the instrument that Pan fashioned.

Ranging from the oboe's lowest note, B flat (for the depths of Phaeton's plunge) to high f'' for the last flicker of a bat's wing at the end of *Bacchus* (a semitone advance on the range of the *Phantasy Quartet)*, the oboe's characteristics are completely and remarkably understood. Britten makes it capture the dazzling allure of *Pan*, the expressive despair of *Niobe* and the beauty of *Narcissus* whilst also bringing energy and even danger into *Phaeton* and *Bacchus*. He asks the oboe to play exquisitely quietly (*Niobe* and *Narcissus* especially) and also raucously and brazenly (*Phaeton* and *Bacchus*). Sarah Francis reports that Britten asked Boughton what was difficult to play on the oboe and all that Boughton told him (a sharp to b trill, downward slurs etc.), he included. Britten obviously wanted to push the instrument to its limits.

Literary influences

What led Britten to turn to a classical poet as his muse in composing the *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Op 49*? It is not surprising that such a literary composer should draw on the classics, but to use Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as inspiration for a solo instrumental work is surely original in itself. Paul Kildea (1999, 36-53) discusses Britten's growing literary understanding in the 1930s and 1940s especially under the important influence of W.H.Auden, and cites examples of the composer's wide-ranging reading during that time. This literary awareness also fuelled the sense of 'otherness', shared with Auden, which separated such artists from society. Auden himself made use of classical mythology to illustrate the pain and separation of the artist in his poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* (Auden 1940, 746).

Boris Ford (1993/6, xii) also makes the point that poetry mattered greatly to the composer: 'Rosamund Strode has said that he never travelled anywhere without packing an anthology'. It could be, then, that Britten had his copy of a selection of Ovid's works in the Everyman edition (Golding 1943) with him when he visited Vienna at the beginning of April 1951, six weeks before the first performance of the *Metamorphoses,* to perform there with Peter Pears. The Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh has two copies of *The Selected Works of Ovid* in the *Everyman* series (Golding 1943).

W.H.Auden (1937) by Howard Coster, © National Portrait Gallery

In fact, Peter Pears was himself a strong literary influence on the composer. Pears was a classical scholar at Lancing and, despite an early departure from Oxford University, had a lifelong interest in the classics, poetry and literature. Even at school he had become aware that his emotional development had resonances with classical thought: 'I realised, too, that the love I had discovered belonged to Classical times of Greece rather than to Christianity of today' (Headington 1992, 15).

This remarkable comment by Pears points to two important themes running through Britten's life and work: the Christian tradition, and classical mythology. Donald Mitchell (Palmer 1984, 211) has seen Britten as 'a peculiarly thematic composer. I am not thinking of the fertility of his melody or of the prominent role that themes and thematic organisation play in his music, but of themes in a broader sense – concerns, commitments, attitudes and sources of stimulation which have been long-standing pre-occupations and which are variously reflected in his art'. Graham Elliott (2006, 38-40) draws on this view in his exposition of Britten's 'spiritual dimension', further referring to Auden's idea of 'parable-art' as a major form in Britten's output:

> There must always be two kinds of art, escape art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love. (Auden 1935)

Elliott makes a strong case for the Christian theme running through so many of Britten's works from his liturgical music to the Canticles, Church Parables and *War Requiem*. But an equal case can be made for classical mythology which pervaded Britten's work from *Young Apollo* (1939) to *Phaedra* (1975).

Arnold Whittall (1999, 96) makes the point that Britten had already written incidental music for Edward Sackville-West's radio play, *The Rescue*, based on Homer's *Odyssey* in 1943, providing a precedent for his accepting Eric Crozier's idea for the opera, *The Rape of Lucretia* (1947): '..offering as it did a small-scale yet strongly dramatic narrative in which a virtuous, sensitive individual is traumatically violated and driven to self-destruction.... Yet Britten's acceptance of the Lucretia story is logical enough, given its direct association with his favoured theme of the conflict between the vulnerable and the vicious...'. Ronald Duncan confirms, too, that Britten was interested in classical literature in searching for universality: 'What is important is that it (Lucretia) has become a European legend. A legend contains universal truth, whereas history at its best is often only accurate in fact' (Duncan 1981, 58). In the light of Graham Elliott's work on the spiritual dimension it is remarkable that, in *Lucretia,* Britten chose to place a classical story within a Christian framework.

Another important literary influence on Britten was the great Cambridge novelist E.M.Forster, who inspired the creation of *Peter Grimes* in the 1940s and who was to be a major collaborator in the creation of *Billy Budd*. Work on this second grand opera brought the two men into close contact from 1948 onwards as first the libretto and then the opera itself took shape. This was an extremely taxing process for Britten and at times brought periods of doubt and depression about the project. Forster, together with his co-librettist, Eric Crozier, seems to have provided strength in the creation of the libretto, and no more so than with the character of Captain Vere. Forster's renowned Prologue for Vere could provide a clue to Britten's interest in antiquity, and hence Ovid. Coming at the very beginning of the opera, as 'Captain Vere is revealed as an old man' the Prologue sets the scene for this great story of Good and Evil as exemplified by Billy Budd and Claggart:

E.M.Forster and Benjamin Britten in a boat at Aldburgh, 1949, photo Kurt Hutton (Hulton Getty Picture Collection)

> I am an old man who has experienced much. I have been a man of action and fought for my King and Country at sea. I have also read books and studied and pondered and tried to fathom eternal truths. Much good has been shown to me and much evil. The evil has sometimes been absolute. And the good has never been perfect. (Forster 1949, Act 1, Prologue)

Vere's studying is further illustrated in Act I, Scene 2 where the Captain is found sitting in his cabin, reading. He sings: 'Plutarch – the Greeks and Romans – their troubles and ours are the same. May their virtues be ours and their courage! O God, grant me light to guide us all' (Britten, Forster, Crozier 1951). As the Greeks and Romans are referred to, the Plutarch volume is likely to be one from his *Parallel Lives* where outstanding figures from the two cultures are compared. Rex Warner (Warner 1958, 7-10) points out: 'What really interests him (Plutarch) is character, the effects of birth or education, the drama of an individual's success or failure, and the various moral reflections which can be made on these subjects'. All very apposite for the plot of *Billy Budd,* the dramatic interests of its librettists and composer and for Britten's interest in one of Plutarch's greatest predecessors, Ovid.

The reference to Plutarch does not come directly from Hermann Melville's original novella but must have been created by the librettists to flesh out the character of Captain Vere. Nonetheless, two passages in Chapter 7 are the pointers to Plutarch: '...his (Vere's) bias was toward....books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era – history, biography....' and 'but in illustrating of any point touching the stirring personages and events of the time he would be as apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity as he would be to cite from the moderns' (Melville 1891, 340).

Vere's erudition is in fact an extension of Melville's own character and approach to his writing. By any standards, Melville was a highly literary writer. *Billy Budd,* his last work, is full of references – to Montaigne, Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Diderot, Andrew Marvell and many

more. It is almost as though Melville needed to demonstrate his immense knowledge as well as his volcanic imagination. It is important for this discourse that in the first chapter of the story, Billy is greeted on board with his travelling chest with the words 'Apollo with his portmanteau' (Melville 1891, 326), a reference to the writer's own researches in Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* which revealed that the Celtic equivalent of *Apollo*, 'Hu', was known also as *Beli* and *Budd* (Beaver 1967, 457). This is surely no coincidence and highly significant. Apollo was the god of music, poetry and medicine and the brother of Diana. He was the father of Phaeton, though he is often confused with the Sun God and with Hyperion in this respect. In relation to the sun, he often carries the name Phoebus Apollo. He took revenge on Niobe, competed in music with Pan, and was compared by Ovid with the beauty of Bacchus and Narcissus. These interweaving classical themes are a strong connection between Melville, Forster, Crozier and Britten himself.

In fact, Britten had already taken inspiration from Keats' *Hyperion* in entitling his *Young Apollo* (1939) for piano and string orchestra. Keats' 'fragment' has a ravishing section in which Clymene, Phaeton's mother, makes music with a seashell. More importantly, the poem ends with Apollo being addressed by memory (Mnemosyne):

> Thou has't dreamed of me; and awaking up
> Did'st find a lyre all golden by thy side
> Whose strings touched by thy fingers, all the vast
> Unwearied ear of the whole universe
> Listen'd in pain and pleasure at the birth
> Of such new tuneful wonder. Is't not strange
> That thou should'st weep, so gifted?
> (Keats 1819, III, 61-68)

The connection between Apollo and talent is important here and it is of further note that Britten returned to the Nietsche-inspired theme of Apollo in his last great opera, *Death in Venice*. Clifford Hindley (1999, 157) traces the connection between 'the intellectual quest for formal perfection (through an Apollonian order of self-discipline) and, on the other hand, the Dionysian forces which emerge from passion and the submission to collective feeling' in Britten's portrayal of the relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio. The relationship between the artist (Apollo/Britten) and observed intense relationships is paramount to this debate on the *Metamorphoses*.

Donald Mitchell (1979/1991, 111-134) argues that the character of Vere in *Billy Budd* is central to the most profound theme in the opera: 'two conflicting types of authority are contained within the tormented psyche of one human being – his (Claggart's) antagonist, Vere'. This theme, together with Claggart's and Vere's appreciation of beauty (Billy Budd) underpins the development of this great opera which reaches its climax in the famous 'Interview chords' illustrating the unspoken interaction between Vere and Billy before the latter's death. This musical stroke of genius, Mitchell points out, allows 'the composer, in releasing Vere's voice from captivity, from its suppression, also releases his own; as Vere speaks to Billy, so does Britten speak to us.' It could be argued that, in the *Metamorphoses,* Britten is being Vere-like and speaking to us on behalf of classical mythology.

These insights set the scene for Britten's departure from working on *Billy Budd* in the summer of 1951 to prepare for the Festival and particularly to write the solo oboe work for Joy

Boughton. This the composer probably did after the première on 1 May of his and Imogen Holst's edition of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas,* though the diary entry for March with a sketch for the opening of *Niobe* indicates the composer was thinking about the work at that time (Caird, 2006). Here again Britten had been working with a libretto drawn from classical times with a reference to Ovid's 'mini-Aenead' in the *Metamorphoses* (Raeburn 2004, XIV, 78-81). It is remarkable that this section in Ovid contains the reference to Scylla and Charybdis, the monster and whirlpool at the straits of Messina which Britten apparently insisted on incorporating into Vere's climactic aria in *Billy Budd* when the captain has to condemn Billy to death (Britten et al 1951, Act II, 73). Even more remarkable is the fact that in September 1950, Britten and Pears had taken a holiday in Sicily and wrote a postcard from Messina to Erwin and Sophie Stein (Britten and Pears 1950).

Ovid

Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid), 43BC - 17AD

Britten's choice of the *Metamorphoses* by the great classical poet Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid) is of real interest, and it is important for any interpreter to understand something of the background to this work and the characters taken from it. As has already been discussed in detail, Classical mythology was one of the major thematic sources for the composer throughout his lifetime from his early *Young Apollo* (1939) based on Keats' *Hyperion* and the incidental music written for *The Rescue* (1943), an adaptation of Homer's Odyssey, through to the great opera, *Death in Venice* (1973), in which the Voice of Apollo appears in Act 1 to the aging author, Aschenbach who in turn dreams of a battle between the opposing forces of Apollonian self-discipline and the chaotic passions of Dionysus (Bacchus). Apollo seems to be the deity that most haunted Britten because of his association with music and genius and the 'otherness' which the composer knew to be his lot. This inspiration from the classics was also nurtured through the influence on the composer of the poet W.H. Auden, and the writer E.M. Forster who with Eric Crozier was working with Britten on the opera *Billy Budd* (1951) at the time of the composition of the *Metamorphoses.* The libretto of this opera reveals that Billy, the model of goodness, was connected with Apollo and that the composition of this opera led its creators into ways of portraying 'eternal truths' through setting Hermann Melville's remarkable allegorical novella.

Britten, in taking time from the composition of *Billy Budd* in the spring and summer of 1951 appears to have gone a stage further with such reflections by looking at some of the relationships described by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses.* In this great work, Ovid sets out in fifteen books of incomparable poetry a complete cosmos of understanding on human nature from the creation of the world to the deification of the Emperor Augustus, taking a vast range of human relationships all asserting that the fundamental nature of existence is change or metamorphosis:

> My vessel is launched on the boundless main and my sails are spread
> To the wind! In the whole world there is nothing that stays unchanged.
> All is flux. Any shape that is formed is constantly shifting.

Time itself flows steadily by in perpetual motion.
(Ovid, trans. D. Raeburn, XIV, 176ff)

This understanding may have influenced Britten musically in his approach to melodic development (Cook 1987, 253-9). Nevertheless, the relationships between gods, heroes and mortals play a significant role in the *Metamorphoses,* and Britten will have been attracted to this aspect of Ovid's writing. Its connection to Plutarch should be noted, not least in the remarkable sweep of stories in Books IX and X from that of Byblis who falls in love with her twin brother and Iphis who was a girl brought up as a boy and later betrothed to a girl, through to the magnificent songs of Orpheus (again a musical god to influence the composer) including the stories of Pygmalion and Myrrha whose incestuous love for her own father gets special attention from Ovid. Melville himself would have approved of Britten's attraction to these tales, as he peppers his writing with references, in *Billy Budd* for instance, writing 'With mankind', he (Vere) would say, 'forms, measured forms, are everything: and this is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood' (Melville 1891, 404).

However, Britten seems to have concentrated on characters signifying particular relationships for his own purpose and these are taken from Books I (*Pan* and *Syrinx*), II (*Phaeton*), III (*Echo and Narcissus*), IV (*Bacchus and the daughters of Minyas*), V (*Arethusa*) and VI (*Niobe*). It should be made clear that Britten's copy of the *Selected Works of Ovid* (Golding 1943, 159-230) contains a fine choice of Ovid's writing in translation, beginning with the moving Elegy on 'how the poet was constrained by Cupid to write of Love rather than War'. The metamorphoses in this volume represent a rich selection from the original fifteen books in the renowned translation in rhyming iambic heptameters by Arthur Golding in the 16th Century. The selection contains 'purple passages' and notably pulls out the six stories in Britten's work in close order: *Pan and Syrinx, Phaeton, Echo and Narcissus, Bacchus, Arethusa* and then *Niobe* as part of the story of *Latona*. Nevertheless, many stories (e.g. *Andromeda)* are rejected for this purpose.

The six stories chosen by Britten appear to illustrate different relationships which caused a fundamental change to take place. Each movement in Britten's work seems to choose a story that points to particular truths about human nature. In this set, the story of **Pan** and Syrinx opens with the obvious connection to music but also demonstrating a man-woman relationship of unrequited love. The story is well-known: Syrinx was a particularly beautiful wood-nymph living in Arcadia and a follower of the goddess Diana. She was spotted one day by Pan, the god of the woods and fields, who was immediately attracted to her and chased her to the banks of the River Ladon. Like Diana, Syrinx observed chastity and rejected Pan's advances, eventually calling on the nymphs of the stream to transform her into marsh reeds. Pan sighed with disappointment but then noticed the sound of the wind whistling in the reeds making a 'thin, low, plaintive sound'. He was captivated by this strange music: 'And so, when he had bound some reeds of unequal length with a coating of wax, a syrinx – the name of his loved one – stayed in his hands' (Raeburn 2004, I, 699-712).

The story of **Phaeton** follows, with the arrogant young boy pleading with his mother, Clymene, to prove that he is the son of the Sun God. She loses her temper and angrily tells him to go and ask his father for verification. Phaeton goes to his father's magnificent palace and demands of him a proof that he is his son. His father allows Phaeton any single wish to demonstrate his love for his son, and this results in Phaeton's doomed request to drive the

chariot of the sun for a day. His father is immediately horrified and remorseful at granting him any such wish and tries to dissuade him but nevertheless cannot go back on his promise. The story takes Phaeton on his infamous ride across the heavens resulting in total havoc and fire and Jupiter's thunderbolt causing the boy's destruction and descent into the River *Eridanus* (Britten and Golding have *Padus*). For Britten, it is likely that the father-son relationship is significant in this story.

This is followed by a mother-children story in that of **Niobe**, which comes in Book VI of the *Metamorphoses* and, as a tale about pride follows another on the same subject in which Arachne is famously turned into a spider. Niobe is the wife of Amphion, King of Thebes; her playing on the lyre was a great source of pride. Again the musical connection is worthy of note and here is another link with Apollo. But Niobe's pride was especially centred on her seven sons and seven daughters: 'Yes, Niobe would have been known as the happiest mother on earth, if only she had not thought it herself' (Raeburn 2004, VI, 154). Niobe's extended and haughty invocation to Theban women to favour her over the goddess Latona resulted in a fiery outburst. Latona needed to say little to her children, Apollo and Diana, to bring about the downfall of the house of Amphion. All fourteen children were killed by arrows – sons first then daughters – and Niobe's invocation to spare her one child went unheeded. To crown it all, Amphion killed himself to overcome his own grief. The story ends with Niobe becoming more and more immobile with blood-flow ceasing. A mighty wind blows her to a mountain top where to this day her tears flow down the crag of her cheeks.

The story of **Bacchus** is perhaps the most complex of Britten's choice for his cycle. Firstly, he is the one deity of the group who eventually was allowed to join the twelve principal gods of Mount Olympus (together with Hercules). Secondly, his metamorphosis is less obvious unless the act of getting drunk was what was intended. Thirdly, there are a great many stories involving Bacchus in the *Metamorphoses* including his birth as a result of an illicit liason between Jupiter and Semele, his revenge on Pentheus, his seduction of Erigone and his changing Ariadne's crown into a constellation. Certainly, Bacchus seems to have a sense of 'otherness' as he is depicted in many sources as coming from Asia Minor and outside the Greek conciousness (Dalby 2003, 71-79).

Koen van Slogteren (1992) suggests that Britten's brief description of *Bacchus* is not enough to do justice to his characterisation and points to the story of Pentheus as significant (Raeburn 2004, III, 513-731). Here, the raging revelry of Bacchus' festivities involving 'mothers and wives with their sons and husbands' (ibid. 528) and 'curling pipes of animal horn and clashing cymbals' (ibid. 533) caused old Pentheus to object, hastening his death at his own mother's hands. This is a highly charged tale of liberality and reaction in the drama of the relations between men and women. Not for nothing is Bacchus' other name *Liber*.

However, the story which Britten must have had predominantly in mind is fairly easy to recognise and is the story under the title *'The Feast of Bacchus'* which appears in the *Everyman* version that Britten possessed. Moreover, in Golding's translation of lines 27-28 of Book IV we find the phrase 'the noise of gaggling women's tattling tongues and the shouting out of boys'; these are Golding's words not Britten's or Boughton's (Golding 1943, 191). This is the story of the daughters of Minyas and it comes at the beginning of Book IV after the stories of Bacchus' double birth to Semele and Jupiter, the extraordinary story of Teiresias and his sex-change experience revealing that women have more pleasure from sex than

men, his prophecy for Narcissus and then the rather violent stories surrounding the Lydian sailors and Pentheus' destruction, to persuade the Theban women to worship Bacchus.

This is all rather important because Book IV opens with all Thebes under Bacchus' control. However, the daughters of Minyas resisted the revelries of the god whilst many other women abandoned their household duties to wear the fawnskin and carry the thyrsus and presumably to loose their 'tattling tongues'. Their invocations to *Bacchus* included 'wherever you go, young men's voices are raised in cheering, and women's voices join in the chorus, palms beat upon tambourines, hollow cymbals clash, to the sound of the boxwood's shrill piping' (Innes 1955, IV, 28-30). Again music is present in this god's festivities.

The daughters of Minyas, however stayed indoors and continued to spin at their looms. Whilst doing so they told stories, the first of which incidentally was that of Pyramus and Thisbe which Britten would encounter nine years later in working on *A Midsummer Nights' Dream*. The daughters told many stories but eventually the bacchic revelry overtook their retreat, their looms grew leaves and became covered in grapes and, finally, having slunk away into dark corners of the room they were turned into bats. Bacchus won.

The fifth movement in the *Six Metamorphoses* is that of **Narcissus**. His story appears in Book III of the *Metamophoses* , just after the description of Bacchus' birth and the story of Teiresias who, on his own transsexual experience, was blinded by Juno for settling the dispute between her and Jupiter as to which gender enjoyed more pleasure in bed. Teiresias prophesies that Narcissus will 'live to a ripe old age.....so long as he never knows himself' (Raeburn 2004, III, 348). This theme of self-knowledge is very symbolic for this story and perhaps for Britten's intentions for the *Metamorphoses* as a whole. The story is therefore closely related to Bacchus. The outcome of a rape of a water nymph called Liriope by the river god Cephisus, Narcissus' story is integrally involved with water. It relates his extraordinary beauty such that 'legions of lusty men and bevies of girls desired him'. But he was too unaware to respond. Poor Echo, whom the goddess Juno had condemned to parrot the last words anyone spoke to her, fell head-over-heels for Narcissus and this unrequited passion takes up many delightful lines of the story. When they eventually meet, the conversation is touching: 'Hands off! May I die before you enjoy my body', he cries; 'enjoy my body' she replies. Transformed into a stone, Echo survives only in the acoustic form we know today.

There follows the story which Britten's subtitle refers to. Narcissus, tired from hunting, rests by a forest pool. He sees his own image in the water and is transfixed and Ovid describes painfully and beautifully Narcissus' desire and self-adoration. He is transformed into a flower 'with a trumpet of gold and pale white petals' after his sad moans and cries are reportedly echoed by his eponymous admirer.

Narcissus is arguably the subtlest story of the set, alluding in sound to the story of Narcissus and Echo (unrequited girl-boy) but also to the self-awakening of this beautiful young man in falling in love with his own image. Housman's poem *Ladslove,* a telling version of the Narcissus myth, is known to have moved the composer (Britten 1959):

> Look not in mine eyes, for fear
> They mirror true the sight I see,
> And there you find your face too clear

And love it and be lost like me.
One the long nights through must lie
Spent in star-defeated sighs,
But why should you as well as I
Perish! Gaze not in my eyes.

A Grecian lad, as I hear tell,
One that many loved in vain,
Looked into a forest well
And never looked away again.
There, when the turf in springtime flowers,
With downward eye and gazes sad,
Stands amid the glancing showers
A jonquil, not a Grecian lad. (A.E. Housman 1887, *A Shropshire Lad*)

The story of **Arethusa** provides Britten with just the right ending because here the lovers end up together for eternity. Arethusa makes her first appearance in Book V as the nymph in Calliope's song, who tells Ceres that her daughter is indeed in the underworld. Her story relates how she came upon a beautiful clear mountain stream on a very hot day. The cool water enticed her to remove her clothes and swim naked. This roused the river god, Alpheus, which in turn put Arethusa to flight. She invoked the help of Diana as Alpheus bore down on her and a cloud enveloped her whilst Alpheus cast around to find her. Sweat poured from Arethusa until she turned into water. The final twist in the tale is magnificent: Alpheus realises what has happened and changes himself back into water to be united with Arethusa. Diana 'magics' them both to Syracuse harbour where they remain to this day in watery union. The fact that Britten and Pears had a holiday in Sicily in September 1950 may be pertinent to the geography of this tale and the wateriness of this ending to a very watery work can be seen to relate to the composer's overriding preoccuapation with the opera *Billy Budd* at that time.

For a full understanding of these stories it is strongly recommended that Ovid's great work is read. Oboists will be able to use the original as a vital source for developing individualistic readings of Britten's music. Britten penned sub-titles to each of the movements to describe the characters and often the metamorphosis involved. But he never went much further in defining the 'meaning' of his music and thus interpretations of this illustrative music can and should vary.

Ovid, Britten and the visual arts

It should also be noted that Britten may have been influenced, especially through Pears' interest in art, by the many interpretations of these ancient stories by artists through the ages. The magnificent pictures of Bacchic ritual and revelry as seen in stone carvings such as the Nereid Monument in the British Museum and countless early earthenware jars, as typified by the Attic jar (on the CD cover) signed by Panthaios (no date) must surely give pictorial inspiration to this movement in the *Six Metamorphoses*. Equally Poussin's glorious paintings of Pan worship and Bacchic festivals (Poussin 1625-7) serve as excellent examples from the 17th century and probably known to Britten (Fantham 2004, 133-151). Christopher Allen (2002, 336-367) traces the influence of Ovid as a 'vital source – a fount of inspiration' for artists through the ages, from Pollaiuolo's early and restrained *Apollo and Daphne* (Pollaiuolo),

through the more flamboyant works of Bernini, Poussin, Botticelli, Titian (notably *The Death of Actaeon)* and Rubens, to the nineteenth century where English artists, George Watts' *Minotaur* for example, exert much influence. Mention should be made of the pre-Raphaelites and especially Rossetti, whose poem and painting *The Blessed Damozel* inspired Debussy profoundly. The link between Debussy's *Syrinx* has already been made (Caird 2006) and the pre-Raphaelite connection will be discussed more in connection with Bacchus.

In addition, the influence of the visual arts should be mentioned in connection with symbolism. One important dimension in Britten's selection of characters for the *Six Metamorphoses* involves the elements. From the beginning of classical times the four elements of fire, air, earth and water pervaded philosophical thinking. It is natural that Ovid's masterpiece reflects the underlying importance of these elements in his writing. The Pythagorean section of Book XV contains a defining passage on the elements which has direct relevance to the elemental themes within the stories of Britten's work:

> This law of impermanence also applies to what we call elements.
> Pay attention, and I shall explain the changes they pass through.
> The world eternal contains four bodies which generate matter.
> Two of them, earth and water, are heavy and gravitate downwards;
> The other two, air and fire, which is even purer, are weightless
> And tend to make their way up, if nothing is pressing them down.
> Although these elements occupy different positions in space,
> They form the source and the end of all matter.
> (D. Raeburn 2004, Book XV, 236ff)

Here in Britten's selection there is a broad spread of elemental influence: Pan and Syrinx are representative of earth and water, Phaeton of air and fire quenched by water, Niobe of water (tears) and earth, Narcissus of water and earth and Arethusa of water. Bacchus is surely very earthy but his story involves the flight of bats and thereby air.

Throughout the history of art, the elements have been much used symbolically, with air representing spirit, fire representing passion and not least in the use of the fountain as a symbol for love. The overall wateriness of the *Metamorphoses,* another connection with *Billy Budd*, is magnificently consummated in the fountain images of *Arethusa*. Matilde Battistini (2005) draws on a wide bibliography to illustrate the major archetypal symbolic themes in art. For example, the mountain is often seen to be the meeting place of heaven and earth and thus the home of deities (as in Mount Olympus). Niobe's metamorphosis might have a more profound connection in this respect. The mirror (as in Narcissus' story), however, has two conflicting interpretations being an image of lust, vanity and pride but also of inner knowledge. This double meaning offers us a choice of interpretation for *Narcissus.* The symbol of the fountain is of great importance in art usually representing the source of life and perpetual renewal. For Ovid and Britten, this symbol involving water is of the greatest significance, starting with Syrinx and culminating in the eternal cascades of *Arethusa.*

Lucia Impelluso (2003) gives specific examples of all Britten's characters in art. Pan is depicted in Annibale Caracci's *Pan and Diana* (c 1597-1604) and Rubens' copy of Jan Brueghel's *Pan and Syrinx* (no date). In this work note should be made of Pan's fierce and savage demeanour. The spectacular *Fall of Phaeton* by Sebastiano Ricci (1703-4) is one of a

number of cited portrayals of this story. Abraham Bloemaert's *The Death of Niobe's Children* (1591) shows Apollo and Diana dispatching the seven sons and seven daughters. Apollo is never far away in these stories. There are many depictions of *Bacchus* including famous images by Caravaggio (1596-7), Bellini (1505-10) and the sensational *The Triumph of Bacchus* by Caracci (1597-1604). *Narcissus* receives much attention, too, notably from Caravaggio (1599-1600) and Poussin (1625-7). Arethusa, whilst less acknowledged by artists, receives ravishing attention from Arthur Bowen Davies (1901).

It is debatable how much notice Britten may have taken of such artistic sources in his instrumental music, though Graham Elliott (2006, 123) reports that the composer was inspired by a capital in Autun cathedral in the creation of the *Burning Fiery Furnace*. Donald Mitchell (1993, 111) also refers to Britten's strong pictorial image of the music he wrote especially in opera: "'imagery that is concrete in its statements and ....positive in its effects'. A key phrase (from John Piper), that, because I am quite sure it precisely reflects how Britten 'saw' his operas while he was composing them - in very considerable visual detail...".

2. Sources and Interpretations

The Printed Edition

The printed edition of the *Metamorphoses* published by Boosey and Hawkes must surely be the 'bible' for any performer. The composer sanctioned the 1952 edition and made virtually no changes when it was reprinted in 1968 save for the added metronome marks already mentioned and discussed below and the small clarifications on *Narcissus*. Some misunderstandings in performers' readings of the demisemiquaver patterns (which could be read as *tremoli*) leading to the metamorphic trill in bar 23 of *Narcissus* may have lead to the typographical clarification of this bar in the 1968 impression. Also added was an explanatory note that the music was a visual pun on reflection (Britten 1968).

Nevertheless, and even with Britten's known desire for accuracy, there is enormous scope for interpretation of this text and hence the extensive nature of these notes!

Metronome marks

The first edition of the *Metamorphoses* contains no metronome marks and it is a matter of great interest as to what speeds the composer intended. Apart from recordings, beginning with Joy Boughton's in 1952, there is no early available evidence. However, a letter from Britten to Friedrich Krebs, dated 26 July 1957 (Britten 1957), containing some fascinating information on Britten's views of the characters and the music, states: 'In case it is useful to you I append a list of rough metronome marks.' The Britten-Pears Library has a copy of this letter but no metronome marks. It goes without saying that these marks, if found, would be of considerable importance in understanding Britten's views on tempi. A further correspondence between Britten and Boosey and Hawkes (Britten 1965) containing a list of metronome marks identical with the 1968 reprint indicates that, in that year, a 'reprint has gone without metronome marks etc.' An unanswered question is whether this list corresponds to the metronome mark that Britten sent to Krebs in 1957.

Edwin Roxburgh makes the point that, while the tempi of these pieces are bound to fluctuate in performance, a basic tempo was intended by the composer. Joy Boughton, in working with him, likened this to the difference between the rhythm of a written poem as opposed to a recited performance. This latter might be rhythmically free but nonetheless would have an underlying rhythmic discipline.[7] Neil Black also studied the work with Joy Boughton and supports this argument, remembering Boughton's disciplined approach and adherence to detail. Black performed regularly with the composer and recalls Britten's idealistic standards and precision with metronome marks.[8]

In 1968, Boosey and Hawkes brought out a second impression of the *Metamorphoses* with the added metronome markings from the composer. It is thought that Britten had become concerned by what he considered to be 'wayward' interpretations and this led him to their introduction. But he had by then also heard some remarkable performers playing the pieces and these could have encouraged some of the tempi he put down. For example, Britten was apparently astonished by the technical and musical expertise of Heinz Holliger whose playing could have argued a case for the tempi in *Phaeton* and *Bacchus* for example.

It should be noted, too, that on 1 March 1976, Britten wrote a letter to Janet Craxton having heard the tapes for the recording of the *Metamorphoses* that she did with him at Snape: 'As I thought all along, my choice of you to record these two pieces was an excellent one and I can tell you that I was delighted with what I heard' (Britten 1976). An undated Christmas card to her also says 'I loved your metamorphoses at the proms. Thank you!'

Information is available on the tempi adopted by performers on recordings (Caird 2006) and we will come to this in more detail later. For now it is sufficient to note the 1968 tempi against Joy Boughton's original recording to indicate the range of interpretation in this area. It could be argued that the original freedom offered by the lack of tempi has enabled performers from the beginning to exert their own views on what is fundamental to the character of each piece. It should be said that these tempi can only be approximate due to the natural fluctuation of tempo. Nonetheless they are indicative.

Edition	Boughton
Pan: quaver = approx.138	quaver = c.100
Phaeton: dotted crotchet = 152	dotted crotchet = c. 132
Niobe: crotchet = 60	quaver = c. 92
Bacchus: 1. crotchet = 112	crotchet = c. 96
2. crotchet = 120	crotchet =.c.112
3 crotchet = 132	crotchet = c.112 +
Narcissus: quaver = 84	quaver = c. 80
Arethusa: quaver = 152	quaver = c. 84

The Friedrich Krebs letter

The letter written by Britten to Friedrich Krebs on 26 July 1957 and already referred to in connection with metronome markings is interesting in providing the only written clues to Britten's views of interpretation. A carbon copy is held by the Britten-Pears Library although Friedrich Krebs no longer has the original. It is worth quoting in full:

[7,8] As reported to George Caird (personal communication)

Dear Mr Krebs

Thank you for your letter. I am so glad you are enjoying play (sic) my Six Metamorphoses, and I look forward to hearing your forthcoming performance on the radio.

I will endeavour to answer your questions, but please forgive me if the answers are brief because I am just about to go away.

1) You are quite right about the Pipe of Pan. I have no very clear pictorial image for the repeated A sharps, except that they show hesitation. I am sorry they are ponderous on your oboe; the original oboist (Joy Boughton) was able on hers to make them light and short.
2) The soft C major arpeggios in Phaeton could perhaps suggest a similar movement to the beginning, but at a distance – perhaps even an echo – but something anyhow to give a sense of space.
3) You were quite right, Niobe's lamentation becomes granite in the last four bars.
4) In Bacchus, as before, I find it difficult to give a precise indication of any particular bit, but perhaps it will help you to think of 'shouting out of boys' as being the piu vivo, and the 'tattling tongues' as the C major con moto passage.
5) Narcissus should not be too slow, but it must be very peaceful.
6) Arethusa is pictured here entirely as being a fountain, although there are pools of stillness (the trills).

In case it is useful I append a list of rough metronome marks.

Thank you very much for your kind remarks about the work itself.

With very best wishes, Yours sincerely, (Benjamin Britten)

Tracks 1 – 6: Six Metamorphoses after Ovid

Britten's set of miniatures seem to reflect the stories he chose from Ovid and in this programme note, tentative but not prescriptive interpretations of the stories are suggested. Highly concentrated in material and structure, the music for this instrumental *tour-de-force* is typically Brittenesque, adopting simple ternary or rondo forms and diatonic harmonies generally based on thirds and dominant sevenths. The overall structure is subtle: the movements alternate between slow and fast tempi and could be viewed as three groups of two with moments of reflection before *Niobe* and *Narcissus* or two groups of three with a natural point of repose at the end of *Niobe*.

The cycle as a whole is a plethora of melodic invention based on distinctive themes which are developed to reflect the metamorphosis in question. The key structure for the six movements takes us from a Lydian mode on D in *Pan*, to the affirmation of D in *Arethusa*, by way of *Phaeton*, built on juxtaposed and unstable dominant sevenths on C, through *Niobe's* D flat major, *Bacchus* in F (with sections in A and C) and *Narcissus'* C major/minor.

A number of analytical commentaries have been done on the work or individual movements, notably Peter Evans' insightful commentary (Evans 1979, 306-7), an analysis of four of the

movements by Stephen Hiramoto (Hiramoto 1999, 23-26) and an intriguing analysis of *Pan* by Nicholas Cook (Cook 1987, 253-9), which sees the piece as an ABAB form constructed on a set of cadential phrases each ending in a pause. Jane Peters (Peters 1987) argues that the *Metamorphoses* should be looked on as a 'multi-piece' showing a common approach to motivic development and an overall structure for the work as two groups of three pieces. Koen van Slogteren (1990/2) gives a number of insights into the harmonic and rhythmic structure of the pieces in a series of ground-breaking articles.

For the performer the most important thing is to ensure that continuity of the six movements is brought out. These are short ternary form movements with the exception of *Bacchus* where an A-B-A-C-A rondo is adopted. Performances can be timed to split the work into two groups of three or three groups of two to give natural shape to the flow of the work as whole.

But performers may also wish to reflect on the musical content in harmonic terms. Edwin Roxburgh[9] has written:

> For me the most important aspects of the *Metamorphoses* are in the diatonic structures of the harmony. The implied triadic progressions of the single line establish a harmonic backcloth to each piece containing important references to the characterisation of each subject. For instance, *Phaeton* has no key signature but begins on a dominant seventh of F major (as does the opening of Beethoven's First Symphony). At bar 3, the dominant seventh transfers to A flat major. These modulating dominant sevenths form the constantly migrating structure of the whole piece, an important aspect of the metaphorical connection with the title. We can see this happening in each movement. In *Niobe,* D flat major passes to A minor (major?); the coda of *Bacchus* has the repeated Cs followed by arpeggios of E major, G major, B minor, E flat major, a startling series of triadic associations worthy of Bartok; the echoes in *Narcissus* are never made with the same-key triads, thus distinguishing the subject from the reflection; and *Arethusa's* flowing arpeggios contain at least two different triads in each cascade creating a characterisation of constant movement.

The following notes on the *Metamorphoses* serve the double function of programme notes with a digest of information from Ovid, from the sources and from performers and performances, and as a resource for anyone wishing to listen to the work or prepare it for performance. The information given is offered as a help in guiding choices - whether conscious or sub-conscious - towards truly individualistic interpretations. All performers should find their own interpretation whilst positioning themselves in the accuracy-imagination continuum.

Pan
who played upon the reed pipe which was Syrinx his beloved

Britten's music is appropriately enigmatic in capturing the character of this god of the woods and fields in pursuit of a such a beautiful nymph. The music is based on the three-note motif which quizzically ends the piece and, marked *Senza misura,* is characterised by free and asymmetric rhythms, always ebbing and flowing.

[9] Email to George Caird (personal communication)

In preparing a performance of *Pan* a number of things should be taken into account. Firstly, the character of Pan needs defining - is he a pastoral god, or is he a more sinister character driven by lust and able to scare the living daylights out of people should they be caught alone in the forest? Does the change from the major to minor in bar 3 imply some self-pity in his nature? Does the ending of the piece indicate cheekiness and a flippant side to his magical powers?

Secondly, the *Senza Misura* marking (without measure) asks for some freedom in pulse. How should this be? Careful study will reveal that all phrases tend towards having 'ping-pong ball rhythm' or its reverse - that is either a continuous accelerando or rallentando of quaver or crotchet pulse. The pulse varies between quavers and crotchets and, again, performers need to decide where this happens.

Pan, Lord Leighton, The Great God Pan (The Cornhill Magazine, July 1860)

Thirdly, the motif a'-c'-d or a'-c#'-d is structural and performers should seek ways of bringing the overall shape of the movement out from this kernel. In Britten, structure is integral to the performance of even such a free work as this.

Finally, the piece is full of commas. These need not be the same length. Performances are made interesting by the use of the comma as a source of additional rhythmic tension or relaxation.

The opening section can be read in a variety of ways. Most commonly, this is seen as a portrayal of the expanses of fields and woods that Pan had dominion over. Pan's personality in this respect can be seen as a benign one and therefore the music can have a spacious and easy command about it as exemplified in the performances of Hansjorg Schellenberger (1998), Maurice Bourgue (1967), Simon Dent (1998) and John Mack (1990). Schellenberger opens the piece at around quaver = 64, and this is mirrored by longer pauses than in many performances. Bourgue also takes a very pastoral view at quaver = 72 with even longer pauses to highlight spectacular dynamic control. His reading of *Pan,* lasting 2' 36", demonstrates the difference of approach that is possible, taking as it does over one minute longer than Boughton's version. Nancy Ambrose King (1999) also adopts a spacious approach enhanced by a reverberant acoustic. In Mack's recording the use of a reverberant acoustic also plays a strong part in adding personality to this opening, an approach adopted by Nancy Ambrose King as well. Douglas Boyd's equally pastoral performance (1994) makes distinctive use of Britten's 'hairpins' to great dramatic effect.

Other readings take into account the scary side of Pan's character as described in the discussion on Ovid's stories. A quicker and more threatening interpretation of the opening would thus be justifiable. The first broadcast performance of *Pan* by Joy Boughton (Boughton 1952), with an approximate quaver pulse of 100 certainly gives over a sense of urgency at the start which could be interpreted as 'scary' and this quality is also in the performances of Sarah Francis (Francis 1964) and Janet Craxton (Craxton 1976), both of whom

adopt a similar tempo. Heinz Holliger (1991) adopts nearly as quick a tempo but makes a highly expressive opening resulting in an almost dotted rhythm for the first two notes.

Gordon Hunt (Hunt 1997) takes a middle course between the urgency of Boughton, Francis, Holliger and Craxton and the later more pastoral readings, starting spaciously but moving through the phrases. Simon Dent's performance of the *Metamorphoses* begins with a slow and pastoral reading of *Pan* emphasising sonority throughout. Koen van Slogteren (1990), in the first of his extensive articles on the Metamorphoses, writes of yet another interpretation – that the opening section is the pursuit of Syrinx by Pan.

Despite Britten's only being able to point to hesitation as an overall characteristic (Britten 1957), the second section (bar 6ff) is almost universally seen as Pan trying out his pipe of reeds. But perhaps the insistent repeated notes in this middle section could also be representative of Syrinx' annoyance at Pan's advances? The rise and fall of the phrases from bar 6 could show Syrinx becoming more flustered by the pursuit, hence the shortening of the phrases.

Both Boyd and Nicholas Daniel (1994, 1997) begin the second section with cautious tension in seemingly invoking Pan's amazement at the sounds he is making or, for van Slogteren, in Syrinx' escape from Pan's advances. The wildness of Pan's improvisation is quixotically captured by Daniel in his renowned performance from the BBC Proms (1997) where the vast acoustic of the Royal Albert Hall seems to lend considerable atmosphere to the whole work. Holliger (1997), too, creates great character through pointing of the rhythms in the middle section arriving on a plaintive harmonic a#'', so beautifully quiet. This performance, live from the Barbican Hall in London is superbly effective in the recorded acoustic. The use of more resonant acoustics is noticeably advantageous in some performances, for instance that of Richard Weigall (1998).

The two bars of recapitulation at bars 9 and 10 present performers with a wonderfully expressive opportunity. Clearly marked at different dynamics, they mirror the opening and the lower dynamic of bar 3. Jonathan Kelly's broadcast reading (1996) could be heard to capture 'pastoral' and 'reflective' emotions in these bars, whilst Holliger's performances (no date, 1991, 1997) are more 'dramatic' and 'sad'.

The *Lento ma subito accel.* passage at bar 11 receives a variety of readings, some starting slower than others. Janet Craxton makes the point of accentuating the beginnings of each group, whilst Douglas Boyd uniquely differentiates the semiquavers from the twelfth group onwards. The six staccato a#''s have many individual interpretations, some slower and in 8, others faster and in one beat. Earlier discussion of Britten's intentions in this bar highlights this ambiguity (Caird 2006). Thomas Indermuhle (1990) makes a strong point of highlighting the a#-c#-d motif in the penultimate bar, in keeping with Nicholas Cook's analysis of the piece (1987). The final bar often brings humour, though occasionally a tinge of sadness. Koen van Slogteren distinguished his experimenting on the reeds themselves before binding them together into a pipe which he plays in the melismatic section at bar 11.

The end of Pan must surely be a paradox for us all to muse on. The music gets more and more frenetic culminating in a shrill trill. There follows the poignant repeated a#s, a final outburst and the quizzical three-note ending. Richard Weigall sees this gesture as Pan 'thumbing his nose' at us all.

Phaeton

who rode upon the chariot of the sun for one day and was hurled into the river Padus by a thunderbolt

S Ricci, The Fall of Phaeton (1703-4)

The energy and drive of Britten's music gives the listener plenty of scope to imagine the clattering of horse's hooves, the speed of the ride and the uncontrolled nature of the journey. Any interpretation of *Phaeton* is dependent on rhythm. It is arguable that the slurred version of the Composition Sketch is easier to bring off in comparison with the printed edition where tonguing can lead to lumpy phrasing. It is worth comparing the phrasing of the Sketch with that of the printed edition as an aide to learning this movement.

Koen van Slogteren (1992) hears the staccato quaver triplets as excellent illustrations of the clatter of hooves, perhaps most vividly interpreted by Robin Canter (1982), but goes further to view *Phaeton* as a rhythmic paradigm of adolescent *angst*.

When preparing a performance of *Phaeton,* it is recommended that each triplet be practised in a strong-weak-weak accentuation to establish the underlying rhythm of the music. That established, the written accents should be added ensuring that these are strong and stand out over the prevailing dynamic. Hairpins are the next thing to introduce and here it is interesting that the dynamic is often below the level of the opening *forte* mark. Care should be taken in getting the *crescendi* optimised by starting at a low enough dynamic to make them work. In the middle section, note that the general dynamic is less than *pianissimo*!

The printed tempo for *Phaeton* (152) is very fast! Some performers, notably Maurice Bourgue and Heinz Holliger, have recorded at this tempo and above most successfully. However, many players (Joy Boughton included) have adopted a much slower opening, giving a better chance of a quicker *Agitato* section.

Ovid goes to great length in his telling of the Phaeton story to depict the enormity of the heavens and the power of the Phaeton's father, the sun-god sometimes known as *Phoebus Apollo* and sometimes confused with *Hyperion*. His realisation that he has allowed his son the one wish that would be impossible to carry out is at the heart of the story. Phaeton wants his father to show him that he is special, and in pestering for the ultimate demonstration of his love, brings about his own downfall. Britten intends to convey the massive energy and violence of the ride across the sky

The middle section, marked *pianissimo*, seems (as Britten indicated to Krebs) to give perspective and space to the story. Following on from van Slogteren's view, perhaps the still spaciousness of this section is momentarily when Phaeton is in control of the chariot and relishing the journey? Could Phaeton's true metamorphosis be a psychological one as his thoughts move from arrogant confidence to uncontrollable terror? Or is the chariot, as some have asserted,[10] simply going behind a cloud?

[10] Conversation with Jeremy Polmear

The last section, marked *agitato,* gives a marvellous musical picture for the boy's fall into the river. It could be that Britten intended this as the metamorphosis, though Ovid's story goes on to relate how the onlooking nymphs became trees and poor Cygnus turned into a swan. The *pianissimo* ending has been described as the chariot disappearing into the distance in keeping with the sense of space created by the middle section. But Janet Craxton is reported to have described this as steam rising from the water after the catastrophe.

Joy Boughton's recording sets the pace for *Phaeton* at dotted crotchet = 126-132. This is interesting in the light of Britten's eventual metronome mark of 152, indicating tempo inflation in the intervening years. Certainly Schellenberger's 138 is somewhat faster and Holliger's quickest reading faster still at around 144 (Holliger 1991). Maurice Bourgue tops the speed charts with a virtuosic 152, rising to 160+ for the *agitato* in a superbly technical version. François Leleux (1995) and Gordon Hunt also give fast tempi with even quicker readings of the *agitato* section. Nancy Ambrose King makes interesting use of hesitant starts to phrases in the first section to create a sense of danger in Phaeton's ride. In a similar vein, Sarah Francis' 1995 version gets slower at the *agitato* successfully creating unease and tension through accentuation. A very interesting detail comes at the end of the first section in the Boughton performance where the last bar is clearly played in compound time, a reading echoed by Lajos Lensces (1978). This is not the case with Janet Craxton who recorded the work with the composer but nevertheless we have an example of two unresolved possibilities for this bar. Craxton makes great use of the dynamics in her performance with a beautifully distant middle section at a genuinely *pp* dynamic.

Niobe

Who lamenting the death of her fourteen children, was turned into a mountain

A Bloemaert, The Death of Niobe's Children (1591)

The falling phrases in D flat major marked *piangendo* (weeping) seem to capture an archetypal despair as Niobe comes to terms with loss and faces her own shortcomings. It has been pointed out that the seven sons' and seven daughters' deaths are depicted in the tonally shifting phrases in bars 2, 4 and 9 where the first section ends with 14 notes (for each child). The six notes in bar 2 could refer to the six sons killed before the seventh pleads to Diana and Apollo for mercy (which is not given)[11]. The moment of metamorphosis is, perhaps, at the end of the first section where two short phrases seem to work their magic on our heroine, although another reading could continue the metamorphosis throughout the long third phrase as it expands into a tortuous elongation through a variety of keys to settle on C. After a pause marked *lunga* Niobe's weeps *espressivo* to herself, before *(senza espressione)* becoming a mountain.

Britten's 1970 metronome mark of crotchet = 60 is faster than virtually all known performances. Boughton's quaver = 92 sets a 'norm' and interpretative differences tend to focus on the amount of rubato. The earlier recordings interestingly are strict to tempo with little 'pulling around', the expression remaining in the sound. Roy Carter (Carter 1995/6) provides a classically beautiful version of this movement very much in the Boughton tradition with a minimal but finely judged *animando*. Maurice Bourgue starts relatively slowly but

[11] Email from Stephen Powell

moves forward in crotchet beats to create an expressive and free feeling. His *animando* is very marked whilst his still, dead ending produces a remarkable *senza espressione* and *niente*. Thomas Indermuhle has an original reading of the opening making distinctive pairings of notes under slurs. Lajos Lensces makes the point that the metamorphosis must surely be taking place in bars 10 and 11 by a momentary placing of the *pp* phrase endings. Lensces' is a generally powerful reading of the work as a whole allowing scope for beautiful comparison with important quiet passages. The slowest version belongs to Francois Leleux with a performance lasting nearly a minute longer than, for example, Janet Craxton. The distant beauty of his final phrase is remarkable reflecting Britten's own view that 'Niobe's lamentation becomes granite in the last four bars' (Britten 1957).

Niobe requires control. Here it is as much in having a good enough reed to make the ending work as anything else. Using golf as an analogy, if *Bacchus* needs a driver and *Phaeton* and iron, *Niobe* certainly needs a putter! The problem is that for a full performance we have to have all these qualities in one.

Whilst the middle section is marked *rubato* and has a further *accelerando* marking, thought should be given to how much movement forwards is helpful in telling this story. But here there are many ways to make this passage work. One piece of advice is to use a very discreet *rallentando* to get the feeling of spaciousness, grandeur and quietness at the end. The last four bars, whilst having no such slowing marked, can be helped by almost imperceptible broadening to help the effect of the marked *diminuendo*.

W-A Bouguereau, The Youth of Bacchus (1884)

Bacchus

at whose feasts is heard the noise of gaggling women's tattling tongues and the shouting out of boys

Here is a scherzo-like movement in which the sheer energy and the virility of the god Bacchus dominates. Whether the music depicts his drunkenness or the rhythm of his festivities is a matter of debate, but surely tattling tongues and shouting are present, as Britten advised, in the second and fourth sections. That said, the fourth section, marked *Con moto* could be a musical depiction of the five daughters of Minyas' spinning wheels, followed by the low Cs fixing them to the ground before they are turned, one by one, into bats.

In preparing *Bacchus*, a decision is needed on how much licence to take in bringing out the desired character of the opening. Some oboists have gone for the distinctly drunken version with lurching rhythms and staggering semiquavers. Others, like Joy Boughton and later Janet Craxton, have been more faithful to the written rhythms. Whatever the decision made, the piece needs energy and character. If 'tattling tongues' and 'shouting out' are to be invoked then these characteristics need some input, though the Ovid story definitely includes the daughters of Minyas spinning at their spinning wheels.

If Britten's desire for accuracy is to be adhered to, care should be taken in realising the rests in this movement, especially at the end of sections where Britten writes no pauses. The crotchet rests following the held low Cs in the final bars of the piece should also be exact, whilst the arpeggios should follow the held notes with no or little separation.

Finally, the *con moto* section needs a decision on speed. Britten's metronome marking is quick and some players have achieved even quicker tempi most successfully. Whatever the image sought, normal practice routines of rhythms and the use of the metronome will help here.

Boughton's version is very faithful to Britten's original markings, maintaining a vigorous allegro at the start although slower than the published tempo. Roy Carter and Janet Craxton also offer strictly rhythmic readings. Other versions, notably that of Maurice Bourgue and François Leleux are freer in the opening section and use considerable rubato. Thomas Indermuhle uses less rubato but appears to espouse the idea of drunkenness. Not so Jeremy Polmear (1991) whose impeccable rhythm in this section seems to conjure up the ritual marching of Bacchus' followers. Nicholas Daniel too, is more faithful to the tempo with a marching feel to this first section.

Alan Vogel (1997) brings a quirky originality to the second section perhaps invoking 'the shouting out of boys' or a truly gossipy atmosphere amongst the 'tattling tongues'. Heinz Holliger (no date) treats this section with a quixotic feeling, too, in his first recording becoming more brilliant and rhythmic in his later two (1991 and 1997). Thomas Indermuhle makes more of a dance out of this section with an attractive and rhythmic swing to the music.

The *con moto* receives a wide range of interpretations from different oboists with Boughton's crotchet = 112 outstripped by Francis, c.120-126, Craxton, c. 132, Hunt and King, c. 160, Bourgue, 176+, Leleux, 192 and Holliger 184+. If the idea of this *con moto* is to illustrate the spinning of the daughters of Minyas, then the slower tempi may have something to say. Curiously, Tom Bergeron's alto saxophone (1996) seems to lend itself to such an effect more than the faster, virtuosic readings of this section, and Douglas Boyd chooses a moderate speed to give a good spinning effect. However, this does not invalidate faster readings which may have other images in mind, 'tattling tongues' included.

The final section is also subject to varied readings from strictly in time (Carter, Craxton, Francis) to very free (Leleux, Schellenberger). The metamorphic moments on the long held C's also have a wide range of interpretations. Perhaps, Lajos Lensces' version should be mentioned for its commanding low Cs followed by really ephemeral arpeggios, as does Holliger's versions which all give structural and apparent metamorphic importance to the low Cs. Nicholas Daniel makes the ending of the piece more and more urgent in his Proms performance (1997).

Narcissus

who fell in love with his own image and became a flower

Caravaggio, Narcissus (1596-7)

The ravishing phrases at the beginning of this movement enable the oboe to paint the mythical unknowing beauty Narcissus. The introspective statement grows to reveal the boy, more confident, facing his own image. Britten confirms in the score that the quiet passages do represent his reflections and these become more and more intense as the images and reflections blur into a moment of drama. The ensuing stillness retains the image and reflection but with no emotion, just the beauty of the flower that the boy has become.

Whilst Britten's *Narcissus* can be interpreted as an aural description of a visual reflection (and what lovely watery effects one can get on the oboe), the story of *Echo* should be considered as a double analogy of reflection in sound and sight. The tale looks at the fall of innocent beauty and the agonies of growing up. Unrequited love is mirrored by remorse. Koen van Slogteren (1990) cites Sigmund Freud's '*Zur Emfuhrung des Narzissmus*' to argue a psychological significance for this story based on self knowledge and the self's relationship with the world. This relates to a similar view on *Niobe*, already described. Britten's music is lyrical and utterly beautiful. The opening phrase is entirely suitable for such a beautiful deity and the reflections leading to metamorphosis are brilliantly handled. The moment of metamorphosis is surely very obvious in the increasing agitation towards a cathartic trill. The final section where the mirror image gently combines towards the long *niente* c, gives the performer a perfect opportunity for a moment of complete stillness.

As with *Niobe, Narcissus* is all about control for the performer. The dynamic level of the opening requires considerable work in refining the sound and achieving a sense of liquidity in the phrasing. One secret is perhaps to 'hide' subsidiary notes in the ornamented figures behind the first note (in bar 2 for example). Tempi vary in performances from a rather fast quaver = 84 by Francis, to 68 for Craxton and 56 for Bourgue. Some versions are freer than others and Francis effectively makes use of silence with a long pause at the end of the first section. The opening receives many beautiful interpretations with differing tone colours and dynamic levels. Nicholas Daniel (1994) is an example of a performance where a very quiet opening is highly effective in portraying a narcissistic quality. Britten (1957) asks that 'Narcissus should not be too slow, but it must be peaceful'.

Practically all performances make a good account of the reflection in the middle section emphasising the nature of a visual reflection through the exact connection between object and image. The echo passages are most effective if attached to the lower and louder image *with no break*. Getting the change of dynamic here needs practice. But Helen Jahren (2004) makes an interesting analogy with a genuine echo effect by timing her reflections with a small delay. The relation of Echo in the Ovid story is made in this performance which generally contains many unusual interpretations throughout the work. Most interpretations make the point that metamorphosis has taken place before the last section, leaving this at a single dynamic, as marked, as though Narcissus and his reflection have become the same

thing. John Mack offers a remarkably muted quality to a reflective reading of this piece, whilst Gordon Hunt makes an interesting point by grading the difference between *mf* in bar 10 at the start of the mirror section and *f* six bars later. Here he creates an atmosphere with more menace in it, which somehow empowers the metamorphic moment of the trill in bar 23. Robin Williams (1988) has the idea of leaning on the first b natural in bar 22 to emphasise the power of the music at this point. Being reforged into a flower is no light matter. A number of versions miss the difference between the demisemiquavers and the final semiquaver group in bar 23.

The final section requires decisions on where to breathe. Ideally the last bar should not have a break after the first note, rather perhaps inserting a breath after the first note of the penultimate bar. It is generally accepted that this section no longer has traces of echo - the metamorphosis has happened and we have one long line at the same dynamic, albeit showing the lines of what was an echo. However, Bourgue takes a different view, maintaining the reflection dynamically to the end, all exquisitely played. His version (lasting nearly 90 seconds longer than Boughton's) again gives an original reading of *Niobe* throughout.

Arethusa

who, flying from the love of Alpheus the river god, is turned into a fountain

Arthur Bowen Davies, Arethusa (1901)

The Bach-like arpeggios of the opening of this finale immediately invoke a fluidity that brings the work back to its major ingredient, water. Arethusa is clearly in motion and the phrases enable her to pause by the river. But this repose is more and more disturbed and the music becomes restless moving into fast demisemiquvers as panic begins to ensue. But the story relates that the girl had to use camouflage to hide from her pursuer, and the middle section certainly gives a sense of stillness whilst bubbling away with its trills. These could depict small waterfalls, or perhaps the clouds cast round Arethusa for cover whilst the flighty semiquaver figures reminiscent of the opening still pervade to show that she has not rested from her pursuer. The final section speeds up to return us to the feeling of cascades and ends the work with a positively virtuoso display in D major, perhaps expressing Arethusa and Alpheus united in water.

In working on *Arethusa*, players might want to compare this writing with that of the Bach cello suites. The arpeggiated figures seem to have strong Bach-like influence, and playing some of the cello suites two octaves higher can be a very good exercise for any oboist! If, too, the phrases were regarded as in six-parts in dotted crotchets, they can be practised as written but bringing out each part in turn. This enhances the beautiful lines that Britten has created.

Performances vary considerably in speed, perhaps as a result of the *largamente* direction and Britten's eventual choice of a metronome mark. Boughton is very slow and pairs the notes of the opening *largamente* markedly whilst Francis plays the opening very fast and with freedom. Heinz Holliger (1991) structures the piece with an interesting pause before the fourth phrase in bar 22, a decision also taken by some other performers including Douglas

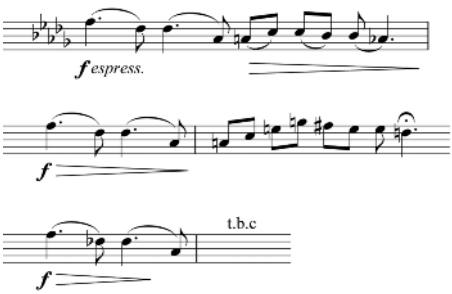
Boyd. Nicholas Daniel (1994) gives an interesting dynamic shading in bars 14/15 and 16/17 in a performance which puts racy effect into the chase. Janet Craxton is quick and provides (like Daniel) the most distant and muted quality for the burbling trills of the middle section, where her performance also goes furthest, along with Richard Simpson (2002/3), in differentiating between the trills with lines on them and those without. Robin Canter speeds up and 'throws away' the phrases after the trills in an interesting interpretation of this section. In differentiating between the phrases with lines on the notes and the last phrase, one should remember Britten's reference to 'pools of stillness' for these passages. Jeremy Polmear's trills are brilliantly continuous in the final phrase providing a consequential change to flowing water of an impelling kind. Schellenberger gives a rather restless feeling in these trills with convincing results, whilst Bourgue takes time in producing very quiet, burbling trills in a performance which is perhaps the most expansive.

The animando last section can be interpreted with a variety of increases in speed, but note should be taken that the outline shape of a-c#-d returns us to the motif of Pan, and here the performer must draw together the overall musical journey that Britten has taken us on. To this end, Gernot Schmalfuss (1999) brings his final section of *Arethusa* to a resounding close by accentuating the top notes of the phrases to make this important structural point. (The triumphant ending of Britten's *Temporal Variations* for oboe and piano, written fifteen years earlier, also consists of a c# to d[12].)

Tracks 7 – 29 Britten's manuscripts

The second section of this recording is devoted to setting out for the first time the material from Britten's 1951 diary, the Composition Sketch and the Fair Copy. Track 7 consists of the diary sketch whilst Tracks 8 – 29 offer alternative versions of the six movements based upon differences found mainly in the Composition Sketch, but also in the Fair Copy together with smaller sections from both these sources.

Track 7: The Diary Sketch
It is a remarkable experience to leaf through the pages of Britten's 1951 diary (Britten) and to find the short opening from *Niobe*. Its position in the diary suggests that Britten had already begun work on the *Metamorphoses* by March 1951, and gives a real insight into how an initial idea might be changed before reaching a final version. Note the careful phrasing already in place albeit with a very different second phrase taking us away from the opening tonality:



[12] Conversation with Jeremy Polmear

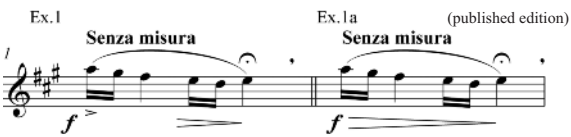
The Composition Sketch
The Composition Sketch consists of three double sheets of 28-stave manuscript paper, written in pencil in Britten's clear and firm handwriting. Imogen Holst's view (Holst 1966) that much of the composing took place in Britten's mind before putting the music on paper is born out by some of the movements which appear in an almost completed form. *Niobe,* especially, seems to be more-or-less 'copied' from an earlier source, most likely straight from the composer's mind although we do have the short opening from Britten's 1951 diary. Other movements, notably *Bacchus* and *Arethusa*, are less finished and include material which is not eventually included in the final versions. Examples below are from the Sketch or Fair Copy in the following respective sections; those marked *a*, for instance *1a,* are from the published edition and are for comparison. Bar numbers relate to the Sketch, Fair Copy and Edition and occasionally differ. Material, which is crossed out or rejected, is un-numbered.

The Fair Copy
Written in ink, the autograph score contains far fewer surprises but nonetheless repays investigation. Dedicated with the words "For JB to play on the Meare" and dated June 14, 1951, we are reminded of the reason for the work, an open air concert with madrigals and a chance for Britten to explore the inspiration of Ovid's natural world. Sarah Francis makes the point that the subtitles are written in this copy in Joy Boughton's handwriting with the words on the first page: 'Before each piece – Inscription – '. Could these subtitles or inscriptions have been co-authored by Boughton?

Pencil markings seem to indicate that this score was used at the time of the first performance. These include breath marks for the oboist in *Pan* and *Narcissus* and the tell-tale o for a 'forked f' putting these marks down as Boughton's own.

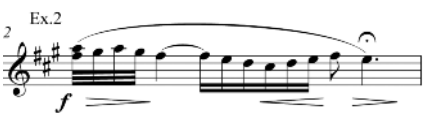
Track 8: Pan
Pan is one of the more complete versions in the Composition Sketch but contains a number of interesting differences which can all be incorporated into a single performance:

Firstly, Britten writes an accent under the opening a'', with a delayed diminuendo in the first bar:

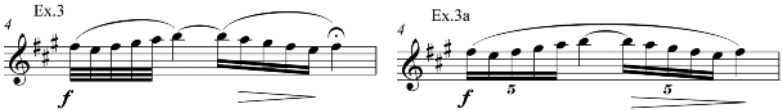


This could give weight to the view, reported by Janet Craxton, that Britten saw Pan as a frightening personality as well as the benign god of the woods and fields.

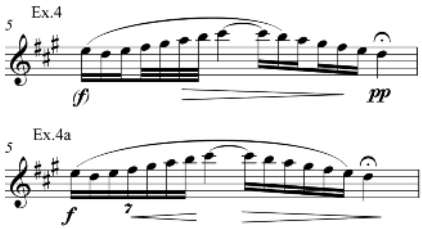
The trace of an a'' at the beginning of bar 2 shows Britten rejecting this figure as an ornament of the first bar in favour of an answering motif:



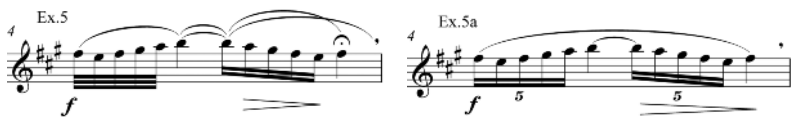
In bar 4, it looks as though Britten wrote the opening quintuplet over a faster motif with demisemiquavers in it. This he rejects, perhaps to enable the slide in bar 5 to grow out of the slower quintuplet:



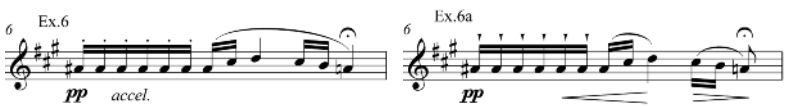
What seems certain, though, is that he is retaining the quaver pulse to the end of this first section as there is a trace of a triplet motive at the end of bar 4, and a clear indication of a 3-4 split of the first beat and triplets in bar 5. Note should also be taken of the *pp* marked on the D at the end of this section:



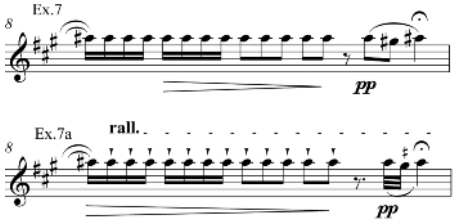
It could be argued that in arriving at his final version Britten does ask the performer to move from a quaver to a crotchet pulse in bar 4. The third beat of bar 4 is rubbed out and rewritten as a quintuplet in the Composition Sketch and the first beat is eventually rationalised to a semiquaver quintuplet in the edition. In Ex 5 the double slur at the end of the bar will account for the rubbed out notes:



It is generally accepted that a quaver pulse is intended for the opening of the second section. It is interesting, though, that, in the Composition Sketch, Britten asks for an *accelerando* in the first bar of this section which is delayed to bar 7 in the printed edition. Britten probably made this change to ensure that the section started calmly enough. With this change in place he is also able to shorten the final crotchet a' to a quaver. But the early version is an important signal towards the constant ebb and flow of the pulse in this piece. This 'ping-pong ball rhythm' is the key to the performance of the piece:

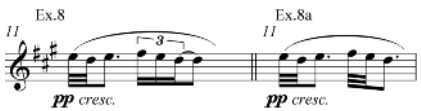


An important detail to note at the end of this middle section is the slower mordent onto the final a#'', following a more rapid diminuendo:

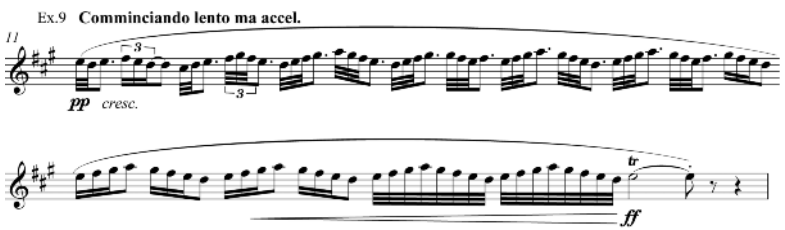


A *fortissimo* at the recapitulation in bar 9 seems to have been rejected in favour of a *forte*, probably to allow for a greater climax at the end of the work. Had Britten retained this dynamic, the c#''' in this bar would have been highlighted in keeping with Cook's a-c#-d framework for the piece (Cook 1987). In this same bar, Britten tried out a more flamboyant resolution to the phrase, but rubbed these notes out in favour of the falling scale (cf bar 5). The answering phrase of bar 10 brilliantly mirrors the penultimate phrase of the opening section (bar 4) thus setting up the long melisma and the final bars. This answering phrase has a very marked diminuendo in the Composition Sketch giving visual emphasis to the need for a real sense of silence before the *Lento ma subito accel*. Most interestingly, Britten also wrote the word *Comminciando* ('starting') before *Lento* emphasising the drama of this moment. But he drops this word in the Fair Copy.

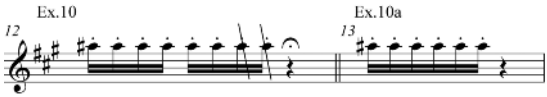
A further clue that the composer saw the *accelerando* of this section as beginning from a very still point is provided by the sketch version of bar 11:



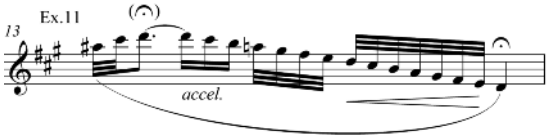
The slow triplet on the second beat gives the opening of the phrase a much more poised and held-back feel than in the final form. In the melisma, group 7 is written as a triplet and dotted quaver and there are two crossed-out figures simply showing the composer trying and rejecting different turns of the phrase. Furthermore, the double value semiquavers begin a beat earlier in group 13; could these relate to the triplet mark which Britten uses in group 2? Lastly, the final trill lacks the acciacatura d' – a small but interesting detail:



Two other rhythmic matters are of significance to the performer. In bar 12, Britten writes eight semiquavers in two groups of four and then crosses out the final two:



The eight semiquaver version would require the performer to retain a crotchet pulse, albeit with some licence to relax the tempo. The six semiquaver version, however, surely asks the performer to revert to a quaver pulse, reminiscent of the middle section. The divided crotchet beat after the pause in bar 13 would support the idea that the performer begins this penultimate bar, feeling quavers. Notice the accelerando in the Sketch in this bar:

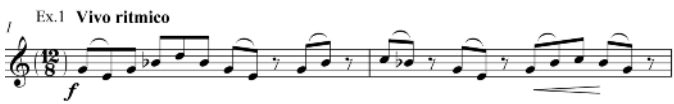


Finally, the trace of a quaver rest before the three-note *coup-de-grace* and its rejection in favour of a comma gives credence to the idea that the use of the comma throughout could represent a downbeat or an upbeat and of course could be interpreted in varying lengths during the piece. Here, the comma (like the erased rest) is arguably on the beat and very short.

All the above details pertain to the Composition Sketch version of *Pan*. Apart from the introduction of the subtitle *'who played upon the reed pipe which was Syrinx, his beloved'* and the fact that the third comma is larger than the first two, indicating perhaps that Britten wanted to indicate differing lengths, the Fair Copy has no substantive differences from the printed edition.

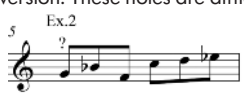
Track 9: Phaeton

The Composition Sketch of *Phaeton* is striking in the differences of phrasing throughout based on the opening:

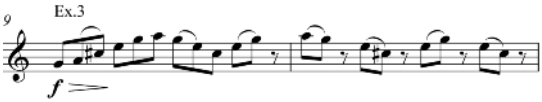


The slurs and lack of accents give an effect which clearly was not biting or energetic enough for Britten. Nonetheless the slurs do show us something about the rhythmic drive of the music and perhaps the need to avoid an over-dry approach to the articulation. The asymmetric bar lengths come over more obviously in this version as a result of the slurs. Notice the *Vivo ritmico* marking, remembering that the printed metronome marks of the modern edition are still nearly twenty years away (see page 18, Metronome marks).

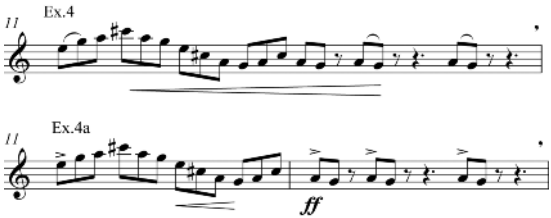
A lower start to bar 5 and two extra beats to bar 10 are crossed out in favour of the final version. These notes are difficult to read but could be:



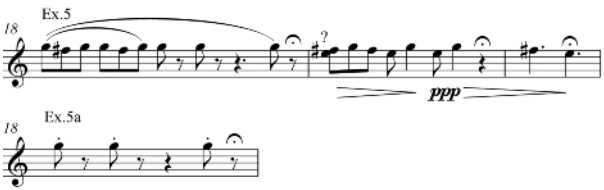
In bar 9, the first beat has been added on to the front of the line with a handwritten extended staff showing that this beat could have been an afterthought. The fact that the second and third quavers of this beat are slurred is an added complexity here:



In the Sketch, bars 11 and 12 seem to lack a bar line between them:

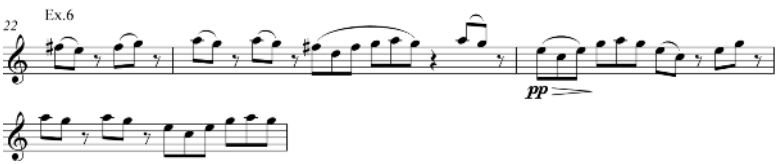


More interesting is the rather hazy end to the first section which looks like this:



The first two slurred beats are crossed out and do not survive but give a lead to the composer's invention in relation to the last line of the piece. The extended ending is unclear, but again provides an intriguing possible link to the middle section.

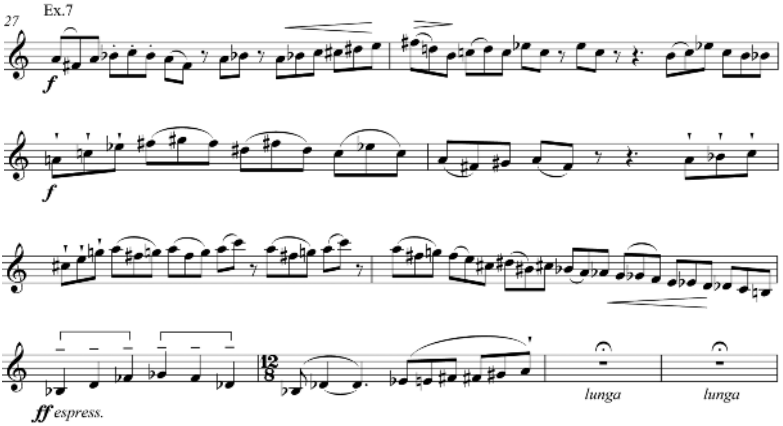
The middle section is slurred as we all know it but there is a whole line of material crossed out from bar 22:



Where the music of *Pan* seems almost complete in the sketch, we see here Britten making decisions about the length and shape of this middle section, favouring the economical and finely balanced final version. It is exhilarating to see the composer's logic at work.

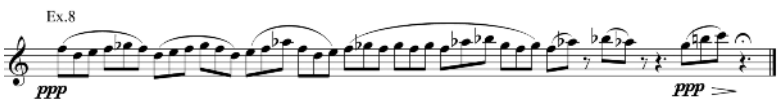
The final section has no *agitato* marking. This, with the racier phrasing might suggest a faster tempo for the whole piece (see page 18, Metronome marks).

Some rubbing out in bar 30 continues the feeling of Britten revising as he goes here, though a d natural second note as Phaeton hits the water is probably an error, but note the unslurred crotchets. It is worth writing out this section from the Sketch to show Britten's original intentions:

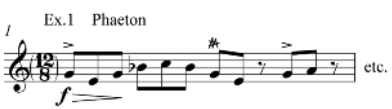


The double f# in the final bar is clear but does not survive and Britten writes a double pause (as though two bars) before the final phrase. Not necessary, he eventually decides, but we must give time for this mythical catastrophe to sink in before all is gone in a puff!

Finally, Britten writes a first version of the last line and then crosses it out. The three-note ending is reminiscent of the end of *Pan*, perhaps:



The Fair Copy version of *Phaeton* appears more or less as we know it in the printed edition with the added sub-title, *'who rode upon the chariot of the sun for one day and was hurled into the river Padus by a thunderbolt'*. The crossed-out accent on the third beat weakens the argument that Britten forgot to put an accent here. Nevertheless, this is the only instance of a missing third beat accent (cf bar 6):



There is still no *agitato* for the third section.The 2 +1 slurs are here still and in bar 32, the quavers are slurred 3 +2 with a further slur over all five at the beginning of the bar.

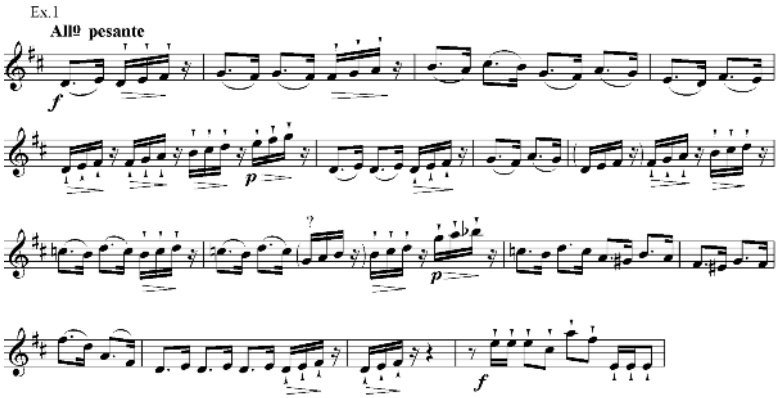
Bacchus

The next movement in the Composition Sketch is *Bacchus* although it is marked 4. This could be because Britten already had a near-perfect version of *Niobe* in his head and was using

the sketch to work on the less finished movements. It could also be that he was following the sequence of stories in the *Everyman* edition of the *Metamorphoses* that he appeared to use (Golding 1943; Caird 2006). Certainly, *Bacchus* is very incomplete in the sketch and there is much rejected material which can illuminate the final version.

Track 10

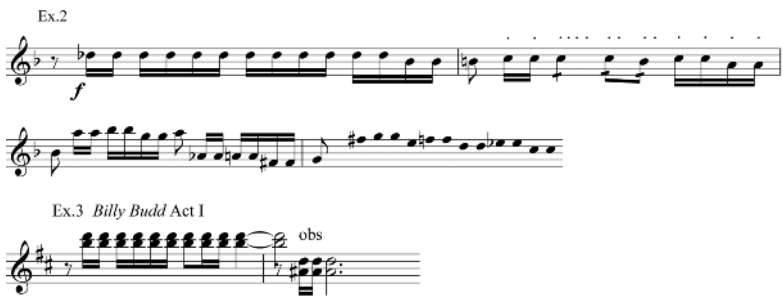
Firstly, Britten begins with a sixteen-bar opening for *Bacchus* in D major:



This may have been rejected because he realised the key would pre-empt the D major of *Arethusa* in the overall key scheme. The fact that the tonality is being worked out in this way is really significant as we see Britten making an important structural decision even with much of the material already created.

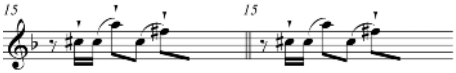
Track 11

The F major opening is then fully stated with one small difference in that there is a comma rather than a pause at the end of bar 5. The F major tonality seems much 'righter' for this piece and is arguably a delayed resolution of the C7 chords in *Phaeton*. The crossed out second idea, gives an intriguing alternative version for the second section and a possible reference to *Billy Budd*:

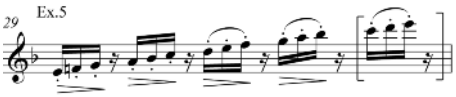


The second section in the Sketch is similar to the printed edition with some minor differences, but note the dot on the first a'' which clears up one small anomaly from the final version:

Ex.4 **Più vivace** Ex.4a **Più vivo**

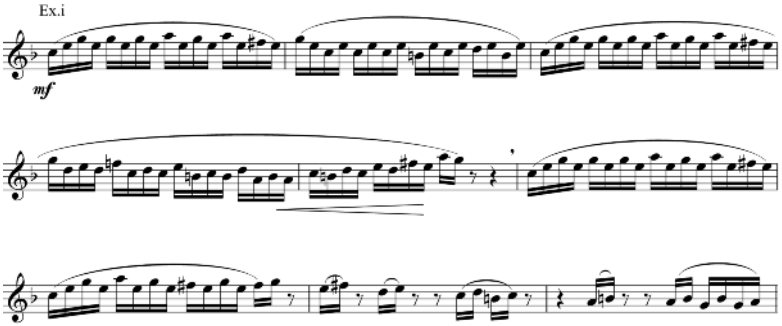


The third section gives us an extra beat in bar 29 which is later removed:

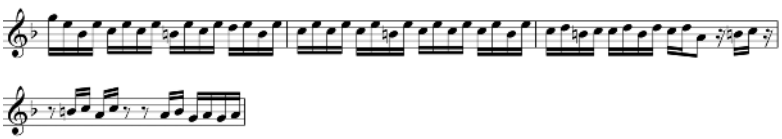


Track 12

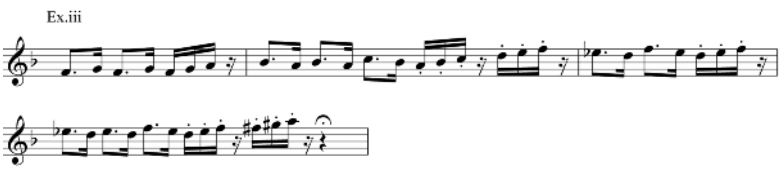
The fourth section, lacking the final direction *Con moto*, consists of a considerable amount of material which can be laid out as follows:



Track 13

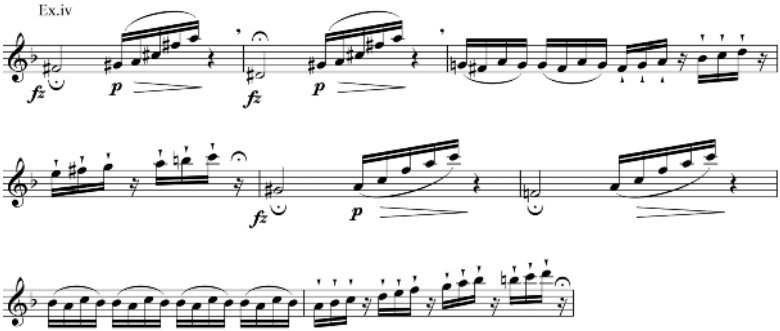


Track 14



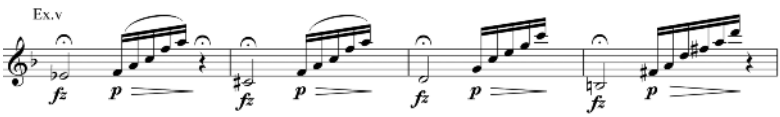
Track 15

Ex.iv



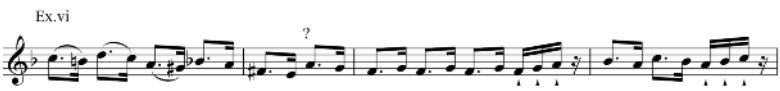
Track 16

Ex.v



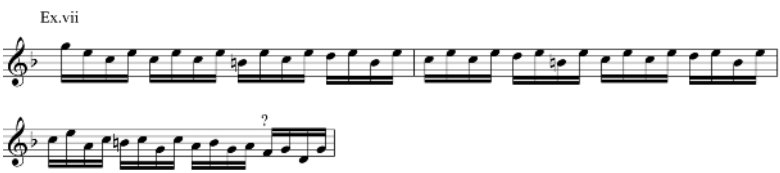
Track 17

Ex.vi



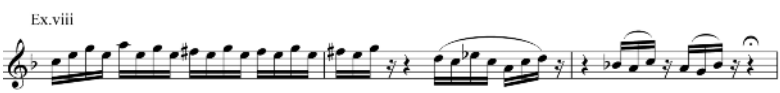
Track 18

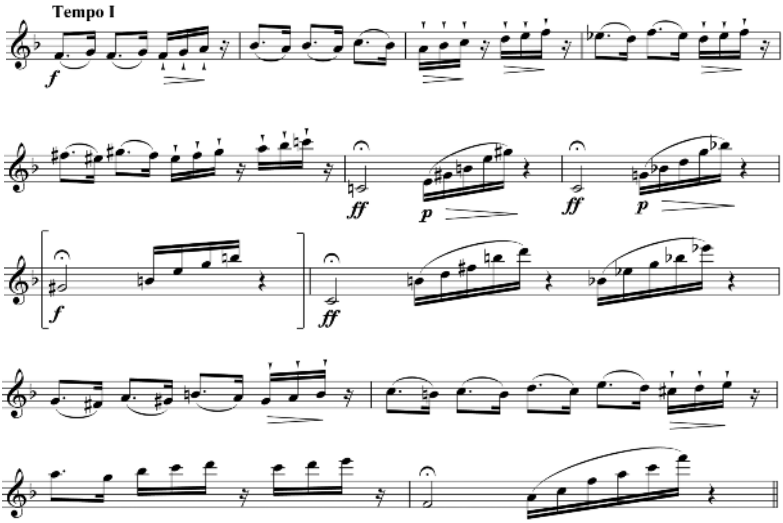
Ex.vii



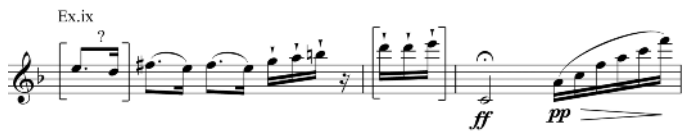
Track 19

Ex.viii

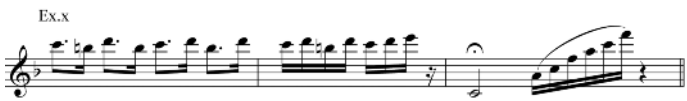




Track 20



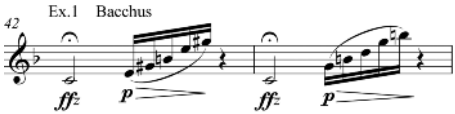
Track 21



These sketches work on the material for the 'spinning wheel' effect (Caird 2006) with (i), (ii) and (vii) yielding recognisable patterns though by no means finished. (iii) and (vi) deal with the recapitulation of the opening motif, whilst (iv) and (v) play with the minim pause and arpeggio 'bat' idea. Britten eventually sets out this section more or less notatim in (viii) with two improvements to the ending (ix and x). NB: examples ii – vii are crossed out in the Sketch.

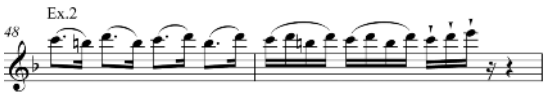
The sketch of *Bacchus* represents 'work in progress' and comparison of this with the final autograph will demonstrate the extent to which Britten organised his thinking away from the page.

Apart from a pair of missing slurs (p5, line 2, bar 1), the Fair Copy is now as we know it until the last section. Arthur Golding's words *'at whose feasts is heard the noise of gaggling womens' tattling tongues and the shouting out of boys'* forms the added sub-title though the words, *Con moto,* are still absent from the fourth section and when we arrive at the first long low C, extra notes are still in the *arpeggios:*



Two beats of semiquavers are also inserted engagingly in the flourish before the final C:

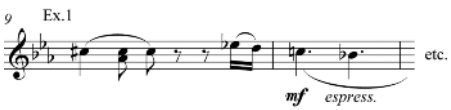
Track 22



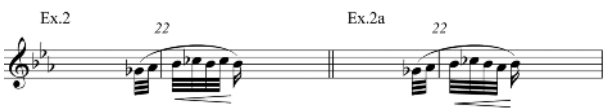
Track 23 : Narcissus

Marked *Lento* only, *Narcissus* appears fairly complete in the Composition Sketch. Interesting differences are:

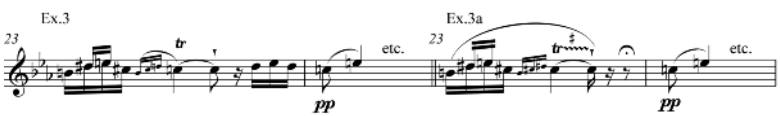
Bar 7 g flat crossed out
Bar 9 extra quaver a flat' and added upbeat in turquoise ink:



Bar 17 no tie on the e natural
Bar 22 two c flats (see Fair Copy, below):

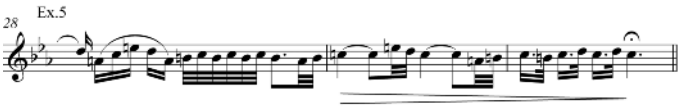


Bar 23 a c natural trill following a group of three semiquavers. Then three upbeat semiquavers into the final sections:



This c natural will have been rejected as too much of an arrival before the final section in C.

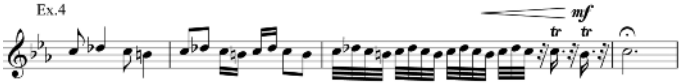
The last two bars in this Sketch version are of real interest:



Here, the diminuendo is missing at the end of bar 28 and the extra three quavers lengthen the end and keep the 6/8 pulse going. By cutting these beats, Britten arrives at a 9/8 bar as in the printed edition. Could this have been a sop to the breath control of oboists?

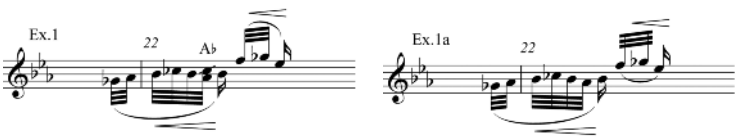
Track 24

An interesting feature in the Composition Sketch is an alternative ending written and crossed out above the known final line:



This seems to give much more of a sense of power and self-will to Narcissus.

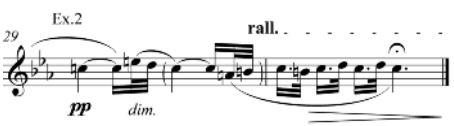
In the Fair Copy, everything is in order but for three main details of interest. Firstly, Britten corrects the two-note pattern of Narcissus' image in bar 22, replacing the second c flat with an a flat:



Some players, Gordon Hunt included, have re-corrected their readings to maintain the familiar pattern (Hunt, 1997) Certainly Britten does seem to have been undecided on this small but significant point, only arriving at the printed version at a late stage.

Secondly, an interesting feature relates to the demisemiquaver patterns in bar 22. These are consistent in both the Composition Sketch and the Fair Copy but have been 'clarified' in the most recent impression.

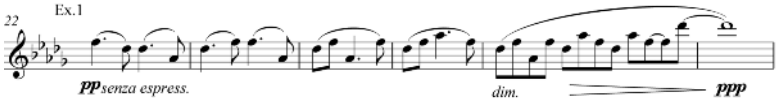
Thirdly, the continued extra beats in the penultimate bar retaining the 6/8 pulse, but then crossed out:



Track 25: Niobe

Written neatly and compactly at the top of *Arethusa's* second page, *Niobe* is the most completely perfect movement in this sketch. Whether Britten had completed an earlier version and simply copied it out is not known, although the diary entry indicates that he had made a

start in March 1951. The only substantive point of comment is that Britten omits bars 20 and 21 at the beginning of the last section, writing them separately below with an insertion arrow. The final phrase, *senza espressione*, he writes with an added two bars, retained in the fair Copy but then crossed out and again omitted for the shorter and arguably more breathable version of the edition:



Other details are:

Bar 4	the *diminuendo* is continuous into bar 5
Bar 13	*mp* rubbed out
Bar 16	there is a *crescendo* over one beat to the top d flat
Bar 17	no *animando* is marked (n.b Joy Boughton's 1952 broadcast has quite a marked *animando*)
Bar 19	begins with a *diminuendo*
Bar 20	has a *rallentando* marked
Bar 24	crossed out illegible notes on second beat leaving a 3/2 bar for the edition.

The Fair copy has the subtitle '*lamenting the death of her 14 children, was turned into a fountain*' though this lacks the 'who' that appears I the printed edition. The two extra bars are still in the final phrase showing this is a last-minute rejection, maybe based on Joy Boughton's performance. Certainly there are in and out breath marks from her in these final phrases!

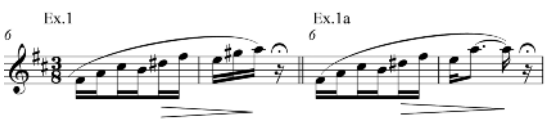
Arethusa

Track 26

The most remarkable feature from both the Composition Sketch and the Fair Copy is the alternative ending which Britten retained as an alternative marked with a cross at the bottom of the page in the printed edition. It is clear from the Fair Copy that this ending was still under consideration at a late stage and thus it merits inclusion in a complete version presented here with the interesting alternative for bars 72 and 73 in the final section. Britten probably preferred the final printed edition version because the first section ends in a less final way here (see below under Track 29).

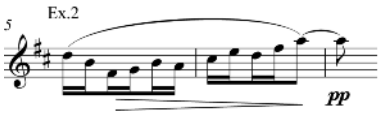
The Composition Sketch of *Arethusa* begins with three crossed out false starts which have an interesting variant for bars 6 and 7 in the first:

Track 27



and another one for bars 5 and 6 in the third:

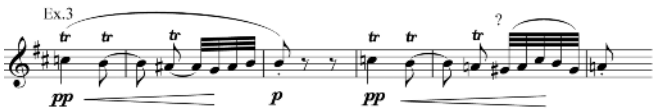
Track 28



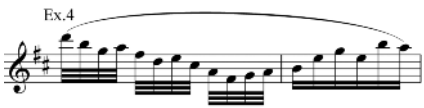
It is then more or less possible to reconstruct the final version from the Sketch. The opening section is written out as is but it should be noted that the ending is reconsidered in the Fair Copy with some ambiguities to resolve (see below).

The central section initially has only two phrases prior to the *Animando*. The first is as in the printed edition but with a long crescendo from *pp* to the third bar and then a similar diminuendo. These bars are bracketed with a question mark. The second phrase appears to be identical with the final version though some notes are very indistinct. A third phrase is written at the end of the movement as an afterthought:

Track 29



The final section of the sketch is, with one exception, in keeping with the final edition, although Britten begins at the second bar here and inserts the first as an afterthought. The exception relates to bars 10 and 11 of this section (bars 71 and 72 of the edition) where the following bars are inserted in place of the repeated figure finally arrived at. The words '*from the beginning*' are written over these bars with a bracket:



Apart from the water damage on the front sheet of the Fair Copy resulting from Joy Boughton's accident at the first performance, the opening of *Arethusa* appears to be as in the final version. But the alternative ending to the first section now makes its first appearance possibly as a result of work with dedicatee. The printed ending which is in place in the Sketch is now crossed out in favour of the alternative with a large cross mark next to it. The last four bars of this section are also written out again at the end of the piece with no slurs (probably for note accuracy).

The inclusion of this new ending is puzzling as the first ending alternative is re-instated in the

printed edition with the alternative printed at the bottom of the page, again with a cross sign. It should be assumed that Britten felt the alternative ending to be too final and too much like the end of the work to be his choice, but still left the option in for the performer. One wonders how many times this ending is ever performed.

The middle section of *Arethusa* reaches its final state but with a correction in the final bar of the second phrase and with the entire third phrase appearing as an insertion and written at the bottom of the page. It seems that this section was settled only at the last minute.

Tracks 30 – 35 Joy Boughton's 1952 recording

This remarkable historic recording transmitted on 3 October 1952 is a valuable reference for this study and it speaks for itself. Joy Boughton was Britten's choice of oboist for the *Metamorphoses* and he was clearly happy to support her two recordings of the work. The background to these and the letters between Boughton and Britten have already been discussed. It should only be added that Boughton's playing offers us many stylistic clues to interpretation whilst also being a wonderful insight into oboe playing in the early 1950s. The change of order of the movements with *Niobe* following *Bacchus* is intriguing. This must be a mistake made by the BBC as both the *Composition Sketch* and *Fair Copy* list the order of movements correctly. Nevertheless we leave this order in place as a record of what actually went out on that day.

In listening to this recording, it should also be remembered that this is a 'recorded performance', with no retakes after the odd slip.

Tracks 36 – 41 Nicholas Daniel's recording

Recorded live before his students at the Musikhochschule, Trossingen, Germany, 11 October 2007

In preparing this CD it was felt that it would be of interest to include a performance by a contemporary player representative of the line of influence which could be drawn from Britten. This would not necessarily be someone who had come into contact with Britten himself, such as Sarah Francis or Janet Craxton (whose recordings are highly recommended), but one who had lived with and absorbed a variety of approaches, nonetheless taking previous performances into account. There are many candidates for this, but Nicholas Daniel's reading of the Metamorphoses very much fits this description. Nicholas is a solo oboist of international acclaim who studied with George Caird, Janet Craxton and Celia Nicklin, and has lived for many years with the Metamorphoses. He has performed and broadcast the work many times, notably in 1997 at the Proms. We offer this performance as another view and we would hope that this will lead listeners to the many other distinguished versions contained in the discography, or indeed to recordings not picked up by this study.

Epilogue

This brings an exhaustive if not exhausting journey to a close. There is no doubt that the period when Britten was working on *Billy Budd* was a critical time in the composer's life. With this second large-scale opera, Britten proved conclusively that he was able to deal with profound subjects in a truly original way. His command of both libretto and music in this opera points to a composer who could draw on literary sources as a natural source of creativity. Britten's use of Ovid for the *Metamorphoses* is a fine example of this rare ability. In exploring these exquisite miniatures we really feel that the composer had 'studied and pondered and tried to fathom eternal truths'.

Biographies

After studying at the Royal Academy of Music and Cambridge University, **George Caird** pursued a freelance career as an oboist which included orchestral playing, chamber music and solo engagements. He worked with many of London's major orchestras including the London Philharmonic, BBC Symphony and City of London Sinfonia, and particularly as a member of The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields from 1984 to 1991. He has also been a member of a number of leading ensembles, notably as a founder-member of the Albion Ensemble and the George Caird Oboe Quartet.

George has toured for the British Council in China, the Far East, India, Egypt, Tunisia and Canada as well as performing in concerts and broadcasts in most European countries. He has recorded for the Chandos, Nimbus, Hyperion, Meridian and Proudsound labels with solo and chamber music repertoire. In November 2004 *An English Renaissance,* of quintets and quartets for oboe and strings was issued on the Oboe Classics label. In 2007 the Albion Ensemble released its CD, *Beethoven, Music for Wind Ensemble*, for Somm Recordings. George was the director of Stage 96, a chamber music course run by La Caixa de Pensiones in Catalonia, and in 1996 and 2007 he was a juror in the Munich International Oboe Competition. George has also sat on adjudication panels for BBC Young Musician of the Year, the Audi Junior Musician, the Shell-LSO Competition, the YCAT awards and the Chamber Music Competition for Schools.

George has performed all of Britten's Oboe music extensively, including broadcasts of the *Temporal Variations* and the *Metamorphoses after Ovid* for BBC Radio 3. He has performed the *Metamorphoses after Ovid* over 60 times.

George has been involved in many areas of music education: teaching, devising educational programmes, coaching chamber ensembles, conducting and coaching youth orchestras and as a founding member of the British Double Reed Society. He is a member of the Executive Committee of the International Double Reed Society and will host the 2009 IDRS Conference in Birmingham. He was appointed as a professor of oboe at the Royal Academy of Music in 1984 where he became Head of Woodwind in 1987 and Head of Orchestral Studies in 1991. Since September 1993, George has been Principal of Birmingham Conservatoire.
George is a board member of Symphony Hall and Culture West Midlands. In 2004 he joined the Board of Youth Music, and was the President of the Incorporated Society of

Musicians for 2004/5. He chaired the Learning and Skills Council Music Review for Birmingham and Solihull 2003/4 and was elected Secretary-General of the Association of European Conservatoires in November 2004. Since November 2005 he has been Chair of the National Association of Youth Orchestras. In January 2006 he joined the Advisory Group for the Department of Education and Skills Music and Dance Scheme.

Joy Boughton (1913-63) was the daughter of the composer Rutland Boughton. She had oboe lessons with Léon Goossens, and while still at the Royal College of Music began playing with the Boyd Neel Chamber Orchestra. In 1935 she gave the first of many BBC broadcasts as a soloist, and in 1937 gave the first performance (with the Boyd Neel Strings) of the concerto her father had written for her.

During World War II she played with the Sylvan Trio and the London Harpsichord Ensemble, and joined the newly-formed English Opera Group for the first Aldburgh Festival in 1948. She performed in eleven festivals, and also toured and gave London performances with the Group.

She was an active freelance oboist, playing also with the Jacques Orchestra, the Brighton Philharmonic, and the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

Joy Boughton taught at the Royal College of Music, and was an influence on many younger players, including Sarah Francis and Neil Black.

photo: Benjamin Harte

Nicholas Daniel's long and distinguished career began when, at the age of 18, he won the BBC Young Musician of the Year Competition and went on to win further competitions in Europe. At his debut at the BBC Proms in 1992 the Sunday Times described him as one of the greatest exponents of the oboe in the world. Today one of the UK's most distinguished soloists as well as an increasingly successful conductor, he has become an important ambassador for music and musicians in many different fields.

Nicholas has been heard on every continent, and has been a concerto soloist with many of the world's leading orchestras, working with conductors such as Sakari Oramo, Sir Roger Norrington, Oliver Knussen, Richard Hickox and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. He is an important force in the creation and performance of new repertoire for oboe, and has premièred works by composers including Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Henri Dutilleux, Thea Musgrave, Nigel Osborne, John Tavener and Sir Michael Tippett.

An active chamber musician, Nicholas is a founder member of the Haffner Wind Ensemble and the Britten Oboe Quartet, and enjoys a long history of collaboration with the pianist Julius Drake, and the Maggini and Lindsay string quartets. As a conductor, Nicholas has worked with orchestras in the UK and abroad, and is Associate Artistic Director of the Britten Sinfonia, with whom he made his Proms conducting debut in 2004. He is also Artistic Director of the Leicester International Festival, and teaches in the UK and in Germany, where is he Professor of Oboe at the Musikhochschule, Trossingen.

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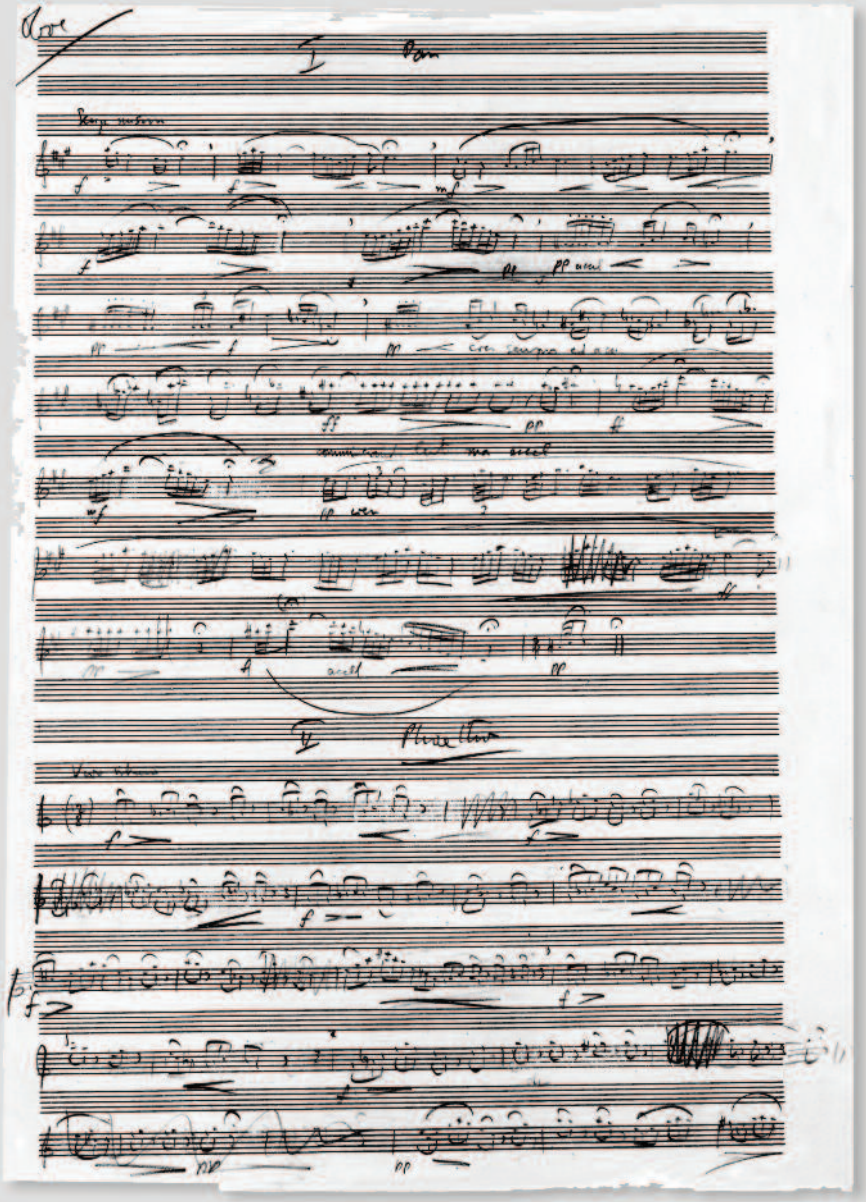
N.B. Most of the above images are viewable on the Internet.



Benjamin Britten: Composition Sketch (1951), opening. Courtesy Britten-Pears Library, Aldburgh.