INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI®
BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S NOCTURNAL, OP. 70 FOR GUITAR: A NOVEL APPROACH TO PROGRAM MUSIC AND VARIATION STRUCTURE

by

ROBERTO ALCARAZ

A Document Submitted to the Faculty of the
SCHOOL OF MUSIC AND DANCE
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS
WITH A MAJOR IN MUSIC
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2001
As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the
document prepared by ROBERTO ALCARAZ

entitled BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S NOCTURNAL, OP. 70 FOR GUITAR: A

NOVEL APPROACH TO PROGRAM MUSIC AND VARIATION

STRUCTURE

and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the requirements for the Degree

of DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

Final approval and acceptance of this document is contingent upon the candidate's
submission of the final copy of the document to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this document prepared under my direction and
recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the requirement.

Director Prof. Thomas Patterson

12-4-2001
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This document has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degree at The University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

Brief quotations from this document are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgment of source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the head of the major department or the Dean of the Graduate College when in his or her judgment the proposed use of the material is in the interests of scholarship. In all other instances, however, permission must be obtained from the author.

SIGNED: 

[Signature]
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ABSTRACT</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. BENJAMIN BRITTEN</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Brief biography</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Survey of his works</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Instrumental music</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Solo vocal music</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Dramatic works</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Works with guitar</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Works inspired by Elizabethan literature and music</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. THEME AND VARIATION IN BRITTEN’S OEUVRE</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Theme and variation form in Britten’s works</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Use of the passacaglia in Britten’s works</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV. NIGHT, DEATH, SLEEP, AND DREAMS: COMMON THEMES IN BRITTEN’S OEUVRE</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. List of works which deal with these themes</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V. BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND JOHN DOWLAND</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. John Dowland: a brief biography</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Britten works inspired by John Dowland’s music</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VI. JOHN DOWLAND’S AYRE “COME HEAVY SLEEP”: BASIS FOR BRITTEN’S NOCTURNAL, OP. 70</strong></td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Background</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. The Ayre</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VII. BRITTEN’S NOCTURNAL, OP. 70 FOR GUITAR</strong></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Formal structure and design</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Musingly (Meditativo)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Very agitated (Molto agitato)</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Restless (Inquieto)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Uneasy (Ansioso)</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. March-like (Quasi una marcia)</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Dreaming (Sognante)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gently rocking (Cullante)</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Passacaglia (misurato)</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Programmatic implications of the Nocturnal, Op. 70</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VIII. Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REFERENCES</strong></td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This document is a study of Benjamin Britten's Nocturnal, Op. 70, a major work composed for solo guitar in 1963. It intends to demonstrate that the architecture used by the composer in this work is determined as much by its underlying program as well as to the variation structure used to convey it.

This work is structured in eight sections: following an overview of the document in section one, section two consists of a brief biography of the composer as well as a general survey of his works, including those in which he makes use of the guitar. Sections three and four examine the works by Britten composed in variation form, as well as those which are related to the themes of night, death, sleep, and dreams. Sections five and six include a brief biography of Renaissance composer John Dowland, as well as a brief discussion of other Britten works inspired by the music of this composer. Benjamin Britten uses John Dowland's song "Come Heavy Sleep" as the basis for his Nocturnal, Op. 70. This song is examined and analyzed as part of section six.

Section seven consists of a close examination of the Nocturnal, Op. 70. This examination looks closely at the most important harmonic, rhythmic, and formal elements of each variation and how they relate to the theme of Dowland.

Finally, the conclusion sums up and reemphasizes the main thesis laid out in the introduction of this document.
I. INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW

Composed in 1963, Benjamin Britten’s Nocturnal, Op. 70, is among the most important pieces written for the guitar in the twentieth century. Dedicated to guitarist Julian Bream, it was first performed at the Aldeburgh Music Festival on June 12th of 1964.

Since its first performance, this work has become a mainstay of the guitar repertory; it has since been widely performed and recognized as a significant contribution by a major twentieth-century composer. Britten, in this sense, is among several other notable composers who have contributed to the expansion of the instrument. Among these, Sir William Walton, Toru Takemitsu, Alberto Ginastera, Hans Werner Henze, and Luciano Berio, to name a few, have also written important works. As opposed to the nineteenth-century repertory written for guitar, the works of these composers reveal a non-traditional approach to the instrument. This stands in stark contrast with the main body of repertory for this instrument right up to the first two decades of the twentieth-century which came from the hand of guitarist-composers; they wrote for the instrument in great part motivated as much by its lack of repertory as to their own creative impulses. The more recent lack of first-hand knowledge of the instrument from composers has given way to a fresh and adventurous input of ideas concerning the guitar’s
interpretative and technical possibilities. Without having the constraints imposed by pre-conceived notions of technical limitations offered by the medium, this fresh outlook has, without doubt, contributed significantly to its enrichment. From the performer's perspective, this has forced new and challenging technical demands; from a purely musical standpoint, they are new and musically substantive works to be performed. Seen from a broader perspective, this repertory is a welcome contribution and a break from traditional repertory, given the wide variety of contemporary musical currents they encompass. Britten's Nocturnal, Op. 70, for example, when compared to earlier works (namely by Tárrega, Aguado, Sor, or Giuliani), is a well-conceived work which exploits the different expressive and technical resources of the instrument (among them the use of pizzicatti, harmonics, and varied textures) while utilizing a non-tonal, freer musical language.

The primary focus of this study will be centered on the architecture used by Britten in this work. Given its unusual nature, I will explore the two main elements which lie at its core: the use of an implied program (Dowland's ayre, "Come, heavy Sleep," which is stated at the conclusion of the work), and Britten's unorthodox use of a theme and variation structure. My intention in this study is, therefore, to demonstrate that the architecture used by Britten is
determined as much by the implied program as to the variation-type form used to convey it.

After this overview, I will refer to the figure of Benjamin Britten. First, I will offer a brief biography and then will proceed by making a general survey of his works. This survey will include the works in which Britten uses the guitar, as well as a list of his works inspired, as this one, by Elizabethan literature and music.

In the third part, I will examine a representative group of Britten works which use a variation structure. I will also review works of his in which he employs the passacaglia, a specific form based on variation. Britten was very fond of the passacaglia and used it repeatedly in other works. It is also related directly to the Nocturnal, Op. 70, since the last and by far the most substantial variation of this work, is written in this form.

In the following part, I will survey the works of Britten which share some common themes: night, death, sleep, and dreams. A fairly high number of his works touch upon these subjects. The Nocturnal, Op. 70, in this respect, is highly representative of Britten's works since all four themes lie at the core of this work.

The fifth part will introduce John Dowland, whose ayre, "Come, heavy Sleep," furnishes the thematic and formal material of the Nocturnal, Op. 70. I will first comment on Britten's only other work based on a Dowland ayre: his
Lachrymae, Op. 48 composed in 1950 for viola and piano, and later transcribed for viola and full orchestra in 1976. This work also shares a formal relationship with the Nocturnal, since its variation structure is very similar.

Following this, I will go straight to John Dowland's ayre, "Come, heavy Sleep." Given the fact that this ayre is the cornerstone of the whole work, it is important to examine it closely. Both the text as well as the musical form will be studied.

An examination of the Nocturnal is the natural follow-up to Dowland's ayre. This examination will cover the most important harmonic, rhythmic and formal elements of each variation, particularly in terms of their connection with Dowland's ayre, which serves as the theme.

Once I have studied the formal aspects of the work, I will then discuss the programmatic element. This part will examine the Nocturnal, Op. 70, from the point of view of its underlying program: the poetic text of the ayre which touches upon the subject of sleep as a reflection on death, a common literary theme throughout the Renaissance. The overall conception of this work has as much to do with Britten's reflection on this theme as to its actual form, where varied motives go hand in hand with a descriptive nature of the different states of sleep as suggested by Britten himself.
Finally, the conclusion will sum up and reemphasize the main thesis laid out earlier in this introduction.
II. BENJAMIN BRITTEN

A. Brief biography

Born in Lowestoft, Suffolk, on November 22, 1913, Benjamin Britten first began the study of composition with Frank Bridge, who was to become a major influence in Britten's musical formation, a fact he was at pains to acknowledge throughout his entire life. Through these formative years with Bridge, he acquired, through rigorous training, a solid musical grounding as well as an early interest in contemporary musical trends. By the time he was admitted to the Royal College of Music in 1930, he already possessed solid compositional skills. This change of venue resulted in his taking lessons with composer John Ireland while becoming a piano student of Arthur Benjamin. The latter's own composing style also made an impression on Britten, both in his works as in his performance. Besides his work as a composer, Britten was an accomplished pianist, ensemble player and, particularly in his later years, song accompanist.

Having been introduced to Arnold Schoenberg shortly after the first performance of his Sinfonietta, Op. 1, Britten was awarded a traveling scholarship at the end of his college career in December of 1933. His intention was to study with Schoenberg's pupil Alban Berg, whose Lyric Suite
and orchestral fragments from Wozzeck he was already acquainted with. Due to opposition from college authorities and to his father's death, he was unable to meet Berg during a visit to Vienna that same year.

Having concluded his European trip, he began his professional career writing music for some short documentaries. During this period he became acquainted with poet W. H. Auden, who was one of the script writers with whom he worked. This marked the beginning of a fruitful relationship between both men. During the 1930s he composed, among other works, the orchestrally accompanied song cycle Our Hunting Fathers, Op. 8 (Norwich Festival, 1936), the Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, Op. 10, in 1937, and the choral-orchestral Ballad of Heroes, Op. 14 (Festival of Music for the people, 1939). The most discernible influences in these works are Mahler, Berg, and the neo-classical Stravinsky.

In 1939, following the path taken by W. H. Auden, Britten, along with Peter Pears (his lifelong companion and renowned tenor) went to the United States for a brief period. Cultivating instrumental as well as vocal music, he wrote his violin concerto (1939), his Sinfonia da Requiem (1940), and his first string quartet (1941). During this period he responded to Pears' individual artistry and penetrating musical intelligence, inaugurating a creative partnership
that was to be the foundation on which most of his first achievements in both opera and song would be based."

He considered settling in the United States and taking American citizenship, but opted for a return to England in 1941, a decision in part influenced by a chance reading of an article on the Suffolk poet George Crabbe. After his return to England he went through a period of readjustment. He was exempted from military service, and, along with Peter Pears, offered recitals to diverse audiences, a fact which may have encouraged Britten to search for a direct and widely comprehensible idiom. After a protracted illness, along with one of his recurring creative blocks, he composed his Serenade for tenor, horn and strings in 1943, an important work "which most clearly declared his readiness to embark on the broad, richly varied canvas of true opera."

As a result of his work with librettist Montagu Slater, starting in 1944, the opera Peter Grimes (based on a poem by George Crabbe) was first performed on June 7, 1945 to a resounding success. This work became highly influential in the resurgence of twentieth-century English opera. It was immediately taken up by many of the world's greatest opera houses and added to their repertory. The success of Peter Grimes marked the beginning of Britten's most prolific

---

2 Ibid., 6.
creative period which saw the composition of the *Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, the *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, and his second string quartet, all completed in 1945. The following year he wrote the chamber opera *The Rape of Lucretia* and, a year later, in 1947, his comic opera *Albert Herring*.

Through his friendship with Peter Pears, Britten's main focus was tilted toward the composition of opera. However, given the scant support for this medium (there were only two established opera houses in England), after *Peter Grimes* he turned to the medium of chamber opera as a way of enabling performances in smaller provincial theaters. After the performance of *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring*, the English Opera Group (the special company formed to present both works) helped a year later to launch the Aldeburgh Festival in the small Suffolk town where Britten had settled. The creation of this Festival proved to be a turning point in his career: from its beginnings Britten's principal activity for the rest of his life involved the production of music to be included in the programs for the Festival. His major work as a pianist and conductor was also done there. His working conditions for the festival also permitted him to compose music for specific ensembles, halls, and performers, among them cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, harpist Osian Ellis, and guitarist Julian Bream.
Despite the limitations regarding the composition of large-scale opera in Aldeburgh, his opera Billy Budd, based on a story by Herman Melville, was produced in December of 1951. It is a work which has been widely recognized as a dramatic achievement comparable to Peter Grimes. Gloriana followed in 1953 and was presented as a tribute to Elizabeth II at the time of her coronation. The Turn of the Screw, a chamber opera, followed in 1954. This last work reveals an interest on Britten’s part to explore twelve-tone techniques and quasi-serial devices he would use in some of his later works.

A trip to the Far East in 1955 proved influential on his writing, a fact which became discernible by his use of new sonorities in his full-length ballet The Prince of the Pagodas (1957). This may have influenced his choice of texts for his Songs from the Chinese, dating from the same year. It also had an effect on his work Curlew River, the first of a trilogy of church parables dating from 1964. Here Britten modified to a certain extent his musical language, paring down textures.

The opera A Midsummer-Night's Dream (1960) was followed by War Requiem, first performed in 1962. This last work "marked a second peak (Peter Grimes and its aftermath being
the first) in Britten's esteem with the general public. It interweaves liturgical text with poems written by Wilfred Owen, a victim of World War I. This last work made a strong impact on its early audiences. Besides vocal music, several important works inspired by Rostropovich were also produced during these years, among them the cello symphony, (1963) and the three solo cello suites. His Nocturnal, Op. 70 for guitar, dedicated to Julian Bream, was also composed this same year.

The opening of the concert hall Maltings at Snape in 1967 broadened the scope of the Aldeburgh Festival. Britten's work as conductor in this bigger house, and his involvement in recordings, given the excellent acoustics of this hall, were intensified. It was, however, not until 1973 that an opera was composed to be performed on this stage: Death in Venice. Previous to this work, and written as a commission for BBC, he had composed Owen Wingrave (1970) a television opera, first broadcast in 1971. Death in Venice, based on a story by Thomas Mann, proved to be his last opera, and its subject matter, similar to Peter Grimes, involves homosexual overtones, a central factor in Britten's own personal life.

Britten's declining health worsened after this last opera, as he suffered from a heart condition. Given his

\[^{1}\] The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, s.v. "Britten, Benjamin," by Peter Evans, 494.
delicate state, Britten continued to revise some earlier works and was able to produce *Phaedra*, a cantata written for soprano Janet Baker, and his third string quartet, first performed fifteen days after the composer's death.

Benjamin Britten died on December 4, 1976.

B. Survey of his works

Though primarily a vocal and dramatic composer, the full scope of Britten's works is rather broad, encompassing a wide spectrum of vocal and instrumental combinations. Until the year 1942 (the year of his return to England) he was predominantly an instrumental composer, the vast majority of his most important scores until that year being chamber and orchestral works. A determinant factor in his later emphasis toward vocal and dramatic scores was his lifelong partnership with tenor Peter Pears. This became more evident after 1945, when he concentrated his major efforts toward the writing of operas, while writing other works, including song cycles, between these major dramatic pieces.

I have classified his works in five separate groups: instrumental music, solo vocal music, dramatic works, works with guitar, and, finally, works inspired by Elizabethan literature and music.
1. Instrumental music

Among Britten’s works in the field of solo repertory, his personal friendship with several prominent instrumentalists proved to be a stimulating and rewarding impulse for his efforts. As expressed by Donald Mitchell, "the instruments are explored to their innermost recesses, so too are the personalities of the players, whose techniques had come to fascinate the composer and eventually to prompt him to write for them." *

Among his most important works in the field of solo repertory are the following works:

1936 Temporal Variations for oboe and piano.
1950 Lachrymae, Op. 48 (reflections on a song of John Dowland, for viola and piano).
1951 Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Op. 49 for oboe solo.

Among his other chamber works, these may be mentioned among his finest:


Among his works for orchestra, the following may be mentioned:

1937 Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, Op. 10.
1946 The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, Op. 34.

Britten also wrote a handful concertos for solo instruments and orchestra:

1940 Diversions, Op. 21 for piano (left hand).
1976 Lachrymae, Op. 48a (reflections on a song of John Dowland, for viola and string orchestra; original version for viola and piano, 1950).

2. Solo vocal music

A great part of Britten's creative efforts was destined to the medium of solo voice and piano. He produced
over one hundred settings. The very wide range of the verses used reflects a discriminating taste in his selection of texts. Besides the settings based on English texts, cycles using texts by Rimbaud, Michelangelo, Hölderlin, and Pushkin were also set in their original languages.

The following is a list of his most important song cycles:

1940 *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, Op. 22.
1953 *Winter Words* (Hardy), Op. 52.
1965 *The Poet’s Echo* (Pushkin), Op. 76.

The following are among his most important cycles for voice and orchestra:

1943 *Serenade* (various poets), Op. 31.

Among his choral works the following are among his most important:

1933 *A Boy was Born* (15th and 16th century carols), Op. 3.
1942 *Hymn to St. Cecilia* (Auden), Op. 27.
1949 *Spring Symphony* (various poets), Op. 44.

3. Dramatic works

Britten's eleven operas are considered the most important contribution to English-language opera since Henry Purcell. Besides full-scale works of this genre, he wrote several chamber operas of importance. Other dramatic works also include some pieces for church performance. His most important dramatic works are the following:

1941 *Paul Bunyan* (operetta), Op. 17.
1951 *Billy Budd* (opera), Op. 50.
1954 *The Turn of the Screw* (chamber opera), Op. 54.
Among other important works intended for performance in churches are the following:


4. Works with guitar

Benjamin Britten employed the guitar in three of his published works. Of these, the *Nocturnal*, Op. 70, is the only one written for the guitar as a solo instrument; the other two works use the guitar as an accompanist instrument to vocal music. In his opera *Gloriana*, however, Britten employs the gittern, an early guitar-related instrument, as part of a stage ensemble in the third act. These four works are, in chronological order:

1953 *Gloriana* (opera / gittern).
1957 *Songs from the Chinese*, Op. 58, for high voice and guitar.
1961 *Folk Songs* (Volume 6, England) for high voice and guitar.
1963 *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, Op. 70, for guitar.
Gloriana, Britten’s sixth opera, was written for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. It uses a libretto written by William Plomer, based on Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History, by Lytton Strachey, as well as some material furnished by the biography Queen Elizabeth I, written by J. E. Neale. An historical opera, despite the multiple characters involved in the plot and the changes of scenery, it is fundamentally a portrait of the aging Queen Elizabeth I. The plot deals mostly with her love-hate relationship with her favorite subject, the Earl of Essex, whose death warrant she finally signs.

As an opera that reflects Britten’s eclectic side by using modern idioms with evocative period music, its initial reception was mostly hostile. It is a festive work which combines history, choral and instrumental dances, and pageantry. It suffered, nevertheless, from the miscomprehension of an audience assembled more to celebrate than to experience a musical event.

Divided into three acts, it consists of eight scenes, each one of which is complete in itself, and works out as a succession of vivid self-contained tableaux. Britten limits his use of the gittern to the courtly dances in the second scene of the third act. Julian Bream later arranged some of the instrumental dances from this opera using the lute as a solo instrument.
Britten uses the guitar for the first time in his Songs from the Chinese, Op. 58, written for high voice and guitar in 1957. Dedicated to Peter Pears and Julian Bream, this collection of six songs is based on Arthur Waley's English translations of Chinese poems published in 1946. The title of the songs are the following:

1) "The Big Chariot"
2) "The Old Lute"
3) "The Autumn Wind"
4) "The Herd-Boy"
5) "Depression"
6) "Dance Song"

This cycle was written one year after his ballet The Prince of the Pagodas, in the autumn of 1957. It is also one of his works of oriental subject matter written after his trip to the Far East in 1955.

Britten reveals in these miniatures a grasp of the guitar's technical and expressive capabilities. He evokes the style brisé typical of French Baroque lute music in his second song, where he uses a "strange quasi-polyphonic lute texture"; this song, (except for a clear G major conclusion)

---

1 Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten, 362.
is strictly a modal piece, based on the Lydian mode. In the third song ("The Autumn Wind"), Britten captures the restless movement suggestive of the wind through his persistent use of slurred semiquavers with shifting tonal implications. In "Depression," the fifth song, Britten exploits the use of glissandi and the use of mostly fourth-dominated chords in parallel movement, a technique he will once again use in the Nocturnal, Op 70. He also manages some illustrative effects in "The Herd-Boy," the fourth song of this cycle, where the gait of the ox and a graceful upper vocal line are juxtaposed effectively.⁶

Overall this is, despite its brevity, a beautiful, contrasted, and psychologically penetrating cycle. Its treatment of the themes of transient youth and beauty, old age and the passing of time, are very effectively conveyed using the guitar's full palette of resources. It is, as stated by Jeremy Noble, "a work that can stand with any of his song cycles."⁷

In 1961 Britten published his sixth volume of Folk Song arrangements for high voice and guitar. Britten's arrangements of folk music began in 1942, just before his return to England and extended to 1976, the composer's last summer, when he arranged eight songs for harp. This volume

⁶ Ibid., 363.
of Six English Songs had by then received its first performances in the late 1950s at song recitals by Peter Pears and guitarist Julian Bream. The six songs are the following:

1) "I Will Give My Love an Apple"
2) "Sailor Boy"
3) "Master Kilby"
4) "The Soldier and the Sailor"
5) "Bonny at Morn"
6) "The Shooting of his Dear"

As a whole, Britten's arrangements reveal an adherence to tradition combined with an awareness of twentieth-century trends. His arrangements reflect "a unique blend of the innovative and the traditional, the insular and the international."

In his settings Britten shows a sensitivity to text, as in the first song where he plays on the words "without any key." In this song he blurs the original triple meter and the original's traditional chord sequences (as used by Ralph Vaughan Williams in his own setting of this song)."

According to Roseberry, other original touches in these songs include the harmonic changes in the "Amen" of the

---

9 Ibid., 303.
fourth song ("The Soldier and the Sailor"), which reflect the "tipsy" state of the sailor. In the last two songs of this collection ("Bonny at Morn" and "The Shooting of his Dear"), Britten once again uses the open fourth chords offered naturally by the instrument's open strings as an ostinato figure.

In the second song ("Sailor Boy"), he writes for the guitar by combining sprite cross-rhythms with a more folk-like accompaniment in the refrains.

5. Works inspired by Elizabethan literature and music

Throughout his career, Britten wrote a number of works which reveal an affinity toward literature and music from the English Renaissance. For some of his song cycles he drew upon texts by John Donne, Ben Jonson, and John Milton, among others, and on William Shakespeare for his opera A Midsummer Night's Dream. Among the composers belonging to this same period for whom he showed an affinity, Henry Purcell was unquestionably the most important. Britten showed a lifelong devotion to Purcell's music as is manifested in the numerous arrangements he made. He also wrote several instrumental works which pay homage to this composer. Of these, the most important is The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, also known as Variations and Fugue on

---

10 Ibid., 303-4.
a Theme of Purcell. Purcell stands as "a figure with whom Britten has strong creative affinities, and possibly the greatest single influence on the development of his own vocal and operatic style." Another composer to whom he played tribute was lutenist and composer John Dowland. Dowland's music became the basis for two of his own works using variation technique: the Lachrymae, Op. 48 for viola and piano and his Nocturnal, Op. 70, for guitar, the object of this work.

The following is a listing of Britten's most important works related to seventeenth-century English music or poetry:

1945 The Holy Sonnets of John Donne, Op. 35 (nine songs for high voice and piano).

1945 String Quartet no. 2, Op. 36 (written for the 250th anniversary of Henry Purcell's death, the last movement, titled Chacony, is a tribute to him).

1946 The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, Op. 34 (variations and fugue on a theme of Purcell for orchestra, with speaker ad lib).

1950 Lachrymae, Op. 48 (reflections on a song of John Dowland, for viola and piano); version for viola and string orchestra in 1976.

---

1953 *Gloriana*, Op. 53 (opera in three acts, based on English history, it centers around the later years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I).

1960 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 64 (opera in three acts, based on Shakespeare).

1963 *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, Op. 70, for guitar.

Apart from his original compositions, Britten did a series of arrangements and realizations of other works by Purcell among which the most important are the following:

- Chacony in G minor (for strings).
- The Golden Sonata (for two violins, cello and piano).
- *When night her purple veil had softly spread* (chamber cantata for baritone, two violins and continuo).
- *Orpheus Britannicus* (realized and edited by Britten and P. Pears):
  - Five Songs (for voice and piano).
  - Six Songs (for high (or medium) voice and piano).
  - Seven Songs (for high (or medium) voice and piano).
  - Six Duets (for high and low voices and piano).
  - Suite of Songs (for high voice and orchestra).
- Three Songs (for high voice and orchestra).

- Harmonia Sacra (realized and edited by Britten and P. Pears):
  - The Blessed Virgin’s Expostulation (for high voice and piano).
  - Job’s Curse (for high voice and piano).
  - Saul and the Witch at Endor (for STB voices and piano).
  - Three Divine Hymns (for high (or medium) voice and piano).
  - Two Divine Hymns and Alleluia (for high voice and piano).

- Odes and Elegies (realized and edited by Britten and P. Pears):
  - The Queen’s Epicedium (for high voice and piano).
III. THEME AND VARIATION IN BRITTEN'S OEUVRE

A. Theme and variation form in Britten's works

Variation form was cultivated by Britten in a fair number of works involving a variety of forces: vocal settings, orchestra, chamber music, opera, and, if we include the Nocturnal, solo instruments. As such, his imagination seemed to be triggered by this form given the varied and unorthodox ways he used it: from straightforward orchestral variations (The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra), to variation used as a binding tool (as in the prologue and interludes of the opera The Turn of the Screw), or as in the Nocturnal, to variation form combined with an underlying program. Following are some of his works or movements which are cast in variation form along with a brief description of each:

1932  Sinfonietta, Op. 1, second movement (written for chamber orchestra). All three movements of this early work are thematically related. The second movement is, according to Evans, more conventional than the outer two, even though his "variation procedures are a long way from the soft option of the apprentice composer."  

---

12 Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten, 19.
1933 *A Boy Was Born*, Op. 3 (variations for unaccompanied choir with ad lib organ accompaniment). This is Britten's earliest large-scale work for voices. It is based on a four-note motive and uses texts by C. Rossetti, Tusser, Quarles, and some anonymous texts. It consists of six choral variations, the last of which is an elaborate rondo.

1937 *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, Op. 10 (for string orchestra). This work is a tribute to his early teacher and mentor. His first popular success, it gained an international reputation for Britten. Based on a theme from the second of Three Idylls (1911) for string quartet by Bridge, its ten variations reveal his skill in writing for string orchestra, an ability developed early as the result of his viola studies. Britten originally conceived this work as a musical portrait. In this respect each variation portrays a different character trait of Bridge's personality. Here elements of parody and satire are also to be found; in most variations he parodies a range of musical styles or writes in the manner of composers such as Mahler and Rossini. This work is comprised of the following movements: Adagio, March, Romance, Aria
Italiana, Bourée Classique, Wiener Waltzer, Moto Perpetuo, Funeral March, Chant, Fugue and Finale.

1940 Diversions, Op. 21 (theme and variations for piano and orchestra). Britten’s fourth work for soloist and orchestra, it was commissioned by the Viennese Paul Wittgenstein, a one-armed pianist. Consisting of ten variations and a tarantella finale, it was later revised in 1951; Britten cut the seventh variation and modified some of the orchestration. Britten’s declared objective in this work “was not to suggest the illusion of two-handed sonorities and textures, but to exploit the single line in a wide variety of guises.”

1945 The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra, Op. 34 (also known as Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell, for orchestra with speaker ad lib). This is basically a didactic work, written for an educational film titled The Instruments of the Orchestra. Its main objective is to acquaint young listeners to the basic sounds of the orchestral departments. Based on a dance theme from Purcell’s incidental music to Abdelazar, or The Moor’s Revenge, this work consists of thirteen variations followed by a fugue. Each variation successively

---

introduces a different instrument or group of instruments, and in the final fugue each group makes its entry in the same order as in the variations.

1950 *Lachrymae*, Op. 48 (reflections on a song of John Dowland, for viola and piano). This is the only work by Britten (besides the *Nocturnal*) which is based on an ayre by John Dowland, in this case "If my complaints could passions move," from his *First Booke of Songes*, published in 1597. Its unorthodox treatment of variation form is similar to the one used in the *Nocturnal*: a series of "reflections" (or variations) which ultimately lead to the theme at its conclusion. Britten, in 1976, orchestrated the piano part for strings, and this was to be his last completed composition before his death. Consisting of ten variations, Britten quotes another Dowland song in the midst of his sixth variation: "Flow my Tears."

1954 *The Turn of the Screw*, Op. 54 (an opera in a prologue and two acts based on a story by Henry James). This opera is constructed as a sequence of self-contained episodes. Britten, in an ingenious way, binds all the scenes using a succession of orchestral interludes, each one of which is a variation on an instrumental theme stated in the
prologue. Using a highly complex scheme, the theme uses the twelve notes of the chromatic scale stated in two whole-tone scales, one odd and the other even numbered. Britten, in a very complex way, uses keys (as in Act I) in an ascending sequence - the first seven scenes are each in one of the seven white note keys of the octave. This follows in close parallel the flow of the opera's argument. The use of black keys, for example, is used in the scene of Act I, when for the first time the two ghosts are heard.

1954 Canticle III, Op. 55: "Still falls the rain" (for tenor, horn and piano). Based on a text by Edith Sitwell, this is the third of five canticles Britten composed during the span of twenty-seven years. It was written the same year as The Turn of the Screw and employs, not surprisingly, a very similar variation technique. Conceived as an alteration of verses and instrumental interludes, "these interludes are developing variations for horn and piano on a theme presented at the outset."\(^{14}\)

1965 Gemini Variations, Op. 73 (written for flute, violin and piano four-hands). This set of

\(^{14}\) Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten, 408.
variations and fugue came about as a result of the composer's meeting with the Hungarian twelve-year-old twin brothers Zoltán and Gábor Jeney. Besides abilities respectively as flautist and violinist, they were also gifted pianists. The work is based on a theme of Zoltán Kodály. A minor piece within Britten's overall output, "the piece stands as a pleasantly eccentric testimony to a quixotic impulse."  

1971 Third Suite for Cello, Op. 87. This suite, as well as his earlier two, came about as a result of his friendship with Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. It is a suite consisting of nine movements, the last of which is a passacaglia, a favored form of Britten. Its overall conception, however, bears resemblance to the Lachrymae and the Nocturnal: the nine movements are based on not one, but four melodies: three Russian folk songs from Tchaikovsky's volumes of arrangements, and the Kontakion (Hymn of the Departed), an ancient hymn tune Britten took from the English Hymnal. The melodies finally emerge at the conclusion of the passacaglia where they are played in succession. The suite is based on these four themes: at least one movement is closely derived from it and in

---

15 Ibid., 333.
other contexts they are interwoven or blurred into one another.

B. Use of the passacaglia in Britten's works

As a musical entity, the passacaglia is in itself a theme and variation form using a simple compositional device, the repeated use of a ground bass above which variations develop. Britten found in it a wealth of creative possibilities which he explored in many of his works, including the Nocturnal, Op. 70, where he uses it as the final and most elaborate variation of this work. In this case (as will be further discussed), Britten, according to Handel, "uses the passacaglia as a confirming finale, but he also employs it to create a point of stability around which other movements can gravitate."¹⁶ Not only did he explore the possibilities offered by this form in the realm of instrumental music, but also in his operas and vocal works. It is also noteworthy that in some of his most important examples (as in Peter Grimes, The Turn of the Screw, The Rape of Lucretia, and The Holy Sonnets of John Donne) the passacaglias used have associations with the subject of death. Such is also the case of the Nocturnal, Op. 70, where this subject is related to the underlying program of the

whole work. In any case, "he often elevates the passacaglia to some crucial dramatic point of an opera or song cycle to reflect on a tragedy or intensify a dialogue."\(^{17}\) The same could also be said of the way he employs it in the *Nocturnal*, Op. 70, even though it is a purely instrumental work.

Following is a list of Britten compositions in the form of a passacaglia with a brief description of how he employs it:

1938 Piano Concerto, Op. 13. His only piano concerto, it was conceived more as a suite than as a work in a classical mold. Its movements are entitled Toccata, Waltz, Impromptu (originally a Recitative and Aria) and March. The Impromptu movement is a passacaglia with seven variations: it was written the same year as *Peter Grimes* and recalls the interludes of his opera in terms of form and its serious nature. It departs from the other movements of this work which use parody and satire.

1939 Violin Concerto, Op. 15. Belonging to his early period, Britten uses a passacaglia as the final movement of this concerto, a three-movement integrated sonata form (moderato con moto, scherzo (cadenza), and passacaglia). The passacaglia consists of a ground bass introduced by the trombones followed by nine variations. According to

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
Evans, "it is the first example of Britten’s use of the characteristically Purcellian passacaglia form." It is also "the first of a memorable sequence of passacaglia finales that sound a note of high seriousness in Britten." There may also exist a possible connection between this work and Berg’s violin concerto, whose first performance was attended by Britten. Berg also uses a slow variation finale in his concerto.

1943 Serenade for tenor, horn and string orchestra, Op. 31. Consisting of six songs framed by a prologue and an epilogue, Britten employs the passacaglia in the fourth song of this cycle, entitled "Dirge," which sets to music a text by an anonymous fifteenth-century poet. Its distinguishing trait lies in the fact that the ground is sung throughout by the tenor, while a fugue is developed on an independent theme.

1945 Peter Grimes, Op. 33. Britten’s most important operatic achievement, he uses a series of orchestral interludes throughout the opera as a way of uniting the different scenes. In the interlude

---

which links scenes I and II of act II, he uses a passacaglia. It serves a dramatic purpose reflecting on the action; it "depicts the derangement of Grimes and is, as it were, oppressed with the sense of his impending death." In terms of structure, it makes thirty-nine statements of the ground bass.

1945 The Holy Sonnets of John Donne, Op. 35. This song cycle, written for tenor and piano, was composed during a period of spiritual and physical crisis. Britten had returned from a series of performances with violinist Yehudi Menuhin offered to concentration camp survivors, and had just fallen ill. It consists of seven settings, of which the last one ("Death, be not proud") is based on a five-bar ground bass. It is described by White as a movement that "successfully embraces extremes, being both simple and fanciful, sensuous and austere, a masterpiece of feeling and form."^21

1945 String Quartet No. 2, Op. 36. This work was composed to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Henry Purcell’s death. The fourth movement is a large-scale chaconne (but he uses the Purcellian

---

^20 Handel, "Britten’s use of the Passacaglia," 2.
^21 Eric Walter White, Benjamin Britten, His Life and Operas, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 52.
term chacony) that, while not a passacaglia, is a closely related form. It is crafted in four sections: prelude, scherzo, adagio, and coda, each one separated by cadenzas for cello, viola, and first violin respectively. The four movements form a sonata in miniature. Its chacony consists of a theme and twenty-one variations. Each one of these four sections explores the theme from specific standpoints: harmonic variations, rhythmic variations, variations of new melodic counterpoint and formal variations on the ground. Another interesting twist to this form is that "the adagio itself a set of variations on a counter-theme, and its close marks the furthest point of development reached."\(^{22}\)

1946 *The Rape of Lucretia*, Op. 37. Britten uses a passacaglia in this opera for the culminating ensemble of the work: a funeral march which follows the suicide of Lucretia. In this respect he uses it as a vehicle for elegiac expression, a use also given in the seventeenth century, as in the lament of Dido in Henry Purcell's opera.

1954 *The Turn of the Screw*, Op. 54. Once again Britten

---

reserves the use of a passacaglia for the final and climatic moment of this opera, which concludes with the death of Miles.

1957 *Noyes Fludde*, Op. 59. In this children's opera, Britten uses a passacaglia in the flood scene. It underlies the representation of the incoming waves, which grow bigger as the orchestral forces gradually join in building dramatic weight. The chromatic, rhythmically restless theme (the ground), is interrupted at the climax, but is eventually picked up as the flood subsides toward the end.
IV. NIGHT, DEATH, SLEEP, AND DREAMS:  
COMMON THEMES IN BRITTEN'S OEUVRE

A. List of works which deal with these themes

As will be discussed further in this document, the related themes of night, death, sleep and dreams are the underlying subject matter of the Nocturnal, Op. 70. In this case, using John Dowland's text and music as his point of departure, Britten proceeds to explore this world of night, death, sleep and dreams by means of a variation structure, the last movement of which is a passacaglia.

This subject matter, however, seems to have been a constant throughout his entire oeuvre, exploring it in many ways. Given Britten's penchant toward literary stimulus in his works (a normal fact since he was more of a vocal composer), he extended in some cases this penchant to some of his instrumental works as well. "Young Apollo, Sinfonia da Requiem, Lachrymae, Six Metamorphoses after Ovid and perhaps the second and third string quartets owe their inspiration and some aspects of their form to literary models."²³ In this respect the Nocturnal, Op. 70, could also be added to these works since its architecture is in part literature-based, using Dowland's text as the point of departure for its

reflections, or variations. As stated before, Britten made use of this subject matter beginning in his earlier works. In most cases a movement of a song cycle or an instrumental or orchestral work is based on it. Among these works, his Serenade for horn, tenor, and string orchestra, Op. 31, is closer to these themes since they permeate, in a way, the entire cycle: the titles of two movements, for example, the "Nocturne" and the "Dirge," are overtly related to night and death. This cycle ends with a sonnet by John Keats in which he invokes sleep as a safeguard against the woes of conscious life.

According to Mellers, Britten, after composing The Turn of the Screw in 1954, "wrote a number of works that explored dream as a gateway to truth." Among these works, The Nocturne, Op. 60 (for tenor, seven obbligato instruments and strings), is the one which goes deepest into these themes. Setting to music an anthology of verse by English poets Shelly, Tenneyson, Coleridge, Middleton, Wordsworth, Owen, Keats and Shakespeare, the texts are all linked to the common theme of night, sleep and dreams. In a sense it is a follow-up of his setting of texts in the Serenade, composed earlier in 1943. It is a work "which deals entirely with the world of night, but sees dreams as the source of the deepest

---

reality known to us."²⁵ Here, however, instead of using self-contained poems, he uses excerpts from a wide variety of contexts, except for the last one, which is a sonnet by Shakespeare ("When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see"). Musical considerations aside, the setting of this entire sonnet "traces a full cycle of experience while most of the other verses appear to leave the cycle incomplete."²⁶

The manner in which Britten handles the subject matter and structure in this last work brings to mind the Nocturnal, Op. 70, which is, of course, an instrumental work. Both works, however, share some common traits: both are literature-based, both explore the same subject matter and, in terms of form, both end with a conclusive, summarizing statement (in the Nocturnal, Op. 70, this statement is Dowland's ayre) which in a way sums up the previous partial, incomplete fragments.

Below is a list of works which use in one way or another the themes of night, death, sleep and dreams as their subject matter:

1932 Three two-part songs, first movement ("The Ride by Nights"). Written for two-part boys' or women's voices and piano.

1934 Holiday Diary, Op. 5, fourth movement ("Night"). This is a suite for piano.

²⁵ Ibid.
²⁶ Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten, 371.
1936  *Our Hunting Fathers*, Op. 8. Two movements are entitled “Dance of Death” and “Funeral March”). It is a symphonic cycle for high voice and orchestra.

1937  *On this Island*, Op. 11, fourth movement ("Nocturne-Now thro' nights caressing grip"). This is a set of five songs with texts by Auden.


1940  *Diversions* Op. 21, sixth variation ("Nocturne"). Written for piano and orchestra.


1942  *A Ceremony of Carols*, Op. 28, (number eight is titled “In Freezing Winter Night”). Written for treble voices and harp.

1943  Serenade for tenor, horn and string orchestra, Op. 31 (discussed above).

1945  *Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes*, Op. 33a, third movement ("Moonlight"). Written for orchestra.
1945  *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, Op. 35. The ninth song is titled "Death be not proud"). Written for high voice and piano.

1946  Three Arias from *The Rape of Lucretia*, Op. 37. The third aria is titled "Slumber Song." Arranged by the composer from the opera.


1953  *Winter Words*, Op. 52. The second and the fifth bear the respective titles "Moonlight on the Great Western," and "The Choirmaster's Burial." This is a set of eight lyrics and ballads by Thomas Hardy written for high voice and piano.


1957  *Songs from the Chinese*, Op. 58. The fifth song ("Depression") deals with death. It is a song cycle written for high voice and guitar.

1958  *Nocturne*, Op. 60. All the texts are related to the themes of night, sleep, and dreams. Written for tenor, seven obbligato instruments and strings.
1960  *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 64. An opera based on Shakespeare's play. The action takes place mostly during the night and touches upon the subject of dreams.

1961  *War Requiem*, Op. 66. Its text interpolates poems of Wilfred Owen (a fallen soldier) and the standard text for the Mass for the Dead (*Missa pro Defunctis*). Written for STB solos, chamber orchestra, chorus and orchestra, boys' choir and organ.

1963  *Night Piece* (“Notturno”). Written for piano solo.

1965  *The Poet's Echo*, Op. 76. The last song deals with insomnia, a ticking clock and nocturnal sounds. The set comprises six songs for high voice and piano.
A. John Dowland: a brief biography

Many gaps concerning the life of John Dowland — by common consensus the greatest lutenist-composer during his own time — make it difficult to draw a fairly complete picture of his life. Few confirmable sources exist as to precise details of his biography, and in many cases his own printed music is the only source of information we have. Much of what is known about him comes from his own hand, in particular two sources: "Other necessary observations belonging to the Lute" from his Varietie of Lute-Lessons from 1610 and his address to the reader in A Pilgrimes Solace from 1612.

Born in 1562, of English origin, little, if anything at all is known about his early years. Beginning in 1580 we know that at the age of seventeen he went to Paris as "servant" to Sir Henry Cobham, Ambassador to the King of France. Brought up as a Protestant, Dowland converted to Catholicism during his stay, a decision "he later believed was to exert a profoundly unfortunate influence over his worldly career." 27

Between 1582 and 1584 he returned to England, and in 1588 Dowland was admitted to the Bachelor of music at Christ Church, Oxford. Although mention of John Dowland as one of the most famous musicians of his day was already made during this time, little evidence exists of his works to that date. We do know that in 1592 Dowland performed before the Queen as part of an entertainment, and during the same year he contributed six harmonizations to Thomas East's *The Whole Booke of Psalmes*.

In 1594, Dowland, following the death of John Johnson (one of the Queen's lutenists), applied for the latter's vacant post. Having been denied this request he proceeded to travel, first to Germany, and later to Italy, where he had the intention of taking lessons with madrigalist composer Luca Marenzio. After having been to Venice, Padua and Ferrara, he finally reached Florence, but due to extraordinary circumstances, he found himself among a group of exiled English Catholics who were plotting the assassination of Queen Elizabeth. He then returned immediately to Nuremberg where he wrote a letter to Sir Robert Cecil in which he discloses his account of these events.

Encouraged by his friend and prominent courtier Henry Noel, Dowland returned to England probably in 1596 or 1597. Dowland expected Noel to plead for him to Queen Elizabeth who, according to Noel, had asked for Dowland during his
sojourn abroad. Unfortunately, Noel died before he could plead for his cause, and once again Dowland’s efforts toward securing a post as a court musician were denied. In 1597 Dowland collected twenty-one of his songs and an “invention of two to playe upon one Lute” and had them published under the title *The First Booke of Songes or Ayres of Foure Partes with Tableture for the Lute*. This publication was issued in a way that permitted the songs to be sung by solo voice and lute or as four-part ayres. It enjoyed wide popularity and was reprinted four or five times, the last of which underwent a major revision.

In 1598 he was appointed lutenist at the court of Christian IV of Denmark. In 1600 he published *The Second Booke of Songs or Ayres*. This was later followed by *The Third and Last Booke of Songs* which dates from 1603. *Lachrimae or Seaven Teares*, a collection of seven pavans based on the famous *Lachrimae* theme, was composed in 1604.

Dowland’s employment in Denmark ended in 1606, when he was finally dismissed. At this stage he found himself under financial stress, having accumulated a growing number of debts during the preceding years. Upon his return to England in 1609 he published his translation of Andreas Ornithoparchus’ *Musicae activae micrologus*, a Latin treatise which dates from 1517. From this publication we know that Dowland was still promising his readers his work *Observations*
and Directions concerning the Art of Lute-playing, a project long promised but apparently never completed.

Between 1609 and 1612 he entered the service of Theophilus Howard, Lord Walden, a courtier who held several crown appointments. We then learn from his address to his readers in A Pilgrimes Solace, his last work to appear in print in 1612, that he was in a state of neglect, and was hurt by the criticism made by some younger lutenists. In spite of his resentment, his works were still being published; most surviving English music collections, as a matter of fact, contained examples of his solo works. On the continent his works were found in many printed collections and manuscripts even ten years after this date. Both home and abroad, arrangements of his music were made for other instruments by some distinguished composers of his time. In particular, his Lachrimae enjoyed enormous popularity. It was variously arranged and "its famous opening phrase was also consciously incorporated into the structure of countless works by other composers."^28

Finally in 1612 his lifelong ambition came to being when he was appointed one of the King's Lutes. It also seems that his creative powers had greatly diminished since from this point onwards he appears to have written only a handful of works. Little of relevance is known of Dowland during his

last years. His name, however, continued to command respect, and until his death in 1626, he received many tributes and was named among the greatest in his profession.

B. Britten works inspired by John Dowland’s music

Among Britten’s entire oeuvre, two works were inspired by the music of John Dowland: his Nocturnal, Op. 70, which is the focus of this work, and the Lachrymae, Op. 48, composed in 1950 for viola and piano and later arranged in 1976 by the composer for viola and orchestra. This work shares several common traits with his Nocturnal, Op. 70, composed 13 years later, as will be further discussed.

Lachrymae is based on the song “If my complaints could passions move,” song number four from his First Booke of Songes or Ayres of Foure Partes dating from 1597. The Lachrymae carries the subtitle “reflections on a song of John Dowland.” Written in 1950, this work was written at a time when his major efforts were concentrated on his opera Billy Budd, completed one year later in 1951. It was written for violist William Primrose, and first performed at the Aldeburgh music festival in June of the same year.

In its overall form and construction this work bears strong similarities to the Nocturnal, Op. 70. Britten uses a reverse variation technique which is based on the first of three eight-bar strains of Dowland’s ayre. The whole work,
therefore, consists of ten successive "variations" which elaborate or "reflect" on the one of these strains. At its conclusion, the complete second half of the ayre finally emerges using Dowland's original harmonies. Britten did not limit himself to these two works in using this technique: he would use it one last time in his third cello suite of 1971.\(^9\)

In terms of its harmonic structure, the *Lachrymae* is anchored in C minor, though it "is a work rich in bitonal implications."\(^{10}\) In the midst of the sixth "variation," Britten quotes from "Flow my Tears," another Dowland ayre which is based on his *Lachrimae Pavan*. In this sense Britten seems to introduce a programmatic element in this work, a fact which brings it even closer to the *Nocturnal*, Op. 70, in this respect.

The *Nocturnal*, Op. 70, and the *Lachrymae* are in a way companion pieces since their similarities extend far beyond their being based on an ayre by John Dowland. They were both composed for musician friends (Julian Bream, guitarist, and William Primrose, violist) and received their first performance at the Aldeburgh Festival; both are structured as "partial variations" or "reflections" on a given theme which finally emerges at the conclusion of each work; both pieces are strongly linked, in one way or another to the literary

\(^9\) Here three Russian folk songs and the Kontakion (Hymn for the departed) lie at the base of a nine-movement suite. They all emerge in succession at the conclusion of the work.

\(^{10}\) Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 304.
content of each song, meaning that both have programmatic implications. Finally, they are both similar "also in mood, in that both inhabit the same veiled world of fantastic, nocturnal images."\(^{11}\)

---

VI. JOHN DOWLAND'S AYRE "COME HEAVY SLEEP":
BASIS FOR BRITTEN'S NOCTURNAL, OP. 70

A. Background

John Dowland published his *First Booke of Songes or Ayres of Foure Partes with Tableture for the Lute* in 1597, after a period in which he had returned to England hoping for an appointment as a court musician. It consists of a collection of twenty-one songs and an "invention for two to playe upon one Lute," using Dowland's own words. They were issued in such a form so as to admit two possibilities for performance: they could either be sung by a solo voice and lute or as four-part ayres (with or without lute). The songs were preceded by a Latin epigram by Thomas Campion and by a letter from madrigalist composer Luca Marenzio.

This book enjoyed remarkable success: it was widely imitated and established a trend that lasted some twenty-five years. It was also reprinted four or possibly five times: 1600, 1603, 1606, and 1613. It may also have been printed in 1608 even though no original copy survives; there is, however some documentation that points toward it being reprinted in this year.\(^{12}\) Of these, the edition of 1606 underwent some

\(^{12}\) Diana Poulton discusses in further detail the evidence she relies on in order to support the belief that a reprint dating from 1608 took place in *John Dowland*, 216.
changes, namely in the lute accompaniments of some of the songs. Overall, this book is characterized by its relative light-heartedness if compared to the far more melancholic, philosophical character of books two and three: many of the songs are in fact galliard-songs, a festive-like Renaissance dance requiring a degree of dexterity. It also happened to be Queen Elizabeth's favorite dance. Many of these dance songs are related to specific courtiers of Elizabeth's circle, in fact providing "in lyrics and music, the equivalent of the long Tudor portrait gallery." Nevertheless, a few songs in this volume reflect the darker, melancholy side of Dowland, among which "Come, heavy Sleep" is the most representative as well as one of the most beautiful.

All of the songs in this volume are strophic. Some of them were originally conceived as dance tunes which later had words fitted to them, though it is not easy to determine which were the original versions of the two. Compared to the other books, the songs are harmonically less adventurous and keep within the diatonic conventions of the time. The table of contents of Book one is the following:

\[\text{---}\]

1) "Whoever thinks or hopes of love for love"
3) "My thoughts are wing’d with hopes"
4) "If my complaints could passions move"
5) "Can she excuse my wrongs with virtue’s cloak"
6) "Now, O now I needs must part"
7) "Dear, if you change I’ll never choose again"
8) "Burst forth my tears"
9) "Go crystal tears"
10) "Think’st thou then by thy faining"
11) "Come away, come sweet love"
12) "Rest awhile you cruel cares"
13) "Sleep wayward thoughts"
14) "All ye whom love or fortune hath betrayed"
15) "Wilt thou unkind ----reave me of my heart"
16) "Would my conceit ---that first enforst my woe"
17) "Come again: sweet love doth now invite"
18) "His golden locks hath to silver turned"
19) "Awake, sweet love thou art returned"
20) "Come, heavy Sleep"
21) "Away with these self-loving lads"

- A Galliard for two to play upon one lute at the end of the Book -
B. The Ayre

"Come, heavy Sleep" is song number twenty from John Dowland's *First Booke of Songes* of 1597. It stands out among this collection as one of the most beautiful, profound, and, in a broader sense, representative of many of the composer's future works, which are characterized by his recurring themes of tears, melancholy, sin, and death.

The song is a setting of two six-line stanzas whose authorship has not yet been ascribed. The following is the poem in its entirety:

I

*Come, heavy Sleep, the image of true Death,*
*And close up these my weary weeping eyes,*
*Whose spring of tears doth stop my vital breath,*
*And tears my heart with Sorrow's sigh-swoll'n cries.*
*Come and possess my tired thought-worn soul,*
*That living dies, till thou on me be stole.*

II

*Come, shadow of my end, and shape of rest,*
*Allied to Death, child to the black-faced Night;*
*Come thou and charm these rebels in my breast,*
Whose waking fancies doth my mind affright.

O come, sweet Sleep, come or I die for ever;
Come ere my last sleep comes, or come never.

The original sense of the first couplet of the first stanza and the second line of the second stanza may have been altered in their modern translation. The original words of this couplet are the following:

Com & posses my tired thoughts, worne soule,
That living dies, till thou on me bestoule.

According to Poulton, this is the manner in which they appear in all the four-voice parts of the surviving editions (1597, 1600, 1603, 1606, and 1613) of this collection.¹⁴ As opposed to the texts of other songs (which were emended, presumably, by Dowland in subsequent editions), this one did not undergo any changes, therefore making a plausible case for considering the original words as the ones Dowland intended for the song. Dr. Edmund Horace Fellowes altered them in his 1920 edition of Dowland's First Booke of Songes and during this same year he also published a compilation titled English Madrigal Verse which includes the lyrics to Dowland's three song books and A Pilgrimes Solace. In this

¹⁴ Diana Poulton goes into further detail in this discussion in John Dowland (243-244). She also mentions the text of the same stanza set to music by Robert Johnson, which differs from Dowland's and lends support to Fellowes' amendment.
last work he explains the reasons as to why he modified the original verse of this song. He also introduces a change in the second line of the second stanza:

Allied to Death, child to the black-faced Night

as opposed to the original:

Allied to Death, child to this black fast Night

These minor textual changes, justified or not, do not alter in any substantive way the poem itself; they are discussed with the single purpose of offering a more accurate picture of Dowland’s original text. Given the fact that the language used in Dowland’s time differs from modern use, modifications of the original texts are sometimes necessary.

As to the musical setting of this text, Dowland uses a form which reflects the poetic construction: ABBabb. The first four lines (A) of each stanza are sung only once but the couplet (B) is repeated. His basic harmonic scheme is the following:

---

36 During this period, spellings often differed from source to source. Dowland himself sometimes used a different spelling for his own name, signing it instead “Douland.”
Come, Heavy Sleep

The poem deals with a common metaphor found in Renaissance literature: sleep as an image of death. In this poem, full of typical brooding melancholy, sleep is evoked as a soother for the pains of conscious living. Similar to
death, it brings conscious life to a temporary halt and thus
effaces the pains of living.

Dowland's setting (here transcribed to E major, the
same key used in Britten's setting) is mostly characterized
by its simplicity. Generally speaking, there is nothing
particularly adventurous; the A section (the first four lines
of each stanza) begins and cadences on E major with no
unusual harmonic foray except, perhaps, at the end of line
three, where it briefly moves toward C# major, on the words
"doth stop my vital breath."

After returning to E major at the end of the fourth
line, the fifth line (the couplet) shifts abruptly to G#
major where the lute accompaniment uses repeated chords in
support of the repeated notes of the melodic line. This
emphasis leads once again to a cadence on VI even though the
G# may also be interpreted as the dominant of C# major if G#
is accepted as a temporary tonal center). The next line
"That living dies" is the only instance where text is
repeated: it is perhaps the only example of word painting in
this setting. The threefold repetition of these words in a
sequence-like way melodically mirrors the restless, anxious
movement of a soul that "living dies." For the last words of
the stanza, there is a return to E major in a calm,
comforting manner which seems to evoke a state of reposed
tranquility as suggested by the poem.
VII. BRITTEN'S NOCTURNAL, OP. 70 FOR GUITAR

A. Formal structure and design

1. Musingly (Meditativo)

This variation is the only one in the whole of Op. 70 that follows, phrase by phrase, Dowland's original melody, including Britten's own incomplete repetition of the fifth verse at the end of the work. Except for the few bars which correspond to the words "Come and possess my tired thought-worn soul" (measures 16-18 and 27-29), it is entirely monophonic. Britten meticulously separates each phrase with a breath mark and in several instances (measures 15, 24, 26, and 28), he uses fermatas. All of these markings are used to emphasize the singing, vocal quality of this variation. Melodically, it preserves the general contour of Dowland's phrases, but includes a fair amount of chromaticism. It is tonally ambiguous and unstable; only fleeting and suggestive tonal implications appear throughout. Along with these traits is a whimsical freedom in Britten's use of rhythm, which creates a wave-like push and pull to each phrase: he introduces triplets, accelerandi, ritardandi and is very specific in the dynamic shadings of each phrase. This variation ends, as stated before, with a corresponding passage in Britten's statement of the original which
superimposes the tonalities of E major and F minor. In the overall architecture of the work, this tonal conflict is of key importance.

Observed in closer detail, the similarities and differences in Britten's treatment of the melodic contour can be summed up as follows:

a) **Phrase divisions** - Britten is meticulous in his observance of each phrase along with its respective cadence. In each case the cadence is made obvious by his invariable use of half notes followed by breath marks. These fall on the following measures:

- m. 2
- m. 4
- m. 9
- m. 12
- m. 15
- m. 18
- m. 24
- m. 26
- m. 29

Breath marks are also used in measures 20, 22 and 23, all of which are consistent with the overall vocal conception of the phrases. In this sense he follows Dowland's ayre very closely.

The phrase lengths, however, vary when compared to the original. It must be stressed that this first variation is unmetered, and therefore the values within each measure differ greatly from one another. Britten on occasions extends phrases, as in measures 19-24, where he extends the original's melodic contour ("that living dies...") by adding
one full sequential repeat. Other times, as in measures 16-18, Britten purposefully follows more closely Dowland's original, in this case as an emphasis of line five: "Come and possess my thought-worn soul," which includes the E major accompaniment. It is this passage that comes closest to being a quotation. The rhythms of both melody and accompaniment are preserved as well as the leaping fourth of the melody. On the other hand, the harmonic juxtaposition of two conflicting tonalities is new (see example on page 69).

b) Melodic intervals and pitches - This first variation bears, generally speaking, a distorted similarity in terms of pitch and overall melodic contour to the melodic line of "Come, heavy Sleep." Another characteristic of this first variation is its tonal ambiguity which, in a way, reflects the "musing" character Britten intends to convey. The fleeting tonal implications (which vary and shift throughout), give this overall impression.

Following are the first four measures of Britten's original side by side with Dowland's ayre:
Britten: A--------C-------G-------F#' B--A#--G#--A#--B#--C#

Come----Hea----vy---Sleep’ The-i-mage-of-true--death

Dowland: G#-------B-------F#-------E' A--G#--F#--G--A#--B

<------- M 3rd -------> <------------ P 5th ------->

Several details should be observed: in Britten’s passage the initial pitch (A) is half a step higher than its equivalent in the ayre, even though it is written a major seventh lower than Dowland’s G#. Other than this, when we compare the intervallic relationship between the first four notes of the melodic line in “Come, heavy Sleep” with their respective equivalents in the opening measures of Britten’s opening variation, we notice that they are, except for the last one, similar. However, in Britten’s paraphrase the G natural - F# half step on “sleep” is enough to create tonal instability, since it does not cadence on F natural. The C# on measure 4, on the other hand (a perfect fifth above F#) once again reestablishes a sense of tonal stability.

In the following measures Britten continues a similar process:
The phrases in these measures are, once again, similar in the overall contour but use inexact intervallic relationships. However, the cadence on measure 9 (on F) is unsettling since it destroys any previous tonal implication, namely the F# of measure 2.

The whole variation is also characterized by many half tone changes which tend to suppress tonal implications. An example in point are measures 7-9, where the notes A and G
are successively altered (A natural - A# - A natural, and G# - G natural).

Finally, an important and crucial point should be observed: measures 16-18 (line five of the stanza), which are later repeated in an incomplete form in measures 27-29, present an F natural - C natural melodic contour above an E major chord underneath:

The rhythmic outline as well as the use of a major chord in the accompaniment (E major - G# major) is similar to the original; the melodic leap of a perfect fourth is also preserved (F - C and G# - D# in the original) but this time they are foreign to the E major harmony. This tonally disturbing tonal clash (F - E major) will work as a bitonal axis and it will acquire increasing importance as the Nocturnal, Op. 70, develops through its succeeding variations. Whether it be against any form of an F chord (incomplete or in the minor mode) as in this variation and the following one, the driving force behind the whole work is the tension created harmonically against E major. This tonal conflict is finally resolved in the last variation, the
"Passacaglia," where, after a dramatic and tense climax, E major appears in its pure form without contention, and leads the work peacefully to the statement of Dowland's ayre.

As a whole, this variation works structurally as a mirror image of Dowland's ayre. It also serves to frame the work by enclosing the succeeding variations in between, each one in its own way further removed from the ayre. As stated before, these depart from the rigid structure used here and acquire life of their own through other means.

2. Very agitated (Molto agitato)

This variation forms a dynamic contrast to the previous one: whereas the "Musingly" is dominated in terms of dynamics and character by double and triple pianos, fermatas, breath marks, and long, vague phrases, this one is dynamically the opposite. Here mezzofortes, double fortes and sforzandi are the dynamic markings used. The title used is descriptive of its tempo and character.

Dynamics and character aside, it bears some formal similarities to the preceding variation: it is an entirely homophonic movement which follows a fairly consistent pattern of phrases followed by half note chords. This pattern varies throughout with unequal phrase lengths (once again, this variation is unmeasured); however, the cadences are all similar in that they are all triple beat measures of one
quarter note followed by half note chords, all of which invariably have an accented note with a sforzando on the chord. These fall on the following measures:

m. 3  m. 11
m. 5  m. 15
m. 7  m. 17
m. 9  m. 19

In terms of rhythm, it follows an unbroken and homogeneous pattern of eighth note triplets between cadences. This pattern is only broken in the last two measures (measures 21 and 22), where the triplets are abandoned in a process of rhythmic augmentation: the eighth note triplets are successively replaced by eighth notes, quarter note triplets, quarter notes, and finally by a half note triplet:

In terms of Britten’s use of motives, three important points are particularly relevant:

a) The opening triplet motive is directly linked to the last measure of the preceding variation: as such, it serves a twofold purpose: it states a motive from Dowland’s ayre,
as well as formally linking one variation to another in a coherent, logical way.

\[\text{\textbf{b)} Within the overall motivic and formal conception of the work, all the chords used to signal the end of cadences are composed of open strings on the guitar. They are used in varied ways using different combinations of notes, in all cases three notes (sometimes one note is doubled), except for the chord on measure 19, which is comprised of four notes:}\]

\[\text{\textbf{The importance of this lies in how Britten uses these fourth-dominated open string chords from this point onwards; variations three, five, six and seven, in varying degrees exploit to a great extent the harmonic possibilities of these chords along with their ambiguous tonal implications. Given the open string tuning of the instrument, the intervals} }\]
between them are (except for the major third between the third and second string) comprised of perfect fourths:

\[ \text{\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image}} \]

Besides the rhythmic and agitated character of this variation, it is also characterized by a harmonic struggle, in particular the E major / F minor tonal conflict already presented in measures 16-17 and 28-29 of the previous one. Beginning with a succession of phrases ending on different cadential notes (B–Eb–Ab–Gb), it momentarily stabilizes on F# in measure 10, but, once again this apparent tonal repose is shattered in the following measure with the F natural on the downbeat. It then moves to D major in measure 12 followed by F minor in succession, a tonal conflict which will dominate the rest of this variation.

This E major / F minor juxtaposition is manifested in different guises beginning on measure 18: first through the repeated and ascending G#'s and B's covering three octaves followed by the E bass and repeated F's, and secondly through a succession of arpeggiated E and F chords beginning on measure 20 which gradually slow down rhythmically through the use of augmentation. Similar to the conclusion of Britten's statement of "Come, heavy Sleep" and to the first
variation, it gradually fades dynamically with a triple piano.

3. Restless (Inquieto)

This is the first variation in the Nocturnal, Op. 70, which uses a meter, in this case 3/4 (triple meter). Its main characteristic is a pervasive ostinato accompaniment using repeated two-note chords (only measures 26, 27 and the first beat of measure 28 use three). This flow of repeated chords is briefly broken starting on the last beat of measure 54 and runs through measure 57, where it once again falls into a pattern of repeated chords. This ostinato pattern of two-note chords is comprised of perfect fourths, minor thirds, minor sevenths (which I believe Britten used due to the limitations of the instrument; otherwise they would normally have been major seconds) and for the most part major seconds. This pattern serves as a flowing tapestry underneath and above which motives in duple time appear and are answered in a dialogue effect. These motives are at times mirrored in the answering voice through the use of melodic inversion and exact intervallic relationships. The combination of duple against triple rhythms, the tonal ambiguity which arises from the melodic exchanges counter to the ostinato, and the use of unresolved 2nds, 7ths, and 4ths,
create the sense of restlessness that pervades this variation.

The repeated ostinato figure which begins on measure 1 is derived from the last measure of the preceding variation:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{III Restless Variation} \\
&(\text{Inquieto})
\end{align*}
\]

Melodic inversion using exact intervallic relationships is used in both voices above and below the ostinato. This creates a sort of inverted echo effect:

\[
\begin{align*}
&(\text{Eb--C--Bb--A)} \\
&(\text{Ab--F--Eb--D)} \\
&(\text{F#--A--B--C)} \\
&(\text{A--C--D--Eb)}
\end{align*}
\]

(In the example above the same motive is melodically inverted using the exact intervals between notes in the form of sequence (minor third / major second / minor second))
Concerning the use of motives drawn from "Come, heavy Sleep," Britten is now far more subtle and less obvious. This variation, as a whole, is more loosely connected to the original source and its ties are less tangible, bordering at times on a subjective interpretation of their derivation. The melodic contour of some of the initial phrases may be interpreted as being drawn from Dowland:

a) measures 2–3

b) measures 7–8
c) measures 16-19

More crucial still are measures 31-36, which once again are brought back in the last ten measures. Above and below the accompanying Eb-Db ostinato, a descending fourth in the bass is repeated successively in a higher register. The persistent use of this motive may well be interpreted as a paraphrase of the “Come and possess my heart-worn soul” passage. Its appearance (twice) in this variation (as the appearance of the E major / F minor clash in the preceding variation) evokes the exact passage with which Britten concludes his statement of “Come, heavy Sleep.”

4. Uneasy (Ansioso)

This variation marks a return to a mostly monophonic texture. Once again it lacks a time signature, and given the
nature of the musical language used, it stands in strong contrast to the ostinato 3/4 pattern of the preceding one. Using quick and abrupt statements, abundance of rests and breath marks, sforzando chords followed by repeated notes, and unequal groups of phrases, Britten manages to convey an atmosphere of discomfort and anxiety.

It is divided in three main segments: the first one is characterized by bursts of thirty-second notes followed by a chord and repeated notes that fade rhythmically and dynamically; the second section, beginning on measure 5, follows with undulating phrases which gradually rise and then descend to a climax on measure 6, ending with fading repeated notes. Britten once again plays around with tonal ambiguity, altering previously used notes. The phrase groups are irregular; accented notes are used in a flow of detached and slurred notes where symmetry or tonal context are absent. In the third section (measures 7 and 9) Britten employs a series of rapid two-note slurs. It ends with a threefold repetition of an ambiguous Bb dominated chord followed by a repeated flow of G notes in varying rhythms.

Several motives drawn from Dowland's ayre may be identified: the first one at the very outset consisting of a four-note group of thirty-second notes which is repeated and then used in its inversion:
Measures 2, 4, 6, and 10 through 12, all consist of a sforzando chord followed by repeated notes with varying rhythmic pulses. The last three measures consist of a Bb-based chord followed by repeated G notes. Measures 2, 4, and 6 seem variants of these. However, all derive from the same musical source in “Come, heavy Sleep.”

The entire middle section, consisting of an uninterrupted flow of sixteenth notes draws on the four rising notes from Dowland’s passage corresponding to the verse “And close up these my weary weeping eyes”: 
The same may be said of the slur passage, which seems to distort the equivalent melodic passage in Dowland's ayre:

After the previous variation with its insistent rhythmic pulse, this one has an improvisational character; it is devoid of any unifying motive, rhythmic or melodic. Even though Britten juxtaposes brief sections which seem unrelated to each other, each one is in itself motivically linked to Dowland's ayre.
5. March-like (Quasi una marcia)

Britten, in a broad sense, breaks loose from the constraining technique of subtle paraphrasing from "Come, heavy Sleep" in this variation. Here one sole rhythmic motive drawn from the line "Come and possess my thought-worn soul" is used as the dominating rhythmic cell of this whole variation. This rhythmic cell is previewed in the last measure of the preceding variation, but on a different melodic-harmonic plane:

Once again there is no established meter. On the other hand, given the pervasive use of some form of the combined two eighth note / two sixteenth note rhythmic figure, there is a sense of stability and hints of tonality involved. Whereas the preceding variation is characterized by its unpredictability and wide variety of rhythmic, melodic, motivic, and dynamic elements, here we are presented with a fairly static and repetitive rhythmic-harmonic framework. Above it a melodic flow of rising and descending double octaves develops.
More than at any other point in this work, Britten uses to the fullest the open string harmonies offered by the instrument in a variety of combinations:

Britten's emphasis of pitches two octaves apart using the first and sixth string of the instrument does not seem to follow any particular pattern. Harmonically, though, some form of an E chord, whether E minor seventh chord, or an E major seventh chord seems to be implied as in the opening measures:

Throughout this entire variation, Britten's subtle use of altered pitches in the melody (pitches half a step higher or lower than previously used), adds doubt and ambiguity to any specific tonal plane. The asymmetric and unpredictable melodic contours lend an element of surprise and add spice to a mostly homogeneous rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment. At
the height of this melodic-harmonic struggle, a sort of climatic high point of implied E minor is achieved in measure 12, where E is most clearly stated in both melody and harmony:

![Musical notation image]

This, however is soon followed by a melodic descent which will rest on F natural on measure 13, once again exposing the harmonic E / F chord clash which is at the core of this work. These two opposing tonalities are, from this point onwards, stated back to back. An F natural / B flat melodic leap is several times articulated beginning on measure 22, and will continue to be repeated until the end of this variation. It ends on a lingering melodic F above the accompaniment of open fourths.

Britten's emphasis on the F natural / B flat melodic leap will resurface in the "Passacaglia" in a different guise: F sharp and B natural, the first two notes of that variation. At that point in this work this motive will possess a different constructivist role. Here it is used as an implied tonal plane which works in opposition to E major.
6. Dreaming (Sognante)

Similarly to variations five and seven, this one is fully grounded on the open string tuning of the instrument. Structured as a succession of four phrases framed in each instance by a four-note chord (A-D-G-B), a stream of harmonics (mostly based on the first four strings of the instrument) accompanies each of the individual phrases. Britten conveys the "Dreaming" character of this variation by using a slow tempo, no established meter, extensive use of fermatas, and repeated material (harmonics and the A-D-G-B chord). The four phrases are reflective in nature and are melodically limited in their range, reaching a minor sixth on only one occasion.

Once again a link is formed between this variation and the preceding one: the four-note open string chord at the outset is used repeatedly in the preceding variation's last measure:
The first phrase following the initial chord is loosely based on a small fragment of "Come, heavy Sleep":

This phrase begins and ends with an A-D-F-B chord. As such, it is representative of the variation as a whole: each succeeding phrase follows a similar pattern with the A-D-G-B chord giving a sense of repose and stability. After each statement a stream of harmonics based on E minor 7 is interpolated. They enhance the relaxed and dreamy character of this variation.

Only the third phrase (the only one not to begin with the A-D-G-B chord) contains slightly more internal conflict in its discourse. It is also the only one to use chord accents and to use the A-D-G-B chord within the phrase. At

its cadential point the A-D-G-B chord is augmented by the addition of an E above:

\[ \text{\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chord_diagram.png}} \]

In this case the tension is created by the three E-based chords. Each one is harmonically conflictive given the sharp dissonances it contains. However, as seen in the example above, it eventually finds resolution in the A-D-G-B-E chord. The final statement becomes briefer, and finally the last stream of harmonics leads the movement to its conclusion but is left in a restless, inconclusive state given the ascending E-F-G-G# with which it finishes.

This variation is a contrast to the highly rhythmic movement which precedes it and the one which follows. Its dreamy aspect is suggested by a very soft dynamic which ranges from piano to triple piano, a very free sense of pulse, a more introverted, reflective and fragmented discourse, and overall by the extensive use of harmonics. At this stage Britten is also less confined to "Come, heavy Sleep" in his use of motives. The discourse is more subtle, the bits which may allude to it are each time more transformed and ambiguous, as if he has assimilated the
original song and begins to transform it. Nevertheless, an important motive surfaces in the last line which involves a repeated C reminiscent of the first three variations. This motive itself has its origin in "Come, heavy Sleep"'s last measure, which is first transformed in variation one, more clearly stated in variation two, and finally used in a more ambiguous form in variation three. In each case it is a paraphrase of "Come and possess my tired thought-worn soul," and the repeated C is a tonally conflictive remnant of the incomplete F chord. In this variation, which involves a relaxation of tonal conflict, the C is underscored by a descending melodic line underneath. It all resolves in the A-D-G-B chord thus diluting its potentially dissonant and conflicting nature.
7. Gently rocking (Cullante)

Written in 6/8 meter, this variation bears a title which once again evokes the world of sleep. Contrary to what the title suggests, it juxtaposes from the outset two different tonal planes: the first one is delineated by the use of repeated thirty-second notes: the second one involves the irregular use of the open strings of the instrument as an accompanimental figure. These open string notes are rhythmically irregular and used mostly on the first and fourth beats of each measure. This amalgam results in the articulation of a clear rhythmic pattern and an atmosphere of harmonic uncertainty: the accompaniment is sufficiently ambiguous so as to be both foreign and non-conflictive at the same time.

Britten at this point in the Nocturnal, seems far removed from "Come, heavy Sleep" in terms of motives or direct paraphrases. This variation is at its core an exploration of the tonal conflict at the center of the whole work. The only clear tonal relationship with "Come, heavy Sleep" is the fact that despite all the harmonic movement created beginning on the F of the first measure, it gradually finds its way to the key of E. In this search for E, however, as is the case in measure 8, the chord of E does not come about without struggle: in this case Eb in the
tremolando upper figure is at odds with the open E-A-D-G which is delineated underneath:

After more hesitation in measures 9 to 13, measure 14 arrives to the only statement of an unambiguous E minor chord:

This measure also marks a turning point in the harmonic language as well as in the way Britten puts it in writing: the use of five flats in the upper voice are now suppressed. The two tonal planes (in what remains of this variation) reconcile but only to a certain extent. As can be seen in the last four measures, the tonal conflict between Eb and E is dragged on to the very end. Beginning at this point there is also an inversion of tonal registers. Now the tremolando descends mostly to the lower strings while the first two open strings ring above. In the last line the registers are
widened furthermore by the use of natural harmonics above the low E of the guitar:

The high point of tonal conflict takes place on measure 18, where a sharp dissonance on the downbeat exposes the conflicting paths of both tonal planes. This clash of a minor second is further stressed by the dynamic accent while the B in the accompaniment is the only instance of a non-open string in the whole variation. On measure 20 another minor second clash occurs though in the form of a major seventh since the voices are at this point on different registers. However, it marks the only instance where Eb-E are juxtaposed directly in their bare form:
The harmonic movement at times moves from tonal center subtly as in the first two measures where Db major with an open A natural is followed by Ab with open E and A strings in the bass. It later shifts to Gb and Eb, where it temporarily stabilizes on measure 8. Measures 10-11 move subtly from Gb to Eb where it will remain until E minor is clearly delineated on measure 14.

8. Passacaglia (misurato)

This last variation of the Nocturnal, Op. 70, is a self-contained variation form in itself. Placed within the perspective of the Nocturnal, Op. 70, as a whole, its weight and complexity seems disproportionate: it is a much longer variation and involves a far more developed architecture. Its overall structure consists of four clearly delineated sections: each one is a type of arch-form, gradually building in tension and then winding down before leading to the succeeding part. This architecture uses elements already explored in previous variations: namely the use of the perfect fourth interval as a recurring motive, the exploitation of the open string harmonies offered by the instrument, and the alternating use of chromatic alterations of recurring notes which create an unsettling tonal background.
The architecture of the "Passacaglia," as used in the Baroque variation form, utilizes one single motive (a ground bass) as a recurrent and binding thread. In this case it links the continuous flow of expanding and contracting phrases which seem to develop in a sort of "developing variation technique" manner (a term used by Schoenberg which describes motives which develop out of themselves). This motive is, curiously, taken from the lute accompaniment of Dowland's ayre and not from the melodic vocal line (see example on page 94). However, Britten's use of this motive is used between variations, resulting in an invariably unaccompanied statement of this ground bass whenever it appears.

Given the length and the divisions of this last variation, I will discuss each of its component parts independently from each other.

a) Part I

Following a pattern used previously, the first measure of the "Passacaglia" is derived straight from the artificial harmonics of the last measure of variation seven:
This initial statement of a perfect fourth is of structural importance to the whole of the "Passacaglia." It is derived from the already discussed passage of Dowland’s ayre corresponding to the words "Come and possess my thought-worn soul":

Throughout the first fifteen measures it is recurrent in different guises, beginning on measure 2, where it is once again stated one whole tone higher:
The first five measures of this part are monophonic; they are also characterized by the use of repeated notes which are altered, similarly to the opening variation of the Nocturnal. From measure 6 onwards, a second voice is introduced above which the perfect fourth continues to develop. As stated earlier, the ground bass is interpolated between the variation passages instead of having the variations played above the ground bass. As such, it is stated in the same form throughout this and the following part. This motive consists of a descending bass line:

b) Part II

Once again using the perfect fourth as a starting point, measures 17-26 exploit the use of arpeggiated chords in a flow of thirty-second notes. Compared to measures 1-16, this second part sustains a quicker rhythmic pace given this steady flow where bits of melodic lines rise above and
beneath the arpeggios. As in the first part, the use of the perfect fourth is prominent as a structural motive as seen in the following example:

![Musical example](image)

Though tonally ambiguous (since tonal centers are at best fleeting and suggested), it nevertheless conforms to triadic harmonies. As in the previous part, it begins piano and is structured in an arch-like form; each succeeding phrase between the interpolating ground bass seems to expand and grow before winding down. In the last four measures Britten uses a series of quick sforzando arpeggios which bring this part to a close. The last statement (measure 26) marks the beginning of a breakdown of the ground bass, which from this point onwards will be gradually distorted by the use of rests between the ground bass notes, the use of pizzicati, the use of multiple octaves, and by changing dynamics. In other words, the ground bass is itself submitted to a series of variations.
c) Part 3

Marked "lively" (animato), this third part serves as a bridge which leads to the last major segment of the "Passacaglia." It consists of three measures of ascending and descending lines of eighth notes. This succession follows the same pattern of alternating pitches which shift by semitones. Dynamically in the piano range, this flow is characterized by an emphasis on tritones, perfect fourths, and, as in the last of these three measures, an alternation of major and minor seconds.

The ground bass, on the other hand, begins to be submitted to a series of variations, and will never again be stated in its original form.

\[\text{\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{music notation}}\]

d) Part 4

The last part comprises measures 30-42. Marked "starting broadly" (cominciando largamente), it consists of a succession of chords which are rhythmically organized in a pattern of quintuplets. The first six measures (30-35)
consist of a gradual buildup of increasingly tense and denser chords. This buildup is equally reinforced by the use of dynamics which go from double piano to double forte on measure 35. In this same passage the ground bass metamorphoses each time: beginning with a single note statement on measure 30, it varies each time in terms of rhythm and density, growing to a triple octave statement on measure 35. Once measure 36 arrives, accompanied on the score with the indication "with force," a sforzando augmented chord marks the beginning of a frenzied bridge. This bridge section (measures 36-42) is entirely based on the ground bass in a succession of stretto-like statements in which E major is finally introduced; first hesitantly on measure 37 and then variously repeated. Between repeats, the furious succession of statements based on the ground bass covers the whole spectrum of the instrument. Each time the same intervallic relationship is retained:

C - B - A - G - F - E

(1/2 -1 - 1 - 1 - 1/2)
From measures 40 to 42 the rhythm slows down, and E major begins to dominate by the closeness of each individual appearance and by the final hesitant ground bass statements. On measure 42 the last E major arpeggio is followed by the last rhythmically expanded statement of the ground bass, now using the original pitches with which it began. It ultimately leads to the statement of Dowland's ayre, which is prepared by a rallentando and a change in key signature (E major).

B. Programmatic implications of the Nocturnal, Op. 70

Britten's programmatic conception of the Nocturnal is clearly manifested in several ways. The structure of the work, the descriptive titles he uses for each variation, and the emphasis of one specific passage in the song, all point
toward this fact. I will discuss each one of these points separately.

The first and most obvious is the structure of this work. Comprised of eight variations, they flow progressively from one to the other and finally lead toward a quiet statement of Dowland's ayre "Come, heavy Sleep" at the end of the work. The most direct and unequivocal fact concerning an underlying program are the titles used by Britten for each variation. Each one of these carries, in most cases, a descriptive title related to different states of sleep. Of these, two of them ("Dreaming" and "Gently Rocking") are unmistakably related to it; the variations titled "Restless," "Uneasy," "Musingly," and "Very agitated" may also be interpreted as emotional states related to sleep or rest. On the other hand, the variation called "March-like" is only descriptive of its rhythmic character. The "Passacaglia," the last and most substantial variation of all, is the name of a musical form. It is relevant, as I shall further discuss, that, similar to the Nocturnal, it is a variation structure in itself.

The first variation ("Musingly") serves as an introduction to a succession of "dream episodes." It is significantly the only one that is molded on Dowland's ayre phrase by phrase in an almost verbatim way. It functions, however, as a distorted mirror image of this ayre and one has the impression of drifting slowly from this "musing" state to
other contrasted dream episodes, where reality becomes twisted and blurred, but recognizable to a certain extent. This first variation also introduces the most important motive of the Nocturnal in measures 16 and 17. It is repeated in the last three measures:

This motive resurfaces throughout the work in different guises. It is a quotation of the beginning measures of the second section of Dowland’s ayre which state the words:

*Come and possess my tired thought-worn soul,*

Britten gives a particular emphasis to this passage: it is the only measure which breaks away from the monotony of single-line melody which characterizes the rest of this variation and is repeated before fading away at the very end. The tonal ambiguity with which Britten underlies this passage (E major / F minor) is continued on in the succeeding variations and becomes a sort of focal point which brings
unity to this work. Even when the following ones depart in terms of motive from this passage (as already discussed earlier, it is constantly being twisted and transformed), the tonal conflict which stems from this measure is the starting point from which all the tension of the Nocturnal develops. This is carried to its highest point in the "Passacaglia," where, after several intense and dramatic episodes, the harmonic tension finally shatters, giving way to the tonality of E major in its pure form. In the end, after all the emotional turmoil is exhausted, Dowland's ayre "Come, heavy Sleep," is finally stated in hushed tones of double and triple pianos. As opposed to Dowland's original setting, Britten pointedly abandons the couplet's repetition and slowly leaves the song in a suspended state, which, from my point of view, represents a final state of rest or a drift into oblivion. Britten underscores his intentions by writing "slower and dying away" above these last measures.
VIII. CONCLUSION

As I have demonstrated throughout this study, Benjamin Britten's Nocturnal, Op. 70, is a work in which variation structure and programmatic content are equally important to its architecture. Outwardly, it is a theme and variation structure in reverse form, meaning that the theme surfaces at its conclusion and not at the outset. The variations themselves are, with the exception of the first one, freely based on bits and fragments of the theme and are then submitted to a process of variation and transformation. The "Passacaglia," the last variation of the Nocturnal, pushes this process to a further stage, since, as opposed to the previous seven variations, it is a variation form in itself.

This same musical structure serves as an ideal vehicle for the programmatic or "descriptive" element conveyed in the work. The variations are at once "dream episodes" which develop progressively into further dream-like stages. At first "Musingly," the first variation, is a sort of entrance door which leads to the impression of different states of sleep, each time further removed from the theme. By the time we reach the "Passacaglia" (which in the overall program may be interpreted as a dream within a dream), only a fragment of the lute accompaniment keeps us anchored to the original starting point. The statement of "Come, heavy Sleep" (Britten's transcription of both the voice and lute
accompaniment for solo guitar), then, is the final state of rest desired according to the words of the ayre. In this state all earthly concerns disappear as we drift slowly and silently from the conscious world into a state of oblivion, similar to death.

A statement should be made, however, concerning the term "variation structure" as applied to the Nocturnal, Op. 70. As such, this is an unusual work: the eight variations which comprise it are all objectively based on a common "theme" and the outward structure of this work is, in this respect, quite clear. Throughout the Nocturnal, Op. 70, motives related to the theme are, as stated earlier, paraphrased, transformed and varied. However, the term variation does not seem to do justice to Britten's full procedures, which to a great extent (particularly in the "Passacaglia") consist of the use of motives more as points of departure or as material to be developed rather than material to be varied in a more traditional sense. In the absence of a more precise technical term, perhaps "reflections" (the term used by Britten in his subtitle to the Lachrymae, Op. 48) instead of "variations" comes closer to describing the different sections of the Nocturnal. This said, the term variation structure is the term which comes closest to offering a picture of this work's overall structure.

Viewed from the perspective of the literature written for guitar, Benjamin Britten's Nocturnal, Op. 70, is
unquestionably a landmark. It is a remarkable work in terms of its excellent craftsmanship, its interesting programmatic content, and its inherent beauty in terms of pure music. Composed from the perspective of a non-guitarist composer, (meaning by this a lack of firsthand knowledge of the instrument which is acquired as a performer), the work also offers a fresh outlook on the guitar’s resources and capabilities. Britten’s imaginative and varied writing, such as his use of cross-rhythms, his extensive use of long monophonic, expressive passages, his use of the open string tuning of the instrument as an harmonic and motivic source, for example, attest to this fact. In this sense the Nocturnal does not fall within the tradition of standard guitar writing, which forms the mainstay of the guitar literature. As such, Britten’s writing is unique and his musical language is all his own.

From a broader point of view, the Nocturnal, Op. 70, is a work which has helped assert the guitar’s position as a serious concert instrument. As a major piece of music coming from one of the twentieth-century’s important composers, it serves as a tribute and as an acknowledgment of the guitar as a respectable and worthy instrument capable of conveying a major piece of music. Works such as this help reach a broader audience and help bring the guitar on equal footing with the other standard concert instruments. Nevertheless, the musical value of the Nocturnal, as demonstrated
throughout this document, goes beyond its usefulness to the
guitar repertoire to a more universal example of excellence
in craftsmanship, effective use of color, and creative
imagination. I firmly believe, therefore, that it deserves
more exposure than that which it has previously received and
that, by any standard, it is worthy of the most
discriminating audiences.

Historical perspective, formal analysis and programmatic
considerations aside, Benjamin Britten’s Nocturnal, Op. 70,
is, at its core, a beautiful, original and profound piece of
music. As with other great works, our appreciation and
understanding increase and change with repeated listening.
It is as though, speaking metaphorically, the more we scratch
beneath the surface, the more we appreciate and gain from it.
It remains, however, a challenging piece for both the
performer and the listener. All things considered, the
guitar literature has without doubt been enriched by Benjamin
Britten’s single contribution for solo guitar. A work of
this stature, as deep, disturbing and admirably written as it
is, rightfully holds an important place in the guitar
literature.
REFERENCES


Musica Britannica. 78 vols. London: Published for the Royal Musical Association by Steiner and Bell, Ltd., 1951-.


