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It's All in the Hearing and the Seeing: Donne, Britten, and Beyond

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Bryan N. S. Gooch's 2001 essay, "Britten and Donne: Holy Sonnets Set to Music," concludes, after a close analysis of words and music, with the remark that "if they are to be performed, they can *only* be done well, else all is lost."[1] It is too bad that he wasn't at the twenty-fourth John Donne Society Conference on 19 February 2009. For that evening we heard an extraordinary performance of Britten's music and Donne's words given by Christopher Swanson with Lisa Kinzer at the piano, who did not merely accompany the voice but was full partner in the interpretative act.[2] I use that last phrase rather than setting, since what both Britten and these performers accomplished was a reading of Donne's text from deep inside the words, inside their sounds, syntax, and vexed but insistent need to believe. It was a process that spoke back to the text in the act of following it. The performance connected the moment of our hearing with the moment of Britten's composition and with the different but equally complex moments of the poems' writing. And one further element was added, images to accompany each poem.

The visual layer of the experience was most striking in one of the images, the iconic photographs of the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima,

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I am grateful to Sara Anderson, who sent me her copies of several of the conference papers. They were a crucial aid to memory.

[1]Gooch, "Britten and Donne: Holy Sonnets Set to Music," *Early Modern Literary Studies* Special Issue 7 (2001): 16, italics in original.

[2]Dr. Christopher Swanson and Dr. Lisa Kinzer, Department of Music, Longwood University, Farmville, Virginia.

6 August 1945 and Nagasaki, 9 August 1945 that accompanied the central sonnet of the nine that Britten chose and arranged in a sequence that gives operatic structure to the whole (Britten composed these settings between 2 August and 19 August of that year). For that image certainly asks that sonnet's question: "What if this present were the world's last night?" Two months earlier Britten had gone to Germany with Yehudi Menuhin, playing Mozart at Bergen-Belsen for the freed prisoners (the camp had been liberated in mid April), half alive in the place of death. The experience could only have been deepened by the news of Hiroshima. That German trip seems to have prompted an intense period of writing on his return; it produced a work that makes urgent the need to believe, enacted, for example, in the long drawn out final half line of "Death be not proud," the last of Britten's nine. As Christopher Swanson described that line in his remarks before the performance, "the voice delivers a rhythmically augmented version of the theme. Death is powerless and time stands still." Britten arranged the nine sonnets that he selected so that they move from "sickness, death's herald" in the first to the pivot of "What if this present," passing through the deep longings of "Since she whom I lov'd" to the challenge of "Thou hast made me" and finally to the triumphant, or, at the least, the defiant assertion, as Britten's music reads it, "Death, thou shalt die."

These settings have been variously examined by both Donne and Britten scholars ever since the tenor, Peter Pears (to whom the score was dedicated) and Britten performed them at Wigmore Hall in November 1945 (as I've been writing these remarks, I've been listening in an almost continuous loop to a 1967 recording of their rendering). In a plenary address to the 1995 John Donne Conference, Bryan Gooch discussed (and demonstrated) a wide range of musical responses to Donne concluding with a brief look at Britten's settings.[3] In the 70s and 80s there was a PhD dissertation as well as several articles.[4] One in particular

[3]Gooch, "Music for Donne," *John Donne Journal* 15 (1996): 172–188.

[4]Brian Morris, "Not Siren-like to tempt: Donne and the Composers," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972); Rembert Bryce Herbert, "Analysis of Nine Holy Sonnets of John Donne Set to Music by Benjamin Britten," PhD diss., American University, 1974; Paul Gaston, "Britten's Donne and the Promise of Twentieth Century Settings" in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), pp. 201–213;

by Barbara Docherty, "Syllogism and Symbol: Britten, Tippett and English Text," recognizes the tension between reticence and release and the scrutiny of desires and inconstancies in both Donne's texts and Britten's settings. However, discussion is one thing, the revelation afforded by performance, especially performance as profound as was offered that February evening in Baton Rouge, quite another. Were we in the seventeenth century, the twentieth, the twenty-first, or "dispatch[ed] in a minute all the way / twixt Heaven and Earth?" It rather felt as if we were in and through all those times and spheres at once, Empson's characterization of Donne as a spaceman made immediate and possible.

If music was the most potent means for the encounter with Donne, however, it was not the only one at that conference. A panel was devoted to the California artist, June Wayne's 1959 lithographs of the *Songs and Sonets*. There were papers by Paul Parrish, Helen Brooks, and Jonathan Post. Post made the important observation that Wayne's way into Donne "was aural—through the intimacy of listening to his poetry spoken." We watched her hand capture his line. He concluded with the question that continues to impel me as I track that elusive but still omni present voice print: "what is it in Donne that enables his multi-performative appeal?" There was no single or simple answer, there probably cannot be, but he offered an important hint: the "gift of suggestion, a gift that will allow a later artist like Wayne, the intellectual and creative freedom to roam in the course of making a response—some breathing room for *her* thought and invention."[5]

And there was more, for amongst us at that conference was a poet talking about Donne's poetry and, to a degree, his own, as his title, "Trying to Learn from Donne," implied. X. J. Kennedy spoke of his pleasure in Donne's stanzas and meters, the mono syllable, the strong stress, the showing off of technique and skill. He spoke about the poet who "didn't mind being a wise guy," but who "knew how to transform a pretty room into a tremendous chamber." He also read from some of his own poems, which "an acquaintance with Donne made possible." One,

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Barbara Docherty, "Syllogism and Symbol: Britten, Tippet and English Text," *Contemporary Music Review* 5 (1989): 37–63.

[5]Post, "1590/1950: John Donne, June Wayne, and Concrete Expressionism," in this volume, pp. 212 and 216.

"Veterinarian," has a fine Donnean specificity of word as material body, as thing:

> Working alone
> On hands and knees, a carpenter of flesh,
> She joins together the staves of broken bone,
> Mends fences for the blood stream that would run
> Out of the raving dog, the shattered horse,
> Her hands as sure as planets in their course.[6]

And in that last line, the pure Donne sound. In the poems Kennedy has published since the early 60s, one can find other lines and stanzas that share some of Donne's concerns and show him in an ongoing learning from and listening to Donne. As in:

> While in the restless dark I burned
> Bright as a brimstone in my guilt[7]

Or

> But Hell, sleek Hell, hath no freewheeling part:
> None takes his own sweet time, none quickens pace.
> Ask anyone, "How come you here, poor heart?"—
> And he will slot a quarter through his face[8]

So from opening music to closing poetry, and, of course, with many Donne stops in between, the rumpus was pretty extraordinary.

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[6]Kennedy, "Veterinarian," in *Dark Horses: New Poems* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), lines 3–7.

[7]Kennedy, "First Confession," in *Nude Descending a Staircase: Poems, Songs, a Ballad* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), lines 13–14.

[8]Kennedy, "Nothing in Heaven Functions As It Ought," in *Cross Ties: Selected Poems* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), lines 9–12.