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Donne, Britten, and the Honesty of Song

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Song, by its nature, presents a problem of meaning. Because music and language are structured in completely different ways, musical listening and linguistic listening are never entirely compatible, and yet, in listening to song, we must do both at once. When we read a libretto or a lyric written for music, of course, that double listening exists in potential, but the potential becomes more complicated given that composers at least since Handel have habitually created songs from poems that were never intended for that treatment—poems whose creators imagined them primarily as being read on a page. In that case, musical listening, linguistic listening, and reading all exist in relation to each other. Despite the complexity of that situation, poets and critics still seem to invite it, given that lyric poetry remains defined—as the word "lyric" suggests in itself—in relation to song or more generally to music. In an introduction to the genre, David Lindley gives a definition of lyric that connects its disposition to be set to music to its inherent qualities: "From being poetry that organizes language so that it may be accommodated to musical setting, lyric becomes language so disposed that it imitates music in effect. Lyrics are poems that work in some more or less precisely perceived way 'like' music."[1] It follows that lyric poems that are intended to be read on the page and are read are still affected by the capacity of lyric poetry in general to be set to music.

John Donne considers this problem—the effect that the *potential* to be set to music has on written or printed poetry—in his lyric "The Triple Foole." The poem is about a key aspect of lyric representation: the

[1]Lindley, *Lyric* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 30.

capacity of the poem to contain (and, in the conceit, to deflect) the pain of the emotional turmoil of the poet:

> I am two fooles, I know,
> For loving, and for saying so
> In whining Poetry;
> But where's that wiseman, that would not be I,
> If she would not deny?
> Then as th'earths inward narrow crooked lanes
> Do purge sea waters fretful salt away,
> I thought, if I could draw my paines,
> Through Rimes vexation, I should them allay,
> Griefe brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,
> For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse.[2]

We already sense that there is an irony here—Donne does not really believe that writing will allay grief—but that irony is recast into an anxiety about music:

> But when I have done so,
> Some man, his art and voice to show,
> Doth set and sing my paine,
> And by delighting many, frees againe
> Griefe, which verse did restraine.
> To Love, and Griefe tribute of Verse belongs,
> But not of such as pleases when 'tis read,
> Both are increased by such songs:
> For both their triumphs so are published,
> And I, which was two fooles, do so grow three,
> Who are a little wise, the best fooles bee.
> (12–22)

The key to the stanza is metonymy. The composer/singer takes on along with the poem, *as* the poem, "my paine," manipulating it for his own purposes: delight, not grief. But because of the metonymy, because the audience's delight in the music is figured as delight *in pain*, the delight is simultaneously a celebration of grief. The metonymy is the mechanism

[2]Donne, "The Triple Foole," in *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), lines 1–11.

by which the musical setting of the song frees the speaker's grief from the fetters that the formal requirements of his poem have created in the first place. Of course, there are paradoxes here, which are part of the foolishness with which the whole poem abounds; the chief example is the deliberately bad science of the desalination theory in the first stanza.[3] Thomas Docherty points out that for the conceit to work, the reading of the poem has to be prior to the events it describes, which is true, but a similar paradox afflicts the relationship between the poem and the song, since the fool-making depends on the music.[4] The present tense of "do so grow three" invites us to imagine the whole process as taking place as we read it, which suggests that the music is already present.

The pun on "published" explains that paradox; the primary meaning is that the song makes grief public, but, since the modern meaning (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) was very much in use in the period, the possibility of a reassertion of the independence of the poem must be present as well (the song makes the poem popular, but that popularity can take the form of print distribution).[5] The process is *described* as a musical one—only music, the poem says, allows grief the freedom to make the whole thing work. But it is *figured* as poetry again, however jokingly. The "triumphs" of both grief and the pleasure of this kind of poetry are made public when published. The stanza as a whole, despite its argument for the power of music, is making fun of the musician: accusing him of showing off ("his art and voice to show"—not to put to use), and claiming that his art is not the culmination of poetry but its opposite. By emphasizing the contrast between "my paine" and "his art," Donne accuses the singer of a kind of theft and a kind of dishonesty: a misrepresentation of the original poem. The ironic condemnation of poetry in the first stanza turns into a similar condemnation of music, and what we end up with is the little wisdom—it is enough—of the published, read, but unsung poet.

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[3]Helen Gardner traces to Seneca the theory that salt water turns into fresh inside the Earth, but points out that Aristotle had already considered and rejected it (*The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets*, 173 n.). Gardner is not sure what to make of it, but the theory is clearly antiquated by Donne's time; he includes it as an indication that the conceit itself is not to be taken seriously.

[4]Docherty, *John Donne, Undone* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 204–206.

[5]*Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, s. v. "publish," v., 3a.

In this essay I will argue that Donne's concern about music—that the musician's intent to show his own art rather than contain the poet's pain will alter the original poem's capacity to represent—is well-founded. I would like to demonstrate how far-reaching Donne's point about the relationship between poetry and music is by considering an example that crosses temporal boundaries—Benjamin Britten's *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*. Since Donne, as I will argue, demonstrates acute awareness of the role of sound in poetic meaning, it is valuable to consider the extent to which Britten is able to preserve, recreate, or represent that role musically. I will say at the outset that I do not think he does so very well, but his attempt reveals a great deal about the relationship between poetry and music, and allows us to postulate a kind of musical reading—a readerly song-setting—that would preserve linguistic meaning not by imitating linguistic sound (in Donne's case, as we will see, that would be futile) but by allowing for the fundamental difference between music and poetry. In other words, Lindley's simple formulation that lyric poetry is defined by its putative relationship to music is challenged (in a way that Donne anticipates) by the actual process of song-setting. In the final section of this essay, I will suggest that Donne's resistance to song-setting is comparable to the modern problem of word-music relation as explored by Arnold Schoenberg and his philosophical admirers.

Britten's role in music history has been contested almost since the beginning of his career. Hans Keller, in a deliberately polemical essay, once summed up the criticisms of Britten (acknowledging that many of them came from distinguished musicologists) by asserting that "most respectable resistances to Britten boil down to primitive guilt."[6] Keller's chief antagonist, Theodor Adorno, considers Britten to belong to a school of musical compromise in the postwar generation, a loosely defined group of composers who attempted to combine nineteenth-century harmonic principles with a liberal sprinkling of chromaticism; Adorno calls Britten's contribution "triumphant meagerness."[7] He seems

[6]Keller, "Resistances to Britten's Music: Their Psychology," in *Hans Keller: Essays on Music*, ed. Christopher Wintle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 17.

[7]Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 7. Adorno's metaphor in

to mean by this Britten's interest in sharply contained harmony and repetition, one that anticipated a younger generation's turn to minimalism. Britten's formal constraints are in part a reaction against the more dissonant (and overtly theorized) Schoenbergian harmony of the previous generation, but they also derive from his particular interest in language. Since so much of his output is vocal, choral, or operatic, and since he so often worked closely with those whose words he set (particularly W. H. Auden) and those who sang them (particularly Peter Pears), it seems safe to assume that it is fidelity to those words and to musicians that motivates Britten more than an aesthetic agenda.[8] His attempt to faithfully and honestly set Donne's *Holy Sonnets* to music is an opportunity to reflect on the sound-content of those sonnets and its relationship to modern music and to modernity in general.[9] The setting, we will see, relies on the poems' complex use of poetic sound just enough to reveal the difference between the modes of representation available to musical and poetic sound. At the same time, I will argue, we can find a level of resistance in the original sonnets toward being set—toward being thought of, indeed, in sound. The trope that must define an understanding of Donne's poetic sound is synesthesia; we see poetic sound on the page, but we do not hear it.[10]

Britten set nine of the sonnets to music, ordered according to his own needs. "Oh my blacke Soule" leads the group and has remained the most

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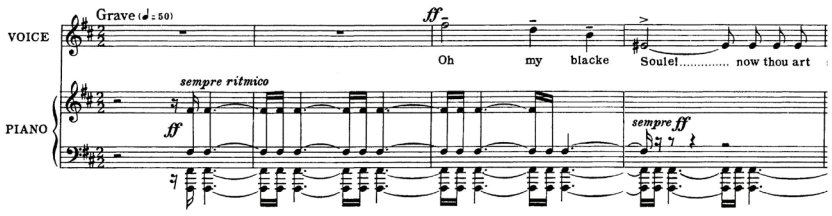
the German text is derived from card-playing, and Keller translates it "meagreness playing trumps" (p. 13).

[8]Indeed, admirers of Britten's settings of Donne cite this fidelity as the cycle's chief accomplishment; see Bryan N. S. Gooch, "Britten and Donne: Holy Sonnets Set to Music," in *Wrestling with God: Literature and Theology in the English Renaissance*, ed. Mary Ellen Henley (Vancouver: Henley, 2001), pp. 193–212.

[9]Those unfamiliar with the songs should start with one of the recordings made by the tenor Peter Pears, for whom they were written, accompanied by the composer. The last of these recordings, released by Decca in 1969, was rereleased with Britten's Blake Songs and his *Billy Budd* on Compact Disc (London: Decca, 1989), and is available as of this writing.

[10]This term derives from the medical study of a condition in which one sense is involuntarily conflated with another (see the word's *Oxford English Dictionary* entry). Imagined as a trope, however, synesthesia separates itself from the word's medical meaning, because in the literary sense it is a voluntary action.



Ex. 1. Benjamin Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, op. 35, first song ("Oh my blacke Soule"), measures 1–4. © Copyright 1946 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.

familiar to audiences. Britten's aggressively non-contrapuntal style is evident—there is essentially no voice-leading relationship between the vocal line and the piano accompaniment, which consists almost entirely of quadruple octaves repeating an identical figure: a sixteenth note followed by a dotted quarter note (ex. 1). The direction is "*Sempre ritmico*"—always rhythmic—and the piano plays exclusively F-sharps for the first nine bars, suggesting that (though the pitch eventually changes) it is the repetitive rhythmic figure, and not any harmonic function of the tones themselves, that counts. The vocal line, meanwhile, is syncopated and exceedingly disjunct, frequently containing horizontal intervals of a minor sixth or greater; if the piano is governed by repetition, the voice is governed by an unpredictability in which patterns are difficult to find. Though its relationship to the piano part is often dissonant—there are occasional intervals of a minor or major second between the two parts—the vocal line's essential tonality is established with a B minor descending triad at the outset and maintained throughout. The dissonances, though they contribute to an overall air of disquiet, do not define the harmonic structure.

"Oh my blacke Soule" is the fifth sonnet in the standard groups of twelve, sixteen, or nineteen in the manuscripts considered most reliable by modern editors, and the second in the ordering of twelve common to several other manuscripts.[11] This is Helen Gardner's text (Britten's is less

[11] *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part 1: The Holy Sonnets*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. lxi–lxvii.

frequently punctuated and, of course, marks elisions for the singer's benefit, but I am not certain what edition formed its basis):

> Oh my black Soule! nowe thou art summoned
> By sicknesse, deaths Herald, and Champion;
> Thou art like a Pilgrim, which abroad hath done
> Treason, and durst not turne to whence hee is fled,
> Or like a theife, which till deaths doome be read,
> Wisheth himselfe delivered from prison;
> But damn'd and hal'd to execution,
> Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned;
> Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack;
> But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?
> Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,
> And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne;
> Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might
> That being red, it dyes red soules to white.[12]

The structure of the sonnet is unusual. The first two lines present the situation in summary, and are followed by quite a long simile, which takes up the rest of the octave. The sestet is similar; the first two lines pose a question, and the following four an extended metaphor as a kind of answer, though of course a fundamentally unsatisfying one. Both the simile that governs the octave and the metaphor of the sestet are disturbed by a binary opposition, set off by the word "or" at the start of a line. Thus, structurally, the sonnet suggests an analogy; as the pilgrim is to the thief, so is the demand that the soul color itself black and red to its potential to be washed clean in the blood of Christ. Because of that analogy, the consistency of Britten's treatment has some basis. Even though the sestet claims a resolution of the octave's problematic, the response is structured similarly to the question.

Still, other formal elements enforce a distinction. The meter of the octave is perhaps the most difficult, even unsteady, in the Holy Sonnets. Only one line, line 7, consists of five iambs; the first as I hear it contains three stresses in a row ("black Soule! nowe"). The enjambment from line

[12]Donne, "Oh my blacke Soule," in *The Divine Poems*, corrected ed., ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959). Gardner follows the order of the 1633 edition, in which this is the second sonnet. I will use her text for all of the sonnets.

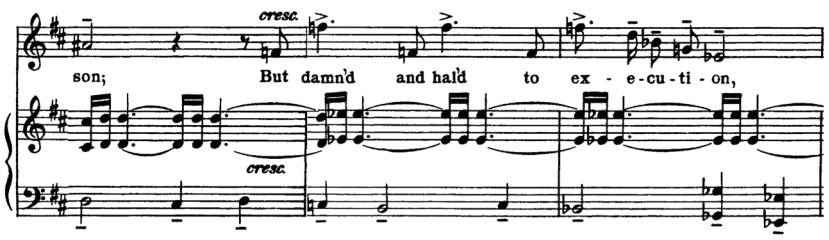
3 to 4 leads into a trochee, which creates a similar effect of a heavy, off-kilter beat. These are dark words, handed down with gravity. The sestet is entirely different. It moves quickly, almost trippingly: a series of blameless iambs. So Donne sets up a neat contrast, only to dash it through the repetition of "or," the return of "black" to describe the soul in grief as it described the soul in sin, and the deeply troubling identity between the "red" of sin and the "red" of Christ's blood. If the "or" from line 5 did not come back to take over line 13, then the paradox of Christ's blood that "dyes red soules to white" would be resolvable through the larger, divine paradox of grace itself; but the structural sympathies between octave and sestet make it a *final* ambiguity, one that cannot be resolved.

In arguing that this poem reveals considerable doubt about its own attempt at Calvinism (and thus arguing that the sonnet is unsuccessful), Richard Strier notes, contrary to those readings that would see the two alternatives as "establishing a temporal sequence," that the image "presents the alternatives without either coordination or sequence."[13] Since the lines stress the "physical redness of the blood" but "establish no logical or conceptual relation between the physical process they envision and the moral, psychological, and theological terms of the poem," they provide "a merely poetic solution."[14] In fact, the structural undermining of the *volta* through the repeated "or" figures means that there is no solution poetically or theologically. At the very least, that complete lack of resolution brings the poetic and theological aspects of the poem back into sync, though whether it can save the sonnet from Strier's objections is another question. A lack of resolution, of course, presents a particular challenge to a composer.

Britten, whose music is based on repetition and variation, looks for analogous sound patterns in the sonnet. He finds a useful one at the start of line 7: "But damn'd and hal'd to execution," which he sets by making "But damn'd" an eighth-note followed by an accented dotted quarter note, which is then repeated with "and hal'd" and "to ex-" before the remainder of the word spells out a descending arpeggio in E-flat minor

[13]Strier, "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets,' 1608–1610," *Modern Philology* 86 (1989): 357–384; quotation from p. 371.

[14]Strier, p. 372.



Ex. 2. Benjamin Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, op. 35, first song ("Oh my blacke Soule"), measures 18–20. © Copyright 1946 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.

(ex. 2). Britten wants "But damn'd and hal'd" to be two parallel statements, and so (in sound) they are—two clear iambs, each with an unstressed conjunction followed by a stressed monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon weak verb in the past tense. The two vowel sounds, though not identical, are similar enough in sound. The "d" in "and" coupled with the non-consonant "h" in "hal'd" creates a further parallel—a virtual alliteration, in addition to the consonance of the same sound created by the past-tense endings. Britten brings attention to all of this by having the two parallel, and set off from the rest—they are large intervals, which are one of a composer's chief tools for emphasis.

But the two verbs are not really parallel at all, since "hal'd" only functions as part of the phrase "hal'd to execution." Indeed, "hal'd" is a particularly useful word for creating the pull toward execution; execution is hailing *it*, as well as the thief. Donne painstakingly creates the parallel through sound only to undermine it through syntax. We can understand this process only through synesthesia: what happens when we read the line is that the eye first *hears* the two phrases as parallel, and then upon understanding the contrast between them goes back and corrects itself, so that "and hal'd" sounded so that it is parallel to "But damn'd" exists on the page simultaneously with the same phrase sounded as the beginning of a longer phrase and thus not the same as the first iamb.

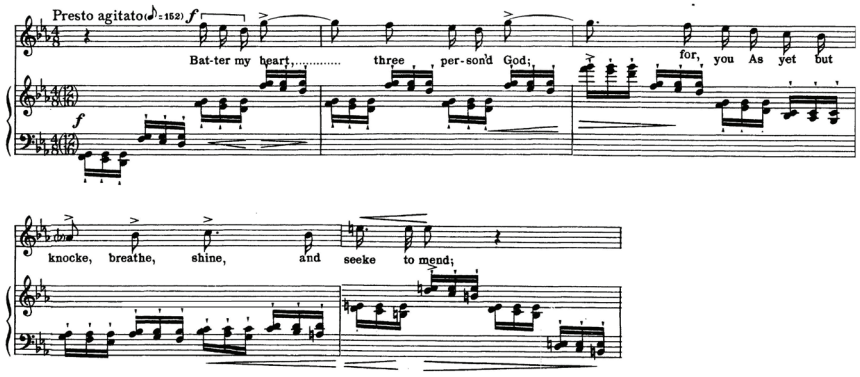
That complex trick of sound sets up the more significant sound-turn of the poem: the paradoxical pun, created in sound and image simultaneously, on "red." The "Or" at the start of the second quatrain introduces a relationship that will come back again, between the first stressed word of the poem, "black," and the first rhyme word of the

second quatrain, "read," which we only find out later is a pun. "Deathes doome" is both *read* and *red*, and thus, just as the axe is pulling the rhythm of "But damn'd, and hal'd" forward "to execution," so it turns the *figured* death—the death that is read—into a literal, red one. Of course, that pun does not exist yet when we read the fifth line; it comes into being at the same moment that the word is asked to do two new things—to signify "red with blushing" and "with sinne." "Red" without the "a" is introduced as a simple, two-way dichotomy, which stands in for the dichotomy between grace and sin. But as such it is unstable, since it is already looking backward to its initial use. Because the soul is not only red but also read—because the larger context of the sonnet is present in the midst of the plain Christian truth of the final couplet—that truth is undermined. The red soul is "hal'd to execution"—haled back to the red "Deaths doome" from earlier. The central theme of the sonnet, in a sense, is that kind of hailing, that kind of pull that language can perform.

The static but fragile and momentary relationship that can exist between words before the continued force of the poem draws them apart is somewhat like music, but is too tied to the page (and to the way language functions in the mind) for the parallel to hold up. Though we may use music as a metaphor to describe the relationship between sounds within the poem, music itself cannot recreate this dynamic mutability. Britten's use of repeated rhythms and intervals stands in contrast to Donne's awareness and exhibition of the mutability of written language.

A similar example may make clearer the ways in which Britten's musically limited repetitions cut off Donne's linguistic metamorphoses. Britten chooses "Batter my heart" for his second song:

> Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
> As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
> That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,'and bend
> Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
> I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,
> Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
> Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
> But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue,
> Yet dearely'I love you, and would be lov'd faine,
> But am betroth'd unto your enemie,
> Divorce mee,'untie, or breake that knot againe,
> Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I



Ex. 3. Benjamin Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, op. 35, second song ("Batter my heart"), measures 1–5. © Copyright 1946 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.

> Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
> Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

Britten sets it in C minor, "*Presto agitato*." The piano part consists entirely of sixteenth-note triplets; each set of triplets is descending and conjunct, but each beat is more often than not separated by a disjunct interval. The vocal part by and large moves at a slower pace, except that it intermittently echoes the triplet figure in the piano (ex. 3). Because of the motivic role of these triplets, the three-syllable phrases that are so set achieve a distinct prominence. Taken always from the beginnings of Donne's lines, they are:

> Batter my
> That I may
> Labour to'ad-
> Reason your

In addition, there are similar figures consisting of an eighth note tied into a sixteenth-note triplet; these are both, in the sonnet, trochaic substitutions:

> I like an
> weake or un-

Thus, in this case Britten enforces a greater distinction between the octave and sestet; the latter is set entirely in slower motion, without any of these triplet figures. But his treatment of the octave requires some thought.

The triplet figure ends always with an accented upbeat, which is tied to the downbeat—a distinctive syncopation. Since the song begins with the figure, it is governed by its rhythmic lack of balance, which lends an air of uncertainty to the whole. The only words that sound certain, coming solidly on the downbeat, are the accented verbs of God's current actions—"knocke, breathe, shine"—and his future ones—"breake, blowe, burn." The accent on the phrase beginning with "knocke" suggests that the word is onomatopoeic, and that the string of monosyllables, which could indeed be read with consecutive accents as Britten sets it, is an instantiation of that knocking. "Breake, blowe, burn" is parallel to the first phrase in grammar and in its trio of images, and Britten sets it using the identical rhythm. Britten's setting leads us to ask: what *is* the relationship implied between these two similar sets of three? Is "breake" indeed an intensification of "knocke"—and, thus, does the sonnet's breaking of form through its repeated accents figure the kind of breaking of the soul the poet wishes God to accomplish in him?

The key to the sonnet is the end of the octave. As Strier points out, the beginning and end of the sonnet are matched in their reliance "on the conception of total spiritual dependence on God," whereas the end of the octave in between shows a poet who "does not seem to know where he stands."[15] Even though God has implanted reason in man, reason can still fail to live up to that calling, and its failure casts doubt on the very mechanisms of grace that might allow for the ravishment the speaker desires. The charge against reason is a very serious one, and necessarily colors the whole poem. In particular, it undermines any force of the poet's claim to "Labour to'admit you." If the labor is led by reason, and if reason is held captive by sin, then it is not that the speaker labors to admit God and finds that his labor is insufficient, but rather that the labor itself pulls him in the wrong direction.

The interpretive claim of Britten's setting is that, as far as sound is concerned, the structural function of "Labour" and "Reason" are the same (that seems reasonable) but also that they mirror "Batter" in the first line.

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[15]Strier, pp. 375–376.

That does not mean that he believes the lines have the same meaning, or that he confuses the battery that comes from God with the failed labor and reason of man, but it does mean that he regards each of these points as available to structure the sonnet—to delineate its basic sound outline, drawing a clear connection between the words that themselves refer to sound, and thus to think of "batter" in sound terms. What God does now is to "knock" and to "breathe," which suggests the anticipation of speech or song, and to "shine, and seek to mende"—the emphasis is on the seeking rather than the mending, as God's mere presence in the world and even the fact of the Messiah are never sufficient in the Holy Sonnets. So there seems to be a specific relationship between "knock," which is not enough, and "Batter," which is. Given that relationship, and given the similarity of sound between *batter* and *beat*, it seems reasonable to regard battery in this case as a more intense form of knocking, but whether it is depends on the difference between what God is doing in the sonnet's present time and what the speaker wishes he will do ("break, blow") in the future.

Anthony Low has argued that this sonnet illustrates a general problem in the cycle: that though the sonnets suggest essentially a Catholic, meditative method, the doubts they so frequently express have a decided Calvinist tinge. Thus, the poems are "not very useful for those looking for devotional exercises to improve their souls."[16] If they are so prescriptively ineffective, then the soul of their subject does not seem to be in very good hands either, as Donne complains in "Batter my heart." Of the final wish, "ravish me," Low says, "it will take something like Calvin's irresistible grace to free him from his bondage, the kind of grace that leaves no room for cooperation or for willing consent. Such a grace is very different from either Catholic or Anglican prevenient grace, the term most critics of the poem mention in this connection."[17] Low's disjunction between method and content suggests a way to think about the figuration of God's hoped-for intervention as sound. The poem sets itself up as something like George Herbert's "Deniall," a poem that withholds the expected rhyme at the end of each stanza until the last, when the poet hopes that God's grace and his mind "will chime / And

[16]Low, "Absence in Donne's Holy Sonnets: Between Catholic and Calvinist," *John Donne Journal* 23 (2004): 95–115; quotation from p. 114.

[17]Low, p. 112.

mende my ryme"; the failure of the sounds of the poem to rhyme sets up a correction of it that figures (but does not contain) God's hoped-for correction of the larger failure.[18] In that sense, the failed labor of the poem is the work of the poet, the knocking of the iamb itself; the battery called for figures the greater sound, the impossibly great and unhearable sound, that God's own mastery of any devotional form must produce. But the parallel does not hold up, because the labor is *not* an attempted version of God's labor; it is led astray by traitorous reason, a charge that taints both the verbal knocking of the poet and God's knocking on the soul.

"Breake" is different from "knocke"; it is a desire to get beyond the knocking, to get beyond anything that can be figured in sound. "Make me new," Donne demands of God: remake the sonnet not as the underwhelming knocking it currently is but as something else. The "mee" that must be ravished in the sestet is the subject as poet, not just as meditator, and the knot that must be broken in line 11 is the sonnet's own formal bindings. The potential intervention that would work—"breake, blow, burn"—is parallel in sound to the kind that does not in order to suggest the real distance that can be contained in this superficial similarity. If "knocke" is indeed an onomatopoetic reference to poetic meter, it functions not as a tribute to poetic sound but as an excoriation of it. By coming back to the same rhythm, Britten collapses that distance and elides the collapse of form that the sonnet reaches toward.

We see in "Oh my blacke Soule" and "Batter my heart" two different ways that poetic sound can function. Both poems point toward the shortcomings of sound. In "Oh my blacke Soule" what matters is rhythm, which Donne uses to point simultaneously to the way poetic sound is and is not like musical sound and the way it is and is not like the sound of speech. Like music, poetry can create through repetition of sound miniature static structures: worlds of sound containing their own tensions and resolutions. But those worlds can be pulled in different directions by things located outside of them, outside even of the poem—

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[18]Herbert, "Deniall," in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), lines 29–30. I will use this text for all quotations of Herbert's verse.On the inscrutability of the metaphor of harmony in this poem, see Andrew Mattison, "'Keep Your Measures': Herrick, Herbert, and the Resistance to Music," *Criticism* 48.3 (2006): 323–346.

as the axe completes the pun on "red" and "read" even as it is not mentioned. Similarly, the use of onomatopoeia in "Batter my heart" works to reestablish the autonomy of poetic meaning apart from sound. The word "knocke" ultimately describes the failure of sound to represent, and casts the entire sonnet as a meditation on the fraught and ambiguous relationship between poetic sound and poetic mimesis.

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As I have suggested, Britten's style, beyond his individual compositional choices, makes his settings resistant to Donne's ambiguity and complexity. The context in which that style is best understood is the debates over musical vocabulary in the twentieth century: Britten himself understood his use of tonality as polemical. Repetition, another key element of his style, was a subject of considerable controversy as well.[19] Schoenberg rejected repetition because his music demands, as he and his admirers have insisted, a kind of listening with its own sense of the relationship between one sound and another: beyond repetition and variation lies a kind of difference between sounds which is neither transparent nor arbitrary.[20] This kind of listening seems as if it might address some of Donne's concerns about song-setting as he expresses them in "The Triple Foole."

The philosopher Massimo Cacciari has argued that Schoenberg's attention to the possibility of radical difference between the aims of a musical setting and the text set allows for a particularly germane approach to the setting of words in the *lied*. Rather than assimilating the text into a controlled structure, Schoenberg's settings acknowledge "the general presence of another system beside the musical signs, of expressive

[19]Schoenberg argues that the reason for the intensive repetition found in the composers of Britten's generation is a desire to be understandable, and the adaptation of that desire to a different audience with different expectations and abilities. The complexity of Schoenberg's music precludes such repetition; he says: "were I prepared to be as discursive as one must be, in order to be widely comprehensible, my works would play for two hours, while a whole day would not suffice to get through a longer one" (*Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], p. 470).

[20]Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), p. 149.

signs which are also thoughts."[21] The precision with which the musical system is organized makes audible the organization of the linguistic even though—actually, *because*—the two modes of organization are entirely different. Just as those listening from a literary point of view must allow for the difference of music, so musicians must allow, as Cacciari says, for the difference of poetry. "The Triple Foole" suggests that Donne wants something very similar to what Cacciari sees in Schoenberg: that the singer's art and the poet's pain will be present at once, both permitted to have whatever meaning it has without being restricted by its relationship to the other. Even allowing for that difference, there is still a danger that we then declare that whichever art form we are not talking about is constituted entirely by the fact of its difference. To guard against that, the effect of the verse *as* verse (grief, in "The Triple Foole") must be present as a counter to its effect as song (which Donne calls delight). We can call a song-setting *honest* if it allows the poem to speak in its own terms by acknowledging that poetry carries meaning in a different way from song. My contention is that Britten's setting of Donne, because he assimilates poetic coincidences of structure (such as the trochaic substitutions that sometimes open Donne's lines) into his own repetitive structure, has attempted to negate that difference.

My word *honest* comes from Herbert, who, I think, addresses exactly this question of differences in linguistic meaning between poetry and song in his brilliantly paradoxical "Jordan" (the first of the two poems by that title in *The Temple*). The problem I have been examining in Britten's settings of Donne is not just tension between modernity and the Renaissance but tension between two kinds of reading. The question that informs "Jordan" is whether the value that poetic skill adds to a poetic statement outweighs the value that poetic flashiness detracts from it. Herbert complexly praises the simple statement of truth, acknowledging that simple praise would not be poetic:

> Who says that fictions onely and false hair
> Become a verse? Is there in truth no beautie?
> Is all good structure in a winding stair?

[21]Cacciari, *Posthumous People: Vienna at the Turning Point*, trans. Rodger Friedman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 50–51.

May no lines passe, except they do their dutie
Not to a true, but painted chair?

Is it no verse, except enchanted groves
And sudden arbours shadow course-spunne lines?
Must purling streams refresh a lovers loves?
Must all be vail'd, while he that reades, divines,
Catching the sense at two removes?

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing:
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for Prime:
I envie no mans nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with losse of ryme,
Who plainly say, *My God, My King*.

All of the metaphors of the first two stanzas—those that figure the kind of beauty that the poem rejects in favor of honest simplicity—are visual metaphors. Those metaphors, however tangled their logic, exist primarily to be displaced by the aural conceit of the last stanza, the singing shepherd.

That stanza contains a paradox, however. Can Herbert "plainly say, *My God, My King*," given that the line is *not* plain, since it sets up the rhyme with "spring"? As the shepherd's sole statement, the phrase is different from what it becomes when inserted into the poem, and this difference is parallel to a difference between the words as spoken and as written. As sound, "My God, My King" does not have the same function that it has as a visual object, part of a poem on a page. The honesty seems to apply only to the sound. The context in which Herbert wants us to understand that paradox is supplied by the first line of the last stanza: "Shepherds are honest people; let them sing." It is "them" and not "us"; unlike pastoral, this poem does not enter into the conceit that the poet, by emulating the simple song of a shepherd, can become one. The line acknowledges that, however much an honest poem must praise the honesty of song, it must also recognize the difference of song. The complexity of the metaphors Herbert uses to criticize complex metaphors acknowledges the same difference between poetry and song, as does the use of rhyme in asking to be excused for not rhyming: all of these paradoxes place poetry in the position of praising simple truth—the kind contained in the shepherd's song or in prayer—while acknowledging that

such truth is other than poetry, outside of poetry. Letting shepherds sing means acknowledging the difference of their truth, but writing about their singing means acknowledging the difference of poetry's, and if the poem is to emulate the shepherd's honesty, it must do so not by imitating a shepherd but being frankly different. The difference between text and song-setting in Cacciari's model of the *lied* or between the poet's intention and the singer's in Donne's "The Triple Foole" is the same as the difference between the words "My God, My King" as read in a poem and as heard sung by a shepherd.

Just as Herbert's honesty moves away from the shepherd's song to be able to contain poetry after all, Donne's requires an emphasis on non-musical possibilities of sound. So we can only understand the way sound works in the Holy Sonnets by recognizing the independence of their kind of sound from that of music. But, as the example of Britten demonstrates, it is crucial as well to acknowledge what music can tell us about sound, and particularly about the historicity of sound—the ways in which sound determines and is determined by its historical moment. That sonic historicity turns out to be a key feature of music; as the conflicts among twentieth-century composers show, musicians struggle constantly with the tension between an often unyielding sense of musical tradition and the rapidly and unevenly changing status of music in the moment. To discuss the relation between poetic and musical sound is to build a bridge between islands that will not stay still, and perhaps the best we can do is to stand on each in turn and look out at the other.

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