

A Fine Reciprocity

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Abstract: The “Fine Reciprocity” referred to in my title is multi-valanced. In musical compositions, among other attributes, the reciprocity can refer to the relations between musical settings and poetic texts. The more basic metaphysical principle involves all aspects of reaching out and taking in, including the ways a listener engages a musical performance and the ways a reader engages a written text. The essay explores various meanings and exemplifications of this reciprocity, taking examples from a variety of poems and musical compositions. We close with thoughts on Benjamin Britten’s *Nocturne* developed out of our previous discussions.

The fine reciprocity of my title is twofold. First, there is the remarkable reciprocity between music and poetry. Second is a more fundamental kind of reciprocity, one might even say a metaphysical principle basic to the ways we interact with the world about us, including the people we come to know. We might think of the first type, the reciprocal relations between music and poetry, as an instance of the more encompassing principle.

Exemplifying this more basic, metaphysical principle is the reciprocity between the vectors of reaching out and taking in. Through my words on the page (or computer screen), I move toward you, my reader, as you move, reciprocally, toward me. We meet in the middle. In Kabbalah, there is a double motion of mystical ascent toward the Divine, palaces, chariot, and throne, and downpouring grace, like a rain that blesses, infusing the earth with its nourishment and powers of healing. We gaze upward, seeing light-years past in the visible stars. And as we gaze upward, the light of the stars and our star, the sun, as well as our moon, pours down: “*Den Wein, den man mit Augen trinkt, gießt nachts der Mond in Wogen nieder, und eine Springflut überschemmt den stillen Horizont,*” as Schoenberg’s moonstruck (*Mondestrunken*) Pierrot would have it.

When we come to know a work of art, a painting, a piece of music, a poem, the same reciprocity obtains. It is the double vector of love. It is the handshake of friendship. It is the double vector of being at peace in the world. When the double-arrowed motion, emotion, is curtailed, we lose the ability to reach, to teach, and to love one other. In the case of music, the music doesn’t reach us if we do not reach it. Enlarged beyond the sphere of music, although it is all music of a sort, the consequences of that breakdown are consequential; we experience them every day.

If we imagine a vector as a directed arrow, the reciprocal arrow is a specific permutation

of the first, permuting out to in, past to yet to come, and all the like. Moshe Idel writes of Abraham Abulafia's meditative technique of permuting the names of God, merging names together, interleaving the letters.

While in the other known techniques—Yoga, Sufism and hesychasm—the goal is to attain the maximum degree of concentration by means of a generally simple formula, to be repeated over and over again, Abulafia's method is based upon the contemplation of a constantly changing object: one must combine the letters and their vowel signs, “sing” and move the head in accordance with vocalization, and even lift one's hands in the gesture of Priestly Blessing. This combination of constantly changing components is entirely different from what we know of these other techniques. (Idel 1988, 40)

Music, among its many attributes, is the place where permutations abound. The twelve tones of the tempered scale, so long the foundation of art music in the West, are endlessly permuted to create so much of our music. The twelve-tone music of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern bring the technique to a specific focus. Milton Babbitt characterized the distinction between tonal music and twelve-tone music as a distinction between combinational music (where various subsets of the chromatic whole give rise to diatonic collections that may interact) and permutational music (where the twelve tones are omnipresent and where their specific orderings and reorderings give rise to the music). Abulafia's transformations of “a constantly changing object” comprising the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, all of which point to, embody, and bring inward a multiform singularity, find an uncanny analogue in the music of Milton Babbitt.

The double vector that meets in the middle is one variety of musical permutation, the musical palindrome. Less severe in its restrictive ordering, but clearly related in its reciprocities, is the rhetorical device known as *epanalepsis*, where the opening sentence, clause, or word is repeated at the end. The more general and inclusive term, *chiasmus*, as in John Hollander's “Imagined mirrors mirror imagining,” broadens our perspective even further (Hollander 2014, 49). Each of these terms can be applied to varieties of musical permutation, music without words and the music of poetry. Among canonical composers, I associate the use of epanalepsis and chiasmus in particular with Schubert and Brahms, but the technique is commonplace in many musical works.¹ The figures work the same in poetry as in music: the

¹ I explore two striking examples of the technique in previous publications. Schubert's setting of Goethe's “Wanderers Nachtlied,” D. 768, begins and ends with a cadential figure whose tonic closure correlates with the text: *Warte nur, warte nur, balde ruhest du auch* (Only wait, only wait, soon you too will rest). In the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony, the opening motto returns at the

final A of any ABA is conditioned by the B in between. If the B is an extensive commentary on the meaning of A, then A in its return is filled with meaning that it could not possibly have had prior to our experience of B.

An instance of the principle that I have been formulating can be found in the poetry of Yehuda Halevi (1075–1141), among the most celebrated Hebrew poets of his era. The poem given the English title “Where Will I Find You” in Peter Cole’s anthology *The Poetry of Kabbalah* contains the following lines, given in Cole’s exquisite translation.

I sought your nearness.
With all my heart I called you.
And in my going out to meet you,
I found you coming toward me. (Cole 2012, 72)

The Hebrew lines translated as “And in my going out to meet you / I found you coming toward me” comprise only four words that form a chiasmus: A B B’ A’. The exceptions to this scheme are the final syllable of each word (transliterated as *tee, kha, tee, kha*), the single letter designated as ‘c’, allows the two halves of the hemistich to rhyme.

וּבְצֵאתִי לְקִרְאתֶךָ לְקִרְאתִי מִצֵּאתֶיךָ
c A’ B’ c B A
(*uvetsetee leqratekha leqratee metsateekha*)

As with one who moves toward the reflective plane of a mirror, the move toward the beloved, here God, is reciprocated. (We recall John Hollander’s “Imagined mirrors mirror imagining.”) The poetic image profoundly captures an aspect of the middle voice as I conceive and espouse it, where my approach toward *whatever* is reciprocated by whatever’s approach toward me. When I read a poem or hear or perform a piece of music as a middle-voiced experience, in going out to meet the poem or musical composition, I find it coming toward me. The active lover (agent) is also the receiver of that love (patient) in a reciprocal vector: lover/beloved \rightleftharpoons beloved/lover.

The chiasmic structure of the line in Halevi’s poem bears an uncanny resemblance to the kinds of relations one finds in Schoenberg’s twelve-tone music, with particular resonance in Schoenberg’s opera *Moses und Aron*. Shown below (on the left) is the twelve-tone row that is the source of all musical relationships in the opera. On the right is the form of the row that

end of the final movement as a wispy revenant, its force finally dissipated. The Schubert song is interpreted in Cherlin 2017, 94–98. My comments on the Brahms symphony are found in Cherlin 2024, 140–143.

Milton Babbitt dubbed its “hexachordal combinatorial inversion.” This pairing of row forms, along with various transpositions, is used extensively throughout the opera, including in places in the first scene, where Moses is charged with being a prophet, and in the second scene, sung by Aron, where Moses and Aron meet in the desert, each approaching the other.

<u>A\natural B\flat E\natural D\natural E\flat D\flat</u>	<u>G\natural F\natural F\sharp G\sharp B\natural C\natural</u>	<u>C\natural B\natural F\natural G\natural F\sharp G\sharp</u>	<u>D\natural E\natural E\flat D\flat B\flat</u>
<u>A\natural</u>			
A	B	C	D
		D'	C'
			B'
			A'

The row pairing that we hear at the very outset of the opera, portraying Moses’ revelation at the burning bush, is partitioned differently; its mirror imagery is much harder to hear. Instead, we most likely misperceive. Understanding the nature of divinity is difficult, even for a Moses.

Each row of the pair is partitioned into its two “outer” trichords and its inner hexachord, with the second row of the pair presented in reverse order (its transposed retrograde).

<u>A\natural B\flat E\natural</u>	<u>D\natural E\flat D\flat G\natural F\natural F\sharp</u>	<u>G\sharp B\natural C\natural</u>	<u>A\natural B\flat D\flat</u>	<u>E\flat E\natural D\natural G\sharp F\sharp G\natural</u>	<u>F\natural B\natural C\natural</u>
A	B	C	A'	B'	C'

The initial presentation of the trichords labeled A to C, then A’ to C’, emanates from the burning bush (Schoenberg’s score identifies this only as the “Voice from the Thornbush”). These trichords are sung first *without words*. Only after Moses replies in words does the Voice reciprocate in words. The trichords A to C and A’ to C’ are presented as vertical harmonies. Their shared tones, A \natural –B \flat moving to B \natural –C \natural , are easily recognizable and easily heard as a transposition, A \natural –B \flat moving up a whole tone to B \natural –C \natural . But the “true” relationship, retrograde inversion, is profoundly difficult to hear. Even more deceptive is the relationship between B and B’, the six inner notes of the respective tone rows. Schoenberg presents both “inner six” as a linear idea with the contour (in semitones) <+1–2+6–2+1>, an interval palindrome. Played consecutively, the six-note lines (labelled B and B’) are easily heard as being related by transposition up a semitone. As with the vertical trichords, the “true” relation, a retrograde inversion, is hidden, eluding our hearing.

Another pairing of row forms, shown below, combines the prime form of the row with the inversion that starts on the note B-natural, using the same partitioning of the row as at the burning bush. Here, the inner six tones of the two forms, each an interval palindrome, create a palindrome of pitches as well, where the latter six are the retrograde of the first.

necessary, if not sufficient. Clearly, what goes for the musician is true of the poet as well. *Pace* Schoenberg, the competent critic or scholar has their craft as well.

Remarkably, the Hebrew noun translated as “craft,” מלאכה (*melakhah*), shares the same root as the word for angel or messenger. The connection of craftsmanship with divinity is made explicit in a poem by Moshe ben Nahman, also known as Nachmanides (1194–1270). Here is the verse in Peter Cole’s translation (I have interposed the Hebrew word for “of the craftsman” as in the original).

My life’s course flowed from the heaven’s foundation,
which endowed it with form in evident fashion.
The hands of the craftsman [עושי המלאכה] that weighed out creation
shaped me then for the vaults of the King. (Cole 2012, 94)

The permutations of poetry and music are the shapings of their crafts. I suppose the permutations of DNA are a proto-shaping that shapes the rest.

The fine reciprocity of lovers has its dual fount in the Greek poems of Sappho and in the biblical Song of Songs. And so, for my final example of a near palindrome in Hebrew verse, I turn to an example that predates all the others, the Song of Songs.

In a recently published book of interviews, Peter Cole and his interlocutor Nate Klug discuss the poem.

NK: *One thing that I love about the Song of Songs is that it’s a conversation—a dialogue as opposed to a narrative, which really makes it stand out from the rest of biblical literature.*

PC: Exactly. And in the Hebrew, the sensual qualities of the language, the play that we’ve been talking about, is especially thick and palpable, and so you feel that it’s not just a dialogue between people or characters in the Song of Songs but very much a dialogue of the letters themselves and the words they form and inform. (Cole 2024, 188–89)

The letters meet like lovers, and their lovemaking is better than wine, more alluringly fragrant than consecrating oils. I draw on the translation and commentary on the first verse of the poem by Ariel and Chana Bloch (1995, 137–38).³

כי-טובים דְדִיךְ מִיַּיִן: לְרִיחַ שְׁמָנֶיךָ טוֹבִים
ki ṭōḇim dodeykā mi(n)-yayin: le-reaḥ šemaneḱa ṭōḇim
better is your love making than wine: the scent of your oils is better

³ The transliteration is theirs. I have modified the translation to better capture the chiasmus.

In poetry the letters, grouped into words, provide the music that we read and hear and the images that we see through language's imaginative force. In music without words, the tones, their shape and timbre, their groupings into motives and phrases, melodies and harmonies, textures of all variety, spans and shapes, do their work with musical syntax but without semantics, although perhaps music embodies a kind of semantics kindred to the unworded sounds of wind and rain, birds and beasts. To recognize these kinds of relationships of craft and imagery is not to assert that musicians derive their ideas from poets, or that poets derive their ideas from musicians, but rather that there is a fine reciprocity where each comes to meet the other.

Palindromes and other chiasmic structures share the property of ending where they began. When the beginning and end are separated by a journey in between, the meaning of the reiterated text or music takes on new meaning as a result of what we have experienced. To explore this and related matters, I turn to Psalm 139 along with commentary by Robert Alter, Devora Steinmetz, and Adele Berlin. Here is the fifth verse of the psalm, in Hebrew and in Robert Alter's translation (Alter 2007, 480).⁴

אַחֲרֵי וּמִלְפָּנֶיךָ צִרְתָּנִי
וּתְשֵׁת עָלַי כַּפְּךָ:

From behind and in front you shaped me,
and you set your palm upon me.

Alter's footnote to the verse understands the shaping or fashioning as suggestive of a potter who shapes the clay with the palm of the hand. The psalm goes on to speak of the end of our human span, "if I bed down in Sheol—there you are" (verse 8), and of its beginnings, "For you created my innermost parts, / wove me in my mother's womb" (verse 13; Alter 2007, 480–81). Hamlet's "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" [act V, scene 2] beautifully makes a similar observation.

Verses 11 and 12 of the psalm shift the imagery from "behind and in front," or "before and behind" (as in the JPS translation), to images of darkness and light.

אֶמַר אֶחֱשֶׁךְ יִשְׁכַּנִּי
וְלֵילָה אֲזֹר בְּעֵדְנִי:
גַּם־חֹשֶׁךְ לֹא־יִחְשֶׂיךָ מְתוּרָה
וְלֵילָה כְּזֹמַם יֵאָרֵר
כְּחֹשֶׁיכָה כְּאֹרֶחַ:

If I say, "surely darkness will conceal me,

⁴ The Hebrew is taken from *Sefaria: A Living Library of Jewish Texts Online*.

night will provide me with cover,”
darkness is not dark for You;
night is as light as day;
darkness and light are the same. (JPS translation)

If, as the psalmist would have it, darkness and light—and by extension, morning and night—are the same, then that sameness would also apply to behind and in front, or before and after.

Devora Steinmetz, in *Why Rain Comes from Above*, provides two apposed translations of verse 11, along with commentary that is very suggestive in our context.

And I said, “Surely darkness will envelop me,
and the light shall be night about me.”

And I said, “Surely darkness will envelop me,
but the night has become light for me.” (Steinmetz 2024, 35)

The two readings hinge on the syntactic ambiguity of night and light in the Hebrew text: “Because the words ‘night’ and ‘light’ are not linked by a verb in the Hebrew text, and because the biblical text leaves ambiguous which word should be understood as the grammatical subject,” the two opposed meanings are equally possible (Steinmetz 2024, 35).

The fine reciprocity of beginnings and endings, light and darkness, receive a final manifestation in the psalm’s paraphrase of the first two verses in the penultimate verse.

LORD, You searched me and You know,
It is You who know when I sit and rise,
You fathom my thoughts from afar. (1–2)

Search me, God, and know my heart
Probe me and know my mind. (23)

(Robert Alter’s translation, in Alter 2007, 179, 183)

LORD, You have examined me and know me.
When I sit down or stand up, You know it;
You discern my thoughts from afar. (1–2)

Examine me, O God, and know my mind;
Probe me and know my thoughts. (23)

(JPS translation)

Adele Berlin, in her commentary on the JPS translation, finds progress in the final echo of the opening. “The speaker is now eager for God to examine his mind and thoughts, more

confident they will be approved” (Berlin 2023, 114). This aspect of the chiasmic structure is exactly analogous to the way musical chiasmus works in Schubert, Brahms, and a host of others.

I find remarkable parallels to the psalmist’s imagery in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 43, where reversals of day and night, darkness and light, echo the imagery of Psalm 139.

When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see,
For all the day they view things unrespected;
But when I sleep, in dreams they look on thee,
And darkly bright, are bright in dark directed.

Then thou, whose shadow shadows doth make bright
How would thy shadow's form form happy show
To the clear day with thy much clearer light,
When to unseeing eyes thy shade shines so!

How would, I say, mine eyes be blessed made
By looking on thee in the living day,
When in dead night thy fair imperfect shade
Through heavy sleep on sightless eyes doth stay!

All days are nights to see till I see thee,
And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.

(William Shakespeare, Sonnet 43)

The sonnet provides the closing text for Benjamin Britten’s *Nocturne*, a work for chamber orchestra and tenor, to which we now turn.

Music, like prose or poetic text, can project an overall atmosphere—celebratory, solemn, erotic, comic, ecstatic, despondent, reverent, irreverent, exuberant, sullen, whatever—or it can summon up specific images, things seen, things heard, things felt: rushing waters, a babbling brook, a summer breeze, a winter storm, cries of anguish, moans of erotic pleasure, or anything else.

Songs, and music with sung or spoken text more generally, may focus principally on atmosphere, with poetic image subordinated to a more generalized sense, or they may principally express or project images so that atmosphere is a result generated by a musicopoetic image. Of course, musical situations regarding atmosphere and image are not simply binary; the synthesis of words and music includes subtle shadings where atmosphere gives rise to image that in turn gives rise to atmosphere. Britten’s *Nocturne*, while certainly not devoid of musicopoetic images, generally subordinates image to atmosphere.

Despite its episodic nature, Britten’s work feels through-composed. Britten creates his *Nocturne* using a sequence of eight poems, each very different from the others, written by eight

different British poets, each with a distinctive poetic voice, all directed toward and terminating with Shakespeare's Sonnet 43. The Shakespeare sonnet, as I interpret the composition as a whole, is poetic fount and origin as well as final goal for the entire sequence: in the Latin terminology of the scholastics, Shakespeare is both *terminus ad quem* and *terminus a quo*. As we experience Britten's *Nocturne*, it is as though we were groping toward Shakespeare's tone and message. Moreover, I maintain that an unstated passage from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the poetic subtext of the entire work, but more on that later.

On October 1, 2016, at a symposium on poetry and song hosted by the Eastman School of Music, I compared and contrasted Britten's work with Maurice Ravel's *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*. In pairing the two works, I was motivated not only by my interest in their contrasting achievements of excellence, but by another factor as well: each work includes a brilliant adaptation of the rhetorical trope *metalepsis*. This rarified and historically ambiguous trope was brought into contemporary prominence in the writings of Harold Bloom. For Bloom, *metalepsis* is the highest form of achieved poetic figuration, the strongest form of misreading through which the later poet reverses his or her relation to the precursor, so that instead of standing in the shadow of the one who came before, the later poet achieves a kind of temporal priority. More generally, *metalepsis* involves any strong reimagining of a prior trope, either within an individual work or within an ongoing tradition. Another feature of *metalepsis*, emphasized in John Hollander's scholarship on the topic, entails a series of transformations, words echoing earlier words while taking on new meanings. Ravel's musical *metalepsis*, placed at the end of the first song, *Soupir*, reimagines the figuration that opens that song. The opening musicopoetic image is of a fountain, symbolic of Eros, of life. The same music at the end of the song depicts a leaf, fallen into a stream, its wake glimmering in the setting sun, symbolic of death. Britten's musical *metalepsis* involves a *metaleptic* series that achieves full fruition at the very end of his work, in his strong misreading of Shakespeare's 43rd sonnet.

I interpret the eight poems set in *Nocturne* as depicting a sequence of eight dream episodes. While each of the eight poems, set for tenor solo, seven obbligato instruments, and string orchestra, is very distinctive in its tone and imagery, nighttime or sleep, metaphoric or actual, is common to all. Britten creates a distinctive atmosphere for each episode, in part by coloring each with a different timbre. This is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Overall structure of principal dream-poem imagery and orchestration

1. Percy Bysshe Shelley, from *Prometheus Unbound*: Enter the poet's dream space, and with the third musical sentence enter the visionary company ("He will watch from dawn to gloom ... nor heed nor see.... But from these create he can"); strings alone
2. Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Kraken*: Phantasmagoria and first intimations of death; physical displacement into a watery world; bassoon and accompanying strings
3. Samuel Coleridge, *The Wanderings of Cain*: Being alone in a forbidding place (wilderness); harp and accompanying strings
4. Attributed to Thomas Middleton, from *Blurt, Master Constable*: Sounds of the night, intimations of anxiety mixed with comic elements; diffuse sound location without clear physical location; horn and accompanying strings
5. William Wordsworth, from *The Prelude*: Deepening anxiety builds to "Sleep no more!" timpani and accompanying strings
6. Wilfred Owen, *The Kind Ghosts*: "Boys on boys ... dooms on dooms"; English horn and accompanying strings
7. John Keats, *Sleep and Poetry*: Benign nature imagery embedded in a series of questions—"What is more gentle ... more soothing ... more tranquil ... more healthful ... more serene ... more full of visions ..."—all leading to the answer: "Sleep ... enlivening all the cheerful eyes / That glance so brightly at the new sun-rise"; flute and clarinet until the strings reappear with fragments of SM
8. William Shakespeare, Sonnet 43: "When most I wink, then do my eyes best see"; elegiac tone, where voice and strings intermingle; strings lead and the rest of the ensemble accompanies

We find a subtle hint of chiasmus in the work's orchestration where the strings, used exclusively in the first episode, also dominate the closing episode, Shakespeare's sonnet, there joined by the rest of the entire ensemble in a supporting role.

Britten opens his work with a musical motive that recurs intermittently throughout the dream sequence, mimetic of breathing while asleep. I refer to this as the "sleep motive," or SM for short. Immediately evocative of the lines from Shelley that it precedes, "On a poet's lips I

slept / Dreaming like a love-adept / In the sound his breathing kept,” SM creates atmosphere out of image. Its imagistic attributes aside, the most obvious formal function of SM is to integrate a work as a whole.

In terms of musical meaning, I have come to interpret SM as expressive of a liminal space, where sleep is shallow, and where the various dreams bring the sleeper into varying depths of more or less deep sleep. Freud thought that one of the functions of dreams was to keep us asleep. Freud was wrong in most of his theories of dream function, and he may have been wrong about this as well; nonetheless, Britten may have had something like Freud’s idea in mind. Figure 2 summarizes the role of SM as we move through the dream sequences of *Nocturne*. If my readers have access to the study score, I would encourage them to leaf through the score, following the indications in the figure. An alternative would be to listen to a recording of the work, following Figure 2 as a kind of plot summary.

Figure 2

Overall rhythmic structure of sleep motive/textual interaction:

1. Shelley, from *Prometheus Unbound*: The sleep motive introduces the first song and then is continuous throughout the song; it is heard prior to the first singing and through each vocal pause: **shallow sleep**.
2. Tennyson, *The Kraken*: The sleep motive dovetails with the opening of the second song and returns only after the song/dream episode is complete: deeper sleep with phantasmagoric imagery to the **sleep motive as a bridge between dream sequences**.
3. Coleridge, *The Wanderings of Cain*: The chord heard at the outset of the song/dream sequence is vestigial of the preceding sleep motive bridge; the sleep motive is then absent throughout the song, returning only at the end of the song/dream, where it **dovetails with the opening of the fourth song**.
4. Middleton, *Blurt, Master Constable*: **The sleep motive is heard intermittently throughout the song**, which is very episodic. The sound images are night sounds that have taken on a hallucinatory edge, as though external sounds are being processed and modified in shallow dream sleep. The affect, spooky mixed with comical, is extraordinary: **shallow sleep**.
5. Wordsworth, from *The Prelude*: The potential for an anxiety-produced nightmare hinted at by the preceding song/dream is fully manifest. The climax of the dream-poem is at its very end, with the quote from Macbeth, “Sleep no more!” as the incisive chords, mimetic of heart

pounding, threaten sleep. The sleep motive is absent throughout; the **anxiety threatens to awaken the sleeper out of a deep sleep.**

6. Wilfred Owen, *The Kind Ghosts*: The heart pounding morphs into the regular pulses of a funeral dirge as we return to deep sleep. The sleep motive returns after the dream-poem is finished to create a relatively long interval (eight measures) separating the Wordsworth/Owen pair from what follows: **continuation of deep sleep and death imagery giving way to shallow sleep in between dreams.**

7. Keats, *Sleep and Poetry*: The sleep motive is absent from the first ten lines of the dream-poem and the returns as a chord (vestigial residue) without the characteristic breathing rhythm to set the word *Sleep* halfway through the eleventh line of the dream-poem (one before Reh. 30); again at the end of that line (“closer of our eyes,” 30.4); at the end of line 12 (“tender lullabies,” one before Reh. 31); at the end of line 14, now with characteristic rhythms; and after 15 (chord only). Then (at Reh. 33) the sleep motive accompanies the final two and a half lines of the dream-poem, which terminate with the sunrise. **The sleep motive gradually comes to the fore as the dream-poem approaches its final image of awakening.**

8. Shakespeare, Sonnet 43: The sleep motive is absent throughout the three quatrains of the sonnet, returning conspicuously with the final couplet, at the half-point of the penultimate line (“All days are nights to see”), at the end of that line (“till I see thee”), and accompanying the final line (“And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.”), and continuing beyond the final text until the close of the entire dream-poem sequence. **The return to deep sleep for the first 12 lines of the poem, and to shallow sleep as the final couplet, misread as homage to sleep itself, brings *Nocturne* to its conclusion.**

SM is heard throughout the setting of the first dream text, from Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*. Here the liminal space is the threshold to fantasies of deeper sleep. SM dovetails with the opening of the second dream-poem, Tennyson’s *The Kraken*, and then is gone until that dream is completed. To my mind, the *Kraken* episode is devoid of specific musicopoetic imagery. Instead, the melismatic figuration led by the bassoon creates a generalized atmosphere of phantasmagoria.

SM returns at the episode’s end, where it functions as a bridge into the third dream episode, based on Coleridge’s poetic fragment *The Wanderings of Cain*. The use of the harp, along with the predominant style of vocal writing, creates a curiously antique effect. Once again, the

setting does not evoke specific musicopoetic images but instead creates an overall atmosphere unique to this episode.

SM, absent during the third dream-poem, returns as we enter the space of the fourth episode, an excerpt from *Blurt, Master Constable*, a late Elizabethan play attributed to Thomas Middleton. Up until this point, the mimetic sleep motive aside, atmosphere rather than poetic image has dominated Britten's settings. Things change radically with the Middleton poem, where the French horn, accompanied by SM, summons up distorted representations of the various night sounds mentioned in the poem. Here, shallow sleep is aware of external reality—the sounds of birds, cricket, mouse, and caterwauling—all transformed into something “rich and strange.”

SM is absent throughout the dream-poem excerpt from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, the harrowing nightmare of the set. The use of timpani drums throughout the song is likely suggested by the September Massacres, as Wordsworth expresses his troubled reflections on the bloodbaths of the French Revolution, another example of atmosphere generated by musicopoetic imagery. The poetic and musical climax of this dream episode is the line “Sleep no more!” taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Here, a possible interpretation is that the dreamer momentarily awakes or half-awakes from a nightmare. After Macbeth's words are declaimed, a series of six incisive chords, forming a diminuendo from *fff* to *p*, mimic the pounding heart of the dreamer. If we interpret this as a near awakening, the music depicts a different sort of liminality from that depicted by SM, conspicuously absent from the setting.

The pounding heart motive morphs into the footfall of a funeral dirge as we enter into the dream space of Wilfred Owen's poem *The Kind Ghosts*. Derived from the poem's ninth line, “And she is not afraid of their footfall,” the dirge is heard throughout the dream sequence, underlying the solemn and sorrowful declamation of the voice, which alternates with the voice-like English horn.

As the Owen dream episode concludes, SM returns, forming a bridge into the penultimate episode, the first stanza of the Keats poem *Sleep and Poetry*. Absent during the first part of the poem, SM returns with the word “sleep,” which we are told is more gentle, soothing, tranquil, healthful, secret, serene, and visionary than all of the images mentioned in the first nine lines of the poem. Still within the dream sequence, morning approaches: “the morning blesses / Thee [sleep] for enlivening all the cheerful eyes / That glance so brightly at the new sun-rise.” We are approaching the point of awakening that will terminate the night of dreams, but we are not quite there yet.

The invocatory homage to sleep in Keats's poem is the setup for Britten's strong misreading of Shakespeare's sonnet. The beloved in the sonnet, addressed throughout by the second person pronouns *thee* and *thou*, is a person. Drawing a parallel to Psalm 139, we can say Shakespeare has transformed *Thee* and *Thou*, addressed to personified God, to *thee* and *thou*, addressed to a human being. In Britten's metaleptic misprision, the beloved is Sleep personified. This becomes evident as SM emphatically returns with the final couplet of the sonnet: "All days are nights to see till I see thee, / And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me." In the Keats poem, "thee" ("the morning blesses thee") refers unequivocally to sleep. Britten's metalepsis brilliantly misreads Shakespeare so that Shakespeare's invocations of "thee" in the final couplet are transformed into a more conclusive celebration of sleep, which now achieves status as the overriding topic of Britten's entire *Nocturne*.

More inclusive than the misreading of Shakespeare, a four-poem sequence culminating with the misprision of the sonnet forms a metaleptic series of the kind studied by John Hollander in his book *The Figure of Echo: the anxieties of Wordsworth's Prelude*, climaxing with "Sleep no more!" give rise to Owen's personification of death, "who sleeps on soft, last breaths," the pounding heartbeat morphed into the footfall of a funeral dirge. Following this, a relatively long interlude of SM segues to the ebullient atmosphere of the Keats episode with its invocation of sleep enlivening cheerful eyes that glance at the new sunrise. The slippage from Wordsworth to Owen to Keats forms a metaleptic series: "Sleep no more!" (suppressing "Macbeth does murder sleep") to a personified death *that brings sleep*, to a personified sleep *that brings cheer*. The metaleptic sequence culminates with the elegiac misreading of Shakespeare's sonnet, where the personification is intensified as a longing for the beloved, now understood as sleep itself.

It also makes sense to consider the whole, in the choice of poets and poetic imagery, as pointing toward Shakespeare, as though the dream work of the whole has been groping toward the Shakespeare sonnet all along. Each of the poets whose poems comprise the texts for Britten's dream episodes was indebted to Shakespeare and highly cognizant of that debt. In the poems by Tennyson, Coleridge, and Owen, the influence seems to be indirect; so far, I haven't found specific echoes of Shakespeare. Nonetheless, Tennyson, in the words of one scholar, "never wavered in placing Shakespeare above all other writers, and the influence of Shakespeare on his poetry... can scarcely be overemphasized" (Hoge 1976, 147–70). As is well known, Coleridge wrote extensively on Shakespeare. And Owen characterized his fatal enlistment in the British army as an effort "to save the language of Keats and Shakespeare."

The remaining poems have more direct correlations with Shakespeare. The Shelley excerpt that opens *Nocturne* seems to be a paraphrase of Theseus' speech from *Midsummer's Night Dream*. I compare the two passages in Figure 3.

Figure 3

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy.
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

(Midsummer's Night Dream, act V, scene 1, 15–23)

On a poet's lips I slept
Dreaming like a love-adept
In the sound his breathing kept;
Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses,
But feeds on the aerial kisses
Of shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses.
He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom
Nor heed nor see what things they be;
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living man,
Nurslings of immortality!

(Prometheus Unbound, 737–49)

Blurt, Master Constable, the fourth episode in Britten's sequence, is a late Elizabethan play, published without attribution in 1602. Later in the seventeenth century, the play was attributed to Thomas Middleton, the poet-playwright listed in the published score. In more recent years, this attribution has been challenged. Be that as it may, the play from which the night poem is derived is a parody of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the excerpted poem seems to be a parody of Mercutio's paean to Queen Mab, the "midwife of our erotic dreams"

(act I, scene 4, 53–95).⁵ In addition to the direct quote from Macbeth, the passage from Wordsworth's *Prelude* quotes a passage from *As You Like It* ("The horse is taught his manage.... The earthquake is not satisfied at once"). The Keats poem's homage to sleep echoes Shakespeare as well. Keats would have known lines from Macbeth that are omitted in Britten's excerpt from Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the lines that immediately follow "Sleep no more."

Macbeth does murder sleep, innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

The sentiment of these lines is echoed in Keats: "What but thee, Sleep? Soft closer of our eyes." This linkage, Shakespeare to Wordsworth to Keats and back to Shakespeare, forms the subtext of Britten's misreading of the Shakespeare sonnet.

If we interpret Britten's *Nocturne* existentially, as depicting not a night's dream-filled sleep but a person's lifespan, then the work can be understood as a paraphrase of Shakespeare's Prospero.

Be cheerful, sir.

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(The Tempest, act IV, scene 1)

Our discussion of chiasmic figures has included ideas of events or experiences past and future. We recall Robert Alter's translation of the fifth verse of Psalm 139.

From behind and in front you shaped me,
and you set your palm upon me.

⁵ *Romeo and Juliet* was first published in 1597, some five years before *Blurt, Master Constable*. The characterization of Queen Mab as "the midwife of our erotic dreams" comes from Bloom 1998, 95.

Drawing on the psalm and subsequent midrash, Devora Steinmetz provides commentary that augments our understanding of the verse and has interesting implications about the way we think of progress through a musical (or poetic) work as it unfolds in time.

In rabbinic texts, “behind” refers to what is in the future.... Conversely, that which is in the past is that which is before or in front of a person. This directionality is counterintuitive to us, who see the past as behind us, and who imagine ourselves as oriented toward the future, which lies before or ahead of us. But in rabbinic imagination, one faces what has already happened; this is what can be known and this is how we orient ourselves. The future is what we cannot see; it is in back of us. (Steinmetz 2024, 38)

This is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” where Benjamin broods on Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*: “His face is turned toward the past.... But a storm is blowing from paradise.... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned” (Benjamin 1969, 257–58).

In most of our discourse, the positions of past and future are reversed: the past is behind us, the future in front. We face the future and reflect on the past. What can we make of this paradox?

The more we move through time, the more extensive become our reflections on the past. By moving forward, we arrive at the depth of our past. And it is as though the future creeps up on us from behind. In music this is manifested by coda-space; moving through the piece we are more and more able to face the past. As our musical (or poetic) experience accumulates over time, the saturation of things past typical of coda-space fills our hearings, our readings, more and more. If we have been blessed to live a full life, our past looms and dilates before us. If that life is filled with music and poetry, we reach into the past to form our ever-expanding sense of self.

The Scottish poet William Sydney Graham beautifully captures this sense in his poem *The Nightfishing*.

At this place
The eye reads forward as the memory reads back.
At this last word all words change.
All words change in acknowledgement of the last.
Here is their mingling element.
This is myself (who but ill resembles me).

(Graham 2018, 18)

And here are the last two lines of John Ashbery’s poem *Still Life with Stranger*:

The whole cast of characters is imaginary
now, but up ahead, in shadow, the past waits.

(Ashbery 2007)

As I write this in December 2025 (14 Kislev, 5786), my 80th birthday looms ahead in the months to come, creeping up from behind. I face the worlds of music and poetry that have filled and continue to fill my life. The fine reciprocity of my title is twofold.

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