

Mythological figure of the god Pan in *Metamorphoses* after Ovid by Benjamin Britten

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Abstract: *Through the rich treasure of the characters and events of the Metamorphosis, Ovidius Publius Naso opened the way for various interpretations in many artistic fields such as painting, sculpture, music or literature. Six metamorphoses after Ovid by Benjamin Britten is part of the successful attempt of portraying mythological characters. The cycle of works is dedicated to solo oboe and has become one of the most famous works of the 20th century for this instrument. The first of these pieces, Pan, is distinguished by the melodic outline, soundtrack and special architectural structure that drive imagination to a diverse array of interpretations of mythological stories.*

Key-words: *Metamorphosis, Ovid, Benjamin Britten, oboe*

1. Introduction

The Inspiration for the *Six metamorphoses after Ovid* Op. 49 written by composer Benjamin Britten in 1951 started, as evidenced by the title of a work comprising fifteen books of the Roman poet Ovid Vesuri Publius Naso (43 BC to 17 e.n). The work is based on legends from Greek mythology, where mythological characters sometimes suffer some transformations.

But before we start analyzing the proposed pieces, we might wonder why the composer has chosen this inspiration source. Each creator builds a plan in the creative process, sometimes starting from some images or concepts. What draws attention in the first moment, to this source of inspiration based on these achievements of the ancient poet, is, of course, the title: *Metamorphosis*. The name, first translated by the Latin by the word transformation, describes the process of changing the form in which *meta* means change, and *morphe* - form. The characters of the work have as a common point the change of form. And then, what was the idea that led Britten to such a name? We can assume that the pieces of *Metamorphosis after Ovid* involve a change of form, that is, a change of a pre-existing form, a remodeling.

From a musical point of view, the form of a piece is first seen as an architectural organization. In some cases, however, changing the shape may mean altering a predefined pattern that can occur at a rhythmic, metric, melodic, or dynamic level. There is an idea that in these pieces, Britten is considering a process of transformation change of some initial patterns, of previously defined existence.

If we enter the poetic text, we will notice that the characters are some imagination, mythological characters like gods, nymphs, satires, titans, whose bodies can then be subjected

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to the metamorphosis process. It is a passage in Ovid's work that suggests that humans are in a way, metamorphoses of the earth from which they were made.

2. Pan

Some analysis attributes the work a direct reference to the story that Pan has discovered the panpipe. A possible clue is offered by the composer who sets the subtitle at the beginning of the song: "The one who sang at the nail, who was Syrinx, his beloved." For this reason, Stephen Hiramoto considers that the action described by Britten does not concern "the transformation of Syrinx into cane, but rather, the experience of Pan's viewpoint².

The story tells how Pan pursued Syrinx, a nymph of the forest, whispering his seductive words. But she treated him with contempt and ran away from him, stopping by the water of the Ladon River. Here, Syrinx prayed for a transformation in the intention of avoiding Pan, and his prayers were heard. When Pan reached her and rushed over her, she vanished leaving behind a handful of reeds. The sighing breath of the god over the broken stones produces a sound that makes the waist. Then he decides to create, by joining several reeds, a musical instrument whose sounds to remember the nymph.

This instrument was often used by the ancient Greeks in opposition to lyre. In fact, the opposition between the two instruments will be the subject of the second story in which the same mythological character is involved. This time, in the 11th book, Pan proposes to the god Apollo a musical duel that involves his panpipe on the one hand, and the sun god lyre, on the other.

From a musical point of view is distinguished in this fragment is Ovid's notation on the Phrygian mode of the song panpipes. The ancient Greeks attributed to the tone-semitone-tone structure the name of the Phrygian, demonstrating its topographic and ethno-geographical origin.³ Pan's song is pleasing to Midas, the only man to among other legendary characters. We can deduce from this that this Phrygian mod in which panpipes are expressed, has a special quality appreciated by men in particular, being more to their liking than the gods.

This technical aspect of the sound material can be a powerful argument to exploit by any composer in an attempt to outline an archaic atmosphere or a direct reference to the space and time. Such a clue will have to lead our analysis, either to discovering the frightened mode in Britten's work, or to investigating some issues related to sound scales or modes that will appear as landmarks in the work plan.

Based on these ideas, we can begin the analysis by establishing two directions: one aesthetic level, which concerns the transformation - what can be accomplished through various means on music: melody, rhythm, etc., and the other at technical level - which concerns the organization of sounds in different ways and musical temperament.

The first joint is built the first five measures whose content unequal temporal dimension is clearly defined through fermata.

² Hiramoto, Stephen. "An Analysis of Britten's 'Six Metamorphoses after Ovid.'" *The Journal of the International Double Reed Society*, vol. 22, no. 2. 1999. 23. La: <http://www.idrs.org/publications/controlled/DR/DR22.2/JNL22.2.pdf>

³ Victor Giuleanu, *Tratat de teoria muzicii*, Volumul I, Editura Grafoart, București 2013, pag. 289

Ex. 1

Senza misura ♩ = approx. 138

The first measure takes place on a descending fourth (A-E), whose base is enriched by a downward embroidery, extends the initial ambit to the fifth. This melodic figure can be divided into two segments by three sounds that make up: a descending passage (a) and a lower mordent (b). To the next, the two melodic cells are amplified by the increase of the elements, a change that does not alter their characteristic elements, among which the most obvious is the gradual progression. The initial downward passage is now preceded by a similar ascendant, and the lower mordent that develops into a figure that imitates an ornamental formula oriented in both directions (turn).

The third measure resumes the first formula (a) transposed to the descending fifth, and the motif (b) will appear in a concentrated form synthesizing the first passage at the beginning of the developed formula. From another point of view, this first part of the third measure can also be seen as a transposition to the lower third of the end of the second measure with the change of the rhythm. This figure will resume transposed to an ascending target after a reversed inversion of the first cell, developed in turn by the outgrowth to the fifth of the contour.

The next two measures resume the previously mentioned thematic material in the first measure. Recurrence and then the original of the melodic drawing, whose fifth stretch is developed to seventh (measure 5). The melodic outline shows a characteristic panpipe formula, commonly found in the practice of interpreting this instrument, embodied by sound groups on gradual passages organized in ascending and descending order.

Failure to fit in a certain metric pattern gives the speech a great freedom of movement, leading to the idea of portraying the character moving freely through the legendary forest and describing either the god or the nymph before the metamorphosis. If the most obvious feature of the melodic profile of this first segment is the gradual gait, then we can interpret an instrumental play over the panpipes tubes that outline the beginning of the story.

Regarding the sound system used, we can distinguish a mixolydian modal scale with the final on the E sound and a specific subtonic cadence. By this approach, the author rejects Ovid's statement in *Metamorphosis* XI to associate Pan's song with a Phrygian mode.

A simplification of the text by highlighting the sounds will almost echo pairs of sounds whose ambitus starts first from a second and develops gradually to seventh: the sounds F sharp and E (the first 2 measures) and then, F-G, B-F, C-D. The composer reveals in this

way a building principle that is visible throughout the track, which is based on ambitus amplification.

If we start from the idea that the song describes a character to be transformed, then this first section presents the original form of the character. From a melodic point of view, we can distinguish a type of innocence concretized by short melodic formulas that develop, evolving gradually by discovery.

Measures 6-8 represent the deployment space of the second section (B). Here, too, we observe a discourse formulated on an alternation of two musical cells, more clearly evident through a dissonant melodic differentiation: A sharp and to A natural.

Ex. 2

The obsessive repetition of the A sharp sound creates a tension, then strengthened by the upward profile of the fourth interval, initially proposes a chromatic space, is later solved by a diatonic downward passage, returning to the natural sound. The same melodic figure is then resumed in the following steps, amplifying ambitus to fifth. The two bars undergo evolution indicating two acts contrary to the first concentration and then a development of thematic material. That is why the last measure of this segment is the most extensive. Melodic contour starts to measure a range of 8 to perfect fifth, (which vary widely summarizes the initial motif) that constantly increases gradually upward by the tip extension to a seventh interval. Thus we reach a hexatonic scale, an indirect expression of the chromatic space that will become a specific feature of the second segment. Then the ambitus will gradually narrow, by climbing the base of the interval, to a third, and then second, finally ending in unison on the A sharp sound.

By returning to the end of the segment at the obsessive repetition of the sound A sharp, transposed this time to the upper octave, a closure is made, as in a circle, of the segment that delimits and individualize this joint within the work. From the thematic point of view, this segment compared to the first is in antithesis. It is noted from the first moment a separation from the previous sound material by bringing a foreign sound scale of the first segment. This sound is altered germ of which will develop a new succession steps indicating whole tones scale.⁴

⁴ Hiramoto, Stephen

After each appearance, sound sharp tension is resolved by natural sound that occurs as a result of a resolution designed under the diatonic descending passage. We notice a shift in the chromatic and diatonic dispute, which can also be observed at the upper level between segments A and B.

Since Measure 9 resumes varied section A. The first two steps of this third segment of the piece is actually a replay in reverse and small changes of the last two steps of the first segment. This time, the formula of the fourth measure resumed from sound A, and that of measure five from E, thus recalling the descendant fourth of the first measure. The continuation of recurrence as a principle of construction reveals in measure 11 a development of a melodic model established from the third measure. Here are several melodic formulas from the third measure transformed by various motivational labor processes (inversion, recurrence and others).

Ex. 3

This ample transition process ends with a sustained trill on my sound and a subtonic cadence, which recalls the mixolydian mode profile of the first segment mode.

Then, in measure 14, there is a resumption of the generative motif of the second section (B) which has a large ambitus development, extended this time to the double octave level. The B-segment resumption also has a recurring course because it resumes in reverse order the three characteristic elements: the acute recitative, the scale (now descending and diatonic) and the fourth ambitus of the debut.

Ex. 4

The conclusion of the piece is detached at a careful look at the modal scales used. In this way, a possible resolution of the piece is achieved by assimilation of the diatonic scale specific to the first segment (A) within the second musical idea, which could also be imagined as a conciliation of the two opposing ideas of the second motif (B).

The form of the first part of the cycle works *Metamorphosis* was subject to different interpretations. Some authors such as Stephan Hiramoto or Djiovanis Sotos believes that play is tripartite form ABA type. They propose to deploy the piece in the form of a picture describing in the first part (A) the character of the nymph before the change, in the second part (B) the transformation process and in the third part (A) a redefinition of the character.⁵ Thus, the depiction of the character in the first section may be interpreted with the resumption modified by interference of additional components in the second, as a mixture of features that induces the feeling of change. The new version is shaped by the fusion of ideas and images described in the segments before.

Another interpretation of the work from an architectural point of view is provided by Felipe Mora Garzón who imagines the work in a free form of type A B C, starting from its meaning from the poetical idea of the piece. It is, in fact, a similar interpretation to ABA's tripartite form in which the last segment, due to the changes suffered, is treated as a distinct section, somewhat separate from the first two. This view opens, in addition to an association with Hegel's formula, thesis-antithesis-synthesis (indicating an advanced concept on tripartite concept), and a tempting approach to a particular type of material organization. It is in this case a segmentation of the golden ratio song structure based on Fibonacci, where the three sections would sizes: A - 5 actions B - 3 steps and C - 8 measures. Formally, Felipe Mora Garzón's interpretation indicates a joint's play in three episodes: A - Pan's love song, B - Syrinx's run, and C - song, persecution, and fabrication of the panpipe.⁶

The new occurrence of the motif in B at the end of the play brings a resumption of the second idea, indicating a possible tripartite form on the A B A model and the Code. It is noteworthy, however that returning to the B segment occupies the same number of steps as the first exposure, even if it has a resume concentrated musical material, which entitles us to believe that it is not a laggard with elements of B, but rather concentrated second section resumption. Reducing the material with the same number of bars is due to a flexible approach to the temporal dimension of the measures. Thus, the whole piece takes on a double bipartite form with a symmetrical alternation of the two musical ideas: A (5 bars) B (3 bars) A (5 bars) B (3 bars).

A	B	A	B
(bars 1-5)	(bars 6-8)	(bars 9-13)	(bars 14-16)
5	3	5	3

Meaning the piece can be interpreted in different ways. One direction is drawn by the title of the entire cycle of works, which brings with it the idea of transformation whose protagonist is of course the Syrinx nymph. Thus, some commentators consider the work to be a description, an embodiment of the nymph. This opinion limits interpretation to establishing transformation as the center of action. Or, if Britten wanted only a description of the nymph, he would have attributed to this piece the name *Syrinx*. For example, a work named *Syrinx*

⁵Sotos G. Djiovanis *The Oboe Works of Benjain Britten*, Florida State University Libraries, 2005 la: <https://fsu.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fsu:168899/datastream/PDF/view>

⁶Felipe Mora Garzón, *Análisis de Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Op. 49 for oboe solo, Benjamin Britten*, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Facultad de Artes Departamento de Estudios Musicales Bogotá, 2011 <https://repository.javeriana.edu.co/handle/10554/11676>

was composed by Claude Debussy in 1913. The piece is a small work for flute solo has earned a prominent place in the repertoire of many performers due to its qualities, which gives the performer the opportunity to highlight emotions and feelings.

Another direction of understanding the play can be determined not only by the idea of transformation but also by the intention of portraying one or more characters encountered during the work. Thus, the title of the song (Pan) may indicate as the main concern the description of the shepherd god.⁷ The work plays through two different melodic ideas, the two natures of god: the human, which occupies the upper body and the animal fur, hooves and horns. Last but not least, the two musical ideas can bring both characters of the story face to face. The whole piece can be seen as a musical description of the event in which the first musical idea can describe the nymph, and the second, the god of the shepherds.

We explain below some of the musical characteristics of each segment offering a range of interpretations for each character imagined.

Tab. 1

Segment	Features	Mode	Pan	Syrinx	Action
A (b.1-5)	progressive pitches, passages, ornamental formulas	Diatonic mode Mixolydian	The human nature of the god	Nymph state before the transformation.	Freedom and innocence Description of nymph Description of space
B (b.6-8)	Static insistence on a sound Distinctive melodic formula Ascending leaps	Chromatic mode Whole-tone scale	Animal nature	Change of state, immobility of reeds - insistence on sound and rigid hexatonic scale.	The creation of a diabolical plan. Pan's ambush
A (b.9-13)	Returning to the step motion Recurrence, melodic motion with various formulas of small size Acceleration	Diatonic mode Mixolydian	Reinterpreting the human nature through a playful character	Returning to the decision to change form by resuming character and initial state	The resumption of the idea of freedom, Running the nymph through the forest
B (b.14-16)	Resume of A Sharp The return of the specific melodic figure Resolution through a large diatonic passage	Keeping A sharp Assimilation of the Mixolydian Diatonic Scale	Resumes the melodic figure that personifies animal nature.	Complex melodic formula - the merging of the two previous ideas, Syrinx and the reed.	Failed attempt to capture nymph. Ultimate change of character

Metamorphosis itself appears at the end of the piece, where the second musical idea takes to solve through a large diatonic scale downward pattern of mixolydian mode. Thus, the final phrase brings together the two musical ideas expressed during the work, thus offering a resolution by combining, which generates a hybrid form. Musically, this is characterized by keeping the melodic profile of the second section deployed on the modal content of the first

⁷ Pan is the god of shepherds, gardens and fields, and his presence causes fear, confusion and panic- George Lăzărescu, *Dicționar Mitologic*, Editura Niculescu, București 2008.

section. In addition, the final extensive descending diatonic scale can be seen as a plastic description of the wind instrument that has since been named after the nymph.⁸ The reference to the instrument is achieved by a downward passage of equal values running on the two-octave ambit.

Ex. 6



Conclusion

Starting From the title, we can say that the work seems to be a story told by Pan, one protagonists of the legend. The two musical ideas are double exposed, forming an architectural structure with four joints that create a pattern of double bipartite lied. The first musical statement outlines the idea of freedom of movement and a simple playful character through the diatonicism and melodic profile gradually built on passage formulas and ornaments and the second creates an atmosphere of tension, suspense, with sudden gestures by insisting on a sound or dissonant leaps, producing truncations of the musical discourse. The conclusion of piece appears to the final in the form of a solution to the proposed dissonance in the second segment. We also notice here the melodic figure following the A sharp sound which amplifies the formula of solving by extending the downward passage to double octave. Thus, the diatonic scale at the end of the work is like a resolution by taking over the mixolydian mode specific to the first segment.

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⁸ Ovidius Publius Naso, *Metamorphosis* I 710 - 711.