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**THE MUSIC OF THE SHAKESPEAREAN *DREAM* OR THE DREAM  
OF MENDELSSOHN'S AND BRITTEN'S MUSIC:  
A HISTORY OF TASTE**

The history of literary taste often seems to be a history of mistakes. This conclusion seems to be implied specifically by scholarship on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a Shakesperian play that critics often believe is very important for its use of songs. For example, in *An Introduction to Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* James Halliwell in 1841 commented on a three-hundred-year-old interpretation of the play:

The information which [Samuel] Pepys has given us relative to the representation of this play, on September 29th, 1662, is anything but satisfactory, and does not reflect much credit on the acting drama of the time.

Here is his extraordinary opinion: "To the King's Theatre, where we saw Midsummer Night's Dream, which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life." It was, perhaps, "too etherially poetic" for the gross mind of the eccentric secretary.<sup>1</sup>

While Halliwell's criticism of Pepys' comments on the play is not shocking in its literal meaning, Halliwell's use of terms is. Halliwell said that Pepys gave "information" about the play, and a few lines later described the erroneous contribution as an "opinion." Information or opinion, what is literary "taste"? Who is right: Pepys or Halliwell? Will there ever be a final decision with a consensus such that Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* raises no more questions of interpretation? If this could become true, would the characters and lines lose their life and become waxen, such that future generations would close for ever the doors of interest in the performance? What is so shocking is the reflection that the impossibility of a completed consensus may place all interpretations on a normative par. Any interpretation would be limited in value to a dream.

It is commonplace to accept the very depressing presupposition that critics have never completely agreed and never will — depressing, because the history of taste becomes a history of mistakes. And this status quo is

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All references to the Shakespearean text, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, were obtained from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974.

1. James Halliwell-Phillips, *Introduction to Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream* (1841), 48. The quotation is taken by Lord Braybrooke who was the editor of Samuel Pepys' *Diary*.

even more depressing if we consider the likely fact that critics may someday disagree with *presently* accepted interpretations, or perhaps with Halliwell. The cheerful counterargument that each critic makes some contribution only means that the insights are just points in an infinite series of approximations toward the absolutely accurate interpretation or toward absolutely perfect aesthetic taste. To say that each generation sees its reflection in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is to ignore the complexity of the problem. Susanne Langer, the foremost philosopher of art in America after 1950, gives some examples that help to convey the degree of complexity. Writing about ancient Greek vases, in one passage of *Philosophy in a New Key*, she claims that they have "an artistic value for all generations," and she asks, "What gives it [one such artifact] that preeminence?"<sup>2</sup> She answers her own question in the succeeding book, *Feeling and Form*; to her, the perennial value is the capacity of the Greek vases to convey the feeling of the people who made them.<sup>3</sup> She fails, however, to justify a perennial sense of beauty that would underly the appreciation by successive generations, because either the sense of beauty changes or the cause of it. Discussing the relation of an artwork and its age, Langer concludes that an artwork may be too new to be understood by its audience "unless the impulse which drove the composer to creation is something of a common experience, of a yet inarticulate *Zeitgeist*, which others, too, have felt."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, Pepys could not recognize the idiom of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, because it was too new. Or perhaps, contemporary critics who praise the beauty of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have a sense of beauty that may be "outgrown," for "artistic forms are exhaustible," claims Langer.<sup>5</sup> She believes it is difficult to see beauty in some forms of music without using historical knowledge to re-create a musical taste now buried. This idea is inconsistent with the previously stated idea of the perennial beauty of the ancient Greek vases. Langer almost does not notice her own idea, the sense of beauty can change in kind, not only in degree.

Many fields have been influenced by anthropology, and Alan Merriam's fifteen-year study *The Anthropology of Music* illuminates the present difficulties concerning the history of taste. He stated that songs express the character of a culture and thus the kind of expression is bound to an era. More surprisingly, he also stated that songs express a culture's character both retrospectively and prospectively.<sup>6</sup> The aesthetic criteria as well would

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2. Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), 204.

3. Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (1953), 40-1.

4. *Philosophy in a New Key*, 264.

5. *Ibid.*, 264.

6. Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (1964), 205-7.

belong to the culture's character or to an emerging sense of beauty. Then, by inference, we may respect the ancient Greek feeling of beauty for the vases, because the role of beauty in that culture is analogous, although not identical, to the position of aesthetic concepts in our modern culture.

On the history of taste many literary critics have failed to recognize and to accept fully the principle that not only judgments of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* change but also the aesthetic criteria for them; these criteria should be referenced and defined according to the culture and time of origin. Critical opinion has vacillated from negative to positive since the time of Pepys (1662). For example, Pepys found the fairy songs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to be insipid and ridiculous;<sup>7</sup> where Roger Warren in 1983, however, found much artistic import and value in them.<sup>8</sup> In 1865, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson regarded Felix Mendelssohn's musical adaptation of Shakespeare's songs much more highly than he did the non-musical remainder of the play.<sup>9</sup> In contradistinction, Peter Hall in 1981 saw much "lyrical beauty" in the whole play, of which the songs are fitting parts.<sup>10</sup> David P. Young in 1966 felt that some fairy speeches were "elaborated beyond the dramatic requirements of a given situation."<sup>11</sup> In disagreement, G. K. Hunter in 1962 wrote of the wonderfully effective tone which the songs had.<sup>12</sup> How can a simplistic judgment of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in particular its songs, be avoided? That is, how can we take account of the cultural differences of the criteria used?

By examining versions of the play at different points in its four-century life, we can fully account for cultural variations in its interpretation. Two key points are provided by Felix Mendelssohn (called by Christopher Wilson a "landmark" of Shakesperian music<sup>13</sup>), and by Benjamin Britten (who, Wilson said, produced "the most successful Shakespeare opera for more than one century"<sup>14</sup>). Each of these two artists interpreted *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, perhaps gaining a value from it for their own culture that Shakespeare could not have anticipated. The perennial attraction of the work is its suitability to be re-envisioned. We shall ask, first of all, what the function and role of the songs was when Shakespeare created them.

7. Halliwell-Phillips, 48.

8. Roger Warren, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1983), 10.

9. Extract from an article in *Aftenbladet* (April 28, 1865); trans. Edward C. Thaden; reprinted in Oswald LeWinter (ed.), *Shakespeare in Europe* (New York, 1963), 290-1.

10. Warren. This quotation comes from an interview with Peter Hall in *Sunday Times* (June 14, 1981).

11. Warren. From David P. Young's book *Something of Great Constancy* (1966), 67.

12. Warren. From G. K. Hunter's *Shakespeare: The Later Comedies* (1962), 15.

13. Christopher Wilson's *Shakespeare and Music: Discussion of the Musical Setting of Shakespeare's Plays* (1977), 118.

14. *Ibid.*, 118.

Secondly, we shall examine the three songs as envisioned by Mendelssohn and Britten. If artworks are living and give life, did Mendelssohn and Britten drink the same water that Shakespeare did? How can we see the play as an inexhaustible well from which the last waters can never be drawn?

To answer first what the function and role of the songs were when Shakespeare created them, we need to characterize the play within its historical context. At the time in which Shakespeare was writing, the play was produced without many stage effects such as setting and lighting. Language as a result had the most importance. Shakespeare's audience consisted of well-trained listeners sensitive to the variously colored words distinguishing each character and mood. Written during Shakespeare's lyrical period, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents its lyrical heartbeat mostly through the fairies' speeches. They are presented in terms of the natural world in which they live which is evoked in concrete detail. A very clear example is Oberon's description of Titania's bower,

a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and the noolsling violet grows,  
Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,  
With sweet muskroses and with eglantine.

(II. i. 249-52; see the endnotes).

This speech reminds one of a lyric poem. The adjectives suggest attractiveness and delicacy that are the characteristics of the Queen of the fairies. The four-stress couplets characterize the language of the fairies and by their insistent sound and their short and snappy rhyme they call attention to themselves. The fairies' source of power in this play is their natural world and their lyrical speech.

In contrast to the fairies, the speech of the mechanicals is vital through its earthy colloquial diction and uninhibited natural rhythms. For example Bottom, "a natural fool," speaks instinctively and has unintended wisdom. His speech is conveyed with simple prose that lacks imagination and refinement. It is the appropriate ingredient in the most comical scene in the play in which beautiful Titania, under the spell of the flower-in-idleness falls in love with Bottom. Her lilting verse "I pray thee gentle mortal sing again" (II. i. 137-141), conveys how absurd the situation is. As the queen of the fairies, Titania uses ethereal language to speak about love:

I am a spirit of no common rate;  
The summer still doth tend upon my state;  
And I do love thee; therefore go with me.  
I'll give thee fairies to attend on thee;  
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep  
And sing while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep.

(III. i. 154-9)

The ethereal quality of her speech reflects Titania's world of fancy, folly and "royal" dignity and her difference from the mortals. Like Titania and Oberon, all of the other fairies in the play speak in effective poetry, and sing songs that enhance and articulate their dramatic function.

Having examined how lyrical the speeches of the fairies are in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we can more easily understand why their songs play a crucial role. There was a particular soil and climate in Shakespeare's lifetime for the use of music within plays. In the 1590's dramatists wove music into the dialogue of the plays for dramatic effects such as reinforcing the emotional impact of language, augmenting unadorned settings, adding another action to the motions, suggesting actions too difficult to present, and veiling undesirable sounds that did not help or even hindered the overall created illusion or effect. They had as tools many sources of music including choral works, luteurs, ayres, street ballads, and folk songs frequently sung by people during daily activities. The taste and attitude of Shakespeare's contemporaries toward music differ greatly from ours today. Song books for musical training were very popular while the interest of audiences in songs made them enjoy music in plays, if not to some extent demand it. When Shakespeare used songs, they constituted not only a dramatic part but also a reference to real life. Perhaps the reference in each case helped to determine the quality or degree of dramatic enhancement. When an actor started to sing — and to many a modern viewer the action would seem like a "staged" or artificial interruption of the action — this singing seemed to continue comfortably the dialogue, as if it were even expected. Since people sang more off stage, singing seemed to be more a part of the dialogue and action on stage. Shakespeare used songs in 31 out of his 38 plays and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, music is a significant dramatic force. It sets the fairies apart from the mortals by presenting the separate ideas, the visions, and the language of the elf world. In this way it helped Shakespeare to influence his audience's dispositions.

Music also heightens the dramatic effect of the fairies' spells, symbolizes the harmony following the resolution of the fairy quarrel, and foreshadows the resulting harmony between the mortals. Having seen in general the function and role of the songs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Shakespeare created them, we can understand how Felix Mendelssohn and Benjamin Britten re-envisioned them.

The first song to be examined is "You Spotted Snakes" (II. ii. 9-26):

Fairies Sing.

You spotted snakes with double tongue,  
Thorny hedgehogs be not seen,  
Newts and blind-worms do no wrong,  
come not near our Fairy Queen.

Philomel with melody,  
 Sing in our sweet lullaby,  
 Lulla, lulla, lullaby, lulla, lulla, lullaby,  
 Never harm, not spell, nor charm,  
 Come our lovely Lady night.  
 So good night with lullaby.

SECOND FAIRY: Weaving spiders come not here,  
 Hence you long-legg'd spinners, hence:  
 Beetles black approach not near;  
 Worm nor snail do no offence.  
 Philomel with melody,...

FIRST FAIRY: Hence away, now all is well;  
 One aloof, stand sentinel.

Before determining the dramatic function and then evaluating it for an audience in Shakespeare's time, we should consider its unique manner of production. Davies points out that large numbers of children were used in this play. Shakespeare inherited the tradition of choirboys singing at performances and adapted this means to express through diminutive size the airiness of the fairies. Consider the following "eye-witness" account of an original performance:

The stage direction is "Fairies sing," and they all approach singing, and then when they come to "Philomele, with melody" they circle around in quick racing movement after the manner of children's games. Then "First Fairy" sings solo "Weaving spiders," the fairies taking up the refrain as before... It is interesting to note that although the second stanza is sung solo, its punctuation is considerably heavier than that of the first stanza which is sung in chorus. This is because the movement involved in the first stanza and chorus has taxed the breathing of the participants...<sup>15</sup>

"You Spotted Snakes" is not at all a sophisticated "rondel" but rather simply a round or dancing song.<sup>16</sup> This song, according to P. Seng, is not just a lullaby; it is a magical incantation to ward off evil spirits.<sup>17</sup> The song was dramatically stronger for an Elizabethan audience than for a modern one, because the earlier one believed that music could cure a diseased mind and body, or could induce sleep. The function of the song, however, is ironic;

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15. Peter Seng's *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (1967), 28-9. The quote comes from Noble (1923), 57.

16. *Ibid.*, 28.

17. *Ibid.*, 29.

it can protect the fairies' queen from "newts and blind-worms" but not from Oberon and his Puck. She will waken to the uncharming Bottom.

Noble believes the song transports the audience briefly, while nonetheless remaining integrated with the earlier and later earthly actions. Noble writes: "If the reader examines the scene, he will observe how easily and naturally the song comes into being, how it relieves from awkwardness and makes interesting Titania's retirement, how it imparts to the whole a fairy-like atmosphere, how perfectly it is ended and the continuation provided for; and how it leads up to and facilitates Oberon's little plot."<sup>18</sup>

After Shakespeare's lifetime, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was adapted to new audiences and their times; what changed with the most freedom was the music. For quite a few years the most successful music to the romantic comedy was Felix Mendelssohn's *Overture* in 1826 and the *Incidental Music* to the play written seventeen years later in 1843. Mendelssohn's 1826 musical adaptation of the play is a descriptive overture, which was intended for a concert rather than a dramatic entertainment.<sup>19</sup> In 1826 Felix Mendelssohn, then a seventeen-year-old prodigy, used a leading motif in cyclic forms. This motif is a set of four sustained chords in the woodwinds, that occurs three times: at the beginning, at the "recapitulation," and at the very end.<sup>20</sup> Whereas Shakespeare's play is "romantic" in the sense of theme and "comedy" in the way the theme is presented, Mendelssohn's overture is romantic in a new sense. Its orchestration is detailed, variegated, and rapturous with less comedy and more refinement of the coarse, low diction and action. Mendelssohn himself felt that "the overture follows the play closely."<sup>21</sup> "I think it should be enough," he explains, "to point out that the fairy rulers, Oberon and Titania, appear throughout the play with all their people. At the end, after everything has been satisfactorily settled and the principal players have joyfully left the stage, the elves follow them, bless the house, and disappear with the dawn. So the play ends and my overture, too."<sup>22</sup> Seventeen years later, in 1846, Mendelssohn wrote the incidental music to the play, having been commissioned to write twelve vocal and instrumental numbers for a special production given under the auspices of the King of Prussia at his palace in Potsdam. Mendelssohn's music was applauded highly, but the play at this time was just as frequently ridiculed. "How could music so beautiful and poetic as Mendelssohn's have been squandered on so inferior a play," writes one critic.<sup>23</sup> In his *Incidental Music*,

18. *Ibid.*, 28-9.

19. Christopher Wilson's *Shakespeare and Music* (1977), 179.

20. Eric Werner's *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and His Age* (1963), 87.

21. *Ibid.*, 87.

22. *Ibid.*, 87.

23. Antony Price ed. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1983), 39.

*op. 21 to Ein Sommernachtstraum* he chose to adapt and refashion most vigorously the passages concerning the supernatural in relation to the natural. (Consider the *Wedding March*, Op. 61, No. 9, which is a festive, regal piece). This point distinguishes Mendelssohn's point of departure, along with three other interests. Secondly, the composer highlights the elf world by devoting the only two songs in his *Incidental Music op. 21* to it. Thirdly, he remolds Duke Theseus' hunting party with its resounding horns and the Bergomask dance in which Bottom sounds like a donkey. Fourthly, Mendelssohn interprets the play-within-the-play, "Pyramus and Thisbe," as a delicately restrained comedy of clarinets, bassoons, and kettle drums. Characteristic of his revised "romantic" approach is the *Nocturne* in which the two pairs of lovers are asleep in the forest; Mendelssohn begins with a horn solo in E major, followed by the first violins, and then developed into the rapturous romantic tones of the woodwinds. This tone was used to select and emphasize the fairy atmosphere: natural notes of the horns, suggesting hunting echoes and fairy associations; a lightness of touch and delicacy of tones stepping along. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, a critic in Mendelssohn's era, commented favorably on the relation of the music to the play.

...[Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's] music has respect for the dialogue of the play. The fairies' speeches are not even melodramas (with the exception of the short formulas for exorcism). He allows the music to follow the play merely as a new fairy who sprinkles several tunes over the scene as a form of consecration prior to the entry of the spiritual procession, giving it wings upon which it can fly away. Only when the dialogue with all of its dramatis personae have receded into the background does the music hover over the forest as a sort of mist of recollection, in which our fantasy again assembles the picture of what has just taken place. For the fairies' dance... he only has several bars of music. Why?

Because they are part of the plot, the dialogue, the situation; because the fairies' dance does not require more, the music needs only to suggest...<sup>24</sup>

With this background and overview of Mendelssohn's musical adaptation of the play, let us look at "You Spotted Snakes." The composer used two female soloists and a female chorus for his song, which had a variety of accompaniments to the single main theme. In tremolo, the cello and oboes introduce the magic of the fairies. The first and second violins step faintly in staccato until they are supported by the violas and cello. The woodwinds as

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24. *Aftenbladet*, (28 April, 1865).

the symbols of the elves summon up the land of make-believe. The horns represent the forest's echoes; the bassoons and trumpets represent mankind; and the strings, a background of nature. Mendelssohn used a women's chorus for Titania's train and a contra-alto for Cobweb's lines at the very end.

The fairies as presented by Mendelssohn reflect his personal characteristics and the spirit of his age. This new "romanticism" excluded coarse and evil elements while refining the supernatural presences and making love more rapturous than ridiculous. The fairies are beautiful, innocent, sweet — as understood through their style of singing.

Approximately one hundred years after Mendelssohn's musical adaptations there came another major success of this kind: Benjamin Britten made an opera of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Just as Mendelssohn chose features of the play and magnified and colored them in a style characteristic of concurrent cultural trends, so too Britten preferred to adapt this particular play because he could see how it fit into his surroundings:

I get a lot of letters from young people asking me how they should use their talents, and I always reply that they should try to fit them into their surroundings.

This is what has happened with my new opera. It is an example of how local conditions can determine what you do.<sup>25</sup>

As there was with Mendelssohn, there is the question whether Britten fulfills the original artistic intentions of Shakespeare. Is the new musical adaptation "accurate"? Britten replies:

I haven't tried to give the opera an Elizabethan flavour. It is no more Elizabethan than Shakespeare's play was Athenian. Perhaps one or two points may seem strange. The fairies, for instance, are very different from the innocent nothings that often appear in productions of Shakespeare. I have always been struck by a kind of sharpness in Shakespeare's fairies; besides, they have some odd poetry to speak — the part about 'you spotted snakes with double tongue' for instance. The fairies are, after all, the guards to Tytania: so they have, in places, martial music. Like the actual world, incidentally, the spirit world contains bad as well as good.<sup>26</sup>

The question of verisimilitude is complex. Clearly, Britten claims he did not try to duplicate the Elizabethan feeling for the play. In contrast, however, Britten claims to have identified accurately "a kind of sharpness in

25. Christopher Palmer's *The Britten Companion* (1984), 179.

26. Phyllis Hartnoll's *Shakespeare in Music* (1964), 118.

Shakespeare's fairies," and to have presented this trait in his production so as to take account of the "actual world." Here are two differences that, if true not only to his perception of his work but also to his work itself, distinguish Britten's fairy songs from both Shakespeare's and from Mendelssohn's. Unlike Shakespeare, Britten creates martial music for the fairies to make their evil more "like the actual world." For Shakespeare's audience the evil and the good were to be administered by the supernatural. Unlike Mendelssohn, who de-emphasized the evil and coarse elements, Britten was "struck by a kind of sharpness in Shakespeare's fairies." Although it would seem then that Britten's work might attempt to be truer to the play as seen on an Elizabethan stage, details of the music will show that it is no closer and no farther than Mendelssohn's. Let us examine a few general features of the opera, before examining in detail "You Spotted Snakes."

Just as Mendelssohn de-emphasized by omission the evil of the fairies, Britten curtails long speeches by the mortals, thus emphasizing in his style the spiritual as Mendelssohn did in his. The significant changes have been described in *Shakespeare in Music*:

Most of the big set speeches are wisely omitted or shortened, and there is some redistribution. The most important change affects the balance between the four constituent elements, Theseus and his court, the lovers, the rustics and the fairies. Shakespeare introduces them in that order, presenting all the mortals before they are touched by magic. Britten begins with the fairies, the opening bars of the opera weave the spell of the enchanted woods, and this is reaffirmed at the start of each subsequent act. All three acts end with the fairies in command. This alters the perspective: we never see the mortals except through the magic that envelops them and us.<sup>27</sup>

The tendency of Britten's twentieth-century technological times to abbreviate is characteristically present in his particular work, just as the tendency of Mendelssohn's times to become self-absorbed and rapturous is present in Mendelssohn's musical adaptations. Perhaps the tendency of Shakespeare's productions was the rejection of both romance and spirituality in an extreme and untenable, counter-actual farcical form. Since Britten wanted to underline the fairies' *otherness* or non-worldliness, he used boys' voices for the fairies; each in its way was a sound other than or outside of the normal operatic set-up. He used a counter tenor for Oberon. Only Titania, the most human of all because she is bewitched into loving a mortal, is allowed the soprano coloratura. Ascending to the high, unworldly sounds of the fairies,

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27. *Ibid.*, 118.

she sings a range of timbres. In the Act I of the Opera the fairy plot begins as the fairies with their little scalic song come to the woods. Titania drugs herself and the fairies lull her to sleep. The verses are not lullabies, for the texture can prick and the rhythms can be abrupt.

The second song to be discussed is "The Oozel Cock" (III. i. 128-131, 133-136).

The woosell cock, so black of hue,  
 With orange-tawny bill,  
 The throstle with his note so true,  
 The wren with little quill.

The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,  
 The plain-song cuckoo gray,  
 Whose note full many a man doth mark,  
 And dares not answer nay.

This song by Bottom is akin to a reverdie; a medieval lyric inherited, altered, and used by Shakespeare often. Typically, this type of song expresses the joy which birds, trees, and flowers feel in the springtime earth. Bottom's voice is much rougher than the theme of a reverdie would require, and consequently his singing has a humorous effect at the same time that it reveals a glance at human nature; Bottom sings to show he is unafraid. "The Cock" was very likely sung as crudely, as gruffly, as poorly, as possible to be contrasted with delicate Titania's appreciation:

Mine ear is much enamored of thy note;  
 So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;  
 And thy fair virtue's force (perforce) dothe move me,  
 On the first view, to say, to swear, I love thee.

(III. i. 141-144)

"The Oozel Cock" has the dramatic function of expressing the range of Shakespeare's farcical portrayal of love/sex and of spirit/earth. Titania's ethereal love is shown to be ridiculous by association with Bottom's sweaty, sexual love. The effect of the song calls to mind a statement made by George Hegel, namely, that in the area of the genitals nature has expressed its unity by placing there both its highest achievement (the organs of creation) and its lowest (the means of waste disposal).

Whenever Mendelssohn presents Bottom, he uses the sounds of the bassoon, but he does not orchestrate Bottom's song, "The Oozel Cock." This neglect reiterates Mendelssohn's neglect of the coarse elements present in Elizabethan productions. Britten's version of "The Oozel Cock" resembles in tone the folk song passed on since Shakespeare. Britten makes the earthy voice of Bottom blast and bellow and bray through

trombones, in contrast to Titania's soprani E flats accompanied by harp and glockenspiel.

The third fairy song to be discussed, "Now until the break of day..." (V. i. 401-422), symbolizes on the Elizabethan stage the concord arising from the settlement of the fairy quarrel and foreshadows the resulting harmony between the mortals.

Now until the break of day,  
 Through this house each Fairy stray.  
 To the best bride-bed will we,  
 Which by us shall blessed be:  
 And the issue there create,  
 Ever shall be fortunate:  
 So shall all the couples three,  
 Ever true in loving be:  
 And the blots of Nature's hand,  
 Shall not in their issue stand.  
 Never mole, hare lip, nor scar,  
 Nor mark prodigious, such as are  
 Despised in nativity,  
 Shall upon their children be.  
 With this field-dew consecrate,  
 Every Fairy take his gait,  
 And each several chamber bless,  
 Through this Palace with sweet peace,  
 Ever shall in safety rest,  
 And the owner of it blest.  
 Trip away, make no stay;  
 Meet me all by break of day.

The clock strikes twelve, it is fairy time, the mortals leave. Rather than actually singing out loud, Oberon and Titania may intone their songs, as a priest speaks indistinctly though audibly in some rituals. In the first lines the king and queen probably do not sing but only command the fairies to sing and dance, as they do during the third and fourth stanzas. The intonation would be more familiar to an Elizabethan audience than a modern one, for it resembles magical incantations, the more believable, or also the non-vernacular ritual speech in some churches, or speaking in tongues (a biblical phenomenon).

There were changes made in Mendelssohn's version of this song, because it was translated into German, that make the song felicitous. Mendelssohn did not compose music for Oberon's song. Instead, female fairies sing in chorus. In the epilogue what would be the voice of Oberon is shifted by the alto chorus to sound like Puck. The woodwinds play the

introduction to the magical world. Then, the violins (I and II) in tremolo join the women's chorus and mingle with the two horns which alternate with the flutes. The end resembles the beginning as the woodwinds are accompanied by the brass instruments. A harmonious finale ensues.

Britten presents the third song as much less harmonious, much more nervous and dissonant. The mortals go off to bed while the fairies sing a night-song that is *not* reassuring: it is ambiguous in tone, nervous in rhythm, sharply variant in melody. In consequence the harmony seems to be incomplete. The evil is not entirely forgotten, although not immediately present. Oberon and Titania begin their last song in Puck's F sharp, A and then D. It softens somewhat into a slower F sharp major, and a bell persistently blesses the house.

Having examined the three songs of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as presented by Shakespeare, Mendelssohn, and Britten, we can see more easily how they fit into the history of literary taste. The first question to answer in summary form is, what the function and value of the songs would be for an Elizabethan audience. The music sung by the fairies is a wonderful dramatic device: it moves and links the plot; it expands the theme; it expresses the amoral character of the fairies; and it influences the disposition. As Mercutio tells Romeo, "The Fairies are essentially the bringers of dreams to the mortals." The fairies help to show the Elizabethan audience that the pre-Elizabethan foibles in romance such as undying love are extreme, even farcical. Mendelssohn did not present the fairy songs in exactly the same way as Shakespeare did. Whereas Shakespeare presented some mischievousness and amorality, Mendelssohn saw in the fairies only morality and delicate feelings. Whereas Shakespearean productions did use male singers, Mendelssohn used only female. With the passion characteristic of German romanticism of Mendelssohn's time, the fairies sang. They were happy, beautiful, delicate, enchanted and enchanting. One century later, in the century of doubt, of technology, of loss of tradition and traditional values, Britten presents the fairies as being morally insensitive. Heartless, they are attracted instinctively by whatever appeals to their intricate senses. Titania has no sense of reconciliation with Oberon, no sense of real feeling. Their dance is a non-verbal, incomplete and thoughtless end without resolution.

This particular issue of the function and role of the fairy songs in the three artists suggests a general conclusion about the history of taste. Neither Mendelssohn nor Britten attempted to re-create for their audiences the effect that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had for Elizabethan viewers. With a change in audience and culture, there can be a change in the *desired* and *valued* effects. Taste changes. It would be naive to treat literary documentation as information with an absolutely unique and singular interpretation.

Facts support the opinion, since there does not seem to be a single great literary document about which all issues have been agreed on and no more questions have arisen. The history of literary taste would be a history of mistakes if the objects of taste are supposed to have absolutely one and only one "right" meaning. The words used in great works and those used to interpret them must be, as Susanne Langer feels, "flashing iridescent shapes like flames; ever-flickering vestiges of the slowly-evolving consciousness beneath them."<sup>28</sup>

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28. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 238.

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## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Λιάνα Σακελλίου-Schultz, *Η Μουσική του Σαιξπηρικού Ονειρού ή το Όνειρο της Μουσικής των Mendelssohn και Britten: Μια Ιστορία Γούστου*

Η διαρκής έλξη του Σαιξπηρικού έργου *Όνειρο Καλοκαιρινής Νύχτας* (1595-6) οφείλεται στην καταλληλότητά του να ξαναεπινοείται, να συλλαμβάνεται από την αρχή από συγγραφείς, σκηνοθέτες, συνθέτες. Πολλοί λογοτεχνικοί κριτικοί πιστεύουν ότι το *Όνειρο* οφείλει τη σημαντική λυρική του δύναμη στα δύο τραγούδια των νεράιδων και στο τρίτο του νεραϊδόπληκτου Bottom.

Εξετάζοντας τη λειτουργία και τον ρόλο των τριών τραγουδιών στον δέκατο έκτο αιώνα στην Αγγλία του Shakespeare, στον δέκατο ένατο αιώνα στη Γερμανία του Mendelssohn και στον εικοστό στην Αγγλία του Britten προτείνω ότι οι δύο τελευταίοι αιώνες προσφέρουν τα μουσικά και παράλληλα πολιτιστικά ορόσημα στην ερμηνεία του *Ονειρού* στα τετρακόσια χρόνια της θεατρικής του ζωής. Το ένα ορόσημο είναι η μουσική επένδυση για το *Όνειρο* του Felix Mendelssohn το 1843 (*Incidental Music to Ein Sommernachtstraum Op. 21*) και το άλλο η *Όπερα* του *Ονειρού* του Benjamin Britten το 1960 (*Opera of A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Οι δύο συνθέτες προτίμησαν να μη δημιουργήσουν για το δικό τους κοινό την αίσθηση που τα τραγούδια του *Ονειρού* είχαν δημιουργήσει στους Ελισαβετιανούς, αλλά ερμήνεψαν το Σαιξπηρικό έργο αντλώντας στοιχεία του που τούς φάνηκαν χρήσιμα για την αισθητική αντίληψη του δικού τους κοινού. Συγκρίνοντας τις δύο διαχρονικές παραλλαγές του *Ονειρού Καλοκαιρινής Νύχτας* μεταξύ τους και με το έργο του Shakespeare, καταλήγω στο γενικότερο συμπέρασμα ότι υπάρχουν διαφορές στα κριτήρια αισθητικής της κάθε εποχής και ότι οι κριτικοί θα πρέπει να καθορίζουν τη σχέση των κριτηρίων αυτών με τον πολιτισμό και την εποχή της δημιουργίας του κάθε έργου τέχνης, ώστε να αποφεύγουν ιστορικά λάθη.