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Author(s): John Hollander

Source: *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn - Winter, 1967), pp. 134-141

Published by: [Perspectives of New Music](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/832415>

Accessed: 01/12/2010 12:45

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NOTES ON THE TEXT OF *PHILOMEL*

JOHN HOLLANDER

THE WORDS of *Philomel*, which I wrote for Milton Babbitt to set and Bethany Beardslee to sing, are a cantata text, somewhere between a lyric poem and a frankly programmatic libretto. Long ago I had wanted to use the myth of Philomela for an elaborate aria because I had always felt that the story was quintessentially operatic, with a great transformation scene in which a soprano who has been singing nothing but vocalises or choppy syllables suddenly can break out into both sustained melody and language. But after having heard *Vision and Prayer*, the possibilities of a synthesized accompaniment for dramatic purposes seemed enormous, and when the Ford Foundation commissioned such a piece and Babbitt asked me for a text, the metamorphosis of the nightingale seemed an obvious subject.

The story of the ruined bird whose song pours out of the darkness with a voice restored from incoherence has several sources in classical antiquity. The canonical version for subsequent literature, though, is in Ovid. Earlier Greek mythographers had made Philomela the swallow and her sister Procne the nightingale, but for many reasons the Ovidian story lasted on. The two sisters were, according to the sixth book of the *Metamorphoses*, the children of Pandion, king of Athens. Procne, the older, was married to Tereus, king of Thrace, who took her off to his country where she bore him a son, Itys. After five years, she began to pine for her sister, and Tereus sailed down to Athens and eloquently persuaded Pandion to allow Philomela to accompany him home. But throughout the entire journey back, Tereus lusted for the girl so desperately that upon reaching the shores of Thrace, he took her off into a secluded wood and raped her, and after her threats of exposure, rather than kill her, cut out her tongue. Ovid describes this in a passage of famous *grand guignol*:

The mangled root
Quivered, the severed tongue along the ground
Lay quivering, making a little murmur,
Jerking and twitching, the way a serpent does
Run over by a wheel, and with its dying movement
Came to its mistress' feet. And even then—
It seems too much to believe—even then, Tereus
Took her, and took her again, the injured body
Still giving satisfaction to his lust.

Outraged and silenced, Philomela remained in captivity for a year, but she contrived to weave her horrible story in pictures and prevailed upon an old woman to take the finished fabric to the queen, her sister. Procne read the tapestry-work, and, at the height of the Bacchanal celebrated yearly by Thracian women, went and found her sister, disguised her in the costume of the celebrants, and brought her back to the palace. There, in a fit of hatred and the desire for revenge, inflamed by the Bacchic frenzies, Procne killed her son, Itys, cooked his corpse and served him up to his father, Tereus, for a ritual meal. When he called aloud for

his son to be presented to him, Philomela flung the bloody severed head at him and together the two sisters ran from the palace, Tereus following in a murderous rage. He followed Philomela through the woods, but before he could catch up with either of them, he was turned into a hoopoe, the crested, lapwing-like bird who, as the later allegorists pointed out, befouls its own nest. Procne became a swallow and Philomela, a nightingale.

In late antiquity and thereafter, the myth became that of the poet-musician. "Quando fiam uti chelidon ut tacere desinam?" cries out the anonymous poet of the late *Pervigilium Veneris*, speaking as a self-conscious last gasp of pagan culture: "When shall I, like the swallow (he uses the Greek word and the Greek version of the story) quit this silence?" George Sandys, the seventeenth-century allegorist of Ovid, ingeniously presents a false etymology of Philomela (actually, < philo-mēlon, "lover of fruit," not philo-melos). His comment preserves what is unquestionably the standard Renaissance myth of the nightingale:

The Nightingall chanting in the solitary woods; deservedly called *Philomela* or a lover of musicke, in that no bird hath so sweet a voice among all silvan musitians: singing fiteene days and nights together, when the leaves begin to afford her a shelter, with little or no intermission. So shrill a voice in so little a body, and a breath so long extended, is worth admiration; shee alone in her songs expressing the exact art of Musicke in infinite variety. Neither have all the same tunes and divisions, which shewes their skill to be more than naturall. . . .

And so on. The suffering girl has become the singer who outdoes herself in Crashaw's *Musick's Duell*, in which a nightingale contends with a virtuoso lutenist and wins by dying of sheer exertion, up through to the twentieth-century, neo-romantic nightingales of Robert Bridges ("Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men/ We pour our dark, nocturnal secret"), and of T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. But these versions of Philomela made her the poet, rather than merely the singer, and I felt that a representation of her moment of metamorphosis might allow for a soprano aria of extended proportions.

Hearing *Vision and Prayer* convinced me that many dramatic resources were at the disposal of such a piece. A long acquaintance with Bethany Beardslee's singing allowed me to feel that I could proceed without fear of the singer's limitations. The Philomela story now seemed inevitable, too, and Babbitt's expressed desire to use the singer's own voice as part of the material in the synthesized background called for a dramatic placement of the girl in the woods of Thrace through which she was escaping the wrath of Tereus.

The basic format, then, was to be one in which the soprano's text dominated, but was to be augmented, and perhaps echoed, by some textual material written for the four KLH loud-speakers which eventually shared the stage with her at the New York performance. The voices could represent variously what she heard in the woods, what she thought she heard there, what she fancied she heard inside her head, and so forth. A pivotal dramatic moment would involve her own discovery of her renewed voice, albeit as a bird; I wanted a final strophic aria on the subject of music and pain, also. In addition, I wanted to try to make full use of the amazingly flexible acoustical resources of the sound synthesizer.

The text eventually took shape in three clearly defined sections. The first, a pro-

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longed equivalent (as I thought of it) of *recitative* and bits of *arioso*, starts out, in the final version, with a sustained presentation of the vowel nucleus /iy/, the core of the phrase “I feel,” for it is from her fear, fancied outrage, and remembered pain that Philomela’s psychic energy in the song is generated. The opening section develops by permutations of the phonemes of the words *Philomel* and *Tereus*, the sequences: *feel a million, filaments and tears, trees, tears* (verb), etc. eventually expanding into more coherent phrase groups and finally stanzaic clauses. Throughout all this, I was implicitly remembering W. H. Auden’s invocation about writing any text for a soprano—count on a third of the words getting through. I felt that the short phrases would help with this, no matter how much was lost in the woods-noises, for example, and that they had the additional dramatic function of dramatizing the girl’s incoherence before her change.

The second section is supposed to take place after her transformation, and consists of a dialogue with the various birds of the air, in which she implores them to support her in her new identity as a bird. The echo-song was a favorite device of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century satiric verse; the point was to use the echoing last word of a question for a debunking answer. Thus Swift’s shepherd: “What most moves women when we them address?” and the echo, of course, “A dress.” “Say, what can keep her chaste whom I adore?” “A door.” And so forth. But I felt that the resources of the synthesizer would allow me to build an echo song by cutting word boundaries and even setting up new consonantal clusters in a manner that had not been done before, the effect to be horrific in a kind of baroque way, but not coyly humorous. Throughout this section, the part of the text marked “tape” is the echoing answer of each of the birds, one by one, in answer to Philomela’s call.

Finally, there is the last aria. I wanted it to be strophic and with a clear refrain, in which Philomela might be joined by the tape. But this was to be the fully realized singing of the fully formed nightingale, and I wanted her relation to the text on the tape to be of a fundamentally different order than in the other sections. Where in the first, she was gradually emerging from the background of forest noises, in the second she was seeking to join a new realm of creature. Here at the end, she reigns over a kingdom of sound, and I felt that the tape should join her (as an audible voice, of course) only in the refrain.

The form of the strophes: four loose, six-stressed lines, the first two linked (in all the stanzas) by assonance on the vowel nucleus /ey/, the last two rhymed strictly, and variously. The refrain: a slightly varied shortened (two-stressed) appendage, tightly rhymed, the last three lines unchanging and given also to the tape. The long lines came about as they did because I was writing a good bit of verse in just such a line at the time (I hadn’t used it much before). What haunted me throughout working on the refrain was the immense self-knowledge and even world-weariness of the *Waldtaube* in *Gurre-Lieder* (“Weit flog ich / Klage sucht’ ich / Fand gar viel”), but perhaps it was just the image of the (by now) wide-flying, articulate bird.

I print below the text as I gave it to Milton Babbitt to set. A few changes were made in the course of composition, mostly to repair spots that would have proved too much for the most heroic diction.

COLLOQUY AND REVIEW

I

TAPE

PHILOMEL

(Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee)

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!
Feeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!
Feeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!
I feel—
Feel a million trees
And the heat of trees

Not true trees—

Feel a million tears

Not true tears—

Not true trees—

Is it Tereus I feel?

Not Tereus; not a True Tereus—

Feel a million filaments;
Fear the tearing, the feeling
Trees, that are full of felony—

Trees tear,
And I bear
Families of tears—

I feel a million Philomels—

Trees filled with mellowing
Feminine fame—

I feel trees in my hair
And on the ground, vines,
Honeymelons fouling
My knees and feet
Soundlessly in my
Flight through the forest;
I founder in quiet.

Here I find only
Famine of melody,
Miles of felted silence
Unwinding behind me,
Lost, lost in the wooded night.

Pillowing melody,
Honey unheard—

My hooded voice, lost.

Lost, as my first
Unhoneyed tongue;
Forced, as my last
Unfeathered defense;
Fast-tangled in lust
Of these woods so dense.

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Emptied, unfeeling and unfilled
By trees here where no birds have
trilled—

Feeling killed
Philomel stilled
Her honey unfulfilled.

Feeling killed
Philomel stilled
Her honey unfulfilled

What is that sound?
A voice found;
Broken, the bound
Of silence, beyond
Violence of human sound,
As if a new self
Could be founded on sound.

Oh, men are sick:
The gods are strong.
Oh, see! Quick! Quick!
The trees are astounded!
What is this humming?
I am becoming
My own song. . . .

Oh, men are sick:
The gods are strong.
Oh, see! Quick! Quick!
The trees are astounded!
What is this humming?
I am becoming
My own song. . . .

II

ECHO SONG

TAPE

PHILOMEL

O Thrush in the woods I fly among,
Do you, too, talk with the forest's
tongue?

Stung, stung, stung;
With the sting of becoming
I sing

O Hawk in the high and widening sky,
What need I finally do to fly
And see with your unclouded eye?

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Die, die, die;
Let the day of despairing
Be done

Slight, slight, slight;
With the slipping-away of
The sun

Black, black, black;
As your blameless and long-
Dried blood

Scream, scream, scream,
For the scraps of your being;
Be shrill

Bird, bird, bird!
You are bare of desire:
Be born!

Thrace, Thrace, Thrace!
Pain is unchained,
There is change!
There is change!
In the woods of Thrace!

O Owl, the wild mirror of the night,
What is the force of the forests light?

O sable Raven, help me back!
What color does my torn robe lack?

O bright Gull, aid me in my dream!
Above the foaming breaker's cream!

The world's despair should not be
heard!
Too much terror has occurred:
The Gods who made this hubbub
erred!

Oh green leaves! through your rustling
lace
Ahead, I hear my own myth race.

III

PHILOMEL

Living, growing, changing, being in the hum always
Of pain! The pain of slow change blows in our faces
Like unfelt winds that the spinning world makes in its turning:
Life and feeling whirl on, below the threshold of burning.

I burn in change.
Far, far I flew
To this wailing place.
And now I range

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(with tape) Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace.

If pain brush against the rushing wings of frightened change,
Then feeling distills to a burning drop, and transformation
Becomes intolerable. I have been raped and had my tongue
Torn out: but more pain reigns in these woods I range among.

I ache in change,
Though once I grew
At a slower pace.
And now I range

(with tape) Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace.

Crammed into one fell moment, my ghastly transformation
Died like a fading scream: the ravisher and the chased
Turned into one at last: the voice Tereus shattered
Becomes the tiny voices of night that the God has scattered.

I die in change.
Pain tore in two
Love's secret face.
And now I range

(with tape) Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace.

Love's most hidden tongue throbbed in the barbarous daylight;
Then all became pain in one great scream of silence, fading,
Finally, as all the voices of feeling died in the west
And pain alone remained with remembering in my breast.

I screamed in change.
Now all I can do
Is bewail that chase.
For now I range

(with tape) Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace.

Pain in the breast and the mind, fused into music! Change
Bruising hurt silence even further! Now, in this glade,
Suffering is redeemed in song. Feeling takes wing:
High, high above, beyond the forests of horror I sing!

I sing in change
And am changed anew!
(O strange, slow race
That I ran with grace!)

COLLOQUY AND REVIEW

I sing in change.
Now my song will range
Till the morning dew
Dampens its face;
Now my song will range
As once it flew
Thrashing, through
The woods of Thrace.