

A TALE OF TWO PHAEDRAS: AN EXAMINATION OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S
AND GEORGE ROCHBERG'S SETTINGS OF PHAEDRA FOR MEZZO-SOPRANO
AND ORCHESTRA

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Musical Arts
Music

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DEDICATION

Now the Great Bear and Pleiades where earth moves, are drawing up the clouds of human grief, breathing solemnity in the deep night. Who can decipher, in storm or starlight, the written character of a friendly fate, as the sky turns, the world for us to change? But if the horoscope's bewildering like a flashing shoal of herring, who can turn skies back and begin again?

- Peter Grimes Act 1 scene 2

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ABSTRACT

A TALE OF TWO PHAEDRAS: AN EXAMINATION OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S AND GEORGE ROCHBERG'S SETTINGS OF PHAEDRA FOR MEZZO-SOPRANO AND ORCHESTRA

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In 1976 composers Benjamin Britten and George Rochberg premiered separate works titled *Phaedra*. Both composers adapted Robert Lowell's verse translation of Jean Racine's *Phèdre* into settings for solo Mezzo-Soprano and orchestra; this coincidence, however, has been overlooked. This dissertation explores the genesis of each work and how each composer independently arrived at such a similar concept. Both compositions thus far have received limited scholarship and analysis. In the case of Britten's *Phaedra*, I propose that it should be understood in the context of his operatic works, rather than that of a cantata or final small composition by a composer near death and provide an analysis as such. Rochberg's *Phaedra* has thus far yet to be studied, I have given the work an initial analysis and propose the work be further studied since Rochberg ascribes the work great personal meaning in his autobiography, despite its relative obscurity. The

coincidental similarity also allows me to make comparisons to Britten's and Rochberg's contrasting composition styles.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

On June 16th 1976, at the Aldeburgh Festival, Benjamin Britten's last solo vocal work made its premier¹. The text for the work came from Robert Lowell's English translation of Racine's *Phaedra*. The work for solo mezzo soprano, performed by Janet Baker, and orchestra used the most contemplative excerpts from the *Phaedra* story to create a quasi-operatic work that Britten called a "dramatic cantata." This late-style Britten work, like his last full opera *Death in Venice*, centers on the deep emotional introspection of the protagonist, focusing on psychological drama rather than overt action. In *Phaedra*, Britten presents a distillation of his operatic talents incorporating his interests in the Baroque, Noh theater, and the inner psychological development of his characters. Britten's *Phaedra* is a well-crafted masterpiece by one of the greatest opera composers of the twentieth century, and truly an opera in miniature.² However, Britten was not alone in setting *Phaedra*.

Across the pond, American composer and educator George Rochberg had beaten Britten to the punch, so to speak, by premiering a piece bearing striking similarities. His

1. Benjamin Britten, *Phaedra: Dramatic Cantata for Mezzo-Soprano and Small Orchestra* (London: Faber, 1992), iv.

2. Mervyn Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 274.

work, commissioned by the Society for New Music of Syracuse, NY with assistance from the New York state council on the arts, is also a solo mezzo-soprano and orchestra setting of Lowell's *Phaedra*, which premiered the 9th of January 1976,³ featuring Neva Pilgrim in the solo role of Phaedra. The text adapted by Rochberg's wife, Gene, focuses on the more traditional operatic sense of action. Rochberg fittingly called his *Phaedra* a monodrama, using a large orchestra. *Phaedra* also marked a transition in Rochberg's music to a neo-romantic style from his previous serial compositions.

Why so little is known regarding how these dual musical settings occurred at the same time is due in part to the lack of compositional and historical analysis of either piece; this is evident by the scant existing literature available on each. Britten's work was revived the following year at the Aldeburgh festival, and being one of the final work of a renown composer should have garnered it more attention; as for Rochberg this represented a substantial commission and premier (it's not every day that a 40 minute solo vocal and orchestral piece gets commissioned let alone performed), so it is unfortunate that neither work has received much scholarship and that this coincidence has gone seemingly unnoticed.

What little is said of Britten's *Phaedra* does not disparage it as a poor work but rather places it unjustly as a footnote to the more dramatic tale and deep composition scope of his last opera *Death in Venice*; which is understandable given *Phaedra*'s intimate size and short duration. Rochberg's *Phaderra* languishes in similar obscurity,

3. George Rochberg, *Phaedra: A Monodrama for Mezzo-Soprano and Orchestra* (King of Prussia, PA: Theodore Presser Company, 2002), 2.

again not by merit of the composition *per se* but rather due to the neglect of Rochberg's compositions in general (save select chamber works). Thus Rochberg like many of his contemporaries in America who had strong grounding in academia (Piston comes to mind) has had his music eschewed for his writings, which should not be the case based on the numerous high profile composition awards received by Rochberg (including Guggenheim fellowships, National Endowment for the Arts, and an ASCAP lifetime achievement award to name a few).

The question then arises as to how these two works of striking similarity in concept could have appeared in the same year. Thus, raising further questions about the genesis of each, and why each work has been overshadowed thus needing a first analysis first analysis in the case of Rochberg and an elevation to this other operatic works in the case of Britten. History for the most part seems to have missed this coincidence much like the composers themselves.

I will be using the discovery of this coincidence to achieve two things. First to elevate Britten's *Phaedra* to be viewed more in line with his operatic output, I believe this is the best understanding of the work and not as an anomaly solo cantata that doesn't quite fit with its descriptions. Second, I hope to highlight the work of George Rochberg, it is clear from reading his biography that his setting of *Phaedra* meant a great deal to him so it is worthy of an examination.

Literature Review

Britten

When looking at the major books published about Britten, the trend of *Phaedra* being overshadowed by *Death in Venice* or even worse outright ignored continues. Philip Rupprecht, a Brittan scholar with several published books, fails to even mention *Phaedra* in the book *Britten's Musical Language*⁴. Rupprecht's *Rethinking Britten*⁵ gives the familiar passing nod to *Phaedra*, in a single sentence mention of works after *Death in Venice*. The same story of *Phaedra* being a piece written by an exhausted composer near death is repeated by Eric White in his major biography *Benjamin Britten His life and Operas*⁶.

Claire Seymour in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*⁷ gives a passing mention to *Phaedra* in a paragraph that hints at orchestration and the high quality of the work albeit overshadowed in the literature by *Death*. *The Cambridge Companion*⁸ although an invaluable resource to all things Britten, presents a similar paragraph treatment. Neil Powell provides a few historic details in his one-page summation of *Phaedra* in his book

4. Philip Ernst Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*. Music in the 20th Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

5. Philip Ernst Rupprecht, ed. *Rethinking Britten*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

6. Eric Walter White and John Evans, *Benjamin Britten, His Life and Operas*. 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

7. Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion*. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004).

8. Mervyn Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

*Benjamin Britten a Life for Music*⁹. Michael Kennedy mentions *Phaedra* and his brief comment that the work is “a dramatic opera in miniature”¹⁰ is what has inspired me to look at *Phaedra* as a small opera.

Peter Evans presents the most in-depth book sourced analysis of *Phaedra* is presented in his book *The Music of Benjamin Britten*¹¹ where he devotes just over five pages on the piece in his chapter on “Later Vocal Works”. Although useful as a starting point, it is not in depth and much of the analysis is focuses on a comparison to *The Rape of Lucretia*. Evans’ analysis and writing is by far the most influential, particularly as it was a source for Christopher Palmer’s oft cited *The Britten Companion*.

Humphrey Carpenter gives perhaps the best historical context in his biography of Britten¹². Carpenter’s reference to the Mahler sounding chord comes from Christopher Palmer’s *The Britten Companion* which bases the analysis off of Peter Evans, Palmer mentions *Phaedra* in the context of orchestral works and has followed Evans’ assessment¹³.

The few dissertations on *Phaedra* give it a more substantial treatment and representation of the work particularly from a singer’s perspective. There are two dissertations and one unavailable lecture dissertation on *Phaedra*, however, these are all

9. Neil Powell, *Benjamin Britten a Life for Music*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013).

10. Michael Kennedy, *Britten*, (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1981), 122.

11. Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

12. Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1992) 570-571.

13. Christopher Palmer, *The Britten Companion*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 410.

from the Mezzo-Soprano's perspective. They analyze the vocal line and focus primarily on the performance of the work. The dissertations by Rachel Smiley¹⁴ and Margret Shelton¹⁵ focus on characterizing the vocal line as well as text painting.

Shelton's is the more in depth and focuses particularly on the vocal line and word painting as a formal structure; however, its scope is limited as it does not appear to reference the full score. Furthermore, at thirty-three pages the analysis represents half of her total dissertation; the other portion is her own composition. Shelton's explanation of text painting as structure is compelling; however, I will be looking at the work from the perspective of Britten's operas with a more orchestra centered approach.

Cloyce Beard-Stradley's 1999 dissertation was presented as a lecture is not available to view or purchase through ProQuest, but is available directly from the University of North Texas's library¹⁶. It is however, much more than a simple lecture. The dissertation is very comprehensive in regard to history particularly towards Racine and Lowell but makes no mention of Rochberg. The analytical focus is on the vocal line much like Shelton's and Beard-Stradley provides a score study for the performer.

14. Rachel Smiley, "Vocal Characteristics of the Britten Mezzo: An Analysis of Fundamental Vocal Qualities Demonstrated in the Recordings of the Premiere Performers and Notable Contemporary Singers of Britten's Works - ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global - ProQuest." <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1030776857/3E4CC595840248B7PQ/4?accountid=14541>.

15. Margret Shelton, "The A B C of Phaedra: Word Painting as Structure in Britten's *Phaedra* and *The Spanish Gypsy* For Mezzo-Soprano and Orchestra (Original Composition)- ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global - ProQuest." <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/303136683/723CE685D34842B2PQ/2?accountid=14541>.

16. Cloyce Beard-Stradley, "A Performer's Analysis of Benjamin Britten's 'Phaedra: Dramatic Cantata for Mezzo Soprano and Small Orchestra,' Op. 93: A Lecture Recital, Together with Three Recitals of Selected Works of H. Purcell, R. Schumann, R. Vaughan Williams, P. Tchaikovsky, G. Faure, K. Lowe, G. Menotti, S. Barber, and Others"

Smiley's dissertation is concerned with the vocal qualities of mezzo-soprano singers in recordings of Britten's works not specifically *Phaedra*. This being said there is some wonderful analysis of the vocal line in these three dissertations particularly Shelton's dissertation which is cited by Beard-Stradley and Smiley.

Edward Greenfield's article on *Phaedra* in Gramophone is useful as a general background source. This article mostly focuses on Britten's quality of life when he composed *Phaedra* and work with Colin Matthews who was his amanuensis and assisted him with writing and playing back the music at the piano¹⁷.

The overarching theme of the published literature on Britten's *Phaedra* is the assumption that the work is an afterthought or footnote dwarfed by his last full opera *Death in Venice*. The remaining works focus on the vocal aspect, as it is a very high-quality work for solo Mezzo.

The full-score for Britten's *Phaedra*¹⁸ is currently published by Faber Music and is readily available for purchase. Additionally, there is a vocal score reduction also in print from Faber Music. The vocal score however leaves much to be desired and will be discussed in my conclusion as a factor for *Phaedra*'s lack of frequent performance.

There are selected letters and writings of Britten currently in print titled *Letters from a Life*, which has been issued in six volumes. These six volumes provide a wealth of primary source material for historical context however, the goal of the project is to

17. Edward Greenfield. "Britten The Rescue of Penelope; *Phaedra*." Text, January 9, 2013. <http://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/britten-the-rescue-of-penelope-phaedra>.

18. Benjamin Britten, *Phaedra*, (London: Faber Music, 1992)

show the overarching relationships and narrative of Britten's personal life. Volume 3¹⁹ and Volume 6²⁰ both make mention of *Phaedra* and have provided most helpful in understanding the personal historical context of the work.

Rochberg

The literature on Rochberg unfortunately lacks the breadth available on Britten. However, what exists does shed considerable light on *Phaedra*. Additionally, unlike Britten, Rochberg has published his own autobiography as well as multiple commentaries on modern music in general.

Foremost is Rochberg's memoir on his music, *Five Lines and Four Spaces*²¹. Which features an entire chapter about the piece devoted to its conception, composition, performances, as well as Rochberg's thoughts on its reception and execution. Additionally, there is a very useful time line of his works and life.

Rochberg's published commentaries on music there is interestingly do not mention Britten. The revised and expanded edition of his *Aesthetics of Survival*,²² although reviewing a large range of modern music, lacks mention of Britten.

19. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life* Vol. 3. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

20. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life* Vol. 6. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

21. George Rochberg, (Author), Gene Rochberg (Ed. And Intro.), and Richard Griscom (Ed.). *Five Lines, Four Spaces: The World of My Music*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

22. George Rochberg (Author), and William Bolcom (Ed.), *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer's View of Twentieth-Century Music*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988).

Rochberg is the subject of several articles and scholarly journal entries. These include *The Apostasy of George Rochberg*²³, a general overview of his works, and *Eagle Minds: A Selected Correspondence*²⁴. As well as Dixon's *George Rochberg: A bio-bibliographic guide to his life and works*²⁵. All of these give little context and are most suitable as auxiliary resources for confirming the details of. There are many other dissertations and journal articles on Rochberg, however the main focus of scholarship on Rochberg relates to his serial period, most notably his chamber work.

The score to *Phaedra* is currently available as a published vocal score²⁶ and as a manuscript in the New York public Library. Additionally, the full score is available for rental from Chester music.

23. Alan M. Gillmor, (Author). "The Apostasy of George Rochberg." *Intersections: Canadian Journal of music/Revue Canadienne de Musique* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 2009), 32–48.

24. Alan M. Gillmor, (Ed.). *Eagle Minds: Selected Correspondence of Istvan Anhalt & George Rochberg (1961–2005)*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2007).

25. Joan DeVee Dixon, *George Rochberg: A Bio-Bibliographic Guide to His Life and Works*. (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1992).

26. George Rochberg, *Phaedra A Monodrama for Mezzo-Soprano and Orchestra*, (King of Prussia, PA: Theodore Presser, 2002)

CHAPTER 2

The Story of Phaedra from Racine, Lowell, Britten, and Rochberg

Introduction

As is often the case with art, one source of inspiration can branch out and affect multiple new works. Glenn Watkins examines this phenomena in *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists*, noting how the natural state of modernist music is a function of borrowing and combining pieces from the “curio cabinet” of past ideas to create new works that often possess striking similarities²⁷. Tracing the source material of Phaedra and its transformative journey helps to contextualize both Britten’s and interpretation and offers potential explanations for the works genesis.

Racine’s *Phèdre* and its Subsequent Musical Adaptations:

Starting at its earliest root source, the story of Phaedra began as a French dramatic tragedy in 5 acts titled *Phèdre* by Jean Racine. Racine, a noted French dramatist was baptized December 22, 1639 in Soisson and died in Paris on April 21, 1699. *Phèdre* was

27. Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

Racine's final play that premiered in Paris in 1677²⁸. Eight of his eleven tragedies are rooted in Greek mythology and classical history, including *Phèdre*.²⁹ His *Phèdre* has received numerous adaptations to the operatic stage the most preeminent being Pellegrin's adaptation called *Hippolyte et Aricie* set by Rameau in 1733³⁰.

Stonehouse lists the following operatic adaptations of Racine's play. Rameau in 1733, as *Hippolyte et Aricie*; Gluck in 1745, as *Ippolito*; Holzbauer in 1759, as *Ippolito ed Aricia*; Traetta in 1759, as *Ippolito ed Aricia*; Lemoyne in 1786 as *Phèdre*; Paisiello in 1788, as *Phèdre*; G. Nicolini in 1803, as *Pedra, ossia Il ritorno di Teseo*; Mayr in 1820, as *Phaedra*; Burghersh in 1824, as *Phaedra*; Mihalovici in 1951, as *Phaedra*; Rochberg in 1973–4, as *Phaedra*; Bussotti in 1980, as *Le Racine*, rev. 1988 as *Fedra*³¹. It is intriguing to note that of the twelve musical adaptations listed in the Grove article on Racine in musical settings, Britten is not mentioned. Additionally, Krzysztof Penderecki was working on an operatic adaptation of Racine's *Phèdre*, that was allegedly to be premiered in 2014^{32,33}. However, this adaptation is apparently not going to be borne to

28. Allison Stonehouse, Grove music online, Jean Racine, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mutex.gmu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000022782>, published 2001.

29. Ibid.

30. Allison Stonehouse, Grove music online, Jean Racine (Opera), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mutex.gmu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000007782>, published online 2002.

31. Ibid.

32. Michael Dervan, "A composer for all seasons" (The Irish Times, Wed, Sep. 8th 2010) accessed online <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/2.749/a-composer-for-all-seasons-1.648106>

33. Ori Lewis, "Composer Penderecki is witness to history of native Poland" (Reuters, Feb. 14th 2014) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-penderecki/composer-penderecki-is-witness-to-history-of-native-poland-idUSBREA1D1MA20140214>

fruition with an online article published in March of 2018 that notes his withdrawal from his contract with the Vienna State Opera³⁴.

Of these operatic adaptations Rameau's is the most historically prominent and possesses the only direct connection to Britten. Jean-Philippe Rameau sets a libretto adaptation by Abbé Simon-Joseph Pellegrin; which had its premiere in Paris on the 1st of October 1733.³⁵ The work received its first "near-complete" recording in 1965 with the role of Phaedra being performed by Janet Baker³⁶. This is perhaps more than coincidental, as Britten wrote his *Phaedra* specifically for his friend the very same Janet Baker. Britten could have selected his text for Baker with this connection in mind, however there is no documentation in Britten's notes or correspondence to verify this assertion. However, given Britten's friendship with Baker and the importance of the recording, he certainly would have been aware of this fact regardless of any bearing on his text selection.

Britten was indeed aware of Racine's original play and this is demonstrated in his collected letters. Britten's life partner Peter Pears in writing to Elizabeth Sweeting describes seeing the Racine play during their trip to Paris in 1951³⁷. Thus we know that Britten had at least a fundamental awareness of Racine's original work. Rochberg

34. Norman Lebrecht, "Just In: Senior Composer Can Not Finish His Opera" (Slipped Disc, March 9th 2018) <https://slippedisc.com/2018/03/just-in-senior-composer-cannot-finish-his-opera/>

35. Graham Sadler, Grove Music Online, "Hippolyte et Aricie" (published online 2002) <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mutex.gmu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000009340#omo-9781561592630-e-5000009340>.

36. Ibid.

37. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life* Vol. 3. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 679.

however, makes clear in his biography that did not seek any inspiration or connection to the original Racine; his approach and concept of *Phaedra* is wholly centered on his exposure and passion for Robert Lowell's subsequent adaptation.

***Phaedra* in English, Lowell's verse adaptation**

In the twentieth century, much of the art world was influenced by a conscious interest and reinterpretation of older works. The prominent trend of neo-classicism was reaching its zenith by the mid-century. Artists in every medium were experimenting with putting old wine into new bottles, and this extends to the American poet Robert Lowell, who in addition to his own original works, began translating and reinterpreting older forgotten works.

Robert Lowell, born March 1st, 1917 in Boston Massachusetts won many awards for his own poetry and plays; he also worked diligently to translate and revive classical works of poetry and theater. He deemed of great importance, particularly seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French works. This is akin to Britten's scholarship and devotion to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British music, especially his work on Purcell.

Lowell's first undertaking as translator historian was his free verse translation of Racine's *Phèdre*, which was published in 1961. It received warm reviews, with New York Time's theater critic Harold Clurman noting its Elizabethan tinge, and skillfulness in conveying and adapting the poetry of a seventeenth-century master like Racine³⁸.

38. Harold Clurman, New York Times, May 28th, 1961 accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001) pg. BR5.

Lowell explains that he based his translation on the heroic English language plays of Dryden and Pope, and that he inevitably echoes the English Restoration³⁹. Lowell's admiration and respect for the original Racine is noted in his introduction where he states "Racine's verse has a diamond-edge. He is perhaps the greatest poet in the French language, but he uses a smaller vocabulary than any English poet . . . His poetry is great because of the justness of its rhythm and logic, and the glory of its hard, electric rage."⁴⁰.

Both Britten and Rochberg used this masterful translation of Racine by Lowell for their settings of *Phaedra*. As copyright law always plays a part, for better or worse, in any artform it is worthy to note that both Britten and Lowell at times used the same London publisher. It is particularly apt in this instance as both artists used the publisher Faber of London for their respective *Phaedras*. Rochberg's publisher, Theodore Presser went through the American publisher Farrar, Strauss and Giroux LLC. as noted in the score.

Britten's *Phaedra*

In 1946 Britten's chamber opera *The Rape of Lucretia* premiered. The work is an anomaly in Britten's output with its focus on a female lead character and roman setting. After its premiere, Britten collaborator and librettist Eric Crozier suggested the story of Racine's *Phaedra* as another chamber opera similar to *Lucretia*.⁴¹ This suggestion would

39. Robert Lowell, *Phaedra: A Verse Translation of Racine's Phèdre* (London: Faber, 1961), 7-8.

40. Ibid, 8.

41. Neil Powell, *Benjamin Britten A Life for Music*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013) 454.

not come to fruition, with Britten and Crozier working instead on *Albert Herring*.

Crozier's suggestion was Britten's first noted encounter with *Phaedra* and would not be his last.

Several years later while visiting Paris, Britten and his partner Peter Pears saw a production of the Racine play. This is documented in a postcard⁴² from Peter Pears to Elizabeth Sweeting in September of 1951, in which Pears refers to it as a "terrifying piece". Although nothing more from it came at the time, once again Britten was exposed to the story. It would be nearly twenty-five more years until Britten finally uses the story of *Phaedra*.

By the 1970's Britten's health was on the decline however the annual Aldeburgh Festival which he started was rapidly growing. A fire destroyed the main concert hall at Snape's Malting in 1969; this was a journalist Edward Greenfield put it, a blessing in disguise that allowed for the restoration with a greatly improved stage and seating.⁴³ The English Chamber Orchestra and resident opera company of Aldeburgh produced a recording of *The Rape of Lucretia* with Britten conducting and Janet Baker singing the title role.

The festival continued to grow and in 1973 saw the premier of Britten's *Death in Venice*, his last official opera. Seymour gives a detailed account and analysis where she notes how Britten sensed he was writing his last major work; Britten's partner Pears was

42. *Letters from a Life* vol. 3, 679.

43. Edward Greenfield, The Guardian UK May 18th 1970
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jun/14/from-the-classical-archive-1970-snape-maltings-concert-hall-rebuilt-1970>

more direct “Ben is writing an evil opera and it is killing him!”.⁴⁴ Britten’s health would bounce back the following year with him able to return to composing; however, by 1975 he was constantly accompanied by his nurse Rita Thompson. At the Aldeburgh Festival in 1975 Janet Baker made a stunning performance of Berlioz’s *Nuits d’été* after which Britten asked to write a piece for her.⁴⁵ The time had finally come for Britten to set the story of *Phaedra*.

Given Britten’s poor health his physical writing process for *Phaedra* differed from his usual composition approach. Oliver notes of the composition process “Only a year before, when working on the *Suite on English Folk Tunes*, [Britten] jokingly said that the flutes and piccolos tended to get left out because of the painful difficulty he experienced in moving his right arm over a page of full score. *Phaedra*, for string and continuo only, was easier, but by now he was so weak that he wrote the work slowly into full score, lacking the energy to write a preliminary draft then a fair copy”.⁴⁶ For much of the writing process Britten relied on Colin Matthews who assisted him by playing back the music on the piano and preparing the vocal score.⁴⁷ Matthews describes Britten rejecting a more prolonged orchestral climax and instead chose to have the strings

44. Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* 296.

45. Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996) 206-207.

46. Ibid, 207.

47. Alan Blythe, *Remembering Britten*, (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 175-176.

abruptly cut off with Phaedra's final word purity.⁴⁸ Britten completed the score on the 12th of August 1975, as dated in the score.⁴⁹

Janet Baker began rehearsing *Phaedra* in the spring of 1976 and requested that the final phrase "My eyes at last give up their light" begins on the pitch of 'c' in order to give her voice a moment to rest before the final climax, Britten happily made the requested change.⁵⁰ The premier of *Phaedra* was made at the Aldeburgh Festival on the 16th of June 1976, with Steuart Bedford conducting the English Chamber Orchestra from the harpsichord.

By all accounts, the premier was met with rousing success. John Culshaw describes seeing Britten for the final time at the premier of *Phaedra*, noting how frail he was; "I am glad that he was present in the Maltings to witness the triumph of his cantata, *Phaedra*. The audience may have marveled at how, under such adversity, he could have written such a piece, and it was an emotional moment when he rose to acknowledge the applause; but finally, it was the music that was being applauded".⁵¹

Robert Lowell was also in attendance at the premier; Britten wrote an invitation to Lowell on the 19th of December 1975 signing "looking forward to meeting you again", however the reply was delayed until January when Lowell's secretary replied apologizing

48. *ibid.*

49. Britten, *Phaedra*, 37.

50. *Letters from a Life* vol. 6, 688.

51. Christopher Palmer, *The Britten Companion*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 67.

for the delay caused by Lowell's stay in the hospital.⁵² The editors of Britten's collected letters were able to establish that Britten and Lowell had met once before, likely in New York around 1960, at a dinner along with Lowell's second wife Elizabeth Hardwick, Peter Pears, and Lowell's publisher; a letter from Lowell to Hardwick saying he was going to hear the premier documents Britten and Lowell's prior meeting. Before the premier Lowell gave a reading of a selection of his poems as part of the festival. Unfortunately, this was Britten's final Aldeburgh Festival, he died the following December.

The Case of George Rochberg, the "other" *Phaedra*

Occasionally in the world of art and life in general, two eerily similar works can coexist temporally while being independently conceived of and created under independent circumstances. Such is the case with Britten's and George Rochberg's settings of *Phaedra*. Although no discernable evidence has surfaced to prove either Britten or Rochberg was aware of the others work, their striking similarity is certainly worthy of examination. This unusual coincidence provides the useful benefit of having a contrasting example with which to compare when analyzing Britten's *Phaedra*.

Rochberg gives a first-hand account of the genesis of his *Phaedra* in his autobiography.⁵³ In Rochberg's own words

The story of how I came to know Robert Lowell's wonderful evocation of Phaedra's tragic fate is a perfect instance of how small things can sometimes have

52. *Letters from a Life* vol. 6, 700-701.

53. George Rochberg, *Five Lines Four Spaces The world of My Music*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

major consequences. The small thing in this case was Gene's and my desire to see our friend Miriam Philips act the role of Oenone, Phaedra's nurse, in the production of the Lowell play being presented by the Theater of the Living Arts repertory company in Philadelphia in May 1967. The major consequence of experiencing this production of Lowell's verse translation of Racine's *Phèdre* has been a lifelong involvement with the mythological figure of a woman invested with proportions of tragic grandeur.⁵⁴

Rochberg further notes how impactful it was seeing Diana Sands performing as Phaedra, and how it inspired him to set all of "her barbaric pain and ferocity, to music"⁵⁵

In this short chapter of his book Rochberg describes how he and his wife sought to highlight only the most dramatic moments of the play, and that remaining narrative aspects would be treated as interludes in order to avoid composing a fully cast opera. In his descriptions of his chosen text and his musical idiom, it is very clear that Rochberg's vision of Phaedra is entirely different from Britten's. His concept of the character is worlds apart from Britten, negating concerns of plagiarism.

Rochberg makes clear in discussing his text selection and impressions from seeing the play that he viewed the character of Phaedra as a larger than life heroic figure, plagued by problems outside her control. Rochberg wanted the audience to know that his Phaedra was being tormented by actual Greek deities, and in an outward emotional struggle.

It would reduce Phaedra to sheer meaninglessness to envision her as a hysterically dysfunctional, contemporary Western woman bordering on the pathological, merely another instance of human passions gone off the rails, caught in the confusions of modern life, and thereby deprive her of the grandeur of her struggles against implacable forces she is convinced are invisibly weaving her fate and willing her death. I wanted to open them to an insight into the ancient

54. George Rochberg, *Five Lines Four Spaces*, 216.

55. *Ibid.*

pagan view of raw and wracked passions that can only lose out against the nonhuman forces stacked against them. How else to grasp the iron-clad web of fate that brings Phaedra down – and Hippolytus with her?⁵⁶

True to this spirit and his concept of the figure Phaedra, it is important to note what Rochberg leaves out, that Britten chooses to focus on. In Rochberg's composition and his writings in *Five Lines Four Spaces*, he makes no mention of the final act of the play. Phaedra's final monologue which is the closing scene of the play, has her calmly asking for forgiveness and atonement in her death, as well as acknowledging her guilt and being the cause of the tragedy. This does not fit with Rochberg's heroic supernatural concept of the character, tellingly the chapter on Phaedra in *Five Lines Four Spaces* is titled "Gods of Wrath".

Rochberg's music is stylized to match his tragic hero, being overtly romantic and attempting an over the top luxuriance. His style is soaked with a Wagnerian sense of grandeur and excess "I saw *Phaedra* as one of my most effective pieces of hard romanticism. Not simply what some like to call "neoromanticism" – a meaningless term at best – but a full-blown romanticism where human emotions are stretched to their most extreme breaking point."⁵⁷.

Rochberg unfortunately laments his composition in a tragic light both in the performance of the singers and reception of the audience; viewing it conspired against like its title character. Rochberg was not happy with either of its first two performers

56. Ibid, 220-221.

57. George Rochberg, *Five Lines Four Spaces*, 220.

“Neither this nor a subsequent performance with Lucy Shelton, soprano, met what I felt were the dramatic, emotional, and musical dimensions needed to bring off the role of the splendidly tragic *Phaedra*”⁵⁸. He was not happy with a performance until 1998, with conductor Glibert Rose and soprano Mary Nessinger and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. Unfortunately for Rochberg, he would not get a happy ending for his *Phaedra* stating of the concert “I had looked forward to *Phaedra* capturing their hearts, hence my surprise. Which proves (once again?) that what a composer prizes most among his own works may not necessarily accord with the tastes of others.”⁵⁹.

58. Ibid, 219.

59. Ibid, 221.

CHAPTER 3

Britten's *Phaedra* as an Opera

Britten called his *Phaedra* as a “Dramatic Cantata”. In the program note at its premiere, Britten says the he modeled the structure “on the Italian cantata form, of which Handel has given us so many notable examples”⁶⁰. This influence is certainly visible in his use of continuo; however, Britten is an opera composer first and foremost. Michael Tippett recalls a conversation where Britten said “I am possibly an anachronism. I am a composer of opera, and that is what I am going to be throughout.”⁶¹ It is from this perspective I believe the best understanding of *Phaedra* can be achieved.

Britten produced five other works aside from *Phaedra* that he labeled as cantatas. *The Company of Heaven* (1937), *Rejoice in the Lamb* (1943), *Saint Nicholas* (1949), *Cantata Academica* (1959), and *Cantata Misericordium* (1963). Of these only the *Cantata Academica*, sets a non-religious text, commissioned for the quincentenary of Basel University. These works are cast for larger vocal ensembles with emphasis on the chorus. Additionally, these cantatas feature a tableau type presentation; even *Saint Nicholas* which has the most linear and concrete plot presents his life as a series of

60. *Letters from a life Volume Six*, 686.

61. Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 193.

scenes. *Cantata Misericordium* which is based on the Good Samaritan story, is sung in Latin and is noted by Evans as assuming the audience is already familiar with the “simply story” from the bible. It includes a choral homily and seeks to promote Britten’s message of pacifism rather than emphasizing action in the plot.

This leaves *Phaedra*, much like the character herself, standing alone. It is the only cantata to come directly from a play, rather than poetry or adaptations thereof. The source material inherently lends itself to an operatic context. The lack of a chorus further removes *Phaedra* from the cantata context as there is no longer commentary from a reflective third party; thus, as in his operas, the emotional development and symbolism is drawn directly from the main character.

Britten’s addition of the word “Dramatic” to its cantata label is a further hint that the work shares more in common to his dramatic operatic works than those of his cantatas. Given that Eric Crozier previously proposed the source material for *Phaedra* as an opera it is even more likely that Britten would approach the setting like his operas. With Britten’s deteriorating health, the prospects of writing another full-scale opera eluded him, thus *Phaedra* offered him a chance to exert his dramatic talents on a scale appropriate to his physical health.

Several scholars do acknowledge and recognize *Phaedra*’s operatic quality. Oliver describes *Phaedra* as having an “operatic amplitude of gesture” that spans her declamatory first aria through her madness and climaxing with her confession.⁶² In his

62. Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten*, (London: Phaidon, 1996), 207.

passing summation of *Phaedra* Michael Kennedy coins the most apt and pithy description of *Phaedra* calling it a “dramatic opera in miniature”.⁶³

With this in mind, it is a fair assessment to treat *Phaedra* as if it were another of Britten’s operatic works. In doing so, parallels to his operatic works are justified. In my analysis I will be drawing upon the rich scholarship on Britten’s operas to inform my perspective.

Rediscovering Rochberg

Rochberg’s musical career is a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He is known for being an academic and his years of teaching composition at the University of Pennsylvania. Rochberg represents the plight of many American composers struggling against European traditions and having to choose between the academic world of total serialism (i.e. Babbitt) or the avant-garde (i.e. Cage). Although his music is not well known, his academic output and his compositions had a profound effect on his colleagues and he helped pave the way for other composers.

Rochberg began his career as an “academic” composer of total serialism, however following the death of his son 1964 he began to turn away from total serialism instead returning to new interpretations of tonality: “It is quite impossible to describe in any detail my subjective states and the perpetual internal debate that took place in me during the period in which I had grown painfully aware of the extreme limitations of

63. Michael Kennedy, *Britten*, (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1981), 113.

modernism.”⁶⁴ This shift put him at odds with his serialist peers in academia and the followers of Cage and indeterminacy who both became his critics; “What I had not anticipated was the solid wall of hostility that rose like a black cloud from the large audience of students and faculty in the form of stinging, angry denunciation and questions. I felt engulfed in an electrical storm of rejection”⁶⁵

This struggle to find a place as a composer manifested itself in his essays and writings on music. Rochberg’s collection of essays *The Aesthetics of Survival* published as a collection in 1984, and then expanded and republished in 2004, chronicle the plight of the modern composer and the exclusionary nature of the different circles of aesthetics⁶⁶. Posthumously another collection of writings would be published under the title *A Dance of Polar Opposites* in 2012.

Rochberg’s move towards tonal music is an entirely different experience than that of Britten who began there in the first place. Britten could root his tonality in the rich history of European music; Rochberg felt this was not available to him as an American living in the shadow of European Tradition.

But these are all Europeans. Where and who are the American artists, poets, and composers? Are there any that answer to these self-imposed, almost cruelly demanding standards, of achievement? Hard enough to hammer oneself in an artist in any medium in a culture firmly rooted in the traditions of the art one sets out to master. At least you are digging in soil long cultivated. You can immerse yourself in a lifelong study of the works that move you, that inspire you with their imaginative power to attempt to reach their heights of craft and art – even if a

64. George Rochberg, *Five Lines Four Spaces*, 31.

65. Ibid, 96-97.

66 George Rochberg (Author), and William Bolcom (Ed.), *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer’s View of Twentieth-Century Music*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988).

good deal of the time you are dogged by intense feeling of doubt and despair that you can ever achieve the right to be counted among the company of those whose work means everything to you. But what if you have to dig in stone? What if the culture into which your birth hurls you – whether by accident of fate – lacks what you need most to build upon: a great tradition stretching back hundreds of years in an unbroken line of high achievement? What if you are born in the culturally barren, rock-bound utilitarian materialism of America of 1918? What is there in your own culture to sustain you, to challenge your best efforts, to nourish your most powerful hungers for creating a world more beautiful and ideal than the dull, grey grind you were tossed into at birth?⁶⁷

The struggle of Rochberg is the struggle of so many of the American modernists.

His *Phaedra* represents an attempt to build on the tonal tradition of romanticism and not be pigeonholed into one particular “ism” prevalent in modernist music. The recent publication and republication of Rochberg’s scholarly writings certainly raises his profile as a teacher, but to better understand him the picture is incomplete without looking at his music.

Rochberg’s autobiography makes clear that *Phaedra* was a piece dear to his heart. Presenting it alongside with Britten should help spur renewed interest in his music and demonstrate an American modernist’s treatment of the *Phaedra* story.

67. Ibid, 262-263.

CHAPTER 4

Analysis of Britten's *Phaedra*

As posited, Britten's *Phaedra* operates as an “opera in miniature” thus the best analytic approach is to treat it as such. All of the extant analyses or summations of the work compare it to his operas, though none go so far as to classify *Phaedra* an opera instead choosing to demure to Britten's dramatic cantata title and discount it solely by its diminutive size when compared to *Death in Venice* or his other opera. Furthermore, Evan's book and *The Britten Companion* do not group *Phaedra* along with his other cantatas instead classifying along with Britten's final works before his death. Approaching *Phaedra* as a miniature opera, I hope to give it more perspective, comparing it to Britten's other operatic works and Rochberg's setting.

The Libretto

Understanding any opera begins with its text, dramatic action, and plot. The selections Britten makes from Lowell present an introspective emotional narrative that is a hallmark of Britten's style. Throughout his operatic career Britten focuses his operatic narratives more and more inward, highlighting the inner thoughts and emotional struggles

of the character while relying less and less on physical staging and action. This is a constant that evolves from his first opera *Peter Grimes* where Peter's death happens off stage, to *Death in Venice* where Aschenbach's love interest Tadzio is represented as a stylized dancer. In the libretto for *Phaedra*, Britten chooses text that conveys a full sense of character development and operatic action framed by Phaedra's inner emotional struggle.

Britten's libretto is taken directly from the Lowell translation. A full rendering of Britten's text noting the repetitions of words and phrases can be found in Appendix III. The text in front of the Faber score does not note the acts and scenes from which the text is excerpted and does not account for the subtle changes in Britten's subsequent musical setting. Appendix ii shows a side by side comparison of the original Lowell text, Britten's excerpts, and Rocheberg's excerpts.

Britten's Phaedra

Musical Movement Designation with Corresponding Play Act and Scene

Prologue – Act 1, sc. iii
Recitative – Act 1, sc. iii
Presto – Act 2, sc. v
Recitative – Act 3, sc. iii
Adagio – Act 5, sc. vii

Figure 1: relationship of Britten's music to the text of the original play

In selecting his libretto Britten (like Rochberg) chose to begin with Phaedra's monologue from Act 1, sc. iii. This monologue comes at the end of the scene where she reflects on her history and meeting Hippolytus. Peter Evans notes how the plot begins

“as a retrospective narrative” then moving to the present tense thus the “time scale never feels congested.”⁶⁸ Britten restrains his text selection to just the first section of the monologue, this economic choice prevents there from being too much exposition and allows his next text choices to convey more emotional and character development by not having been overly foreshadowed.

After the mournful past tense musings of the prologue and first recitative, Britten jumps into the action with a presto aria. The text is from the finale of Act 2, sc. v, where Phaedra is angrily proclaiming her love for Hippolytus and subsequent insanity. Britten is careful to extract the most reflective of text, where Phaedra speaks most directly of her love and emotions. The lines omitted by Britten either describe physical plot actions that happened prior (at first I fled you . . .) or lines that directly question and confront Hippolytus (Avenge yourself, invoke your father)⁶⁹.

This is an essential Britten opera characteristic; his characters even during moments of dramatic plot action reflect inward on their emotional or mental state rather than dwelling outward directly on a tangible physical event. Peter Grimes for example at the end of Act 1 where the physical action of the storm is reaching its climax, reflects inwardly with his aria “Now the Great Bear and Pleiades” where he rhetorically asks, “who can turn skies back and begin again”⁷⁰. In the dramatic action of her love and madness Phaedra shines a mirror towards herself referring to “my mind” “this monster”

68. Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 395.

69. See Appendix III

70. Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1963), 198.

“the wife of Theseus” rather than pointing blame outward towards Hippolytus. This clearly contrasts with the more outward focused orientation of Rochberg’s text, where Phaedra asks direct questions towards Hippolytus and even instructs him to “Avenge yourself.”⁷¹

In Britten’s careful excision of text for his presto aria, he has removed lines that would require Hippolytus to be standing directly present in front of Phaedra. The result is a subtle transformation of a monologue into an interior monologue. This slight shift in action placement although not indicative of staging requirements would make the character of Phaedra standing alone onstage logical; thus, if presented as an opera the audience would not question who she is speaking with. Additionally, this helps the final lines of the aria “Look, this monster, ravenous for her execution, will not flinch. I want your sword’s spasmodic final inch”⁷² seem more metaphorical. In the play it is clear from Hippolytus’s presence and Oenone’s subsequent comment “put down this weapon... Stop Kneeling...”⁷³ that Phaedra was not merely musing but explicitly acting out her monologue.

The next text chosen by Britten is from Act 3, sc. iii, where Phaedra laments her situation, being in love with her step son who has rejected her. It’s clear why Britten chose this text, Phaedra’s mournful reflecting and resignation to death. A common theme of Britten’s operas is the concept of a character looking into the abyss, this concept

71. Ibid.

72. Robert Lowell, *Phaedra: A Verse Translation of Racine’s Phaedra*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 45.

73. Ibid.

comes up most prominently with *Death in Venice* and is mentioned by Cooke, Evans, and Seymour to name a few. Phaedra's line "Death will give me freedom; oh its nothing to live; death to the unhappy's no catastrophe"⁷⁴ is a clear example of looking into the abyss.

Britten ends his setting with an Adagio with text from Act 5, sc. vii, which are Phaedra's final lines of the play. This moment represents the quintessential Britten opera plot point, Phaedra is rapidly approaching death and chooses to face it with calm resolve seeking atonement, redemption, and a purification for wrongs. Peter Grimes, Billy Budd, Elizabeth I, Miles, Owen Wingrave, Aschenbach, like Phaedra all see their death quickly approaching and face it with quiet resolve and a sense of coming purification.

Britten's choice in text excerpts for the libretto sets up a smooth plot development arch that exemplifies the psychological themes he explores throughout his operatic works. The character of Phaedra sets up her emotional inner conflict looking to the past (Prologue, Recitative 1), lets her madness and emotion burst forth (Presto), turns evermore inward for reflection (Recitative 2), and finally faces the abyss and death with resolve, absolution, and a hope of purification (Adagio). This general plot arch is seen in his first opera with Peter Grimes's past history, emotional struggles, accident, madness, and resolve to death and purification; and is also seen in his last *Death in Venice* with Aschenbach's reflection of his past and career, struggles with present lust and love contrasting with his aging, and ending with his confrontation of the abyss and absolution

74. Ibid, 53.

in death. *Phaedra*'s libretto condenses this quintessential Britten plot arch to its absolute thematic grundgestalt.

Although *Phaedra* was presented at the Aldeburgh as an un-staged "dramatic cantata" Britten's intuition as an operatic dramaturge makes clear that the libretto can stand its own staged without additional actors present. His focus on rhetorical questions and interior monologues leaves little to no room for any other character to interrupt *Phaedra*'s psychological struggle. Rochberg's libretto adaptation in his setting necessitated orchestral interludes to reconcile and contextualize his *Phaedra*'s outward displays of questions and actions. That's not to say that Britten doesn't have his orchestra provide instrumental commentary (to be shown in the musical analysis) but rather, his text can stand on stage solo.

The libretto of a monodrama always poses a challenge in presentation. Rochberg reconciles this problem by his orchestral interludes (explicitly titled after the respective plot developments in response to *Phaedra*'s monologues – "Black Sails", "Theseus's Homecoming", "The Death of Hippolytus"). Poulenc's *La voix humaine* (1959) achieves this through the technological representation of a second character on the telephone. Britten solves this problem by focusing on *Phaedra*'s inner struggle and state of mind.

The "Small Orchestra"

Like the libretto the music and orchestration of Britten's *Phaedra* have been pared down to the most fundamental psychological themes common to his characters. Britten

uses the smallest configuration of orchestral forces that allowed him to adequately convey his strongest musical influences developed throughout his career.

Phaedra is scored for a “small orchestra” consisting of strings, timpani, two percussionists (bell pitched at concert A, cymbals, gong, tenor drum, bass drum), and harpsichord. From a cursory glance at the instrumentation list one might assume that a large chamber ensemble would suffice, however the complexity of the music is beyond that of a quintet of strings with added keyboard and percussion.

Britten does not note in the score how many string players he requires, but, it is evident from the notation that a substantial number of players would be needed. Every string part contains a split staff divisi including the double bass part. The necessity of two double basses would mean, for the sake of balance and intonation, a traditional chamber sized orchestra of at minimum twenty-one players (6 first violins, 5 second violins, 4 violas, 4 cellos, 2 double basses) could be assumed. Furthermore, Britten frequently uses pizzicato, natural and artificial harmonics, mutes, and long pedal points all of which would benefit acoustically from having sufficient doublings.

For example, during the Adagio, four measures before rehearsal mark 26, Britten indicates that the lower cello staff should have the “last 2 or 3 players” while the upper cello staff notes “the rest.” This is then immediately followed at rehearsal 26 with the upper cello line becoming divisi and noting “2 soli.”⁷⁵ Given such an overlap, four cellos would be needed at minimum to execute this passage without part switching. This,

75. Benjamin Britten, *Phaedra*, (London: Faber, 1992), 30-31.

combined with the divisi in the double bass part demonstrates that by proportion a larger number of upper strings and thus more players overall should be employed.

Perhaps it is merely semantics to debate the “small orchestra” versus “chamber orchestra” designation; however, it is worthy of consideration. Given that the restrained size and scope of *Phaedra* might create a pitfall of enlisting too small of a chamber ensemble, I believe that “small orchestra” still conveys a full orchestral section albeit not to a large Mahler scale; whereas, “chamber orchestra” conveys one to the bare minimum on a part. Modern music productions often involve using the smallest number of available musicians, which is often at the disservice to the music itself. The premier of *Phaedra* used Britten’s own English Chamber Orchestra, an ensemble of classical orchestra size and larger than many chamber orchestras.

The choice of harpsichord by Britten is a clear nod to the Baroque. Britten’s work on the *Beggars Opera* and with Purcell demonstrates his commitment to the Baroque aesthetic. Neil Powell notes, that “there is a fleeting reminiscence ... of Dido’s lament in Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*, another role Janet Baker had made her own.”⁷⁶ Both of the recitative sections of *Phaedra* are scored in the Baroque texture of harpsichord and solo cello accompaniment. The harpsichord does not play during any of the orchestral aria sections; this compartmentalizes the recitatives in their own sound world and imparts audible timbral structure in a through composed work.

76. Neil Powell, *Benjamin Britten A Life for Music*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 455.

Peter Evans chooses to compare *Phaedra* to Britten's early opera *The Rape of Lucretia*, presumably because of their settings of Greek Tragedy. He describes the music of *Lucretia* as having a "rich somber eloquence" and "some of [Britten's] most generously beautiful music" which he then contrasts to *Phaedra*'s "dry-eyed laconism" and "ascetic note."⁷⁷ Evans acknowledges that Britten's "reasons for reinstating the 'continuo' resources are evident enough"⁷⁸ however he disparages the choice of harpsichord as not being sufficiently powerful to convey the harmonic implications and states that Britten would be better served if "the piano were to assume the role"⁷⁹. He writes, "not only do melodic movements tend to sound miserably disembodied, but astringent harmonies that, marked perhaps ff in the score, look to have clinching force, emerge as puny side by side with the powerful sonority of massed strings, the weight of timpani and percussion."⁸⁰

From an orchestration perspective Evans's critique is unsound. Since the harpsichord is isolated, only playing in the recitative sections, it does not need the power of a piano to stand up to the rest of the orchestra. The sound of the harpsichord does make a dramatic timbral shift but in such a compressed libretto it serves to instantly change the mood and marks distinct structure points. The text of the recitative sections is

77. Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 396.

78. Ibid. 400.

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.

the most reflective and inward, and this orchestration shift creates a sense of intimacy suitable to the plot of the libretto.

The final component of the orchestra is perhaps the most personal to Britten, his use of percussion is a hallmark of his later works. Britten's small orchestra requires three percussionists who are the most vital to the symbolism and pageantry Britten is trying to convey. One of Britten's major fascinations was with Japanese Noh theater, which he explored in earnest with his three parable operas (*Curlew River*, *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, and *The Prodigal Son*). Anthony Sheppard explains in detail the natural affinity between Noh theater and the staging of classical Greek works, as well as the Noh aspects in⁸¹. Thus, Britten's inclusion of percussion is not for mere coloristic affect, but rather a more ritual and symbolic purpose. Indeed, biographer Humphrey Carpenter describes the interjected drum rhythms used in *Phaedra* as a symbolic heartbeat that "may be an allusion to Britten's own heart condition."⁸²

note: measure numbers are designated by bar lines in the accompanying parts, occasionally the voice or a solo instrument will be unmeasured however Britten still uses at minimum dotted bar line groupings, ostensibly for ease of accompanists and conductor

The Structure of Phaedra

81. Anthony Sheppard, *Revealing Masks: Exotic Influences and Ritualized Performance in Modernist Music Theater*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

82. Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 570.

Phaedra is in five parts, alternating between lush orchestral aria and dry baroque recitative. These five sections although markedly different in timbre and orchestration are completely integrated thematically creating an entirely through composed piece. The integration is evident by the elision of the text from one section into the next; the only instance where the singer's line does not overlap the section designation is between the Presto second aria and the second Recitative. The connection between the Presto and second recitative is still strongly present through the use of the timpani, which as Carpenter suggests, acts as a symbolic heartbeat. Overall, the piece is in an arch form that builds in tempo through the central section, then slows back down towards the ending.

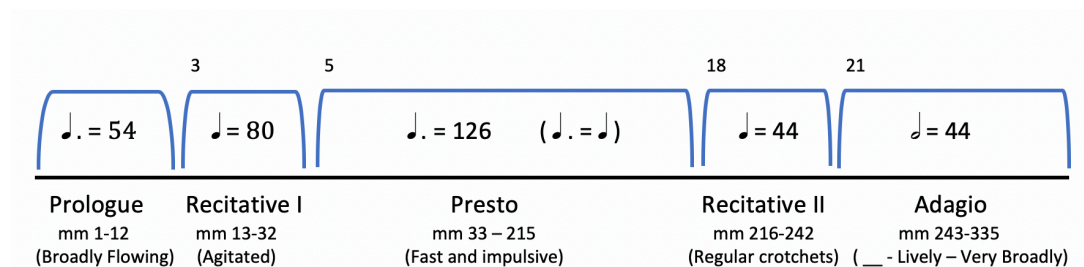


Figure 2: Representation of Tempi, Measure Numbers, and Rehearsal Marks in the five section of *Phaedra*

The Prologue opening aria (measures 1-12) is the shortest section proportionally, however it has a rich depth of development and introduces the main thematic material. This section, which uses the key signature of A Major, consists of three calls by the string orchestra and percussion that are answered by a free vocal line that floats atop a sustained

chord in the strings. Each string “call” is a downward cascade centered tonally on an A major seventh chord with an added sixth; the free vocal responses pivot around the focal note of C sharp. Each grouping develops, the second being more frantic and compressed, and the final statement by the strings changes tone color by being primarily pizzicato.

The first Recitative (measures 13-32) is without a key signature and marks a timbral shift to the baroque continuo sound of the harpsichord and solo cello. This section directly develops the material of the prologue, transforming the figures first heard in the strings through different tonal centers in the harpsichord. Structurally it acts as a development to the prologue as it progresses towards the key of d minor in the next aria movement.

The second aria, Presto (measures 33-215), covers the most material in the work. At twelve pages in the score (out of thirty-seven) it represents about one third of the work’s material, although temporally it is compressed by the fast tempo. This central movement is in a clear arch form that progresses thematically a – b – c – c’ – b’ – a’. The tonality roughly oscillates between D minor and D Major as designated by the key signatures, however the extended chord nature of Britten’s harmonic language implies other tonal areas often simultaneously. The “a” sections are in 6/8 and possess a frantic scherzo quality in D minor. This is in contrast to the “b” sections which are in 4/4 with a sustained lilting ostinato in D Major. The central “c” section is in d minor and also 6/8, however, it is more stable with a consistent ostinato. The “c” section is clearly in two parts as the first half is in D minor followed by a false transition that returns to the “c” ostinato again only a minor third lower with an adjustment to the pedal point now

implying A major. In proportion the “c” section is approximately twice as long as the other “a” and “b” episodes, therefore with the slight break in the ostinato only to return transposed in the dominant key for an equal proportion, it is justified to call it “c” followed immediately by “c” prime.

The second Recitative (measures 216-242) begins without a key signature and is in Baroque continuo scoring like the first. In this Recitative the harpsichord is much less melodically active instead playing an almost percussive heartbeat like ostinato, with the occasional flourish. The heavy use of major and minor seconds in the ostinato sustains tension through this section, only releasing at the end when the ostinato stops. Britten briefly notates the harpsichord part alone in A major during the occurrence of the opening theme before rehearsal 19.

The final section Adagio (measures 243-335) features the most active and full orchestral parts. The general structure of the adagio is a – b – a’ – coda. The “a” sections feature half note scalar motion that slowly moves upward while the each of the dividing string parts enter one after another. Britten is careful to deflect from a powerful arrival point, ensuring growth towards the climax. The “a” sections are keyed in C Major however, as previously mentioned, the extended harmonies often imply other tonal areas. The “b” section is faster and is essentially a variation of the opening prologue, keyed in A Major, it features cascading call from the strings with a vocal response. The second “a” section returns to C Major, and this time reaches a climax at a C Major chord (with added 6th and 9th) on Phaedra’s final word “purity”. This is immediately followed by a short coda section for the orchestra, which displays the primary themes heard throughout the

work. The coda is perhaps the most unusual notation of the entire work, main motives reappear in their original keys and meters over a C pedal in the low strings. This overlapping nature leaves an aleatoric element as there is no unifying meter, these entrances must be approximated and cued by the conductor.

Britten's Use of Tonal Centers in Phaedra:

A good deal of Britten scholarship notes the importance of symbolic key areas. Often a particular character or theme will be associated with a specific key. Also William Mann wrote in his review of *Phaedra* "Britten always writes music for a particular singer (so did all the best eighteenth-century composers)"⁸³. With this in mind, the ranges and key areas would be accordingly adjusted to suit Janet Baker's specific range (for example changing a passage of repeated Es to Cs)⁸⁴. That being said, some of Britten's most recognizable key associations from his career are present in *Phaedra*, particularly in the orchestral parts.

From the opening passage, Britten sets up a key relationship and symbolism he has used before. The key is A major; however, the passage presented in the first four measures contains prominent E naturals, G sharps, and B naturals, also implying the dominant key of E major. Claire Seymour, in her analysis of Britten's preceding opera

83. Editors Phillip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, *Letters from a Live: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten Volume Six 1966-1976* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 725.

84. Ibid, 726.

Death in Venice, identifies the key of A major as a symbol of Aschenbach's platonic love towards Tadzio; while the key of E major symbolizes his subversive sexual impulses.⁸⁵ Mervyn Cooke identifies A major as Britten's Apollonian key⁸⁶, an apt mythological metaphor appropriate to the work *Phaedra*. Meanwhile in his analysis, Peter Evans identifies the key of A major in *Phaedra* as being specific to the character Theseus.⁸⁷

This key relationship of A major to E major in *Phaedra* fits with Seymour's concept from *Death in Venice*. As the operatic work immediately preceding *Phaedra*, and given Britten's exhaustion and failing health, it is pragmatic to assume *Death in Venice* was still on his mind. Phaedra's love of Hippolytus is full of conflict; he is her younger adopted son, this is very similar to Aschenbach's conflicted pursuit of the youth Tadzio in *Death*. Using Seymour's concept, it is appropriate to say the A Major / E Major represents the embodiment Phaedra's conflicted love for Hippolytus, who by marriage is her stepson and yet for whom she also lusts instead of her husband.

Evans's identification of A Major and the opening bi-tonal theme with Theseus alone is problematic. Much of his focus is on Phaedra's relationship to her husband Theseus, even though Hippolytus is Phaedra's lust filled love interest and the source of her emotional turmoil. The conflict arises and is focused on him; Phaedra kills herself not to restore her purity and loyalty to her husband but rather to absolve Hippolytus, whom she accused and turned Theseus against. Evans builds his case based on the

85. Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evaison*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 299.

86. Reed and Cooke, *Letters from a Life* Volume Six, 686.

87. Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 396.

second recitative before rehearsal 19, where Phaedra says “I go to meet my husband” in A major, this is followed by the bi-tonal theme in question; Evans fails to point out that this is then immediately followed with “at his side will stand Hippolytus” centered on the pitch E. Evans also says this theme occurs dramatically before rehearsal 26 representing Theseus’ reaction, however Phaedra is singing “Theseus I stand before you to absolve your noble son” with the word son landing on A.

The A Major paired with E major tonality and theme occurs prominently during the prologue where Phaedra marries Theseus and sees Hippolytus. Given this, I am inclined to assert that the opening theme and conflict of the key A Major to E major is a representation of Phaedra’s conflicted love towards Hippolytus.

The Presto section of *Phaedra* notably oscillates between D minor and D Major, this is fitting with the conflicting emotions conveyed in the text where she confronts Hippolytus and reveals her love for him. In the “a” sections, which are in d minor, the text takes an exclamatory tone: “You monster” and “Why do you hang there speechless” from the “a” section; “Look, this monster, ravenous for her executioner” in the “a” prime section.⁸⁸ This contrasts with the D Major “b” sections, where Phaedra is proclaiming her madness and love “Phaedra in all her madness stands before you. I love you!” in the “b” section and “The wife of Theseus loves Hippolytus!” in “b” prime section.⁸⁹ The stability of the ostinato in the “c” sections as well as its transitory tonality also reflects the

88. Benjamin Britten, *Phaedra*, 8-17.

89. Ibid.

text, which is in past tense with lines such as “I was afraid to kiss my husband...” and “I made you fear me”.

The tonal centers of the Presto work with the libretto to enhance the arch structure of the section. This formal structure at the works central movement mirrors that of the entire work and serves to reinforce the overall arch form. With the Prologue and Adagio sections being primarily in A Major, the central section being in D minor/D Major further adds a tonic to subdominant to tonic motion for the work as a whole.

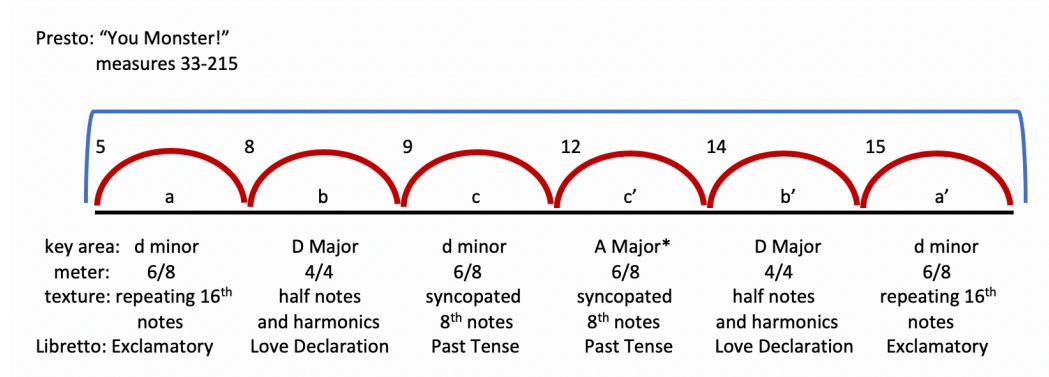


Figure 3: Structure of the “Presto” section showing tonal, meter, textural, and plot relationships

The Adagio ending of *Phaedra* introduces one of the most symbolic tonal centers, C Major. In the Adagio section Phaedra confesses her sins to her husband Theseus, she insists on absolving Hippolytus and accepts responsibility for her actions. She reveals that she has poisoned herself and with her dying breath exclaims “My eyes at last give up their light, and see the day they’ve soiled resume its purity.”⁹⁰ Tonally, the Adagio

90. Ibid, 34-35.

begins with the key signature of C Major; however, the music begins by strongly implying the dominant with its emphasis on G. Instead of C Major the music moves chromatically to the key of A Major. The central section “b” section of the Adagio is in A Major with strong additional implications of E Major, reusing the call and response form and musical material from the prologue. Here Phaedra reveals her love of Hippolytus to Theseus and again the conflict between A Major / E Major is at play.

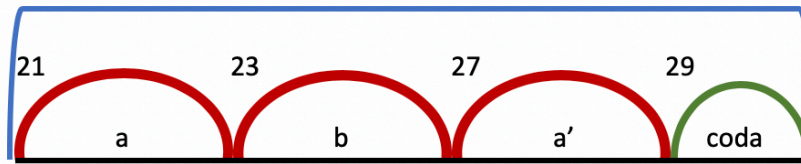
When the slow music of the “a” section returns, Phaedra has accepted her death and with her subsequent purification the music finally arrives at transfiguring C Major chord with added 9th and 6th. Carpenter identifies this chord as one of “consummation and transfiguration” and likens it to Mahler and *Das Lied von der Erde*⁹¹; Neil Powell additionally calls this C Major chord “Mahlerian”⁹². Evans identifies this chord and key of C Major as one of purity and chastity and notes the similar meaning and function in Britten’s earlier opera *The Rape of Lucretia*⁹³.

91. Carpenter, *Britten: A Biography*, 570.

92. Powell, *Benjamin Britten*, 455.

93. Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 399.

Adagio: "My time's too short your highness"
measures 243-335



key area:	C Major	A Major	C Major	multiple
meter:	3/2	4/4	3/2	
texture:	ascending half notes	Recap of Prelude call/response	ascending half notes	
Libretto:		Confession to Theseus	Acceptance of Death & Purification	

Figure 4: Structure, tonal centers, texture, and libretto of the "Adagio" section.

The coda section of *Phaedra* at the end of the Adagio presents all of the important themes from the work in their original respective keys and meters, presented over a sustained low c pedal note in the cellos and basses. The six themes presented overlap each other creating a collage of the work as a whole. Britten's overlapping tonal centers arrive at a quiet restatement of the c "purification" chord in the penultimate measures evaporating into the still sustained pedal that concludes the work. This very unique coda for Britten, represents an Ives like collage complete with superimpositions of keys and meters.

The musical themes and motives of Phaedra

Britten clearly identifies six key musical themes of the work in its final coda. The coda presents a recapitulation of the entire work where the important musical ideas from

the Prologue, Presto, and Adagio are presented overlapping in order of their appearance in the work. This explicit thematic summary of the work is comprehensive and provides a compositional answer key to the ideas Britten himself identifies as important. The resulting effect is like the closing of a Mahler symphony or that of Mozart's *Jupiter*. This makes *Phaedra* an exceptional window into Britten's thought process on musical themes; I can think of, and have found, no other Britten work that presents such a comprehensive presentation of themes unadulterated in their original keys and meters. By using the coda as a thematic index, we can go back through the work and discover how each theme was used.

The final two pages of the score are reproduced on the following two pages to display this. The individual themes, in my opinion, are so self-evident that no annotation is required to highlight them.

36

29 Very soft and free

Timp. *fast, as before with Ruthe (switches) dying away*

Perc. 2 Bell *ppp*

Vln. 1 *1 solo p (as at the start) p*

Vc.

Db.

Timp. *ppp*

Perc.

Vln. 1 *1 solo the rest, muted quick (as before) ppp*

Vln. 2 *unis., muted ppp*

Vla. *1 solo p smooth*

Vc.

Db.

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Figure 5: page 36 of Britten's score representing the start of the coda, recapping the first three themes

30 (slower than before) 37

Perc. 2 (Cym.)
1 T.D.
B.D. *ppp*

Vln. 1
Vln. 2 *ppp*

Vla.
Vc. 1 solo rather quick (slower than before) *pp* *dim.*
2nd half
(div.)
Db. (div.)

moderate
tutti, muted *pppp*
(muted) *pppp*
tutti, muted *pppp*
1 solo
2nd half
(div.)
Db. (div.)

August 12th 1975
Suffolk.

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Figure 6: Page 37 of Britten's score representing the end of the coda, recapping the final three themes

Theme 1 (Phaedra's Theme)

Broadly flowing (♩ = 54)

Violin

Viola

Cello

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Figure 7: The opening Phaedra theme presented in the Prologue first measure, it is the first theme recapped in the solo violin during the final coda.

The first theme Britten presents in the coda is the opening to the entire work, I refer to this as the Phaedra theme. This flowing cascade is used throughout the work and is the most recognizable to the listener since it is the very first thing heard in the piece and is the most prominently repeated theme. As previously noted, this theme presents a distinct tension in tonality between A Major and E Major. The theme is heard against a harmonic A and G# held in the second violins and is joined by F# and E in the violas and basses respectively by the third measure. This short passage uses every diatonic pitch in the A Major scale; the prominent use of E, G#, and D in particular imply and draw attention to the E dominant chord. Interval wise, there is prominent outlining of descending minor 9ths (A-G#, D-C#)

Peter Evans calls this theme the “Theseus” motive, and notes its ability to imply both the key of A and E.⁹⁴ Based on this designation Evans characterizes this theme as portraying Theseus *in absentia*, which makes for a dramatic characterization but does not look at the theme in the work as a whole. Evans does not provide any strong evidence for this Theseus designation other than that it occurs after Phaedra sings “go to my husband” in the second Recitative, and his characterization of the theme being Theseus’ reaction to Phaedra’s confession in the Adagio. Britten’s choice in text however clearly presents this work as being focused on Phaedra alone and her mental and emotional struggles; furthermore, Phaedra is enamored by the youthful Hippolytus, a topic and character much more appealing to Britten. Nowhere in the text is there a required reaction from Theseus. Additionally, central to Britten’s oeuvre is a focus on the internal struggle of a character rather than direct emotional dialogues with others.

Most importantly, in the original play the character of Theseus is only present on stage during the text of the Adagio. Thus, how can Theseus react to text he is not witness to in the original play. I see no reason to ascribe this theme to a character not present on stage and that it better aligns with the main character herself.

This theme is best understood as representing Phaedra herself. From Seymour’s analysis of *Death in Venice*, the A versus E tonality can be seen as an allusion to Phaedra’s struggle of pure love versus the sexual lust for Hippolytus. The theme is used as a call and response in the Prologue, which culminates with the line “Hippolytus! I saw his face turned white!”.

94. Evans, 396.

The theme is a prominent component of the first Recitative, where Phaedra describes her feelings. After each of Phaedra's lines describing herself ("I could not breathe...", "I faced...", "I tried..", I built...") the theme occurs in the harpsichord in different variations. In the original play Theseus is not present in this scene. The theme additionally occurs in the second Recitative before rehearsal mark 19, bridging the two lines "I go to meet my husband; at his side will be Hippolytus.". I believe this thematic interjection demonstrates Phaedra's inner struggle and love towards Hippolytus, as the music leads to his name. This interjection was the one cited by Evans, but again why would Theseus be commenting mid-sentence to Phaedra and in scene he is not even present in (Oenone is her scene partner).

The Phaedra theme notably occurs before rehearsal mark 26 in the Adagio. It is under Phaedra's vocal line that announces "Theseus, I stand before you to absolve your noble son." Here the theme undergoes a transformation, with the notes of G and C natural. Evans describes this as Theseus's tribute to Phaedra's noble spirit.⁹⁵ I believe with the context of the word "absolve" this is seen as representing Phaedra becoming purified into the key of C major. Phaedra's theme with her confession is thus purified removing the A Major and E Major aspects, the key then changes to C major and moves towards the climactic chord on her word "purify".

95. Ibid, 397.

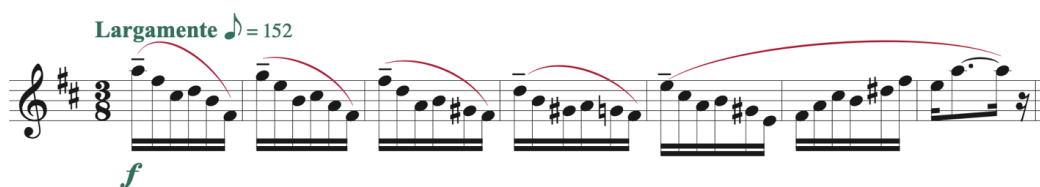
The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Violin, Viola, and Cello. The Violin part is in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It begins with a 'very broadly' marking in green. The dynamics are marked as *ff* (fortissimo), *f* (forte), and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The Viola and Cello parts are in bass clef with the same key signature. They enter later in the score with *mf* and *p* (piano) dynamics. The time signatures change from 5/4 to 4/4, then to 3/4, and finally back to 4/4. Red curved lines connect notes across measures, indicating phrasing. Blue vertical lines separate the measures.

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Figure 8: Phaedra's theme as it is transformed modulating to C Major during her confession and subsequent purification rehearsal 25, note the prominent G and C naturals in the violin.

This main theme travels with Phaedra throughout the work, it transforms and develops along with her character. Interestingly the theme is similar in tonality and cascading contour to that of Britten's "Arethusa" from *Six Metamorphosis after Ovid* for solo oboe. Arethusa, a nymph, seeking to maintain her purity flees from the river god Alpheus eventually turning into a fountain keeping her chaste purity⁹⁶. It is worth noting since it is one of Britten's few works involving classical Greek mythology; these works include *Young Apollo* 1939, *The Rescue* 1942, *The Rape of Lucretia* 1946, and extensive references in *Death in Venice* 1973, and of course *Phaedra*.

96. Ovid, *The Metamorphoses Book V*, translated Frank Justus Miller (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 99-101.



Six Metamorphoses after Ovid by Benjamin Britten
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 University.
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Figure 9: Opening line from Six Metamorphoses after Ovid VI. Arethusa.

This opening passage to “Arethusa” threatens the D Major key signature with its simultaneous implication of A Major, as well as a downward cascading flowing texture. This is similar to the key area ambiguity and texture of the Phaedra theme, which shares quick use of every diatonic scale note by arpeggiated motion. Additionally, the minor 9th occurring between the end of the first and start of the second measure, from F# up to G in “Arethusa” is also a prominent distinctive interval outlined in the Phaedra theme, occurring in outline from A down to G# and D down to C#.

Theme 2 (Heartbeat motive)



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Figure 10: The heartbeat motive as it appears in the third measure of the Prologue

Perhaps the simplest of all the motives is poetically the most poignant.

Throughout the work the timpani adds an irregular syncopated pedal point, which although rhythmically active is melodically static. The primary rhythm played by the timpani is pairs of 8th notes in a compound meter which shift on and off the beat. Carpenter specifically calls attention to the syncopated figure when it occurs in the untuned drums during the Presto section but looking at the work as a whole the concept of the heartbeat can be expanded and is best used to understand the more prominent role of the timpani.

Carpenter writes, “The drums reiterate this rhythm at many moments in *Phaedra*, and it may be an allusion to Britten’s own heart condition. Galina Visnevskaya describes the ‘heavy, hollow beating of his heart’ she heard when sitting next to him at dinner in

the summer of 1976, and says she saw ‘the pronounced throbbing of his shirt on the left side of his chest.’”⁹⁷.



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Figure 11: The Heartbeat motive as presented in the final coda rehearsal 29

Considering the timpani in particular not just as an allusion to Britten himself but also as Phaedra’s own heartbeat, gives it another layer of symbolism. In the Prologue and Presto in particular the timpani provides an underlying pulse that sputters up and down in intensity along with Phaedra’s emotional state. As Phaedra’s anger and madness rage in the Presto, the timpani speeds up and struggles to stay on the beat often shifting to syncopation, and as the Presto ends the timpani finally stabilizes on the beat continuing into the second Recitative at a slower steady pulse, which is then taken up by the harpsichord, where in the text Phaedra begins to meet her fate with resolve.

Theme 3 (Rage)

97. Carpenter, 570.

Introduced in the Presto section the rage theme is a schizophrenic scherzo that flies through the strings. This is the main musical idea of the “a” sections of the Presto. Musically it underpins the sections of the libretto where Phaedra is accosting Hippolytus in anger.



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Figure 12: the rage theme as it occurs in the final coda rehearsal 29.

Evans describes this section of music as being “fast and impulsive, is orchestrally so angular and scrawny as to appear tonally elusive... superimpositions of D minor and E flat Major/minor”⁹⁸. Just as the accusatory tone of the text increases and diminishes in intensity with Phaedra’s rage, this theme crescendos and thickens in orchestration, providing a fitting musical depiction of her mental state. Aside from the coda, this music is confined to the sections of the Presto where Phaedra expresses her anger.

98. Evans, 398.

Theme 4 (Madness)

This musical idea is heard in the “b” sections of the Presto. It occurs first during Phaedra’s line “Phaedra in all her madness stands before you”. The lilting off kilter rhythm is fittingly unstable. Harmonically, the music is in keyed in D Major however the sound is quintal with emphasis on the notes G, D, A, and E; with the notes F# and C# only present in the pizzicato cellos and basses. When this theme returns in the coda it is only presented rhythmically in the unpitched percussion. The pitch content of the passage bares resemblance to the main Phaedra theme, this is her madness, so it is fitting that the pitch content of her theme has been compressed into this new form.

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The music is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The tempo is Presto. The score begins with a blue bracket on the left side of the staves. The first measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a whole rest in Cello and Double Bass. The second measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The third measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The fourth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The fifth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The sixth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The seventh measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The eighth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The ninth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The tenth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The eleventh measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The twelfth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The thirteenth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The fourteenth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The fifteenth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The sixteenth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The seventeenth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The eighteenth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The nineteenth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The twentieth measure shows a half note G4 in Violin I, a half note F#4 in Violin II, a half note E4 in Viola, and a half note G2 in Cello and Double Bass. The score includes dynamic markings: *p* (piano) in green for Violin I, Violin II, and Viola in the first measure, and *p* and *pizz.* (pizzicato) in green for Cello and Double Bass in the second measure. Red curved lines indicate phrasing or bowing in the Violin I and Violin II parts.

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Figure 13: the madness theme as it first occurs in the Presto rehearsal 8 (it is accompanied by matching rhythm in the percussion, not pictured)

This ostinato theme provides a stark contrast to the frantic scherzo of the “rage” music heard in the “a” sections of the presto. The jarring shifts between octaves and changes to harmonics creates an eerie hypnotic sound that matches the madness theme of text. Britten skillfully transforms music that is static harmonically into swirling loops of

timbral shifts. Eleven measures after rehearsal 8, the vocal line changes meter into 6/8 against continuing the madness theme, which is perhaps a musical symbol of Phaedra's detachment from reality. Indeed, after the entrance of the madness theme the vocal line is primarily in contrasting meter to the instrumental parts (i.e. the voice is in 2/4 versus the orchestra's 6/8 etc.).

Theme 5 (fear/shame)

The theme I have designated as the "fear/shame" theme is one of the most repeated musical ideas in the work, surpassed only by the Phaedra theme. Unlike the Phaedra theme, which is prominently highlighted and is easily the most recognizable, the fear/shame theme is often obscured by harmonic alterations and transpositions, it occurs as a solo melody in the voice or a solo string (most often a solo cello).

The basic outline of the theme as presented in the voice is an ascending Bb Major arpeggio as a quarter note triplet followed by a descending Eb natural minor scale as eighth notes. The remainder of the melody is often an ornamentation of the descending Eb minor scale extended to fit the text. The solo cello version of this theme begins in similar fashion however after the opening triplet, the musical line wanders around a D harmonic minor scale.



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Figure 14: the fear/shame theme as it first appears in the vocal line after rehearsal 9.



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Figure 15: the fear/shame theme as it appears in the solo cello during the final coda.

This musical theme is used throughout the work specifically when the text mentions Phaedra’s fear and sense of shame in her love of Hippolytus and specifically his youth. In the Presto it accompanies such lines as “or that I loved your youth...”, “I made you fear me...”, “I was afraid to kiss my husband...”, and most notably in the second Recitative during the line “How shall I hide my thick adulterous passion for this youth,”. The word youth in particular is used twice in the work and both times occurs during this theme.

Given Britten's personal controversies with affections towards youth, it is particularly notable that there is a specific musical theme for when Phaedra expresses fear or unease at her love for the young Hippolytus. I do not wish to ascribe any moral judgement on Britten or speculations here, as there are plenty of other authors ascribing guilt or innocence upon him. On this matter Seymour says that "Any menace or danger latent in this love was probably more likely to harm Britten himself than the children he sought to love and protect...Britten may have hoped that operatic composition would be an act of purgation or purification involving the transference of the darker side of his desires from life into art where they might be dramatized and redefined."⁹⁹ At minimum, Britten was acutely aware of the rumors about him and the subsequent stress it caused; it is sensible that his character Phaedra would have a specific musical theme highlighting her similar fears and unease.

Theme 6 (Purification Chord)

The climax of the entire work occurs with Phaedra's death as she sings the word purify, in this moment the music arrives at a chord previously described as being Mahlerian and in a key symbolic of purity. This climax is fleeting, only a quarter note in duration, as soon as it arrives it disappears into ppp low C pedal in the cellos and basses. The chord, which is approached by stepwise motion, is C major with an added 6th and 9th.

99. Seymour, 337

The image displays a musical score for five string instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The music is in 4/2 time. A vertical blue line marks a specific measure where a 'purification chord' is played. In this measure, each instrument has a single quarter note. The notes are: Violin I (G4), Violin II (F#4), Viola (E4), Cello (C3), and Double Bass (C2). The dynamics are marked as *ff* (fortissimo) for Violin I, Violin II, and Viola, and *ppp* (pianississimo) for Cello and Double Bass. Red wedge-shaped lines indicate the dynamic range from *ff* to *ppp*. The notes for Violin II and Viola cross, with Violin II's note (F#4) being higher than Viola's (E4).

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Figure 16: the purification chord (quarter note), note the voice crossing in Violin II and Viola, all voices have been condensed onto single staves.

The chord's only other appearance is at the very end of the final coda. This appearance is in muted string harmonics, set against the still sustaining C pedal point from the initial use of the chord. This second iteration, with its octave displacement and use of natural harmonics recalls the timbre of the madness theme.

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The music is in 4/4 time. The first three measures show a 'pppp' dynamic marking. Red annotations highlight the similarity of the chord structure to the madness theme. The score is for the purification chord repeated in the final three measures.

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Figure 17: The purification chord repeated in the final three measures, note the similarity to the madness theme

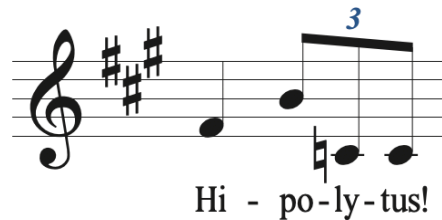
Text Painting and Figures in the Vocal Line

The dissertations by Shelton¹⁰⁰ and Beard-Stradley¹⁰¹ both give an in depth look at the vocal line, it is worth noting here the “Hippolytus” figure identified by Shelton and reused by Beard-Stradley. At the end of the Prologue section, the first time Phaedra sings

100 Margret Shelton “The A B C’s of *Phaedra*”

101 Cloyce Beard-Stradley, “A Performer’s Analysis of Benjamin Britten’s *Phaedra*”

the name “Hippolytus” a distinctive rhythmic patten matching the syllables of his name with a descending major seventh and the last two syllables being on the same pitch. This figure recurs in the second Recitative as well.



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Figure 18: The first statement of “Hippolytus” at the end of the Prologue, this is the motive identified by Shelton and Beard-Stradley. In the score there is a missing letter “p” so it has been preserved here.



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Figure 19: The “Hippolytus” figure that occurs in the second Recitative.

In his analysis Evans focuses primarily on the interval outline of the ninth that occurs between the opening three notes in the Phaedra theme (A to G#, see figure 4) however the second note to the third note creates the interval of a seventh. The seventh is a key interval of the aforementioned Hippolytus figure. Both Shelton and Beard-Stradley

tie the Hippolytus figure to the name Aphrodite, which is sung during the second recitative, they view this as entwining Phaedra's love for Hippolytus with the figure of Aphrodite. Because of the distinct sound from the large descending seventh I feel this can be expanded upon to include the Phaedra theme, thus the falling seventh characterizes their love connection.



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Figure 20: The music used in the vocal line for the name Aphrodite, this is identified by Shelton and Beard-Stradley as being connected to the Hippolytus figure.

CHAPTER 5

An Overview Analysis of Rochberg's *Phaedra*

Rochberg's *Phaedra*, presented as a monodrama for mezzo-soprano and orchestra, contrasts sharply with of Britten's. While Britten focused his work on the inner emotional struggle and psychological framed in a lean concise baroque inspired sound, Rochberg focuses on the outwardly dramatic and confrontational framed in a grand neo-romantic Straussian decadence.

While Britten's work, by nature of its brevity and clarity of composition, lends itself to a complete analysis, Rochberg's work is densely orchestrated and almost triple the length. There is substantially less depth of scholarship to draw on when analyzing Rochberg's music; however, there are two factors working in favor of understanding it. First, his autobiography gives a fairly detailed first-hand account of his thought process and inspiration. Second, Rochberg confirms in his autobiography that his *Phaedra* is an essay in romanticism, thus separating it from one of his academic total serialist works and the inherit pitch analysis that would require.

The Libretto

While Britten was familiar with Racine and had previous exposure to the *Phaedra* story, as previously noted, Rochberg was specifically inspired by Lowell's translation

after seeing a production in Philadelphia with his wife. The play and particularly the character of *Phaedra* had a profound effect on Rochberg and provided a powerful source of inspiration. On choosing the text Rochberg says,

I read Lowell's play over and over – looking for those texts that would provide the essential emotional substance of Phaedra's story for the four arias I had in mind. Each would represent a major emotional peak in the tragic unfolding of her tale. The more I read and reread, the more I was entranced by the polished craft and rightness of Lowell's language – a unique American English, a bit old-fashioned, formal yet relaxed, with its unforced rhymes and strong images.¹⁰²

Rochberg's libretto is taken from Lowell, just like Britten's, however the text has been heavily adapted with the help of his wife Gene, whom he credits in his biography and score. A full rendering of Rochberg's chosen text with repetitions of words can be found in appendix iv. Interestingly, for as much as Rochberg lauds Lowell's original text it is heavily edited; aside from repetition and omission of lines, entire sections can be reordered and in a few instances, words changed (In the first aria Lowell's "loose diseased emotions" is changed to "wild emotions" to fit the music). This is particularly true for the "Cabaletta" where sentences and phrases are presented in a different sequence from the original Lowell, presumably shuffled around to best fit syllabically with the repetitive musical line.

102. George Rochberg, *Five Lines Four Spaces*, 217.

Rochberg's Phaedra

Musical Movement Designation with Corresponding Play Act and Scene

Aria: In May in Brilliant Athens – Act 1, sc. iii
Orchestral Interlude: Black Sails – Act 2, sc. i
Aria: You Monster! – Act 2, sc. v
Orchestral Interlude: Theseus' Homecoming – Act 3, sc. v
Supplication: I Heard the Deluge of Your Voice – Act 4, sc. iv
Cabaletta: My Last Calamity Has Come – Act 4, sc. vi
Orchestral Postlude: The Death of Hippolytus – Act 5, sc.

Figure 21: Relationship of Rochberg's music to the text of the original play

Rochberg begins his text selection with the same two selections as Britten, “In May in brilliant Athens” and “You Monster!” The first text choice is logical for both since it is the climactic speech given by Phaedra at the end of the first scene that she appears in. The second text excerpted from act 2, is equally important as it again Phaedra's longest climatic speech given at the end of the scene, as she confronts Hippolytus. From the second aria onward, Rochberg's text choices differ from Britten's.

For the Supplication, Rochberg takes the text directly from Act 4, sc. iv, it is Phaedra's first line in this short but dramatic scene between her and her husband Theseus, where he reveals he will have Hippolytus killed. Given Rochberg's autobiographic description of fascination with the text, he must have been particularly moved by this passage since it extracted from passing dialogue. Aside from three repetitions of the words “spare me” emphasizing the final sentence, this is the only text set straight through without additional cuts or repeating of sentences. Additionally, the music in this passage is the most lush, tonal, and lyric of the entire piece. This scene of Phaedra remorsefully pleading to her husband in weakness, is a sharp contrast to the one presented by Britten.

The “Cabaletta” presents Phaedra in her final mad scene. Here Rochberg has chosen text from the finale of Act 4, where a hysteric Phaedra threatens to end her life in a frantic rage. This occurs in the play before Phaedra gains clarity and resolve, and thus her subsequent redemption. Furthermore, Rochberg omits the final section of text from the scene of the play, where Phaedra accuses Oenone and becomes more remorseful.

Rochberg in his text choices, has cast Phaedra in a much harsher and remorseless light than Lowell or Britten. The narrative of Phaedra he sets forth is one of increasing madness and anger. Phaedra’s lines are particularly accusatory and violent in imagery. While Britten’s inwardly reflective choices in text paint a sympathetic image of a tormented Phaedra struggling alone; Rochberg’s text creates a violent angry Phaedra raging at those around her. He deprives her character of any of her redeeming lines in the final act and scene, leaving her lasting image as one of madness, hate, and anger. Because of this outward aggression in Phaedra’s character, Rochberg enlists his orchestra to fill in the other dramatic roles to give balance and context to her scenes.

The Orchestra

Rochberg’s *Phaedra*, requires a large orchestra including doubled woodwinds, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion, and strings [2 2 2 2 – 4 2 3 0, timp, perc, strings].¹⁰³ Rochberg clearly envisions his large orchestra as acting as the narrator and additional cast of the drama. His note in the score is clear in this matter.

103. Theodore Presser rental catalogue <https://www.presser.com/shop/phaedra-for-mezzo-soprano-and-orchestra.html>

I have chosen only the high points, the peaks of Phaedra's tragedy in the belief that through her agony and the essence of this ancient and terrible but all-to-human drama will emerge and that only that essence truly lend itself to musical setting. The instrumental portions of this work supply a kind of musical metaphor for those key narrative aspects which, had they been treated vocally, would have necessitated composing an opera. I opted instead for the power of a single-minded concentration on the monument figure of Phaedra, the pawn and victim of Venus, the goddess of love, and the radiant splendor of Phaedra's barbaric ferocity.¹⁰⁴

Rochberg has thus cast his orchestra as a chorus, filling in the gaps between Phaedra's arias. The titles of the three solo orchestral passages refer to key scenes in Lowell's translation of the play. The first orchestral interlude "Black Sails", takes its name from act 2 sc. i with Ismene's line "Princess, fearful tales, are circulating. Sailors saw his sails, his infamous black sails. . ." ¹⁰⁵. The second orchestral interlude "Theseus' Homecoming" corresponds to act 3 sc. v, where Theseus arrives at court and says "What strange welcome. . ." ¹⁰⁶ The orchestral postlude "The Death of Hippolytus" is delegated to cover the entirety of act 5.

The clearest characters portrayed by the orchestra are the noble roles of Theseus and Hippolytus. The three orchestral sections (which by title explicitly refer to Theseus or Hippolytus) are predominantly brass heavy with emphasis on horn and trumpet fanfares, there is perhaps no other stock musical trope to better convey nobility and heroics. The noble brass lines of Theseus and Hippolytus, often in major tonality with emphasis on

104. George Rochberg, *Phaedra A Monodrama for Mezzo-Soprano and Orchestra*, (King of Prussia, PA: Theodore Presser Company, 1977), 3.

105. Robert Lowell, *Phaedra*, 30.

106. *ibid*, 56.

open fourths and fifths, contrast with the frantic strings and woodwinds embodying Phaedra. This characterization of masculine heroic brass in open intervals versus feminine upper woodwinds and strings in thirds may be cliché and heteronormative, but it is easily understood and serves Rochberg's intent.

This casting of the orchestra is particularly clear and effective in Phaedra's "Supplication: Theseus, I Heard the Deluge of Your Voice". The G minor upper winds and strings are paired with Phaedra, meanwhile this is contrasted by a chromatically descending brass line that is dissonant against Phaedra's vocal lines paired with the winds and strings. This instrumentation clearly achieves Rochberg's desired effect of a trembling Phaedra pleading against the discouraging resolve of noble Theseus.

Problematically, the orchestra is delegated to represent the entirety of the fifth act in a postlude. This is a grave disservice to the character of Phaedra as it deprives her of her redemption and the purification she receives in her final lines of contrition. Rochberg simply titles this final orchestral postlude "The Death of Hippolytus", which highlights the perspective from which he views Phaedra herself, Rochberg chooses to deprive Phaedra of redemption and humanity and instead casts Theseus and Hippolytus in infallible terms.

The Structure

Rochberg's *Phaedra* as previously noted, is divided into seven discrete movements. In Britten's piece, each section blends seamlessly *attaca* into the next often with the text overlapping into the next section. Rochberg however, always allows the

orchestra to close out the movement after the vocal line has completed, and ends each movement with rests or a fermata, clearly adding separation.

A unique attribute of the structure pertains to the key signatures. The piece is clearly tonal, with each of Phaedra's sung sections presented in minor keys. The orchestral interludes are left in open key signature; they still sound decisively tonal, albeit with emphasis on quartal/quintal harmony.

With each vocal movement, the tonal areas shift from keys with more flats to sharps. The primary key of each movement moves up by thirds; the first aria is in C minor alternating with A flat minor, the second aria is E flat minor alternating A minor, the third is in G minor, and the final cabaletta is primarily in B minor, with excursions to multiple key areas always returning to B minor for the repeating melody.

As previously stated, each movement is discrete, Rochberg has definite structure and heavy repetition of material within each movement; however, each movement lives in its own word, there is no explicit recapitulation or reuse of previous material to bind the sections together (save the leitmotifs, and musical textures, i.e. fanfare sound, discussed in the next section).

Of the seven movements, four are devoted to Phaedra singing (movements I, III, V, and VI). The outer two movements (Aria: In May in Brilliant Athens and Cabaletta: My Last Calamity Has Come) are similar in the way they formally repeat music creating a strophic or rondo form respectively. The inner two movements (Aria: You Monster! and Supplication: Theseus I Heard the Deluge of Your Voice) are both freer, with "You

Monster!” being almost recitative like and “Theseus I Heard the Deluge of Your Voice” being like a baroque lament.

The first aria, “In May in Brilliant Athens”, is a modified strophic form. Rochberg repeats the C minor music and opening text almost verbatim for the first two chorus sections, the third chorus introduces new text, but the music and vocal line are the same, and finally the codetta is a shortened version of the chorus. The verses, keyed in A flat minor, use the same musical material with different texts; the third verse has a slightly different ending and moves into the abridged chorus which acts as a codetta.

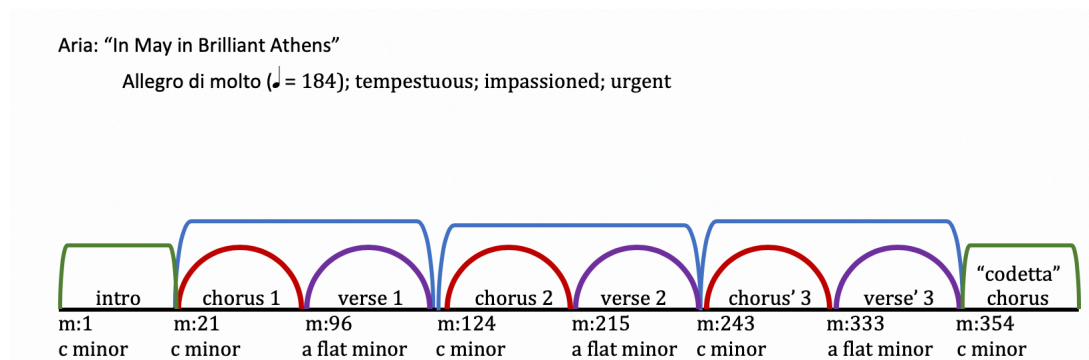


Figure 22: Basic structural chart of Rochberg’s first aria with measure numbers and key signatures.

The second aria, movement III “You Monster!” represents a much more flexible recitative style. In the score Rochberg notes “A very subtle, flexible relationship should be established between the voice and the orchestra, one in which the voice remains essentially free of the beat while the orchestra recovers the beat when necessary (and as indicated by “tempo”, etc.) or maintains the beat against the recitativo character of the

voice.”¹⁰⁷. He calls it an aria yet contradicts this designation with the term “recitando” in his directions. As the music is mostly static during Phaedra’s vocal lines, the most appropriate description is recitative or lyric recitative. Additionally, at measure 546 and 579 Rochberg marks the vocal line “recit.; narrative-style” further contradicting title of “Aria”.

Rochberg, who does not mention Britten in his writings and appears not to be a fan of his music, could have benefitted by using Britten’s “curlew” mark, which allows freely phasing music to resynch at given points. Without said “curlew” mark, Rothberg relies on a hodgepodge of breath marks, fermatas, and “a tempo” markings often combining them.

The third vocal section, movement V “Supplication (Arioso): Theseus I Heard the Deluge of Your Voice” is the most tonal and exceedingly baroque in design. The key is G minor throughout with a slow largo tempo primarily in 3/2 meter; this is a clear nod to “Dido’s Lament” from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* which is also in G minor, marked larghetto, and in 3/2 meter¹⁰⁸. Throughout the movement there is a recurring wind and string motive against chromatically descending brass. The descending ground bass like figure adds solemnity and emphasizes a Baroque Dido’s lament aesthetic.

The vocal lines are particularly Baroque in design, albeit with written out ornamentations, again alluding greatly to Purcell. Each of Phaedra’s phrases begin sequencing upward in a slow stately fashion before melismatically descending to a

107. George Rochberg, *Phaedra*, 23.

108. Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1995) 84.

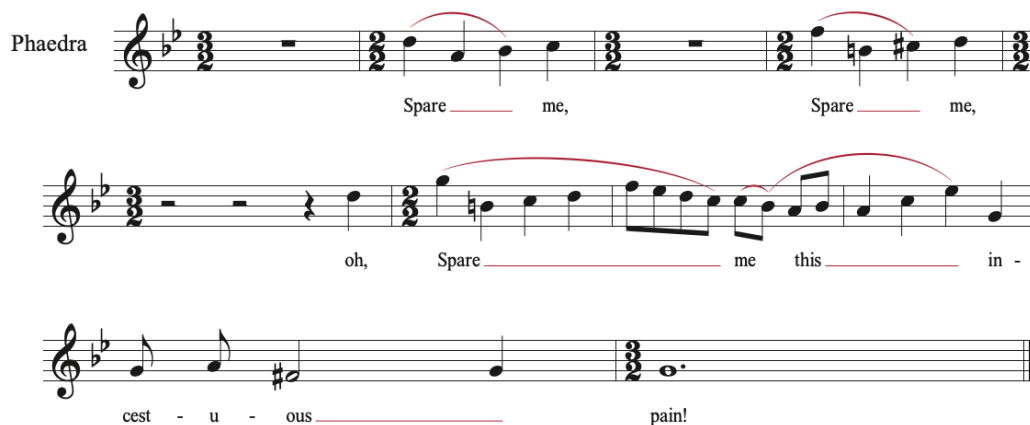
baroque sounding cadence with leading tone resolving upward to an anticipatory note prepping the orchestral resolution. Further alluding to Purcell's "Dido's Lament" the final lines of this aria are "Spare me, spare me, oh Spare me this incestuous pain" which clearly alludes to Dido's "remember me, remember me, but ah forget my fate."¹⁰⁹ As if the text weren't clear enough, the first two instances of "spare me" pivot on the note D on the treble staff, and the final "oh spare..." begins on a quarter note anacrusis D ascending immediately to the G above the staff (Purcell's setting follows the exact same patten, although lacking the pivoting).



Figure 23: Final vocal line from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* no. 37 "Dido's Lament"¹¹⁰, note the similarity to Rochberg's in the next figure.

109. Ibid 86.

110. Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 85-86.



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Figure 24: Rochberg's setting of the final vocal line in Phaedra's "Supplication: Theseus I Heard the Deluge of Your Voice". Note the previously discussed similarities to Purcell. Additionally, the cadence figure at the end of the passage with anticipation is characteristic of all of the vocal cadences in this movement.

The final sung movement is the "Cabaletta: My Last Calamity Has Come," movement VI. The cabaletta title stems from the movement's quick tempo and repetitive rhythmic nature. The structure is a modified rondo form, the final B section is extended including a brief return to the C theme (b-c-b'). The syncopated nature with descending sixteenth arpeggios followed by an accented staccato chord on an off-beat result in a sound very similar to the opening measures of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* first movement.

VI. Cabaletta (aria): My Last Calamity Has Come

Allegro preciso (♩ = 112 exactly); with barbaric but suppressed force

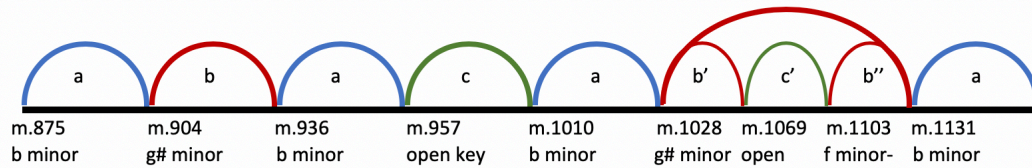


Figure 25: Graphic depiction of the modified rondo form with measure numbers and key signatures.

It should be stated that the B sections are derivative of the A section melody, yet the change of key and compression of rhythms make the B sections distinct. Because of the similarities between the “a” and “b” sections, the movement becomes very repetitive. The pacing and poetry of Lowell’s original text is forced into Phaedra’s frenzied robotic music.

The orchestral sections, movements II, IV, VII, are structurally the freest. Movements II and IV pertain to Theseus, and the final movement to Hippolytus. These movements all follow the same basic pattern of opening fanfare followed by two more short motives; this is then followed by variations and development of the fanfare and other short motives. All three moments end the same, with a held pedal point that slowly fades out as the fanfare fades away. The lack of key signature, heavy use of brass, and predominantly quartal / quintal harmony give the orchestral interludes and postlude a distinctively different sound than those of Phaedra’s sung sections.

Select Thematic and Musical Elements

As established, the movements of Rochberg's *Phaedra* are independent of one another, unlike the through composed music of Britten. Each movement has its own tonal center, form, and melodic components. Although Rochberg does not unite his movements with repeated music or cyclic form, there are a few key musical leitmotifs and sounds that hold true throughout the work.

The first and most easily identifiable element is the brass fanfare, which particularly evokes Theseus and to a lesser extent Hippolytus. As previously noted, it is a simple trope to convey masculinity and nobility; furthermore, the emphasis on fourths and fifths contrasts with the more chromatic and minor keyed sections where *Phaedra* is singing. A perfect example is the opening horn fanfare of the fourth movement "Theseus' Homecoming." "Theseus' Homecoming."



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Figure 26: Opening horn fanfare in the fourth movement "Theseus' Homecoming". Note the open perfect fifths moving down by fourth

There is a more specific fanfare, a motive that I would ascribe to Theseus. The trumpet opening fanfare in the second movement “Black Sails” consists of a chain of ascending fourths planeing downwards in scalar motion. This could be seen as being related to the brass bass line during Phaedra’s supplication in movement five, where the ascending interval of a major seventh planes downward by similar scalar motion. This oblique gesture gives personification to Theseus and his role in both scenes.



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Figure 27: opening trumpet and overlapping horn fanfare at the start of the second movement



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Figure 28: descending chromatic line in the low brass during the opening of Phaedra’s supplication to Theseus in the fifth movement. Although the interval size has increased the gesture remains similar, thus providing reference to music associated with Theseus in the second movement.

The most prominent leitmotif in Rochberg's *Phaedra*, is the motive introduced with the first mention of Hippolytus's name by Phaedra. There is some coincidental similarity between Rochberg's Hippolytus motive and Britten's, however this is most likely due to simple linguistics. Hippolytus contains four syllables with the stress on the second syllable and the final two syllables gliding into one another, hence the logical shape of the second syllable being approached by leap and then falling to the final two syllables on the same pitch.

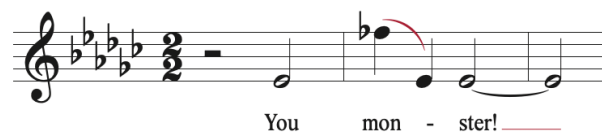
Rochberg's Hippolytus motive is used far more prominently than Britten uses his, although that is also attributable to the brevity of Britten's *Phaedra* compared to Rochberg's. Additionally, the repetition in Rochberg's text allows for this motive to be more strongly emphasized and established. This motive is clearly heard four times in the first movement while Phaedra sings Hippolytus's name, thus its connotation is well established for its use in subsequent movements.



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Figure 29: The first time Hippolytus' name is sung in measure 55. This exact figure is repeated throughout the first movement and will be developed and referenced in later movements.

The third movement “Aria: You Monster!” is heavily saturated with references to the Hippolytus motive. The plot of the play and subsequent libretto depicts Phaedra confessing her love to Hippolytus and revealing the passions that consume her. As the text is directed towards Hippolytus it is logical that any musical motive representative of him would be present. This is confirmed by the motive being used when Phaedra sings his name directly in measure 662.



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Figure 30: This figure represents the transformation of the initial Hippolytus motive with Phaedra’s first line of the third movement “Aria: You Monster!”. The shape and repeated final pitch is consistent with the original motive, although the intervallic content and rhythm is slightly modified. This is a clear reference to Hippolytus since Phaedra’s line is directed at him.

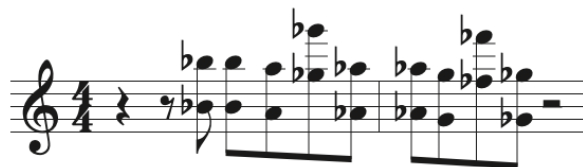
Notably the Hippolytus motive is used in the sixth movement with Phaedra's final singing of his name. The gesture is maintained although it is now expanded with melismatic embellishments.



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Figure 31: the final iteration of the Hippolytus motive in Phaedra's vocal line in movement six. The basic leitmotif is still present most clearly in the first statement of his name, with each iteration it become more ornamented.

The final movement "Orchestral Postlude: The Death of Hippolytus" as expected does contain reference to this prominent leitmotif. An interpretation of this motive can be heard presented in octaves in the strings and low winds. This final statement is created by linking two of the motives together to form a chain. In all of Rochberg's *Phaedra*, the Hippolytus motive I have presented here is the one binding musical theme that prevails through most of the movements.



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Figure 32: The Hippolytus theme as it is presented in the upper strings (doubled in low strings and winds) during the third measure of the final orchestral interlude. Note particularly the a natural moving to the repeated a flats, this is intervallically identical to the first iteration of the theme

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions

Both Britten and Rochberg demonstrate with their respective *Phaedra*'s that what a composer sets out to do is often at odds with the resulting work. In Britten's case, his title and instrumentation strive for a baroque cantata, yet the result is a distillation of his modern operatic career. Britten's piece is entirely through composed with a clear operatic plot development; structurally there are no traditional strict baroque forms. Instead, there are more similarities to his later operatic works such as *Death in Venice* or the Church Parables.

Meanwhile Rochberg set out to create something of a new and evolved romanticism, yet the result is archaic and formalist in structure far more regressive than the late evolved romanticism of Strauss, Puccini, or even Wagner. This is particularly evident with Rochberg's structure of repeating text and melodies, especially the title "Cabaletta" which harkens in form to the early bel canto and classical eras rather than the later verismo or German romantic styles. Furthermore, Rochberg's "Supplication" with its descending ground bass and ornamented vocal cadences including anticipations is a strong simile to Purcell's baroque "Dido's Lament" not a progressive modern take on the romantic. Thus structurally (both written and audible to the listener) and plot

development wise, Britten's baroque cantata is more modern opera and Rochberg's romantic monodrama is more baroque cantata.

If Britten had wished to achieve a true baroque cantata, he should have followed Rochberg's repeating melodies and text paired with discrete movements and staggered plot. Rochberg in turn would have achieved a more romantic and "monodrama" work had he followed the through composed music and developing plot of Britten. Instead Britten and Rochberg at best acknowledge the baroque and romantic ostensibly only through their choice in instrumentation and orchestral texture alone.

Areas of Continued Study

There is still much left to be said and studied in regard to the world of *Phaedra*. I have hopefully opened the door a bit more so to speak, providing new analysis and shining a bit more light, particularly on the coincidence of Britten and Rochberg, but this is by no means the end of the story. I hope that future Britten scholars in particular apply more operatic analysis and research to *Phaedra*, rather than just regarding it as a curious afterthought or some sort of not quite an opera postscript to *Death in Venice*. I chose to look at *Phaedra* in the context of Britten's operas, with that stated looking back at his operas from the context of *Phaedra* could help provide even more insight.

By their nature operas (particularly Britten's) are often very large complex works, spanning psychological themes over music, drama, and even dance in a gesamtkunstwerk. Thus, it can be reasoned that a short and concise work such as *Phaedra* can provide a

manageable small-scale frame of reference when looking at a larger and more daunting work such as *Death in Venice* or *Peter Grimes*.

Britten's *Phaedra* certainly merits more performances but given its format it is not on the standard billing for orchestras or vocalists. Although not labeled an opera, it is certainly within the operatic sphere as I have demonstrated. I would encourage opera companies looking to bill shorter pieces to consider *Phaedra* as an additional option. This has been done in the most recent performance of *Phaedra* in 2015 at the Beckett festival with staging by Sophie Hunter¹¹¹.

One of the most intriguing things I have presented is the intertwined and overlapping timelines of Britten and Rochberg. I have concluded that the two works are substantially different in execution that there is no question of direct plagiarism. However, it is a very eerie coincidence none the less. In my research I have not found any sign that Rochberg or Britten were ever aware of each other's work. Rochberg and Britten existed in two entirely different musical circles best described like ships passing in the night.

There is a long shot possibility Lowell might have known Rochberg was composing a piece using his play. Rochberg would have had to get permission from Lowell's publisher for its use in his musical setting, so there is a possibility that Lowell could have known about Rochberg's setting second hand from his publisher. It is however more likely that Lowell was unaware and that it was handled solely by Lowell's

111. Sophie Hunter, "Why is Sophie Hunter taking Britten's *Phaedra* to the Beckett Festival?" Article in the Guardian UK, Saturday July 25th 2015.
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/25/happy-days-samuel-beckett-festival-enniskillen-benjamin-britten-phaedra>

publisher, also given Lowell's struggles with mental health it is even more likely he was not involved with day to day copyright matters pertaining to his plays. Someone with a penchant for detective work and copyright laws might find evidence with the publisher that Lowell knew of Rochberg's *Phaedra*, but as interesting as that is, he appears to not have noticed it.

Rochberg makes no mention in his autobiography of ever corresponding with or meeting Lowell, despite the plays strong impact on him. His personal letters are stored in the New York Public Library and are not published, so there is a possibility that such a correspondence might exist.

I did not provide a complete or definitive analysis of Rochberg's *Phaedra*, however that doesn't mean it does not merit one. It is clear from Rochberg's autobiography that the piece was important to him, so I would encourage anyone researching Rochberg to put *Phaedra* towards the front of the line for analysis.

One aspect of Rochberg's *Phaedra* that impedes any further performances and limits accessibility is the difficulty of the piano-vocal score. It is not a true piano reduction, a note in the publications says "this edition is produced from composer-provided materials"¹¹². The piano part is primarily in three staves but expands up to five staves for portions; this coupled with Ives style small font notes above, below, and in-between the normal sized type setting results in a piece requiring an exceptional accompanist, if one even can be found.

112. George Rochberg, *Phaedra*, 4.

The Legacy of *Phaedra*

The beauty and magic of any work of art is its ability to reach out and resonate with others on a profound emotional level. It is as if the artist has thrown a pebble skipping across placid lake, with talent and a bit of luck that one pebble can bounce far into the distance sending multiple rings of waves spreading out and overlapping across the surface of the water. This is the case of Racine's *Phèdre*, a Baroque French play that has skipped along inspiring many artists before arriving at our present examination of Benjamin Britten. Racine's work reached Lowell (1917-1977), Rochberg (1918-2005), and Britten (1913-1976). Like three distinct skips of a pebble on a lake, the three sets of ripples started independently have over time spread and overlapped with each other.

For Lowell later in life, his love of Racine and the story of Phaedra found its way into *The Dolphin* (1973), a fictionalized confessional about his divorce from Elizabeth Hardwick and marriage to Caroline Blackwood. This work, like Britten's, falls at the end of his career (Lowell died in 1977) and strikes a very personal autobiographical tone. The reference to Racine and Phaedra occurs in the final poem from which the work derives its name.

Dolphin¹¹³

My Dolphin, you only guide me by surprise;
captive as Racine, the man of craft,
drawn through his maze of iron composition
by the incomparable wandering voice of Phèdre.
When I was troubled in mind, you made for my body
caught in its hangman's-knot of sinking lines,
the glassy bowing and scraping of my will . . .
I have sat and listened to too many
words of the collaborating muse,
and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,
not avoiding injury to others,
not avoiding injury to myself –
to ask compassion . . . this book, half fiction,
an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting –

my eyes have seen what my hand did.

Figure 33: “Dolphin” from Lowell’s 1973 work *The Dolphin*

For Rochberg, as previously stated, the character of Phaedra in her fury and raw passion inspired him more profoundly than perhaps any other work of art. Unlike Lowell and Britten, Rochberg would live to old age and have nearly 30 more years of composing after *Phaedra*. This makes his autobiography published shortly after his death all the more tragic when he reflects on his love for his composition *Phaedra* and the slighted short shrift he feels it was given.

Finally, for Britten, *Phaedra* has become the opera that wasn’t. Britten’s *Phaedra* touches on the psychological and autobiographical themes seen in his other operatic

113. Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 708.

works in the most concisely distilled presentation. His deteriorating health left him unable to write another full opera after *Death in Venice*, so we are left with a career's worth of operatic skill condensed into a fifteen-minute monologue.

Britten studied and was an avid fan of Japanese art, a good analogy of his *Phaedra* is like that of a Japanese Death Poem. In Japan there is a tradition for Zen monks to dictate a short final poem that “breaks the restraints of politeness that hold them back”¹¹⁴ where in a few short lines of poetry they give their final revelation or reflection on life. In this way we can look at *Phaedra* as a poignant miniature that reflects a life of creating opera with Zen precision and clarity.

114. Yoel Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*, (Tuttle Publishing, Tokyo, 1966), 27.

APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

- 1677 – *Phèdre* by Jean Racine premiers
- 1733 – *Hippolyte et Aricie* by Jean-Philippe Rameau premiers (the role of Phaedra is in the modern Mezzo-Soprano range)
- 1946 – Britten's *Rape of Lucretia* is premiered; librettist Eric Crozier suggests *Phèdre* as the basis of chamber opera to follow¹¹⁵
- 1951 – Britten and Pears see a production of Racine's *Phèdre* while in France¹¹⁶
- 1960 – Robert Lowell makes his verse translation of *Phaedra*
- 1966 – Janet Baker sings the role of Phaedra in the DECCA recording of Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*
- 1967 – Rochberg and his wife Gene see a production of the Lowell translation produced by the Theater of the Living Arts repertory company in Philadelphia¹¹⁷
- 1970 – Britten conducts a recording of *The Rape of Lucretia* with Janet Baker in the lead role
- 1973-1974 – Rochberg composes his setting of *Phaedra*, Orchestration began Jan. 24th, 1974
- 1975 – Britten composes his setting of *Phaedra* over the summer, the first page is written on June 29th ¹¹⁸
- 1976 – Rochberg's *Phaedra* premiers on January 9th in Syracuse NY with Neva Pilgrim singing

115. Neil Powell. *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music* (New York: Henry Holt & co, 2013) p 454.

116. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life* Vol. 3. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004. 679. (It is noted in a letter by Pears to Elizabeth Sweeting)

117. George Rochberg, (Author), Gene Rochberg (Ed. And Intro.), and Richard Griscom (Ed.). *Five Lines, Four Spaces: The World of My Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 216.

118. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life* Vol. 3. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004. 684. (It is noted in a letter by Britten to Donald and Kathleen Mitchell)

1976 – Britten's *Phaedra* premiers at the 29th Aldeburgh Festival on June 16th

APPENDIX II: SIDE BY SIDE TEXT COMPARISONS OF LOWELL, BRITTEN, AND ROCHBERG

The following represents a side by side comparison of the texts chosen by Britten and Rochberg, along with the original text by Lowell. These do not take into account the musical liberties taken by the composers to repeat words but solely the lines they have taken from the original play.

Rochberg takes far more liberties than Britten in setting the text, especially in Act 1, sc. iii where for the sake of musical form he treats the first block of his chosen text as a refrain repeated multiple times in the aria.

This layout also further illustrates how the composers diverged after the first two acts to choose material from different acts to complete their respective librettos and thus changing the story and context to fit their musical interpretation.

Act 1, sc. iii

Original Lowell

My evil comes from farther off. In May,
in brilliant Athens, on my marriage day,
I turned aside for shelter from the smile
of Theseus. Death was frowning in an aisle –
Hippolytus! I saw his face, turned white!
My lost and dazzled eyes saw only night,
capricious burnings flickered through my
bleak abandoned flesh. I could not breath or
speak.
I faced my flaming executioner,
Aphrodite, my mother's murderer!
I tried to calm her wrath by flowers and
praise,
I built her a temple, fretted months and days
on decoration. I even hoped to find
symbols and stays for my distracted mind,
searching the guts of sacrificial steers.
Yet when my erring passions, mutineers
to virtue, offered incense at the shrine
of love, I failed to silence the malign
Goddess. Alas, my hungry open mouth,
thirsting with adoration, tasted drouth –
Venus resigned her alter to my new lord –
and even while I was praying, I adored
Hippolytus above the sacred flame,
now offered to his name I could not name.
I fled him, yet he stormed me in disguise,
and seemed to watch me from his fathers eyes.
.....
face shattered me; I saw Hippolytus
each day, and felt my ancient, venomous
passion tear my body limb from limb;
naked Venus was clawing down her victim.
What Could I do? Each moment, terrified
by loose diseased emotions, now I cried
for death to save my glory and expel
my gloomy frenzy from this world, my hell.

Britten Setting

_____ In May,
in brilliant Athens, on my marriage day,
I turned aside for shelter from the smile
of Theseus. Death was frowning in an aisle –
Hippolytus! I saw his face, turned white!
My lost and dazzled eyes saw only night,
capricious burnings flickered through my
bleak abandoned flesh. I could not breath or
speak.
I faced my flaming executioner,
Aphrodite, my mother's murderer!
I tried to calm her wrath by flowers and
praise,
I built her a temple, fretted months and days
on decoration.

Alas, my hungry open mouth,
thirsting with adoration, tasted drouth –
Venus resigned her alter to my new lord

Rochberg Setting

_____ In May,
in brilliant Athens, on my marriage day,
I turned aside for shelter from the smile
of Theseus. Death was frowning in an aisle –
Hippolytus! I saw his face, turned white!

I could not breath or
speak.
I faced my flaming executioner,
Aphrodite, my mother's murderer!

I fled him, yet he stormed me in disguise,
and seemed to watch me from his fathers eyes.

.....
I saw Hippolytus
each day, and felt my ancient,
passion tear my body limb from limb;
naked Venus was clawing down her victim.
What Could I do? Each moment, terrified
by *wild* emotions, now I cried
for death to save my glory and expel
my gloomy frenzy from this world, my hell.

Act 2, sc. V

Original Lowell

You monster! You understood me too well!
Why do you hang there, speechless, petrified,
polite! My mind whirls. What have I to hide?
Phaedra in all her madness stands before you.
I love You! Fool, I love you, I adore you!
Do not imagine that my mind approved
my first defection, Prince, or that I loved
your youth light-heartedly, and fed my treason
with cowardly compliance, till I lost my
reason.

.....

At first I fled you, and when this fell short
of safety, Prince, I exiled you from court.
Alas, my violence to resist you made
my face inhuman, hateful. I was afraid
to kiss my husband lest I love his son.
I made you fear me (this was easily done);
you loathed me more, I ached for you no less.
Misfortune magnified your loveliness.

.....

Do you believe my passion
is voluntary? That my obscene confession
is some dark trick, some oily artifice?

.....

Avenge yourself, invoke
your father; a worse monster threatens you
than any Theseus ever fought and slew.
The wife of Theseus love Hippolytus!
See, Prince! Look, this monster, ravenous
for her execution, will not flinch.
I want your sword's spasmodic final inch.

Britten Setting

You monster! You understood me too well!
Why do you hang there, speechless, petrified,
polite! My mind whirls. What have I to hide?
Phaedra in all her madness stands before you.
I love You! Fool, I love you, I adore you!
Do not imagine that my mind approved
my first defection, Prince, or that I loved
your youth light-heartedly, and fed my treason
with cowardly compliance, till I lost my
reason.

Alas, my violence to resist you made
my face inhuman, hateful. I was afraid
to kiss my husband lest I love his son.
I made you fear me (this was easily done);
you loathed me more, I ached for you no less.
Misfortune magnified your loveliness.

The wife of Theseus love Hippolytus!
See, Prince! Look, this monster, ravenous
for her execution, will not flinch.
I want your sword's spasmodic final inch.

Rochberg Setting

You monster! You understood me too well!
Why do you hang there, speechless, petrified,
polite! My mind whirls. What have I to hide?
Phaedra in all her madness stands before you.
I love You! Fool, I love you, I adore you!
Do not imagine that my mind approved
my first defection, Prince, or that I loved
your youth light-heartedly, and fed my treason
with cowardly compliance, till I lost my
reason.

.....

At first I fled you, and when this fell short
of safety, Prince, I exiled you from court.

I was afraid
to kiss my husband lest I love his son.
I made you fear me
you loathed me more, I ached for you no less.
Misfortune magnified your loveliness.

.....

Do you believe my passion
is voluntary? That my obscene confession
is some dark trick, some oily artifice?

.....

Avenge yourself, invoke
your father; a worse monster threatens you
than any Theseus ever fought and slew.
The wife of Theseus love Hippolytus!
See, Prince! Look, this monster, ravenous
for her execution, will not flinch.
I want your sword's spasmodic final inch.

Act 3, sc. iii

Original Lowell

Oh Gods of wrath,
how far I've travelled on my dangerous path!
I go to meet my husband; at his side
will stand Hippolytus. How shall I hide
my thick adulterous passion for this youth,
who has rejected me, and knows the truth?
Will the stern Prince stand smiling and
approve
the labored histrionics of my love
for Theseus, see my lips, still languishing
for his, betray his father and his King?
Will he not draw his sword and strike me
dead?
Suppose he spares me? What if nothing's said?
Am I a gorgon, or Circe, or the infidel
Medea, stifled by the flames of hell,
yet rising like Aphrodite from the sea,
refreshed and radiant with indecency?
Can I kiss Theseus with dissembled poise?
I think each stone and pillar has a voice.
The very dust rises to disabuse
my husband – to defame me and accuse!
Oenone, I want to die. Death will give
me freedom; oh it's nothing not to live;
death to the unhappy's no catastrophe!
I fear the name that must live after me,
and crush my son until the end of time.
Is his inheritance his mother's crime,
his right to curse me, when my pollution stains
the blood of heaven bubbling in his veins?
The day will come, alas, the day will come,
when nothing will be left to save him from
the voices of despair. If he should live
he'll flee his subjects like a fugitive.

Britten Setting

Oh Gods of wrath,
how far I've travelled on my dangerous path!
I go to meet my husband; at his side
will stand Hippolytus. How shall I hide
my thick adulterous passion for this youth,
who has rejected me, and knows the truth?

Will he not draw his sword and strike me
dead?
Suppose he spares me? What if nothing's said?

Can I kiss Theseus with dissembled poise?

The very dust rises to disabuse
my husband – to defame me and accuse!
Oenone, I want to die. Death will give
me freedom; oh it's nothing not to live;
death to the unhappy's no catastrophe!

Rochberg Setting

[omits this scene]

Act 4, sc. iv

Original Lowell

Theseus, I heard the deluge of your voice,
and stand here trembling. If there's time for
choice,
hold back your hand, still bloodless; spare
your race!
I supplicate you, I kneel here for grace.
Oh, Theseus, Theseus, will you drench the
earth
with your own blood? His virtue, youth and
birth
cry out for him. Is he already slain
by you for me – spare me this incestuous pain!

Britten Setting

[omits this scene]

Rochberg Setting

Theseus, I heard the deluge of your voice,
and stand here trembling. If there's time for
choice,
hold back your hand, still bloodless; spare
your race!
I supplicate you, I kneel here for grace.
Oh, Theseus, Theseus, will you drench the
earth
with your own blood? His virtue, youth and
birth
cry out for him. Is he already slain
by you for me – spare me this incestuous pain!

****It is interesting to note that Rochberg used this relatively short complete block of text from a dialogue between Phaedra and Theseus. The other vocal settings by both Rochberg and Britten parse sections out of Phaedra's longest passages of text and monologues.****

Act 4, sc. vi

Original Lowell

Nurse, my last calamity
has come. This is the bottom of the sea.
All that preceded this had little force –
the flames of lust, the horrors of remorse,
the prim refusal by my grim young master,
were only feeble hints of this disaster.
They love each other! Passion blinded me.

.....

for them each natural impulse was allowed,
each day was summer and without a cloud.

.....

[Oenone interjects]

Ugh, they will love forever –
even while I am talking, they embrace,
they score me, they are laughing in my face!
In the teeth of exile, I hear the swear
they will be true forever, everywhere.
Oenone, have pity on my jealous rage;
I'll kill this happiness that jeers at age.
I'll summon Theseus; ate shall answer hate!
I'll drive my husband to annihilate
Aricia – let no trivial punishment,
her instant death, or bloodless banishment
What am I saying? Have I lost my mind?
I am jealous, and call my husband! Bind
me, gag me; I am frothing with desire.
My husband is alive, and I'm on fire!
For whom? Hippolytus. When I have said
his name, blood fills my eyes, my heart stops
dead
Imposture, incest, murder! I have passed
the limits of damnation; now at last,
my lover's lifeblood is my single good.
Nothing else cools my murderous thirst for
blood.
Yet I live on! I live, looked down upon
by my progenitor, the sacred sun,

Britten Setting

[omits this scene]

Rochberg Setting

my last calamity
has come. This is the bottom of the sea.
All that preceded this had little force –
the flames of lust, the horrors of remorse,
the prim refusal by my grim young master,
were only feeble hints of this disaster.
They love each other! Passion blinded me.

.....

for them each natural impulse was allowed,
each day was summer and without a cloud.

.....

[Oenone interjects]

Ugh, they will love forever –
even while I am talking, they embrace,
they score me, they are laughing in my face!
In the teeth of exile, I hear the swear
they will be true forever, everywhere.
have pity on my jealous rage;
I'll kill this happiness that jeers at age.
I'll summon Theseus; ate shall answer hate!

What am I saying? Have I lost my mind?
I am jealous, and call my husband! Bind
me, gag me; I am frothing with desire.
My husband is alive, and I'm on fire!
For whom? Hippolytus. When I have said
his name, blood fills my eyes, my heart stops
dead

my lover's lifeblood is my single good.
Nothing else cools my murderous thirst for
blood.
Yet I live on! I live, looked down upon
by my progenitor, the sacred sun,

Original Lowell

by Zeus, by Europa, by the universe
of gods and stars, my ancestors. They curse
their daughter. Let me die. In the great night
of Hades, I'll find shelter from their sight.
What am I saying? I've no place to turn:
Minos, my father, holds the judge's urn.
The gods have placed damnation in his hands,
the shades in Hades follow his commands.
Will he not shake and curse his fatal star
that bring his daughter trembling to his bar?
His child by Pasiphaë forced to tell
a thousand sins unclassified in hell?
Father, when you interpret what I speak,
I fear your fortitude will be too weak
to hold the urn. I see you fumbling for
new punishments for crimes unknown before.
You'll be your own child's executioner!
You cannot kill me; look, my murderer
is Venus, who destroyed our family;
Father, she has already murdered me.
I killed myself – and what is worse I wasted
my life for pleasures I have never tasted.
My lover flees me still, and my last gasp
is for the fleeting flesh I failed to clasp.

Britten Setting

[omits]

Rochberg Setting

by Zeus, by Europa, by the universe
of gods and stars, my ancestors. They curse
their daughter. In the great night
of Hades, I'll find shelter from their sight.
What am I saying? I've no place to turn:
Minos, my father, holds the judge's urn.

Will he not shake and curse his fatal star
that bring his daughter trembling to his bar?
His child by Pasiphaë forced to tell
a thousand sins unclassified in hell?
Father,

You'll be your own child's executioner!
You cannot kill me; look, my murderer
is Venus

I killed myself – and what is worse I wasted
my life for pleasures I have never tasted.
My lover flees me still, and my last gasp
is for the fleeting flesh I failed to clasp.

Act 5, sc. vii

Original Lowell

My time's too short, your highness. It was I,
who lusted for your son with my hot eye.
The flames of Aphrodite maddened me;
I loathed myself, and yearned outrageously
like a starved wolf to fall upon the sheep.
I wished to hold him to me in my sleep
and dreamt I had him. Then Oenone's tears,
troubled my mind; she played upon my fears,
until her pleading forced me to declare
I loved your son. He scorned me. In despair,
I plotted with my nurse, and our conspiracy
made you believe your son assaulted me.
Oenone's punished; fleeing from my wrath,
she drowned herself, and found a too easy
path
to death and hell. Perhaps you wonder why
I still survive her, and refuse to die?
Theseus, I stand before you to absolve
your noble son. Sire, only this resolve
upheld me, and made me throw down my
knife.
I've chosen a slower way to end my life –
Medea's poison; chills already dart
along my boiling veins and squeeze my heart.
A cold composure I have never know
gives me a moment's poise. I stand alone
and seem to see my outraged husband fade
and waver into death's dissolving shade.
My eyes at last give up their light, and see
the day they've soiled resume its purity.

Britten Setting

My time's too short, your highness. It was I,
who lusted for your son with my hot eye.
The flames of Aphrodite maddened me;

Then Oenone's tears,
troubled my mind; she played upon my fears,
until her pleading forced me to declare
I loved your son.

Theseus, I stand before you to absolve
your noble son. Sire, only this resolve
upheld me, and made me throw down my
knife.
I've chosen a slower way to end my life –
Medea's poison; chills already dart
along my boiling veins and squeeze my heart.
A cold composure I have never know
gives me a moment's poise. I stand alone
and seem to see my outraged husband fade
and waver into death's dissolving shade.
My eyes at last give up their light, and see
the day they've soiled resume its purity.

Rochberg Setting

[omits this scene]

APPENDIX III: BRITTEN'S TEXT ADAPTATIONS

In this poetic rendering of Britten's text setting each line represents a musical motive or short phrase. Britten does not use breath marks in his setting in keeping with his natural speaking style of setting text. The lines were therefor determined by his use of short rests, slur markings, punctuation in the text, and finally in the case of his unmetered sections of music his use of a dotted bar line. In regards to the dotted bar lines, his use of a pickup or anacrusis had to be taken into account. The spaces between blocks of text were determined by multi measure rests, his use of the "Curlew" mark denoting a resynchronization of the vocal line with the instrumental parts, and clear shifts in the instrumental accompaniments phrasing. Because of this natural and fluid setting style my best judgment was used in conjunction with all these factors, for example in the recit sections, if the static accompaniment pattern shifted before the next line I added a space between the text, with the goal of always showing the text in function with the musical ideas. As with his operas, the music is entirely through composed however he marked clear sections as he would in an opera by using terms such as Aria and Recitative. In the case that the last line of text overlaps into the new section heading an asterisk () is placed at the end of the text in the preceding section.*

Aria

In May,
in brilliant Athens,
on my marriage day.

I turned aside for shelter
from the smile
of Theseus

Death was frowning in an aisle
Hippolytus!
I saw his face
turned white! *

Recitative

My lost and dazzled eyes saw only night,
capricious burnings flickered through my bleak abandoned flesh.

I could not breath or speak.
I faced my flaming executioner,
Aphrodite,
my mother's murderer!

I tried to calm her wrath by flowers and praise.
I built her a temple fretted months and days on decoration.

Alas,
my hungry open mouth,
thirsting with adoration,
tasted drouth –

Venus resigned her alter
to my new lord...*

Presto

You monster!
You understood me too well!
Why do you hang there speechless,
petrified, polite!
My mind whirls.

What have I to hide

Phaedra in all her madness stands before you.
Phaedra,
Phaedra in all her madness stands before you.

I love you!
Fool, I love you,
Fool, I love you, love you, love you, love you!
Fool, I adore you!

Do not imagine that my mind approved my first defection Prince,

or that I loved your youth,
your youth light heartedly,
and did my treason with cowardly compliance,
till I lost my reason

Alas,
Alas, my violence to resist
you made my face inhuman
hateful.

I was afraid to kiss my husband lest I love his son.
I made you fear me
(this was easily done)
you loathed me more,
I ached for you no less.

Misfortune magnified your loveliness.

The wife of Theseus loves Hippolytus!
See, Prince!
The wife of Theseus loves Hippolytus!
Look,

look,
this monster
ravenous for her execution
will not flinch.
I want your sword's
spasmodic
final
inch.

Recitative

Oh gods of wrath,

How far I've travelled on my dangerous path!
I go to meet my husband;

at his side will stand Hippolytus

How shall I hide my thick adulterous passion for this youth
who has rejected me and knows the truth?

Will he not draw his sword and strike me dead?

Suppose he spares me?
what if nothing's said?

Can I kiss Theseus with dissembled poise?

The very dust rises to disabuse my husband
to defame me and accuse!

Oenone, I want to die.
Death will give me freedom

oh its nothing not to live

death to the unhappy's no catastrophe! *

Adagio

My time's too short, your highness.
It was I, who lusted for your son with my hot eye.
The flames of Aphrodite maddened me.

Then Oenone's tears,
troubled my mind;
she played upon my fears,
until her pleading forced me to declare I loved your son.

Theseus, I stand before you to absolve your noble son.

Sire,
only this resolve upheld me,
and made me throw down my knife.
I've chosen a slower way to end my life

Medea's poison;

chills already dart along my boiling veins
and squeeze my heart
a cold composure I have never known
gives me a moment's poise.

I stand alone
and seem to see my outraged husband fade and waver
into death's dissolving shade.

My eyes at last give up their light,
and see the day they've soiled
resume its purity.

APPENDIX IV: ROCHBERG'S TEXT ADAPTATIONS

In this poetic rendering of Rochberg's text setting each line represents a musical motive or "cell". These "cells" were determined primarily by his avid use of breath marks but also take into account fermatas, punctuation, rests, and shape of the musical line. The spaces between blocks of text represent a shift in musical phrase or idea. These spaces between blocks of text were determined by multi measure rests in the vocal part and or a change in musical idea denoted by a new tempo, stylistic mark, double bar line, and key change.

I. Aria: In May in Brilliant Athens

In May, in May, in May, in brilliant Athens,
In May, in May, in May, on my marriage day.

I turned aside for shelter from the smile of Theseus.
Death was frowning in an aisle.
Hippolytus!

In May, in May, in May, in brilliant Athens,
In May on my marriage day.

I saw his face turned white!
I could not breathe or speak.
I faced my flaming executioner,

Aphrodite, my mother's murderer!

In May, in May, in May, in brilliant Athens,
In May, in May, in May, on my marriage day.

I turned aside for shelter from the smile of Theseus.
Death was frowning in an aisle.
Hippolytus!

In May, in May, in May, in brilliant Athens,
In may on my marriage day.

I fled him,
Yet he stormed me in disguise,
And seemed to watch me from his father's eyes,
seemed to watch me from his father's eyes.

Each day, each day, each day, I saw Hippolytus
Each day, each day, each day, I saw Hippolytus
and felt my ancient passion tear my body limb from limb,
tear my body limb from limb.

Hippolytus Hippolytus!

Each day, each day, each day, I saw Hippolytus
Each day I saw Hippolytus!

Naked Venus was clawing down her victim
What could I do?
Each moment terrified by wild emotions,

Now I cried,
I cried for death to save my glory
and expel my gloomy frenzy from this world

my hell, my hell, my hell!

In May, in May, in May, in brilliant Athens,
In May on my marriage day.

III. Aria: You Monster!

You understood me too well!
Why do you hang there
speechless
petrified
polite?

My mind whirls.
What have I to hide?
Phaedra in all her madness
stands before you.
Fool, I love you

I adore you

At first I fled you
and when this fell short
of safety
I exiled you from court.
I was afraid to kiss my husband
lest I love my son.

I made you fear me;
you loathed me more
I ached for you no less.
misfortune magnified
your loveliness

Do you believe
my passion is voluntary?
That my obscene
confession is
some dark trick
some oily artifice?

Avenge yourself
invoke your father
a worse monster
threatens you
than any Theseus ever fought and slew.

The wife of Theseus
loves Hippolytus.
See Prince! Look this monster,
ravenous
for her execution
will not flinch

I want your sword's spasmodic final
inch.

V. Supplication (Arioso): Theseus, I Heard The Deluge Of Your Voice

Theseus
I heard the deluge of your voice
and stand here trembling

If there's still time for choice
hold back your hand
still bloodless
spare your race
oh spare your race

I supplicate you,
I kneel here for grace

Oh Theseus,
Oh Theseus will you drench the earth with your own blood?

His virtue,
his youth,
and his birth
cry out for him

Is he
already slain by you for me?

Spare me,
Spare me,
oh, spare me this incestuous pain!

VI. Cabaletta (Aria): My Last Calamity Has Come

My last calamity has come.
This is the bottom of the sea.
all that preceded
this had little force,
the flames of lust,
the horrors of remorse
the prim refusal
by my grim young master
were only feeble
hints of this disaster.

they love each other!
for them each natural
impulse was allowed
each day was summer

and without a cloud

Ugh!

Ugh!

They'll love forever

Ugh!

even while I'm talking

they embrace,

They scorn me,

they are laughing in my face.

I hear them swear

they will be true

forever everywhere.

have pity on my jealous rage

I'll kill this happiness

that jeers at age.

I'll summon Theseus,

Hate shall answer hate

What am I saying?

Have I lost my mind?

I am jealous and call my husband!

Imposture!

Incest!

Murder!

Bind me, bind me, gag me;

I'm frothing with desire

my husband is alive and I'm on fire

For whom?

Hippolytus

Hippolytus

Hippolytus

When I have said his name,

blood fills my eyes

my heart stops dead.

My lover's lifeblood is my single good.
Nothing else
will cool
my murderous thirst for blood.

Yet I live on!
I live looked down
upon by my progenitor
the sacred sun
by Zeus by Europa
by the universe of gods and stars,
my ancestors.

They cures their daughter.
In the great night
of hades

I'll find shelter
from
their sight.

What am I saying?
I've no place to turn.

Minos my father
holds the judge's urn.
Minos my father
holds the judge's urn.

Will he not shake
and curse his fatal star
that brings his daughter
trembling to his bar?
His child by Pasiphaë
forced to tell
a thousand sins
unclassified in hell

Father
you'll be your own child's executioner!
You cannot kill me
Look,
my murderer is Venus!

I killed my self
and what was worse
I wasted my life
for pleasures I have
never tasted,
for pleasures I
have never
tasted

My lover flees me still
and my last gap
is for the flesh
I failed to clasp.

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BIOGRAPHY

Adam P. Rothenberg is a composer from Centreville Virginia. His compositions include various chamber works and a Concerto for Wind Ensemble and Percussion. His work solo harpsichord has been published and recorded along with other winners from the Alienor competition. He studied composition with Mark Camphouse, Jesse Guessford, Jason Haney, John Hilliard, and Glenn Smith. He studied saxophone with David Pope at James Madison University and Oboe with Margaret Owens at George Mason University. He is currently working on several composition commissions and remains active as an oboist. He is focusing on teaching at the college level, instructing courses on music theory and music technology.

Adam earned his Bachelor of Music in composition from James Madison University and his Master of Music in composition from George Mason University. He Defended his Dissertation on April 22nd, 2019 at George Mason University.