

A Meticulous Examination of the First Movement *Musingly* from Benjamin Britten's Nocturnal after John Dowland Op. 70: The Critique of the Musical Interpretations Between the Three Renowned Classical Guitarists

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Abstract

This study attempts to examine the different interpretations among the couple of world class performers based on the same exact piece of music. Benjamin Britten's Nocturnal Op. 70 after John Dowland is a highly respected piece of music written for the classical guitar that is the prime reason for why it has been selected to serve as the core of this study. Three various recorded interpretations of the first movement *Musingly* by Julian Bream, Sharon Isbin and Jeremy Jouve are evaluated in measure to measure detail. This examination includes the comparison between accuracy, coherency, articulation, phrasing, dynamics, and timbre.

Keywords: Nocturnal, Britten, Bream, Isbin, Jouve, classical, guitar, music

1. Introduction

In this paper, we will be examining the interpretive approaches of how the performers determine the phrases of a musical composition as well as the shaping of the sound along with the accuracy of reflecting the composer's musical intentions and the music itself. Thus, we are going to take a closer look at the first movement *Musingly* by Benjamin Britten's Nocturnal Op. 70 after John Dowland. The performers which we will be listening to and commenting on phrase by phrase are Julian Bream, Sharon Isbin and Jeremy Jouve.

2. Arguments

We begin with Julian Bream to analyze the first phrase mm.1-2 from the first movement *Musingly* (see Table No.1). Julian Bream starts with a warmer color, smooth articulation, slightly louder dynamic level along with the consistent metric pulse throughout the first measure. However, he delays on the last 8th note of the measure, "B" note, and cuts it off without arriving to the highest note "C" at the down beat of m.2 with a gradual, smooth legato. With this slight cut in the duration of the "B" note Julian Bream is obscuring the adoption of the fuller length of the phrase where the "C" note is definitely a significant arrival point in the phrase and therefore it might need to be played with a tidy layout. Sharon Isbin starts to the piece with a lesser dynamic level compare to Julian Bream which has also been specified by the composer as well to be *pianissimo*. However, Sharon Isbin squeezes the half of the second beat (16th note triplet) m.1 in a 16th note value duration rather than an 8th note value as opposed to what the composer notated. However, the movement displays an indication of *molto liberamente* in order to indicate that the movement needs to be played very freely. Thus, the composer has given the performers the privilege to interpret the music within a subtle subjective approach, though in certain parameters. As it is identifiable Julian Bream adds a crescendo to the triplet and he is also playing in a more agitated and heavy way compare to both Sharon Isbin and Jeremy Jouve. Further more, Sharon Isbin has also varied the rhythmic value of the third beat m.1 to be dotted 16th note at first instead of two equal 8th notes for the beat which once again displays that she is following the composer's indication rather decisively. At the down beat of m.2 "C" note, she slightly delays in order to bring clarity to the phrase which gotten to the highest arrival point for these two measures which is exactly opposite with Julian Bream. With Sharon Isbin the last resolution "F sharp" of the phrase is played tiny after the preceding "G natural" dies where with Julian Bream it is articulated with an ongoing manner since the "G natural" is not the final resolution and must flow into the moment of cadential relief with the "F sharp." Jeremy Jouve's approach to the phrasing is very much in the way of Sharon Isbin's, except he does not alter his color which is constantly even.

He also squeezes the 16th note triplet into a 16th note value but what is different from Julian Bream and Sharon Isbin is the first two notes of the triplet is fairly quick and really soft which pricks up the listener's ear. With Jeremy Jouve we can also encounter to the slight cut off at the last 8th note of the first measure right before the highest arrival which we have confronted with Julian Bream as well.

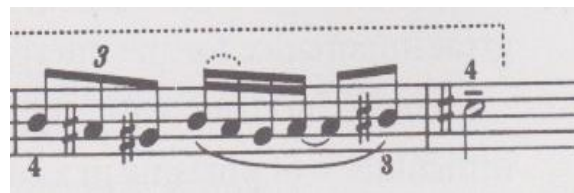
Table No. 1: mm.1-2¹



2.1 mm.3-4

As we go onto the next phrase mm.3-4 (see Table No.2), we can still hear the same strong and stimulating approach by Julian Bream though he starts to use very short and quick rubatos to make the motivic ideas more free and flexible where they can be stretched and released like a rubber band. Julian Bream sustains on the last 16th note of the second beat m.3 “A sharp” which is tied over to the first half of the third beat where he sort of delineates the whole phrase into two sections. If we look even more closer to the “A sharp” we can notice that it is emphasized with its presence as an harmonic tone where the other notes around it are forming the group of non-harmonic filler tones (lower neighbours and *appoggiatura*). This stated emphasis by the composer is seemed to be absorbed by all of the three performers even though they brought it out very reservedly. It is interesting to note that Julian Bream does pluck the “A sharp”, the second 16th note of the second beat m.3, instead of following his technical slur marking on the score which allows him to bring out the “A sharp” extensively since the slurred note will tend to sound softer than its preceding plucked note. For the last three notes of the second phrase, respectively “A sharp, B sharp and C sharp” Julian Bream adds a distinctive quick vibratos which has more lyrical presentation to the ear as well as to the phrase that possesses a contrast with its antecedent part.

Table No.2: mm.3-4 (The music is in G clef)



2.2 mm.5-9

As Julian Bream gets into the third phrase mm.5-9 (see Table No.3 and No.4), he gradually starts to change his timbre from bold striking tone to a slightly brighter one which has more straight and pointed direction in it. At the first beat of m.6, the “E flat” which is the peak of the first four phrases of the movement so far is again cut off right before it slides into the next note “D flat” which is also exemplified by the composer with phrase marking. If we were to analyze the shape of the phrase in mm.5-9, we encounter to a rough, wavy pattern in terms of increases and decreases in the melody for instance; climbing up, slowly reaching to the top and gradually sliding off from other side of the hill. However, this phrase structure is neither quite reflected with this slight cut in the duration of the “E flat” nor do the dynamics match with the linear shape of the wavy melody with the interpretation of Julian Bream. Nevertheless, he happens to do it only on that highest point and not on the latter arrival points such as the first beat of m.7 “C sharp” and the first beat of m.8 “B” in this phrase. At m.8, the composer Benjamin Britten has introduced detached articulation *staccato* with dots under the notes whereas Julian Bream is following the exact opposite of what is written on the score.

¹ Britten, B. (1964). Nocturnal after John Dowland for Guitar Op. 70 ed. Julian Bream. [Musical Score]. UK: Faber Music, 2.

If we turn to Sharon Isbin, we can notice that she has elaborately worked out the linear wavy structure of the phrase where she perfectly arrives to the high points with the use of rubato, smooth crescendos and decrescendos along with really tender glissandos to achieve the sliding off effect. At m.8, Sharon Isbin is accurately following the composers detached articulation marks along with the brief decrescendo that ritards towards the end of the phrase with the “F” note. As opposed to what Julian Bream does with the change of his timbre, Jeremy Jouve develops a warmer echoey tone color throughout this third phrase which introduces a contrast in his approach with the first two phrases.

Table No.3: m.5 (The music is in G clef)



Table No.4: mm.6-9



2.3 mm.6-12

Although the fourth phrase starts at m.10 (see Table No.5), it very much sounds like a rhythmic and melodic continuation of the last motivic idea of the third phrase mm.8 and 9 where Benjamin Britten copies that specific motivic idea and pastes it into a lower register (imitation). Another visible aspect in the contour of the third and the fourth phrases is the decending melodic graph between the down beats of m.6 “E flat”, m.7 “C sharp”, m.8 “B” and m.10 “A.” With all of the three performers (more clear with Sharon Isbin and Jeremy Jouve) it sounds like that they are gradually getting softer in the dynamic level as they arrive to each of those contour determining points which is definitely appropriate as long as the notes are decend and if nothing else is specified by the composer to indicate otherwise. However, if you are pursuing a French style where many indications are reversed in the interpretation you might not get softer as the melodic line descends and not get louder as the melodic line ascends. At m.10, Julian Bream is clearly imitating the previous motivic idea with a *sul tasto* (warmer and darker) color distinction however he does not once again follow the detached staccato marking indicated by the composer even though the piece is specifically written for him. Sharon Isbin chooses to differentiate the imitated passage from one another with going against the composer’s intention with attached articulation rather than a significant color change which applied by Julian Bream. Jeremy Jouve has chosen to contrast the latter motivic imitation at m.10 with a slight different approach in the articulation where he uses dotted tenutos to last the staccato notes tiny bit more attached. He is also playing this passage within a slower tempo than Julian Bream and Sharon Isbin. At m.12, Julian Bream once again cuts off the duration of the supertonic functioning note “F sharp” before it properly resolves into the final resolution of the phrase “E natural.”

Table No.5: mm.6-12



2.4 mm.13-15

The fifth phrase consists of the mm.13-15 (see Table No.4). At m.13, Julian Bream switches back to the brighter tone color which is more brought out with the crescendo and a subtle accelerando towards the high “B natural” which serves as the midway point of the movement. At mm.14 and 15, we can again observe a clear descending line in the contour of the phrase after it has gotten to the loudest and the highest peak which helps to reduce the built up tension gradually with bouncing off effect. The contour determining notes are “B natural”, “A”, “G natural” and respectively “E”, “D natural” and finally “C natural” at m.16. At m.14, Julian Bream is literally following the composer’s phrase markings known as *inegale*. For the last three 16th note triplets in m.14, Julian Bream is accelerating with crescendo known as *rubato* as opposed to what is indicated in the score to be decrescendo. However, he soon undertakes the resolution aspect of the phrase with giving the stolen time back to the phrase with gradually getting slower in the tempo and softer in the dynamic level. At m.13, Sharon Isbin is applying more fragmented grouping towards the nine 16th notes along with the down beat of m.14 as 2+2+3+3 with an acceleration and getting louder in the volume whereas her range of dynamic level is way under than Julian Bream. She is pursuing more tender and light articulation with less wider dynamic levels which the movement possesses as well that the integrating dynamic level of the movement is *pianissimo*. Sharon Isbin is accurately reflecting the composer’s phrase markings (*inegale*) like Julian Bream in m.14. Unfortunately, Jeremy Jouve has undertaken a slight different approach than both the composer and two previous performers attempted to cover, where he interprets m.14 with accenting and using dotted tenuto articulation for the contour determining notes which we have previously clarified. Another difference in the approach of Jeremy Jouve is his literal metric division of the last two triplet 16th notes with placing each in an 8th note value duration that is indicated by the composer as well where the notation suggests a natural *ritardando* with its rhythmic placement.

Table No.6: mm.13-15 (The music is in G clef)

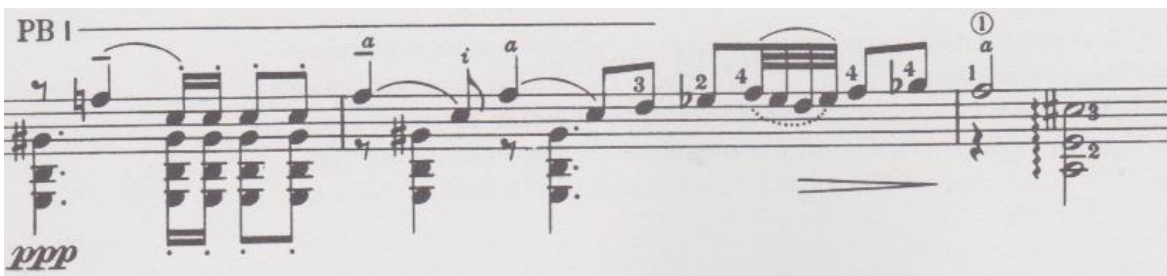
The image shows a musical score for measures 13-15 in G clef. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff contains the melody with various articulations and dynamics. The bass staff contains the accompaniment. The score includes fingerings (1-4), breath marks (a, i, 3), and dynamic markings (p, m, pp). The melody starts with a 12-measure rest, followed by a series of notes with fingerings and breath marks. The dynamics range from piano (p) to pianissimo (pp).

2.5 mm.16-18

If we take a look at the sixth phrase mm.16-18 (see Table No.5), we again come to a conclusion that Julian Bream is not sufficiently matching the requested dynamic level which is indicated to be *pianississimo* “ppp.” At this point we really have to be cautious on what the composer is specifying and demanding from the performer, because he is most vividly mentioning that this chordal passage -which happens to be the first time since the beginning of the movement- needs to be extremely soft therefore clear and bright in the tone color. However, the same exact chordal passage of mm.16 and 17 reiterates at the final conclusive measures of the movement (mm.27-29) therefore, the contrast in the tone color could be a very well defined sectional delineation between them even though it does not necessarily indicated to be figured out that way on the score. Julian Bream is maintaining a consistent tone and articulation for the first chordal passage where he is gradually moving from brighter tone color towards warmer *tasto* at the conclusive repetition. The first two “F naturals” in this sixth phrase which are marked with tenutos, are accented with Julian Bream where the third “F natural” which isn’t marked with tenuto is played with lighter articulation. Not to be disrespectful with what Julian Bream is attempting to achieve with his interpretation but tenuto is literally mean hold the note for full value which does not necessarily mean to accent the note with louder and pointed articulation. Starting from the sixth 8th note of m.18, which is the consequent part of the phrase, Julian Bream is substantially bringing it out with sharper attacks although he once again seems to ignore the decrescendo indication at the end of the measure. Sharon Isbin is thoroughly in the mood of the composer’s level of dynamics where she is differentiating the chord with arpeggiation rather than striking the top “F natural” loudly which is already in the higher register with a 6th leap that will naturally sound more louder and brighter. She is playing the last 8th note of m.16 attached which displays a similarity with the first beat of the phrase.

Therefore she might decided to recall the unified effect of the first beat m.16. Jeremy Jouve is the only performer who literally follows the composer’s phrase marking for the first three 8th notes of m.17 where he applies a slight cut in the duration of the third 8th note “C” to separate the small motivic repetitions from one another. Incidentally, Sharon Isbin is the only performer who happens to get softer at the end of the m.17.

Table No.7: mm.16-18 (The music is in G clef)



2.6 mm.20-24

Seventh phrase mm.20-24 (see Table No.6), is the first time that Benjamin Britten is actually printed out an acceleration and deceleration marks on the score. This phrase is simply made up of one pattern which sequentially rotates throughout the phrase where each are generally shifted up a half step starting from their second imitation. For instance, the first motivic idea that starts with “F” in m.20 goes to “F sharp” in the third repetition and finally to “G natural” in its little varied fifth repetition. With Sharon Isbin and Jeremy Jouve these sequential ideas are separated from each other with tiny pauses where composer is indicated as well with breath marks on the score which unfortunately does not happen with Julian Bream that makes the listener wonder why for the majority of the time he is not following the composer’s indications. Jeremy Jouve has applied the ritardando quite earlier starting from the last six 16th notes of the phrase which made the final motivic idea -that must need to be gotten to the fastest moment compare to the precedings- sounds a bit awkward.

Table No.8: mm.20-24



2.7 mm.25-26

At the second to final phrase of the movement mm.25 and 26 (see Table No.7), Julian Bream is applying a ponticello color choice for the repeating “E” note where the descending melody is enhanced with the thicker texture. He is maintaining a proper balance for these alternations in the timbre. Sharon Isbin has chosen to provide a bouncy effect on the descending melody where she emphasizes it nicely with the use of vibrato as well. Jeremy Jouve is covering the phrase with couple detached notes to make them more noticeable and exalt their importance.

Table No.9: mm.25-26



2.8 mm.27-29

The final phrase mm.27-29 (see Table No.8) which appeared previously in mm.17 and 18, possesses a contrast with the interpretations of Julian Bream and Sharon Isbin where Jeremy Jouve happens to repeat his exact way of approach as he did previously but this time the phrase ends with both diminuendo and rallentando.

Table No.10: mm.27-29 (The music is in G clef)

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, three world-renowned classical guitar players are closely evaluated based on their individual interpretations on the first movement *Musingly* from the Nocturnal after John Dowland Op.70 by Benjamin Britten. As it can be observed from the above measure to measure analysis of this very piece, musical interpretations may still display major varieties even among the extremely high level performers and their performances. When it comes down to pick up the very best performance, I would personally go with the most musical, passionate and the most authentic interpretation between the three which in this case I will not mention in order to respect to all of the performers and leave this for your own musical taste and admiration.

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