

George Benjamin (b.1960)  
*Dream of the Song* (2015)

George William John Benjamin was born on January 31, 1960, in London, and lives there. “Dream of the Song” was a co-commission of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Festival d’Automne. The world premiere was given September 25, 2015, by countertenor Bejun Mehta with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and Netherlands Chamber Choir under the composer’s direction. The BSO’s part in the commission was to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Tanglewood Music Center. The American premiere took place at Tanglewood in July 2016, with Stefan Asbury conducting the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, countertenor Daniel Moody, and the Lorelei Ensemble in Seiji Ozawa Hall.

The score of “Dream of the Song” calls for countertenor solo, an ensemble of eight solo voices, two oboes, four horns, percussion (two players: glockenspiel, two vibraphones, two gongs, two pairs of cymbals), two harps, and strings. Duration is about fifteen minutes.

Vocal music has dominated George Benjamin’s recent catalog: his opera *Written on Skin*, on a text by playwright Martin Crimp, has been acclaimed since its 2012 premiere as among the best operas in a generation, a masterpiece of the new millennium. This succeeded the composer’s “lyric tale” *Into the Little Hill*, also in collaboration with Crimp, a smaller-scale but also highly praised dramatic work. In their accumulations of scenes into works of forty and ninety minutes, respectively, *Into the Little Hill* and *Written on Skin* represented vast expansions of his compositional canvas. This newfound breadth and the concentration on the human voice—which are, naturally, closely related phenomena—continue in his latest work, *Dream of the Song*, an orchestral song cycle for countertenor that is his biggest non-stage work, arguably, since 1987’s *Antara*. (His 2001 *Palimpsests* is also about twenty minutes long, but its two parts were composed independently—or rather, *Palimpsest II* was written as a followup and complement to the independently conceived *Palimpsest I*.)

Benjamin is a surpassingly inventive composer of timbre whose use of individual instruments and their combinations creates vibrating, vivid musical surfaces. His heritage has some of its roots in the scintillating orchestral/instrumental traditions of impressionism, with Ravel and Debussy, and with such later French composers as Boulez and Benjamin’s important early teacher Messiaen. Messiaen’s revolutionary understanding of harmony via instrumental timbre, or vice versa—that, ultimately, the two facets are inextricable—has been one of the guiding principles of compositional practice in the past two generations. As Messiaen had been, Benjamin is an outstanding performer whose experience as a pianist and conductor connect him intimately with the physical ramifications of music creation. The tactile nature of Benjamin’s work extends from his challenging modernism of his early Piano Sonata and the aggressive *Viola, Viola* to his most intimate and lyrical pieces, such as *Olicantus* (2002, a 50th birthday present for his friend Oliver Knussen), or *Upon Silence* (1990, a setting for mezzo-soprano and viol consort or strings of Yeats’s “The Long Legged Fly”), the latter two works in their restraint and contrapuntal intimacy suggesting deep connections with music of the Renaissance.

Benjamin had come to the world’s wider attention first with his brilliantly and subtly colored orchestral work *Ringed by the Flat Horizon* at age twenty in 1980, which was followed by the chamber-orchestra piece *At First Light* in 1982. A stint at IRCAM in Paris studying the physical properties of sound and the use of electronics produced *Antara* in 1987, and while technology in and of itself was not a road much further traveled by the composer, the in-depth exploration he pursued at IRCAM informed the continuing development of his compositional voice. *Palimpsests* is an orchestral tour-de-force; as impressive in its variety, and presaging the composer’s astonishing scene-painting ability revealed in the operas, is his 2004 ballet music for orchestra *Dance Figures*.

Vocal music has been a part of Benjamin's output from early in his career. His first public work for voice is *A Mind of Winter*, a setting of Wallace Stevens's "The Snowman" that combines the composer's instrumental imagination, limning the poem's icy, glassy surface, with a subtle emotional portrayal of the text in the soprano's somehow simultaneously introverted but rapturously lyrical vocal line. Even more intensely effective is his 1996 *Sometime Voices* for baritone, chorus, and orchestra, setting Caliban's "sounds and sweet airs" speech from *The Tempest*, in which the orchestra and chorus quite startlingly provide as much "staging" and atmosphere as any production of the play might want, and the baritone's role embodies Caliban's multi-layered brutishness, confusion, and childlike wonder.

In Benjamin's two stage collaborations with Martin Crimp, *Into the Little Hill* and *Written on Skin*, the composer and writer are well-matched in their embrace of ambiguity, shadings of meaning, and unexpected and expressively pointed excursions into abstraction and surrealism. Both operas have a quality of ancient fundamentals, linking them to the archetypes of legend or of Greek drama, but their details and affects are thoroughly, dyed-in-the-wool modern, in (or paralleling) the realms of Godard or Borges. Not lost in those pieces, too, is that same extraordinarily finessed use of the instrumental body, which (as in *Sometime Voices*) provides dimensions of character and environment unavailable through any other means.

Benjamin has a long association with the BSO and Tanglewood, serving in 2000 as director of the Festival of Contemporary Music and returning as a member of the composition faculty several times. The BSO has performed his work on numerous occasions, and the Tanglewood Music Center has frequently featured his music, including the U.S. concert premiere of *Written on Skin* in 2013 and his *Duet* for piano and orchestra in 2012, among many other works.

*Dream of the Song* seems to cement the notion that Benjamin is smitten with the sound of countertenor, which voice defines the role of the Boy/Angel in *Written on Skin*. *Dream of the Song* was written specifically for Bejun Mehta (although Iestyn Davies later gave the British premiere). The texts set for countertenor in *Dream of the Song*, which the composer says are generally about mortality and the passage of time, are taken from Peter Cole's English translations of Hebrew poems from Andalusia in his *Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry in Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492*. Benjamin cites Cole as being a great help in understanding the context and honing his understanding of the poetry. The Hebrew poems Benjamin chose are from the 11th century and are by two authors: Solomon Ibn Gabirol (ca. 1021-ca. 1050 or 1070) and Samuel HaNagid (993-after 1056).

These Hebrew poems are contextualized by fragments of poems of Federico García Lorca (1898-1936), sung in Spanish, which were in turn inspired by and based on 8th- and 9th-century Arabic verse, also from Andalusia. The frisson between countertenor and chorus; between the two sung languages, Spanish and English; and colored by our abstract awareness of the friction between the Moorish and Jewish cultures, is counterweighted by the sense that the Hebrew poems, sung in English, and the 20th-century Spanish translations of the Arabic nonetheless consider similar and complementary subject matter in sympathetic ways. Benjamin clearly selected the poems to ring, as it were, on consonant (or poignantly dissonant) frequencies. So, as in *Written on Skin*, there is this superimposition of times, of cultures, of legend versus history, that illuminates the continuity and persistence of human concerns. Held up against the Hebrew poems, the Spanish-language texts are analogous to the role of the women's chorus in creating an atmosphere for the perhaps more pointed and individual voice of the countertenor and his words, often blossoming like a corona around a light. Benjamin related in an interview prior to the work's British premiere that this sonic relationship was one that triggered the piece as a whole, saying "One of the inspirations was the idea of writing a work for countertenor and female chorus in which the sound of eight solo singers would surround and encase the sound of the countertenor. Quite similar registers but so different in timbre and sound and in expression as well." The orchestra is often a thing unto itself, as in the operas: its character is rarely accompanimental, its sound often being as foreground—

that is, a primary “subject” of music—as the voices. The instruments’ expressive nature amplifies, counterpoises, and illustrates the nature of the poetry while—again—adding new dimensions and depth. The six songs total about twenty minutes in performance. The first is *The Pen* (Ibn Gabirol), set rather aggressively, an invocation of the power of the pen and of poetry (and by extension, any art) both to dispense wisdom and to inflict (perhaps righteous) damage. Samuel HaNagid’s “The Multiple Troubles of Man” features oboe descants over the relatively speech-like rhythms of the voice. This leads directly into the central and longest of the settings, combining HaNagid’s image-rich “Gazing Through the Night” with Lorca’s “Casida del llanto” (“Casida, the lament”). The countertenor uses prosaic and metaphorical details—the night’s bugs, the night sky like a tent, the moon and stars like a shepherdess and her flock, and so on—to contemplate the mystery of creation. The imagery and its prevalingly mysterious and suspenseful setting increase in intensity over the course of the poem. In Spanish, the women’s voices compare weeping to a huge hound, an angel, a violin.

Countertenor is silent during Lorca’s surreal “Gacela of Marvelous Love,” sung passionately by the women with orchestra, which likens the wounded body to a landscape. The fifth song, “The Gazelle,” is shaded by the orchestra’s surging string harmonies into a strange, almost threatening dream vision. “My Heart Thinks as the Sun Comes Up” at first sustains much of the same mood, with the countertenor now in conversation with a solo horn. The women’s chorus, singing two lines from Lorca’s “Casida del herido por el agua” (“Casida, the wounded by water”), “¿qué desiertos de luz iban hundiendo/los arenales de la madrugada!” (translating loosely as “deserts of light burying the dunes of dawn”) creates a bright and clear echo and resonance with Ibn Gabirol’s ancient words, the shimmering harmonies in both voices and orchestral veritably painting the light itself.

Robert Kirzinger