

The Folly of Desire

Brad Mehldau Ian Bostridge





THE FOLLY OF DESIRE

Brad Mehldau (b. 1970)

The Folly of Desire

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Total playing time: 67. 56

Ian Bostridge, tenor

Brad Mehldau, piano

Cover painting: *The Rape of Ganymede* by Giovanni Battista Naldini (Fiesole c. 1537-1591 Florence), after Michelangelo

Tacit consent

Lovers give themselves in a moment of trust — or they dare to take without asking. The fact that this giving and taking is without an established contract — there is risk — is what gives desire its wings, and also makes it potentially transgressive. Consent exists ideally, but it is unspoken. This tacit quality of consent makes it downright holy for poets, artists and musicians — quiet, untouched by all the prosaic discourse. Desire — unrequited, or consecrated in ecstasy — is a strong trope in music, wrapped into the game of tonality itself: tension and resolution, tension again, and resolution. In its unspoken abstraction, music can trace lucidly an intimate exchange.

In the initial idea for this song cycle, the order of the songs was to reflect a spiritual climb from pure lust all the way to lust-free love. That ascension, though, would import a moral message into the music: that

carnal desire itself was base and ignoble, and love free of desire was the highest achievement. It was too simple. Music should provoke more questions, not answer them with prescriptive finality.

The next thought was to address lust only and thus confront it directly and unapologetically. Too unapologetically, though — might that serve to celebrate what one would condemn? Finally the goal was to neither condemn nor sanction, yet still probe the subject without dodging “should” and “shouldn’t” questions.

A discourse about what may and may not take place, and an attempt to find a provisional consensus, is valuable. It might focus on just how one defines consent. There should remain, though, a private space where one can just love someone and take without asking.

This privacy has been a cherished freedom of liberal societies, but is under question



Brad Mehldau
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now. When sex enters the public forum, it becomes political, and we speak of a citizen's right to privacy. Closely related is freedom of speech. Sexual expression, like speech, often takes place in a relatively anarchic locus in which there are no fixed rules and no policing presence nearby. If someone is asocial — forcing an unwelcome sexual advance, or inciting violence through speech — the governing body is compelled to paternalistically step in, halting the expression. Some children are misbehaving, so the whole classroom will suffer.

This point in history is unique because leaders are doing the opposite: they are goading the anti-social expression onward. A vote, as an expression of speech, has become a raised middle-finger, a malevolent gesture. The free-roaming playful kind of anarchy is threatened from the inside.

The songs here for male voice and piano are an inquiry into the limits of sexual

freedom in a post-#MeToo political age. The variables are still the same: The subject is in danger of valorizing his desire precisely when he should sublimate it. He does not see clearly, and commits folly. Yet, some of this folly he welcomes — he does not want to see clearly. At what cost though?

A few words about the individual poems: The suitor in Shakespeare's two sonnets is perpetually self-aware, a trait Harold Bloom identified in the Bard's most famous characters. In *Sonnet 147*, the subject reasons as to how he has lost his reason: "My reason, the physician to my love,/Angry that his prescriptions are not kept/Hath left me, and I desperate now approve." Even as he sees the folly of his desire, he chooses ruin. Here, self-ironizing doesn't help, and leads to inertia: he perpetually diagnoses the problem yet never takes the bitter medicine.

If tacit, genuine consent is the holy grail, then its most extreme, violent opposite is

rape. Yeats' mythological "Leda and the Swan" is unsettling because it locates a dark Sublime in Zeus' brute overpowering of the girl, who, being so close the god, might have "put on his knowledge with his power." In Brecht's *Über die Verführung von Engeln* the dark humor from this master of satire has a purpose: Brecht describes the duplicity and self-sanctioning of the rapist-protagonist, who mockingly instructs the reader how to say or do whatever necessary to get what he wants. Here, the roles are reversed — whereas Zeus was the perpetrator, the angel here is the one perpetrated, a sublime figure whom one may not gaze at directly, even as he takes him by force — "Doch schau ihm nicht beim Ficken ins Gesicht."

Goethe's Ganymed craves the Father: "Aufwärts an deinen Busen, Alliebender Vater." Zeus is less perpetrator and more pantheistic ideal — the divine expressed in eternal nature, into which Ganymed is received, ecstatically. This spiritualized

Zeus is perhaps less Greek, but otherwise it was always difficult to believe that the youth would be so enchanted as he is lifted away — wouldn't he be terrified, like Leda? Ganymed's *Liebeswonne* (bliss of love) is intertwined with his *heilig Gefühl* (holy feeling). They are both *unendliche Schöne* — eternally beautiful. The poem suggests that spiritual striving and earthly desire both seek the same thing: to cool our "burning thirst" — "Du kühlst den brennenden Durst meines Busens."

What is the nature of that thirst — could lust then be a kind of holy impulse? Not if we understand the Holy to be benevolent. Desire in itself is blind by nature, never giving and always seeking to possess. We would hope that the Godhead would give us eyes to see our own folly. Yet such a sharp division between holy and carnal can itself become spiritual blindness. It becomes another strategy of denial and hidden complicity, of someone believing what they want to believe.

The unsettling suggestion in Auden's *Ganymede* is that perpetration begets violence on the one perpetrated — which in turn might continue a cycle. For William Blake, lust and violence are destructive forces beyond our control, omnipresent elements that “shake the mountains”, as e.e. cummings proclaims in his raucous poem here, which yokes the two together more viscerally. The prelapsarian innocence is gone; Blake's Rose is sick. Yeats calls on the holy sages to guide him in *Sailing to Byzantium*, for his heart is “sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal/It knows not what it is.” Blake answers him from the past in Night II: Self-wisdom may be had, but “it is bought with the price/Of all that a man hath — his house, his wife, his children.” Both poets write of “Artifice” — be it deceitful in the case of Blake, or a property of eternity itself for Yeats. The burning thirst is unquenchable, be it of flesh or spirit, or finally, both.

Auden returns once more for Lullaby, which forms a postlude for the cycle. “Let the living creature lie,” he writes, of someone who consents to him, and finally, one who is loved and loves without censure: “Mortal, guilty, but to me/The entirely beautiful.”

Brad Mehldau

Brad and I met at Schloss Elmau in Southern Bavaria in 2016. We went to each other's concerts, and we had dinner, and we talked, and Brad had the idea of writing a piece for us. The result, *The Folly of Desire*, is a stunning addition to the Lieder tradition. It sets verse with a fearless ambition — I don't know another setting of Yeats's *Leda and the Swan*, and what a setting it is — and it plays with styles from the simple to the complex, from the still to the raucous, from the cynical to the justly sentimental: “I contain multitudes” as Whitman put it. The cycle manages to weave together authentically personal expression, Romanticism embraced, with the social and political issues of the day — never crudely, despite the angel fucking of the Brecht song, or the deep dyed misogyny of e e cummings, but always with intelligence and negative capability. As a performer one is at one and the same time impersonating and inhabiting. Never mistake role playing for acquiescence. But at the same time, don't resist yielding to

the beauty of the moment when, having travelled through all this sound and fury, folly and desire, the simple theme of the first song returns.

We've performed the cycle a lot over the past few years, in Europe and the States, pairing it with Schumann's *Dichterliebe* (which has a few angels of its own to vie with Brecht's). The pieces have illuminated each other, and the sheer weirdness of Schumann's cycle has emerged, cleansed of familiarity.

We started doing standards as encores, a great liberation for me. Before working with Brad, I'd occasionally dared to sing songs like *Night and Day*, but he gave me licence to go a bit further (we once did my favourite Dylan song, *Don't think twice it's alright* on a platform on the river in Prague, while pedalo boats bobbed around as an auxiliary audience). I learned to exploit the microphone, and I reclaimed some of the songs which were part of

my childhood listening (my father was a Sinatra/Bennett/Como fan). And so you'll hear not only Cole Porter and Gershwin but also Mann and Hilliard's *In the wee small hours of the morning*. Singing these songs teaches a singer of Lieder to sing better, challenges us to a better intimacy and a truer engagement. And when I wasn't singing, standing in the bow of the piano I got to listen to his fabulous improvisations.

Ian Bostridge



Lyrics

The Folly of Desire

1

The Sick Rose

(Text by William Blake)

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

2

Leda and the Swan

(Text by William Butler Yeats)

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

3

Sonnet 147

(Text by William Shakespeare)

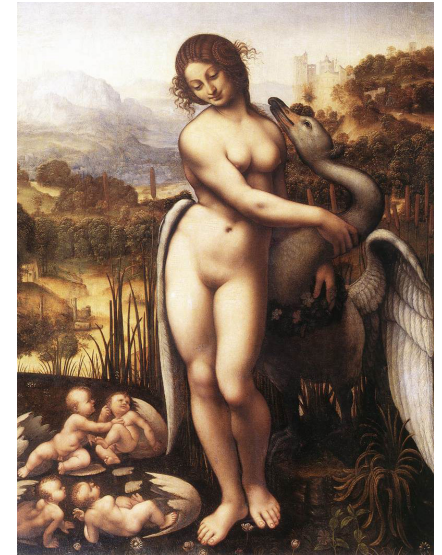
My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
The uncertain sickly appetite to please.

My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept



Leonardo da Vinci
Study for the Kneeling Leda (1505-1507)

Cesare da Cesto,
Leda and the Swan (1505-1510)



Hath left me, and I desperate now approve,
Desire is death, which physic did except.

Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest,
My thoughts and my discourse as
madmen's are,
At random from the truth vainly express'd.

For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee
bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

4

Sonnet 75

(Text by William Shakespeare)

So are you to my thoughts as food to life,
Or as sweet-season'd showers are to the ground;
And for the peace of you I hold such strife,
As 'twixt a miser and his wealth is found.

Now proud as an enjoyer and anon
Doubting the filching age will steal his treasure,
Now counting best to be with you alone,

Then better'd that the world may see my
pleasure,

Sometime all full with feasting on your sight,
And by and by clean starved for a look,
Possessing or pursuing no delight
Save what is had or must from you be took.

Thus do I pine and surfeit day by day,
Or gluttoning on all, or all away.

5

Über die Verführung von Engeln

(Text by Bertold Brecht)

Engel verführt man gar nicht oder schnell.
Verzieh ihn einfach in den Hauseingang
Steck ihm die Zunge in den Mund und lang
Ihm untern Rock, bis er sich naß macht, stell
Ihm das Gesicht zur Wand, heb ihm den Rock
Und fick ihn. Stöhnt er irgendwie beklommen
Dann halt ihn fest und laß ihn zweimal kommen
Sonst hat er dir am Ende einen Schock.
Ermahn ihn, dass er gut den Hintern

schwenkt
Heiß ihn dir ruhig an die Hoden fassen
Sag ihm, er darf sich furchtlos fallen lassen
Dieweil er zwischen Erd und Himmel hängt –
Doch schau ihm nicht beim Ficken ins
Gesicht
Und seine Flügel, Mensch, zerdrück sie
nicht.

(The Brecht Estate does not allow a translation
for this text)



Peter Paul Rubens
The Abduction of Ganymede (1611-12)

6

Ganymede I

(Text by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

Wie im Morgenglanze
Du rings mich anglühst
Frühling, Geliebter!
Mit tausendfacher Liebeswonne
Sich an mein Herz drängt
Deiner ewigen Wärme
Heilig Gefühl,
Unendliche Schöne!
Daß ich dich fassen möchte'
In diesen Arm!

How your glow envelops me
in the morning light,
spring, my beloved!
How your eternal warmth
presses my heart
with love's thousandfold joy,
holy sensation,
infinite beauty!
O that I might hold you
in my arms!

Ach, an deinem Busen
Lieg' ich, schmachte,
Und deine Blumen, dein Gras
Drängen sich an mein Herz.
Du kühlst den brennenden
Durst meines Busens,
Lieblicher Morgenwind!
Ruft drein die Nachtigall
Liebend nach mir aus dem Nebeltal.
Ich komm', ich komme!
Wohin? Ach, wohin?

Hinauf! Hinauf strebt's.
Es schweben die Wolken
Abwärts, die Wolken
Neigen sich der sehnenen Liebe.
Mir! Mir!
In eurem Schosse Aufwärts!
Umfangend umfängen!
Aufwärts an deinen Busen,
Allliebender Vate

Ah, on your breast
I lie languishing,
and your flowers, your grass
press close to my heart.
You cool the burning
thirst within my breast,
sweet morning breeze,
as the nightingale calls
tenderly to me from the misty valley.
I will come, I will come!
But whereto? Ah, whereto?

Upwards! Upwards it strives!
The clouds drift
down, yielding
to yearning love,
to me, to me!
In your lap, upwards,
embracing and embraced!
Upwards to your bosom,
you all-loving Father!

Ganymede II

(text by W.H. Auden)

He looked in all His wisdom from the throne
Down on that humble boy who kept the sheep,
And sent a dove; the dove returned alone:
Youth liked the music, but soon fell asleep.

But He had planned such future for the youth:
Surely, His duty now was to compel.
For later he would come to love the truth,
And own his gratitude. His eagle fell.

It did not work. His conversation bored
The boy who yawned and whistled and made
faces,
And wriggled free from fatherly embraces;
But with the eagle he was always willing
To go where it suggested, and adored
And learnt from it so many ways of killing.



Rembrandt van Rijn
The Abduction of Ganymede (1635)

the boys i mean are not refined

(Text by e e cummings)

the boys i mean are not refined
 they go with girls who buck and bite
 they do not give a fuck for luck
 they hump them thirteen times a night

one hangs a hat upon her tit
 one carves a cross on her behind
 they do not give a shit for wit
 the boys i mean are not refined

they come with girls who bite and buck
 who cannot read and cannot write
 who laugh like they would fall apart
 and masturbate with dynamite

the boys i mean are not refined
 they cannot chat of that and this
 they do not give a fart for art
 they kill like you would take a piss

they speak whatever's on their mind
 they do whatever's in their pants

the boys i mean are not refined
 they shake the mountains when they dance

Excerpt from **Sailing to Byzantium**

(Text by William Butler Yeats)

O sages standing in God's holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing masters of my soul.
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 It knows not what it is; and gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.

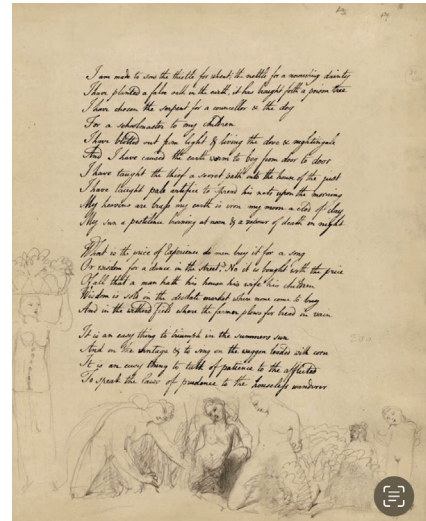
Night II, from "The Four Zoas" (The Wail of Enion)

(Text by William Blake)

I am made to sow the thistle for wheat;
 the nettle for a nourishing dainty
 I have planted a false oath in the earth,
 it has brought forth a Poison Tree
 I have chosen the serpent for a counsellor

and the dog
 For a schoolmaster to my children
 I have blotted out from light and living the
 dove and nightingale
 And I have caused the earthworm to beg
 from door to door
 I have taught the thief a secret path into
 the house of the just
 I have taught pale Artifice to spread his
 nets upon the morning
 My heavens are brass, my earth is iron, my
 moon a clod of clay
 My sun a pestilence burning at noon, and a
 vapour of death in night.

What is the price of Experience? Do men
 buy it for a song
 Or Wisdom for a dance in the street? No –
 it is bought with the price
 Of all that a man hath – his house, his wife,
 his children.
 Wisdom is sold in the desolate market
 where none come to buy
 And in the wither'd field where the farmer
 ploughs for bread in vain.

**Manuscript of Blake's The Wail of Enion**

Lullaby

(Text by W. H. Auden)

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
 Human on my faithless arm:
 Time and fevers burn away
 Individual beauty from
 Thoughtful children, and the grave
 Proves the child ephemeral:
 But in my arms till break of day
 Let the living creature lie,
 Mortal, guilty, but to me
 The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:
 To lovers as they lie upon
 Her tolerant enchanted slope
 In their ordinary swoon,
 Grave the vision Venus sends
 Of supernatural sympathy,
 Universal love and hope
 While an abstract insight wakes
 Among the glaciers and the rocks
 The hermit's carnal ecstasy.

Certainty, fidelity
 On the stroke of midnight pass
 Like vibrations of a bell
 And fashionable madmen raise
 Their pedantic boring cry:
 Every farthing of the cost.
 All the dreaded cards foretell.
 Shall be paid, but from this night
 Not a whisper, not a thought.
 Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
 Let the winds of dawn that blow
 Softly round your dreaming head
 Such a day of welcome show
 Eye and knocking heart may bless,
 Find our mortal world enough;
 Noons of dryness find you fed
 By the involuntary powers,
 Nights of insult let you pass
 Watched by every human love.

These Foolish Things

(Text by Eric Maschwitz)

Oh! Will you never let me be?
 Oh! Will you never set me free?
 The ties that bound us
 Are still around us
 There's no escape that I can see
 And still those little things remain
 That bring me happiness or pain
 A cigarette that bears a lipstick's traces
 An airline ticket to romantic places
 And still my heart has wings
 These foolish things remind me of you
 A tinkling piano in the next apartment
 Those stumbling words that told you what
 my heart meant
 A fair ground's painted swings
 These foolish things remind me of you
 You came you saw you conquer'd me
 When you did that to me
 I knew somehow this had to be
 The winds of March that make my heart
 a dancer
 A telephone that rings but who's to answer?

Oh, how the ghost of you clings!
 These foolish things remind me of you
 First daffodils and long excited cables
 And candle lights on little corner tables
 And still my heart has wings
 These foolish things remind me of you
 The park at evening when the bell has
 sounded
 The "Ile de France" with all the gulls around it
 The beauty that is Spring's
 These foolish things remind me of you
 How strange how sweet to find you still
 These things are dear to me
 They seem to bring you near to me
 The sigh of midnight trains in empty stations
 Silk stockings thrown aside dance invitations
 Oh, how the ghost of you clings!
 These foolish things remind me of you
 Gardenia perfume ling'ring on a pillow
 Wild strawb'ries only seven francs a kilo
 And still my heart has wings
 These foolish things remind me of you
 The smile of Garbo and the scent of roses
 The waiters whistling as the last bar closes
 The song that Crosby sings

These foolish things remind me of you
How strange how sweet to find you still
These things are dear to me
They seem to bring you near to me
The scent of smould'ring leaves, the wail of
 steamers
Two lovers on the street who walk like dreamers
Oh, how the ghost of you clings!
These foolish things remind me of you

13

In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning

(Text by Bob Hilliard)

In the wee small hours of the morning
While the whole wide world is fast asleep
You lie awake and think about the girl
And never, ever think of counting sheep
When your lonely heart has learned its
 lesson
You'd be hers if only she would call
In the wee small hours of the morning
That's the time you miss her most of all
When your lonely heart has learned its
 lesson

You'd be hers if only she would call
In the wee small hours of the morning
That's the time you miss her most of all

14

Every Time We Say Goodbye

(Text by Cole Porter)

Every time we say goodbye
I die a little
Every time we say goodbye
I wonder why a little
Why the Gods above me
Who must be in the know
Think so little of me
They allow you to go
When you're near
There's such an air of spring about it
I can hear a lark somewhere
Begin to sing about it
There's no love song finer
But how strange the change
From major to minor
Every time we say goodbye
When you're near

There's such an air of spring about it
I can hear a lark somewhere
Begin to sing about it
There's no love song finer
But how strange the change
From major to minor
Every time we say goodbye

15

Nacht und Träume

(Text by Matthäus von Collin)

Heil'ge Nacht, du sinkest nieder;
Nieder wallen auch die Träume,
Wie dein Mondlicht durch die Räume,
Durch der Menschen stille Brust.
Die belauschen sie mit Lust;
Rufen, wenn der Tag erwacht:
Kehre wieder, heil'ge Nacht!
Holde Träume, kehret wieder!

Holy night, you fall;
dreams are also floating down,
like your moonlight floats through space,
through the silent hearts of men.
They listen with delight,
crying out when day awakes:
return, holy night!
Sweet dreams, return!

Night and Day

(Text by Cole Porter)

Night and day, you are the one
 Only you beneath the moon, under the sun
 Whether near to me or far
 It's no matter darlin', where you are

I think of you night and day
 Night and day, why's it so
 That this longing for you, follows wherever I go
 In the roaring traffic's boom

In the silence of my lonely room
 I think of you night and day
 Night and day, under the hide of me
 There's an ooh, such a hungry yearning,
 burning inside of me

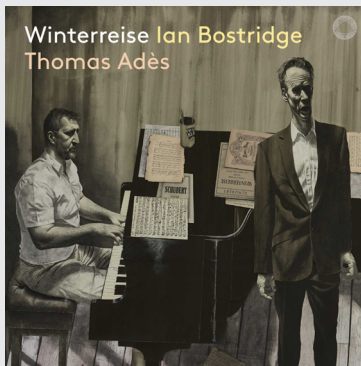
And this torment won't be through
 Till you let me spend my life making love to you
 Day and Night
 Night and Day



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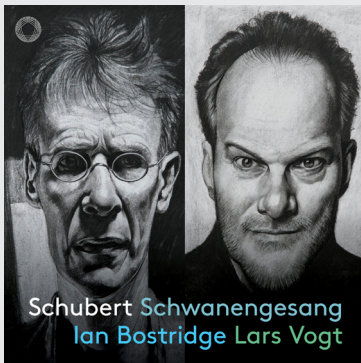
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