The Music of Benjamin Britten:

on “Otherness”
in Life, Love and Death

Canticle V: The Death of Saint Narcissus, Op. 89

Benjamin Britten
(1913–1976)

T.S. Eliot
(1888–1965)

Donald George, tenor
Jessica Suchy-Pilalis, harp

Canticle V, The Death of Saint Narcissus, Op 89, was written in 1974 while Britten was recuperating from a heart operation. His reading at this time included poetry by T. S. Eliot, whom he admired ‘for the clarity and security of his language’, and he decided to set this early poem in memory of his friend William Plomer, librettist of Gloriana and the three Church Parables, who had died the previous year. As Britten was still not well enough to play the piano himself, the accompaniment was assigned to the harp, to be played by his friend and colleague Osian Ellis. Britten himself was to die the following year, and this setting is an instance of his apparent preoccupation with death in his final years, of which the most notable example was his last opera, Death in Venice.

The Death of Saint Narcissus is a species of erotica. Narcissus discusses the life, transfiguration and death of a saint, but it also deals with the themes of narcissism, sexual violence, sexual perversity and sado-masochism. The narrator seems to suggest that we are the invited participants. Indeed we must experience in intimate detail his grotesque destruction. Narcissus, in his “otherness” is unable to follow the way which is considered normal, natural and good. Decadence, in the sense of spiritual death is Saint Narcissus's fulfillment. Eliot shows us that art and decadence are corresponding values rather than opposites. (from notes by Michael Short 1992)