From an Old Ballad to a Minor Opera. Benjamin Britten’s *The Golden Vanity: A vaudeville for boys and piano after the old English ballad.*

*The Golden Vanity* (Opus 78) is a short (a performance lasts only 17 minutes) piece composed in 1966 by Benjamin Britten for boys choir and piano. The libretto was written by the director and writer Colin Graham (1931-2007) and it is based on a traditional English ballad, dating from the early 17th century. The piece is dedicated „Fur die Wiener Sängerknaben”, the Vienna Boys’ Choir¹ [Craggs 2002: 56]. As the composer noted in his introduction to the libretto, the piece was composed in response to a direct request of the young singers. They asked Britten to write an opera which they would be able to perform on tour, however, they wanted one in which there would be no female parts [Britten Graham 1979: 325]. Consequently, Britten composed an opera in which (just as it is in *Billy Budd*) all the parts are sung by male voices, „robust, all-male story of the galleon „The Golden Vanity” told by a double chorus of treble voices” [Reed 2004: 82]. The premiere took place in the Maltings Concert Hall in Snape on the 3rd of June 1967, a as a part of the Aldeburgh Festival. The opera was sung by the Vienna Boys’ Choir with the composer conducting and providing piano accompaniment [LeGrove 1999: 314]. However, the young choristers from Vienna recorded their performance only 30 years later.

The term ‘vaudeville’, the musical genre description provided by the composer, may be interpreted in a variety of ways. Britten wrote a short introduction to the published libretto. He laboriously describes possible provenance of the word: either from Olivier Basselin’s comic song „Vaux de Vire” from the 15th century or from current, usually satirical poems sang in France to the melodies of well known ballads in the 18th century. It is also possible that the name came from the French expression ‘voix de ville’ – ‘voice of the city’. The

¹ Wiener Sängerknaben (Vienna Boys’Choir) is one of the oldest choirs in the world, it was established in 1498 by emperor Maximilian I, Franz Schubert used to be one of its singers.

² According to Stephen Arthur Allen *The Golden Vanity* is “a children’s *Billy Budd*: the piece even includes a direct reference to its ‘parent’ opera (the firing of the canon at Figs. 17-21)” [Allen 1999: 289]. Philip Reed also states that “in some ways the work is a miniature *Billy Budd*” [Reed 2004: 82].
composer states that these vaudevilles, apparently, still understood as songs, were included in dramatic performances (Britten refers to the so called comédie en vaudeville, closely related to the the German Singspiel, English ballad opera, and Polish śpiewogra), usually performed by wandering actors. Later still, vaudeville finale was used to end a play, each of the characters sang one line to the same melody. The term was also used in reference to plays in verse and parodies of operas [Britten Graham 1979: 325]. Britten’s introduction brings a lot of information but it fails to clarify the reason why the composer chose to apply the name vaudeville to his own work.³ Probably the most rational and applicable explanation is that The Golden Vanity is a dramatised and expanded ballad.

However, regardless of which of the available choices we apply (there are still others, the term vaudeville was also used, especially in the United States, to denote performances otherwise known as varietes, combining various dramatic, dance, and musical forms, including even elements of circus shows) the term vaudeville has always been used in reference to performances of light, entertaining, satirical, or outright comic character. The Golden Vanity certainly is not a light and casual piece. According to Stephen Arthur Allen „if Noye’s Fludde was about redemption through the sea, [The Golden Vanity] is about death in it” [Allen 1999: 289].

The contents of The Golden Vanity consist of the plot of a traditional English ballad dramatised and to an extent divided into parts. The crews of the two ships serve as two choruses, introducing and commenting upon the events, there are also five solo parts. James Child included the original ballad in his The English and Scottish Popular Ballads as number 286 under the title The Sweet Trinity. It is the name of the eponymous ship in the first published version of the ballad (more precisely – in the oldest surviving publication as the so called broadside) printed by Samuel Pepys between 1682 and 1685⁴. The title of the first publication was „Sir Walter Raleigh sailing in the Low-lands”, however, with the passage of

³ Reed also expressed doubts concerning the term, in his review of a recording of the piece he uses the following phrase: “described as ‘vaudeville’” [Reed 2004: 82], distancing himself from the name used by Britten.

⁴ The publication is not dated but it includes a note that it was approved by R. L. S. (Sir R. L’Estrange was responsible for censorship from 1663 to 1685) in the printing press of J. Conyersa (active 1682-1691) [Childs (ed.) 1956: 139). The website Folk Music of England, Ireland, Wales, and America is more specific and claims that ballad was licensed in June-November 1685 (http://www.contemplator.com/sea/vanity.html access: 23.02.2015).
time it changed as the name of the ship did, she became “The Golden Trinity”, “The Golden China Tree”, “The English Canopy”, “The Merry Golden Tree”, to mention but a few of the names [Brown 2001: 14]. Curiously enough, Child’s work is not included among twenty collections of traditional ballads included in the catalogue of Britten and Pearce’s library. Reed claims that “Britten certainly knew the ballad „The Golden Vanity” from the early 1940s” [Reed 2004: 82], but he fails to clarify the source of this piece of information.

The ballad is still performed and recorded e.g. by the band Peter, Paul and Mary, Ewan McColl and Peggy Seegers, more recently by Bob Dylan and the country singer Loudon Wainwright III. The YouTube channel includes thousands of, mostly amateur, performances of the ballad. The melody was used by Ralph Vaughan Williams who composed a military march in 1933. The unfinished composition has recently been orchestrated by Douglas E. Warnera.

Sir Walter Raleigh (1554-1618), mentioned in the earliest known version of the ballad, is a well known historical figure, the founder of the first English colony in North America, sailor, discoverer, poet, historian, famous for his quest for the legendary land of gold called Eldorado. The adventure described in the ballad is not known to Sir Walter’s biographers, it probably belongs to apocryphal stories of which the best known is the story of Sir Walter throwing his cloak in front of Queen Elizabeth I to protect her shoes from a puddle. The story in the ballad, however, seems at least to some degree based on facts. The first two lines of the late 17th century version are “Sir Walter Rawleigh has built a ship, / In the Neatherlands” [Child 1956: 136]. Raleigh indeed built a ship at his own expense, she was originally called “Ark Raleigh” after the contemporary fashion of calling ships after their owners. The ship was soon bought by the Queen and renamed “Ark Royale”, she served valiantly in the Royal Navy until 1636 as the flagship.

Raleigh was accused (though the accusation was never made official) that he had left one of his shipman to drown to avoid being caught by a Spanish galleon [Brown 2001: 14]. The ship full of gold which must be taken safely to port might be an allusion to the Portuguese carrack “Madre de Deus” full of gold, spices, ivory, and other valuable goods worth up to half a million pounds in gold which Raleigh took in 1592. One may consequently assume that the ballad was originally composed in the early decades of the 17th century and its contents reflect circulating tales and stories about the valiant sailor and discoverer.

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5 The website Folk Music of England, Ireland, Wales, and America claims that ballad was composed about 1635 (http://www.contemplator.com/sea/vanity.html dostęp: 23.02.2015).
The plot of the ballad may be summed up as follows: a ship is attacked by an enemy galley. The captain addresses the crew, asking whether any of its members can sink the enemy vessel. Cabin-boy\(^6\) volunteers and asks for remuneration. The distraught captain offers him a prize, gold and silver, ultimately, he offers also the hand of his daughter in marriage. The boy jumps into the sea and sinks the enemy ship, drilling holes in her hull. When the enemy galley sinks the boy swims back to his ship but the captain refuses to help him get aboard.

All the known versions of the text follow more or (more often) less closely this storyline. It is quite interesting, however, and rather unusual in folk ballads, various versions differ not only in details concerning the origin of the eponymous ship (e.g. Brown quotes a version in which “The Gold Vanity” is Northern American) as well as her enemy (variously Turkish, Spanish, or French) but they also have completely different endings. The ending of Pepys’ version, as Child noted, is “sufficiently inadequate to impel almost any singer to attempt an improvement and a rather more effective catastrophe” [Child 1956: 137] and one can hardly question this assessment.

„You promised me gold and promised me fee,  
Your eldest daughter my wife she must be.”
„You shall have gold and you shall have fee,  
But my eldest daughter your wife shall never be”
„Then fare you well, you cozening lord,  
Seeing you are not as good as your word”
And thus I shall conclude my song,  
Of the sailing in the Low-lands  
Wishing all happiness to all seamen both old and young.  
In their sailing in the Low-lands [Child 1956: 137].

The conclusion is, to say the least, odd. The Cabin-boy swimming in the middle of the sea around his ship from which he jump is hardly in position to take offence and swim away. It

\(^6\) Cabin-boy was the lowest position on a ship, usually offered to young men of 14 to 16 years of age. It certainly was not a job for children. The position of a cabin-boy was close to that of a servant but it offered an opportunity to show courage and talent at sea. Lord Nelson started his brilliant naval career as a cabin-boy.
seems just as improbable that captain’s unreliability would touch him so deeply that he would decide to commit suicide.

There are at least one hundred and eleven versions of the ballad [Brown 2001: 15]. There are among them such versions in which the captain of “The Golden Vanity” sails away, leaving the boy to drown. There is one in which the boy swims around the ship and his fellow shipmen help him get aboard. In yet another version the boy threatens the captain with sinking “The Golden Vanity” as well, and the captain helps the boy and pays the promised award [Brown 2001: 13]. Ultimately, in the version of O. J. Abbott the dead Cabin-boy speaks from the Netherworld and avenges his own death by sinking “The Golden Vanity” [Brown 2001: 16].

The place of action is given only in rather general terms, it is usually described as “the Lowland Sea” which Brown claims is “commonly understood to refer to the Mediterranean Sea” [Brown 2001: 14]. Certain phrases in Graham’s libretto suggest that it may not be the case e.g. the Turkish galley “had no business (I’m sure you’ll agree) / On the waters of the Lowland Sea” or “Oh, whoever heard of Turkeys / Upon the Lowland Sea” [Britten Graham 1979: 325]. The presence of Turkish (actually, more likely from Algiers or Tunis, both under Ottoman control at the time) pirates was hardly surprising in the Mediterranean. Consequently, the ballad may refer rather to the Netherlands (known also as Holland or the Lowlands) and the southern part of the North Sea where Turks were, indeed, rare guests.

Graham’s libretto tells the story of the galleon “The Golden Vanity” which sailed from the North Country to the Lowland Sea. One day, soon after she leaves the port with a load of gold and silver coins, “The Golden Vanity” is intercepted by a Turkish (and as it soon becomes obvious) pirate galley. The Bosun suggests that they shoot the Turks with a broadside, as it turns out the range is still too great and the bullets do not reach the Turks. However, they take advantage of the time the crew of “The Golden Vanity” needs to recharge the guns and with a single shot they shoot away the mast of the galleon. “The Golden Vanity” cannot escape any more.

The Captain and the crew are in panic, they are afraid that they will be caught and sold as slaves. The Cabin-boy speaks up, asking what he will get if he sinks the Turkish galley. The Captain and the crew initially treat the Boy’s offer as a joke and yet when he keeps on repeating “What will you give me if I sink the Turkish Galilee?” the Captain offers him silver and gold “enough and more to keep you till you grow old” [Britten Graham 1979: 326]. The Boy remarks that this old age may be cold and joyless, consequently, the Captain offers him
the hand of his daughter in marriage. The Bosum sighs bitterly, apparently he hoped to marry her one day himself. The Captain and the Cabin-boy shake hands to seal the deal.

The Boy strips, dives into the sea, and sails up to the Turkish galley. Her crew has just sat down to dine. The pirates continue to sing and dance while the Boy drills three holes in the hull with a little spike. The galley sinks with all the crew to which the crew of “The Golden Vanity” react with laughter, forgetting the Boy completely. The Boy swims up to his ship and asks for a rope, the Captain refuses, supported by the Bosun. As they sing in a duet “To protect our gold no promise was too great / But now our gold is safe, our promise we forget”[Britten Graham 1979: 327]. The crew ultimately throws the rope but the Boy is too exhausted and he dies when he manages to scramble aboard. The Captain and the Bosun confess their crimes, as they say they will not be able to sleep when they sail on the Lowland Sea. The chorus finish with a warning that whoever sails on these waters will hear the desperate cry of the Cabin-boy and the voice is heard off stage.

Graham did not alter the basic narrative structure of the old ballad. He expanded it, clarifying the details of the naval clash and the deal struck by the Cabin-boy and the Captain. In his work the simple tale of the sea gains more depth and moral ambivalence. It is no longer a simple story of sacrifice which was paid for with ingratitude but rather of a deal struck in a critical moment which one of the parties refused to honour once the critical moment passed. Graham expanded the original story in such a way as to take up such subjects as human sins and passions. We can find in the story of “The Golden Vanity” hubris (or vanity, mentioned in the very name of the ship, Graham did not choose to return to the name from the oldest known version of the ballad, “The Sweet Trinity”), avarice (which makes the Cabin-boy volunteer and which, in turn, makes the Captain refuse the boy help which results in the death of the latter), envy (the Captain may count on the support of the Bosun because the latter is envious of the Boy’s fiancée), and ultimately covetousness (the Boy agrees to sink the enemy only when promised the Captain’s daughter as his wife). None of the three main characters of the vaudeville is innocent.

Such a religious reading of the libretto is the more justified as Graham proceeded to study theology a few years after the opera was completed and ultimately took holy orders. Still he created a text which is open to interpretation and, at the same time, comprehensible and attractive both for the young singers as well as their peers in the audience for whom the more complex moral and theological considerations may prove too complex. The language of the libretto is originally playful and self-ironic (e.g. numerous asides addressed to the audience), it changes, however, gradually to a more neutral and serious. It is delicately and
playfully archaized (the use of such words as ‘league’ instead of ‘mile’, ‘Turkeys’ instead ‘Turks, or ‘spake’ instead of ‘spoke’ etc.) fits perfectly a tale addressed to children, it is to some degree like the language used in fairy tales.

*The Golden Vanity* was one of numerous pieces composed by Britten for boys’ voices and piano. One may mention here the earliest such pieces as “Three Two-Part Songs” (1932) and “Friday Afternoons” (1935). The vaudeville is dominated by the theme of the ballad which opens the piece and keeps returning like ritornellos in Baroque operas which indicates structural closeness to the parable composed by Britten in the same period in which plainsongs serve the same purpose [Reed 2004: 82]. Allen points out the accompaniment stresses the destructiveness of the relation between the Captain and the Cabin-boy, “the ballad becomes a vehicle for a set of variations – the theme (regress) and variations (progress) aesthetically reflect the roles of Cabin-boy and Captain respectively and create an air of obsession” [Allen 1999: 290]. As it has been stated above, the vaudeville is an expanded and dramatised ballad, the score confirms the proposed definition. In his work Britten struck ideal balance between the original material and freedom in its handling. The original theme returns continuously but the vaudeville is not monotonous which would be inevitable if its music consisted only of numerous repetitions of the same, fairly short motive.

In his introduction to the libretto Britten described in detail what the performance should look like. The vaudeville is to be given in costume but without scenery. The chorus is divided into two groups, representing two ships, they stand or sit in boat-like formations, thus fulfilling the functions of both ship and the crew. The only pieces of furniture are two benches as bridges of the ships. The number of props should be limited to the basic ones such as telescope and a rope [Britten Graham 1979: 324].

In his review of the CD recorded by the choir of the Christ Church cathedral in Oxford, Reed called the opera not known enough, however, it is performed by numerous boys’ and girls’ choirs all around the world. Unfortunately, it has apparently not been yet performed by any such Polish choir. The only available video recording of a performance is that of the Cor Vivaldi Petits Cantors de Catalunya (the recording took place in Barcelona in March 2011, it was published as a CD and it available online). The performance of the Cor Vivaldi, a part of a larger show entitled *Bèsties i Pirates* does not follow the guidelines of Britten too closely.

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7 The programme of *Bèsties i Pirates* is available at http://corvivaldi.org/agenda/bestiesiPirates.pdf (access: 23.02.2015), the recording of the
The young Catalan singers are a mixed choir, the stage is dominated by girls who sing all the solo parts. A piano is placed in the centre of the stage with Oscar Boada, the director and accompanist of the performance, the instrument separates the two “ships” marked on the stage by two circles of light. This structure is very clear and comprehensible but as a result the whole performance is rather static. Each of the ships has one single cannon.

An additional element of the performance is animation prepared by Pere Puig on the basis of drawings of Cristina Losantos which is projected above the stage. Images of ships, raising the flag, the Captain’s daughter, etc. appear on the screen above the heads of the young singers. Even though not included in the original stage directions the animation is a perfect solution. It serves the same purpose as surtitles in opera, explaining the events on the stage to the young Catalan audience who cannot follow the English language libretto. The only other change is that the Boy drowns (disappearing in the proscenium) instead of dying aboard, consequently, the final scene of burial at sea is omitted.

Due to its limited length *The Golden Vanity* appears on records only as a part of larger selections. The oldest available recording of Wandsworth School Boys’ Choir was made in 1969 with the accompaniment of Britten himself. It was published only in 1993 with *Noye’s Fludde*. Britten’s *vaudeville* has since been recorded at least six times, the Wiener Sängerknaben, at whose request the opera was originally composed, recorded it in 1996.

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show was published on a DVD: *Bèsties i Pirates*, Cor Vivaldi Petits Cantors de Catalunya, Oscar Boada (conductor), Barcelona, March 2011.

Summary
The article presents a little known opera (a ‘vaudeville’) of Benjamin Britten entitled The Golden Vanity (1966). The article presents the history of creation of the opera at the request of the Vienna Boys’ Choir singers, the history of the 17th century ballad, originally entitled “The Sweet Trinity”, which inspired the composer, and comments upon the historical sources of the text of the ballad. The libretto of the opera is analysed in detail with some comments on the original stage directions of the composer and actual performances.

Streszczenie
Artykuł przedstawia mało znawaną operę (jak określił to sam kompozytor ‘vaudeville’) Benjamina Britten zatytułowaną The Golden Vanity z roku 1966. Artykuł omawia historię powstania utworu na prośbę śpiewaków Wiedeńskiego Chóru Chłopięcego, dzieje siedemnastowiecznej ballady, pierwotnie zatytułowanej “The Sweet Trinity”, która była dla kompozytora źródłem inspiracji oraz omawia możliwe źródła historyczne jej tekstu. Libretto i
muzyka poddane zostały szczegółowej analizie, uzupełnionej uwagami dotyczącymi didaskaliów kompozytora oraz znanymi wystawieniami utworu.