

Case Study of "When I am Laid in Earth"

The aria 'When I am Laid in Earth,' also known as 'Dido's Lament,' is from the opera Dido and Aeneas. It was composed by Henry Purcell and the libretto was written by Nahum Tate. There is no exact date of composition, but it is said to be written before 1688 (Wikipedia 03/01/22). The recitative and aria are found in the third act and is the last solo aria to be sung in the Opera. The recitative and aria occur when Aeneas leaves for Italy and Dido commits suicide because she cannot be without Aeneas who she loves. Dido sings the recitative while she is dying to Belinda, who is her sister and handmaid.

The recitative is sang over block chords which makes the listener actively listen to what the singer is telling us and is not being distracted by the music. It does not have a tempo marking so allows the singer to take the melody at her own pace or to add more feeling to the text and allows the listener to take in the meaning of the words. There is a purposeful clash with the piano and vocal line on the important words such as the word "darkness." Also, the word "darkness" is an example of word painting in the form of melisma. The notes sang on the word "darkness" are C, Bb, A, Bb, G, Ab, Bb, which is very chromatic. Both the recitative and the aria are both quite chromatic which makes it feel as though the singer is in pain or that her life is ebbing away and adds a sense of darkness to the aria.

The recitative's melody sets the scene for the aria's line (John Styx 04/12/05).

"There is something ominous about the ominous about moving down a semitone; maybe it's a jab of pain, maybe it's Dido is growing light-headed" (Jenna Simeonov 06/12/16).

The aria is set in the key of G minor, a minor key can give the piece a sense of sadness if it is played at a slow tempo but if it is written in a faster tempo, it could give the impression of anger.

You would usually expect a sad sentiment to be sung in a minor mode. However, composers can play with these expectations to highlight an underlying ambivalence in a text (E.T. Harris, Curtis Price)

The aria is marked *Larghetto* which means slower than *Andante* but not as slow as *Largo*. As a result of the aria being so slow, the audience is forced to listen to the words and fully take in the meaning behind the lyrics. It could also be written as *larghetto* to show that the character is dying, struggling to form her words or that her speech has slowed down.

There is a descending chromatic ground baseline which occurs many times during the piece. The ostinato bass is five bars long and there is a nine bar vocal line that soars over it. As a result, there are nearly two full cycles of the bass ostinato in the first verse of 'When I am Laid in Earth'. The bass clef is in octaves which gives a deeper tone to the music and makes the music feel darker. It could also be a representation of the ground as the bass is so low and makes us feel as though she is on her way to her grave.

The ground bass is 5 bars long and descends chromatically while the vocal line strives upwards in stepwise motion from the tonic to Eb. The voice enters after one full bass pattern. The first two lines 'When I am laid in earth may my wrongs create / no trouble in thy breast' are both written so that they end on a D chord which is also the centre of the ground bass. This creates a dominant harmony. (E.T Harries, Curtis Price)

There are lots of suspensions for example, bar 6 of the aria. The singer sings the notes B flat to A natural. These notes are sang over an F sharp minor chord (F#, A, D) with the added 6th (13th) which is a D. The B flat is the fourth note and it resolves back to the A which create a beautiful suspension in bar 6.

There are many phrases that descend through the register. This could be Purcell's interpretation of the fact that she is on her way to her grave or that she is heading into darkness. This piece is a fantastic example of the use of word painting. There are many musical tools that can aid word painting such as tempo, key, the use of syllabic or melismatic writing, and chromaticism. All of these musical elements have been used in this aria and makes us picture the scene by just listening. There is both syllabic and melismatic writing in the piece which give the piece both a sense of directness and sometime fear or pain. For example, there is syllabic writing at the end of bar 25 going into bar 26. The piece is mainly melismatic is there is more than one note to a syllable.

Word painting is when the melody of a song reflects the meaning of the word (Yorkshire Youth and Music 20/10/20).

When the writing is melismatic, it can highlight certain words and enhances emotional impact and when the expressive meaning of a word overwhelms its grammatical or rhythmic place in the poem. The clarity of words can be either partly or greatly obscured as the shape of the melody takes prominence over the natural flow of the text. For example, on the word 'trouble' Purcell uses a tritone which is a carefully avoided interval in the Renaissance, but it is part of the forward-striving energy that drives tonality" (E.T. Harris, Curtis Price).

There are many points in the aria when there are quite large intervals between notes which sound like the singer could be desperate or scared. The motif "Remember me" is sung, it is repeated three times. This adds emphasis to the phrase and makes it clear to the audience that this is the most important part of the song and makes the audience remember that moment of disparity and heartbreak. When the words "Remember me" are sang on the G, it reminds me of the last moment of energy that people have just before they die, it also reminds me of a high-pitched cry or a scream in pain. The motif starts on a repeated D which is the dominant of the key of G minor, then this is repeated. The third remember me is slightly different as it starts on the dominant note (D) and goes back to the tonic note (G). The final phrase is a descending vocal line down the register to the tonic note (G) as if she is finally resting. There is a perfect cadence in the final two bars of the vocal line which is a Dominant 7th chord (D, F, A, C) to the tonic chord (G, Bb, D).

Trevor Pinnock describes this motif as "a devastated cry of woman parted forever from her lover" (24/03/17).

Word painting was particularly important in Baroque music and to Purcell personally. He wrote, "as poetry is the harmony of words, wo music is that of notes; and as poetry is a rise above prose and oratory, so music the exaltation of poetry."

"Lines moving by descending semitones were and are often used metaphorically to depict death." (A Piece a Week 28/04/11)

As well as the musical elements of the piece, the words are equally important. In the recitative, the words are setting the scene for the whole aria. The words "Thy hand Belinda" could mean that she wants Belinda to reach out her hand to support or comfort her while she is dying. The next phrase is "Darkness shades me" and I

interpret this to mean that everything is going dark as the light in her life (Aeneas) has gone and all hope is gone. Next, she says to Belinda "on thy bosom let me rest". To me, this means that she's asking Belinda to let her rest with her so that she feels safe as she is the only person that can console her while she dies. She says to Belinda that she would do more, but she is dying in the sentence, "More I would but death invades me". The last sentence of the recitative is "Death is now a welcome guest" which is one of the most heart-breaking lines in the recitative. She is saying that death is now a comfort to her as she is so unhappy with her life and feels as though she will never be happy again. In the aria, the first line is "When I am Laid in Earth, may my wrongs create no trouble," and I believe this implies that when she has died, Belinda should forget the way that Dido died and that it shouldn't cause her any pain as Dido believes that living without Aeneas is worse than death. The she sings "no trouble in thy breast" she is trying to tell Belinda not to let her death or the circumstances behind her death cause any pain in her heart. The most memorable line in the aria is "Remember me, but ah forget my fate." This line is telling Belinda that she should not forget Dido, but she should forget the way she died.

"Purcell's music here is both touching and tragic, reaching a distinctly grand level as the opera comes to a close." (A Piece a Week 28/04/11)

Appendix

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When I am laid in earth

from
DIDO AND AENEAS

Henry Purcell

Recitative
DIDO:

Thy hand, Be-lin - da; dark ness shades me, on thy

bo - som let me rest. More I would, but Death in -

vades me; Death is now a wel - come guest.

G minor
Larghetto - *faster than Largo*

word painting
chromaticism
melismatic
Al in F minor
Suspension
Suspension
pp
pp
G *F#* *F* *E* *E♭* *D* *B* *C* *D*

26

p

When I am laid, 3 am

melismatic chromatic

suspension

laid

descending lines

in

earth, may my wrongs cre - ate perfect

ground bass

descending lines

perfect 4th

trou - ble, no trou - ble in thy breast.

tritone

perfect 4th

tritone

suspension

melismatic

chromatic

When I am laid, am laid in

pp

earth, may my wrongs cre - ate *Perfect 4th* No

trou - ble, *tritone* *perfect 4th* no trou - ble in thy breast.

Re - mem - ber me, *mp* *mp espressivo* re -

mem - ber me, but ah! for -

28

The image shows a handwritten musical score for voice and piano, page 28. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of four systems of music. The first system has a vocal line starting with 'get' and a piano accompaniment. The second system has a vocal line starting with 'ah!' and a piano accompaniment. The third system has a vocal line starting with 'mem - ber me,' and a piano accompaniment. The fourth system has a vocal line starting with 'ah!' and a piano accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Handwritten annotations in blue ink are present throughout the score, including 'cresc.', 'decresc.', 'f', 'mp', 'mp espressivo', and 'descending lines'. There are also handwritten 'V' marks above some notes.

get my fate. Re - mem - ber me, but

ah! for - get my fate. Re -

mem - ber me, re - mem - ber me, but

ah! for - get my fate. Re -

Annotations: *cresc.*, *decresc.*, *f*, *mp*, *mp espressivo*, *descending lines*, *V*

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V7

mem - ber me, but ah! for - get my

decresc.

descending lines

decresc.

V - I = Perfect Cadence

fate.

p espressivo

cresc.

mf

decresc.

pp

dominant-tonic

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