

Yan Che
Shakespeare's Dramatic Language
November 8, 2017

Original Passage, Othello, 2.1.183-188.

[...] O my soul's joy!
If after every tempest come such calms,
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas
Olympus-high and duck again as low
As hell's from heaven!

Minor adaptation of text (see score):

May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas
Olympus-high and duck again as low
As hell's from heaven!

O my soul's joy! Let every tempest come,
But thou art here, such calms are ever mine.

Commentary:

First, a brief digression. I first wish to respond to Dolar's comment that "Singing is bad communication; it prevents a clear understanding of the text... in polyphony to the point of incomprehensibility" (Dolar 550); my immediate point of comparison is the following scene from Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*:

MOZART

But it's new, it's entirely new.
It's so new, people will go mad for
it. For example, I have a scene in
the second act - it starts as a duet,
just a man and wife quarreling.
Suddenly the wife's scheming little
maid comes in unexpectedly - a very
funny situation. Duet turns into
trio. Then the husband's equally
screaming valet comes in. Trio turns
into quartet. Then a stupid old
gardener - quartet becomes quintet,
and so on. On and on, sextet, septet,
octet! How long do you think I can
sustain that?

JOSEPH

I have no idea.

MOZART

Guess! Guess, Majesty. Imagine the longest time such a thing could last, then double it.

JOSEPH

Well, six or seven minutes! maybe eight!

MOZART

Twenty, sire! How about twenty? Twenty minutes of continuous music. No recitatives.

VON SWIETEN

Mozart -

MOZART

(ignoring him)

Sire, only opera can do this. In a play, if more than one person speaks at the same time, it's just noise. No one can understand a word. But with music, with music you can have twenty individuals all talking at once, and it's not noise - it's a perfect harmony. Isn't that marvelous?¹

“With music you can have twenty individuals all talking at once, and it’s not noise.” That seems to me the great advantages of not opera, but also other forms of large-scale choral music. There are several reasons that singing might function as an advantageous form communication, if we consider Smith’s various treatments of the different attributes of a sound: two of the most obvious include timbre, which I have already discussed in my passage for emphasis this week, is I believe instrumental to meaning; as well as register – in operas, even more so than in normal speech, the human voice is pushed to the limits of its range, and so the different characters’ voices are even more differentiated in a play. These attributes are, at least according to my musical training, only emphasized in polyphony, as it is precisely the different qualities of the parts that make them distinguishable.

It is with a defense of the ways in which song can not merely enable an understanding of the text, but in fact add to the auditor’s understanding, in mind that I chose to capture a few lines of Othello in aria form.

Now, to my exercise: *Othello* provides an excellent departure point for an operatic imitation, because there are the two prominent existing adaptations of the play already – Rossini’s from 1816, and Verdi’s more famous one from 1887. From purely my own fandom, I was always sad that there were no Handel adaptations of Shakespeare plays, and so I sought, in my imitation, to make some Handelian gestures in writing a *da capo* aria for countertenor from the lines where Othello describes his joy in being reunited with Desdemona. My main technique of representing

¹ <http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/amadeus.html>

the sound of the passage was through text-painting, a compositional technique where musical elements, such as the shape of a melody or the musical texture, corresponds to the meaning of the words being sung.

The agitated repeating texture of rapid sixteenth notes in the accompaniment is my first effort at text-painting. I specifically emulated the musical texture of much of the aria from Handel's "Al lampo dell'armi" from *Giulio Cesare* (1724); whereas Handel uses the texture to match Caesar's state of anger and readiness for battle, I have used the same texture in the minor mode to represent the blowing winds that waken death (l. 185) (also a gesture at the *Strum und Strang* of Romantic compositions that is specifically associated with a dense arpeggiated texture).

Meanwhile, Handel's "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted" from *Messiah* (1741) and Haydn's "Rolling in foaming billows" from *The Creation* (1797) provided excellent examples of melodic text-painting. In my m. 17, the undulation in the melody represents the bark floating on the water (l.186), while in mm. 18-21, a rising sequence mimics the motion of ever-rising "hills of seas" until the flourish at mm. 23-29 represent the highest section of music (and barely below the standard tessitura of a countertenor at E5) to represent "Olympus high" (l.187). The appoggiatura on the half cadence in mm 36-7 on "heaven" (l. 188) is meant to be somewhat ironic – a half-cadence is incomplete, as it does not return to the tonic (and here we are already in the secondary key of D, rather than the home key of b, which is a further unsettling) – but the graceful appoggiatura nonetheless is intended to capture an association with heaven.

In order to make the text fit better with melodic singing, I slightly altered Shakespeare's text of ll. 183-184, and have introduced an additional irony by bringing back the Handelian texture of the agitated sixteenth notes in mm. 38-47 while the voice part sings about joy and calm – there is both the reference to the "tempest" of l.184 and the idea (by placing the major mode section as the B section of the *da capo* aria) that the peace is short-lived. Thus my aria concludes by returning to the minor-mode winds, suggesting the troubles that lie ahead for Othello and Desdemona; this is another feature of my adaptation that is facilitated by my slight adjustment of Shakespeare's text.