

Mary Prokop
Shakespeare's Dramatic Language
Othello
11/5/17

DESDEMONA [singing]

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow.
Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow.
The fresh streams ran by her and murmured her moans,
Sing willow, willow, willow;
Her salt tears fell from her, and softened the stones

...

Sing willow, willow, willow.

...

Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve
(*Othello* 4.3.43 – 56)

As a lifelong singer, lapsed harpist, and daughter of a professional musician, I listen instinctively for the music of language. This week's emphasis on sound provided some new resources for doing so. For this exercise, I decided to set Desdemona's folk "song of a willow"—the one her maid Barbary died singing—to music (4.3.30). In the recording, you'll here me singing and playing a simple accompaniment on the harp. The harp, with its gentle tones and complex construction, is the instrument I most associate with the sweet and even-tempered yet bold Desdemona. My instrument is a pedal harp, which was not invented until the eighteenth century. The harp, however, is of course an ancient instrument. Harps are well suited to intimate gatherings, or as a complement to private conversations such as the one Desdemona shares with Emilia in her final hours.

Bruce R. Smith's article alerted me to one notable quality of the song's lyrics. He explains that "the strongest phoneme of all is [o:]" (225). With the willow song's variations on

the refrain of “willow, willow, willow,” the “o” factor rings out more clearly than any other in this piece. Despite the fact that the second syllable of “willow” is unstressed, its placement at the end of four different lines gives the “o” sound a lingering quality, intensified in my arrangement by the fact that the note is held out for two notes (or more, depending on its placement).

I find it difficult to explain each of the choices I made when composing and performing the song, but I will give it my best effort here. The range of notes I included in my arrangement is restricted, mirroring Desdemona’s circumscribed life of loyalty and obedience—a life that moves toward demise when she makes a single audacious choice, and when her innocence is played upon by Iago’s machinations. Similarly, I did not include varied dynamics—the sound’s “magnitude” remains even throughout. I did include a *ritardando* at the end, a slowing down or dying away that foreshadows Desdemona’s imminent death. The chord progression includes a C minor chord (C, E flat, G) and a variation of a B flat chord. The melody was not, to be honest, a conscious choice. This is the tune that felt right to me when I looked at the words—a mournful tune in a minor key sung by a voice that is conscious, but only faintly, of a coming tragedy. I toyed with the idea of enlisting another voice to speak the words, “When I love thee not, chaos is come again,” which haunted me during this re-reading of the play. I chose, instead, to allow the female voice to end on her own terms. This song allows Desdemona the peaceful ending her life should have had.