Dido and Musical Word Painting in Purcell's Opera Dido and Aeneas (1680): A Storm of Emotions

Hannah Forton
hannah.forton@valpo.edu
Dido and Musical Word Painting in Purcell's Opera *Dido and Aeneas* (1680): A Storm of Emotions

By: Hannah Forton

Valparaiso University Symposium on Undergraduate Research and Creative Expression (SOURCE)  
May 1, 2020
Research Question

How does Purcell employ musical word painting in order to express Dido’s emotional states in Act 1?
Methods

1) Historical / contextual
2) Music-analytical
Definitions

- Word painting:

“The use of musical gesture(s) in a work with an actual or implied text to reflect, often pictorially, the literal or figurative meaning of a word or phrase. A common example is a falling line [...] for 'He came down from heaven’ [...].”

Definitions

- Word-painting:

“The use of musical gesture(s) in a work with an actual or implied text to reflect, often pictorially, the literal or figurative meaning of a word or phrase. A common example is a falling line [...] for 'He came down from heaven' [...].”

Definitions

- Word-painting:

“The use of musical gesture(s) in a work with an actual or implied text to reflect, often pictorially, the literal or \textbf{figurative} meaning of a word or phrase. A common example is a falling line [...] for 'He came down from heaven' [...].”

Figurative Word Painting of Dido

No. 2
- “I am pressed with” [weighed down by] (m. 7, 14, 23, 30)
- “Torment” (m. 8, 15, 24, 31)
- “Languish” (m. 45 ff., 49 ff., 53)
- “Grief” (47, 54)

No. 5
- “Storm” (m. 2, 16)  Exception
- “Fierce” (m. 8)
- “Stubborn” (m. 13)
- “Pity” (m. 24)
Analysis 1: “I am pressed with”  
Act 1, No. 2 m. 7

Word painting: “I am pressed with”

Music-notation: Sixteenth-note following a dotted eighth

Effect: Agitation in Dido’s voice
Analysis 1: “I am pressed with”  Act 1, No. 2 m. 14

Word painting: “I am pressed with”

Music-notation: Eighth-note figure including descending semitone

Effect: Melancholy, similar to “sighing figure” (descending semitone)
Analysis 2: “Torment”

Word painting: “Torment”


Effect: Agitation (snappy rhythm) and sadness (descending semitone)
Analysis 3: “Languish”

Act 1, No. 2 m. 45

Word painting: “Languish”


Effect: Weakening, deteriorating, and unsteady
Analysis 3: “Languish”  

Act 1, No. 2 m. 49

Word painting: “Languish”

Music-notation: Very melismatic. 11 beats long. More resolution due to root position g-minor.

Effect: Unstableness
Analysis 4: “Grief”

Word painting: “Grief”

Music-notation: Descending semitone C - B flat

Effect: Melancholy (sighing figure)
Analysis 4: “Grief”

Act 1, No. 2 m. 54

Word painting: “Grief”

Music-notation: Sixteenth note followed by two dotted eighth notes.

Effect: Nervous and distress (snappy rhythm)
Analysis 5: “Storm”  

Word painting: “Storm”


Effect: Stormy
Analysis 5: “Storm”  

Act 1, No. 5 m. 16

Word painting: “Storm”


Effect: Stormy and agitated emotions.
Analysis 6: “Fierce”  

Word painting: “Fierce”  

Music notation: Quick sixteenth notes ascending a whole octave. Perfect fourth interval to start.  

Effect: Strong, aggressive, and intense
Analysis 7: “Stubborn”  
Act 1, No. 5 m. 13

Word painting: “Stubborn”


Effect: Firm and grounded
Summary and Conclusion

- Better understand Dido’s emotional state
- Unique interpretation
- Influence of storm metaphor
- Emphasizes the emotions