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

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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:

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Words of Affection

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”  

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”  Act 1, No. 2 m. 47

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”  

Word painting: “Storm”


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

Act 1, No. 5 m. 8

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