

PROGRAMME NOTES

to *Venus & Adonis*, R. 10

I became almost obsessed with it. Months had gone by and I could not get William Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* out of my mind. The musicality of its verses, the magical cadence of its rhythms, the tender love she proved, his unkind rejection; all these had glued the book to these, my hands, the poem to my eyes. It was at this time and under these circumstances that Grace Davidson and I met at a café in London in 2018. A delicious scone accompanied our conversation, which soon turned to the master Bard. When we had recorded *An Everlasting Dawn* (2017), Grace had been very encouraging and expressed an interest in my music, the memory of which encouraged me to confess I was considering setting *Venus and Adonis* to music—a song cycle, naturally. She loved the idea. We spoke about it some more and, soon enough, I had my work cut out for me.

The first step was to select those parts of the poem that would become the song texts. I tried to be as least intrusive as possible. It was daunting (for the sheer beauty of each verse begs not be cut), and yet necessary (due to the practical impossibility of setting 1194 lines of text to music). And so I cut: each cut a wound stoically borne for music's sake, like the sweet maple bears the bitter axe that wounds it for its honeyed sap. Creating a convincing dramatic arc with a good mix of varying styles and contrasting episodes was tough. Achieving a well-balanced distribution of the text between all three characters (i.e. Venus, Adonis, and the Poet) was hardly any easier, and required some clever editing at times. In the end, however, my efforts found me satisfaction.

The matter of musical cohesion had to be addressed as well. As with any set of songs, the texts themselves already offer a natural structure and cohesion of sorts, but that is hardly enough in a composition where language and music must cooperate in harmony. Creating explicit transitions from one song to the next crossed my mind early on, but seemed to me to work better for shorter cycles, such as Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte*. Perhaps a judicious use of this, complemented by other techniques, would be best; something closer to Schumann's song cycles, whose connections linking song to song, although not always explicit, are exquisite, subtle, and incredibly effective.

What of the question of cohesion in the musical construction as such, I wondered. Should I tread Beethoven's path or Wagner's? On one side we have what I like to call a 'causal approach,' in which every single detail—from ornamentation and key relations, to surface and background material, and even overall structure—is the effect of a primal cause; this *causa causarum* Beethoven called *Das Thema*. On the other side, we find discernible *Leitmotifs* to achieve long-term musical cohesion, and to indicate otherwise obscure associations between the underlying themes of the work; this could be termed the 'archetypal approach.' The inner debate dissolved when, to my astonishment, I realised both could coexist. (If it seems hard to imagine this discovery astonishing, reflect on this: who has the benefit of hindsight *a priori*?).

At the very beginning, for instance, Adonis' relation to hunting is made musically evident by his theme being sounded in a horn call's guise; it so happens that it also is the first case of word painting in the cycle, for 'hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn.' This theme is later augmented in the minor mode, and placed in the bass to support a series of suspensions and appoggiature that breathe life into the boar's theme—Adonis' transformed *Leitmotif* lying under the theme of the boar, is the music's allusion to the tragic end of the mortal's life, run over by the savage beast.

This approach, combined with the madrigalisms without which songs cease to be songs, allowed me a wide range of expressive devices whilst creating a strong sense of long-range continuity and cohesiveness that weighs not on the listener—one dare hope!

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