“Sigh no more, ladies”: A Comparative Analysis of Three Different Settings of Shakespeare’s Lyric

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Introduction

Ever since Gluck’s reforms in opera, the idea that the music should serve the text has been widely adapted by composers seeking to make a statement with their song compositions. While this idea has evolved and re-evolved over time, the fundamental aspect of a song lies within the message conveyed through the performer via the text. The research topic I have chosen is the Elizabethan lyric, “Sigh no more, ladies,” originally appearing in Shakespeare’s play *Much Ado About Nothing*, written at the turn of the seventeenth century. This study will focus mainly on the suitability of the lyrics to singing as set by three different composers: Geoffrey Bush, Roger Quilter, and Sir Arthur Sullivan. The meaning of the lyric will also be discussed as certain words within it are not readily used in today’s musical settings, such as “hey nonny, nonny” and “dumps.” The words “hey nonny, nonny” were the original inspiration for this study as they were performed on a song recital as part of the Bush setting being chosen. Understanding the meaning of everything one tries to convey as a singer is important; moreover, the ways in which composers have set the words are important to understand as one tries to select music for singing. In this study I will try to determine which of the three settings is best. I will analyze the pieces musically via Jan La Rue’s system of exploring aspects of the overall sound of the piece, the harmonies incorporated, and the rhythm of the piece, the melody, the form, and the text. The text will of course remain constant and serve as the focus of the musical analysis. Certain vocal characteristics of the piece will also be analyzed such as the relationship of certain words and their vowels to their
settings within the vocal register. Did the composer set an unaccented words such as a, an, or the on a high note? Did he place a high note on a vowel that is difficult to sing therefore needing vowel modification? The rhythms to which the words are set will also carry weight in this study. How much musical worth is given a specific word? Is it a word that needs emphasis, and if so is it set on a long note or a very short note? Ultimately the main aspects concerning text declamation will serve most important, as these are the most critical items a singer must contemplate when offering a rendition of any of these three settings. I will also examine the literature concerning the three composers and their respective settings of my text. As there is no definitive study comparing these three composers and their settings of this specific lyric, this project will serve as a starting point for other singers to look upon and help determine their opinions on the lyric. The lyric itself has been set by many more composers than the three I have chosen, with settings numbering close to forty. These three settings were chosen partly based on the reception of the composer’s overall musical output, with songs being more heavily weighed, especially in the case of Quilter, and also based on the performance of the Bush setting on my Master’s recital. My hope is to guide subsequent performers of any of the three pieces to a better understanding of the language used and to offer an educated opinion on which of the three is more suitable for conveying Shakespeare’s original intent.

As stated above, the original source of the lyric is from the Shakespeare play. The first known music setting of it is by R.J.S Stevens in the eighteenth century, but the tune may date as far back as the early 1600’s. The setting by the three composers under consideration appears as part of a song cycle in each instance. Arthur Sullivan’s setting is from his cycle *Five Shakespeare Songs* No. 3 (1866), Quilter’s is from his cycle *Four Shakespeare Songs* Op 30 No. 4 (1927), and Bush’s appears in his cycle *Three Elizabethan Songs* (1944). As the settings span nearly one hundred years, the differing sounds and musical style will be discussed as they relate to the text. None of the three settings has reached critical acclaim. Quilter’s cycle has always been overshadowed by his previous Shakespeare cycle *Three Shakespeare Songs* Op 6 (1905). Sullivan’s fame was made in the area of operetta, and therefore he is rarely recognized as having accomplished much outside of that genre. Both Sullivan and Quilter’s setting of the lyric, as it pertains to the cycle from which it is a part, of have received criticism. Both cycles are criticized for not conveying the original tenor of the lyric. However, the Bush cycle beginning with the ardent “Fire, Fire, Fire” followed by the sentimental “Sweet Stay Awhile” and ending with “Sigh No More, Ladies” takes the performer on a rollercoaster ride and ends with what may be the most poignant setting of the lyric. While Sullivan and Quilter have name recognition in common, Geoffrey Bush has not reached the same acclaim in the musical world as Quilter or Sullivan. As he was a self-taught composer, Bush’s fame came more from lecturing and his writing. Will this hinder his setting? Will Sullivan’s operetta style show through in his song? Will the fact that Quilter, so highly
acclaimed for his songs, focused mainly on this type of composing set him apart? All aspects are worth considering in this study.

**Literature Discussion**

While there is no quintessential comparative analysis, there is literature concerning the separate topics. While the lyric itself pertaining to my three composers has not received more than a paragraph or two of attention within a review, nor has it been given much study in any of the biographies and articles on said composers, information concerning compositional characteristics, Elizabethan lyrics and their significance, and especially information regarding the significance of the words in general to the performer is readily available. This information is paramount in this study of piecing together evidence and analyzing the music and text of the three pieces in order to determine which setting is best or more suitable for singing.

One important source concerning the words of this Elizabethan lyric was Mrs. Walter Carr’s “Words for Songs,” which offers some detailed information concerning the text of songs and their suitability.² She lists three types of songs: love songs, death songs, and love coupled with death songs. She notes that having sentiment to portray through the words of the song “distracts the attention from self and prevents nervousness.” She claims the sacred texts are easiest to sing whereas reflective texts are most difficult. She adds that whimsical lyrics—citing the line “hey nonny, nonny” from my lyric—are also easily sung. She distinguishes this lyric and similar one (“sing willow, 

willow, willow” etc.) from other Shakespeare lyrics that already contain “perfect melody in the words.” She claims that the latter type are less fitted for singing and offers the sonnet form as an example of containing “perfect melody in the words” whereas ballad type poetry is more suitable.

Another good source pertaining to the topic of the words is “Elizabethan Lyrics and Love-Songs” by Reginald Waddy. Here Waddy defines what an “Elizabethan” lyric is and also lists influences on the Elizabethan lyric including medieval song, ballad music, folksong, and Italian and Renaissance poetry. Waddy explains the importance of the lyric and calls it “cultivated and more suitable to the cultured mind rather than the man in the street.”

He lists another influence upon the Elizabethan lyric, Nichlas Yonge’s “Musica Transalpina,” a collection of Italian madrigals the first of which to make their way to England. Waddy discusses the suitability of musical settings of the Elizabethan language of the day and lists alliteration, assonance, parody, and euphuism as elements incorporated. These grammatical and language aspects of the lyric, discussed by Waddy, will serve as points of discussion in my study of text portrayal. Moreover, he goes on to claim that, “The Elizabethan song seems to be the natural instinct of men realizing freedom of expression and voice after the severe repression and asceticism of the Middle Ages.”

He then lists themes of Elizabethan lyrics and also some of the more accomplished lyricists, including Shakespeare and also accomplished composers. He also discusses the musical provenance of the lyric, citing an existing setting housed in the

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4 Waddy, 28.
Christ Church Library in Oxford by Thomas Forde (1580-1648), however, the earliest known setting is by R.J.S. Stevens of the eighteenth century. One last important item Waddy notes is that lyrics of Shakespeare are still being set by modern composers unlike most other Elizabethan lyrics.

Little information exists concerning the life and work of Geoffrey Bush (1920-1998). Jasper Rooper briefly discusses his musical style with his most important point relevant to this study concerning Bush’s song cycle, *A lover’s progress* (1961). Rooper claims, “...this shows Geoffrey Bush’s fondness for giving point to the words by using their natural inflections in the accompaniment before the voice enter.” The specific song cycle containing “Sigh no more, ladies” is briefly discussed in an untitled review but is pertinent to this study as the reviewer notes Bush’s having “an ear for both the rhythms of words, which are caught without pedantry, and for the musical expression of their underlying impulse.” Specifically concerning “Sigh no more, ladies,” the reviewer claims its interest “resides mainly in its flexible rhythms” and cleverly quotes the lyric in his review by adding “to one thing constant never.”

There is considerably more information regarding the other two composers, Roger Quilter (1877-1953) and Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900), but again no quintessential authority pertaining to my lyric. Percy Grainger offers some good information


concerning Quilter’s song writing. 7 Nothing specific is mentioned about the lyric but he does note that Quilter chooses texts very well and is adept at achieving “unique sensitiveness in translating the moods of these texts into music”. This is true for much of Quilter’s work, however as Valerie Langfield argues, the lyric for this study was thought by Quilter to need “lightness and joy” therefore not conveying the original “callousness” first presented in the Shakespeare play. 8 This is also noted in Trevor Hold’s Parry to Finzi: Twenty English Song-Composers, as Hold notes, “The same criticism must be leveled at “Sigh no more, ladies.” Despite elaborate fluctuations of tempo, he misses the point of the lyric completely”. 9 These two sources with their claims refuting Quilter’s ability to set lyrics serve useful when comparing the three composers.

Most of the literature surrounding Sir Arthur Sullivan pertains to other aspects of his career and not his song settings, and therefore it is difficult to find pertinent material to this study. Many biographies exist and contain information about musical style. An article in Music & Letters titled “Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900)” by Ian Parrott offers some information regarding this. His main claim is that Sullivan was a first-rate melodist, and that unlike many of his contemporaries whose melodies were based on the harmonic structure, Sullivan’s melodies could stand on their own, and compares him to Mozart in that regard. Parrott also adds that there are two considerations when dealing with the

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9 Trevor Hold, Parry to Finzi: Twenty English Song-Composers (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2002), 160.
“worth” of any given melody: value from a musical point of view and popularity. He breaks down the category of popularity into four subcategories: good/popular, bad/popular, good/unpopular, and bad/unpopular, and puts Sullivan in the bad/popular group. Overall, this article is mostly in defense of Sullivan due to a large amount of criticism. However some pertinent information concerning his style is helpful.

The Text

As stated in the previous paragraphs, the lack of information concerning an analysis of these composer’s settings might be problematic. The issue is not necessarily pressing in the overall area of music, but if one can better determine the appropriateness of a song setting when compared to one, two, or multiple other settings based on a research project such as this, the project itself becomes somewhat of a didactic study, so while the significance is not found in the problem itself as few will find this very narrowly scoped study of three composers who have gained recognition in other areas other than this particular pertinent to other areas of musical study, the results explored and discussed will certainly offer a point from which to contemplate a different approach to how and why we as singers choose music. To analytically compare three pieces that have received little attention does not address a specific problem, however, my hope is that this project may serve as a didactic study for future performers of these pieces.

The original Shakespeare lyric is as follows:

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Sigh no more ladies, sigh no more,
    Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea and one on shore,
    To one thing constant never.

Then sigh not so, but let them go,
    And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
    Into hey nonny, nonny, nonny.

Sing no more ditties, sing no more
    Of dumps so dull and heavy,
The fraud of men was ever so,
    Since summer first was leafy.

Then sigh not so, but let them go,
    And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
    Into hey nonny, nonny, nonny.

Then sigh not so, but let them go,
    And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
    Into hey nonny, nonny, nonny.

As mentioned before, understanding all the words is paramount to achieving a
successful rendition of this piece. Peter J. Seng offers some insight to the performer who
may not have a full understanding of the lyrics of Shakespeare. The first word that may
be troublesome is “nonny.” Seng describes the meaning as “to cover indelicate
allusions,” and goes on to add “that in this song they (the words hey nonny, nonny) are
surely nothing but an innocent and meaningless burden.” 11 “Blithe” and “bonny” are
two more words whose meanings may escape the performer. “Good and gay or happy”
are the best translations available for these Elizabethan lyrics. Finally Seng address the

word “dumps”. He lists it as being of Swedish dialect and defines it as a “slow mournful dance.”

Musical Analysis

With a basic understanding of the words and their intention, it is time to look at the way in which each of the three composers has set them to music beginning with Roger Quilter’s setting. The sound of his setting is whimsically simple as if to convey a thought that women should simply accept the fact that men are “deceivers” and “unfaithful.” The melody lends to this claim. It is lyrical and unfurls mainly with stepwise motion. There are a few leaps and drops, but none are of more than a sixth and none of the leaps are markedly dramatic. The leap of a fifth to the word “sigh” both times would be the best example of Quilter trying to word paint as he also marks a slight tenuto on the word.

The harmonies of this setting are equally simple. Quilter makes little use of borrowed chords as he utilizes diatonic harmonies. He does incorporate an interesting vi+9 chord.

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12 Seng, 58.
on the word “woe” as the melody fittingly descends to the lowest note of the piece and is marked with a poco ritard that implies a fermata.

Quilter releases the melody at a steady clip with tempo markings that induce rubato, again adding to the whimsical feeling of the piece. The form of the piece is strophic and Quilter ends the first verse with a “sol-mi” melodic V-I cadence in measure twenty-two, which is very typical of his vocal writing.

Overall, there are very few pitfalls in this straight-forward piece. The highest note required is F3 for the tenor, and most of the piece lies below the passaggio secondo, the area in which the tenor voice has the most difficulty. In general, this is just a pretty song
suitable for the beginner. Quilter is successful in creating a whimsical mood which the lyric suggests, but the piece’s lack of dramatic material in the music somewhat hinders its ability to convey the text.

If Quilter’s setting can be described as whimsical, Sullivan’s most surely can be described as somewhat awkward and corny. While known for his melodic prowess, Sullivan fails to create anything lasting in his setting of “Sigh no more, ladies.” The flaws lie mainly in the “boom-chunk” style accompaniment lending the sound of this piece to something more suitable for a marching band than to a singing actor. The rhythms of the piece are simple, and Sullivan uses the dotted-eighth-sixteenth-note pattern to propel the melody in an anthem-type manner ad nauseum. Sullivan uses a lot of dominant seventh chords in the accompaniment along with diatonic harmonies. If the overall sound of this piece is not its greatest failure, then Sullivan’s setting of the text must surely be. He constantly sets unimportant words such as “but” and “and” on strong down beats and makes no attempt to consider the lyric in his catchy yet flawed melodic setting.  

 Musical example demonstrates the accompaniment characteristics as well as the flawed textual setting.
The form of the piece is AAB. While the tessitura of the piece is slightly higher than Quilter’s setting, this piece could easily be attempted by a beginning, young tenor. An A4 is required. However it is set on a passing tone. Sullivan’s setting is by far the weakest of the three when concerned with the lyrics and moreover, Sullivan’s strength as a lyricist hardly shines. There are no key changes, very little tempo fluctuations, and mainly and most disappointing, the words are not taken into account making this a second-rate piece from whom many have considered to be a second-rate composer.

If the Quilter and Sullivan settings could be listed under “beginner”, the Bush setting calls for a more advanced singer. The tessitura of the piece is markedly more difficult than that of the previous two composers. The piece is strophic with the two verses being identical minus a slight alteration in the last few measures. Of the first 112 notes in the first verse, forty-two of them are in or above the passaggio secondo, which poses difficulty for the singer. The next pitfall in this piece is its ever changing meter. The song begins in a lilting ¾ meter then alternates between 2/2 and ¾ the rest of the way making it difficult to keep the quarter note constant.
The difficult rhythm combined with the changing meter requires the performer to dedicate ample attention. Bush’s melody is slightly more angular than Quilter’s or Sullivan’s as it unfurls at a slightly quicker tempo. He incorporates secondary leading-tone chords and secondary dominant chords throughout the gem of an accompaniment. Bush’s also incorporates over-the-bar-line phrasing in this piece. This helps him to not place unimportant text on down beats. Bush is successful in his setting of the lyric. Coupled with careful consideration of not stressing unimportant words, he writes a brilliant crescendo on the melodically ascending lyric “hey nonny, nonny.”

While difficult to sing, as many A4’s are required, I feel this is the most suitable and dramatic setting of the lyric. When paired with his accompaniment, Bush’s setting of this lyric turns into a thrilling piece when performed by a good singer.

Conclusion

The words of a song, whether by one of the greatest lyricists of our time, or by an amateur librettist, will always serve as the most emotion inducing element of vocal  

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14 See musical example above
15 See musical example
music. You will always have the flashy coloratura of a Rossini aria or the fantastic effect-laden music of certain twentieth-century composers. However, what it all comes down to in the end is whether or not you have something to say. Shakespeare had something to say, and Quilter, Sullivan, and Bush tried to convey this message through music. While Sullivan’s setting is amateur at best, Quilter and Bush are successful. I would not hesitate to recommend the Quilter for a beginning singer and moreover the Bush for a more advanced singer. Their ability to create a mood in the music by carefully considering the text makes their settings great. Quilter’s acclaim as a master song writer is exemplified whereas Bush’s self-taught ability shines in his setting and moreover his cycle.
Bibliography


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