

36. Purcell

'Thy hand, Belinda' and 'When I am laid in earth'

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Henry Purcell (1659–1695), one of the most important composers of the seventeenth-century, and among the very greatest of English composers, worked at the court of Charles II and his successors, and also wrote much music for church and theatre. He composed several 'semi-operas' (dramatic works with some spoken sections), partly in response to contemporary French opera but also because the continuous singing characteristic of Italian opera was not favoured in England.

'Thy hand, Belinda' and 'When I am laid in earth' are from near the end of the third and final Act of *Dido and Aeneas*, the only opera Purcell. 'When I am laid in earth' is widely referred to as 'Dido's Lament'.

Exactly what prompted Purcell to write his only real opera (without spoken sections) is uncertain. It may have been staged first at court. It was performed at a girls' school in Chelsea run by Josias Priest in 1689. The female solo parts were apparently taken by members of the school.

The plot of the opera concerns the tragic love of Queen Dido of Carthage for the Trojan hero Aeneas (based on Virgil's *Aeneid*). Aeneas falls in love with Dido, but is tricked into deserting her.

- 'Thy hand, Belinda' and 'When I am laid in earth' portray the desperate state of mind that results in Dido's suicide.
- Together they make up the kind of recitative-aria pair characteristic of Baroque opera.
- The former, which is relatively short, moves the action forward, with a brief text set without repetition in something approaching speech rhythm.
- In the latter, Dido reflects at length on her plight. She begs that her 'wrongs [may] create no trouble in [Belinda's] breast' and that she will be remembered but her dreadful fate (betrayal and death) forgotten.

Musically the aria has strong emotional unity (or, in Baroque parlance, a single 'affection' or *Affekt*) resulting partly from much textual and musical repetition. It is built on a 'ground' or 'ground bass', a repeating phrase heard over and over in the bass part. Grounds of various kinds had been widely used in England and on the Continent for many years; Purcell stands almost at the end of this tradition.

Performing forces and their handling

'Thy hand, Belinda'

- Like many Baroque recitatives, this is for one singer (Dido, a soprano) with continuo accompaniment.

- In the anthology score, the continuo accompaniment is shown just as a figured bass – that is, as a single bass part, played by a single string instrument, with figures underneath to indicate the type of chord required at each point. (It is not certain if any of the figuring is Purcell's own.)
- The bass part is played in the anthology recording by a cello (a twentieth-century copy of a seventeenth-century instrument).
- A harpsichord has been used in many performances to realise the figuring, but some recent performers have preferred (as on the anthology recording) a fretted instrument – in the present case, apparently a larger variety of lute known as an archlute.
- The pitch of the recording is approximately a semitone lower than modern concert pitch to accord with what appears to have been late seventeenth-century practice.

'When I am laid in earth'

- The aria was scored for soprano (Dido again) with strings and continuo.
- The opening statement of the ground bass is played on the recording by cello only.
- The second statement (bar 6) introduces the upper strings – first and second violins and violas.
- The continuo bass is now reinforced by (an eighteenth-century) double bass.
- There is no figuring, but the archlute is still heard on the anthology recording.

Purcell directed the violins to play 'very soft' – one of few dynamic indications in *Dido and Aeneas* that are likely to date from the earliest times. Violins would have outnumbered lower strings and probably been the most likely to need this instruction. Quiet orchestral accompaniment does not mean that the vocal part would necessarily have lacked moments of passion delivered at considerable volume – especially perhaps at the repeated calls 'Remember me'.

Texture

'Thy hand, Belinda'

- On paper the texture is two-part with singer and continuo.
- However, the archlute player provides (improvised) harmonic infilling, guided by the figuring.
- The expression 'melody-dominated homophony' acknowledges the ornate vocal melody and the slow-moving harmonic accompaniment.

'When I am laid in earth'

- The aria begins with a statement of the ground bass alone – monophony.
- The voice is then accompanied by full strings in homophony – the term for the whole texture in much of the aria is again 'melody-dominated homophony'.
- There is little rhythmic elaboration in the string parts, except where the voice rests in bar 38.
- Occasionally, the string homophony is homorhythmic (notably in bars 6-7).

The phrase structures of the ground bass and of the voice part are usually at variance. Dido enters, for example, on the last note of ground bass statement 1 rather than at the start of statement 2. The variance is greatest from bar 25, but is 'resolved' at bars 35-36 where

voice and ground bass cadence together (and at bars 45-46). The element of variance is more interesting musically than continuous regularity, but is also a little unsettling, perhaps deliberately to heighten the dramatic tension.

NB: In the following text superscript figures refer to beat numbers.

Sometimes first violins move in similar motion to the ground bass. See bar 26³ to bar 29², fundamentally in 3rds and then in 6ths although the underlying parallelism is elaborated with suspensions, first at bar 27¹⁻²

The introduction of descending melodic passages in the first violins (especially from bar 26) leads on logically to the descending melodic passages in imitation in the closing instrumental 'ritornelle', with entries in:

- violas from bar 46³
- second violins a bar later
- first violins *two* bars later – a deliberate irregularity.

The descending chromatic lines in both ground bass and accompaniment make the ritornelle even more poignant than the earlier music. In particular, notice the full octave descent in the first violins, with eleven of the twelve available semitones (only A flat is missing).

Structure

'Thy hand, Belinda'

- This recitative links the preceding chorus 'Great minds' and Dido's aria.
- It also acts as introduction to the latter, serving to darken the mood after the relatively sprightly 'Great minds' – this is done chiefly by means of the singer's mostly descending melodic line.
- The descent involves chromatic movement – in anticipation of the chromatically descending ground bass in the aria.
- Like many Baroque and Classical recitatives, it begins and ends in different keys (see the section on 'Tonality').

As normal for a recitative, and because it is so short, there is no 'standard' form such as binary or ternary, but:

- it clearly divides into two
- the second part begins in bar 5 and has the same bass as the first but transposed a 4th higher/5th lower – to begin on G and end on D (instead of beginning on C and ending on G)
- the melody of the second part could be regarded as a (much) varied repeat of the first. Both basically execute a chromatic descent of a 4th.

The *bass* of the recitative involves (transposed) repetition with two elaborated chromatic melodic descents of a perfect 4th. The aria applies a direct chromatic descent to the bass and repeats much more persistently and at the same pitch. The subtle unity between recitative and aria is most effective.

'When I am laid in earth'

The aria is built on eleven statements of the bass melody first heard at bar 1³ – the 'ground bass'. (The first statement (only) has a semibreve D as its penultimate note, whereas elsewhere there is an octave drop from minim D to low minim D.) Each statement is five bars long rather than a more 'conventional' four bars.

The structure of the aria is similar in some ways to binary (A B) form, plus introduction and postlude (the ritornelle). Binary form frequently has a modulation to the dominant or relative major key at the end of the first section. However, Purcell maintains the tonic key of G minor throughout.

| Statement no. | Bar | Comment |
|---------------|----------------------------------|--|
| 1 | 1 ³ -6 ² | Ground bass alone, G minor |
| 2 and 3 | 6 ³ -16 ² | 'Binary form' section A: Voice and strings ('When I am laid in earth...no trouble in thy breast'). The voice enters slightly ahead of the start of statement 2, so that it overlaps with the ending of statement 1 – a foretaste of later 'irregularities' |
| 4 and 5 | 16 ³ -26 ² | A: repeated |
| 6 and 7 | 26 ³ -36 ² | B: 'Remember me...my fate'. The voice enters on the penultimate note of statement 5 |
| 8 and 9 | 36 ³ -46 ² | B repeated, but with a little reorganisation at the beginning. The voice enters a little later, after both voice and ground bass have cadenced together in bars 35-36) |
| 10 and 11 | 46 ³ -56 | The ritornelle. Strings with imitation and some descending chromaticism |

The term 'ritornelle' should not be confused with 'ritornello' as used, for example, in some movements from Bach's Brandenburg Concertos (including no. 4, movement I). In Dido's aria it is not really a 'return' of anything, but a continuation. There is a good definition of ritornello in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*: 'around 1600 [the term]...came to denote an instrumental prelude, interlude or postlude (or any combination of these) for a vocal movement, most often an aria...'

Tonality

'Thy hand, Belinda'

- Tonality is minor as befits the text.
- C minor (as far as the Phrygian cadence (IVb-V) at bars 4³-5²).
- Ends in G minor (with Phrygian cadence from bar 8³).

'When I am laid in earth'

- Again tonality is minor.
- G minor throughout.
- Such insistence on one minor key is immensely effective in underlining the tragic dramatic situation.
- Variety and colour are provided by the chromatic (semitonal) descents in the ground bass (and elsewhere in the ritornelle) – these intensify the mood still further.

Harmony

Purcell's harmony is highly expressive of grief and pain, with striking dissonances and chromaticism superimposed on a mostly simple harmonic vocabulary, with many triads in root position and first inversion. Occasionally, a dissonance is not prepared or resolved in the 'normal' way – see, for example, the comment in the table below on bar 7¹⁻².

'Thy hand, Belinda'

Dissonance treatment:

- Suspensions provide considerable tension. In particular there are 9-8 suspensions on 'bos-(om)' in bar 4, and 'now' in bar 8. The clashes are both highly dissonant minor 9ths rather than relatively mild major 9ths.
- Similarly, the G at bar 4⁴ is a strong major 7th above the bass A flat (not a milder minor 7th). Unusually, a rest comes between the preparation at 4² and the dissonance – the rest intensifying the pathos (see the section on 'Melody' below).
- A milder minor 7th suspension is heard at bar 6³.
- The F sharp at bar 8³ may be described as an upward-resolving suspension or 'retardation' (2-3).
- There is an upward-resolving appoggiatura at bar 7³ – the resolution is E flat, which sounds very 'dark' after the E natural at 7¹.
- The lower auxiliary note B natural in bar 1 produces a pungent major 7th against the bass.

The striking major – minor juxtaposition in bar 7 is referred to above. Note also the A natural and A flat over bass F in bars 2-3 – and how effective the A naturals in bar 3 are (perhaps a moment's consolation on the words 'shades me') after the A flats on 'darkness'.

The harmonic rhythm (rate of chord change) is slow, which perhaps adds to the atmosphere of darkness and pain.

'When I am laid in earth'

The ground bass begins with a chromatic (semitonal) descent. This features all four forms of the notes F and E that belong to the harmonic and melodic forms of the G minor scale – F sharp, F natural, E natural, E flat.

The harmony of statements 2 and 4 of the ground bass works as follows. Bar numbers refer to statement 2.

| Bar, beat | Note | Harmony |
|------------------|-----------|---|
| 6 ³ | G | G minor I |
| 7 ¹⁻² | F sharp | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gm V⁷b (F sharp, A, C, D) • The C (Violin II) is neither prepared nor resolved • The voice suspends a B flat over the bass F sharp and against the C and the A, giving a very dissonant combination – full of pathos • Sounding the note of resolution (A) simultaneously with the suspension (B flat) is contrary to normal practice |
| 7 ³ | F natural | A secondary dominant: Gm V ⁷ d of IV (F, G, B natural, D) |
| 8 ¹⁻² | E natural | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The expected Gm IVb (with, in the bass, E natural, the 3rd of the chord, rather than the E flat of the harmonic minor scale – as part of the chromatic descent) • The harmonic tension established at 7¹⁻² is maintained – note the suspended D in Violin II against the note of resolution C in the voice |
| 8 ³ | E flat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gm IVb (now with E flat in the bass) • The F sharp in the vocal part clashes with G (Vla) – more harmonic tension • The F sharp might be described as an appoggiatura resolving to the harmony note G, or possibly as an accented auxiliary note (between two Gs) |
| 9 ¹⁻² | D | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gm V⁷ • Note that this is V⁷ with C not plain V • This maintains harmonic tension and momentum as plain consonant V (completing a ‘Phrygian’ cadence in Gm) would not have done |
| 9 ³ | B flat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gm Ib • This begins a diatonic approach to the perfect cadence from bar 10 to bar 11 |
| 10 ¹ | C | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gm II⁷b • The dissonant G is prepared in Vla • Harmonic tension remains high, thanks to the suspended D in the voice • This is prepared in the previous bar, although that preparation is embellished or interrupted with the upper auxiliary E flat • The resolution (C) is short – just a quaver |

| | | |
|-------------------|---|--|
| 10 ²⁻³ | D | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gm V with 4–3 suspension (G, F sharp) in Vla ● The dissonant B flat in voice (against G and A in Vla and Violin II) maintain harmonic tension ● The B flat sounds momentarily against F sharp in Vla, producing an augmented triad – it then resolves to A |
| 11 ¹⁻² | G | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gm I ● This is the first plain triad since bar 6 ● This chord completes a perfect cadence, but there is no real sense of closure because the voice rises to the mediant B flat rather than coming to rest on the tonic, G |

It is not possible to describe the harmony elsewhere in this level of detail. The following are some important points.

- Bar 12: the dissonance (a 7th above the bass, in the voice part) is prepared at 11³. It forms part of a diminished 7th chord. The E flat eventually resolves by step to D, after the crotchet and minim A.
- Bar 13: the dissonant D in the voice part (a major 7th above the bass) is not resolved in the voice, but the D in Violin II does resolve to C at 13². It is unusual to have a dissonant note doubled in this way; it helps to add additional harmonic tension.
- Bar 13: beat 2 has what might be described as an inverted half-diminished chord (E natural-A-C-F sharp) leading to G minor IVb. The quaver F sharp in the voice part is a kind of upward-resolving *échappée*.
- Bar 28: the voice part's Ds a 7th above the bass E natural do not resolve – in effect, they constitute an inverted dominant pedal (bars 25-29), punctuated by rests.
- Bar 55: at the final cadence each of the violin parts has a G anticipation (approached in contrary motion) to emphasise the closing tonic.
- Bar 56: the final chord is a 'bare 5th' (unless a continuo player added a B flat or B natural). The upper strings all end with a crotchet, but the abruptness is more apparent than real, as the final chorus of the opera begins at 56².

Melody

'Thy hand, Belinda'

- Up to 'Death is now' (bar 7) the vocal melody falls from C to D (a minor 7th), a sinuous and tortured descent, involving a good deal of chromaticism, to match Dido's descent into a dark state of mind that finds death 'a welcome guest'.
- Every pitch class between C and D is sounded apart from F sharp.
- The vocal descent is not 'in a straight line' – it may turn back on itself, meander or repeat, and involves some major–minor juxtapositions as already mentioned. In bars 1-3 pitches are heard in the order C, B natural, C, B flat, A, B flat, G, A flat, A natural, A flat.

- Until bar 8 almost every melodic interval is a tone or semitone.
- The closing notes – slightly higher and now with a prominent F sharp – match the grimly positive words ‘a welcome guest’.

‘When I am laid in earth’

The bass part:

- This begins with a straightforward descent through a perfect 4th from G to D (tonic to dominant) with every semitone inbetween.
- The final five notes enable a clear perfect cadence in G minor to be approached and completed (although the competing phrase structures of bass and voice sometimes mean that the perfect cadence is deliberately weakened or avoided).
- All 11 statements are at the same pitch – a gloomy insistency which is entirely deliberate and dramatically appropriate.

The vocal part:

- In its first phrase this has B flat and B natural in close and rather tense proximity (also at bars 17-18), but otherwise avoids chromaticism.
- It is frequently stepwise, but employs some small leaps (of up to a minor 6th).
- It has the range of a diminished 7th (F sharp to E flat) in the ‘A’ section.
- It is melodically static at the start of ‘B’ section (a dominant pedal).
- The repeated Ds here ‘lift’ the melody to a higher tessitura.
- The melodic climax has anguished top Gs at the third and final ‘(re)-member me’ before the melody descends by step from F natural to lower G.

The upper string parts have little melodic character until the Ritornelle (after the voice is finished). Here Violins I and II have descending chromatic phrases derived from the ground bass.

Rhythm and metre

‘Thy hand, Belinda’

- As with most Baroque recitatives, this is in simple quadruple time (C).
- The bass part moves in minims and longer notes.
- The vocal part has a variety of faster-moving rhythms.
- Some of these involve syncopation, typically where a bar or half bar begins with a quaver and a crotchet (as in bar 4). Note also the more complex rhythm on ‘dark-(ness)’ in bar 2.
- Bar 8 ends with a Lombardic rhythm (or ‘Scotch snap’) – a dotted rhythm in which the longer note comes second rather than first (here semiquaver plus dotted quaver not dotted quaver and semiquaver).
- Short rests separate a series of short phrases (bars 3-7), presumably to suggest Dido’s sobbing as she decides to take her own life.

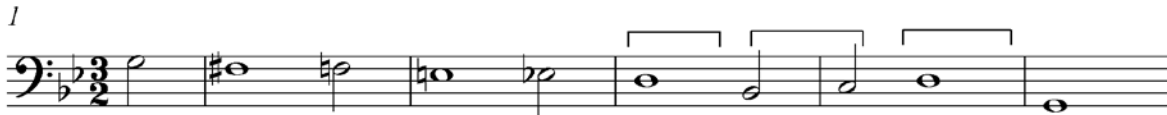
'When I am laid in earth'

- The metre is simple triple with a minim beat (3/2).
- In bar 1 there is an editorial note that a minim (half bar) in the recitative should be equivalent in performance to a dotted semibreve (whole bar) in the aria.
- Triple time is very common in the Baroque era for ground basses (as in chaconnes and passacaglias).

The ground bass is largely based on the rhythm semibreve-plus-minim, after the initial upbeat minim but it ends with a hemiola as in bars 4-5, bars 9-10, etc.

In a hemiola two triple-time bars are accented to sound like three duple-time bars. Hemiola was used in many Baroque triple-time movements, usually beginning at the approach to a perfect cadence.

The music example shows how the hemiola in bars 4-5 is notated with two bars of triple time (2 x 3 beats), while – see the brackets above the staff – sounding duple (3 x 2).

Further Reading:

Margaret Laurie and Thurston Dart (eds), *Dido and Aenas*, (London, 1966 and 1974, Preface.
Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (Oxford, 2001), The article on 'Ground'.

Recording

Philips CD (with Carolyn Watkinson as Dido and John Eliot Gardiner, conductor) from which the anthology recording was taken. See also the review of the same recording at <http://www.classical-music.com/review/purcell-14>.