

## 33. Dowland Flow my tears (for Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

### Background information

#### *Introduction*

John Dowland is regarded by many as one of England's greatest song-writers, along with Purcell and Britten. He composed some eighty examples and they were published in four collections in the years 1597, 1600, 1603 and 1612 (*A Pilgrime's Solace*) respectively.

However, as we shall see, they were not necessarily confined to performance by a single voice with accompaniment. They could be performed by a number of voices, usually up to four, singing in parts, and could also be accompanied by more than one instrument in what is known as a 'mixed' or 'broken' consort.

#### *Biography*

- The exact date and place of Dowland's birth is uncertain but it seems to have been in London, in 1563.
- He appears to have received musical tuition during his teenage years as a member of one or more aristocratic households and gained the degree of BMus at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1588.
- In spite of his growing reputation in this country, he was obliged to seek employment abroad, taking up court appointments at various times in Germany and Denmark.
- He also visited Italy. At this period the most progressive country, musically.
- By the early 1600s, Dowland was one of the most famous musicians in Europe.
- He returned from Denmark in 1606 and in 1612 was given a specially created post at the English court, when the number of lutenists employed was increased from four to five.
- He had by now completed a large number of secular songs, as well as Psalm settings and music for solo lute and for consorts.
- Various writers of the time speak in glowing terms of him, referring to him as 'Doctor Dowland'.
- He died in London in 1626.

## Performing Circumstances, Forces and Their Handling

### History of *Flow My Tears*

We cannot be certain as to when this particular song was first performed but we know that it was published in London in 1600 in Dowland's *The Second Booke of Songs or Ayres of 2, 4, and 5 parts*. The music also appears among Dowland's compositions as the Pavan *Lachrimae* ('Tears') in arrangements for solo lute and for a consort of viols.

It is clearly intended for domestic performance in fairly affluent households, where perhaps one or more professional musicians were employed and where perhaps some members of the household were themselves sufficiently accomplished to take part.

In *The First Booke* published in 1597, Dowland had devised an unusual print format, which made its contents much more widely accessible. Instead of printing a set of quarto part-books, with each book containing all the parts in the collection for a particular voice or instrument, he used a single folio book. This was intended to be placed flat on a small table so that it could be read by all the performers grouped around it.

### Performing Circumstances

*Flow my tears* can be performed by one person, or by a small group. On the NAM CD the singer and the lutenist are not the same person. The addition of a bass viol in this performance reminds us of the already emerging roles of the bass line - moving in polarity to the melody and in defining the harmonic structure of the music. In these respects, it was to assume ever greater importance during the baroque period.

The range of the voice part is a ninth, from d' to e''. There is more information about the writing for voice in the section on 'Melody', below.

### Musical Accompaniment

The accompaniment is played by a lute. This is a member of a large family of instruments on which the strings are plucked by the player's fingers, without plectrum. It has a rounded back, a variable number of strings, each of which, except possibly the top one, is duplicated in unison (though some of the bass ones may be in octaves), and frets on the fingerboard.

Dowland may at first have played on a six-course lute - a course is a string and its unison doubling, before moving on to a seven-course instrument. Towards the end of his life he may even have played on a nine-course lute.

The bass viol was one of a family of bowed string instruments which were the predecessors of the violin family. Further information about them is given in the Notes on Anthony Holborne's *Pavane and Galliard* (NAM 13).

## Texture

- The texture is essentially melody and accompaniment, though often with enough individual movement in the parts to be contrapuntal.
- There are occasional moments when the lute has a four-part chord, creating five parts with the voice (eg. Bar 1) and sometimes plays as many as six notes (Bar 16).
- Notice the contrast in Bar 4 where there are only two parts on the lute accompanying the voice.
- There is little imitation between the parts, except in the passage from Bar 12 beat one to Bar 15 beat 3, and, less exactly, from the end of Bar 19 to the end of Bar 20 (bass and vocal line).
- In Bar 12, the 'tenor' part moves in sixths with the solo line in clear contrast to the treble and bass parts of the lute accompaniment.
- From halfway through Bar 13, the three-part texture (solo line plus treble and bass of lute accompaniment) is fully imitative.

## Structure and Tonality

- The tripartite structure of the song is related to the structure of the stanzas, with verses 1 and 2 being set to the same music, 3 and 4 sharing the second strain, and 5 being set differently again.
- Internal phrase structures are irregular, reflecting the syllabic structure of each stanza.
- The number of syllables per line for each of the sections differs, as does the music, though the song is unified by the use of material derived from the opening four-note figure in all parts.
- Notice the repetition of the text in Bar 14, the one time this occurs.
- Notice also the irregular 3/2 time in Bar 19.

Section A	Stanzas 1-2	7,8,10,6 syllables	Bars 1-8
Section B	Stanzas 3-4	9,5,10,7 syllables	Bars 9-16
Section C	Stanza 5 (repeated)	9,5,8,6 syllables	Bars 17-24

The key is A minor, with some modal (Aeolian) inflections. Note the following tonal landmarks:

- Section A finishes with a perfect cadence
- Section B opens in the relative major (C major) and finishes with an imperfect cadence or Phrygian (IVb-V) cadence
- Section C finishes with a perfect cadence.

## Harmony

The harmonic vocabulary of the song is typical of the early baroque period.

- Most chords are basically in root position or first inversion, though there is a second inversion at Bar 21 (beat 3).
- The descending fourth of the melody line provides the contours for much of the bass line too, for example from Bar 1 beat 3 to the end of Bar 2.
- This phrase ends with a Phrygian cadence (first inversion of subdominant minor, D minor, to dominant root position, E major). This progression is used no less than seven times in the course of the piece. The second phrase has a rising line - tonic root position, mediant (C major) root position, subdominant root then first inversion, dominant root position. The third phrase begins with tonic root position, moves to flattened leading note root position (G major), dominant root position (creating a false relation between solo line and bass, Bar 5 beats 3 to 4), subdominant first inversion, dominant root position. The fourth phrase has the same harmony as the second but with a tierce de Picardie (major third) in the final tonic chord.
- Suspensions are frequently employed, eg. 7-6 at Bar 2, and 4-3 at Bar 7.
- Section C begins with a 2-bar dominant pedal.
- False relations heighten the melancholy feeling of the song, eg. Bar 5, beats 3 and 4: the G natural and G sharp.
- Tierce de Picardie are used in Bars 8 and 24 (but not in Bar 16, where the final major chord is a dominant)

## Word-setting and Melody

- Word-setting is almost entirely syllabic, the exceptions being the paired semiquavers in Bars 1 and 15, and the cadential ornamentation at Bars 7 and 23.
- As noted above, the vocal range is a major ninth (d' to e''). However, the composer is very sparing in his use of the extremes of the compass, confining most of the notes to the fourth between g' (or g' sharp) and c''.
- Much of the solo part is derived from the falling scalic figure in Bar 1, reflecting the doleful mood of the words. See Bar 9, and the inverted form in Bar 17.
- The only real exceptions to this are:
  - The passage from Bars 12 - 14, consisting of the rising third figure and quaver rests, reflects the sense of the words
  - The setting of the word *happie*, starting from the highest note and falling a fourth, then repeated in descending sequence.
- The character of the melody writing also derives much from the ambivalence that exists in any minor scale: the initial four-note falling figure in Bar 1, spanning a perfect fourth, has G and F naturals (melodic minor scale) but in Bar 2 when it falls from C it has G sharp (followed by A in bar 3), so spanning a diminished fourth.

## Rhythm and Metre

- The piece is in simple quadruple time but we have already noted that Bar 19 has six crotchet beats (3/2 time).
- Dowland is extremely inventive with his use of rhythm. No two bars of the solo line have the same rhythm, with the exceptions only of Bars 22 (as 5) and 23-24 (as 7-8).
- By the use of tied and dotted notes, rests and syncopation, he creates an extraordinarily varied and supple line to accommodate the natural stresses and shapes of the words. Longer notes are used to throw greater weight on to words of stronger meaning, eg. *Flow* and *fall* at the beginning, *live* (Bar 7), *dark* (first syllable of *darkness* Bar 18), *live* (19), first syllable of *Happie* (20-21).
- Most of the verses are composed of longer note-lengths.
- Shorter values, eg. semiquavers appear in lute figurations and also at the cadences in the vocal part.
- The bass line of the accompaniment moves in rhythmic counterpoint to the melody of the solo part.

- Mostly, it is simpler in its rhythmic patterns, as, for example, in the second bar of the song. Only in the middle of section B (Bars 12 – 15) does it match the solo line in both melodic and rhythmic character.

## **Bibliography**

- English Madrigal Verse 1588-1632, E H Fellowes (Oxford 1920), 3rd edition, revised and enlarged by F W Sternfeld and D Greer (1967)
- The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 2nd edition, ed Stanley Sadie (London 2001)
- Articles on 'John Dowland' and 'Lute'.