WORDS FOR MUSIC: SIMPLICITY
AND COMPLEXITY IN THE ELIZABETHAN AIR

by Edward Doughtie

Much of the best work on the relationship between words and music in Elizabethan and Jacobean song has been concerned with technique and versification. Bruce Pattison, Catherine Ing, and others have shown us how poets writing under the influence of song, especially the air (or "ayre," usually conceived for solo voice with lute accompaniment), developed certain technical skills to a high degree of sophistication. We have learned that in the best of these poems, the peculiarities of rhythm and phrasing in the first stanza were duplicated in succeeding stanzas, since the music for the first stanza served for all. The line was often the unit of rhythm, and instead of using enjambment for variety, the poet varied the line-lengths. It is certainly true that this discipline on the part of the poet allowed the composer to exercise more freedom in providing musical interest without fear of doing violence to the order and natural accent of the words. Conversely, formal freedom on the part of the poet imposed limitations on the composer, especially in stanzaic songs. Yet the careful arranging of phrases and meter in a poem, however much it may attract the composer, is not absolutely necessary for a song. A good composer can solve most of the problems of a formally difficult text by modifying or abandoning the strophic form. But to succeed as a song—that is, as a composition in which the words are not totally superfluous—a poem must have certain qualities which allow it to be at least partly intelligible when sung. These are the qualities that are most important to the verbal part of the song; they are the most difficult to define, and are the cause of most of the objections to music being associated with poetry at all.

R. W. Short, for instance, writes that Thomas Campion's tunes "rig out his lyrics in pretty but concealing finery; his best poems mean more, as poems, when silently read than when sung or intoned. For this reason, whoever aims at justly appreciating his poetry had best forget his music."

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Short objects because a "musical setting is so overpoweringly, determinatively sensuous that in its presence the subtleties of lyric poetry have little chance of making themselves felt." Music limits one's interpretation of a poem just as an actor's performance limits one's interpretation of Hamlet. It is true that subtleties of poetic meter are obscured by a musical setting, and it is also true that music limits the number of possible interpretations of mood and meaning. But in the songs of Campion and others there is rarely more than one basic interpretation possible for a given poem, and that one is frequently intensified and deepened by the musical setting.

Most critics maintain that simplicity is the major requirement for a song text, in that the primary meaning, interpretation, or emphasis of a poem must be immediately apparent to the hearer. One who is listening to a song cannot reread an unclear line, and if he stops to think about a passage, he may miss the rest of the song. As Bruce Pattison says, "verse for music should therefore keep to broad and simple emotions." He goes on to explain:

The intellectual appeal of music is quite different from that of poetry. It is more related to structure than to content. The 'thought' of poetry has no parallel in music. The two arts can meet only on the emotional plane. But the difficulty of ensuring music and verse should appear appropriate to each other is that music makes its impression much more slowly than poetry. A single word has associations; a single note or chord hardly any, apart from its context.

Discussions of simplicity invariably get complex. Granted that simplicity is necessary in a song text, how does a poet achieve it without being merely simple-minded? What specific means did poets use to aid the listener? If the song should be intelligible on the first hearing, what is left to be discovered in later hearings? Although music may limit the possible interpretations of a poem in some ways, are there ways in which music can suggest further interpretations or subtleties which might otherwise go unnoticed?

The problem of simplicity may be approached through form. Just as the strophic form makes certain demands on the poet's technique, it also makes demands on the arrangement of his subject matter. If the first stanza of a poem is to be melancholy, the second stanza, if it is to be sung to the music of the first, should not be gay. "For it will be a great absurditie to use a sad harmonie to a merrie matter, or a merrie harmonie to a sad lamentable or tragical dittie." Although the tendency of songs is to present one dominant mood, to be sad, joyful, or sentimental throughout, contrasts are possible within the stanza if they are paralleled in other stanzas. The first half of each stanza of John Dowland's "What if I never
"speede" expresses fear or hesitation, and the second half expresses hope. Music could conceivably heighten these contrasts. Nevertheless, Dowland did not choose to have it so in this particular song; what contrast there is is not enough to change the over-all tone radically.

Related to this unity of mood is the structure of the poems. According to Walter R. Davis, the authors of Dowland’s texts “had a predilection for repetitive form or amplification, whereby one idea, repeated several times in different terms, expands itself with different tonal effects.” Davis contrasts this to the logical structure usually employed by Campion (“statement, counterstatement, and conclusion”), and says that the end of a song by Dowland is not a new element, but “merely the final and fullest statement of the idea which has been the basis of the poem since the beginning.”

Davis has described the rhetorical scheme known as expolitio or exergasia, which Henry Peacham the elder describes as “when we abide still in one place, and yet seeme to speake divers things.” A similar scheme is “Congeries, a multiplication or heaping togetheer of manye wordes, sygnyfyinge dyvers thinges of like nature.” Many song texts use such devices, and almost any example will serve to illustrate. “Fie on this faining, is love without desire,” sums up the argument of the whole poem in its first two lines. A reinforcing image follows; then a personal accusation of the beloved, supported by a maxim. Exhortation of the individual woman is balanced with generalization throughout the poem:

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Truth is not placed
In words and forced smiles,
Love is not graced
With that which still beguiles,
Love or dislike, yeeld fire, or give no fuell,
So maist thou prove kind, or at the least lesse cruell.
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It is this characteristic of saying the same thing in different words that enables singers to omit stanzas of some songs without doing obvious violence to the sense. Stanzas of some poems have even been transposed. In a manuscript copy of Dowland’s “Lachrimae,” the first, third, and fifth quatrains are written as one stanza, and the second, fourth, and fifth as another stanza. Fellowes prints Dowland’s “Shall I strive with wordes to move” as two eight-line stanzas with a refrain; but the repeats in the music are ambiguous, and the poem should probably be arranged in five quatrains. In neither poem is the development of the argument evident enough to serve as a guide, and the transposed versions make about as much sense as the others.

This tendency to repetition encouraged the use of schemes like the *carmen correlative*, which is used in two of Dowland’s songs. For example:
Deare if you change ile never chuse againe,
sweete if you shrinke ile never thinke of love,
Fayre if you faile, ile judge all beauty vaine,
wise if to weake moe wits ile never prove.
Deare, sweete, faire, wise, change shrinke nor be not weake,
and on my faith, my faith shall never breake.¹⁵

The songs are full of such rhetorical devices and formal schemes—indeed, it would be difficult for an Elizabethan to write anything that a rhetorician could not classify under a Greek or Latin name. Any educated person would have been familiar with most of these tropes and figures from school, and would take pleasure in hearing them well used. Rhetoric was more seriously considered as the art of persuasion, and was therefore suitable for sermons and orations as well as for love poetry. Both rhetoric and music had similar reputations as powerful agents for affecting men’s thoughts and emotions. Yet the purely decorative value of poetry, especially of the lyric, was still great. A sonnet full of elegant rhetoric was like a jewel in an elegant setting, and both had about the same function in courtship.¹⁶ Rhetoric also had the advantage of ordering language in such a way that the hearer, recognizing the form, would more easily assimilate the content since it would be partly expected. Schemes like those just described were particularly useful for song lyrics, tending as they do to keep the subject matter pivoting about a central idea.

One might expect this central idea to be fairly conventional, as it obviously is in most of the songs. Most of the songs accept and exploit the Petrarchan love situation; a few rebel against it; a good many love songs are more naturalistic, some comically so. There are a few occasional songs, in which pastoral or Petrarchan material is used for purposes of politics or flattery. Several songs are religious, and many of all kinds are sententious and proverbial. All of these songs partake of various conventions, but within the conventions there is room for considerable variety. A novel object can be turned to a discussion of love (Tobias Hume’s “Tobacco”), or a love song can be a framework for writing about something else (Campion’s “When thou must home”).¹⁷ The conventions, like rhetorical devices, had a positive value for the composer. As R. W. Ingram has said, “the familiarity of the conventional material gives the listener an immediately understandable key to the poem.”¹⁸ Conventions also help establish the mood and allow the listener to center his attention on whatever is novel or artfully expressed.

A poem may be thoroughly conventional, and yet quite complex, as many sonnets will show. Henry Raynor says that the song lyric may present a situation or emotional experience, but must not explore or analyze it in terms that cannot be dealt with musically. A composer would find that poems which, “by the use of a texture of symbols, convey a
certain atmosphere are ready for his attentions, while those that use imagery for purposes of compression, of creating explicit relationships or precise contrasts, escape him in spite of their lyric structure and technical precision. Raynor's point may be illustrated by comparing Dowland's "Sweet stay awhile," the text of which was attributed to Donne, with Donne's "The Sunne Rising." Both poems describe a similar situation, two lovers in bed at daybreak. But all the first says is, essentially, "Don't go yet," while the latter develops to this conclusion:

She' is all States, and all Princes, I,
Nothing else is.
Shine here to us, and thou art every where;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphære.

In "The Sunne Rising" the basic situation is explored in so many startling ways that it is a delight to read, but nonsense to hear sung. The sun that wakes the lovers and reminds them of the world and daily affairs is chided as a "Busie old foole" and informed in the conclusion of the argument that all the world is rather in the poet's bed. The ear can hardly follow the progress of the poem without the added interest (or distraction) of music, much less with it.

The images and ideas in most of Donne's poetry are complex and interlocked, and depend on what has preceded and what follows for their meaning. In song lyrics, although the images and ideas may be related to a central theme or an obvious central conceit, they tend to be isolated from each other; they accumulate rather than develop. Rarely, in fact, does an image or thought extend beyond two lines of verse or a corresponding musical period. The line, as well as being a rhythmic unit, is frequently a unit of sense. This characteristic is perhaps one of the most important requirements of poetry that is to be sung, for the listener is rarely able to make connections of much complexity over a longer space of time. Most of Dowland's songs meet this requirement. Some random samples may illustrate:

Can shee excuse my wrongs with vertues cloake:
Shall I call her good when she proves unkind.
are those cleere fiers which vannish in to smoake:
must I praise the leaves where no fruit I find.

(First Booke, V)

Praise blindnesse cies, for seeing is deceit,
Bee dumbe vaine tongue, words are but flattering windes,
break hart & bleed for ther is no recelt,
to purge inconstancy from most mens mindes.

(Second Booke, IX)
Farewell too faire, too chast but too too cruel, discretion never quenched fire with swords: Why hast thou made my heart thine angers fuel, and now would kill my passions with thy words. (Third and Last Booke, I)

Sometimes the images may be more closely related than in these examples, but even then they show no such complex interdependence as in Donne’s poems. Even Donne, however, could write a stanza well suited for singing:

Goe, and catch a falling starre, Get with child a mandrake roote, Tell me, where all past yeares are, Or who cleft the Divels foot, Teach me to heare Mermaides singing, Or to keep off envies stinging, And finde What winde Serves to advance an honest minde.

Although the rest of the poem gets more complex, the single idea in this stanza, “impossible,” is clear, for the listener is not required to follow these images consecutively. If he misses the point of the first line, he has it by the fourth line. The second stanza of “Deare if you change” is similar in imagery, although the theme is idealistic instead of cynical:

Earth with her flowers shall sooner heav’n adorne, Heaven her bright stars through earths dim globe shall move, Fire heat shall loose and frosts of flames be borne, Ayre made to shine as black as hell shall prove: Earth, heaven, fire, ayre, the world transform’d shall vew, E’re I prove false to faith, or strange to you.

Even a brief image within a line may be complex. In Campion’s “When to her lute Corinna sings,” we hear that Corinna’s voice is as “any challeng’d eccho cleere.” The general meaning in the context is clear enough, but the listener may not at first perceive that calling out to an echo is challenging it to answer, as a sentry challenges a stranger. In this instance, full understanding may add to the pleasure of a later hearing; but the individual listener has to decide whether such phrases are too complex or not. The same is true of individual words, although one can generalize about what kinds of words are most successfully set to music. W. H. Auden has compiled a convenient list of these words, which include interjections, imperatives, verbs of motion or of physical expression of emotion (laughing, weeping, etc.); words like bright, hard, sad (“denoting elementary qualities”); “nouns denoting states of feeling”; or words with well-established emotional associations, such as spring.
Poetry having the characteristics described so far was combined with music which was generally designed to enhance the words, not obscure them. Most composers set one note to a syllable, most of the time, a habit reinforced by Protestant psalm-singing. Thomas Morley mentions a few other rules composers should follow when setting music, notably that they should not give short or unstressed syllables undue emphasis by setting them to long notes or to many notes, and that rests or cadences should come only when there are natural pauses in the words. Morley concludes, saying that by “keeping these rules you shall have a perfect agreement, and as it were a harmonical concord betwixt the matter and the musicke, and likewise you shall bee perfectly understood of the auditor what you sing, which is one of the highest degrees of praise which a musicion in dittying can attaine unto or wish for.”

The ultimate reason for this desire to have the words understood is probably related to the humanistic beliefs about the great ethical powers of music. Perhaps the most familiar description of these powers is in Dryden’s “Alexander’s Feast,” where the singer Timotheus manipulates Alexander’s passions with his music. Many humanists sincerely believed in the power of ancient music to produce such marvelous effects, and proposed various means of recovering the ancients’ secrets. Some of these schemes demanded considerable changes in current musical styles, but the net result on most practical musicians—especially in England—was only an increased concern with the audibility of the words, which named the emotions, and the use of musical resources to give them expression. The attempts of some composers to express musically the emotions described in the text result in a few songs in which the poem seems to be richer in meaning, less trivial, more “complex” in a sense, than it actually is. The best example of this phenomenon, and perhaps one of the best songs with English words, is Dowland’s “In darknesse let mee dwell.” It has its beginning in an unimposing piece of melancholy, with poulter’s measure predominating:

In darknesse let mee dwell, The ground shall sorrow be,
The roofe Dispaire to barre all cheerfull light from mee,
The walls of marble blacke that moistned still shall wewepe,
My musicke hellish jarring sounds to banish friendly sleepe.
Thus wedded to my woes, And bedded to my Tombe,
O Let me living die, Till death doe come.

The song begins on a series of long low notes emerging gradually from the accompaniment. The music rises to a long note on “mee,” which is held until it becomes a suspension dissonance to be finally resolved on “dwell.” “Dwell” is cut short, as if sobbed. The voice continues above the shifting, dissonance-filled accompaniment, growing more agitated on “My
musicke hellish jarring sounds.” The next line is smoother in contrast, preparing for the declamatory climax on “O Let me living die, Till death doe come.” After a descending phrase on the lute, the voice repeats the quiet opening and ends alone, once more resolving the suspension on “dwell.” This repetition not only gives form to the piece, but by enclosing the song within itself underlines the image of despair as a prison.

From the very first, the meter of the poem has counted for nothing. The unstressed syllables “In” and “mee” are given long notes, and “mee” is emphasized by higher pitch. More obviously, the many repeated words and phrases completely destroy the outline of the poem. Here are the words without the music:

In darknesse let mee dwell, The ground, [the ground] shall sorrow, sorrow be, The roofe Dispaire to barre all, all cheerful light from mee, The wals of marble blacce, that moistned, that moistned still shall weepe, still shall weepe, My musicke, My musicke hellish, hellish jarring sounds, jarring, jarring sounds, to banish, banish friendly sleepe. Thus wedded to my woes, And bedded to my Tombe. O let me living die, O let me living, let me living, living die, Till death, till death doe come, [till death, till death doe come,] till death, till death doe come, In darknesse let mee dwell.

What Dowland has done is to lard the verses with epizeuxis, a rhetorical device used “when we repeate a word agayne, for the greater vehemen~y.” Most poets object violently to composers repeating their words and phrases, and they do so with some justice when the repetitions simply pad out the music, as in so many baroque arias. But here and in most places where Dowland repeats, it is for emphasis. When judiciously used, repetitions can help the listener understand the words by allowing him to “reread” important passages. Musical repetition can sometimes suggest in a poem new possibilities which would not otherwise be perceived. In “From silent night,” only one syllable of the word “wofull” is repeated, changing the direction of the meaning for a time:

My wayling Muse her woe; her woe, her wofull worke beginnes.

Word-painting, or imitating the sense of the words in the music, is used sparingly in “In darknesse,” but effectively; the harsh crowding together of notes and dissonances in the setting of “My musicke hellish jarring sounds” is entirely appropriate here. Words like “Despair” and “sorrow” are treated with dissonances, but the other expressive effects are atmospheric and dramatic rather than pictorial. The habit of some madrigalists of taking a word out of context and using it as an excuse for word-painting regardless of the ensuing distortion of the sense has aroused the wrath of critics. Dowland rarely used word-painting unless the poem obviously demanded it.
Finally, what has become of the poem in “In darknesse”? One might well say, “Who cares?” But what is there in this not very impressive poem that could be made into such a fine song? Actually, the music has transformed the poem. By substituting for its uninteresting meter the varied and subtle rhythms of the music, by increasing the amount of time the poem takes, thus allowing the mood to develop, and by dwelling on the emotional words—by doing all of these things with that baffling artistry which is in the end unexplainable, Dowland has given liberty to what potential life was in the poem.

Yet it is the music which has done this, and in this song and others like it, the music remains the most important element. In other songs, the words play a more important role in shaping the music, and the words and the music are more or less equally balanced. In some of these songs, the technical demands on both poet and composer limit both so much that the result is not very interesting. As R. W. Ingram has said, the most successful songs in which the words and music are balanced are the lighter airs. Yet there are a few instances in which the song as a whole is of considerable depth and richness, in which a beautiful poem is floated upon equally beautiful music, each complementing the other. Perhaps the best example of this balance is Dowland’s “Weepe you no more sad fountains”:

Weepe you no more sad fountains,
what need you flowe so fast,
looke how the snowie mountaines,
heav’ns sunne doth gently waste.
But my sunnes heav’ly eyes
view not your weeping.
That nowe lie sleeping
softly now softly lies sleeping.

Sleepe is a reconciling,
A rest that peace begets:
Doth not the sunne rise smiling,
When faire at ev’n he sets,
Rest you, then rest sad eyes,
Melt not in weeping,
While she lies sleeping
Softly now softly lies sleeping.

The music follows the shape of the poem and reproduces the rhythms in musical terms. The movement of the poem suggests the melodic curve and the drifting fall of the conclusion (where the only repeats occur). The lute not only supports the voice but enhances the musical interest, especially in the imitative passage before “That nowe lie sleeping.”

The poem has a conventional subject; the weeping fountains and the melting snow on mountains recall another song in the same book, “Flow
not so fast yee fountaines" and Ben Jonson’s “Slow, slow, fresh fount” from Cynthia’s Revels:

(Like melting snow upon some craggie hill,)
drop, drop, drop, drop,
Since natures pride is, now, a wither’d daffodill.

But the refinement of the emotion in “Weepe you no more,” while retaining the advantages of the conventions, purges them of dead and facile responses.

This song will bear repeated hearings, not only because of its formal and musical beauty, but also because of the subtleties that gradually reveal themselves. The mood and general meaning of the poem are clear on the first hearing. The lover attempts to stop his weeping by reflecting that his beloved is asleep and cannot see him, and that because “Sleepe is a reconciling,” she will look on him with favor when she awakes. The situation and the conclusion are understood or inferred; the poem dwells on the moment, the emotions. In later hearings, one becomes aware of a phenomenon that is possible only in artfully conceived strophic songs. Because the same melody is used for both stanzas, the memory juxtaposes the two sets of words; one hears the echo, so to speak, of the first stanza while one is hearing the second stanza. (“Sleep,” incidentally, rhymes with “Weep.”)
The two images drawn from nature in the second and third lines of each stanza are at once parallel and contrasting. “Looke how the snowie mountaines,/heav’ns sunne doth gently waste” is related to the lover’s weeping, his melting under the disapproving glare of the sun of his mistress’ eye. But “Doth not the sunne rise smiling,/When faire at ev’n he sets” expresses the hope that after the reconciling sleep the sun-eye will smile on him. The poet is so considerate towards the musician that even though the sentiment has changed, both images could be set pictorially. “Snowie mountaines” corresponds with “rise smiling,” and “doth gently waste” with “at ev’n he sets.” Dowland did not choose to set the first phrases pictorially, but for the others he did use a brief descending figure which, however, does not call attention to itself.

Campion exploited these same possibilities of the strophic song for subtly ironic effects. In “When thou must home,” the line in the second stanza “Then tell, O tell how thou didst murder mee” is sung to the same music as “from that smoothe toong whose musicke hell can move.”36 Hallett Smith cites a similar use of repeated musical phrases in Campion’s “Blame not my cheeks.”37 Other poets since Campion have used this same phenomenon of song with varying degrees of subtlety. Parodies and burlesques use the memory of the original words and the emotional associations of tunes for comic contrast or irony. Brecht wrote an anti-Hitler song based
on an old German hymn ("Nun danket alle Gott/ Der uns den Hitler sandte").

Poetry for music, then, is limited in many ways in that much of its content and appeal must be on the surface; richness and density of image and allusion are denied it. But the formal discipline and unique effects that are possible in song have challenged poets in the past, and may continue to do so.

NOTES


2. For example, a composer would generally set a word like "arise" to two notes, the higher and longer of which would be on the second, the accented syllable. But if at this point in a later stanza the poet uses a word like "falling," the notes used for "arise" would be inappropriate and awkward. Therefore a scrupulous composer would give both words a neutral setting in which the length and pitch of the two notes are nearly the same; too much of this sort of compromise would make the music uninteresting.


7. Thomas Morley, A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke (1597), sig. Aa2v. Morley specifies the kinds of harmonies and tempos which are suitable for expressing various emotions. Nevertheless, compare John Dowland, A Pilgrimes Solace (1612), Song XIX, where the intention is perhaps ironic.


9. Walter R. Davis, "Melodic and Poetic Structure: The Examples of Campion and Dowland," Criticism, VI (1962), 99. Davis shows (p. 100) how the music repeats variations on a phrase as the verse repeats variations on the main idea in Dowland's "Shall I sue" (Second Booke, XIX).

10. The Garden of Eloquence (1577), sigs. P4v and Q2r, quoted by H. D. Rix, Rhetoric in Spenser's Poetry (State College, Penn., 1940), pp. 42, 46.

11. Dowland, Third and Last Booke, Song XVI.
12. John Dowland, *The Second Booke of Songs or Ayres* (1600), Song II; Christ Church, Oxford, MS 439, pp. 6-7.


15. John Dowland, *The First Booke of Songes or Ayres* (1597), Song VII; see also *The Second Booke*, Song XI.

16. For a detailed account of the importance of logic, rhetoric, and ornament in Renaissance poetry, see Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago, 1947).

17. Tobias Hume, *The First Part of Ayres* (1605), No. 3; Campion, in Philip Rosseter's *A Booke of Ayres* (1601), Part I, Song XX.


21. E.g., Dowland, *First Booke*, IX.


23. Dowland, *First Booke*, VII. Note the *carmen correlativum*.


33. See the discussion of Ben Jonson’s “Slow, slow fresh fount” in Ing, *Elizabethan Lyrics*, pp. 119-124.


35. Third and Last Booke, Song XV.
