

Program Notes

“The bass voice is suitable for almost nothing but the emotion of anger.”

--Benigne de Bacilly¹

This quotation from Bacilly’s widely read and influential vocal treatise from 1668 is representative of a widespread approach to composition for the bass voice. Though by no means universal, bass singers were more often than not consigned to the roles of either villains or old men. While Bacilly continues in his treatise to assert that this serves as a limit to the bass singer’s capacity for artful expression, composers throughout history have stretched the capabilities of these lower voices, though often only in unusual musical circumstances. This recital seeks to pair an examination of rage with its related emotion of grief, and focuses on an expansion of these two emotional themes as found in the repertoire of one specific villainous bass -- the cyclops Polyphemus.

Polyphemus, perhaps better known for his role in the *Odyssey*, in which he is blinded by the wily Ulysses, also features in a romantic myth as a disruptive agent between the nymph Galatea and the shepherd Acis. Handel’s music for an English masque based on this mythological tale is well known (particularly the bass aria “O Ruddier Than the Cherry”), but he also wrote an earlier “serenata” on the subject while he honed his craft in Italy. It is this earlier *Acis, Galatea, e Polifemo* that the recital opens with, as the lovesick cyclops realizes Galatea’s love for Acis prevents any hope that his infatuation will be reciprocated.

The aria itself focuses on the textual symbolism of confused butterflies, fluttering and lost when deprived of the possibility of union with their guiding light, evoking how Polyphemus feels lost without the possibility of Galatea’s love. The conflation of a monstrosity large and lumbering cyclops with the delicacy of butterflies is painted wonderfully by Handel, featuring impossibly large vocal leaps, and the surprising use of an extended upper range that almost certainly demanded falsetto singing from the basses of the time. While Handel’s bass writing from his sojourn in Italy is almost universally wide-ranging, this aria soars as far as high A, only a third below the high C of tenor notoriety, a height which is unmatched in his other bass writing, particularly when coupled with low Ds over two octaves below it. Somehow, however, through this absurd vocal writing, Polyphemus conveys a true depiction of grief, much more emotionally raw than the comic depiction he receives in the later English *Acis and Galatea*.²

The recital then traces a path through a few sets that, while they do not directly tell the story of Polyphemus, certainly reflect the emotional themes the cyclops is experiencing in the tale. Almost a full century earlier, but still in Italy, Domenico Mazzocchi composed a number of

¹ Caswell, Austin B., Jr. "A Commentary Upon the Art of Proper Singing and Particularly with Regard to French Vocal Music by Benigne de Bacilly translated by Austin B. Caswell, Jr." PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1964. p. 23

² There is also an aria from this earlier Italian work which features a full and sparkling depiction of rage, “Sibilar gli angui d’aletto.” This aria was reused later in Handel’s *Rinaldo* to great success, but its martial use of trumpets unfortunately made this emotional contrast unachievable on this recital.

sonetti, a type of strophic variation setting an Italian sonnet to music. This particular *sonetto* is a sonnet “against” jealousy. Through its four stanzas, it provides a journey through a description of jealousy, first with an evocation of the grief one is consumed by while in the throes of the emotion, but then spends most of its time with a raging repudiation of jealousy, banishing it back to the hell from whence it came. With two quatrains followed by two tercets, Mazzocchi was able to subtly shift the metrical and musical emphasis between the verses of the poem to highlight different moments in the poetry. While originally composed as a piece simply for solo bass (again, treated quite virtuosically and with large, prominent leaps) and basso continuo, this performance marries Mazzocchi’s work with ritornelli by Marco Uccellini (1603-1680), allowing for a reactive transition between the principal affects of the four stanzas of vocal writing. I thank Ellen Hargis, and the Newberry Consort for their generous permission to use this marriage of Mazzocchi with Uccellini on my recital.

Having examined the jealousy of Polyphemus, the recital turns its focus to his yearning for Galatea, in a set of early German *Lieder* by Karl Friedrich Zelter of three Goethe poems. Each of these three songs highlights a different relationship between pianist and singer, as the art of *Lied* composition was in a state of development toward its mature realization in the later compositions of Schubert, Schumann, and Wolf. The first, “Schäfer’s Klagelied,” is the most Schubertian, featuring a strophic text above a perpetual motion accompaniment in the fortepiano. While all six verses are set to the same melody, the varying images depicted in the text allow for some affective shifts in delivery, serving as an early example of the strophic variation that was practiced through Schubert’s own time. “Sehnsucht” features a much sparser accompaniment, highlighting the empty feelings of the narrator and filling the song with a pathos I find somewhat lacking in Schubert’s later adaptation of the same text as “Lied der Mignon.” The set finishes with “Wer sich der Einsamkeit ergibt,” a meditation on loneliness. The most foreign in accompaniment to modern notions of *Lieder*, the manuscript actually features only the two staves of a piano score. The vocal line is written into the treble line of the piano part, which doubles it while adding a few harmonies, undoubtedly an example of the fairly common practice of self-accompanying early *Lieder*.

Returning to the tale of Polyphemus, the recital arrives at a Clérembault cantata of the same name. Famous for developing the genre of French cantata after the turn of the 18th century, much of Clérembault’s material was drawn from Classical mythology. They frequently include switches between narrative voice and in-character speech, more apparent when additional singers are involved in the larger cantatas, but fascinatingly not separated by musical style -- in this cantata, for example, many recits will switch voice midway through, and while the first two airs are from Polyphemus’ perspective, the final one serves as a moral coda to the cantata and is delivered by the Narrator. This work contains examples of both grief and rage, but serves as a cautionary tale against letting either emotion overcome rational control, using Polyphemus as a moral example.

As musically rich as the veins of rage and grief are, it seemed inappropriate to explore so deeply these intense emotions without offering a balm at the close of the program, so the recital departs fully from the Polyphemus lens to close with John Blow's "Musick's the Cordial of a Troubled Breast." Another composer who exploits the capacity for bass singers to shift from a relatively normal tessitura to the subterranean vocal realms, Blow balances the extremely low bass writing with a double violin obbligato, ensuring that the relatively uplifting and lighthearted message gets through. While I originally programmed this piece to close the recital before the coronavirus pandemic so endangered musical activities throughout the world, it serves remarkably well as a reminder in these times of the healing capacity of music for the rage and grief many artists (myself included) have experienced, having our careers upended and the foundation of our art threatened.

Texts and Translations

<p><u>Fra l'ombre e gl'orrori</u></p> <p>Fra l'ombre e gl'orrori farfalla confusa già spenta la face non sà mai goder.</p> <p>Così fra timori quest'alma delusa non trova mai pace ne spera piacer.</p>	<p><u>Among the Shadows and the Horrors</u></p> <p>Among the shadows and the horrors a confused butterfly, with light already extinguished, cannot enjoy anything.</p> <p>Thus among fears this disappointed soul never finds peace nor hopes for pleasure.</p>
<p><u>Sonetto Contra la Gelosia</u></p> <p>Cura, che di timore ti nutri, e cresci, E più temendo maggior forza acquisti, E mentre con la fiamma il gelo mesci, Tutto il Regno d'Amor turbi, e contristi.</p> <p>Poiche in breve hora entro il mio dolce hai misti Tutti gli amari tuoi, dal mio cor esci, Torna à Cocito, à i lagrimosi, e tristi Campi d'Inferno, ivi à te stessa incresci.</p> <p>Ivi senza riposo i giorni mena, Senza sonno le notti, ivi ti duoli Non men di dubbia, che di certa pena.</p> <p>Vattene, ah che più fera, che non suoli, Se'l tuo venen m'è corso in ogni vena, Con nuove larve à me ritorni, e voli?</p>	<p><u>Sonnet Against Jealousy</u></p> <p>Care, that which feeds on fear, and grows, And the more fearing the greater force acquires, And while mixing ice with the flames, Disturbs and saddens all the kingdom of Love.</p> <p>For in a brief moment you mixed into my sweet All your bitterness, get out of my heart, Return to Cocytus, to the tears, and sad Fields of the inferno, therein grow by yourself.</p> <p>There without rest lead your days, Sleepless be your nights, there you will grieve No less from doubts, than from certain sorrow.</p> <p>Begone, ah is it not enough, you savage, If your venom courses in all my veins, With new phantoms you fly in return to me?</p>

<p><u>Da droben auf jenem Berge</u></p> <p>Da droben auf jenem Berge Da steh' ich tausendmal, An meinem Stabe gebogen Und schaue hinab in das Thal.</p> <p>Dann folg' ich der weidenden Herde, Mein Hündchen bewahret mir sie. Ich bin herunter gekommen Und weiß doch selber nicht wie.</p> <p>Da stehet von schönen Blumen Die ganze Wiese so voll. Ich breche sie, ohne zu wissen, Wem ich sie geben soll.</p> <p>Und Regen, Sturm und Gewitter Verpass' ich unter dem Baum. Die Thüre dort bleibt verschlossen; Doch alles ist leider ein Traum.</p> <p>Es stehet ein Regenbogen Wohl über jenem Haus! Sie aber ist weggezogen, Und weit in das Land hinaus.</p> <p>Hinaus in das Land und weiter, Vielleicht gar über die See. Vorüber, ihr Schafe, vorüber! Dem Schäfer ist gar so weh.</p>	<p><u>Up There On That Mountain</u></p> <p>There up on that mountain There I stood a thousand times, Leaning on my staff And looking down into the valley.</p> <p>Then I followed the grazing flock, My hound guarding them with me. I have come down And indeed I know not how.</p> <p>There of lovely flowers The whole meadow stands full. I pick them, without knowing, To whom I should give them.</p> <p>And rain, storm, and thunder I miss while under the tree. The door there stays closed; For everything is unfortunately a dream.</p> <p>There is a rainbow Well over that house! She, however, has moved away, And gone into a distant land.</p> <p>Into a distant land and further, Maybe even over the sea. It is past, my sheep, it is past! For this shepherd it is full of pain.</p>
<p><u>Sehnsucht</u></p> <p>Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt, Weiß, was ich leide! Allein und abgetrennt Von aller Freude Seh ich an's Firmament Nach jener Seite. Ach, der mich liebt und kennt, Ist in der Weite. Es schwindelt mir, es brennt Mein Eingeweide. Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt Weiß, was ich leide!</p>	<p><u>Yearning</u></p> <p>Only one who knows yearning, Knows, what I suffer! Alone and detached From all joy I look into the heavens In that direction. Alas, he who loved and knew me, Is in the distance. I feel dizzy, My insides are on fire. Only one who knows yearning Knows, what I suffer!</p>

<p><u>Wer sich der Einsamkeit ergibt</u></p> <p>Wer sich der Einsamkeit ergibt Ach! der ist bald allein, Ein jeder lebt, ein jeder liebt, Und läßt ihn seiner Pein.</p> <p>Ja, laßt mich meiner Qual! Und kann ich nur einmal Recht einsam seyn, Dann bin ich nicht allein.</p> <p>Es schleicht ein Liebender lauschend sacht! Ob seine Freundin allein? So überschleicht bei Tag und Nacht Mich Einsamen die Pein, Mich Einsamen die Qual. Ach werd ich erst einmal Einsam in Grabe seyn, Da läßt sie mich allein!</p>	<p><u>He Who Surrenders to Loneliness</u></p> <p>He who surrenders to loneliness Alas, he will soon be alone, Everyone lives, everyone loves, And leaves him to his pain.</p> <p>Yes, leave me to my agony! And can I only once Be properly lonely, Then I will not be alone.</p> <p>A lover gently creeps up and listens! Is his beloved alone? So creeping by day and night Pain comes to my loneliness, Agony comes to my loneliness. Alas, only once I will Be alone in the grave, That it will leave me alone!</p>
<p><u>Poliphème</u></p> <p><i>Récitatif</i> Poliphème inquiet, amoureux et jaloux, Cherchait l'aimable Galatée. Les vents impétueux et la mer agitée Semblaient partager son courroux. "Venez, s'écriait-il, Néréide sévère, Venez par vos appas calmer mon trouble affreux, Partagez la flamme sincère De mon cœur amoureux.</p> <p><i>Air fort et tendre</i> Ah! rendez-moi votre présence, Venez calmer la violence De mes feux et de mes tourments. Loin de vous tout me désespère. Je crains qu'un rival téméraire N'occupe de trop doux moments.</p>	<p><u>Polyphemus</u></p> <p><i>Recitative</i> Troubled Polyphemus, enamoured and jealous, Sought the lovely Galatea. The impetuous winds and the agitated sea Seemed to carry his wrath. "Come," he cried, "Harsh Nereid, Come to calm by your charms my awful trouble, Share the genuine flame Of my loving heart.</p> <p><i>Air, strong and tender</i> Ah! Return to me your presence, Come to calm the violence Of my fire and of my torments. Far from you I despair of all. I fear that a rash rival Occupies your sweetest moments.</p>

<p><i>Récitatif</i> Mais je l'appelle en vain, c'est Acis qu'elle adore, Punissons-le de son bonheur. Il m'offense et respire encore, Il triomphe et j'éprouve une vive douleur Éteignons dans son sang le feu qui me dévore.</p> <p><i>Air de mouvement et marqué</i> Vengez-moi d'un fatal vainqueur, Dépit jaloux, affreuse haine, Bannissez l'amour de mon cœur. Venez, volez, brisez ma chaîne! Immolez un rival aimé, Que sa mort calme mes alarmes Et que l'objet qui l'a charmé Répande d'éternelles larmes."</p> <p><i>Récitatif</i> Le terrible fils de Neptune Exprimait ainsi ses tourments Lorsque la barbare fortune Offrit à son courroux deux fidèles amants. D'un rocher qui l'accable, Acis est la victime: En nommant Galatée, Acis quitte le jour; Poliphème jaloux s'applaudit de son crime Mais il en est bientôt puni par son amour.</p> <p><i>Air, gracieusement</i> Amants jaloux, rompez vos chaînes Quand rien ne flatte votre ardeur. Quelquefois en vengeant vos peines, Vous en redoublez la rigueur. La mort d'un rival qui sait plaire Accable l'objet de vos vœux. Si vous contentez la colère, L'amour en est plus malheureux.</p>	<p><i>Recitative</i> But I call her in vain, it is Acis that she loves, I'll punish him for his happiness. He offends me and still breathes, He triumphs and I feel a living pain I'll quench with his blood the fire that devours me</p> <p><i>Air of motion and marked</i> Avenge me of this terrible victor, Jealous spite, awful hatred, Banish the love from my heart. Come, fly, break my chains! To sacrifice a rival in love, That his death calms my fears And that the object that charmed him May shed eternal tears."</p> <p><i>Recitative</i> The terrible son of Neptune Thus expressed his torments When the barbarous fortune Offered to his wrath two faithful lovers. Of a rock which crushes him, Acis is the victim: While naming Galatea, Acis leaves the day; Polyphemus, jealous, applauds his crime But he is soon punished by his love.</p> <p><i>Air, graciously</i> Jealous lovers, break your chains When nothing flatters your ardor. Sometimes in avenging your sorrows, You redouble its harshness. The death of a rival who knows how to please Crushes the object of your vows. If you satisfy your anger, Love is more unhappy for it.</p>
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Musick's the Cordial of a Troubled Breast

Musick's the Cordial of a Troubled Breast;
The softest Remedy that Grief can find;
The gentle Spell that charms our cares to rest;
And calms the rustling passions of the mind:

Musick does all our joys refine
'Tis that gives relish to our Wine,
'Tis that gives Rapture to our Love;
It wings Devotion to a pitch Divine,

'Tis our chief Bliss on Earth,
And half our Heaven above.

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