

Sacred or Secular: (Lack of) Separation Between Church and State in Weelkes' "As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending"

By Dana Simpson | November 27th, 2012

When the term *popular music* is used today, it is generally with reference to any sort of song or piece of music that is well known within the vast spectrum of 'modern society'. It can be noted, however, that *popular music* still in some ways reflects its secular origins as it continues to exclude from its definition traditional sacred music. It was during the Renaissance era that there was a rise in the popularity of secular music and *popular music*, as we know it today, began to develop. Music was making the move from monophonic chant with the purpose of furthering one's relationship with God to polyphonic and homophonic song structures that focused on storytelling and courtly love. Among the various forms of secular music that emerged during the Renaissance, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation, the madrigal centered on expressionism and was one of the most lyrically important genres of the time.

Thomas Weelkes (1576 – 1623) was one composer of the madrigal who expressed current cultural concerns through his pieces. In his madrigal "As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending", Weelkes plays secular elements against sacred elements in order to elevate English culture with particular interest on Queen Elizabeth I. The madrigal form, the *ars poetica* style, and the descriptive word painting and declamation all combine to present Queen Elizabeth I as an idol to be revered. Throughout her reign as queen of England, Elizabeth I commanded a remarkable following and, as cultural norms evolved so did musical expression. The Elizabethan era of English society was host to many new changes in both politics and style; Thomas Weelkes all the while standing at the foreground of the latter with regard to music.

During the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance there was a shift in ideology from religious thought to a more secular focus on man in his own right. Monophonic sacred chant, though still a part of the church, diminished in popularity among the citizens of Europe while polyphonic and homophonic secular songs began to take shape as the prominent new art form. This notable alteration in the collective devotions of society was seen as troublesome to some (often religious) citizens while, to others, the shift was viewed as an admirable return to the Classics; a 'rebirth' of the Roman and Greek antiquarian culture. This change in European society sparked the development of many forms of art including poetry, visual art, and music. As Reinhart Strohm indicates in his essay entitled "Music, Humanism, and the Idea of a 'Rebirth' of the Arts", the "link between poetry, music, and the fine arts was the concept of imitation or *mimesis* of nature" (11). For Thomas Weelkes and his piece, "As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending", this meant creating a one-stanza musical representation of the pastoral nature of the English countryside. This imitation, though, was not rooted solely in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century English culture, but was also influenced by ancient Roman civilization. Weelkes made use of English values and

landscape and paired these aspects with ancient Roman idols and icons. He gave birth, once again, to the Classics by presenting then-present English civilization as a mimesis of the Italian antiquity.

In his biography of Thomas Weelkes, David Brown finds it imperative to note that “English composers were still largely church musicians, living in a world which had a natural distrust of new ideas, and which would have judged the novelties of the Italian madrigal not only unnecessary but repellent” (47). To this end we must recognize Weelkes as a sort of idol himself, setting Roman ideals in an English context. Weelkes incorporated secular ideas into a sacred context while doing the very same with Roman ideals into an English context. This double clash of ideologies to some extent familiarizes the unfamiliar with respect to English citizens by providing them with “links between Renaissance humanism and Christianity” (Strohm, 7).

Renaissance humanism is of the philosophy that man is strong, capable, and beautiful in his own right. This is not to say that humanists did not believe in the power of God but that one’s belief in Him was not dependent upon one’s closeness to Him. Humanist thought is deeply associated with the gods and goddesses of the antiquity and Weelkes makes use of this aspect in his 1601 madrigal through the incorporation of the goddesses Vesta and Diana. The first lines of Weelkes madrigal – “As Vesta was from Latmos Hill descending, / She spied a maiden queen the same ascending” – make allusive reference to the goddess Vesta: virgin goddess of hearth and home, and representative of family values (*The Encyclopædia Britannica*). Later in the song, toward the end of the stanza, the lyrics state, “Then sang the shepherds and nymphs of Diana / Long live fair Oriana”. Diana, being the patron deity of the moon and woodland animals (*The Encyclopædia Britannica*), is portrayed by Weelkes as an embodiment of the pastoralism of England. The contrast between Roman deities and, not only the English countryside, but also the monarchical figure of Queen Elizabeth I (often referred to as ‘Gloriana’ or ‘Oriana’ for short) aids in this sense of sense familiarization while also uplifting Queen Elizabeth to a goddess-worthy standard. Weelkes was particularly talented at the melding together of two cultures as “he was gifted with the most restless musical imagination of all English composers of the time, and in his madrigals he applied this gift to a musical style which was basically Italian, but which incorporated substantial element of the native English manner” (Brown, 48). It is easy to become enraptured with the lyrical content of “As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending” though it is important to maintain awareness that the poetic and musical forms adopted by Weelkes play at least as large a part in the final product as do the lyrics.

The previously mentioned shift in European values and culture not only lead to a return to the Antiquity but also aided in the development of new styles and genres of various forms of art. Among many other new forms, in the music world, the Renaissance and Reformation led to the creation of the madrigal. Madrigals were typically single-stanza songs of a homophonic texture and were “idyllic, pastoral, satirical, or love poems usually written for two voices. The poems usually consist of several three-line followed by a closing pair of lines...” (Grout, 106). Madrigals were intentionally created with secularity in mind though, as is the case with “As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill

Descending”, there were often sacred elements that became incorporated into the song. Though the Weelkes madrigal in question does not fall into the following category, secular madrigals of a spiritual (albeit not necessarily religious) nature were popularized by Giaches de Wert and collectively grouped under the title of *madrigali spirituali* (Grout, 200). Weelkes’ “Vesta” (for a shorter title) may incorporate elements of divinity but it is hardly a sacred piece. The song is born out of a devotion to the queen and it therefore stands as a secular madrigal through and through. Despite the fact that there appears to be no distinct category such as *monarchical madrigal* or *societal madrigal* within which to place “Vesta”, “in 1601, Thomas Morley published a collection of twenty-five madrigals by different composers.... he called his *The Triumphes of Oriana* in honor of Queen Elizabeth I.... Each madrigal ends with the words ‘Long live fair Oriana,’ a name from the conventional vocabulary of pastoral poetry often applied to Elizabeth” (Grout, 201). Thomas Weelkes’ “Vesta” was one of the twenty-five madrigals included in Morely’s homage to the queen and continues to be one of those more well known among the bunch due to its poetic word painting and declamation.

Musical symbolism is an effective tactic when it comes to stressing the meaning of a particular piece. Subtle nuances in the musical arrangement make all the difference with regards to conveying a message. In the case of “As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending”, the *ars poetica* style aids to further the idolization of Elizabeth I as, not only do the lyrics speak to the queen’s magnificence, but so too does the arrangement of the notes. It is at this point that it is important to note that the term *ars poetica* is being used in its most literal form: to signify the poeticism of a particular piece of art – in this case – Weelke’s madrigal, “Vesta”. Under the umbrella of *ars poetica* stand not only the lyrical qualities (which have already been discussed) but also how the words are set to the music (declamation) and the meaning of this (word painting). David Brown was spot on by noting in Weelkes’ biography that “Vesta” “grasps at the numerous opportunities for musical symbolism, especially in the central couplet, where ‘two by two’, ‘three by three’, ‘together’ and ‘all alone’ determine the number of voices to be used for setting each particle of text” (109). This, however, is not the only use of proper text declamation and word painting within the song. During the beginning two lines of the madrigal, the notes fall and rise accordingly with the words “descending” and “ascending”. Also the proximity and succession of the notes in the musical scale during the section of lyrics “...came running down amain” give the feeling as though Diana’s darling truly is running down the hill – and perhaps a tad clumsily too. Arching over all declamation within the song is the melismatic form. The melisma, which for further clarification, could be described as the vocal ornamentation atop a particular note within a song, aid in the creation of an angelic sound. A syllabic form within a madrigal such as “Vesta” would have led to a much less decorative and elevated sound and, moreover, this use of melisma furthers the divinity that Weelkes attributes to England’s Queen Elizabeth I.

It is particularly interesting to consider the elevation of a political figure rather than that of a figure of clearly divine proportions such as Jesus, Mary, or God himself. This blurring of the line between sacred and secular could place “As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending” into the categorical genre of *conductus* as “conductus straddle the vague dividing line between sacred and secular music” (Grout, 57). Weelkes’

madrigal, however does not quite belong to this gospel-type genre but instead forces the English to identify with the Roman antiquity through the “enjoyment, edification, admiration, imitation and praise” of Elizabeth I (Strohm, 24). Weelkes’ work was not so much about “straddling the dividing line” as Grout suggests but more about a return to the Classical uplifting and idolization of a strong, symbolic, and worthy figure. Elizabeth was representative of what it meant to be English and she was viewed as an idol to many. The incorporation of Diana and Vesta in proximity to the queen (Oriana) can be seen not only as Oriana embodying the values of the home and of the woodland, but also that Oriana is to be revered for her likeness to the Goddesses. Weelkes’ muses for this piece do not begin and end simply with figures from Roman mythology. It is his commitment to these figures in conjunction with Oriana/Elizabeth as well as his strict and well thought out musical *ars poetica* style that uplifted the queen to such a standard. It is safe to say, though, that the standard to which she was idolized was well deserved and that “Elizabeth I ... was well honoured in this tribute” (Brown, 109).

References

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