CATULLUS AND THE SWANSONG

Philip Barnes (John Burroughs School, St. Louis; Saint Louis Chamber Chorus)

[pbarnes@jburroughs.org](mailto:pbarnes@jburroughs.org) www.chamberchorus.org

There have been few more poignant valedictions in poetry than Catullus’s farewell at the grave of his brother (Poem 101). Its concision sharpens the image of loss and despair, and as a result it has served as a paradigm for subsequent mourners. Sixteen centuries later, the English composer Orlando Gibbons rued the demise of Queen Elizabeth I, whose keen interest in, and support of, the arts was not matched by the less discerning King James I: a sibling had not died, but rather a patron. The lyrics lamented that, following the death of the ‘silver swan’ (i.e., the Queen), now “more geese than swans now live, more fools than wise” – a veiled criticism of James’s Scottish courtiers then transplanted to London.

These two, seemingly disparate *adieux*, have recently been interwoven in “Silver Swan,” by the British composer, Bob Chilcott. His pedigree could hardly be more appropriate; while he knew Latin from high school, and then studied at King’s College, Cambridge – the *alma mater* of Orlando Gibbons. After many years singing with The King’s Singers, Chilcott ‘retired’ to concentrate exclusively on composition. Since then he has received numerous commissions around the world and is now published exclusively by Oxford University Press.

“Silver Swan,” written in 2016, is actually scored not for one choir, but two, assuming the persona of Catullus and Gibbons. Their verses intertwine, echoing and sometimes contrasting the other. The Gibbons is an elaboration upon the Elizabethan original, a ‘phantasy’ as the composer calls it. The Catullus, on the other hand, is entirely new but – gratifying to sensible readers of the Latin – observes all the quantities and elisions of the original verse. Too often composers who set ancient Latin not fully cognizant of how the words were originally read and stressed, but no such shortcoming can be found in Chilcott’s handling of the lyrics.

In addition to listening to the premiere recording of this work, this paper will also describe not only the circumstances behind Catullus’s bereavement & Gibbons’ despair, but also the loss suffered by the sponsors of this new composition, a loss which inspired them to commission Chilcott. Thus, this paper describes the intersection of the ancient and modern, and may appropriately be included within the discipline of Reception Studies.

Orlando Gibbons - Silver Swan

The silver swan who, living, had no note,

When death approached, unlocked her silent throat.

Leaning her breast upon the reedy shore,

Thus sang her first and last, and sang no more:

“Farewell, all joys! O Death, come close mine eyes!

More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.”

(probably by Christopher Hatton, 1581 – 1619)

Bob Chilcott – Silver Swan

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus Through many peoples and through many seas have I been carried

advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias, And come now for these wretched funeral rites, my brother,

ut te postremo donarem munere mortis  That I may present you with the final offerings due the dead

et mutam nequiquam adloquerer cinerem, And address pointlessly your silent ashes,

quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum, Since fortune has taken away even you from me,

heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi.  Alas, poor brother, unworthily claimed from me.

nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum Now, however, these things, which by our ancestors’ custom

tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias, Have been handed down in sad offering for funeral rites,

accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu - Accept them, much sodden with a brother’s sobbing

atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale. And for ever, my brother, hail and farewell.

(Gaius Valerius Catullus, c.84 – c.54 BCE) (translated by Philip Barnes)