Bantock Revisits Agamemnon: Revenge Is Sweetly Sung

Whilst it is not unknown for composers to return to a religious text, such as the Magnificat or the Latin Mass, and write more than one version, it is highly unusual to revisit a secular work and essay different settings. Yet this is precisely what occurred in the case of Sir Granville Bantock and a chorus from Aeschylus’s “Agamemnon.” Bantock, a musical giant of Edwardian Britain, was renowned for an eclectic but broad knowledge of texts and languages, from ancient Greek to Walt Whitman. Among several of his works inspired by Greek tragedy are five selections from Euripides’s “Bacchae;” two extracts from Sophocles’s “Oedipus at Colonus;” and two distinct versions of the same chorus from the opening of the “Oresteia.”

It is the music inspired by Aeschylus that this paper addresses. The first version, using E. D. A. Morshead’s translation, was made very shortly after its publication in 1909. Despite its initial success, being selected as a test piece in various competitive festivals, something about it failed to satisfy the composer; for two decades later Bantock returned to the text, this time in the version made by Robert Browning. What was it that drove him back to Aeschylus, and to the very same passage in the “Agamemnon” in which the Chorus sings of the avenging power of Zeus?

The answer to this question may be found between the composer’s own interest in taking revenge upon his enemies, and the immediacy of the tragedian’s imagery that portrays Zeus ensnaring Troy with his unforgiving net. Even without such theorizing we can examine the two translations for the music implicit in their lines, and then assess the relative strengths & weaknesses of each of Bantock’s settings through two new recordings. In so doing we are bound to consider the processes involved in creating modern music for ancient lyrics, albeit in our own English tongue.