

Singing Sappho, From the Intimate to the Grandiloquent - Musical Settings of Sappho

The intense, personal poetry of Sappho has fired the imagination of diverse composers to depict in music her historical and emotional life. In Charles Gounod's 1851 eponymous opera, and Granville Bantock's tone poem and orchestral song cycle, Sappho is the stuff of legend, the means to a dramatic and even a political end. Not until the great American song-writer Ned Rorem did anyone make a convincing attempt to penetrate and explore her true emotions, whilst only in the early 2000s have two women composers, Caroline Ansink (Netherlands) and Clare Maclean (Australia) tackled Sappho's words in ancient Greek. And along the way, in 1961, the great Italian opera composer Ildebrando Pizzetti gave her lyrics a treatment that would not have disgraced Puccini!

It has been observed that every generation reinterprets Sappho in its own way. This paper examines how composers have followed suit, finding in her verse elements that either struck a chord in their own psyche, or enabled them to advocate for a dearly held belief. This is apparent even in verse not by Sappho, but put into her mouth, when one considers Rita Mae Brown's "Sappho's Reply," set by Gordon Kerry for the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir of Sydney, Australia.

From this survey of Sappho's vocal and choral settings arises the question of Sappho's lyricism. The songs she herself sang, though stripped of their original music, refuse to lie silent. What is it about her words and ideas that invite new musical treatment?

Works cited, and from which brief excerpts will be played:

Granville Bantock: Sappho, an orchestral song cycle (Susan Bickley, Royal Philharmonic)

Ned Rorem: Parting (from *Four Sappho Madrigals*) (Saint Louis Chamber Chorus)

Idebrando Pizzetti: Due Composizioni Corali (Danish National Radio Choir)

Clare Maclean: Os Anthos Chortou (Saint Louis Chamber Chorus)