

Catullus and the Swansong

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.

Bibliography

Catullus, Poem 101 (OCT & translation by Guy Lee, Oxford, 1991)

Orlando Gibbons, "The Silver Swan" (Choral Public Domain Library, ed. James Gibb, 2017)

Bob Chilcott, "Silver Swan" (Oxford, 2017)

Saint Louis Chamber Chorus, CD "Saint Louis Classics" (Regent Records, UK, 2017)