Harmony, melody and expression in Dido's Lament

A question on Dido's Lament might ask you to demonstrate how Purcell uses the elements of his musical language to create a tragic utterance.

Your answer could revolve around two main areas:

Harmony

- Use of the minor key gives a veiled quality to the music as a whole
- Chromaticism, arising from the descending Ground bass line, was used a lot in the Baroque (and later) to evoke tension, sorrow, pain, etc.
- Individual choices of chord underlining specific words, e.g. the diminished 7th at *trouble* in bar 12 of the aria
- The gradual increase in dissonant or convoluted harmony – the instrumental coda is a good example here, with some very odd chords arising out of the multiple suspensions and chromatic passing notes
- Unexpected shifts from major to minor and *vice versa* in the recitative

Melody

- Word-painting – the use of melodic gestures to 'illustrate' the meaning of a word as it is sung. One clear example is the descending **melisma** on *laid* in bars 8 & 18 of the aria, the melody reflecting the idea of lowering down by its very shape
- Expressive emphasis on particularly important or emotive words, either by the use of dissonance (*laid* again, this time in bars 7 & 17) or by setting the word to a melisma (several examples in the aria, from the two notes of trouble to the despairing ah! In bars 30, 34, 40 & 44)
- The recitative has a good example of word-painting: *darkness*, set to an intense phrase falling to the flattened 6th; the various appoggiaturas and suspensions which push against the underlying chords in the rest of the recitative are also deeply expressive
- Less obvious, but very important for the overall feel of the piece, the melodic lines move largely in stepwise waves, rising and falling back, making the leaps (trouble) all the more prominent
- Don't forget the descending chromatic bass line which underpins the whole aria with its doom laden tread

Be sure to make clear in anything you write about this piece whether you are referring to the recitative or the aria, as the bar numbers begin again with the entry of the ground bass.

Purcell: extract from *Dido & Aeneas* (1689) p.356

Context

- Purcell's only real opera, although he composed a lot of incidental music for plays and several 'semi-operas' involving choruses, arias, dances interspersed with spoken dialogue.
- Written in 1689 for performance by pupils at a girls' boarding school, hence its brief duration (no more than 1 hour), modest demands on the singers and basic orchestra of strings and continuo. Most of the solo parts are for female voices.

The libretto

- Written by Nahum Tate and based on an episode from the Aeniad by the Roman poet Virgil, which tells of the wanderings of the Trojan Aeneas and the mythical founding of Rome.
- In the opera, Aeneas fetches up in Carthage (North Africa) and takes up with the widowed Queen, Dido. Evil witches bent on Dido's destruction then trick Aeneas into leaving her to follow his destiny and she dies of a broken heart (not before singing about it in the extract under consideration).

The music of the opera as a whole

- A unified sequence of recitatives, arias, choruses and dances, drawing on musical English, French and Italian musical styles.
- The English polyphonic tradition in which Purcell was trained evident in some of the choruses.
- The two part Overture (slow section with dotted rhythms followed by lively section with imitative entries) and homophonic choruses in dance rhythm are all influenced by the French style of Lully and his contemporaries.
- The arias derive from Italian opera, but are given a distinctive flavour by Purcell's expressive word-painting and his use of a ground bass for the three main pieces.
- The large amount of recitative which links the set pieces is another distinctively Purcellian type, arioso (semi-melodic) rather than purely speech-rhythms and often very expressive in its own right (i.e., not just telling the story, as recitative often does in a rapid, emotionally neutral way).

The music of the extract

- A short arioso recitative accompanied by continuo only, starting from C minor but taking several tonal detours before ending on the dominant of G minor.
- A ground bass aria in G minor, accompanied by continuo and upper strings; the 5 bar ground is repeated 11 times with no change of key.
- The vocal melody is phrased across the repetitions of the ground bass and consists of two sections, each repeated: 6-14/16-24 and 25-36/36-46 (the repeat here is slightly foreshortened). The vocal part therefore takes the form A-A-B-Bi superimposed on the 11 repetitions of the ground bass.

Dido's Lament

Bars 6-15



Bars 26-35



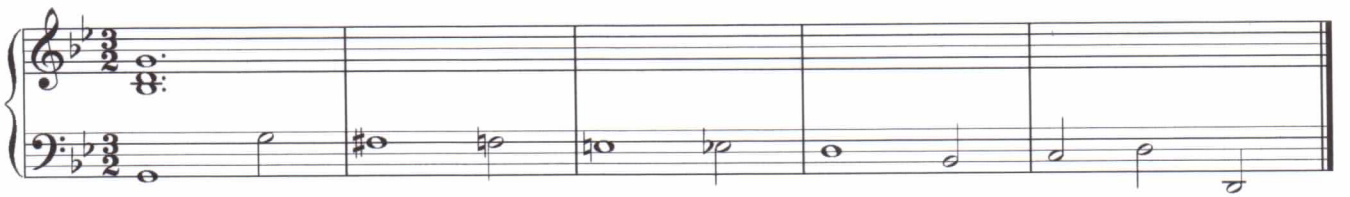
Bars 46-56



Recitative from Dido



Ground bass



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(Ger. *Affektenlehre*).

In its German form, a term first employed extensively by German musicologists, beginning with Kretzschmar, Goldschmidt and Schering, to describe in Baroque music an aesthetic concept originally derived from Greek and Latin doctrines of rhetoric and oratory. Just as, according to ancient writers such as Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian, orators employed the rhetorical means to control and direct the emotions of their audiences, so, in the language of classical rhetoric manuals and also Baroque music treatises, must the speaker (i.e. the composer) move the 'affects' (i.e. emotions) of the listener. It was from this rhetorical terminology that music theorists, beginning in the late 16th century, but especially during the 17th and 18th centuries, borrowed the terminology along with many other analogies between rhetoric and music. The affects, then, were rationalized emotional states or passions. After 1600 composers generally sought to express in their vocal music such affects as were related to the texts, for example sadness, anger, hate, joy, love and jealousy. During the 17th and early 18th centuries this meant that most compositions (or, in the case of longer works, individual sections or movements) expressed only a single affect. Composers in general sought a rational unity that was imposed on all the elements of a work by its affect. No single 'theory' of the affects was, however, established by the theorists of the Baroque period. But beginning with Mersenne and Kircher in the mid-17th century, many theorists, among them Werckmeister, Printz, Mattheson, Marpurg, Scheibe and Quantz, gave over large parts of their treatises to categorizing and describing types of affect as well as the affective connotations of scales, dance movements, rhythms, instruments, forms and styles.

The so-called was closely related to the compositional craft required for the establishing of affects in Baroque music.

See also

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