Listening to Herbert's Lute

ROBERT BOENIG

Perhaps the most famous of Isaac Walton's passages about George Herbert is that which establishes him as a musician:

His chieftest recreation was Musick, in which heavenly Art he was a most excellent Master, and did himself compose may *divine Hymns* and *Anthems*, which he set and sung to his *Lute* or *Viol*; and, though he was a lover of retiredness, yet his love to *Musick* was such, that he went usually twice every week on certain appointed days, to the *Cathedral Church* in *Salisbury*; and at his return would say *That his time spent in Prayer, and Cathedral Musick, elevated his Soul, and was his Heaven upon Earth*: But before his return thence to *Bemerton*, he would usually sing and play his part, at an appointed private Musick-meeting; and, to justify this practice, he would often say, *Religion does not banish mirth, but only moderates, and sets rules to it*.¹

Walton's accuracy, of course, is suspect,² but scholars with good reason have accepted the kernel of truth in this hagiographical husk,³ for musical proficiency, at least from the time of Castiglione to that of Henry Peacham the Younger in his *The Compleat Gentleman* (1622),⁴ was the *sine qua non* of a Renaissance courtier like the young Herbert. Musical imagery, moreover, abounds in the mature Herbert's poetry.⁵ If indeed Herbert did set at least some of his poems to music and even performed them before his friends, he joins Thomas Campion as the only first-rate Renaissance poets who composed as well. Usually someone was either a poet, like, for instance, Samuel Daniel, or a composer, like his brother John Daniel—but not both. Unlike Campion, however, Herbert has left us no music upon which to judge his talents, but it is safe to say that if he intended some poems as songs with accompaniment, an understanding of that accompaniment is necessary for an appreciation of the works as Herbert originally conceived them. What follows is, of course, conjectural and suggestive and must of necessity rely on analyses of songs of other composers with surviving lute parts, but the conjectures and suggestions should be made.

In the early seventeenth century, the lute song became for a time one of

the dominant forms of musical composition, rivaling the madrigal before it was supplanted by the art song of the early Baroque.⁶ A case could be made for the renaming of the genre the lute-viol song, for often a bass viol would double the lute's lowest line, thus strengthening it—a necessity because the bass gut strings of the Renaissance lute were not yet overwound and therefore were rather weak in tone.⁷ According to Walton, lute and viol were alike Herbert's instruments, but the lute was dominant in such songs; it alone is capable of the elaborate counterpoint and harmony the song settings often require.⁸ Herbert reflects the lute's dominance by his frequent use of it in his poetry: the lines from "Easter," "Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part/With all thy art"⁹ comprise one typical example. The point about the Renaissance lute song is that the lute did have a very important artistic part, often contributing to the meaning of the words; it is this contribution that we perhaps lack in some of Herbert's poetry.

Even without the lute accompaniments available, we may still see that many of his poems are structured as lute songs, for a main characteristic of such songs was their subtle stanzaic form, in which the nuances of a given line or half-line often would repeat throughout the entire piece—the type of structuring at which Herbert excels.¹⁰ Champion's songs are the best examples of this technique among the poems whose lute accompaniments survive.¹¹ In his "Follow thy Fair Sun," for instance, each line has emotive connections to the similarly numbered lines in the other stanzas:

Follow thy fair sun, unhappy shadow.
 Though thou be black as night,
 And she made all of light,
 Yet follow thy fair sun, unhappy shadow.

Follow her whose light thy light depriveth.
 Though here thou liv'st disgraced,
 And she in heaven is placed,
 Yet follow her whose light the world reviveth.

Follow those pure beams whose beauty burneth,
 That so have scorched thee,
 As thou still black must be
 Till her kind beams thy black to brightness turneth.

Follow her while yet her glory shineth.
 There comes a luckless night,
 That will dim all her light;
 And this the black unhappy shade divineth.

Follow still, since so thy fates ordained.
 The sun must have his shade,
 Till both at once do fade,
 The sun still 'proved, the shadow still disdained.¹²

Beyond the repetition of "Follow" and the grammatical similarities of the lines are connections in meaning. In the first line of stanza one, the contrast between "fair sun" and "unhappy shadow" has its equivalents in stanzas two and three with "light"/"light depriveth" and "pure beams"/"beauty burneth." Similar is line two, where "black as night" is echoed by "liv'st disgraced," "scorched thee," "luckless night," and "shade." Sometimes in this poem and in other lute songs the equivalence is denied in favor of an opposite—a technique generating ironic contrast. Thus, in line three, "all of life" is affirmed in the second stanza by "heaven is placed" but denied in the succeeding stanzas with "black must be," "dim all her light," and "at once do fade." The reason for this type of strict stanzaic patterning in the lute song is that seventeenth-century composers attempted to make the accompaniment fit the ideas: if the music repeats, so should the approximate meaning of the words.

Many of Herbert's stanzaic poems show this mark of the lute song. A perhaps surprising example is his famous hieroglyph, "Easter-wings":

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store
 Though foolishly he lost the same,
 Decaying more and more,
 Till he became
 Most poore:
 With thee
 O let me rise
 As larks, harmoniously,
 And sing this day thy victories:
 Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne :
 And still with sicknesses and shame
 Thou didst so punish sinne,
 That I became
 Most thinne.
 With thee
 Let me combine
 And feel this day thy victorie:
 For, if I imp my wing on thine,
 Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

The visual effect of this poem with its retinue of theological nuances should not obscure for us its structural similarities to the lute song, for each line of the first stanza has its equivalent in the second, suggesting the repetition of a now lost accompaniment. The uncertain syllabic count in the ninth line of each stanza may, moreover, be explained by musical rests in either that or the surrounding lines.¹³

That Herbert was particularly interested in writing poems that follow the

stanzaic patterning of the lute song is evident when we look at some other Renaissance poets. Sir Philip Sidney, for instance, called the stanzaic lyrics he includes in *Astrophel and Stella* songs, but they lack the connections in meaning between the corresponding lines of each stanza to allow for the type of composition Renaissance theorists like Campion and Thomas Morley recommend:

Only joy, now here you are,
Fit to hear and ease my care;
Let my whispering voice obtain
Sweet reward for sharpest pain;
Take me to thee, and thee to me—
“No, no, no, no my dear, let be.”

Night hath closed all in her cloak,
Twinkling stars love-thoughts provoke,
Danger hence, good care doth keep,
Jealousy itself doth sleep;
Take me to thee, and thee to me—
“No, no, no, no my dear, let be.”

Better place no wit can find,
Cupid's yoke to loose or bind;
These sweet flowers on fine bed too,
Us in their best language woo;
Take me to thee, and thee to me—
“No, no, no, no my dear, let be.”¹⁴

These lines, the first few stanzas of the “Fourth Song,” have a refrain but little else by way of concession to a composer wishing to find appropriate lute and voice settings. “Joy” (1) meets “Night” (7), then “place” (13), while “whispering” (3) misses its appropriate equivalent “Twinkling” (8), which appears a line too early, and finds the altogether inappropriate “Danger” (9) before it goes on to meet “sweet flowers” (15).

The connection between setting and words that causes close correspondences is called “word painting”—a technique at which, again, Campion is especially adept.¹⁵ The setting to his “When to her Lute Corinna Sings,” for instance, is appropriate to the meaning. The melody is given here with the accompaniment in both keyboard transcription and lute tablature, in which each line represents a string, each letter a fret (a means “open string,” b, “first fret,” c, “second fret,” etc.), and each flag the timing of the note:

The octave jump at “high—” provides the necessary high note for the meaning, while the sixteenth notes at “notes” provide a sufficient number to go along with the word’s plurality. We find from Elizabethan books of compositional theory that the ability to do this sort of thing consciously was a skill the young composer should develop. Thus Thomas Morley, in his *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (1597), advises:

You must then when you would express any word signifying hardnesse, cruelty, bitternese, and other such like, make harmonie like unto it, that is, somewhat harsh and hard, but yet so that it offend not. Likewise, when any of your words shall express complaint, dolor, repentance, sighs, teares, and such like, let your harmonie be sad and dolefull. . . . Moreover, you must have a care that when your matter signifieth ascending, high heaven, & such like, you make your musick ascend: & if descending lowenes, depth, hell, & others such, you must make your musicke descend. . . . We must also have a care to applie the notes to the words, as in singing there be no barbarisme committed: that is, that we cause no syllable which is by nature short, be expressed by manie notes or one long note. . . .¹⁶

In his Preface to *Rossiter’s Book of Ayres*, Campion also discusses such word painting (or, to use his own term, “gracing”) but complains of its excesses:

But there are some, who to appeare the more deepe and singular in their judgement, will admit no Musicke but that which is long, intricate, bated with fuge, chaine with sincopation, and where the nature of everie word is precisely exprest in the Note, like the old exploded action in Comedies, when if they did pronounce *Memini*, they would point to the hinder part of their heads, if *Video*, put their finger in their eye. But such childish observing of words is altogether ridiculous, and we ought to maintaine as well in Notes, as in action, a manly cariage, gracing no word, but that which is eminent, and emphaticall.¹⁷

A good composer, in short, writes music appropriate to words without becoming a slave to his own technique.

A few examples of how musicians wrote appropriate accompaniments to their words will help us reconstruct what Herbert might have done.¹⁸ Word painting in a lute accompaniment could be general as well as specific, gracing the whole mood of the song rather than individual words of eminence. Campion's "I Care Not for these Ladies" from the Rossiter collection is a poem about the pleasures of country maids, so the lute accompaniment is mostly chordal, with the alteration of dominant, tonic, and subdominant chords precisely what an unsophisticated country lutenist would play:

The musical score for "I Care Not for these Ladies" by Thomas Campion is presented in three staves. The top staff is the vocal line in treble clef, 3/4 time, with the lyrics "I care not for these la--dies". The middle staff is the lute accompaniment, showing a grand staff with treble and bass clefs, featuring simple chordal progressions. The bottom staff is a lute tablature, showing fret numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) on a six-line staff.

Campion's "My Sweetest Lesbia," however, is a free translation of a poem by Catullus, with the object of the speaker's attention no longer the simple Amaryllis, but a very courtly Lesbia. It is in the same key as "I Care Not for these Ladies" and from the same songbook, but the lute accompaniments could not be more different, for here intricate counterpoint replaces the simple chord progressions we heard when we were out in the country side:

It is, however, when a composer sets specific words to appropriate music that he generates the most interesting results. The anonymous composer who set John Donne's "Song: Goe and catch a fallinge star," for instance, creates a falling motion appropriate to the opening words with his descending lute line, while giving the voice a gradually ascending motion, almost as if it rises to catch the star.¹⁹

The subtlety here is great: the lowest note on the lute, the open F-string, occurs at the syllable, "-linge," while the highest note for the voice is on the following syllable, "star," implying that the speaker and star have missed connecting—thus underscoring Donne's meaning.

In the setting to another of Donne's poems, "The Expiration," Alfonso Ferrabosco²⁰ sets the opening words thus:²¹

So, so, breake off this last la---men-----ting kisse

The lute here begins with three sustained chords, but the rests in the voice part cause a syncopation that breaks in upon the chords—appropriate underscoring of the words’ meaning. Similarly, in an anonymous setting of the same poem, the rest in the first measure of the voice part creates the same effect, evidence that separate composers could generate similar word painting.²²

So, so----- breake off

Morely comments that such rests were particularly appropriate for representing the act of sighing.²³

One final example will serve to illustrate both word painting and the demise of the lute song.²⁴ A generation after Campion, Donne, and Ferrabosco, the composer John Wilson (1595-1674) set stanzas 1, 2, 3, and 9 of Herbert’s “Content.” Wilson was sensitive to what the lute could do. For instance, the accompaniment (available only in keyboard transcription) to the words “who cannot on his own bed sweetly sleepe” runs thus:²⁵

The chromaticism of the lute line accompanying “sleepe” creates a musical restlessness appropriate to the meaning. Similarly, the accompaniment to “to court each place and fortune that doth fall” runs thus:

The descending sixteenth notes accompanying “fall” are, of course, appropriate to falling. The difficulty, however, with Wilson’s setting of “Content” is that it no longer follows Herbert’s stanzas; it is through-composed, with different music to each. Doubtless the rigors of such composition made Wilson, a noted reveler, abandon the attempt to set stanzas 4-8. In any event, as effective as his setting is in short focus, in long it obscures rather than clarifies Herbert’s poem because the lute song connections between individual lines of different stanzas are musically obliterated.²⁶

If he did compose settings for some of his poems, Herbert likely engaged in word painting. As we have seen, it is the participation of music in a poem’s meaning; Herbert is justly famous for an analogous technique—causing metre and stanza structure to participate in the poem’s meaning. An analysis of a couple of passages from “Deniall” makes this clear:

When my Devotions could not peirce
 Thy silent eares;
 Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:
 My brest was full of fears
 And disorder.
 (1-5)

The phrase "as was my verse" is the key: the different lengths of the lines and the lack of rhyme at the end create the appropriate metrical and stanzaic disorder, which extends to the very end of the poem:

O cheere, and tune my hartles brest,
 Deferre no time.
 That so thy favours granting my request,
 They and my mind may chime,
 And mend my rime.
 (26-30)

The mending of the rhyme with the last word is a performatory utterance and, of course, a participation of the poem's structural elements in its meaning.

But Herbert also structures "Deniall" as though it were a lute song, for each line in a given stanza echoes the emotion in the equivalent lines in the other stanzas—with the necessary exception of the last, which possibly could be accompanied by a closing major chord instead of a minor that could have ended each of the other stanzas. Thus each except the last ends with a short line elaborating on the concept of "disorder"—"disorder" (5), "Alarmes" (10), "no hearing" (15 and 20), and "Discontented" (25). But more important is the underlying musical metaphor of the poem—a disused lute becomes an emblem for the troubled soul: ". . . my soul lay out of sight/Untun'd, unstrung" (21-22). The lute accompaniment Herbert might have written for "Deniall" thus would have been characterized by the dissonances recommended by Morley for emotive occasions such as this one.

Since Herbert so carefully constructed his stanzas and paid so much attention to literary ways of underscoring a poem's meaning, it is reasonable to assume that if he set some of his poems to lute accompaniment, he would have tried analogous musical techniques. What has preceded should give us examples of the type of techniques he might have employed, while what follows are conjectures about how he might have set some other passages.

A possible candidate among Herbert's poems for lute accompaniment is "The Thanksgiving." Walton, at least, associates it with Herbert as a musician:

The Sunday before his death, he rose suddenly from his Bed or Couch, call'd
 for one of his Instruments, took it into hand and said—
 My God, My God,
 My Music shall find thee

 And every string
 Shall have his attribute to sing.²⁷

Walton's Herbert only recites these lines before playing a stanza from "Sunday," and the poem is strictly not a lute song since it is in couplets, not stanzas. But the larger passage from which these lines are taken is nevertheless apt for lute setting:

My musick shall finde thee, and ev'ry string
 Shall have his attribute to sing,
 That all together may accord in thee,
 And prove one *God*, one Harmonie. (39-42)

Proper word painting would necessitate a contrapuntal accompaniment similar to that in Campion's "Sweetest Lesbia" for the first two lines, where each string has a different part, but a chordal accompaniment similar to that in Campion's "I Care Not for these Ladies" for the last two lines, where all the strings abandon their different parts and accord in harmony.

Walton's account of Herbert's deathbed performance continues:

And having tun'd it he played and sung:

The Sundays of Mans life,
 Threaded together on times string,
 Make Bracelets, to adorn the Wife
 Of the eternal glorious King:
 On Sundays, Heavens dore stands ope;
 Blessings are plentiful and rife,
 More plentiful than hope.²⁸

"Sunday" is thus a candidate for a lute song with original music composed by Herbert: it is stanzaic and offers some particularly fine lines for word painting. The second stanza is a good example:

The other daies and thou
 Make up one man; whose face thou art,
 Knocking at heaven with thy brow:
 The worky-daies are the back-part;
 The burden of the week lies there,
 Making the whole to stoup and bow,
 Till thy release appeare.
 (8-14)

At "knocking" the lute could play rapid, percussive notes, also appropriate at the same place in the stanza Walton quotes where bracelets are being made. At "stoup and bow" the lute could descend, as it did in the opening measures of the anonymous setting of Donne's "Goe and catch a fallinge star."

Herbert's short poem "Vertue" is, with its musical imagery and tight stanzaic patterning, a likely lute song:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridall of the earth and skie:
The dew shall weep thy fall to night;
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue angrie and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet dayes and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie;
My musick shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

Like Campion's "Follow thy fair sun," "Vertue" has a strict pattern in which the stanzas begin with the same word and follow the same grammatical structure. A descending lute part would be appropriate for the rather apocalyptic third line in each stanza, in which, successively, dew falls, the rose's root lies in a grave, the song's melody reaches a cadence, and the world ends. The term "closes" (11), as Herbert's editors usually point out, is a technical term indicating a musical cadence. Thus Campion uses it in his book of musical theory, *A New Way of Making Fowre Parts in Counterpoint* (1613),²⁹ where his second topic is an explanation of the proper closes for the various keys. But it is more than that, for it is also a term for a particular type of lute ornament that often accompanied cadences in a song's melody. An example is the accompaniment, already quoted, to the words "notes appear" from Campion's "When to her Lute Corinna Sings." Such a lute close would, of course, be appropriate for Herbert to include at the end of the third line of each stanza of "Vertue." Herbert was not, moreover, the only writer in the Renaissance to associate the word "close" with death. In his book on music theory, *A Briefe Discourse* (1614), Thomas Ravenscroft laments the death of Morley with the appropriate metaphor:

The ice is broken, and the Foot-path found; and I hope to finde many Morleyes alive, though He (who did shine as the Sunne in the Firmament of our Art, and did first give light to our understanding with his Praecepts) be long since come to the Close and Period of his Time.³⁰

What Herbert's editors have noticed less often than the musical meaning behind "closes" is the metaphor that works in the opposite direction, the word "die"—also a term for a musical cadence, as in the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, where Duke Orsino comments:

If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again! It had a dying fall. . . .

The final line of each stanza of "Vertue" reaches such a dying fall in music—and the lute metaphorically could become death in the closing embellishment.

Many others of Herbert's poems—ones like "Easter" and "Church-Musick" that mention musical terms, especially—invite this sort of analysis. The suggestions offered above, of course, do not constitute evidence of what Herbert actually did in specific instances; instead they are intended as guidelines to what he might have done. Until the unlikely event of the discovery of an autograph copy of the lute settings to some of his poems, we can do no more than guess that they were works of musical as well as literary art and wonder what they were like. Only the printed text survives, but it is enough to convince us that Herbert was one of our most musical poets. The numerous settings of his poetry—from John Wilson through John Wesley to Ralph Vaughan Williams³¹—are proof enough of that.

Rutgers University

Notes

- 1 G. Saintsbury, ed., *Isaac Walton's Lives* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), p. 303.
- 2 See, for instance, John Butt, "Isaac Walton's Methods in Biography," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* 19 (1934), pp. 67-84; Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954, rpt. Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1981), p. 12; and David Novarr, *The Making of Walton's Lives* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958).
- 3 See, for instance, Amy Charles, *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 163, who accepts Walton's story; but compare David Novarr, "Review: *A Life of George Herbert* by Amy Charles," *George Herbert Journal*, 1 (1978), p. 56.
- 4 Henry Peacham the Younger, *The Compleat Gentleman*, 2nd ed., (London, 1634); quoted in Morrison Comegys Boyd, *Elizabethan Music and Musical Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940, 1962), pp. 3-4.
- 5 See Summers, pp. 156 ff.
- 6 See Edward Lowbury, Timothy Salter, and Alison Young, *Thomas Campion: Poet, Composer, Physician* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), pp. 39-42.
- 7 David Munrow, *Instruments of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 77.

- 8 For an introduction to the construction, tuning, and use of the Renaissance lute, see Munrow, pp. 75-78; and Jeremy Montagu, *The World of Medieval and Renaissance Musical Instruments* (Woodstock, N.Y.: 1976), p. 118.
- 9 Quotations from Herbert are from Barbara K. Lewalski and Andrew J. Sabol, eds., *Major Poets of the Earlier Seventeenth Century* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973).
- 10 See Wilfrid Mellers, "Words and Music in Elizabethan England," in Boris Ford, ed., *The Age of Shakespeare* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1955, 1969), p. 404; compare Summers, pp. 163-164.
- 11 See Miles Kastendieck, *England's Musical Poet: Thomas Campion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 103-160.
- 12 Quotations from Campion's poems and music are from Edmund A. Fellowes, ed., *Thomas Campion: Songs from Rossiter's Book of Airs*, The English School of Lutenist Song Writers, First Series, No. 4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1922). "Follow thy Fair Sun" is on page 14.
- 13 See Summers, p. 163.
- 14 Quoted from J. William Hebel and Hoyt H. Hudson, eds., *Poetry of the English Renaissance* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1929, 1957), pp. 116-117.
- 15 For a good introduction to word painting in Renaissance music, see Mellers, pp. 386-415.
- 16 Quoted in Boyd, pp. 234-236.
- 17 Walter R. Davis, ed., *The words of Thomas Campion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 15.
- 18 Louise Schleiner, "Jacobean Song and Herbert's Metrics," *Studies in English Literature* 19 (1979), pp. 109-126, theorizes that some of Herbert's stanzaic forms were "shaped by tunes he had in mind for them. . . ." (p. 109). My suggestion is a complement to this: they were also shaped by his lute accompaniments.
- 19 Andre Sorires, ed., *Poemes de Donne, Herbert et Crashaw mis en musique par leurs contemporains* (Paris: Anatole-France, 1961), p. 4.
- 20 Three generations of musicians from the famous Italian immigrant Ferrabosco family had the name Alfonso Ferrabosco: Alfonso the Elder (1543-1588), Alfonso the Younger (1578?-1628), and Alfonso III (1610-1660). Alfonso the Younger is the composer who concerns us here. See Richard Charteris, "Autographs of Alfonso Ferrabosco I-III," *Early Music* 10 (1982), pp. 208-210.
- 21 Sorires, p. 8.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 23 See Boyd, p. 237.
- 24 See Mellers, p. 404.
- 25 Sorires, pp. 20-22. See Boyd, pp. 197-198 for more information about John Wilson.
- 26 See Mellers, p. 404.
- 27 Walton, p. 316.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 For the text of Campion's treatise, see Davis, *op. cit.*
- 30 Quoted in Boyd, p. 242.
- 31 For an analysis of Vaughan Williams's setting of Herbert's *Five Mystical Songs*, see Robert Boenig, "Vaughan Williams and Herbert," *Studia Mystica* 5 (1982), pp. 28-38.