

David Matthews

A Congress of Passions

Cantata on poetry by Sappho

opus 62

(1994)

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David Matthews : A Congress of Passions, op.62
Cantata on poetry by Sappho



My title comes from Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime*, the only source for one of the few almost complete poems of Sappho – the central poem of this cantata. Longinus comments that it displays "not one passion, but a congress of passions". The most celebrated of all women poets, Sappho flourished around 600 B.C. in the Aegean island of Lesbos. Her work survives only in fragments quoted by other writers, but the language of these fragments has an intensity rarely equalled by any poet.

I first discovered Sappho when I learned Greek at school, and set one of her fragments to music when I was about 19 (the one that begins the third section of this cantata): it went on to a bonfire of early compositions and I have no clear recollection of it. I have long wanted to set more of her poetry, in Greek rather than in translation. In assembling a text, I grouped together one set of fragments about love with another about evening and night, and placed them on either side of the famous love poem (which is incidentally addressed to a woman: hence 'lesbian') quoted by Longinus.

We do not know much about what kind of music the ancient Greeks made, but one of their most frequently used instruments was the *aulos*, which was a reed instrument, an early oboe. I was, therefore, glad to be able to use an oboe in my piece. There are two references to Cretan folk music: the melody of the opening invocation to Aphrodite is a Cretan folksong which I have used more or less intact, while the oboe music in the central section of the piece is based on some music for the Cretan bagpipe, the *askomandboura*.

A Congress of Passions was commissioned by Michael Chance, Nicholas Daniel and Julius Drake with funds provided by South East Arts, and first performed by them at Cranbrook School, Kent, on 9 March 1994.

D.M..

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Translation of the text

Come, goddess of Cyprus, and in golden cups serve nectar delicately mixed with delights.

Now like a mountain wind overwhelming oak trees, Love shakes my soul.

Now Love, the ineluctable, dominates and shakes my being, and fills me with bittersweetness.

I yearn and I seek.

*

That man seems to me the equal of the gods, who sits in your presence and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter; that indeed has made my heart beat fast in my breast. For when I see you even for a moment, I cannot speak, my tongue is useless, with my eyes I see nothing, suddenly a subtle fire races beneath my skin, my ears ring, a cold sweat covers me and my whole body is seized with trembling. I am paler than grass and seem little better than dead. But I must dare all...

*

Evening, you who bring all that the bright morning scattered, you bring the sheep, the goat, the child back to its mother.

By the cool water the breeze murmurs, rustling through apple branches, while from quivering leaves streams down deep slumber.

The stars around the fair moon lose their bright beauty when she, almost full, illumines all earth with silver.

The moon has set, and the Pleiades; it is midnight, the time is going by and I lie alone.

I yearn and I seek.

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A CONGRESS OF PASSIONS

Cantata on poetry by Sappho

Daniel Macdore, op. 62

Passionate, dramatic, like an invocation (♩ = c. 63)

The musical score is arranged in four systems. The first system features a Voice part in 5/4 time, starting with a rest followed by a melodic line with lyrics: "ἔλθε, κύπρι, / ethe, Kupri,". The Oboe part begins with a forte (f) dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes. The Piano part is in 5/4 time, marked forte (f), and includes a pedal point (Ped.) and a fermata. The second system features a Violin part with lyrics: "χρυσί-αισ - iv ἐν κυλί-κεσ - σιν ἄβρωσ - συμ - / kreskrais - in en kuli-kes - sin hab-rös - sum -". The Oboe part continues with a melodic line. The Piano part continues with a similar melodic pattern and includes a fermata.

voice

- μεμιγμένον - θαλί - αι - - - σι νέκ - τας οί - νοχού - σα, νέκ -
- memigmenon thali - ai - - - si nek - tas oi - nochou - sa, nek -

Ob.

Pno

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Voice

- τας οί - νοχού - σα.
- tas oi - nochou - sa.

Ob.

Pno

Voice *f* 3
 Ἔπος δ'εἶνάξ- ἐ μοι φρένας, ὡς ἄνεμος κατ'
 Epos d'eina x- e moi phrenas, ws anemos kat'

Ob. *f*
 trb

Pno. 12
 5 4
 8

Voice *f* 3
 ὄρος δρύσιν ἐμ-πέτρων. Ἔπος θεῶν-
 oros drusin em-pet-ron. Epos theu-

Ob. *f*
 trb

Pno. 15
 5 4
 4
f

voice

-τέ μ' ὄλι - σι μέλης δόνει, — γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχ - - ανον ὄρ - πετοῦν. —
 -te mio lu - simelēs donēi, — glukupikron amach — -anon or-peton. —

ob.

no.

voice

καὶ ποθή - ω
 kai pathē - ō

ob.

no.

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Voice

και μά-ο-μαι.
kai ma-n-mai.

Ob.

Pno.

23

Voice

Ob.

Pno.

26

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