

Chant and variations on Shakespeare's 127th sonnet

By Gylfi

*In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slandered with a bastard shame:
For since each hand hath put on Nature's power,
Fairing the foul with Art's false borrowed face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.
Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem
At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
Sland'ring creation with a false esteem:
Yet so they mourn becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says beauty should look so.*

This entry is a set of variations on an original chant melody, each based on a different portion of Shakespeare's sonnet. It is set for mixed choir a capella, with a minimum of two singers *per part* but it is recommended that there be at least four or five per part to achieve a smooth continuous tone in the long notes. Some more practical notes concerning performance:

The beginning chant is to be sung in the traditional liturgical style of Roman Catholic plainchant, with a broad resonant tone in a free speaking rhythm in accordance with the text. Great care must be taken to observe all fermatas as they are vital to make the outlines of the form clear. Bar lines have no special significance, be it rhythmic or structural, other than separating lines of the poem from one another. The decision of where to place emphases must be made only with the music and the meaning of the text in mind, and the performer has great freedom in this regard, just as one has when reciting the poem itself. Commas in the middle of lines in the sonnet should be taken to mean a slight detachment in the performance or even a syncopation where appropriate. The chant is written for the tenor as an endearing homage to the great tradition of Gregorian chant although it utilizes a larger vocal range than is commonly found in that music. That being said, there is no reason why basses with a good falsetto register cannot accompany the tenors as the character of the music does not call for excessive chest voice. For the pronunciation of the text and all IPA symbols found throughout Received Pronunciation is recommended.

In the first variation, the goal should be to achieve a homogenous texture and balance among the voices except in bars 23-24 where the soprano melody must be very clear. In the percussive sections it is recommended that the first note after a rest always be accented slightly so that the overlaid rhythms are audible and the texture is not just a mush of incoherent tkt's. On that note, the consonants should be clearly differentiated, even if that means overexaggerating them, and should be completely unvoiced (pitchless). Judgment must be exercised regarding the dynamic levels as they are clearly relative and not necessarily comparable to the same dynamics with normal singing.

The second variation uses microtonal inflections which should not be mistaken for quarter tones in the same way that the duodecimal notation otherwise used should not be mistaken for equal temperament. The effect should be subtle yet unequivocal but most importantly, harmonious. The idea is not to create instability and chaos through corrupting the intonation in an ugly fashion, but rather to discover new and exciting sonorities. The lowest voice is instructed to sing on /m/ in order to create a sense of distance and otherworldliness but it may be advisable to sing on /ŋ/ instead if the upper voices drown out the lowest one. It is preferable that the part be sung by a bass, baritone or even tenor who is proficient at subharmonic singing and that this technique be used for the low notes. If no such singer is available the part can be sung by a basso profundo. When the voices are momentarily divided it is expected that one half diverge from the main part at the exact moment that the new part starts and converge with the main part when it ends. The slurs should be taken to mean a subtle portamento effect.

In the final variation it is necessary to sing very rhythmically so that the alto and male voices can be exactly synchronized; it should continue with a steady pulse until the very end. The male voices need to be careful not to overpower the female voices but they must also be clear. The same rule as before regarding the consonants applies here: they must be clearly differentiated from each other.

Some info on the composition itself: The text was divided into five sections and a pentatonic scale associated with each section. These are, respectively: 01378, 02458, 02468, 01268 and 01479. Each variation takes a unique look at one of these scales and also offers an abstract perspective on the text, it being split up into its constituent vowels and consonants.

