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MAVES

Four Greek Songs

Voice & Piano

Four Greek Songs (1998)

Dedication

These songs are a collaborative effort, and the result of actions and kindnesses by several people. Dr. Frank Morris, Chairman of the Classics Department at the College of Charleston, allowed me to tag along with two of his Greek classes in different years, and is totally responsible for getting me to Greece on two occasions. Chasing around that incredible country for several weeks, studying archeology, ruins and artifacts, art, drama and philosophy both there and on several Aegean Sea islands made the kind of indelible impression upon my psyche that somehow had to be expressed in music.

Some time later, guitarist Marc Regnier and soprano Deanna McBroom, both of whom are colleagues of mine on the faculty at the College of Charleston, approached me to do some songs for them. Deanna and Ross McGoulus, also a singer/teacher and a wonderful musician/person who is/speaks Greek, spent hours helping me with the translations from first Ancient, then Modern Greek, and finally to English. Then with the employment of these wonderful fragments by Sappho, Dr. Robert Wagman, Professor of Classics at the University of Florida at Gainesville, with his encyclopedic knowledge of both ancient and modern Greek; was, by virtue of recent discoveries, able to help with insertions and translations of missing snippets in the original text. The short story is that these songs are the result.



South Carolina Arts Commission
1800 Gervais Street • Columbia, South Carolina 29201
803-734-8696 Fax: 803-734-8526
www.state.sc.us/arts



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David W. Maves

mavesd@cofc.edu — <http://www.cofc.edu/~mavesweb>

DAPrint Music Preparation / Publishing

datimp@home.com — <http://members.home.com/datimp/>

Notes about the songs

After various visits to Greece, I wanted to make some kind of musical statement about ancient Greece, which I had studied and thought about a lot, and wherein, I believe; has originated just about every good thought we've ever had about evolving into a decent collective society with a worthwhile "high" art.

For texts I have chosen the words of (by most accounts) the greatest lyric poet of all time: Sappho. The problem with these "snippets" (we don't really have much of her work) is that; like Ancient Greek musical fragments, we know almost everything ... except how they sounded. Modern attempts to approximate the sounds of Sappho's ancient tests (in spite of many valiant efforts) don't ring true. And translations into English seem equally stilted. As Ezra Pound once rather testily remarked, upon publication of yet another attempt: "Nobody seems to have mastered the lady's meter."

Every pictorial representation of Sappho (mostly on Greek pottery) shows her with her lyre. Plainly these texts were meant to be sung — not spoken. And no one knows how to do this! What I have attempted is a translation into modern Greek of Sappho's fragments (with enormous amounts of help and encouragement from Ross McGoulus and Professor Wagman). The later translations into English are my own paraphrases.

The original version of these songs is for soprano and guitar, which though not a lyre, is at least a somewhat similar instrument. If the version with piano is performed, the piano should sound not like a piano, but more like some in-between instrument that has an unusual delicate, mostly non-legato sound. And if a grand piano is used with the lid raised sufficiently, the passages played with a plectrum will help deliver the unusual, ethereal quality that comes effortlessly for a guitarist.

Song I

The shining stars which peek out behind the lovely new moon
are outshone by the full and brilliant bright lunar light which
over all the earth scatters a silent sheen of silveriness.

Song II

Hither from Kriti (Crete) come now to me
to this tiny holy temple, this blessed place
which has this beautiful meadow filled with apple trees
and the aroma of incense sifting, wafting 'round the altars.
There, too, babbling cool rushing water flowing under
branches of apple trees
and with roses the whole place now is shadowed
and from shimmering dark green leaves
the sleep of enchantment flows through.
There, too, a meadow wherein graze the horses
where spring flowers blossom, spreading open
and with breezes blowing so gently
there you, *Cypris, now into our cups of gold
pouring gracefully nectar
with our joyous feast
intermingle—intertwine.

*a poetic name for Aphrodite

Song III

As blessed as a god it seems is he who sits by you;
see how he encircles you, how soft he is
when he whispers and when he smiles so sweetly at you
oh then this tortured heart's not mine
it breaks inside me, in my breast
and as I look at you it seems as though I lose my voice
and that I lose all sound and my tongue can't speak at all—
shattered and my body's frozen in torment
suddenly I'm overwhelmed by fire, my eyes now darken
bells ring in my ears, I am soaked with fear
and wracked by trembling seizing me then entirely,
more green than grass I am moving now toward death a little
flying—floating—falling.

Song IV

On the ornate throne the bright immortal Aphrodite,
daughter of the greatest god, with fear distress and anguish
do not enslave my heart my soul, you I implore lady mine,
but now draw nigh, as in the past when you listened to
this voice of mine, my far away voice that you listened for;
and then nearby to me you hastened, for then you left your father's
palace, and then in your chariot of burnished gold,
lovingly and beautifully to me you came, to this black world
with swiftly flying sparrows flapping whirring wings
down from heaven's edge through the midair and from breezes inside
and quickly came down here to me, and you most blessed of all
inquired of me with a smile on that godlike face of yours,
what happened that made me call again and what from you
this time I needed, and what now this time I wanted,
inquires this crazed, this maddened soul of mine;
what now do you ask more, what is it this time?
“Whom am I to bring in to your arms,
to your embrace now? What, Sappho, preoccupies you now?
for if she runs from you away
she'll just as soon to you return
and if she disregards your gifts
soon she will be giving you some
if it is not you that she wants now,
she all too soon shall love you.”
Come to me now and stay with me
and from the depth of all my deep despair deliver me
and make it so my happiness returns, reawakens in me
and the best of love will then fill my soul
as you now stand by me.

Text by the composer, free translations from fragments in the Ancient Greek by the lyric poet Sappho.