

Spontaneity, Improvisation and Composition: Catullus and ‘The Fox’

Was it possible for a poet like Catullus to produce critically acclaimed poems spontaneously, or does the complex technical art of lyric with its metrical intricacies automatically prevent this? In this brief study, I consider whether we may usefully compare the virtuosic skills required in improvising and composing classical music at short notice with those required for composing lyric poetry. It is then up for question whether the possibility of spontaneity in the one field supports the re-examination of the possibility of spontaneity in the other.

It is clear that several composers did achieve such a degree of technical virtuosity that they were capable of more or less fully forming a hugely complex work in their minds before writing it down more or less mechanically, or of improvising hugely complex works from bare sketches, even for first performances. While it may have taken some years to perfect the craft, once learnt, each work did not in itself require those years as part of the composition process. Mozart, in particular, is famous for his extraordinary methods. It is recorded that he sometimes played billiards to aid his concentration. During the tranquillity that the game gave him, he was able to arrange his ideas sufficiently to be able not just to write down the music very quickly, but to do this in public, amidst the disruption of general conversation.

Phenomenal feats of improvisation are no longer required or the fashion for modern composers, and so it is often forgotten that Mozart ‘was prized by his contemporaries first as an improviser, second as a pianist, and only third as a composer (Morrison, R. *BBC Music* April 2004, 20).

Similarly, at Leipzig, Bach wrote, rehearsed and performed a cantata each month for twenty-seven years, in between teaching, training, and playing, tuning and testing the organ. His sons, who no doubt assisted him in this, provide the testimony ‘that, however, complex their papa’s written-down fugues may seem, they were mere tabloid splashes when set beside the towering infernos of sound he plucked, ready-formed in invertible counterpoint, out of his imagination when improvising in the Thomaskirche.’ (Morrison, 20).

A more recent example, Philip Heseltine (also known as Peter Warlock, and satirised by DH Lawrence in *The Rainbow* and by Aldous Huxley in *Antic Hay*), was similar to Catullus and his friends in that he was more interested in highly crafted occasional compositions and songs rather than full symphonic pieces. Regarded as a fine and precise technician, there is an account of one spontaneous composition that has many striking echoes with the account Catullus gives of his evening of light verse-making with Calvus (poem 50). Warlock’s friend, the poet Bruce Blunt, records how ‘The Fox’ came into being as a poem, with musical accompaniment within twenty-four hours.

‘... I can, however, tell you the whole story of ‘The Fox’.

Philip was staying with me in Bramdean in the summer of 1930, and we spent a long evening in ‘The Fox’, which is the local pub.

When we got back home, Philip went almost straight to bed, but I stayed up and opened a bottle of Chablis (what an

inadvisable addition to a lot of beer) and wrote the words of
'The Fox'.

[The Fox

At "The Fox Inn"
The tatter'd ears,
The fox's grin
Mock the dead years.

High on the wall
Above the cask
Laughs at you all
The fox's mask.

The horn is still,
The huntsmen gone;
After the kill
The fox lives on.

Death's date is there
In faded gold;
His eyes outstare
The dead of old.

Beneath this roof
His eyes mistrust
The crumbled hoof,
The hounds of dust.

You will not call,
I shall not stir,
When the fangs fall
From that brown fur.]

As I did not go upstairs till about 3.0, I thought that Philip would probably be down before me, so I left the poem on the table with a note to the effect that I thought it was unsuitable for setting to music on account of the shortness of the lines.

When I got down at about noon next day, I found Philip sitting at the table with music MS paper in front of him and he was working at the song. He said 'On the contrary, my dear sir, I think that this is admirably suited for setting to music'.

We were going to Salisbury that afternoon and, when we got there, Philip hired a room with a piano at some music shop, played and whistled the thing over, and finished the song on the spot. So 'The Fox', words and music, was conceived and completed within about eighteen hours, which may, or may not, be a record.' (Letter from Bruce Blunt to Gerald Cockshott. 1943. The original MS records the date as '29 vii 1930.)

It was said of 'The Fox': This song... is considered by many musicians to be Warlock's finest achievement.' (Cox & Bishop (Ed) 1994, 101), and Warlock himself has been considered as one of the greatest songwriters that music has known (Lambert, 1938). This incident is of particular

interest, therefore, as it shows spontaneity of composition, both poetic and musical, inspired by a real life situation, with the final product of both highly talented individuals reflecting very closely the initial drafts. While it cannot be proven that Catullus composed with similar felicity, it does reassert the possibility that poems that appear to describe his emotions may have been written closer to the event and even possibly more in the throes of emotion than allowed by some critics.

Furthermore, it also draws attention to the aesthetic worth of the poems that Calvus and Catullus were capable of achieving in their evenings of literary entertainment, as Catullus describes in poem 50. These have tended to be dismissed outright as bearing any resemblance to the poems of the collection. Quinn (in Sullivan (Ed) 1962, 35), for example, marginalised the 'versiculi' as 'scraps of verse, tossed off by talented idle young men stimulated by intimacy and the exhilaration of outdoing one another in technical competence.' 'The Fox' shows, however, how an informal evening can lead to something of true artistic worth and suggests that some at least of the 'nugae' were precisely the poems about dinner parties and each other's sex lives written on such occasions and which may have required some careful polish, but no substantial redraft.

References:

Cox, D. and Bishop, J. (Eds) (1994). *Peter Warlock: A Centenary Celebration*. London: Thames Publishing.

Lambert, C. (1938). 'Master of English Song.' Radio Times.

Quinn, K. (1962). 'Docte Catulle' in J.P. Sullivan (Ed) *Critical Essays on Roman Literature Elegy and Lyric*. London; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 31-63.

