Hearing the Intricacy of Charlotte Smith’s *Beachy Head*: A Collaboration

ONE OF THE most fruitful outcomes of our Visiting Fellowship programme is the varied and multidisciplinary collaborations that can result from different scholars having time together in an inspiring environment away from their usual lives. The musical interpretation of Charlotte Smith’s poem *Beachy Head* is one such collaboration. Elizabeth A. Dolan, Associate Professor of English at Lehigh University, tells us more.

At the end of a gloriously sunny July 2015 fellowship month, the JASNA international fellow, composer Amanda Jacobs invited me to collaborate with her in setting some of Charlotte Smith’s poetry to music. Charlotte Smith shaped Romantic-era poetry by initiating the sonnet revival, celebrating subjective experience as a legitimate poetic topic, and boldly experimenting with poetic form. Her 731-line poem *Beachy Head* (1807) depicts the landmass of the same name on the eastern coast of the British Isles, the coastline that was once joined to France. Writing the poem during England’s long war with France, Smith poignantly articulates themes of separation and continuity in the very spot the British expected an invasion. But the poem’s exploration extends well beyond Smith’s immediate historical moment to investigate the geographical, palaeontological, botanical, commercial, and martial histories of this iconic landform. Solitary figures wander in the landscape, including a shepherd, a smuggler, a heartbroken poet, and a hermit who recovers bodies from shipwrecks to bury them in the chalky coastal cliff. We felt that *Beachy Head*’s formal variety, thematic complexity, and range of voices would lend themselves to a song cycle. At least one of Smith’s short poems has been set to music, yet no one has attempted *Beachy Head*. Indeed, very few Romantic-era women’s poems have been set to music, although poems by Blake, Byron, and other male poets have long been celebrated in this way. Amanda and I hope that our collaborative project will offer additional insight into Smith’s impressive contribution to the British poetic canon.

Although I teach *Beachy Head* regularly, this magisterial and capacious poem became more vivid to me in July when I visited the ‘stupendous summit ... o’er the channel’ that inspired the poem (ll. 1-2). The sun-drenched white cliffs of the ‘projecting head-land’ came alive through Smith’s lines (ll. 12). The air was filled with the ‘shriil harsh cry’ of ‘terns, and gulls, and tarrocks’, punctuated by the vocalise of the ‘bleating flock’ (ll. 21, 23, 28). Even today, the sheep farms seem to run up to the edge of the cliff, so that one feels the peril of the little careless sheep/ On the brink grazing’ (ll. 684-85). Watching the ‘changing colours of the sea,’ one imagines Smith’s hermit on a stormier day scanning the water for bodies to recover (ll. 693). *Beachy Head* calls one to these cliffs and these cliffs invite one more deeply into Smith’s poem.

As Amanda and I read *Beachy Head* aloud to each other via Skype, we began to hear the poem’s intricate structure. Although they are not explicitly marked, discrete thematic cycles in *Beachy Head* emerged, which we are translating into song cycles. We have identified and named both the cycles and the individual songs. The ‘Beachy Head Cycle’ contains a prologue and 4 songs (ll. 1-117); a long, single song interlude, ‘Historical Contemplation,’ follows (ll. 117-166). Next Smith takes up ‘Happiness’ in a 5-song cycle (ll. 167-309), and then begins the 7-song ‘Nature Cycle,’ which includes lines that speak back to ‘Historical Contemplation’ (ll. 309-505). Five songs make up the ‘Stranger’s Cycle,’ one of which harkens back to the ‘Happiness Cycle’ (ll. 506-671). Finally, three songs comprise the ‘Hermit’s Cycle’ (ll. 671-731). In all we identified 5 song cycles containing a total of 26 songs, a major undertaking for Amanda to set. With this framework in mind, we worked through the poem again, examining each line to extract lyrics for the songs. In order to preserve the integrity of the poem, we did not add, but only took away Smith’s words. As Amanda has taught me, the music can fill in for words so that nothing is truly lost, just translated.

With a draft of the lyrics in hand, Amanda began to compose. Amanda first sketches the melody and chord progression, and then formally sets the song with the full piano accompaniment. Smith’s words speak in a new way when set to Amanda’s beautiful music. Quite different from anything literary critics might write, the musical setting offers insights based more in feeling and the senses than in analysis. For example, in the song ‘Afternoon,’ the line ‘The slope, her angular canvas shifting still catches the light and variable airs’ begins in Amanda’s setting with a whole note, then moves to a two beat triplet voicing the word ‘angular,’ then ascends a half step, goes down a whole step, and up a half step through ‘canvas shifting still.’ The rhythm and intervals together capture the visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic sensory experience, including the angular shape and small movements of the sail. The piano accompaniment flows beneath these lines with the repeated oscillation of eighth note intervals.
As she was composing, Amanda noticed a thematic rupture in the lines we had identified as ‘Evening.’ The magic of the collaborative, cross-disciplinary process lies in moments like these. Amanda’s observation that the lines about commerce and slavery did not fit with the emerging sunset clarified another aspect of Smith’s structure: in the ‘Beachy Head Cycle’ Smith alternates evocations of the landscape at progressive times of day with recreations of the activity or industry in that landscape. To be specific:

‘Prologue: Fancy’s Day’ (the titles are ours) locates the poet on the ‘stupendous summit,’ then depicts the work of ‘the Omnipotent’ rending England from the continent (ll. 1, 6). First Smith describes place and then work.

‘Morning’ lifts the ‘glorious sun,’ to illuminate the daily labour of the chattering birds, who ‘seek their food,’ as well as that of the ‘lone shepherd, and his baying dog,’ who, together, ‘drive to the turfy crest his bleating flock’ (ll. 16, 23, 27-28). The beautiful light reveals the noisy industry of the birds, shepherd, and sheepdog.

‘Afternoon’ stretches out lazily at first, the ocean ‘murmur[ing] low . . . upon the level sands’ (ll. 31-32). Yet the eye is drawn to the distant ‘ship of commerce’ that carries the pearl and adamantine collected by slaves’ ‘perilous and breathless toil’ (ll. 42, 53). With this juxtaposition, Smith suggests that the leisure evoked by the quiet afternoon is made possible by the violation of ‘The sacred freedom’ of ‘fellow man’ (ll. 59).

‘Evening’ bursts open, shifting from the underwater darkness where slaves dive for pearls to the jewel tones of the sunset, whose ‘transparent gold / Mingles with ruby tints, and sapphire gleams’ and the rise of the early moon, who throws ‘Her pearly brilliance on the trembling tide’ (ll. 81-82, 99).

‘Night’ shifts from the sunset scene to labour, bringing not the expected quiet of night, but instead the return of fisherman from the sea, unloading their boat ‘with loud clamours’ (ll. 108). Amanda has brilliantly set this final song in the cycle as a sailor’s song to capture the feeling of camaraderie and industry.

Together the song cycles illuminate the deep structure of Smith’s posthumously published Beachy Head. An advertisement for the volume in which Beachy Head was published, probably written by Smith’s sister Catherine Dorset, asserts that the poem was ‘not completed according to the original design’ (215). Stuart: Curran observes that ‘it is unlikely... that we will ever be able to determine whether her masterpiece Beachy Head was as unfinished as the introductory note to the volume assumes it to be’ (xvii). Nonetheless, Curran argues a work that begins atop a massive feature of the landscape and ends immured within it bears a remarkable coherence (xiv). And, indeed, Amanda and I are excavating an intricate internal coherence that reveals Beachy Head as a complete and refined work of art.

We were delighted to perform excerpts from the song cycle as a lecture recital at the Romantic Studies Association of Australasia’s July 2015 meeting, with Amanda playing piano, mezzo-soprano Jeannie Marsh singing, and me introducing the song cycles with short lectures. We also presented the song cycles at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, on September 11, 2015 with Kathryn Cowdrick, a mezzo-soprano at the Eastman School of Music, singing with us.

Works Cited

There will be a conference on Charlotte Smith’s work at Chawton House Library in 2016 organised by Profs Elizabeth A. Dolan and Jacqueline Labbe. Details will be added to our website as they become available.