

Imagery and Texts in Music

In the first decade of the 17th century the Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi launched a musical revolution that changed the course of Western music forever. His idea, that texts and imagery are most powerfully conveyed through a single sung melody supported by a continuous bass line, became known as *Seconda pratica* or Second Practice, as distinct from contemporaries such as Palestrina and Zarlino who employed complex counterpoints of equal voices that often obscured the words and their meaning. 17th-century audiences delighted in this new mode of expression, and composers developed a new musical language to describe events, scenes, and feelings in music. Composers of succeeding generations, including Purcell, Vivaldi, and Bach, developed and expanded upon this new language, and the descriptive, and single-voice "monody" style supported by a harmonized bass remains the primary structure used in Western popular music today.

One popular topic of musical expression was the weather. Cascades of fast notes might illustrate rushing wind or water; a pleasant rustling melody might convey a balmy summer evening; repeated short string chords in a minor key might indicate icy shivering. Vivaldi's *Le quattro stagioni* are perhaps the best known examples of this type of program music. Published in 1725, as the first four of his Opus 8 concertos, "The Four Seasons" were boldly experimental: Vivaldi combined the structure of the solo concerto (essentially, monody for an instrument) with a musical depiction of events found in nature, with telling results. The inspiration for these concerti came from a set of four anonymous sonnets, from which Vivaldi took descriptive phrases to direct his development of musical ideas. The sonnets themselves are rather pedestrian, at least in translation, but Vivaldi enshrined them in the richest surroundings. The original score has the appropriate phrases printed in.

Monteverdi wrote two musical settings of *Zefiro torna*, a sonnet by Ottavio Rinuccini; the first was a mostly traditional five-voice madrigal from 1614, while the second is a lively duet, published in the *Scherzi musicali* of 1632. The text concerns the west wind Zephyr who brings Spring and its attendant opportunities for romance, or at least dalliance. Here, as in many of his madrigals, Monteverdi's exceptionally fluid text-setting skillfully subverts the structure of the sonnet so that its poetic effusions seem spontaneously improvised rather than constructed according to strict formal standards. The catchy repeated figure of the ciaccona, the springy rhythms, and the graceful but florid vocal lines give the work an infectious exuberance.

King Arthur was by far the most popular of Purcell's semi-operas; it was revived throughout the eighteenth century and well into the next--it was staged until the 1840s. The text is by John Dryden, who intended it to be "adorn'd with Scenes, Machines, Songs and Dances" when he wrote it in 1684, calling it a "dramatick opera." Dryden's text, a rather imaginative reworking of medieval legend, concentrates largely on Arthur's attempts to free his beloved Emmeline, set against the battle of the Britons and the Saxons.

The "Frost Scene" in the third act has always attracted praise from critics. This aria ("What power art thou who from below") is accompanied by shivering strings, probably influenced by a scene from Act IV of [Jean-Baptiste Lully](#)'s opera [Isis](#) (1677) but, as Peter Holman writes, Purcell's "daring chromatic harmonies transform the Cold Genius from the picturesque figure of Lully (or Dryden, for that matter) into a genuinely awe-inspiring character — the more so because Cupid's responses are set to such frothy and brilliant music." It has been suggested that the whole scene was inspired by the [Frost fairs](#) held on the [Thames](#) during the 1680s.

- YuEun Kim and Stephen Hammer