

SONNETS TO SUNDRY NOTES OF MUSIC. Part 1

The Sonnets by William Shakespeare



We know very little about William Shakespeare. Born in Stratford on Avon on St. George's Day (April 23rd) 1564, he died there on St. George's Day 1616. He married Ann Hathaway, a woman 8 years his senior, in 1582 and had three children by her (of which 2 survived after his death). We know where he went to school, who his parents were, and that he had a modestly successful career as an actor and greater success as a writer of drama, spending most of his working life in London. It is an irony that we know precious little about the man who is without doubt the most influential, the most linguistically creative and the most well-known (some would say, greatest) single author ever to write in the English language. He is the most widely read author ever to have lived, and yet we know almost nothing about the man.

For many scholars and readers, the collection of Sonnets (published 1609) are probably the clue to the man. My purpose this evening, however, is not to discover the man but to enjoy and explore the richness of the literary world that he epitomises - power, melancholy, bitterness, sex, hurt and love in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. To compliment this I have selected a few songs from the time, mostly by John Dowland (who probably wrote most of his own texts).

I have selected those sonnets that appeal most to me, having purposely avoided the stream of the first half of the cycle and concentrated more on the last third, and have ordered them slightly differently to their normally published order only as an expression of my own personal preference for this particular occasion. I have not tried to create any real narrative as such, preferring that you the audience make your own assumptions as to what may lie behind the choices made both in word and music.

SONNETS TO SUNDRY NOTES OF MUSIC. Part 2

“The Passionate Pilgrim” and the “Sonnets to Sundry Notes of Music”



John Dowland

The Sonnets to Sundry Notes of Music, normally included in the complete works of Shakespeare, were possibly not written by him at all. Sometimes they are published as part of the sequence of poems known as The Passionate Pilgrim. The speculation surrounding the true author has persuaded some critics to remark that these poems do not really reflect the greater skills of the writer William Shakespeare. Putting that speculation to one side, for me they still skilfully convey the things that seem to be paramount in poetry of this period. These poems admittedly do not have the perfected form of the Sonnets which are held in such high esteem, but they still convey a rich personal expression, and one of them certainly reflects the disdain and cynicism that Shakespeare had for the Society of the time. His disappointments morally and professionally are also reflected in John Dowland's life, a composer and performer who was renowned throughout Europe and yet who was largely ignored by the Court of Elizabeth I. Luckily his fame was such that almost all his work was published during his lifetime.

SONNETS TO SUNDRY NOTES OF MUSIC. Part 3.

Elegies and Holy Sonnets



John Donne (1572-1631) is probably the best known of the English metaphysical poets, a school of writing that thrived during the last years of Elizabeth I and the reign of King James I. A descendent of Sir Thomas More, Donne was born a Roman Catholic and later converted to the protestant faith, eventually becoming Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. His love poetry has a special appeal, especially those written of his love for his wife Anne, often being quite explicit as well as full of ecstatic imagery. These are equaled by the sometimes fervent, sometimes discreet, yet always richly intense religious poems, the Holy Sonnets. This final selection of poems hopefully displays that richness and variety so typical of Jacobean writing, epitomized in the worldly offerings of John Donne. Included here also is John Dowland's setting of Donne's "Sweet, stay awhile".