The Three Ravens

An Tir Bardic Championship

Lady Emma Godwif, Artisan of Wastekeep - March 2014
Introduction: Beauty Found Within Life and Death

Music is the language of our heart and soul when words fail, and can evoke powerful images and atmospheres with mere sound.

I first came upon "The Three Ravens" when I was looking for more period pieces to add to my repertoire for nights around the campfire. The imagery of the words and the poignant beauty of the story (with just a touch of the macabre) grabbed me by the lapels and shook me: I immediately found myself on that field, in the fog, listening to the birds and seeing what the composer saw.

The reality -- and frequency -- of death in the Renaissance is something we modern souls prefer to gloss over, but the truth is, death is something my persona, Emma, would likely not have been a stranger to. There are several accounts of plague throughout English history, both before, during, and after the reign of the Tudors -- and that doesn't take into account the deaths from foul play (depends on which account you read!), deaths from accidents, or deaths from general sickness.

Art (whether music, poetry, painting, etc.) is unique in that it has a tendency to become the outlet and the vehicle by which we come to grips with the hard parts of our lives. "Three Ravens" is no exception.

The Three Ravens

“The Three Ravens” is an anonymous English tune predating Thomas Ravenscroft’s *Melismata* collection of 1611 in which it was first published. It is sung from the point of view of a group of ravens debating what to eat, and details the events surrounding a dead knight in a meadow. The birds note the fact that the man’s hawks and hounds never leave his side, and observe the arrival of a pregnant woman – the “fallow doe” – who is presumably the knight’s wife, mistress, or lover, who then buries him (thus removing the birds’ chance at a meal) and dies herself at his side. The last verse of the song takes an omniscient point of view, stating that “every gentleman” (i.e. every good, honorable man) will find himself with loyal companions such as the slain knight’s hawks and hounds, and the unfailing love of a woman1.

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1 “leman” archaic: sweetheart or lover, especially mistress. From Middle English *lefman, leman*, from *lef lief*. First Known Use: 13th century. Page 664.
There is some debate on dating "Three Ravens," given that it was published so late in period by Ravenscroft. However, after considering the research, I believe it is a fairly safe bet that the song is older than 1600. According to Reese (834), Ravenscroft was known for collecting popular songs from the populace and printing them. In Ravenscroft's preface to his collection, *Pammelia*, he writes:

"...what seems old, is at least renewed, Art having reformed what pleasing tunes injurious time and ignorance had deformed." (Reese 834)

Reese suggests that this statement coupled with the texts found in Ravenscroft's "catch" (song) books that have been mentioned in earlier sources indicate he was an avid "recycler" of old tunes. It is also noted that at the latter part of the 16th century, laws were in effect to ban the tradesmen from singing new, popular music -- an effort to protect the court musicians and professional actors of the time. Therefore, Ravenscroft may not have even been able to collect the song for several years after its writing, and given the publication date of *Melismata*, that effectively pushes the tune prior to 1611, if not earlier.

C.A. Powers has also done research into "Three Ravens," and purportedly, it is the same tune as “King Edgar Deprived” (a ballad cataloged by Thomas Deloney between 1592-1593 detailing King Edgar’s losing of a potential lover to a knight of his court), which also throws the date of the song prior to 1600.

**The Madrigal... and Women in Music**

The madrigal began in the early 16th century as a form of poetry set to music popular with the aristocracy in the Italian courts (Machlis & Forney 109). Typically, madrigals were written for multiple voices, either *a cappella* vocals, or vocal and instrumental combinations. The form relied heavily on a device called "word painting," (113) or the use of mimicking the action of the lyric in the melodic line (for example, in John Farmer's "Fair Phyllis," he makes the melodic line fall as the singers sing "up and down").

Eventually, the Italian madrigal migrated to England, and the English took it and made it their own. The art form flourished during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and lasted through the reign of her successor, James I, at which point we see more virtuosic performance with heavy ornamentation, melismatic passages, and vivid emotional description (110-111).

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3 The act of singing multiple notes using one word or even one syllable.
The study of music at this time was also considered to be a critical part of a young woman’s education (especially if her family was well off), and we begin to see women performing music in a professional capacity as well as at home (Machlis & Forney 108). For example, Francesca Caccini (b. 1587) became one of the highest paid musicians in the Medici court (Brown 267). And the *Concerto Della Donne* -- an all-female professional singing group formed in 1580 by Duke Ferrara -- won acclaim throughout Italy and several other European courts (Brown 269).

### Preparing My Performance

My first big challenge in building a performance version of "Three Ravens," is that the piece contained in the "Melismata" collection is set as a 4-part madrigal, and I am a soloist. After examining arrangements of "Three Ravens" and comparing them, it appears that madrigals of the time could be performed as a solo simply by singing the top line, or melody, with the rest being filled in by instrumental accompaniment (as further documented by McGee on page 105), akin to early folk music.

Given my persona’s status, it was important to me to preserve the “folk song” aspect of it – solo with bare accompaniment – in addition to working within my limitations as a performer. Typically, according to McGee, the accompaniment would condense the supporting lines in the madrigal. Due to the difficulties of condensing parts and playing multiple lines that sometimes are at odds against the melody, I chose a version (from Powers’) that contained chords for ease of interpretation. Studying the alto, tenor, and bass lines in the madrigal notation, as well as listening to some vocal ensembles (Lumina) perform this piece gave me a better sense of how the accompaniment should support the vocal line.

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4 Performing as a woman in Renaissance Europe was not without its difficulties. Prior to the mid 16th century, women’s role in music was typically limited to the scope of the religious sector, or within a private home. (Brown 270). If she were to perform publicly, it raised uncomfortable questions about her morality. It wasn’t until the latter part of the century that views became relaxed.

5 While Emma is a member of the wealthier middle class, she is far from being a noble. She is a woman who still has to work to maintain the household, and occasionally help her husband with his business. Though she is musically sharp and passionate about her art, she is far from being a virtuoso.
The next question in my mind was how accompaniment was structured. Traditionally, any accompaniment would have most likely been played on a lute or virginal. During this time of history, having such an instrument was a mark of status, as even then they were expensive.

"The Lute Player" by Orazio Gentileschi, circa 1626.

While I do not have an authentic lute, my primary instrument is guitar, which is in the same family (plucked strings), and can be used to mimic the appropriate sound with the judicious use of playing technique. The Lute Society out of London, UK, has a few beginners' lessons available for free off their website that sufficed as a quick introduction to how a lute is played. Upon researching the technique, it appeared that while the hand and arm positions differed (I would presume to say because of the giant bowled back of the lute), many of the results for playing chords -- plucking the notes simultaneously and/or "spreading" the notes, with a "rolling" motion -- were similar to classical guitar technique.

Using and understanding the Lute Society's information on how to play chords in different styles to further the musical effect enhanced my performance; the ability to either arpeggiate the chord, to "roll" it quickly, or pluck all the notes simultaneously (or any combination thereof), lends a nice bit of variety for the ear. As I practiced, I found myself using the different styles to help enhance the lyric and the story: the first verse begins softly and contemplative, and builds and builds through the subsequent verses until it reaches the climax of the story -- "And she was dead herself 'ere even-song time" -- at which point it returns to a quiet and contemplative state as the narrator tells us how loyalty can earn us much in life and death.

"Three Ravens" presented another problem: the performance length of the song. Traditionally, this early ballad has ten verses and playing at a moderate tempo clocks in over...
five minutes. (And that was at quite a clip for the tenor and tone of the lyric!) Unfortunately, this length is unacceptable for the modern ear. In Livingston Taylor's book, *Stage Performance*, (for one example, there are others) he makes mention of the needs of the listener and how the performer's first duty is to their audience. Over time, the average length of songs have shortened -- today, even a three-minute song is considered pushing it. Longer songs risk losing the audience's attention, especially if they are high on repetition. Considering the needs of today's listener (a shorter song), and the importance of telling the entire story of the ballad (i.e. not omitting a single verse), I began to look into ways I could shorten the playing time, yet still keep the ballad intact. My initial idea was to remove some of the "down adowne" refrains, as they add nothing to the tale, however, that produced a musically ungainly phrase. I considered "splicing" two verses together, for example:

(verse 1)
There were three ravens sat on a tree
Down adown hey down hey down
There were three ravens sat on a tree
With a down
There were three ravens sat on a tree
They were as black as they might be
With a down, derrie derrie derrie
down down

(verse 2)
One of them said to his mate
Down adown hey down hey down
One of them said to his mate
With a down
One of them said to his mate,
Where shall we our breakfast take?
With a down, derrie derrie derrie
down down

Which became:

There were three ravens sat on a tree
Down adown hey down hey down
They were as black as they might be
With a down
One of them said to his mate,
Where shall we our breakfast take?

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8 McGee discusses the concessions that must be made regarding texts of early music on pages 109 and 110 of his book, and gives many potential solutions to the problem: omitting repeated parts, omitting unnecessary verses, etc., within the framework of staying true to the text.
With a down, derrie derrie derrie down down
(&etc.)

At which point I came across a version of lyric at the Cantaria Folk Song Archive that did just what I interpreted, effectively cutting the performance time to just under three minutes -- well within the modern listener's tolerance. I still opted to keep the first and last verses as originally written to honor both the feel and heritage of the lyric.

**Conclusion: Pulling It All Together**

My desire in presenting "The Three Ravens" in an appropriate manner as possible was to further explore Emma's world. As I practiced, the music taught me things. I had to up my game in terms of guitar skills and really tune into what the music told me, and learning to do what it required. I had to focus on the lyric to convey what it said about the nature of love, life, and death in order to sing it with the inflection at the right places.

Through the process I learned something else, too: that we are really not that different from our historical counterparts.

Our hearts are made of the same things, and that's not something centuries can change.

The birds in "Three Ravens" view a woman who struggles to give her love the honor of a burial and then lies down, broken-hearted, at his side, just as we fall apart when a loved one passes. The mood of the song places us very strongly in that foggy meadow with the birds in the tree, and we are not asked to fear death, we are asked to take a good look at ourselves and how we are living our lives:

Will we be the honorable knight? Or will we be the carrion that the ravens (presumably) find to feast on later?
CO\textsc{untry} P\textsc{astimes}.

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<td>Here were three Ravens fat on a tree, Downe a downe, hay downe, hay downe. There were three Ravens fat on a tree, with a downe. There were three Ravens fat on a tree, they were as blacke as they might be, with a downe dettic, dettic, dettic, downe, downe, downe.</td>
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1. The one of them said to his mate, downe adowne hay downe.
2. The one of them said to his mate, with adowne.
3. Where shall we our breakefast take? with adowne dry downe.
4. Downe in yonder green field, downe adowne hey downe, Downe in yonder green field, with adowne.
5. Downe there comes a fowle Doe, downe adowne.
6. Downe there comes a fowle Doe, with a downe.
7. As great as yong as she might get, with adowne.
8. She lift up his bloody bed, downe adowne.
The words I chose to use go thus:

There were three ravens sat on a tree
Down adown hey down hey down
There were three ravens sat on a tree
With a down
There were three ravens sat on a tree
They were as black as they might be
With a down, derrie derrie derrie down down

One of them said to his mate
Down adown hey down hey down
Where shall we our breakfast take?
With a down
Down in yonder green field
There lies a knight slain under his shield
With a down, derrie derrie derrie down down

His hounds they lie down at his feet
Down adown hey down hey down
So well they can their master keep
With a down
His hawks they fly so eagerly
That no fowl near him come nie
With a down, derrie derrie derrie down down
Down there comes a fallow doe
Down adown hey down hey down
As great with young as she might go

With a down
She lift up his bloody head
And kissed his wounds that were so red
With a down, derrie derrie derrie down down
She got him up upon her back
Down adown hey down hey down
And carried him to the earthen lake
With a down
She buried him before the prime
And was dead herself 'ere even-song time
With a down, derrie derrie derrie down down

God sends every gentleman
Down adown hey down hey down
God sends every gentleman
With a down
God sends every gentleman
Such hawks, such hounds, and such a leman
With a down, derrie derrie derrie down down
Works Cited


