

Documentation: Original Composition, “I asked of thee a boon”

Submitted by Lord Drake Oranwood for East Kingdom Laurels’ Prize Tourney, A.S. LI.

Challenge presented by Master Peregrine the Illuminator:

Document, compose, and perform a composition using a musical form from prior to 1600.

Contents

Form	1
Source works	1
Lyrics	1
Music	2
Period song structure and tropes	3
Vocal harmonies	4
Lute arrangement	4
Creating period sheet music	5
Elizabethan music notation.....	5
Presentation and format	6
Creating my notation	7

Form

“I asked of thee a boon” is modeled after lute songs, often called “ayres” or “airs”, of the Elizabethan period, as exemplified by the works of John Dowland and Thomas Campion. Songs for lute and voice had been popular in England throughout the latter part of the 16th century, but until the end of the sixteenth century they were only ever published as broadsides or loose sheets, and only one actual book of songs was in fact published before 1600. There is a reason for this, which is concerned not with the tastes of the time, but rather with intellectual property rights.

In 1596, William Byrd’s 21-year royal monopoly patent over the printing and selling of music in England expired. (He had published a good deal of music, but no lute music—notably, this was one of the few instruments Byrd himself did not play.) Upon the lapse of Byrd’s patent, the patents for printing and distribution of music passed, respectively, to Thomas East and Thomas Morley, who quickly began filling the unmet demand for popular printed music. Dowland’s *First Book of Songs or Ayres* was a runaway success in 1597, which led to a 25-year explosion in the publication of lute song books, designed to make readily accessible music for a lute and one to four voices. (David Price, *Patrons and Musicians of the English Renaissance*, 1981, p. 183)

Source works

The main sources for “I asked of thee a boon” are:

1. John Dowland, “Come again sweet love” (*First Book of Songs or Ayres*, 1597, song 17)
2. Dowland, “Clear or cloudy” (*Second Book of Songs*, 1600, song 21)
3. Dowland, “Can she excuse my wrongs?” (*First Book of Songs or Ayres*, song 5)
4. Thomas Campion, “I care not for these ladies” (Rosseter and Campion’s *A Book of Ayres*, 1601, song 3)
5. Campion, “My love hath vowed”, (*A Book of Ayres*, song 5)
6. Anonymous, “Watkins Ale” (ca. 1590 broadside, multiple sources, *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, vol. 1, ca. 1625, #43)
7. Anonymous, “What if a day” (from Richard Alison’s *An Hour’s Recreation in Music*, 1606, though a version of the song dates back to 1566, refuting Campion’s oft-ascribed authorship. See A.E.H. Swain, “The Authorship of ‘What If a Day’”, *Modern Philology*, vol. IV, issue 3, January 1907. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/432587>)

Lyrics

The songs by Dowland, Campion, and others, which were published in songbook form, took their titles from the first line, which is why the titles are generally not capitalized in citations, aside from the first word. This is consistent with the citations for Renaissance poetry, and during the Renaissance it was common to consider songs to simply be poems set to music, such that the words and music were often considered largely separate components that could be enjoyed or analyzed independently of one another. Indeed, Campion is the only composer of the period who was known to write songs as a whole, words and music, together, for the bulk of his output. Dowland’s songs, while musically richer and more inventive, often fit uneasily with their lyrics (which by and large were written after the fact, and whose authors can only be guessed at).

Here are the words for "I asked of thee a boon":

I asked of thee a boon of thine assistance,
Availing me thy faculties well known.
A vision fair I'd espied in the distance,
But could not life breathe into it alone.

Scarcely could I give voice my request,
Imagining scorn that I make so bold.
Not so, for when thy bounty I test,
Thy zeal and delight are joys to behold.

From thy bag came forth beauty of such a worth
I'd never thought to hold such treasure.
From thy summer storm did my dream take this form
I now admire with boundless pleasure.

Giv'st thou to me such heady recognition,
By offering me a part in thy design?
Might I enhance the scope of thine ambition,
That thou hast need of talent such as mine?

My garden's stock'd with my wonted breeds:
With lavender thick, and lily and rose.
Here in thy orchard, these different seeds
My skills do refresh, and so too my nose.

And I find gifts more as thy grounds I explore
Than ever dwelt in my conceiving.
Thy rewards to me as I labor for thee,
Are rich indeed beyond believing.

Thus I arrive in happy contemplation:
For want of aid, our prize we might not earn.
Yet, if we toil combinèd in creation,
Each that gift giveth, gaineth in return.

Think'st thou art poor, alone in the dust?
O fie! Doth our world in plenty abound.
Should'st thou more oft lend helpers thy trust,
The more we gain wealth of sight, taste, and sound.

Such a riddle fine, for when thou seekest mine,
'Tis mine own fortune that increases!
Ask when thou hast need! Life is fulsome, indeed,
And this abundance never ceases.

The lyrics are on a theme that is of interest to me, particularly as it applies to the Society: the surprises and delights of collaboration. I explore the theme from different angles in the three verses. In particular, Verse 2 (explaining the joy of the invited collaborator being asked by the primary creator for help) is a reversal of the point of view of Verse 1 (explaining the happiness of the creator that the invitation was accepted and the results exceeded expectations). The choice to write verses in parallel but in opposition to one another was suggested by the first two verses of John Dowland's "Come again sweet love":

Come again! sweet love doth now invite
Thy graces that refrain
To do me due delight,
To see, to hear, to touch, to kiss, to die,
With thee again in sweetest sympathy.

Come again! that I may cease to mourn
Through thy unkind disdain;
For now left and forlorn
I sit, I sigh, I weep, I faint, I die
In deadly pain and endless misery.

Each verse begins with "Come again!" and holds the sustained note on the word "die" in the next to last line, to highlight the stark difference between Verse 1, which speaks of love's blessed fulfillment and sexual ecstasy (a meaning of "die" specific to the 16th century), and Verse 2 which speaks of the agony of rejection (quite possibly by the self-same lover).

In composing my lyrics, my objective was to maintain period-appropriate language. I availed myself of Oxford University's online edition of the Bodleian First Folio (<http://firstfolio.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>), which allows a word search of the First Folios of Shakespeare's plays, and shows both the text and facsimiles of the printed pages. This allowed me to examine not only how each word was spelled and looked in print, but to discover how words I was incorporating were used at the time (or indeed if they were in common use at all). In Verse 3, for example, the first line originally was going to end with the word "revelation", until I found that the word doesn't appear in any of Shakespeare's plays; checking the OED online, I learned that this word was only used in a spiritual or religious sense in Elizabeth's day, and only took on the more secular meaning of "unexpected discovery" a couple of centuries later. Thus I changed the rhyme to "contemplation" and adjusted the line accordingly.

Some subtle rules of usage no longer present in English became clearer to me as I examined the language in Shakespeare and some of these songs. Having studied and performed Shakespeare, early modern phrasings such as "giv'st thou" and syllable placements as in "combinèd" were quite familiar. It took me a while to realize, though, that my choice of "thine ambition" in Verse 2 wasn't merely a nice affectation to make the piece sound more Elizabethan, but consistent with an early modern rule about how to end possessive pronouns when the next word started with a vowel. Thus I had to return to Verse 1, and change "thy assistance" to "thine assistance", since that's how it would have been spoken at the time, giving the language (particularly in poetry or song) a bit more flow.

Music

Elizabethan lute songs were written to be accompanied on a 6- or 7-course tenor lute. The 7-course lute only came into vogue late in the 16th century, and the newest bass course was generally only played a few times in a given song. Omitting or replacing the occasional bottom note is not difficult, making it simple to play these songs on a 6-course lute or a modern guitar. In English songs, these lutes were consistently tuned as follows: (D,) G, c, f, a, d', g'. Omitting the bottom string, a modern guitar can be played this way by simply lowering the third string from G to F#, and placing a capo on the third fret, which is the method I used when learning to play the songs I used as sources. This tuning strongly favors writing in the key of G, if one is writing a cheerful song. And while Dowland in particular is famous for his melancholy airs, his and Champion's more upbeat songs are predominantly in G major. Most of my source pieces ("Come again", "Clear or cloudy", "I care not for these ladies", and "Watkins Ale") are in this key. (Dowland's *First Book of Ayres* has 23 songs in it: 10 are in G minor, 7 in G major.)

The tune for "I asked of thee a boon" is adapted from a melody I composed on assignment from my first teacher, Maistre Lucien de Pontivy. I was asked to select an Elizabethan song to learn, and then compose a new lyric for the tune, and finally a new tune for the lyrics. I found and fell in love with Champion's "My love hath vowed", and it has been a source of rich study ever since. (I shared the results of that first assignment on my blog at

Meter for "Clear or cloudy", Dowland

<http://wp.me/p2CZvH-kQ>.) In creating a new melody for the piece, I opted for a total contrast to Campion's atypically dark tragic tone, emulating instead the normally melancholy Dowland's bounciest work, "Clear or Cloudy". Thus I wrote my new tune in G major and 4/4 (common) time.

Period song structure and tropes

In adapting that melody for this new original composition, I had the freedom to use the quick meter and runs of notes to expand the lines lyrically over Campion's. I also revised the melody to fit a more regimented structure that would both give me a little more room for verbal expression, and allow me to transcribe the piece in a manner typical of these works. The verses are organized in groupings of three stanzas. Stanza 1 runs a melodic line and chord progression and then repeats it, and Stanza 2 and 3 do the same, each with a different melody and progression. Stanza 2 is a departure of musical mood from Stanza 1, not unlike a modern song "bridge", whereas Stanza 3 returns somewhat to the tone of Stanza 1 and resolves it. This sort of structure, while not universal, was fairly common in Elizabethan popular songs, in particular that a verse was broken up into two or three sections or stanzas, each of which often contained a repeated melodic line. Examine the first verse of each of these pieces.

<p><i>"Can she excuse my wrongs", Dowland</i></p> <p>Can she excuse my wrongs with Virtue's cloak? Shall I call her good when she proves unkind? Are those clear fires which vanish into smoke? Must I praise the leaves where no fruit I find?</p> <p>No, no, where shadows do for bodies stand Thou may'st be abus'd if thy sight be dimmed. Cold love is like to words written on sand Or to bubbles which on the water swim.</p> <p>Wilt thou be thus abused still Seeing that she will right thee never? If thou cans't not o'ercome her will Thy love will be thus fruitless ever. (Wilt thou be thus abused still Seeing that she will right thee never? If thou cans't not o'ercome her will Thy love will be thus fruitless ever.)</p>	<p><i>"Watkins Ale", Anonymous</i></p> <p>There was a maid this other day, And she would needs go forth to play; And as she walked she sighed and said, I am afraid to die a maid.</p> <p>With that, beheard a lad, What talk this maiden had, Whereof he was full glad, And did not spare To say, faire maid, I pray, Whether go you to play? Good sir, then did she say, What do you care?</p> <p>For I will, without fail, Maiden, give you Watkins ale; Watkins ale, good sir, quoth she, What is that I pray you tell me?</p>	<p><i>"What if a day", Anonymous</i></p> <p>What if a day, or a month, or a year Crown thy delights with a thousand sweet contentings? Cannot a chance of a night or an hour Crosse thy desires with as many sad tormentings?</p> <p>Fortune, honor, beauty, youth Are but blossoms dying; Wanton pleasure, doting love, Are but shadows flying.</p> <p>All our joys are but toys, Idle thoughts deceiving; None have power of an hour In their lives bereaving.</p>
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I also reworked the middle section to better incorporate an intriguing melodic trope many of these songs use: a rising tension created by a continued rising of pitch, over the course of multiple lines. To the right, see examples of the trope several of the source songs, followed by my incorporation of the trope into the middle section of "I asked of thee a boon" in its final form.



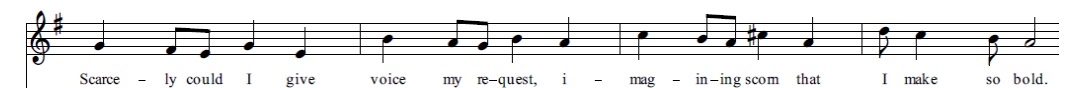
Rising pitch in "Watkins Ale", Anonymous



Rising pitch in "Can she excuse my wrongs," Dowland



Rising pitch in "Come again sweet love", Dowland

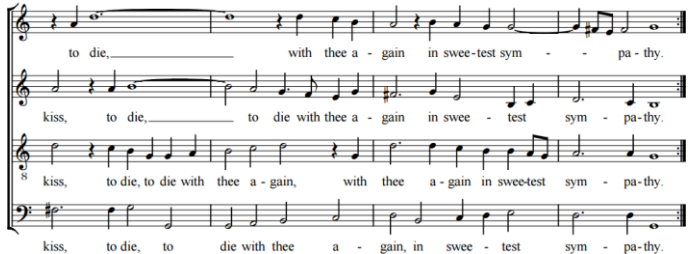


Rising pitch in "I asked of thee a boon"

In addition to following the trope more cleanly than in my older melody, this simpler line would now also fit the vocal range of a Soprano lead (or Cantus), which was important to create the next component I wanted to emulate from Elizabethan lute songs: a four-part vocal arrangement.

Vocal harmonies

Elizabethan lute songs were often composed with vocal harmonies in mind. Full four-part harmonies were not uncommon, though many songs only had two or three parts composed. Thomas Ravenscroft often wrote pleasing harmonic arrangements, and Campion wrote them as well, though many of his best songs, being conceived as an intimate confession from an individual persona, did not have harmony vocals included. Dowland, however, is the composer that leaps to most minds when one imagines the signature elaborateness and contrapuntal richness of Elizabethan choral music. He places a taskmaster's demand for discipline and focus on singers and audience alike. This showmanship is on full display in the examples below.




Vocal harmonies in "Come again sweet love", Dowland



Vocal harmonies in "Can she excuse my wrongs", Dowland

In my arrangement, I strive to emulate Dowland's contrapuntal style, as shown in this example.



Vocal harmonies in "I asked of thee a boon"

Lute arrangement

In the lute arrangement, I made the choice to write for 6 courses only. (I may revisit this at a future point when I have spent enough time learning 7-course lute to be able to play it comfortably, but I haven't encountered many in the SCA.) The time I spent learning to play most of the source pieces on guitar was an immense help in terms of familiarizing myself with Elizabethan chord voicings. Virtually every chord in "I asked of thee a boon" can be tied directly back to the lute tablature for one or more of these songs.



Lute arrangement with color-marked chords from "Come again sweet love", Dowland

As an example, compare the color-marked chords in the passages above and below. (There are instances here where I have altered a chord voicing by adding or removing a note, but in most cases there are other passages where the chord is rendered identically to how I have voiced it.)



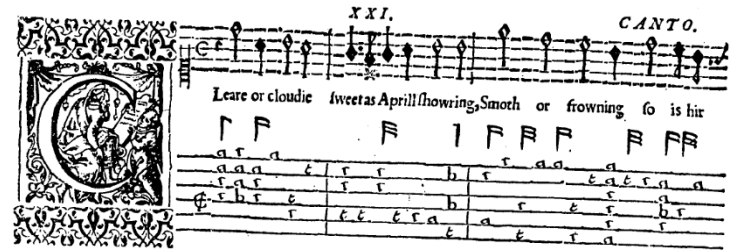
Lute arrangement with color-marked chords from "I asked of thee a boon"

The above passages also illustrate my attempts to emulate the connective melodic notes between chords that is another Dowland hallmark.

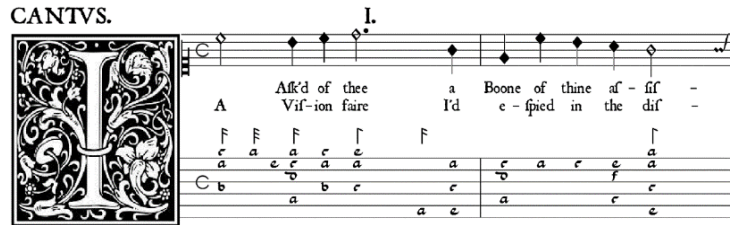
Creating period sheet music

Master Peregrine invited composers to "notate the composition in an authentic manner." Having spent considerable time poring over facsimiles of the original Dowland and Campion songbooks published around 1600, I felt this component deserved every bit as much attention as the composition itself. The songbooks of the period are small wonders of design and beauty.

My objective, then, would be to present Song #1 from the long-lost *First Booke of Ayres for Lute and Voice* by Drake Oranwood. What I have endeavored to recreate, then, is a standard two-page songbook layout in the Elizabethan style. Note if you look carefully at the above example from Dowland's "Clear or cloudy", this is typeset, not hand-written, sheet music. I chose to render my folio sheet digitally rather than with ink, which, to my mind, allowed me to more closely emulate the fine-grained mechanical process that was used to assemble these sheets in 1600, and also gave me more time for my creative process, since I wouldn't need to get time from a busy scribe's schedule.



Top of left-hand page from "Clear or cloudy", Dowland



Top of left-hand page from "I asked of thee a boon"

Elizabethan music notation

Elizabethan songbooks used mensural notation for vocal parts and French lute tablature, predominantly. The tablature, while at first strange to a modern guitarist, is actually fairly simple to learn, since it translates easily to (Italian) guitar tablature. In guitar tablature, *0* represents playing an open string, *1* is a string held on the first fret, etc. In French lute tablature, *a* indicates playing an open string, *b* is a string held on the first fret, etc. The lowercase letters can be confusing (the *c* and *e* look very similar) but can be distinguished with a little study. The symbols appear between (or above) the lines rather than through them, and the note values, shown above the staff, require a bit of review. The version I adopted, with small staff marks with numbers of flags representing different note values (more flags represent shorter durations), was slightly more common than a different version showing the equivalent mensural note symbols above the staff.

By the Elizabethan era, music notation had evolved to be very similar to modern notation, with notes, rests, and measures which gave the transcriber fine control over the exact length and pitch of each note and phrase. Obvious differences include the diamond-shaped note heads and the lack of connecting barlines for eighth or finer notes and simpler rest symbols (as shown on the right), but there are subtler differences as well.



For one, these songbooks made use of vocal-part clefs which fell out of use after the 18th century: soprano, alto, and tenor, in addition to bass. The symbols used at the time were different from the ones used in later music, as shown on the right. (Sometimes the lead "cantus" voice was transcribed in treble clef, but soprano clef was fairly common for a SATB harmony transcription. When in doubt, I adopted conventions that don't appear in modern transcriptions to illustrate what made period practices distinct, as long as I found evidence that it was commonplace for Elizabethan music.)



Time and key signatures existed in mensural notation, but they were not applied with the same consistency that they are in modern sheet music. "Clear or cloudy", for example, is marked as being in common time, but the note values on the published sheet total 8 beats to a measure. Given that this was my model for the meter in "I asked of thee a boon", I used the same practice in transcribing it. (For some reason, the lute tablature that accompanied a 4/4 common-time piece was often noted with 2/4 cut time, though this was not done in every case, and for reasons I will explain later I did not choose to replicate this practice for my composition.)



Likewise, though key signatures were in use, for some reason G major, the most commonly used key, didn't use an F# key signature, and this was consistent across all the songs I examined in that key. Instead, the F#'s were marked with accidentals in the music everywhere they appeared, so I did the same in my case. Sharps, while recognizable, appear quite different in their mensural form, as shown to the right.



One music symbol that was perplexing until I worked out its purpose: it seems to be a placeholder or continuation symbol which often indicates that a measure has been broken at the end of a line, and continues on the next line. It also appears on the last line if the music finishes with considerable space before the right-hand margin. On the right is a version I stitched together from two other variants to best approximate the way it is rendered in the sheet music I am recreating. Conservation of typesetting space was a driving consideration in the layout of these songs.



Creating my notation

To get the proper look and feel for the song text, I was going to need a font that was designed specifically to represent typeset English printing between the Elizabethan and Regency periods, and specifically that would render properly the long descending *s* discussed above. (In most fonts, there is such a character but it renders as *f*, which looks italicized and doesn't match the original form. Ultimately, I tracked down a perfect (and free) font for my needs: JSL Ancient, which is specifically designed to emulate the look and feel of print from that period. Utilizing this font, and my research around spelling, capitalization, and letter usage, the lyrics to "I asked of thee a boon" can be rendered thus:

I ask'd of thee a Boone of thine assistance,
Awaiting me thy faculties well knowne.
A Vision faire I'd espied in the distance,
But could not Life breathe into it alone.

Scarcely could I give voyce my request,
Imagining scorne that I make so bold.
Not so, for when thy Bountie I teft,
Thy zeale and delight are ioyes to behold.

From thy bag came forth Beautie of such a worth
I'd never thought to hold such Treasure.
From thy Summer Storme did my Dreame take this forme
I now admire with boundlesse pleasure.

Giue't thou to me such headie recognition,
By offering mee a part in thy Designe?
Might I enhance the scope of thine Ambition,
That thou haft neede of talent such as mine?

My garden's stock'd with my wonted breeds:
With Lauender thicke, and Lily and Rose.
Here in thy orchard, these different feedes
My skills do refresh, and so too my nose.

And I find gifts more as thy grounds I explore
Than euer dwelt in my Conciuing.
Thy rewards to me as I labour for thee
Are rich indeed beyond beleueing.

Thus I arriue in happy contemplation:
For want of aide, our Prize we might not earn.
Yet, if wee toil combined in Creation,
Each that gift giueth, gaineth in return.

Think'ft thou art poore, alone in the duff?
O fie! Doth our World in Plentie abound.
Should'ft thou more oft lend helpers thy trust,
The more we gaine wealth of Sight, Taste, and Sound.

Such a Riddle fine, for when thou seekest mine,
'Tis mine owne Fortune that increafes!
Alike when thou haft need! Life is fullsome, indeed,
And this Abundance neuer ceafes.

To generate the sheet music, I utilized the excellent free notation program MuseScore 2. I had used the older version of MuseScore to create sheet notation for my original songs for years, but the new version opened new possibilities for this challenge. While it doesn't support mensural notation it does include the following features:

- Support for "Early Music" staves, including lute tablature in various styles, for any number of courses.
- The full set of clefs for Soprano, Alto, and Tenor.
- The ability to set the music in 8/4 time to capture the correct number of beats per measure, and relabel it as common time (though I found no practical way to mark the vocal parts in 8/4 time and the lute part in 4/4 time, so I used 8/4 for all the staves, which was sometimes done).
- The ability to split measures across lines (allowing me to imitate the practice from Elizabethan notation).
- Access to a massive extended character set, including the "tall s" in the active font, as well as various mensural notation symbols I could use to build a graphics template (including all the symbols shown in the preceding section).
- Detailed control of staff sizes, note density, and overall page layout, allowing me to customize my pages for the sections I would need to create for the two-page Elizabethan format.

I then exported the different page sections to graphics files, and proceeded to edit and replace all the notes and music symbols one at a time in Microsoft Paint. The document with the finished product includes a sample of what the sections looked like when initially exported from MuseScore, to make clear the level of detail work required to create the final songbook pages. As I mentioned earlier, the process is not unlike setting moveable type pages.

The result, I hope, captures the beauty and intricacy of these songs, along with these essential books which not only preserved them through the centuries, but propagated and popularized them in their own day, making them available to anyone with the means and the education to read and perform them.

The image displays a two-page layout of a songbook for the piece "I asked of thee a boon". The left page features a large, ornate initial 'A' for the first line of the CANTUS part. Below the main musical notation, there are smaller sections for BASSUS and TENOR parts, each with their respective lyrics. The right page continues the musical notation for the CANTUS part, followed by the BASSUS and TENOR parts. The lyrics are printed in a stylized, historical font. At the bottom of the page, there are several columns of text, likely representing the original lyrics or a transcription of the lyrics in a different format.

Two-page songbook layout for "I asked of thee a boon"