

Angelina Figus - On the Sea. Analytical and stylistic aspects

Ildiko KALLO¹

Abstract: *Choral works intended for amateur choirs must meet both the criterion of accessibility and several aesthetic and artistic criteria that motivate the amateur chorister to perform them. Angelina Figus, composer and conductor for amateur choirs, with an impressive musical career, combines quiet, serene, sometimes slightly chromatic modal sounds with vigorous, powerful sonorities in her choral works for amateurs, leading both the chorister and the listener through a vast field of feelings. John Keats' sonnets are truthfully rendered through the work of Angelina Figus, transporting us to the distant world of fairy tales, of melancholy, where the sea accompanies us, stirs us, but also calms us. The analysis of the work aims to highlight the morphological and syntactic structure of the choral miniature *On the Sea*, focusing on the rhetorical and stylistic elements used by the composer.*

Keywords: *choral miniature; analysis; amateur choir; Angelina Figus; John Keats;*

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the work *On the Sea* by the Italian composer Angelina Figus from a musical and stylistic point of view, focusing on the morphological and syntactical aspects used by the composer.

1. Angelina Figus – The composer

Born in 1957 in the town of Carbonia on the island of Sardinia, Angelina Figus² is known for promoting amateur choral creation through her compositions and from the perspective of amateur choir conducting. From her brief biography, we learn that she studied classical guitar, composition, and conducting, completing her basso continuo and lute studies at the Conservatory of Neuchâtel in Switzerland under Professor Jorge Fresno.

After graduation, she was a teacher, founding school and amateur choirs, especially women's choirs, and intensively promoting the choral movement in schools. She collaborates with the cultural associations Collegium Musicum Monteverdi, the Centre for Musical Studies, and Su Conti in Carbonia. She is one of the driving forces behind the cultural and musical life of the town. Since 2019 she has been working as the conductor of the women's choir *SolEnsemble* in Padua³, with which she tours and for which she has written numerous choral works. With a strong patriotic spirit, she encourages the use of the Sardinian language in music, which has attracted a number of requests from cultural theatrical associations in Sardinia. She is present online, her works can be found on the Choral Public Domain Library

¹ Gh. Dima National Music Academy, kallo.ildiko@amgd.ro.

² Angelina Figus, *On the sea*, Score. Retrieved January 5, 2023, from [https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/On_the_sea_\(Angelina_Figus\)](https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/On_the_sea_(Angelina_Figus)).

³ *Figus Angelina*, (n.d.). Retrieved January 23, 2023, from https://susiledizioni.com/pagina_autore.php?idPersona=818.

page, and some recordings are posted on Youtube.⁴ She is listed in the catalog of women organists as a composer of liturgical pieces.⁵

Her work includes religious compositions, generally for the Catholic divine service, reworkings of carols, reworkings of Renaissance melodies, and choral works based on the lyrics of universal poets. Most of the works are written for women's choirs in 3 or 4 voices, but there are also other settings such as SATB, SSAB, SSAT, SAAT.

2. Analysis of the choral work *On the Sea*⁶

On the Sea is one of the choral compositions composed for women's choir, having the SSAA scoring. In John Keats's sonnet,⁷ the main character is the sea, with its many facets, at times calm, at times stormy, capable of flooding a thousand caverns, keeping still the smallest shell, or chasing away the world's empty noise. The sea, by its magical powers, is capable of curing worldly torments and healing the troubled eyes or damaged ears of those who listen to it attentively. The poem's ending takes us to the mystical realm of the nymphs, bringing back the atmosphere of tranquility.⁸

Although the work is conceived in a large monostrophic form, three different semantic units are distinguished within it, corresponding to stanzas that delineate the sonnet's ideational message. The chain-like unfolding of the small stanzas A, B, and C is preceded by a rhythmic-melodic refrain based on a descriptive leitmotif of the sea, which recurs almost identically between stanzas A and B, and at the end in a fragmentary epilogue. The work is composed in D minor, but the harmonic discourse shows occasional modal inflections, creating tonal uncertainty. The structure is as follows:

Opening chorus	A	median chorus
leitmotif+a+av1+av2+av3	phrase 1+ phrase 2	a+av1+av2+av3
2 + 5 + 5 + 5 + 5bars	7 + 7	5 + 5 + 5 + 5bars
acomppedal.....imitations.....homophony.....pedal.....imitations		
B	C	epilog
phrase 1 + phrase 2	phrase 1 + phrase 2	av4
6 +2+3 10	4 + 6	6bars
Resp....homophony.....imitative polyphony.....homophony.....polyphony.....pedal		

The personification of the sea is present from the very beginning of the work. The leitmotif of the sea is presented in several forms of motivic elaboration, each of which is meant to portray the diversity of sea states, from the most peaceful to the most agitated.

4 Marco del Vaglio, *Il Gruppo SolEnsemble porta in tournee in Sardegna*. Retrieved April 7, 2023, from <https://criticaclassica.wordpress.com/tag/angelina-figus/>.

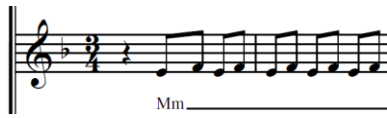
5 SWO Directory of Women Composers of Organ and Liturgical Music Work catalogue. Retrieved May 5, 2023, from www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk.

6 John Keats, *On the Sea*, (the poem). Retrieved January 5, 2023, from <https://genius.com/John-keats-on-the-sea-annotated>

7 John Keats, *Poems [Poezii]*, translation by Miron Kiropol. București: Editura Albatros, 2021.

8 Emma Baldwin, *On the Sea by John Keats. Poem Analysis*. Retrieved January 5, 2023, from <https://poemanalysis.com/john-keats/on-the-sea/>.

The leitmotif α , presents the calm state of the sea:



Interval additions, representing wave motion:



The chorus is segmented into four equal-sized phrases, a, av1, av2, av3 each of which has five bars. The opening is static, but with each phrase, the musical discourse is amplified, adding new elements both melodically and rhythmically: the ambitus widens from the interval of the minor third, D4-F4, to the interval of the compound major sixth, F4-D5; the march of quarters appears in the alto voice²; the constant movement of the leitmotif is varied melodically; harmonically, the use of melodic variation is observed; and the cadence of the phrase av2 is in the key of the dominant, A major.

Four staves of musical notation. The first staff is in treble clef and shows a melodic line with two red circles highlighting the notes F4 and D5. The second and third staves are in treble clef and show a melodic line with a red circle highlighting the note F4. The fourth staff is in bass clef and shows a bass line with a red circle highlighting the note D4.

19 It keeps e-ter-nal whi-spe-rings a - round
a - round
a - round
a - round

The introductive beginning of the chorus prepares us for the first four lines of the sonnet in which the author introduces us to the sea, portraying it as calm but at the same time capable of changing in an instant.

The first stanza, A, begins in soprano voice¹, with a syllabic character, and a wavy rhythmic-melodic discourse. The lower voices converse with the soprano, creating the sense of wave motion, and the descriptive character is reinforced by the internal caesuras given by the dotted rhythmic formulas and the small internal chorale, naturally dividing the verse prose into asymmetrical articulations of phrases, the first of five plus two bars, and the second of seven bars.

19 It keeps e-ter-nal whi-spe-rings a - round
a - round
a - round
a - round

25 — a-round — de-so-la-te shores — and with its mi - ghty swell gluts twice ten thou—
de - so - la-te shores and with its mi - ghty swell gluts twice ten thou—
de - so - la-te shores and with its mi - ghty swell — gluts twice ten thou—
de - so - la-te shores and with its mi - ghty swell — gluts twice ten thou—

31 send ca - verns till the spell of He - ca - te leaves them - their - sha - do-wy sound.

31 send ca - verns till the spell of He - ca - te leaves them their she - do-wy sound -

31 send ca - verns till the spell of He - ca - te leaves them their sha - do-wy sound.

send ca - verns till the spell of He - ca - te leaves them their sha - do-wy sound -

The invocation of the goddess Hecate,⁹ who with the power of her spells can simultaneously flood tens of thousands of caverns intensifies the musical discourse both by its imitative character and by the appearance of a rhythmic dactylic formula, bringing a new suggestion to the turmoil of the sea. The swell of the waves is rendered by the widening ambitus of the voices and the breadth of textural density. The melodic design of the constituent motifs is also amplified from second to quintet intervals, alternating gradual gait with intervallic leaps. The dynamics, though not notated in the score are amplified precisely because of this rhythmic-melodic tumult, which reaches its upper and lower melodic extremes through the notes of F3 in alto 2, and D5 in soprano1.

The D minor cadence in unison once again brings a note of calm, while preparing the reappearance of the chorus, which is repeated almost identically, missing only the first bars in which the leitmotif is presented.

The second stanza, **B**, opens the first phrase with a responsorial dialogue between alto2 with sopran2, and alto1 with sopran1, and after six bars the discourse returns to being homophonic, but metrically there is an alternation of three and four-quarter measures, changes that arise for prosodic reasons. The ambitus reaches the note E5 in soprano1, the dactylic rhythmic formula is reversed, and harmonically the natural D minor is used, giving the speech a strong modal character, suggesting the gentleness of the sea, in which the small shells remain undisturbed for a long time. The melody retains its undulating character, alternating gradual gait with leaps, describing in a plastic way the infinite mobility of the sea.

⁹ Hecate, a mysterious deity, is often identified with Artemis. She was the daughter of Perses and Asteria. At first, Hecate was regarded as a benevolent deity who bestowed various blessings on the people: prosperity, victory, success, etc. Later she is regarded as a god who rules over the underworld and, as such, is the protector of spells, spells, and all manifestations of magic. Her statue, depicting a three-headed woman, is found at all roadside crossings - places considered to be ideal for magic - which is why it was also called Trivia.

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia (2023, May 8), *Hecate* Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved May 8, 2023, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hecate>.

55 that scar-ce-ly will the —
 55 o - ften 'tis in — such gen-tle tem per found
 55 that scar-ce-ly — will the
 55 o - ften 'tis in — such gen-tle tem-per found

61 ve-ry smal lest shell — be mo ved for — days from where it some - time fell, when last the wind of
 61 be mo ved for — days from where it some time fell when last the wind of
 61 ve-ry smal lest shell — be mo ved for — days from where it some - time fell when last the wind of
 61 be mo ved for days from where it some - time fell when last the wind of

The second phrase of the stanza is introduced imitatively by the exclamation *oh, ye!* the voices entering in stretto, keeping the imitative polyphonic speech until the end of the phrase. The climax in measure 77 is reached by a dynamic unison gradation highlighting the importance of the exclamation, and the V-I cadence in D major brings a note of brightness, bringing harmony back into the tonal-functional zone.

66 hea - ven were un - bound. Oh ve. oh

66 hea - ven were un - bound. oh

66 hea - ven were un - bound. Oh ve. oh ye, oh ye, who

66 hea - ven were un - bound. Oh, ye oh ye, oh ye, oh ye, oh ye, oh ye oh

75 pon the wide ness of the sea. Oh ye, oh ye, oh ye! whose ears are din ned with up - roar rude

75 wide - ns of the sea. Oh ye, oh ye, oh ye! whose ears are din ned with up - roar rude

75 wi - dness of the sea. Oh ye, oh ye, oh ye! Mm

75 wideness of the sea. Oh ye, oh ye, oh ye! Mm

The last stanza, C, exploits the brightness of the key of D major in the first four bars, marked also by a change of harmony, but the author makes a subtle allusion through the note B flat to the emptiness of the world's empty tears. The rhythmic formula of a dotted fourth followed by an eighth used in the previous anacrusis phrase, with the role of an exclamation, is resumed with the role of a whispered accompaniment, configuring the harmonic route of I-IV-V-I, V-I, and in the second phrase of stanza C, it is used as a pedal, symbolizing the gentle lapping of the waves on the shore.

80 or fed too much with cloying me-lo-dy sit ye near and brood

80 or fed too much with cloying me-lo-dy sit ye near some old caver's mouth and brood

80 or fed too much with cloying me-lo-dy. sit ye near seat ye near sit ye near

Mm sit ye near, seat ye near sit ye near

85 Un - til ye start, as if the sea nymphs qui - red

85 Un - til ye start, as if the sea nymphs qui - red.

85 sit ye near sit ye near sit ye near Mm

sit ye near sit ye near sit ye near Mm

The end of the work brings back the original leitmotif in a six-bar epilogue, reminding us of the calm and serenity of the sea.

3. Conclusions

In the choral work *On the Sea*, the composer uses the most appropriate compositional means to create a calm, meditative atmosphere in which the sea appears as the main character. The chorus, with its three appearances - introductory, middle, and concluding - suggests cyclicity, giving the strophic form unity and roundness. The musical stanzas naturally follow the text's prosody, following the concordance of the prosodic accents with the musical ones, the undulating melodic gait associated with the pulsation of the quavers, and various rhythmic formulas transport us into the fantasy world of the sea, creating a contemplative-meditative atmosphere.

Angelina Figus stands out in the 21st-century compositional landscape both for her leaning toward the area of children's and amateur choirs and for the diversity of musical genres she approaches. Aware of the educational and socio-cultural importance of the amateur choral movement, Angelina Figus is both a composer and a conductor of amateur choirs, showing a thorough knowledge of choral writing for amateurs, her scores being transparent, without major difficulties from a technical-interpretative point of view, and as for the ambit of

her works, it easily lends itself to amateur choral performance. Her music is usually in the tonal-functional sphere, but we also find modal harmonies, outlining a modern sound world that expresses the message of the lyrics in a plastic way.

4. References:

- Keats, John, *Poems [Poezii]*, translation by Miron Kiropol. București: Editura Albatros, 2001.

Internet sources:

- Baldwin, Emma, *On the Sea by John Keats. Poem Analysis*. Retrieved January 5, 2023, from <https://poemanalysis.com/john-keats/on-the-sea/>.
- Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia (2023, May 8), *Hecate*, Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved May 8, 2023, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hecate>.
- del Vaglio, Marco, *Il Gruppo SolEnsemble porta in tournée in Sardegna*. Retrieved April 7, 2023, from <https://criticaclassica.wordpress.com/tag/angelina-figus/>.
- Figus, Angelina, *On the sea*, Score. Retrieved January 5, 2023, from [https://www.cpdl.org/wiki/index.php/On_the_sea_\(Angelina_Figus\)](https://www.cpdl.org/wiki/index.php/On_the_sea_(Angelina_Figus)).
- *Figus Angelina*, (n.d.). Retrieved January 23, 2023, from https://susiledizioni.com/pagina_autore.php?idPersona=818.
- Keats, John, *On the Sea*, (the poem). Retrieved January 5, 2023, from <https://genius.com/John-keats-on-the-sea-annotated>.
- SWO Directory of Women Composers of Organ and Liturgical Music Work catalogue. Retrieved May 5, 2023, from www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk.