

Adaptation of *The Song of Achilles*

The characters in Madeline Miller's book *The Song of Achilles* were already so solidly written that I wanted to emphasize them more than to make any drastic changes. It was interesting making an adaptation of an adaptation. The characters were already derived from classic Greek works such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and had already gone under some tweaking to fit into Miller's story. I stayed true to her storyline but I wanted to portray the characters in ways that both reflected and tested operatic conventions while getting across the themes I wanted to focus on as well.

When it came to Achilles, the main character, I could not spend a lot of time on his likeable traits so his 'goodness' had to be reflected mainly in his interactions with Patroclus. Even in the book there is nothing that confirms that he is a good person other than the way that he treats Patroclus. The things that Patroclus argues he should be remembered for in the last song are weak still — Patroclus was the one who convinced him to save the slave girls and he only gave Hector's body over to his family after a long time of refusing to. I wanted to draw out the more redeeming side of Achilles, being the side that loved Patroclus. His decisions were only ever swayed either when his pride or his *therapon* were taken into account. I kept Achilles' desperation for fame but wanted to make it clear that he only wanted it if Patroclus was there beside him every step of the way. It is true even in the *Iliad* that Achilles wished for all Greeks to die so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone.

As for Achilles' musical characterization he is that of a typical heroic tenor, though the voice of a baritone may have been more conventional for that of a warrior. I found that Achilles embodied a sense of beauty and softness while still remaining his masculinity and that kind of portrayal would be better suited for a tenor. His voice became soft and enchanting when

speaking to Patroclus while switching to formal and regal when keeping up his image of the *Aristos Achaion*. The only times Achilles truly breaks convention is in Act Three where he takes on the chromatic melodies of his mother and the Fourth Act where he is going mad. The only other time we witnessed a male character's music containing chromaticism was in *Carmen*, when Don Jose's music becomes 'tainted' by Carmen's musical style. As for the mad scene, we had never actually seen a male character in a position such as the Lucia's breakdown in *Lucia di Lammermoor* and I thought it it would be very interesting to see a man in this light for a change.

Before writing in Patroclus' character, I thought it would be difficult to make it so that he wasn't boring. All the other characters had very distinct traits and interesting backgrounds where as Patroclus, even being the narrator in the book, had nothing truly special to attribute to himself. Therefore his interest is solely revolved around his love and devotion to Achilles. Nearly all of his lyrics are about Achilles, whether he's narrating or going on about how he would do anything for the other man. Because Patroclus is such a static character, I imagined his vocal technique being the same way. The main reason he is a tenor is to show how similar, yet extremely different he and Achilles are. Also while he is suited in the armor, he could easily mimic the voice of Achilles.

Thetis was a character I knew would be the most fun to play with. There were very few female character of significance in the books so I wanted to expand on hers and have her play a bigger role. She was designed as to bring up a lot of the themes of power imbalance in gender and sexual violence. Despite her assault she remained a powerful force and that was reflected very clearly within the music. She is the 'witch' part of the 'witches, bitches, and britches' type role, usually associated with mezzo-sopranos. She was described in the books as ceasing everything with her presence, that everything would go cold and silent upon her entrance and I

saw it only fitting that the orchestra would play into this. Achilles' music does the same thing in Act Three when he warns Agamemnon for dishonoring him; this shows that relationship between mother and son and just how much of an influence she had on him.

Though Briseis and Deidameia only had two songs each, I still wanted to make their characters broader than they were in the book. They give more emphasis on gender dynamics and sexual violence that I tried to express in Thetis as well. Deidameia's child is conceived in much the same manner as Achilles was — although consensual, in the end her feelings were not taken into account and she was thrown aside as nothing but what her body had to offer. The act is analogous to that of breeding farm animals. I also thought it was fitting to have her express stereotypical female hysteria with her coloratura while still maintaining to hold her ground against Thetis. Briseis fits into this idea of woman being used as pawns as well just in the more extreme way. I thought it was important to delve into more detail of the literal sacrifice of her body and being given up and traded as property. Even with this lack of power she has no issues with standing up to Achilles and calling him out on his selfishness, not caring for the consequences. I wanted to play into the conventions of gender imbalance while also giving these women a voice of strength and defiance.

The other characters were more for plot purposes rather than expressing the themes and conventions I wanted to convey. As for my main characters, I hope I was able to portray them the way that they were intended and that they all had individual power in their roles.