

Stuart Greenbaum: *Upon The Dark Water* (1991)

Written for a' capella vocal sextet, *Upon the Dark Water* comprises three songs based on poems from the Treasury Gardens by Ross Baglin. It was originally written for The Song Company (Sydney) and was commissioned through the Australia Council.

Musical Structure Vs. Text

While there are a number of recurring themes, the overall structure of the songs is dictated by the text which is often asymmetrical and 'through-composed'. This is particularly true of the 1st and 3rd songs, but less so of the 2nd song which has an underlying Minimalist structure. If the piece were to be played by an instrumental sextet (rather than sung) it would make less structural sense. It is often the ideas in the text that help the music to progress in a comprehensible way.

1 - This Public Figure

*This public figure, with its girdled statues
Of Burns, and Judges, and military men
Surrendered now to pigeons, and reduced
To quartered squares for clowning gulls and lunchers,
Still recalls with steeped English shadows,
The pruning of a colony ; enough then,
For shabby poets, clumsy lovers
And thin-lipped Cromwells in Sun-shingled towers
To note, at evening, how the tea-light brews
And new shoots nudge the moist light falling, falling,
Below the leafless circuit of the moon.*

Musical Structure: Through-composed

The opening song is almost 'turn-of-the-century-English' in its vocal writing. This is used to depict 'Burns and Judges' and 'steeped English shadows'. The text is set in Melbourne's Treasury Gardens, but the statues hark back to England. Most of the melodic lines use conjunct motion and this gives the impression of an anthemic chorale. The first two bars in the upper voices outline this in a clear B major (see Ex. No.1).

Ex. No.1

1 $\text{♩} = 66$

Sop. 1 Thi(s) fi - gure

Sop. 2 This pub - lic fi - gure

Alto pub lic fi - gure

But the 'public figures' have been displaced into a (at the time) new and strange land and the music reflects this. Whilst incorporating traditional tonal harmony, the triads sometimes overlap in bi-tonalities which create a strange effect of partial recognition. A good example of this bitonality (two different keys sounded at the same time) is at the end of bar 8 where D major is added to Eb minor (see Ex. No.2).

Ex. No.2

8

(Gb-F#: Enharmonic pivot note)

Sop. 1 And re - duced to

Sop. 2 And re - duced to

Alto And re - du

Tenor And re - duced to

Bari. pi - geons

Bass And re - du

D major

Eb minor

In this instance, there is a pivot note between the (otherwise unrelated) chords. The 3rd in D major is F# which is also the 3rd of Eb minor, but enharmonically respelled as Gb. This pivot note helps to connect the dissonant pitches, creating a bitter-sweet effect. There are a number of similar bi-tonal dissonances in the 1st song, but they can all be attributed to tonal triads.

The syllables of the words in the text are occasionally distributed between more than one singer. This often results in the overlapping of vowel sounds which are not finished off by the expected consonant. Whilst a given singer's part may not make sense in its own right, it is intended that the overall texture should make phonetic sense of the text. A clear example of this can be found in bars 5 to 7 (see Ex. No.3).

Ex. No.3

5

Sop. 1
a(nd) li - tary me(n)

Sop. 2
and mi - li - tary

Alto
O(f) and mi - li - tary men

Tenor
Of Burns and ju - dgesa(nd)

Bari.
Of Burns a(nd)

Bass
Of Burns and ju

In this example, the words "of Burns and Judges and military men" are passed from the lower male singers up to the higher female singers. The syllables with brackets on the end help to indicate the correct vowel sounds. In bar 6, the tenor sings 'a(nd)'; in this instance, the 'nd' is not required because it is sung by the alto and 2nd soprano. This distribution of the text is akin to a jigsaw puzzle - only when all six parts fit together does the text become clear.

2 - Upon The Dark Water

*The mother duck that chased at reeds
And fantasies of weightless things
That lurked in water, out of light,
Is menaced by the crevices
Of rocks that scour and foam ;
The water's changing, and the growing ducks
She mothered in the teeth of Winter
Fledge in poison; No expression in the eye
Forgives their dying, no condolence comes
In leaves that break the clean white bones of sun
Upon the dark water.*

Musical Structure: Minimalist

The 2nd song (which also bears the title of the work) is perhaps the most intriguing of the three. It is Minimalist, because it is made up almost entirely of long notes (of differing rhythmic lengths) which are repeated for the whole song. Actually, all the long notes are 4 bars in length (two bars crescendo, two bars decrescendo) but the duration of the rest before the note starts again is different for each part and this creates a sense of different cycles shifting against each other. A more simple example of this is standing at an intersection and hearing the pedestrian traffic lights beep in and out of phase. The long notes of *Upon The Dark Water* create a musical equivalent of standing at the intersection of a 12 road junction and hearing 6 different time cycles from the pedestrian lights. In the score, it looks like this (see Ex. No.4):

Ex. No.4

11

Sop. 1
U

Sop. 2
the dark

Alto
wa ter

Tenor
ter U

Bari.
the dark

Bass
the dark

The text for the long notes is taken from the title and divided into three pairs of syllables. These are:

- | | Cresc. | Decresc. |
|----|---------------|-----------------|
| a) | <i>u -</i> | <i>pon</i> |
| b) | <i>the</i> | <i>dark</i> |
| c) | <i>wa -</i> | <i>ter</i> |

This is also the last line in the text for the 2nd song and so, there is a sense of inexorably heading towards the conclusion. Against this combined texture of independent 'waves of sound' are small solos that carry the main body of the text.

3 - A Cicada in the Blackbird's Beak

*A spark of green spits and chirrs in the toed claw ;
The dipped spear clacks the tessellated shell,
The luculent green fans twirled,
The nerves cut, the netted wings wave
Unbidden circles, the clash of strings
Bewilders instinct, and the golden thighs
That rattled Summer nights are cracked,
Snap !
The flakes of flame smack in the scarlet beak.*

*The dismantling of a frail jewel
Will not be accounted in the published report
Of beauty's ravished accessories,
Beauty does not stir when hunger's march
Pounds sullen on;*

Musical Structure: Fugal - free form

Fugue

Interlude

Fugue

Nursery Rhyme

Anthem

The most apparent attribute of the 3rd song is the fast tempo coupled with fugal entries (see Ex. no.5).

Ex. No.5

1 $\text{♩} = 76$

Bass

A spark of green spits and chirrs in the toed claw

Unlike a strict Bach fugue, however, the subsequent entries are not necessarily the main subject and are only a tone away (D, D and Bb) from 'C'. The counterpoint is very free mainly because the subject is so chromatic. It continues until bar 28, which leads to a tutti rhythmic unison. This is used as a bridge into an interlude (bars 33 to 44) which is reminiscent of the slower 2nd song. The interlude creates a dreamlike state to mirror the bewilderment of the captured cicada.

The Fugue returns (slightly altered) at bar 45 and returns to the harsh reality of death in nature, the harmony chromatically falling as the cicada's life is extinguished. Once all the voices have settled into an F drone (bar 57), the Nursery Rhyme figure appears (see Ex. No.6).

Ex. No.6

57 non. vib. 'child-like'

Sop.1

The dis - mant - ling of a frail jewel

This 'child-like' melody is at first simple, but the echo at bar 63 is in D major whilst the other voices are still in F. This harmonic use of bitonality is found throughout the work as a whole and represents the emotional ambiguity of nature. The 3rd song concludes with a homophonic anthem much as the 2nd song ended.

Terms for study

Bitonality

A' capella

Through-composed

Minimalism

Enharmonics

Pivot Note

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