



The Closed Town by Robert Convery (earthsongs press)

Analysis

Broad Description/Type

The Closed Town is the sixth movement of Convery's *Songs of Children* (1991), a cantata on nine poems written by children while interned at Terezin concentration camp during World War II.

Background information

(notes by Robert Convery)

"*Songs of Children* was composed in memory of all children who perished in the Holocaust. The purpose of the work was to give accessible, musical voice to the poetry, that it be performed in schools as an historically instructive vehicle. I have placed at the beginning of the cantata a passage from Deuteronomy which more eloquently states the purpose of *Songs of Children*: Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your hearts all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

The ordering of the poems in *Songs of Children* demonstrates a spiritual transformation of a child, beginning with the naïve state of entry into the concentration camp; the quick, brutal confrontation with the reality of the camp; a sense of having one's soul stripped from one's body; a cool vision of the reality of the camp; and, finally, a transcendence of that reality, knowing that the soul cannot be harmed, though the body be humiliated, degraded and destroyed."

The Closed Town falls exactly in the center of this 11 movement cantata (though there are only nine poems). It is unique from the other movements in that the voices are all in unison and there are no strings, something that occurs nowhere else in the work. According to Convery's description, this is movement embodies the "cool vision of the reality of the camp."

Elements of Music

Rhythm

- In the keyboard:
 - Ground bass ostinato
 - Constant quarter note repetition (m.1-41 mostly on "A," m. 43-62 on "E", m.65-end on "C")
 - Consists solely of quarter and half notes, no other types of notes
 - Constant, plodding, aching rhythmic drive with rubato points for emphasis
- In the vocal line:
 - More rhythmic diversity than the piano line, but still relatively reserved, with some triplet figures or syncopation added for more drive forward
 - Holding some notes across the bar line for emphasis/text painting
 - Text stresses determine rhythm of each phrase (not much rhythmic repetition)

Melody

- In the keyboard:
 - Slowly progressing stepwise higher to climax, then immediately returning to start and repeating the process
 - Almost no "melody" in keyboard, functions primarily as harmonic/rhythmic support
- In the vocal line:
 - Almost all phrases have a haunting feel; very arching, undulating, mostly return to where they began (except the last phrase, ends on the 5th)
 - Virtually no repetition from phrase to phrase; all new material
 - Almost all unison/octave statements

- Not in any one key; different phrases have different tonal centers; always feels “like it’s in a key” though
- At key points, large leaps (octaves, 4ths, 5ths, 7ths) lend the normally stepwise line an angular shape
- Depending on the key, a flat 6 is employed to lend a haunting moment in an otherwise diatonic vocal line

Form

m. 1-17	1 st statement of ostinato, in quasi-key of “A” with A as focal note
m. 18-38	2 nd statement, in “A,” piano and voices
m.39-42	Transition from “A” to “E” with piano; voices still have “A” as focal note
m. 43-59	3 rd statement, in “E,” piano and voices
m.60-62	Transition from “E” to “C”
m.63-end	Half statement of ostinato, then 4 th full statement, then another short portion to close

Although the ground bass ostinato continues throughout the work, it is not exactly uniform for each section. While the ground bass obviously supports the vocal line, the line is not completely dependent on the piano. Often times, the singers will begin their phrase a few measures after the piano has begun another statement of the ostinato and finish after the piano has begun another statement. The effect is that both ‘voices’ (piano & singers) are performing at the same time, but not together. It is as if the body must stay in one place, but the soul longs to be in another.

Harmony

As noted in the “Form” section, the piece has multiple tonal centers which are emphasized by the repetition of a single note throughout each section as a kind of pedal tone. The first section uses “A” as the focal note and sounds mostly in A major. Through a slow moving transition section, the focal note changes to E and again through another transition changes to C. Each time, the only note that is out of the “key” is a flattened sixth. The piano harmonies support the vocal line, but it remains independent rhythmically.

Timbre

The overall mood created through the piano/vocal line combination is somber, plodding, and resigned, however there is also a calmness and sense of acceptance present. This is created by the cycle of the ground bass, starting in a low register and gradually working higher toward a climax, at which point the cycle is completed and begins anew. The voices are also in a relatively low range, with the two highest notes of the piece reserved for more climactic points of emphasis.

Texture

A significant piano interlude (20 measures) and postlude (11 measures) are the only textural variation in this work. Otherwise, the ground bass ostinato with a unison vocal line above is the only texture for most of the work. At a few key points (mostly for vocal tessitura issues) the composer will double octaves so the altos and basses will not have to sing so high. This also thickens the overall texture for those few notes.

Expression

Throughout this work, there are repeated places to slightly slow the constant quarter note “heartbeat” through *ritardando* and then a tempo markings. Although each quarter note is not marked with a tenuto, there are many places for interpretation to emphasize or lean into these quarter notes. The dynamics rarely rise above pianissimo, with occasional *messa di voce*. The composer leaves any other expressive ideas up to the discretion of the ensemble and lets the text dictate the musical phrasing.

Heart

The heart of “The Closed Town” lies in the contrast between the regular, heartbeat-like repetition of the ground bass, and the irregular, haunting vocal line, which embodies the struggle of the human spirit enduring man-made atrocities.

Introducing the Piece

I will share my personal history about the worst time in my life, a time in graduate school when I was going through difficult times: uncertainty, doubt, some fear, some helplessness. I'll ask students to journal about a similar time in their life when they felt these emotions.

Then, I'll ask them to read the "Forward" to *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* by Chiam Potok.

Skill Outcome

Students will work toward singing a sustained, pianissimo vocal line in tune, with proper diction.

Strategies

1. "Breathing for Singing" exercises to encourage proper breathflow
2. See/feel what in tune singing is: palms facing ground, middle fingers touching, one hand center of pitch, practice going sharp flat, practice <> and staying on 1 pitch
3. Pair up, sing a unison pitch with your neighbor, 1 person go intentionally flat. Then, go "less flat, but still flat," what do you hear? Can you tell the difference?
 - a. Change partners and guys/gals, high pitch/low pitch & difference?, what is the most important skill for tuning unison?
4. Sound on/off (audiation) activities – at multiple dynamic levels with questioning afterward
5. TPS (Think Pair Share) – read the poem out loud...what words/consonants tend to be "swallowed" or not pronounced?
 - a. Sing poem again out loud to each other on 1 pitch. Can you understand the other person's words? Why/why not specifically
 - b. Share with large group and make list of "pitfalls"
6. 'Section Show Offs' – pick one person from your section to model this vocal line in tune and pianissimo

Assessment

1. What's in a Name? (Peer assessment)
 - a. Define *pianissimo* any other way than its actual definition (picture, analogy, moment in life, how it relates to other things, etc). In pairs, talk about your partner's definition, why you liked/disliked it, can you make each other's definition better?
2. Journal responses (Teacher/Self assessment)
 - a. How did we as a choir (and you as an individual) do today at singing pianissimo, in tune, with good diction? Why (technically and emotionally) is it hard to sing a pianissimo vocal line in tune? Or is it? How consistent have we become at singing this line *pp* in tune with good diction? Why is any of this important to the performance of this piece?

Knowledge Outcome

Students will demonstrate an understanding of the elements of a phrase (melody, rhythm, harmony, and text syntax) and the relationships between these elements, the vocal line, and the accompaniment.

Strategies

1. "Question and Answer" improvisation game
2. Phrase Microscope –
 - a. Text only – Read text alone and underline words that stick out to you. As you read again, can you pare them down to only a single word (or maybe phrase)? What is the most dramatic/important spot of this poem? What leads up to it and what comes after it?
 - b. Melodic/Rhythmic – sing each phrase with no text, students analyze what the natural stresses/high points are (Create vocal line w/o text), students use markings to clarify for future rehearsal (ie, cresc, tenuto, phrase markings, other made up markings?)
 - c. Harmonic – On regular score, sing song through, students mark where interesting harmonic events take place; class discussion "Should this change how we phrase our line?"

3. "One of these things is not like the other" – Record the ensemble singing each phrase two ways, with musical, unified phrasing (A) and with almost no phrasing whatsoever (B). Then combine the recordings (ie. the first 3 phrases A and the 4th B) and see if students can hear the difference. Discuss the effect.

Assessment

1. 4 Folksongs (Teacher/Self assessment)– pick any 1 of the following: Water is Wide, Danny Boy, Turtle Dove, Poor Wayfaring Stranger (unison vocal line found online to practice). Into a digital voice recorder, sing 2 versions:
 - a. One recording with clear, musical phrasing
 - b. One with obvious differences to letter A above.Must turn in a hard copy of each song and version with your score markings and reason for the musical phrasing.
2. Create a Phrase (Teacher/Self assessment) – students choose their favorite line of poetry (in advance, limit selection to 10 words or less). Compose a melody to fit these words (isolate parameters: C major, 4/4 time, nothing more than 8th notes).
 - a. Compile anonymously and sing as a class for a warm-up/sight-reading.
 - b. Analyze in journal the qualities of a good melody/text phrase.
 - c. Re-write your piece (if you want) and explain why you like this melody with this text.

Affective Outcome

Students will explore their feelings toward how the human spirit prevails in times of adversity and uncertainty.

Strategies/Assessments

1. Journal response from Introduction
2. Free journal responses to clips of Survivor Testimonies (over a period of weeks)
 - a. <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/otv/otv.php>
3. Journal: Although you cannot put yourself in that situation, can you remember a time when you have had to struggle in the midst of uncertainty or adversity? What got you through it? What did you lean upon to help you?
 - a. If people are willing to share, make a list, find commonalities
4. Describe your worst experience in something other than text (monologue, collage, video, poem, audio recording/mix, painting, miming, song, dance)
5. Interview an adult that you're close to (family member, clergy, mentor, boss, etc) about the most trying time in their life.
 - a. Formulate questions, interview, document it (record or write down), and reflect upon their answers.