



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 movement embodies the "cool vision of the reality of the camp."

Elements of Music

Rhythm

- In the keyboard:
 - o Ground bass ostinato
 - o Constant quarter note repetition (m.1-41 mostly on "A," m. 43-62 on "E," m.65-end on "C")
 - o Consists solely of quarter and half notes, no other types of notes
 - o Constant, plodding, aching rhythmic drive with rubato hints at the hopelessness and "long, long hours" of life in Terezin
- In the vocal line:
 - o More rhythmic diversity than the piano line, but still relatively reserved, with some triplet figures or syncopation added for more drive forward
 - o Holding some notes across the bar line for emphasis/text painting
 - o Text stresses determine rhythm of each phrase (not much rhythmic repetition)
 - o Final, syncopated vocal line (m.71-74) contrasts w/pulse on the beat, possibly signifying a struggle to be free (either through liberation or death)
- 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.

Melody

- In the keyboard:
 - o Slowly progressing stepwise higher to climax, then immediately returning to start and repeating the process
 - o Almost no "melody" in keyboard, functions primarily as harmonic/rhythmic support

- In the vocal line:
 - o Almost all phrases have a haunting feel; very arching, undulating, mostly return to where they began (except the last phrase, ends on the 5th)
 - o Virtually no repetition from phrase to phrase; all new material
 - o Almost all unison/octave statements
 - o Not in any one key; different phrases have different tonal centers; always feels “like it’s in a key” though
 - o At key points, large leaps (octaves, 4ths, 5ths, 7ths) lend the normally stepwise line an angular shape
 - o Depending on the key, a flat 6 is used 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, subtly implying a sense of hope, reaching upward. 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.. This also thickens the overall texture for those few notes.

Dynamics

The dynamics rarely rise above pianissimo, with occasional messa di voce. The only crescendo to mp comes on the text “long, long hours,” underscoring the feeling of helplessness and misery experienced by children at Terezin. 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.

<p style="text-align: center;">Skill Outcome Students will sing with energized breath and consonants.</p>

Strategies

1. Shadow Consonants & [Singlish](#)
 - a. I demo on text “wrong” - no consonants: “Why was that strange?” & Why game
 - b. “Singlish”: shadow consonants
 - c. and(ih), on(ih), sing(ih), love(ih), S = Z(ih)
 - d. Students write / in score to signify separation & shadow consonant
2. [Energized Breathflow](#) warmups - “Energy is the foundation on which pianissimo rests”
 - a. Inhalation:
 - i. Sip through a straw, in for 4 out for 8, 12, 16, hands press each other to simulate steady, constant breath pressure
 - b. Exhalation:
 - i. Middle fingers touching together on abdomen, then expand, then “ss” out
 - ii. “sss-aaahh” connecting breath to phonation on/before an exercise (transition: zzz-aaahh)
3. The Jim May Technique - story
 - a. Star Spangled Banner (unison)- slow down to adagio, pianissimo
 - b. transfer to “piano”: same animation of face, engagement of breath muscles, same intensity
 - c. “Oh- say” 3 times: I conduct bigger, they get softer
 - d. [Aladdin Genie clip](#)

Assessments

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?
3. Using PracticeFirst, sing a section of this song and use the [Singing Assessment](#) to analyze and evaluate your performance (Demo: use VoiceMemos & informally evaluate)

Knowledge Outcome

Students will recognize and create artful repetition (contrast & variety) in music.

Strategies

1. [How Music Makes Sense](#) - Students read aloud in groups, key takeaways
2. [Backpack Composer 1.0](#) - varied repetition using everyday items - group - other groups score first to 5 on how well they did
3. [Guided Listening - The Closed Town](#)
 - a. Students listen to recording of piece...actively listen/watch score in groups
 - i. roles: Pitches, Rhythms, Dynamics/Tempo

Assessment

1. Composition Project (choose A or B)
 - a. Soundtrap - compose a song featuring Artful Repetition using Soundtrap; submit with an one paragraph explanation of how you used contrast and varied repetition
 - b. Backpack Composer 2.0 - get the band back together and compose another song using everyday elements, record it and write up a one paragraph explanation

Affective Outcome

Students will explore how the human spirit endures extreme adversity and uncertainty.

Strategies

1. Introduction: [Poems & Artwork of Terezin](#) & [Google Slide of Poems](#)
2. Students read short summaries of Resilience from [news headlines](#)
3. [Brief survivor video testimony](#)
 - a. If you could talk to a survivor, what questions would you ask them? [Journal Response](#)
4. Class Participation in [Pinchas Gutter Survivor Testimony](#) & [Educator Tips](#)
 - a. Journal Response
5. Journal: Although you cannot put yourself in the situation of the Holocaust, 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. For students willing to share, make a class list, find commonalities
6. Resilience TED talk summary
 - a. https://www.ted.com/talks/katie_oblie_resilience
 - b. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWH8N-BvhAw>
 - c. https://www.ted.com/talks/raphael_rose_how_failure_cultivates_resilience
 - i. pick out 1 key phrase from the speaker & make it as the title of your journal response
 - ii. Why did this resonate with you?
 - iii. How will you use it moving forward?

Assessments

1. Project #1 - In something other than prose (collage, video, poem, audio recording/mix, painting, miming, song, dance), depict a time when you have personally endured adversity. Explain the choices you made.
 - i. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/142028/poems-of-hope-and-resilience>
 - ii. <https://theawesomemix.com/songs-about-resilience/>
 - iii. <https://www.artofresilience.art/participatory/>
 - iv. <https://www.clancyworks.org/performance/repertory/the-resilience-project>
2. Project #2 - Interview any teacher or staff member in our school: What strategies did you use to get through school from March 2020 until now?
 - a. [Interview Project Requirements](#)
 - i. Students must answer the same question back to the teacher and record both responses (teacher and student) in final "paper" or audio submission