



At Terezin by Robert Convery (earthsongs press)

Analysis

Broad Description/Type

At Terezin is the second 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."

At Terezin, the second movement, captures "the quick, brutal confrontation with the reality of the camp," through its irregular 7/8 feel, textural changes, harmonic wandering, and formal repetition.

Elements of Music

Rhythm

- 7/8 time signature (2+2+3 and 3+2+2) at quarter=132 tempo
 - The pattern alternates between 2+2+3 and 3+2+2 only in the B section
- Constant drive toward cadence points
- Almost frantic piano line through the use of 16th notes at this fast tempo

Form

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|---|-----------|---|
| A | m.1-8 | Introduction by piano/string trio |
| B | m.8-29 | "When a new child comes, everything seems strange to him." Vocal parts begin after section has begun and continue past the beginning of the new section (m.12-32) |
| C | m.30-60 | "What, on the ground I have to lie, eat black potatoes..." |
| A | m. 61-67 | Transitional material: finishing the last phrase of the first stanza ("I'll get all dirty") while repeating the beginning material (same as m.1-8) |
| B | m.68-89 | "Here the sound of shouting, cries..." Same vocal and instrumental material as m.8-29. |
| C | m.90- 115 | "Everyone knows flies carry disease..." Same vocal and instrumental material m.30-60. |
| A | m.116-end | Transitional material: finishing the last phrase of the second stanza ("I can't yet tell") while repeating the beginning material (same as m.1-8, and 61-67) |

Similar to "The Closed Town" the phrases of the vocal lines do not exactly align with those of the instruments.

Melody

- Firmly in g minor
- Not only in one vocal line; gets passed from line to line, imitative entrances
- Text drives the contour/angularity of each phrase; sometimes stepwise, other times angular/skipping

Texture

- Thick texture of 4 part SATB voices, string trio and piano for most of the work except:
 - Piano/string trio begin/end work w/o voices
 - m.38-45 & m.98-100 voices, trio, & piano alternate statements
 - m.46-60 & 101-115 trio drops out when piano strays further from G tonal center
- Vocal lines:
 - Imitative polyphony 20th century style, entrances layered by 2 beats (“When a new child” and “Here, the sound of shouting”) alternates with:
 - Homophonic, block chords, w/sharp, quickly staggered entrances (“What, on the ground” and “Everyone knows flies carry disease” which then alternates back to:
 - Similar imitative polyphony, entrances layered by 1 measure and climaxes to homophonic ending statement (“The floor why look” and “Here in Terezin”)

Harmony

- Overall feel is certainly G minor, however the tonal focal points shift throughout the work (G, A, D)
- A section common chord pattern: Gm, Eb7, Cm, Dm64
- B section common chord pattern: Gm, Cm, Bb7 and variations: Gm, Bb7, Cm & Fm7, Cm, Eb & Fm, Eb, Bb
- C section common chord pattern: Gm, Eb7, Cm (begins as ‘A’) but cadences to ‘D major’
 - m.46 – D, Bb7, Gm, Am64 (i vi7 iv v64 same relation)

Timbre

- Frenzied, strange, out of control feeling at times in each “voice” (pno, trio, voices)
- The piano uses its full range for dramatic effect; plays in lower, murkier sounds for blocks of measures and gradually expands out/upward; uses more extreme high ranges when coming into a cadence point
- Voices sing in the mid-upper tessitura consistently; feeling of no release & anxiety
 - High tessitura coincide with dramatic points m.38 and m.98
 - Tone: firm, forceful, forward, and full of dread

Expression

- Trio: switching between pizzicato and arco bowings (feeling of agitation)
 - Many staccato, accent marks, sfp, use of harmonics = sense of drama, unrest, unease
- Piano: many notes strong accent & staccato
- Voices: Need strong consonants and sense of energy of vocal line towards phrase endings
- All: many subtle < > ; dynamics mostly *mf* but then will swell to *ff*;
 - Certain dramatic spots: m.51 – *f* – subito *p* < *mf*

Heart

The heart of “At Terezin” lies in the compositional devices which Convery uses to contrast the known versus the unknown. This dichotomy captures the range of human emotions when encountering a new, dangerous situation.

Introducing the Piece

Show students video clip of Survivor testimony about the entrance into Terezin. Free journal responses about reactions: What is your initial reaction to this? Do you think you could empathize with this woman? What would have been your reaction to entering Terezin?

Skill Outcome

**Students will refine their ability to perform compound meters
(count internally) on independent vocal lines**

Strategies

1. Compound (and other irregular meters) theory worksheet – how to write in counting
2. Count singing examples in regular and compound meters
 - a. As ‘warm-ups’ count sing extracted examples from At Terezin and add pitch
3. Identify 3+2+2 groupings (circle circle triangle) and 2+2+3 groupings (triangle circle circle)
 - a. Divide students into 2 groups. Teacher will hold up 2 cards representing each grouping, students will trade off clapping their card’s grouping
 - b. Ask for a third grouping, demonstrate, add card; also try to ID in score (trick question!)
4. Scanning – Teacher counts off, student tap pulse, all sing/read silently and then ID measure/beat when teacher says stop; teacher sings on neutral syllable, students tap pulse and follow (What measure were we in when I stopped?)
5. Conduct while singing each vocal line

Assessment

1. Theory worksheet (formal)
2. Observation of students conducting (informal)
3. Performance and self-analysis of vocal line into Digital Voice Recorder (formal)
4. Record rehearsals & class analysis/evaluation of clarity of entrances/releases of vocal lines (informal)

Knowledge Outcome

**Students will be able to understand and define four compositional devices and analyze
and identify them in their score: homophony, polyphony, canon, and imitation**

Strategies

Canons

1. Solfege canons (vary: 3rds, 4ths, 2nds?, rhythms (ie half vs. quarter)
 - a. Discussion about the variations: is it still a canon, how the sound/feel/difficulty is affected by the changes
 - b. Students compose their own canons; use these compositions for sight-reading/warm-ups; discuss how it worked, easy/hard to sing, what do we call this kind of harmony, did it work, etc.
 - c. My Crazy Country tis of Thee - Sing unison, then canon at: 2 measure, 3 measures, 1 beat
 - i. Discussion from 1a.

Imitation

2. Copy Exactly, Copy with Changes – Teacher sings a pattern (D through S), student copies it exactly; student gives a pattern, teacher copies it almost the same. Let the students try an almost copy. Find exact imitation in the score and near imitation. (Why isn’t it always EXACTLY the same?)
3. “Isn’t it Great to Imitate” – Have a student volunteer to create a simple motion. Allow the class to imitate the exact motion, nothing can be different. Then challenge them to come up with as many variants to the motion as possible (they must demonstrate and if necessary, explain how their motion is imitative). Keep a running tally of the variants on the board and continue until ‘exhausted.’ Then begin anew and see if you can top your previous total.

Homophony/Polyphony

4. Prefix Game – ‘-phone or -phony,’ ‘homo-,’ ‘mono-,’ ‘poly-,’: generate a list of words that use these prefixes and come up with a class definition for each
5. Physical Texture Examples – Bring in things that feel really different in texture. Blindfold volunteers, describe the differences.
 - a. Class discussion: How can there be texture in sound? What is the texture in this piece? Can you think of analogies for each texture? Where does it change in At Terezin?
6. Obligato Buffet – (from Composition/Improvisation strategies) Discussion about changing texture and the effect on the whole work.

Assessments

1. Play another work from *Songs of Children* (Birdsong/To Olga). Tally the number of times students hear homophony, polyphony, imitation, and canon (informal)
 - a. After examining the score as a group, Venn Diagram the differences between these two pieces
2. Journal response about the properties of a good imitation (after strategy #3) (formal)
3. Scavenger hunt to find these devices in non-musical forms (descriptions of life events, artwork, dance, sculpture, poetry, theater, mathematics, history, science, etc.) They must describe the device(s) and point out any similarities to our song. (formal)

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.