*The Darkling Thrush*

for

Solo Violin and Piano

(Three-part Structure)

Robin Milford wrote a series of works for solo instrument and piano. Some were written purely for these mediums, while others were written for orchestral forces and then transcribed as works for solo instrument and piano.

This essay is based on a personal three-part structure where it seems possible to study a work in terms of (i) ‘setting’ (beginning), (ii) ‘action’ (main material in terms of thematic statement and development), and (iii) ‘conclusion’ (ending in terms of coda/codetta). It has been chosen because the original version was based on the layout of Hardy’s poem in conjunction with Milford’s composition, becoming complicated to follow. Thus, an easier layout was deemed essential. Milford constructs his composition by using an introduction, four separate sections with repetitions and a coda.

Based on Thomas Hardy’s poem *The Darkling Thrush,* Milford published this work in 1929 for solo violin and small orchestra. It was later transcribed by the composer for solo violin and piano and published in that form by OUP in 1930. It thus became the first in line of a number of works for solo instrument and piano.

In his poem, Hardy considers winter’s effects on man and nature. The land is deserted except for “An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small ....” whose cheery “carolings” brighten the air and make the writer think of “Some blessed Hope” of which he, personally, is unaware.

Hardy’s poem falls into two sections. The first, consisting of stanzas one and two, depicts the bleakness of winter while the second, consisting of stanzas three and four, brings hope through the bird’s determination to sing, leading to the poet’s consideration of hope (the literary change is not immediate and the opening of stanza three serves as the transition from darkness to light). The poem is of reflection and conclusion of ‘hope’. There is no real human action, apart from the poet’s thoughts and conclusion. It is the bird which has the central role, suggesting the possibility, if not necessity, of hope.

Milford constructs his composition by using an introduction, repeating sections, and a coda. Each section is profoundly influenced by the poetic imagery of Hardy’s poem. The main musical material is as follows.

Setting (*Lento*)

Milford’s ‘setting’ (introduction) seems to suggest Hardy’s verses 1 and 2 of the poem. An F Aeolian beginning, stark texture over a pedal F, a *Lento* tempo, and theme (descending an octave and used in imitation) all suggest the opening poetic phrases “I leant upon a coppice gate/When Frost was spectre-gray/And Winter’s dregs made desolate/The weakening eye of day”. This theme consists of a descending 3rd, rising 2nd and falling 4th, all used as motifs throughout in varied forms. Descending melodic disjunct movement (involving octaves, and 4ths), creating jagged melodic contours, reflects “The tangled bine-stems scored the sky/Like strings of broken lyres”. Continuous semiquaver/quaver figuration and wide jagged disjunct melodic contours suggests Hardy’s words, “And all mankind that haunted nigh/Had sought their household fires”, while a continuous pedal C (10 bars) continues to suggest the long desolation of winter. Dramatic tension and starkness is further created through rising chromatic sequences, involving a falling 2nd, and rising dynamics. The pedal C serves as a link to the next section.

Action (Adagio, Andante con motto, Allegro moderato, and Andante)

This section is based on verses three and four of Hardy’s poem, representing such aspects as “An aged thrush”, “full-hearted evening”, “carolings” and “some blessed Hope”. It is characterised by a wealth of melodic material which, without literary consideration, could be considered as rhapsodic in form. Would Milford have been better reducing his amount of melodic material and developing the more pertinent themes, as in *Fishing By Moonlight?* Musical features, however, reflecting the images of the thrush include:

* a shift to C (for the appearance of the bird)
* a sustained supertonic 7th chord (swaying between bass and treble registers) over a pedal C (lasting 14 bars)
* new melodic material 1 – Adagio (freely)
* a soaring pentatonic theme in the solo violin which bears reference to Vaughan Williams’ *Lark Ascending*); this falling pentatonic shape becomes a motif throughout the remainder of the work, in addition to trills and triplet rising 4th figures which represent the bird
* 1st inversion harmony, with no bass part, moving by ‘step’ in the piano
* chromatically-moving harmony (for example, Emin, Db, Emin, Db, C, Bmin)
* semiquaver ‘neighbour notes’, suggesting bird-call
* the theme moves to the piano with falling triplets in the piano treble register (codetta)
* a sudden shift to Db major
* new melodic material 2 – *Andante con moto*
* in Db, based upon a rising 4th motif in triplets (Ab-Db) and repeated notes on tonic-subdominant harmony (representing “At once a voice arose among/The bleak twigs overhead …”)
* violin trills, against rising piano arpeggios
* descending violin pentatonic contours falling an octave (e.g. Db’ – Db), against descending harmony in the piano (Gb, Fminor, Ebminor, Db)
* a modulation to Ab
* new melodic material 3 – *Allegro moderato*
* in Ab, commencing with a falling 4th and consisting of constant quaver arpeggiation (this must surely represent “… a full-hearted evensong/Of joy illimited”), first in piano and then violin
* large link material [bar 187]
* perhaps emphasising the important pastoral setting of this work, and the importance of the thrush with its singing looking forward, within winter’s desolation, to hope
* shifts to 3/8 metre and remains in Ab
* develops out to a cantabile violin theme [bar 199], soon moving to the piano [bar 213]
* a triplet rising motif seems to refer further to the thrush, perhaps now hopping along; this motif is developed out through chromaticism
* climax of the Action Section [bar 264]
* consists of melodic material 2, now an octave higher in the violin
* this magnificent climax surely suggests the poet’s “Some blessed Hope” and points to the fact that it is the bird which has the prominent role in the work, teaching man to think beyond the present scene of winter to a brighter horizon
* marked *Andante* and *fortissimo*
* dramatically preceded by three rising piano chords Fmin, Gb and Ab
* the pentatonic motif appears again, leading to references of the first theme.

Conclusion – (Part 1) [bar 292]

* a sudden harmonic shift to C and a first-inversion tonic chord (lasting 12 bars) supports a violin trill and then falling pentatonic shapes lead to a series of theme 1 references against rising harmony by ‘step’
* theme 1 references, alternating trills, harmony falling by ‘step’ and a pedal (16 bars) lead to Conclusion (Part 2)

Conclusion (Part 2) - *Tempo I*

Milford now returns to the opening setting, presumably for the purposes of musical structure but, also to reset the memory to the wintery scene where we started but, more importantly, perhaps to suggest the phrase “… to fling his soul/Upon the growing gloom”. This section is evocative through its use of *pp, diminuendo* and *ppp* but, even more so, by use of an incomplete melodic phrase before the final ‘open’ F bass chord and upper F minor chord.

It would have been interesting to have had Hardy’s reaction to this work but there can be little doubt that he would have approved of Milford’s care and attention to detail in this illumination of the poet’s poem. This work must surely be one of Milford’s finest instrumental works. It reflects so effectively Hardy’s poem and is finely constructed with melodic and textural development, creating a unified and satisfactory work.

Throughout this wonderful flow of melodic material, Milford employs episodes,

consisting of developed piano figuration, trills, chromaticism, time changes, descending arpeggios, a wide range of texture and fast changing dynamics. The work throughout is supported by gentle harmony, involving concord, gentle added-note chords, and chords of superimposed and unrelated intervals.

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