

Like the sea, like time for Tenor Soloist, Children's Chorus, SATB Chorus and Orchestra (2007)

Although Hesketh has written numerous shorter pieces for chorus, as well as several works that involve vocalists, the opportunity to essay a large-scale work for soloists, chorus and orchestra came about not only through his current position as Composer in the House with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, but also through the desire of Henry and Kate Bicket to commission such a work in celebration of Liverpool being City of Culture for 2008.

While the subject-matter of the work was not specified, Hesketh's thoughts were immediately drawn to his experiences of growing up in and around the city. In essence, these are concerned with the constant presence of the River Mersey as well as the specific landscape and character associated with a port setting. Taking these as a basic concept for the work, texts were sought out to complement and build on its expressive qualities. What has resulted is a poetic sequence that centres on the idea of [a] **journey**: whether from point to point across marine expanses or allegorically, in terms of a life - with all of the attendant disasters, frustrations yet also triumphs that such a human journey cannot but embrace.

Although the work features a tenor soloist and children's choir alongside the full chorus, Hesketh has pointed out that these do not represent fixed components over the course of the piece as a whole. Indeed, one of the most distinctive features of the musical treatment is the way the vocal forces are brought into ever more flexible and intricate interplay as the work progresses; thus moving from a straightforward alternation in Part One, through the swifter and more unexpected juxtaposition in Parts Two and Three, to their elaborate superimposition in Part Four. Moreover, while the tenor part does not correspond to any clearly-defined persona, it does serve to focus the emotional trajectory of the work at specific points and so contrast with the more generalized expression of the chorus.

Part One is a Prologue which takes the form of a series of invocations as the journey gets underway. Part Two is a journey across time and life, akin to the 'ages' (though not necessarily seven) of man. Part Three represents a human impasse, as the 'existential void' is encountered and then overcome. Part Four is an Epilogue whose knowledge of journey's end brings an affirmation borne of attainment.

Part One begins with a restless orchestral introduction, whose opening chord is the motivic nucleus for the work as a whole. There is a slight crescendo going into the first setting - derived, as is each of the three Invocations, from ancient Greek prayers - building upwards through the choral texture from basses to sopranos. The glowering intensity relaxes marginally for the tenor's 'Invocation I,' which speaks of the journey now about to commence in terms that are both anxious and ambivalent.

Part Two then sets off with an energetic setting from Walt Whitman's 'After the Sea Ship', prefaced by an introduction that sets the tone in suitably restless terms. Reaching a culmination, the music maintains a simmering disquiet through the passage at 'A myriad, myriad waves', before a stealthy interlude leads into the explosive setting from Whitman's 'Patroling Barnegat'. This dies down for the re-entry of the tenor in a sombre rendering from the anonymous eighth-century text 'A song I sing of sea-adventurers' - sparse orchestration and wordless choral interjections enhancing the mood of intense yearning for the certainty of arrival. At 'the cry of the swan', the actual sound of a Whooper Swan is heard (taken from a field recording) - leading into a setting of Thomas Hardy's 'The Selfsame Song'. The scoring for children's choir and chamber orchestra adds to a feeling of remoteness and introspection evinced by the words, as does the sound of a Musician Wren that delicately rounds off this longest section of the work.

Part Three begins mysteriously with a setting of lines from Edgar Allan Poe's 'The City in the Sea', whose unreal imagery and becalmed mood is underlined by the distribution of text between men's and women's voices - the full chorus only coming together for the baleful first three lines of the third verse. The tenor then returns for 'Invocation II', a supplicatory address to the Harbour-god for safe passage across the oceanic void. The music now takes on a renewed momentum for a setting from

Pablo Neruda's 'Bird', where the children's choir is joined by sopranos (and briefly mezzos) from the main chorus in a scherzo of teasing intricacy. The pace slackens for the tenor's re-entry at 'When I returned from so many journeys', whose greater sense of certainty is carried over into the choral setting of Whitman's 'Gliding o'er all'. The image of the sea-voyage as correlating to the voyage of the soul comes as a sudden revelation that concludes this section on a note of new-found optimism.

Part Four (continuing from its predecessor virtually without a break) opens with a luminous setting of Emily Dickinson's 'The Sea of Sunset', children's choir and sopranos juxtaposed with the tenor's 'Invocation III'. A mounting sense of anticipation spills over into the uninhibited setting of Whitman's 'Joy, shipmate' Joy!' - towards the close of which, all of the vocal forces come together for the first time. They remain for the setting from Neruda's 'Tower of Light' - as elaborate in its interplay of voices and orchestra as it is ecstatic in its sense of 'homecoming', and with the closing line (which gives the piece its title) sounded out defiantly as the work races towards its decisive close.

Any musical undertaking of this degree of ambition is bound to invite speculation as to whether the composer sees it as a 'summing-up' of his achievements. For Hesketh this surely is so, and yet the peremptory feel of those final bars - as if pointedly stopping short of the ultimate triumph - suggests the need to go onward and create anew that makes this work a culmination only in relative terms.

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