

Form in Howard Goodall's *Invictus: A Passion*

Ralph Woodward

In this article, I'll progress from the macro to the micro, considering first (and fairly briefly) the overall form of the piece, before discussing the construction of some of the individual movements, and touching on how their shapes relate to their composer's song-writing hinterland. This article will make more sense if you have the vocal score of *Invictus: A Passion* in front of you.

Taken as a whole, the work shows a careful balance between the expository and the meditative. Movements I, III, VI and IX tell the Passion story (through Æmilia Bassano's text), while the other movements are largely meditative; there is an obvious parallel to be drawn here with Bach's Passion settings, in which the narrative is driven by the Evangelist and the chorus, while the arias are moments of dramatic stasis during which emotions are explored. The same applies to the recitatives and arias of Baroque and Classical opera, and one could go further and say that Sonata Form movements can show the same sense of diastole and systole, characterised as they often are by thrusting and assertive first subjects, leading to more lyrical and reflective second subjects – ebb and flow is an intrinsic feature of, well, pretty much everything.

If we now consider the individual movements, Goodall's heritage as a song-writer becomes obvious. This is not a criticism: Schubert's choral music contains many passages that are more or less Lieder for choir, and are none the worse for it, and Mozart was criticised in his lifetime for his church music's sounding too operatic. If we're honest, some people are inclined to be sniffy about music that's accessible regardless of its merit, and one shouldn't take too much notice of them. Movements I, VI and IX are big, sprawling sections with lots of text, often from several sources, so their form is generally determined by the shape of the text. The other movements are closer in conception to songs, and it's worth having a look at each of them, in no particular order.

The form of movement III is fairly straightforward. The opening section (basically two runs through the melody) occupies the first 23 bars; then we have 21 bars of contrasting material, pulling increasingly towards the relative minor, before the opening idea returns. This time it is capped with a codetta (b.61), and then it is repeated, with the codetta now playing the role of coda – in broad terms, therefore, the design is ABAA, with the B section acting like the middle eight of a song.

Movement V is, on the face of it, the simplest in form:

- b.1 Intro
- b.5 Solo verse ("Out of the night")
- b.21 Solo bridge ("Beyond this place")
- b.31 Solo chorus ("It matters not")
- b.41 Intro
- b.45 Tutti verse
- b.61 Tutti bridge

b.71 Tutti chorus

b.79 Coda

It's virtually a two-part strophic form ("strophic" means written in verses, like a hymn, or like "Ding dong merrily" in Carols for Choirs 1, where the music is repeated to a different set of lyrics – the opposite of strophic is through-composed); strophic forms have been characteristic of songwriters for centuries. In this piece, none of the movements is strophic in the sense of the music being repeated exactly to set subsequent stanzas, but several movements have forms based on repetition – in a sense, this a truism, because most musical forms derive their coherence from repetition, but I think it's a pertinent observation. The subtlety of the text-setting lies in the way Henley's four stanzas are used to make a satisfying musical structure. What I referred to above as the "verse" is Henley's stanzas 1 and 2, the "bridge" is stanza 3, and the "chorus" is stanza 4. Broadly, the entire text is sung by the soloist in the first 38 bars, and then repeated (by the soloist and the choir, minus sopranos) from b.45; the "coda" is merely a varied repeat of the chorus. So the impulse is essentially decorative: the musical structure needed eight stanzas, and for that reason Henley's four stanzas are sung straight through and then repeated in a more elaborate version. The shifting between G and E major helps to clarify this design.

Similar deftness informs the structure of movement VII, in the way that the composer makes the poetical structure subservient to musical considerations. This is an example of what the great musicologist Hans Keller called "creative aggression" when discussing the songs of Schubert. It is hard to understand at first, but the "best" settings of lyrics are often the ones that depart the furthest from a literal and simple reading of the text: Goethe much preferred trite and anaemic settings of his poems to the great settings by Schubert and others, because he was approaching them as the poet and not as a musician – but history has disagreed. As soon as you set a text to music, the music has to take control or the enterprise fails. Movement VII works as follows:

b.1 Intro

b.3 Horn melody

b.7 Verse 1

b.23 Sax melody

b.27 Verse 2

b.39 Interlude

b.44 Verse 3

The musical structure needed three stanzas, and A. E. Housman carelessly only provided two, so what I have labelled as "Verse 3" in Goodall's plan is in fact a varied repeat of Housman's second stanza. Again, the form is not unsonglike...

Movement IV is all about melody. It introduces a number of themes, each corresponding to a line of text, often sung first by a soloist and then by the choir.

b.1 Intro 1

b.9 Intro 2

- b.17 Theme 1 (“Divisiones aquarum”)
- b.25 Theme 1a (“Venatione ceperunt me”)
- b.33 Theme 2 (“Audisti ne avertas aurem”)
- b.38 Theme 3 (“Quia persecutus est”)
- b.44 Theme 3a (“Collocavit me”)
- b.51 Theme 1 reprise
- b.59 Theme 1a reprise
- b.67 Theme 2 reprise
- b.72 Theme 3 reprise
- b.78 Theme 3a reprise
- b.85 Theme 4 (“Ubi caritas”)
- b.90 Theme 4
- b.97 Theme 5 (“Et ex corde diligamus”)
- b.101 Theme 5
- b.105 Coda, based on Theme 4

To break it into larger blocks, bb.17 to 50 are repeated (varied) in bb.51 to 84, whereupon the introduction of the “Ubi caritas” text takes us in a new direction, so the overall arc is roughly AAB. Intro 1 is cunning, in that it combines the melody of Theme 4 with textural and harmonic elements of Theme 2, while Intro 2 simply spells out the chords of Theme 1/1a. Meanwhile there is an unexpected twist in the way the Latin text is set across Themes 1a and 2. Here’s how the text looks on the page:

Venatione ceperunt me quasi avem inimici mei gratis.

Vocem meam audisti ne avertas aurem tuam a singultu meo et clamoribus.

But Goodall annexes the words “Vocem meam” into Theme 1a, and starts Theme 2 at the word “audisti”, setting up a tension between the verbal and musical structures which would have delighted Purcell (and Hans Keller).

Movement II appears complicated, but its shape is actually fairly clear. A distinctive chordal pattern on the piano opens the movement, underpins the cello melody at b.9 and then accompanies the voice at bb.17 and 39, returning at b.70, with a new theme (albeit anticipated at b.61) starting on top of it at b.74 – out of this melody grows the theme for the Wilberforce text from b.100. We hear the second part of the main theme, in the relative major, in bb. 31, 53, 90 and 114, and finally at b.122. So this lengthy movement is structured on alternating sections of minor and major, with enough textural variety to stop it becoming predictable.

Movement VIII is characterised by overlapping song-forms, as shown:

- b.2 Theme 1 (“Now we are they who weep”)
- b.13 Theme 1 combined with Theme 2 (“Our Master lies asleep”)
- b.25 Theme 3 (Tenor & Bass “Una autem”)
- b.37 Theme 3 with descant
- b.51 Theme 1 combined with Theme 2 (“Renew Thy youth”)

- b.62 Theme 4, stanza 1 (“When I survey”)
- b.72 Theme 1 combined with Theme 4, stanza 2 (“Forbid it, Lord”)
- b.82 Theme 4, stanza 3 (“See from His head”)
- b.92 Theme 3
- b.105 Theme 4, stanza 4 (“Were the whole realm”)
- b.114 Coda (repeat of last two lines)

There is obvious wizardry in the way that Theme 1 works in counterpoint with both Theme 2 and Theme 4, but the formal masterstroke, in my view, is the reprise of Theme 3 at b.92, between the last two stanzas of “When I survey” – not only because it disrupts the flow of Theme 4, which could have become humdrum if one stanza followed another throughout, but also because the lower sonorities of the Tenor and Bass melody provide a foil for the higher tessitura of the soprano solo that follows in b.105.

I hope this shows that while the structures are often influenced by the strophic thinking of a songwriter, the repetitions are never thoughtless and are often executed with great skill. Successful songwriters, especially those with lots of theatrical experience, develop an acute sense of what works structurally and how to balance the need for variety with the need for coherence (through repetition), and in my view *Invictus: A Passion* is an object lesson in this.