

The “grief motif” in Howard Goodall’s *Invictus: A Passion*

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There is one melody that is used in its entirety several times in *Invictus: A Passion*, playing a significant unifying role. Before we deconstruct it, here it is, as first heard in the opening movement:

I, b.29

Now we are they who weep, and tremb-ling keep Vi-gil With wrung heart in a sigh-ing
breast, While slow time creeps, and slow sha - dows creep.

Having initially been sung by the Sopranos and Altos, it is partially reprised by the Bases in b.40 of the same movement, and then entirely by the Altos and Tenors at b.116. But it plays its most crucial role in the eighth movement: sung by the Sopranos and Altos in b.2, unfolding in counterpoint with a new Soprano melody in bb.13 and 51, and then combined ingeniously with Goodall’s “When I survey” melody at b.74. So it gives the theme of grief a musical shape, and its treatment moves from initial sparseness to contrapuntal elaboration, with all of the emotional response that that can engender (just ask Bach).

Now let’s look at the melody itself. One interval is particularly salient: the perfect 4th; I bracketed each appearance of that interval above, and would especially draw attention to the alternating 4ths in the first bar quoted, because this shape pops up several times in the rest of the work, such as in the following places:

I, b.49

Some-where, veiled un - der eve - ning skies,

I, b.129

— Com-mu - ni - cate thy grie-fe? Tell of thy woes?

The Piano plays it twice in the fifth movement:

V, b.28

and several times in the eighth movement (e.g. b.49), where it ties in motivically with the rest of the theme.

Growing out of the alternating-4ths idea, there is another way to play two 4ths: a chain of 4ths. There’s a nice example of this in the first movement, situated, as many of the other instances are, at the start of the phrase, to give it prominence:

I, b.108

pur - pose in Geth - se - ma - ne.

These ideas (alternating 4ths and chain of 4ths) re-emerge in the final movement; this is unsurprising, given the way that movement draws together various of the work's musical and thematic threads. Here, the Tenor melody in the Yeats setting starts with both alternating 4ths and a chain of 4ths:

IX, b.23

Nine bean - rows_ will I ___ have there, ___

So what does it all mean? Well, in the first place, a repeating musical element that gives a large score some unity and coherence doesn't have to mean anything extra-musical at all – it can just be there to operate on the listener's sub-conscious and make the work somehow more "satisfying". However, if this were a Britten opera, an analyst would point to the last example I quoted above, and say that because that melody starts with both of the motifs under discussion, the composer is telling us that only by going through grief can one attain that peace (heaven?) that Yeats alludes to. And I think that interpretation is perfectly valid, whether the composer did it deliberately or not. Benjamin Britten himself said that if a composer is good, the work will often show more depth than the composer is consciously intending – and, for what it's worth, I think Howard Goodall is a good composer.