

A Vision of Hills

This work for piano trio is based on the traditional Irish melody, "Slane." The tune is well-known in its hymn setting, "Be Thou My Vision." In using this tune within a new instrumental work, the concept was formed to frame the melody in unique ways, and to create an overall structure which would allow the tune to grow in strength.

*With these goals in mind, one might investigate the entire work. An arch form might describe the shape. For, the theme is introduced at the beginning, the music departs from the theme, and then a return forms the conclusion. Perhaps **A B C B' A'** might be an appropriate summary.*

A represents the theme in its first presentation to the listener, in its "home" key of Eb (as found in many hymnals). Eb is often associated with gentle, pastoral music. So, this is a suitable beginning, in a suitable key.

The decision was made, in planning the work, to have the final return of the tune be in the Second Pole, the key of A Major. Not only would this represent a dramatic shift of tonalities, but it would also place the Violin and Cello in a key where open strings would be predominant. This would allow for brightness of tone, and the possibility of facile double stops. Indeed, the ending section, starting at letter V, uses many double stops. The melody lies well for the strings in the key of A Major. A bright, forceful ending is possible.

Looking at the opening section now, one can see that the gentle, pastoral quality of the key of Eb had led to an introductory section (mm. 1-20) which is atmospheric (marked "Gently, as the coming of dawn"). The Violin and Cello answer each other in falling fourths, "as a voice calling out across the valley." As forceful and bright as the closing section is, so is the opening section distant and muted.

For the overall form, the first section (thematic statement) comes at letter A, in the key of Eb. The second theme, which might be called a "Celtic Dance," comes at letter F. This is in the key of C Major. It is very much the opposite of the first theme (hymn tune). It is staccato, lively, and the melodic line rises, in contrast with the theme which falls in the first phrase.

It has already been established that the hymn tune returns at the end at letter V, in the key A Major. And, this is the A' section. Therefore, as would be expected in an arch form, the B' section (the return of the B material) comes earlier, at letter Q, this time in the key of D Major.

In between these sections comes the C (or contrasting) section. This is actually a thematically-derived section, and there could be argument for calling this another variation of the theme (thus interpreting the piece as a rondo instead of an arch form). However, the treatment of the theme is considerably varied from either the A or A' sections. In the C section, the theme appears in the piano, with the strings offering commentary. The meter is switched to 6/8, and the theme is embroidered, rather than

stated directly.

Viewing this work as an arch form would lead the sections to be seen as:

A (letter A) B (letter F) C (letter M) B' (letter Q) A' (letter V)

And, the tonal scheme would be:

A (key of Eb Major) B (C major) C (D Minor) B' (D Major) A' (A Major)

An interesting aspect in this piece is the transitional material. For, similar tonal structures reappear and are used to direct the harmonic flow in different directions. Perhaps these structures might be called the "transitional pitch class." Let us examine.

The first transition is from the main theme (hymn tune) in the key of Eb to the second theme ("Celtic Dance") in the key of C Major. Minimal transition is needed here, since a deceptive cadence in the key of Eb (mm. 113-4) leads to a C Minor scale (m. 116) followed by the theme in C Major.

However, more of a transition takes place at letter K, leading from the key of C to D Minor at letter L (the introduction to the C section). This transition is effected through the chord in m. 182. This chord, an E half-diminished-7, could be interpreted as vii-7 of the F Major chord in the previous measure. However, it quickly becomes evident that this harmony is actually the Supertonic in the key of D Minor. The goal is the D Minor to be reached at letter L, and then to be sustained throughout the C section. As the pitch E becomes less prominent (mm. 184-187), this sonority merges into a G Minor sonority, the Subdominant of D Minor. Perhaps we might view the pitch class which encompasses E half-diminished-7 and G minor (the common tones of E G Bb D) as the "transitional pitch class."

If so, then one might notice how similar is the material from mm. 232-239 (C E G Bb) which merges the D Minor into the D Major for the B' section at letter Q. And, most importantly, the section at letter U prepares for the climax of the music, with a movement toward the ultimate key of A Major. Mm. 283-4 are the Tonic D major. Mm. 285-6 are the lowered VII. Mm. 287-8 are the lowered VI, relating more to D Minor than D Major. The 6/8 measures (mm. 289-292) form structures with a G Minor tonality, the iv function in D Minor. By m. 293, with the arrival of the E as the top note, the transitional pitch set (E G Bb D) is once again evident. The chord of greatest intensity (m. 296) is a G Minor-9 chord (G Bb D F A). However, rather than functioning as a Subdominant in the key of D Minor, and resolving to D, this chord resolves by outward pressure. The top note, G, resolves up to A, and the bottom note Bb resolves downward to A. The result is heard almost as an explosion outward.

The C, D Minor, D Major and A Major tonalities in this piece have all been served well by the same "transitional pitch class." The pitches form chords which shift functions to relate to one tonal center, and then to another.