"thy fingers make early flowers" from ***Though Love Be a Day***

A Musical Analysis by Gwyneth Walker

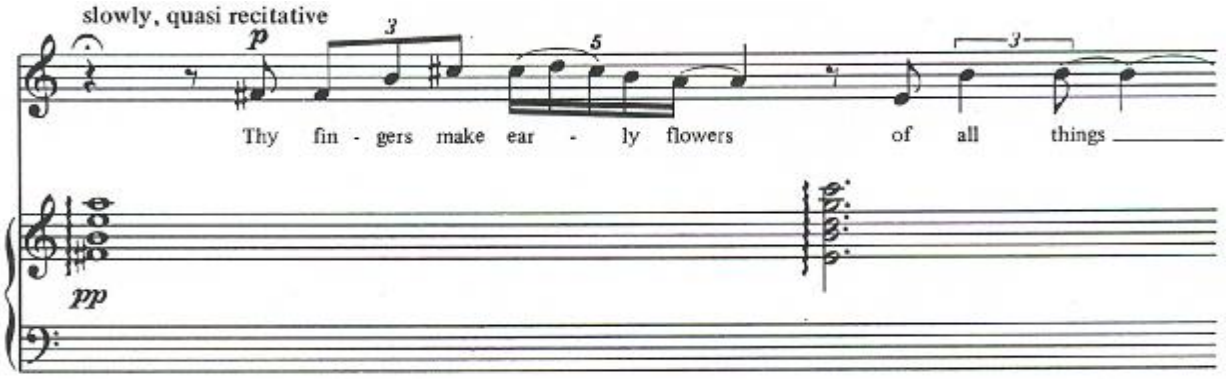
The following discussion will focus on the musical language of composer Gwyneth Walker, as evidenced in the song, "thy fingers make early flowers..." This particular song was selected to begin the analysis project since it is the first song in the first song cycle in the Walker catalog, dating back to 1979. Indeed, this is one of the earliest works in the catalog. And, as such, it evidences stylistic characteristics common to this relatively early compositional period.

Among these characteristics is **notational freedom**. There is a frequent lack of key signature and barlines. These influences came from the years of graduate study at the Hartt School of Music in the 1960s-70s, when key signatures and fixed meters were often avoided. As the composer's individual style evolved, key signatures and meters became more prevalent.

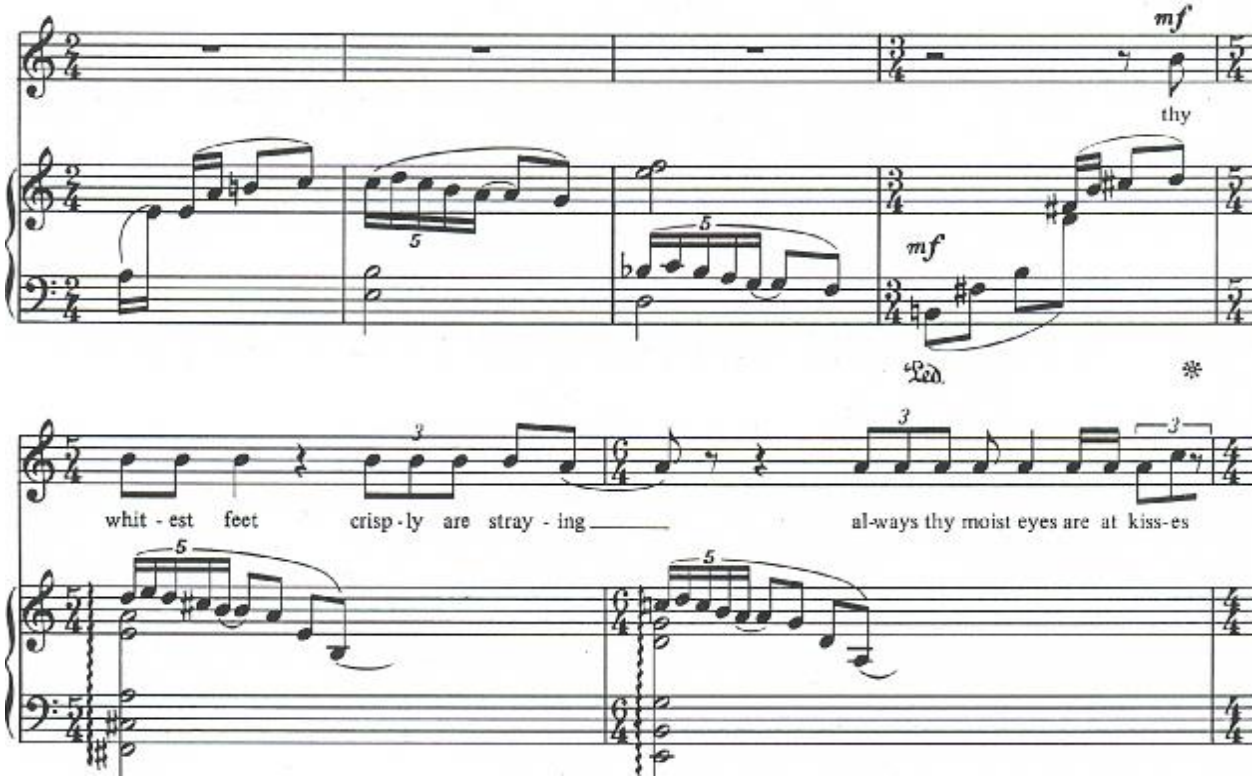
Musical Form and Language

When setting poetry to music, one often structures the music to conform to the poetic shape. Such is the case in this song.

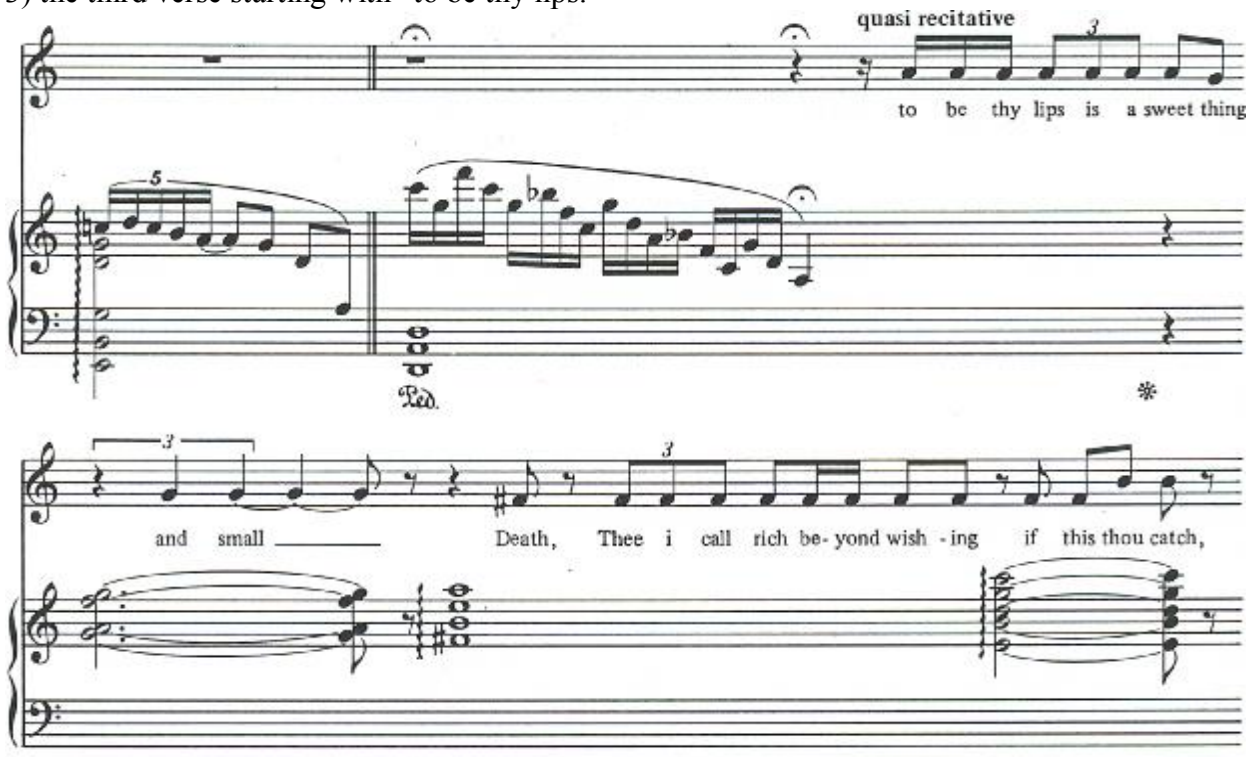
The poem is divided into three stanzas. The song, consequently, displays a strophic form with three sections: 1) the first verse starting with the words "thy fingers make early flowers"



2) the second verse starting with “thy whitest feet,”

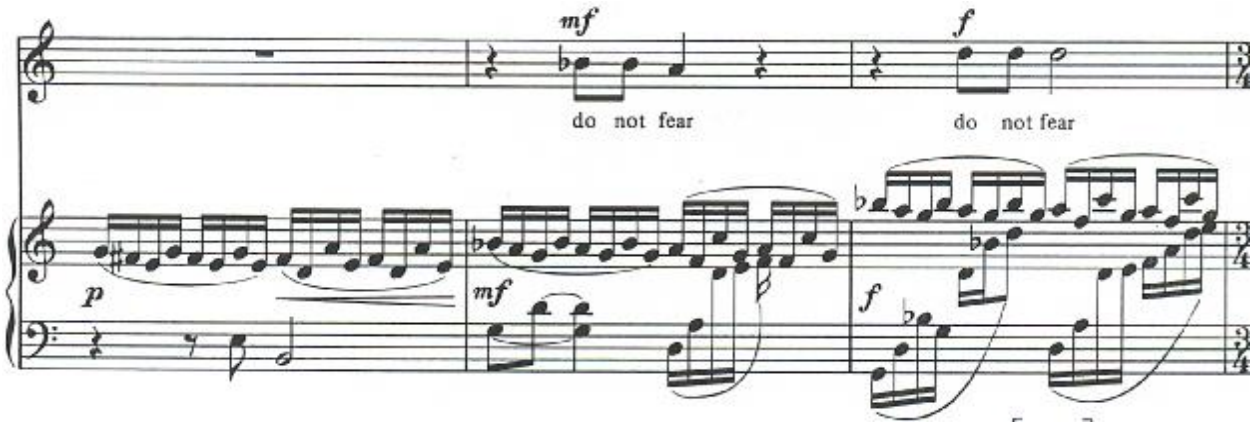


3) the third verse starting with “to be thy lips.”

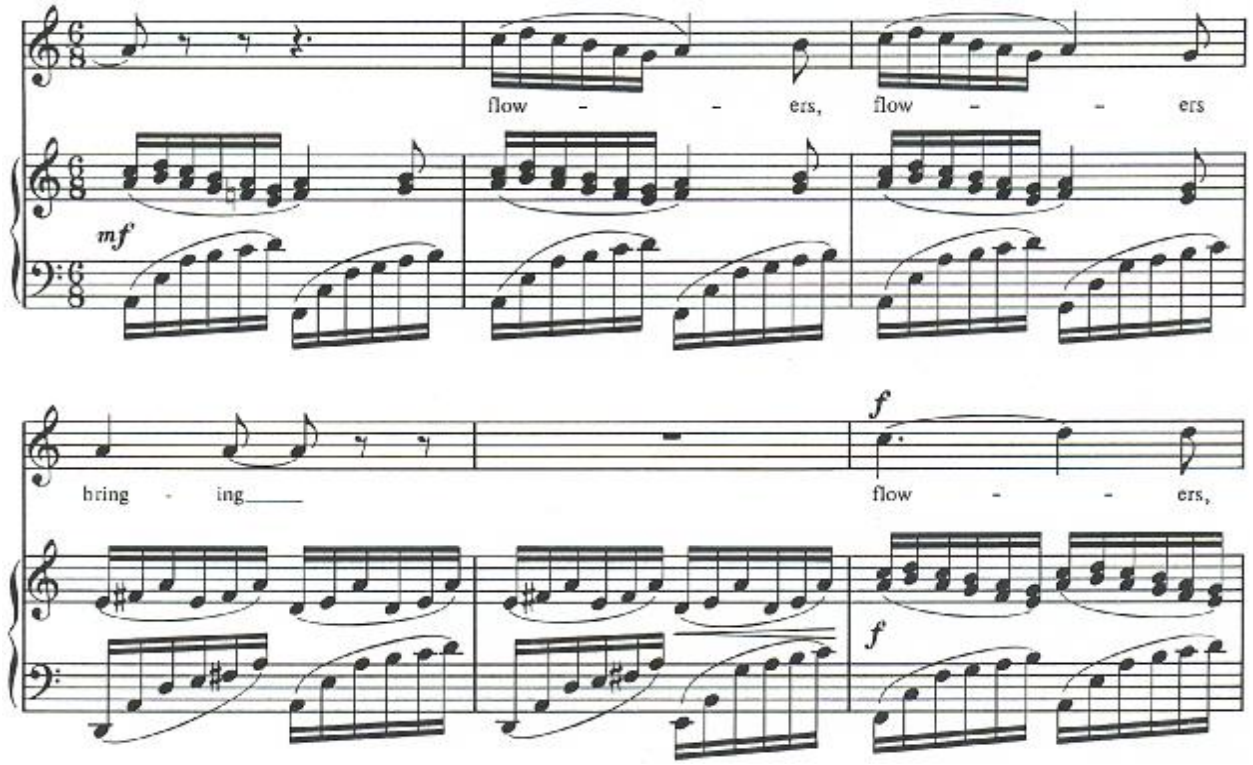


Each of these sections starts in the same manner, with a free, or relatively free, metrical situation. The first and third verses have no meter, and are marked “quasi recitative.” The second verse has shifting meters.

Each of the three verses follows a similar development. Whereas the opening is free, the motion is toward metrical definition. One notices how the phrase “do not fear” (end of first verse) is reiterated several times, always within the confines of a 4/4 meter.



And, the passages for “flowers bringing” (end of second verse) establish a 6/8 metrical section. The closing measures, “though love be a day...” once again settle into extended 6/8 or 9/8 phrases.

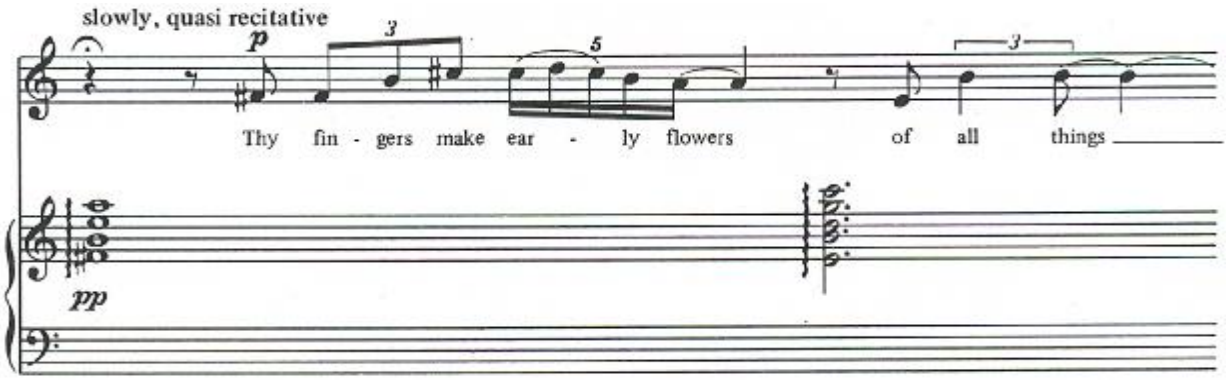


Therefore, it might be observed that the musical setting of this song grows from the amorphous to the defined in terms of meter. Each verse has a similar motion.

One might wonder why. Perhaps the opening lines of each verse are viewed as establishing the central images of the verse, as well as seeking completion – a completion which indeed does come at the end of the verse.

In the first stanza, one asks "what does the smoothness say?" The answer comes in "do not fear, we will go amaying." Thus, the freedom of the opening question settles into a defined answer.

In addition, the first images of the poem are those of fingers and flowers. Both are perceived as delicate. Therefore, the recitative quality of the musical setting is appropriate. Notice how the word "early" is set as a quintuplet.



These five notes may indeed be the fingers. As the composer has explained in the program notes, the number five figures prominently in this set. The title of the set, ***Though Love Be a Day***, has five words, as does the title of the first song. There are five songs in the cycle. And, the five-digit image of fingers is central to this song.

Therefore, the quintuplets and the recitative nature of the opening verse fit the musical poetic/concept.

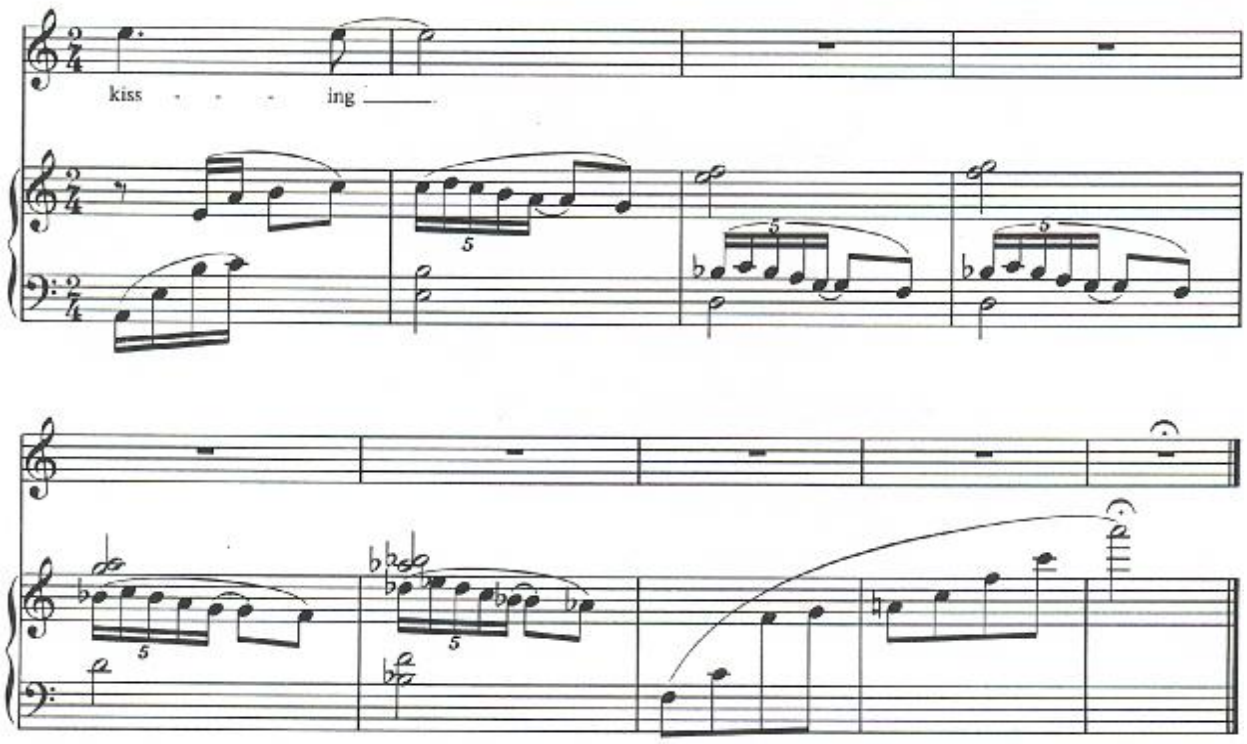
The matter of harmonic language is fairly complex in this song, typical of the early style period of the composer. However, it shows traits of the simpler language which will be developed in the later works. Thus, it is consistent with the composer's vocabulary in general.

The complexity stems not only from the lack of key signature, but also from the constantly shifting tonal centers, and the chromatic links between them. But the common element is the employment of structures that are both tertian and quartal. This combination often appears in later works.

Within this song, as previously discussed, there is the movement within each verse from amorphous to defined in terms of meter. This movement is paralleled by the harmonic structures. Quartal harmonies (chords built of fourths) appear during the recitative sections. Simple triads become prevalent within the metrical phrases which conclude each verse. The quartal harmonies

are associated with tonal ambiguity and unsettledness. The tertian harmonies are associated with the "goals," or the "answers."

As noted earlier, the tertian harmonies themselves shift tonal centers rapidly. The connections between the chords are often established through common tones, or through slight modifications of the mode. An example of this is found in the closing nine measures of the song.



On the word "kissing," the key of A minor has been reached. We shall call this m. 1 of our example. M. 2 therefore can be described as the modal (minor) Dominant within A Minor. [Modal harmonies are prevalent within the style of Gwyneth Walker, reflective of a background in folk music.] M. 3 tends to resemble the Subdominant (D), however, the intrusion of B flat alters the chord into a Neapolitan in the first inversion (with the suspended E above). This same harmony continues into m. 4. Yet, with the rising dyad in the right hand, the chord is now explained as a G Minor, which no longer relates to the key of A Minor. The key of reference of this harmony is not immediately apparent. However, in m. 5, with the continued rising dyads in the right hand, the root of this chord is now seen as B flat. M. 6, which alters the B flat Major into B flat Minor, now makes clear the harmonic motion. The ultimate center will be F Major. And, all of the preceding B flat chords are now seen as alterations of the Subdominant function within the key of F Major.

The goal of F Major is significant for several reasons. Within the first and last verses of this song, the movement has been from B Major to the most distant key (known as the Second Pole), F Major. This reflects the vast harmonic distance covered in these verses.

Also, arriving at this Second Pole to end the first song leads directly into the Second song, which indeed is centered in F Major.

It has often been observed that the musical language of Gwyneth Walker is direct, accessible and yet holds the interest of the listener. Perhaps the preceding analysis will help to explain these qualities. As we have seen, the form is logical, yet also dramatic in nature. The rhythmic language is varied, and yet not overly-complex. And, the harmonic structures are basic (chords built in fourths, triads), yet shifting center and moving in unexpected directions often enough to avoid predictability. This is a simple and familiar vocabulary, used in new ways, with artistic purpose.

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