

## Britten's Hymn to St. Cecilia:

### An Exegesis

By Mel Unger

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Britten's *Hymn to St. Cecilia* has long been a favorite of many choral musicians. Not overly demanding, its lyric simplicity makes it immediately appealing to conductors and singers. Understanding it is a more difficult matter however. There is reason to believe that Auden's poem had personal significance for Britten, therefore it is essential that we understand the poetic text. Since the details of Britten's trial emigration to the U.S. during World War II, his stay at the Mayer household in Amityville, Long Island, his worry and subsequent illness in February and March of 1940, the chance encounter with Forster's essay on the Suffolk poet George Crabbe, and his subsequent decision to return to England are all well-documented elsewhere, I simply mention them here. Only some general facts which affected the birth of this work need concern us here:

1) W.H. Auden's ideas had strongly influenced Britten, and the relationship between the two men was fairly close.

2) Auden had written the poem especially for Britten and was well aware that his birthdate fell on St. Cecilia's Day — Nov. 22.

3) *Hymn to St. Cecilia* was composed upon the conclusion of a time of personal rootlessness, a time of serious indecision, of which Auden would also have been aware. Since Britten's own view of his identity as an artist was at stake, it is not improbable that this work reflected some of Auden's ideas and Britten's conclusions in this regard.

4) Britten composed the work on board ship while returning to England in 1942.

In view of the above, we would expect not only that the relationship between text and music to be a close one, but also that the poem itself would be a particularly apt one. Unless one understands the subjects and symbols involved, however, the *Hymn to St. Cecilia* remains enigmatic. An exegetical approach, taking the poetry as a point of departure, will best serve us in our attempt to understand this work.

#### Part I

In a garden shady this holy lady  
With reverent cadence and subtle psalm,  
Like a black swan as death came on  
Poured forth her song in perfect calm:  
And by ocean's margin this innocent  
virgin

Constructed an organ to enlarge her  
prayer,  
And notes tremendous from her great  
engine  
Thundered out on the Roman air.

According to the legend as recorded in *The Acts of St. Cecilia* (c. A.D. 500), Cecilia was a Roman maiden who had taken Christian vows of celibacy but was betrothed to a Roman nobleman named Valerius. She persuaded him to respect her vows. He agreed to this on the condition that he might see the angel that watched over her. His request was granted and the angel appeared, placing crowns of lilies and roses on their heads. After Valerius received Christian baptism, both were martyred by the Roman governor.

The idea of St. Cecilia as patroness of music came much later. She was proclaimed patroness of church music toward the end of the sixteenth century. The origin of this association with music and especially the organ can be traced to a statement from *The Acts* which speaks of the sound of musical instruments (*cantantibus organis*) on her wedding day while she was "singing to God in her heart." A later omission of the phrase "in her heart" in the vesper antiphon "*Cantantibus organis, Caecilia Domino, decantabat, dicens: Fiat cor meum im-*

maculatum ut non confundar," and the incorrect identification of "organum" as "organ," probably led to the tradition of St. Cecilia singing while playing an accompaniment on the organ.<sup>1</sup>

Auden makes obvious references to the Cecilian legend with the words "holy lady," "reverent cadence," "subtle psalm," "perfect calm," "innocent virgin," "black swan," etc.

The symbol of the swan is fairly well known to choral musicians from such works as Gibbons' "The Silver Swan." The belief was that the swan loved music and uttered a beautiful song at its death. The swan was also associated with Venus because of its beauty. Furthermore, it was believed that at death, the soul of a poet entered a swan.<sup>2</sup> Auden's use of the words "black swan" therefore refer to three ideas: St. Cecilia's celibacy, her association with music, her martyrdom.

Blonde Aphrodite rose up excited,  
Moved to delight by the melody,  
White as an orchid she rode quite naked  
In an oyster shell on top of the sea;  
At sounds so entrancing the angels  
dancing  
Came out of their trance into time again,  
And around the wicked in Hell's abysses  
The huge flame flickered and eased their  
pain.

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Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of love and fertility. Her Roman counterpart was Venus. In many ways she stands here as the opposite of Cecilia (e.g., black swan vs. blonde Aphrodite). According to Hesiod, Venus was born at sea of Uranus and floated to shore on a shell. Boticelli's painting "Birth of Venus" depicts the legendary scene. As mother of Aeneas who was considered the ancestor of the Latin race, Venus stands in opposition to Cecilia who was martyred by the Romans. The attributes of Venus are the swan (beauty) and the rose (love).<sup>3</sup>

Auden's choice of words emphasizes the sensual character of Aphrodite ("excited," "delight," "entrancing") as well

as the contrast between Cecilia and Aphrodite. Nevertheless, a certain unity is expressed since it is Cecilia's song which arouses both Aphrodite and the angels.

Auden's reference to the power of music in easing the pain of the condemned no doubt refers to the musical exploits of Orpheus in bringing back Euridice from the Underworld. The two previous lines concerning the angels may likewise refer to that legend or may in fact refer to the legendary revelation of Cecilia's guardian angel.

Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions  
To all musicians, appear and inspire:  
Translated Daughter, come down and  
startle  
Composing mortals with immortal fire.

This invocation ends each of the three sections. It not only recognizes Cecilia as patroness of music but emphasizes the need to bridge the finite and infinite with musical inspiration. Cecilia's martyrdom is hinted at with the word "translated," her sainthood with the words "blessed," and "Daughter."

In setting this first section, Britten makes some significant choices of musical materials. The apparent mixture of C major and E major harmonies is the result of a Phrygian cantus firmus which appears in its pure form in the unison invocation that ends the section. This theme is characterized by relatively long tones and is repeated in the manner of a ground. It is divided between tenor and bass voice parts and generally remains in the Phrygian mode: E Phrygian, F# Phrygian modulating, E<sup>b</sup> Phrygian, A<sup>b</sup> Lydian, E major, E Phrygian. Its pattern of descending fourths remind one of similar lamenting patterns used by other composers (e.g., Clemens non Papa: "Vox in Rama"). Above the cantus firmus the treble voices sing a lilting trio, thus creating a clear 3 + 2 texture. As if to underscore the choice of an archaic style, Britten introduces hemiolas at three primary cadences. Occasional instances of word

painting (e.g., "flickered") can also be found.

The archaic texture is briefly abandoned at the description of Aphrodite where a 1 + 4 texture is favored; the uppermost voice riding on a "sea" of lower voices. Though it is always risky to infer motives, it seems Britten is consciously using a "Cecilian style" when referring to St. Cecilia, and abandoning it when Aphrodite is introduced.

The choice of the Phrygian mode may also be significant, since its ethos has often been described as provocative. This provocative effect of music is obviously the central theme of the first section. The clear shift to the Lydian mode at the appearance of the angels is also not without reason, for it is paralleled by the use of the same mode at the appearance of St. Cecilia in Part III.

## Part II

I cannot grow;  
I have no shadow  
To run away from,  
I only play.

I cannot err;  
There is no creature  
Whom I belong to,  
Whom I could wrong.

Part II introduces the voice of music. In contrast to man, it is terse, riddling, unchanging, innocent, child-like, the exclusive property of no man. The absence of a "shadow" may refer to music's carefree character. It may also refer to the absence of a "shadow" may refer to music's carefree character. It may also refer to the absence of extra-musical meanings when music is found in "absolute form." It is then simply aesthetic.

I am defeat  
When it knows it  
Can now do nothing  
By suffering.

All you lived through,  
Dancing because you



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No longer need it  
For any deed.

I shall never be  
Different. Love me.

These next stanzas picture music as the expression of humanity that is emotionally drained, incapable of doing anything. Man has exhausted the possibilities of action. Only music is left, unchanging. It is not a matter of doing but of feeling.

Britten chooses a scherzo in  $\frac{6}{8}$  to depict the carefree child-likeness of music expressed in Part II. He casts the material in canonic form, an "absolute" form, but one which is also reminiscent of playfulness. The movement rests firmly in E major. A kind of archaic (timeless?) tenor technique is again used in the bass voice, while the upper voices dance lightly above these long tones. A marked deviation occurs to depict the despair of the third stanza. Here accented duple rhythms slow the rhythmic motion of the descending passages. "I am defeat." The second statement moves away from E major to C major and uses the flatted sixth and seventh scale degrees in the descending line. Both statements end with a Landini type of cadential figure. Then the triplets return in E major for the fourth stanza, as the mood brightens again.

Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions  
To all musicians, appear and inspire:  
Translated Daughter, come down and startle  
Composing mortals with immortal fire.

The invocation reappears to end Part II. This time Britten harmonizes the Phrygian melody which appears ~~first~~ in soprano and tenor voices.

### Part III

O ear whose creatures cannot wish to fall,  
O calm of spaces unafraid of weight,  
Where Sorrow is herself, forgetting all

The gaucheness of her adolescent state,  
Where Hope within the altogether strange

From every outworn image is released,  
And Dread born whole and normal like a beast

Into a world of truths that never change:  
Restore our fallen day; O re-arrange.

This prayer to St. Cecilia, who is music personified (O ear . . .), recognizes music's ability to transform, develop, and resensitize the emotions. The idea that man was able to hear the music of the spheres before the fall and that music can show man his lost innocence originated in the Renaissance. Here in Auden's poem, the emotions (Sorrow, Hope, Dread) are seen as the offspring of music. In the realm of perfect and unchanging music, these emotions are fixed, stabilized, matured: born normal and whole, fully matured into an unchanging state; they have no wish to fall. They have forgotten the gaucheness of their adolescence. The emotions become the means of man's restoration ("restore our fallen day").

O dear white children casual as birds,  
Playing among the ruined languages,  
So small beside their large confusing words,  
So gay against the greater silences  
Of dreadful things you did: O hang the head,  
Impetuous child with the tremendous brain,  
O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain,  
Lost innocence who wished your lover dead,  
Weep for the lives your wishes never led.

As St. Cecilia answers, her tone is very tender. She points out that man is immature. He has great knowledge but not the wisdom of maturity ("so small beside their large confusing words"). He carelessly disregards the cultures he is destroying ("ruined languages") and doesn't realize the awfulness of what he has done ("So gay . . ."). Because of his

willfulness he has missed a great deal ("the lives your wishes never led"). The key line "O weep, child weep, O weep away the stain" is given added weight through repetition in the following stanza.

O cry created as the bow of sin  
Is drawn across our trembling violin.

O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain.

O law drummed out by hearts against the still  
Long winter of our intellectual will.

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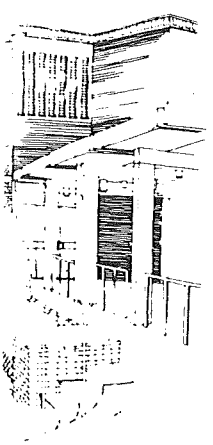
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That what has been may never be again.

O flute that throbs with the thanks-  
giving breath  
Of convalescents on the shores of death.

O bless the freedom that you never  
chose.

O trumpets that unguarded children  
blow  
About the fortress of their inner foe.

O wear your tribulation like a rose.

In this third stanza St. Cecilia is involved in a dialogue with the suppliant. Each of four couplets introduces a musical instrument (violin, drum, flute, trumpet) in a manner like that of Dryden. These are answered by responses from St. Cecilia. The essential conflict between emotion ("cry," "weep," "hearts," "thanksgiving") and intellectual willfulness ("will," "chose," "inner foe,") is emphasized. Man's impetuous brain ("intellectual will") has rejected freedom and has brought him to the brink of self-destruction ("the shores of death"). This inner foe must be brought down like the walls of Jericho. Only through emotional resensitization can man ensure that "what has been will never be again." The repetition of the line "O weep child, weep away the stain" emphasizes this concept, as does the reappearance of the emotions of Sorrow, Hope, and Dread which were introduced in the opening stanza. They can now be found in the first, second, and third dialogues respectively. The fourth introduces love, whose symbol is the rose. If man can learn to love, he may yet learn from this experience ("O wear your tribulation like a rose").

Like that of the poem, the musical structure of the third section is complex. The despair of man's situation is well-pictured by a descending bass ostinato figure in the Dorian mode. The mood of resignation is enhanced by the incorporation of a "seufzer" motive which is clearly indicated by Britten's dynamic markings. Originally appearing only in the bass, it later moves to all voices. When St. Cecilia responds, she appears as a solo above the previous four-part texture. The sudden shift to the Lydian mode at this point (E Lydian), has already been mentioned. Perhaps Britten was thinking of Zarlino's description of this mode as "a remedy for fatigue of the soul, and similarly for that of the body" or Beethoven's title for the slow movement of his string quartet op. 132, "Sacred song of thanksgiving of a convalescent to the Divinity in the Lydian mode." Though the soprano line floats rapturously above the other voices, tension accumulates between the Lydian A# and the tenor pedal A7. This is resolved at a crucial point: "O hang the head . . . O weep child, weep."

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In the second stanza the ostinato returns in A Dorian, now with a more anguished character. Each response by St. Cecilia is set as a solo, imitating the instrument in question and thus appropriately identifying the patroness of music with these instruments. The fanfare-like tenor solo which closes the section ("O wear your tribulation like a rose") employs the flatted 6th and 7th scale degrees on the descending scale which earlier appeared on the text dealing with the inability of man to deal with his predicament: "I am defeat when it knows it can now do nothing by suffering."

Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions  
To all musicians, appear and inspire:  
Translated daughter, come down and  
startle  
Composing mortals with immortal fire.

Britten sets the closing refrain to the same Phrygian melody as before. This time however he adds the opening theme in the tenor and bass voices, thus producing a texture similar to that which began the work. The resulting sense of reprise is coupled with a slowing rhythmic motion, an effect which is enhanced by means of divisi writing for tenors and basses and duple rhythms. A soft treble chord is added at the cadence, and one is reminded of celestial beings returning to some heavenly trance.

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>McKinnon, James W., "Cecilia," *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 6th edition, vol. 3, pp. 45-46.
- <sup>2</sup>Hall, James, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, revised 1979, p. 294.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 318.
- <sup>4</sup>Warren, Raymond, *Song for St. Cecilia's Day*, Belfast: Mayne, Boyd & Son, Ltd., 1967, p. 6.
- <sup>5</sup>Zarlino, *Institutioni harmoniche*, p. 303.

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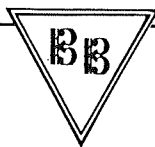
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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Helmuth Rilling understands all interpretation to consist of these three basic elements.
- <sup>2</sup> At the conference where this paper was presented, the composer Samuel Adler admitted to having once performed a piece by his friend Milton Babbitt at twice the indicated tempo. To Adler's chagrin, Babbitt learned of this violation when someone played a tape of the performance for him. Fortunately, the composer took it in good humor, saying later to Adler, "It's a gas at that tempo!" At the conference, however, Adler admitted, "I wouldn't want anyone to do to my pieces what I did to his! You should first try the speed indicated by the composer!"
- <sup>3</sup> Consider the staccato line from *My Fair Lady*:

*Lots of chocolate for me to eat,  
Lots of coal makin' lots of heat . . .*

Using imploded consonants tends to make the staccato articulation sound less mannered, because, by leaving the tongue against the palate until it is time to sing the next syllable, it avoids the little puffs of air between successive consonants that otherwise occur.

- <sup>4</sup> Usually blend may be regarded as an element to be refined rather than varied. One factor affecting blend that may legitimately be modified according to style, however, is vibrato. It affects both timbre and blend.
- <sup>5</sup> James Fankhauser of the University of British Columbia has been experimenting with physical performing arrangements based on original concert layouts. See James Fankhauser, "Choral/Orchestral Balance: An Old Problem Reviewed," *Choral Journal* 30 (August 1989): 5-7.
- <sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Green and Nicolai Malko, *The Conductor and His Score* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 32. —CJ—