“THIS IS NO LEAVE-TAKING”: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND LEGACY IN ETHEL SMYTH’S *THE PRISON*

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Autobiographical readings are standard when it comes to the works of British composer Ethel Smyth (1858–1944). In addition to being a composer of large-scale orchestral works, she was an outspoken feminist and prolific writer; her fascinating and exceptional life practically begs to be considered when analyzing her music. But little has been written about her final composition: *The Prison*, an ambitious “choral symphony” that premiered in 1931. My thesis demonstrates the value of an autobiographical interpretation of *The Prison.* Drawing upon feminist theory, queer theory, and disability studies, I situate the piece relative to Smyth’s biography and engage music-analytically with the piece to show how Smyth exerts her authorial intent on its text, a libretto based on a philosophical meditation by her friend H.B. Brewster. I argue that Smyth inserts herself into the work’s narrative to negotiate her legacy and attempt to place herself into the immortal lineage of the Western musical canon’s most treasured figures.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Everyone loves a good story. It's human nature. It's the way we make sense of the world around us, of our place in it. Narratives are what people use to wrangle the wild confusion of existence into something we can live with: chaos, domesticated.

The field of music has recently been engaged in a conversation about the narratives that shape our discipline. Familiar tropes that were once comfortable – the tortured genius, the child prodigy, titans of Western canon – have been revealed as the insidious scaffolding of a harmful ideology. The overriding narrative of Western music history has been one of white supremacy, antisemitism, misogyny, and ableism.[1] To fill the void left by a misguided mythos, musicians, theorists, musicologists, and educators have been called upon to decide which stories they feel are worth telling, making a place for marginalized voices that have until now been silenced. It seems inevitable, then, that Ethel Smyth would have her moment – she's been clamoring to tell her story for more than a century.

Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) was a British composer who has been described as many things: a pioneer, a steamroller, an egomaniac, an institution … the list goes on. She wrote six operas in a time when it was unusual for a woman to attempt any large-scale forms. She loved, and was loved by, some of the most preeminent women of her

[1] See Philip Ewell's work, particularly "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (September 2020), and Ellie Hisama's work, particularly "Getting to Count," *Music Theory Spectrum* 43, no. 2 (May 2021): 349–363. Ewell also runs the blog "Confronting Racism and Sexism in American Music Theory" at https://musictheoryswhiteracialframe.wordpress.com/.

age (including the Empress Eugenié, widow of Napoleon III, who would also become a valuable patron). She was remarkably ambitious, and tenaciously pursued performances for her music. Witnessing Smyth lead a rehearsal, the essential feminist writer Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary:

> She stood at the piano in the window, in her battered felt, in her jersey and short skirt conducting with a pencil. There was a drop at the end of her nose… She sang now and then; and once, taking the bass, made a cat squalling sound, but everything she does with such forthrightness, directness, that there is nothing ridiculous. She loses all self-consciousness completely. She seems all vitalized; all energized. ... What if she should be a great composer? This fantastic idea is to her the merest commonplace: it is the fabric of her being. As she conducts, she hears music like Beethoven's. As she strides and turns and wheels about to us perched mute on chairs she thinks this is about the most important event now taking place in London. And perhaps it is.[2]

Smyth wasn't just looking to make a living by composing – she wanted to be a household name. But sadly, it was not to be; the obstacles facing Smyth as a woman composer, in conjunction with an unreceptive audience for new music in England and the composer's deafness in the latter half of her life, precluded most of her works from receiving more than a handful of performances. Despite her lifelong campaign of aggressive self-

[2] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 168.

promotion, Smyth was never able to achieve the level of renown she sought for herself, and following her death in 1944, she faded into relative obscurity.

This thesis is predicated on the idea that, given the current push to reorient ourselves within musical history by amplifying the voices of composers who have historically been silenced, there is no better time to tell Smyth's story than right now. This effort is valuable, not only for the vibrant new music that can finally receive the attention it deserves, and not only for the composers whose unique experiences enrich our understanding of our field. More than anything, this effort is valuable for the musicians, academics and educators who are alive today who *need* to see themselves in the venerated elders of their field. As a queer AFAB person who has a complex relationship with gender, I am extraordinarily grateful to have discovered Ethel Smyth. I didn't know until I began this project how badly I needed to see myself in my work. That feeling is powerful, and it's the bright future we must imagine for our institutions even as we do the hard work of dismantling them. More than that, Smyth is a powerhouse composer whose music speaks with an incredible clarity of vision. Her work is eloquent, poignant, and original, and we are all the poorer without it.

The focus of this thesis is Smyth's final composition, an ambitious multi-movement choral symphony called *The Prison,* which premiered in 1931. Like many other women composers during this period, Smyth faced sexist criticism for composing in "masculine" genres which at the time would have included any large-scale orchestral work. Although she saw some success (her opera *Der Wald* was the first opera written by a woman to be premiered at the Metropolitan Opera), she had difficulty securing performances throughout her career. However, following the wider trend in music

academia of prioritizing the works of historically marginalized composers, Smyth scholarship has seen a resurgence in the past ten to twenty years (discussed in more detail in the section "Ethel Smyth and Autobiography"). In 2020 *The Prison* was recorded and made widely available for the first time – just shy of a century after it first premiered.[3]

My first goal is historical: to show that *The Prison* is at least partly autobiographical in nature. Autobiographical interpretations of an artist's works have been criticized in recent years as "biographical fallacy," but in the case of Smyth, there is a clear case for this approach to her music.[4] I argue that Smyth identified with this narrative as a way of coming to terms with a disappointing end to her career. Smyth was almost completely deaf by the time of *The Prison*'s premiere; she would have known that it was her last chance to make her mark as a composer. By inserting herself into the work's narrative, she was able to negotiate her legacy on her own terms; *The Prison* was her final attempt to place herself into the immortal lineage of the Western musical canon's most treasured figures.

My second goal of the project is to engage music-analytically with the piece in order to demonstrate the ways in which Smyth exercises her authorial intent by interpreting the text in distinctive and personal ways through her music. My primary analytical aim is to showcase the compositional techniques Smyth employs to convey her own distinctive interpretation of Brewster's text. I do not perform a broad analysis of the entire piece, but rather an in-depth examination of salient moments where Smyth's

[3] Ethel Smyth, *Dame Ethel Smyth: The Prison*, Sarah Brailey, Dashon Burton, and the Experiential Orchestra, James Blachly, Chandos Records CHAN 5279, 2020, Spotify.

[4] For an exploration of this precedent in existing Smyth scholarship, see the section "Ethel Smyth and Autobiography" in Chapter II.

authorial voice is especially strong. My analytical goal is complementary to my historical goal of demonstrating the benefits of an autobiographical interpretation of the piece; I argue that Smyth identified with the character of the Prisoner, and therefore took special care in her portrayal of his predicament. *The Prison* is an extraordinarily complex, multifaceted musical work. The level of craftsmanship, emotional intensity, and thematic nuance present in the piece offer a listening experience that rewards multiple analytical interpretations. It is important to note that the approach outlined above is only one of many possible frameworks through which the music of *The Prison* can be understood. It was chosen for its relevance to the main argument of this thesis, but there are many exciting perspectives that may serve as future avenues for research. One such framework is the *ars moriendi*, or "the art of dying" – given that the narrative of *The Prison* is intensely focused on coming to terms with death, this framework promises to yield fascinating insight into the work's primary themes.

The libretto is based on *The Prison: A Dialogue*, a philosophical text by H.B. Brewster, a lifelong friend of Smyth's who died in 1908. [5] While Brewster's overall themes are left largely intact in the libretto to *The Prison*, Smyth exerts significant influence both in her selection of text from the original book and in her shaping of that text through various compositional choices. My analysis will both identify the techniques Smyth employs to characterize the titular Prisoner and explore the ways in which Smyth interprets and portrays his incarceration, enlightenment, and eventual death as the

[5] H.B. Brewster, *The Prison: A Dialogue* (London: Williams and Norgate, Printers, 1891); Amanda Harris, "The Smyth-Brewster Correspondence: A Fresh Look at the Hidden Romantic World of Ethel Smyth," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 14, no. 1 (2010): 72–94.

singular narrative arc of the piece. In this process I make observations on Smyth's distinctive compositional language. Lawrence Kramer's analytical approach to texted music, from his essay "Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry," is an essential methodology for this project.[6] Kramer's approach involves carefully considering the relationships between text and music: does the music complement the text, or contradict it? Is the message of the text undermined or reinforced by the composer's choices? This reorients song from undisputed musical object to "an activity of interpretation—emphasis on activity—that necessarily both takes apart and reassembles the text that it incorporates."[7] Such an approach illuminates not only the audience's interpretation of the text, but the composer's as well—an essential question for my argument that Smyth's interpretation of the text places her inside of it. Another benefit of this approach is its flexibility, as it can encompass virtually every relevant aspect of the music itself in its relationship to the text; a line can be examined according to its semantic meaning as pure text, then by the ways in which its musical elements strengthen that meaning, remain neutral towards it, or actively work against it using various musical parameters.

The parameters I focus on the most are harmony, texture, timbre, and melody. First, the harmonic language of *The Prison* is highly tumultuous. Although a comprehensive chordal analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis, I endeavor to address significant moments as they pertain to my argument. Smyth's harmonic choices

[6] Lawrence Kramer, "Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry," in *Song Acts: Writings on Words and Music* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2017).

[7] Kramer, "Song Reconsidered," 5.

contribute to an unusually unpredictable ebb and flow in the momentum of the piece, which directly impacts narrative tension and even meaning in certain contexts. In addition, a textural and timbral analysis will help to highlight salient features of Smyth's orchestration. This will in turn inform Smyth's interpretation of the text in the ways that she uses these elements to frame different parts of the libretto – often with a high degree of subtlety, as these parameters tend to be perceptually overlooked.[8]

The majority of scholarship on Smyth has been musicological in nature; analysis of her music is rarer. With this project, I aim to do my part in filling that void by engaging deeply with the music of one of her most monumental works. This thesis will be one of only a few music-theoretical studies of Smyth's music, and the first such examination of *The Prison*. As her final work, *The Prison* holds particular significance within the context of Smyth's oeuvre for two reasons. First, final works typically have particular interest as benchmarks of compositional language. I do not argue that *The Prison* represents the culmination of Smyth's style, but rather that it marks a highly significant moment in her output; therefore, future research of Smyth's body of work will certainly benefit from an understanding of the piece.

Secondly, everything that has been documented about Smyth tells us that she had an uncommonly strong regard for herself, a regard that manifested in her works both musical and written. In her mind, Smyth was the protagonist of her own life, and her detractors merely obstacles on her path to great things. *The Prison* was Smyth's final say on the topic of her exceptional career; therefore, it is well worth finding out exactly what

[8] Cornelia Fales, "The Paradox of Timbre," *Ethnomusicology* 46, no. 1 (2002): 56–95.

it is she is saying. I have already mentioned how Smyth's changes to Brewster's original text in making her libretto demonstrate a degree of authorial intent, but my analysis will elucidate the meaning of the work in other ways as well. For example, what does the tumultuous and often meandering harmonic language of *The Prison* tell us about the Prisoner's mental state as the piece progresses? Do fluctuations in timbral palette and orchestrational density correspond to particular characters, themes, or both? What can the unique treatment of melodic contour for the Prisoner, his Soul, and the Voices tell us about their roles in this drama? All of these questions and more will inform the primary argument of this thesis: an autobiographical interpretation of *The Prison.*

Due to the autobiographical lens from which I approach this piece, I also draw upon sources from feminist autobiography, queer studies, and disability studies. Smyth scholars such as Wood, Lumsden, and Wiley have set an excellent example in their own writings, all of which draw heavily from scholarship in these fields. It has also been helpful to engage with studies of compositional late style and legacy more generally, while taking care to avoid the historically problematic aspects of this scholarship; Joseph N. Straus's "Disability and 'Late Style' in Music" is an essential part of this section.[9] Drawing from these sources allows me to situate Smyth's life and works within the context of traditions and histories she was actively engaged with, as well as those that became posthumously relevant to her unusual life and career as a queer woman and composer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

[9] Joseph N. Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style' in Music," *The Journal of Musicology* 25, no. 1 (2008): 3–45.

It is always a worthy goal to showcase the works of historically marginalized composers; by committing time and critical thought to these figures, we begin to rectify the gross injustice done to them by both time and convention. An analysis of *The Prison* is worth doing because Ethel Smyth did everything that was necessary to enter cultural thought as a major figure of Western musical canon and yet was barred because of her gender. However, since *The Prison* is Smyth's final work, an analysis of it can offer unique and vital perspectives on negotiations of autobiography and legacy in the late works of underrepresented composers. The cult of personality that turned mere mortals like Beethoven and Brahms into giants was alive and well in Smyth's time, as it is today. How did Smyth, after a lifetime of attempting to break into that realm of musical demigods, come to terms with the reality that she never would? *The Prison* stands out as a deeply significant work in an already highly personal oeuvre, and thus has much to tell us about the way Smyth (and composers like her) conceived of their place in the overarching "narrative" of Western musical canon.

The main body of this thesis is divided into two chapters. Chapter II, "Context," offers biographical perspectives on Smyth's life and career through the lens of several different frameworks. The first of these is "Ethel Smyth and Autobiography," which delves into the history of autobiographical perspectives in existing Smyth scholarship. The second, "Ethel Smyth's *The Prison* and H.B. Brewster's *The Prison: A Dialogue,*" examines the ways in which Smyth exerted her authorial intent over Brewster's original text to transform it into the libretto of *The Prison*. In "Ethel Smyth, Disability, and 'Late Style'," I use Straus's concept of "disability style" to explore the significance of Smyth's eventual deafness. And in the final section, "Identity and Authenticity Across Mediums,"

the friendship between writer Virginia Woolf and Smyth stands as a backdrop to a larger discussion about what an "authentic" feminist work looks like.

In Chapter III, "Analysis," I examine selected passages from *The Prison* for their musical significance within the framework established by Chapter II. Although there are interesting and relevant moments to be found in every movement, the scope of this thesis required that I limit my analysis to nine movements (presented in the order in which they appear). Each section refers to Chapter II or introduces new context for notable features of the music where applicable. As stated above, my analysis represents only a fraction of the potential for interpretive engagement found in *The Prison*, but I have also striven to demonstrate the beauty, mystery, and emotional impact of Smyth's work. Chapter IV, "Conclusion," contains final thoughts on the significance of this piece in the present cultural moment.

CHAPTER II

CONTEXT

Ethel Smyth and Autobiography

It is unsurprising that many scholars have interpreted Smyth's music autobiographically. Smyth herself seems to invite this avenue of analysis; she chronicled many of her life experiences and much of her career in a series of memoirs numbering eleven in total and published over a period of twenty-one years. It is both fascinating and frustrating that Smyth generally avoided explanations of her own music in her written work, choosing instead to catalogue the obstacles she met as a female professional when she spoke of her career. Despite these gaps (or perhaps because of them), it is difficult to come to know the shape of Smyth's extraordinary life and *not* speculate on the connection between her lived experiences and her music.

Virtually everything that has been written about Smyth or her work includes at least some degree of speculation about the autobiographical aspects of her music. The most prolific scholars to have written about Smyth from this perspective are Elizabeth Wood and Christopher Wiley, both of whom have explored how Smyth's experiences may have inspired and suffused her compositional output. Wood's extensive contributions to the Smyth scholarship focus on the intersections of feminist theory, queer theory, and disability studies in her body of work. These include a biographical overview and character sketch cataloguing Smyth's role as "pioneer" for women in music, a study of the progression and impact of Smyth's deafness on her creative output late in her career, and an essential chapter introducing "Sapphonics" – "a mode of

articulation…describing a space of lesbian possibility, for a range of erotic and emotional relationships among women who sing and women who listen" – and arguing for their presence in Smyth's vocal works.[10] Wiley's work is similarly focused on these main areas with the added facet of Smyth's relationship to Virginia Woolf, which he addresses in both of his articles. The first of these assesses the impact of Smyth's career on gender politics of the time by analyzing contemporary perspectives, particularly Woolf's erroneous description of Smyth as the "first woman to write an opera."[11] In another article Wiley delves into the issues faced by Smyth and other women-loving women who sought to create autobiographies that conveyed their true selves without risking social condemnation; he outlines the divergent styles of memoir employed by Smyth and Woolf and reanimates their long-standing argument about what makes an "authentic" lesbian autobiography.[12]

Wood and Wiley's writings on Smyth have been essential to the formation of my own arguments presented in this thesis. To start, their examinations of the biographical and sociopolitical context surrounding Smyth's career are foundational to my understanding of her significance in the field of music, both during her life and after her death. It is clear from their work that Smyth was a giant, incomparable; her relative

[10]Elizabeth Wood, "Women, Music, and Ethel Smyth: A Pathway in the Politics of Music," *The Massachusetts Review* 24, no. 1 (1983): 125–39; Elizabeth Wood, "On Deafness and Musical Creativity: The Case of Ethel Smyth," *The Musical Quarterly* 92, no. 1/2 (2009): 33–69; Elizabeth Wood, "Sapphonics," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2nd ed., ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006): 27–66.

[11] Christopher Wiley, "Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and 'The First Woman to Write an Opera,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (2013): 263–95.

[12] Christopher Wiley, "'When a Woman Speaks the Truth about Her Body': Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and the Challenges of Lesbian Auto/Biography," *Music & Letters* 85, no. 3 (2004): 388–414.

obscurity in the modern day is nothing short of a ghastly mistake. Wood and Wiley's work has also supplied me with the context to discuss Smyth's perceptions of herself – without these perspectives, I would be unable to speak to the ways in which Smyth conceived of her own legacy, let alone her negotiations of it. In addition to these broad concepts, Wiley's specific work on Woolf, Smyth, and their conflicting approaches to feminist and lesbian autobiography has been a valuable jumping-off point for further exploration in this area; Wiley's speculation that Smyth may have chosen to give voice to the otherwise unspeakable reality of her identity as a queer woman in the subtext of her music is a valuable idea, and one that informs my own analysis of *The Prison*. I am especially interested in the tension between Smyth's self-portrayal in her memoirs, which were by her own admission a vehicle to stir up interest for her music, and the autobiographical aspects of her music. I explore this concept in full in the section "Identity and Authenticity Across Mediums."

If Wood and Wiley explore the impact of Smyth's work as a whole, other scholars have chosen to narrow their focus to just one of Smyth's works – still, however, tending to view those works through the lens of Smyth's biography. The most in-depth of these is Rachel Lumsden's article on Smyth's song "Possession," which she argues was inspired by Smyth's fellow suffragette and romantic partner Emmaline Pankhurst.[13] Lumsden's theoretical analysis addresses text setting, vocality and timbral signifiers, genre implications, and harmonic language. Her analysis, coupled with biographical details to make an explicit connection between the song and the two women's love affair,

[13] Rachel Lumsden, "'The Music Between Us': Ethel Smyth, Emmeline Pankhurst, and 'Possession,'" *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 335–70.

demonstrates how an understanding of the personal and political forces at work in Smyth's life can contribute to an in-depth interpretation of the piece. In a formal sense, this thesis owes much to Lumsden's article, as her approach is the one I emulate the most. Like Lumsden, I generally present biographical context relevant to *The Prison* and my interpretation of the piece. This is followed by in-depth analysis of relevant musical passages, which draws from those biographical sections to reinforce my analytical observations of the music. The advantage of this approach is that it is easy to incorporate music theory with musicology and other disciplines as need be (Lumsden's article, for example, utilizes feminist theory); as my thesis proves, it can also be scaled up or down for projects of different sizes.

Other scholars whose writings focus on one work only include Elizabeth Kertesz, who analyzes Smyth's opera *The Wreckers* for its merits as a distinctly English opera; Judith Lebiez, who addresses the complexities of gendered power dynamics in another of Smyth's operas, *Der Wald*; and Hannah Millington, whose analysis of the previously undiscussed song "1910" highlights its importance to the members of the Women's Social and Political Union.[14] These works have been helpful insofar as they are excellent examples of the ways in which scholars have approached Smyth's oeuvre, as well as the types of conversations her body of work has thus far provoked; Smyth's identity, both as a woman and as an English composer, remains front and center in all three.

[14] Elizabeth Kertesz, "Ethel Smyth's 'The Wreckers': A Cosmopolitan Voice for English Opera," *Studia Musicologica* 52, no. 1/4 (2011): 485–97; Judith Lebiez, "The Representation of Female Power in Ethel Smyth's Der Wald (1902)," *The German Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (2018): 415–24; Hannah Millington, "'1910': Ethel Smyth's Unsung Suffrage Song," *The Musicology Review* 10 (2021): 55–75.

Fitting neatly into none of the above categories is the work of Amanda Harris, which delves into the often-overlooked correspondence between Smyth and H.B. Brewster. [15] Her findings – that Smyth and Brewster were romantically involved, and not simply close friends – are a reminder that queer historical experiences are infinitely complex and that modern labels, applied retroactively, only ever benefit the modern reader. Harris's research offers a valuable perspective for any conversation relating to Smyth's sexuality, and it was particularly helpful in my own exploration of how Smyth's queerness affected her self-expression in her musical and written works. Throughout this thesis I use the terms "lesbian" and "queer" to describe Smyth. While "queer" is the most widely accepted term in modern academia, I also use "lesbian" in deference to its common use in Smyth scholarship designating Smyth as a woman who had romantic and sexual relationships with other women; it is in no way meant to dismiss the multifaceted nature of Smyth's identity or her relationship with Brewster.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the work presented at the Third International Conference on Women's Work in Music in September of 2021. There were three presentations given at a session titled "Autobiographical Approaches to Ethel Smyth's Vocal Works." While I was unable to attend the conference myself, the authors have graciously provided me with summaries of their projects. The first, by Hannah Millington, offers context for one of Smyth's early works, *The Song of Love*, Op. 8.[16] She argues that Smyth may have been experiencing an increased interest in religion at the

[15] Harris, "The Smyth-Brewster Correspondence."

[16]Hannah Millington, "I unearthed in my loft a cantata": Contextualising Ethel Smyth's *Song of Love*, Op. 8" (paper presented at The Third International Conference on Women's Work in Music, Bangor University, Bangor, Gwynedd, September 2, 2021).

same time as her tumultuous affair and unhappy separation with Brewster, which influenced her choice to set the biblical text "Song of Songs." Leah Broad presented an autobiographical interpretation of "The Clown." In her presentation she notes that discussions of autobiography are practically de rigeuer in Smyth scholarship despite the potential risks inherent in connecting a composer's life and work because "the links between her life and works are more overt than for many other composers."[17] She points out also the prominence of imprisonment and slavery metaphors in the suffrage oeuvre, of which "The Clown" is a part. Her observations on the prominence of autobiographical perspectives in Smyth scholarship provide further justification for my own choice to combine autobiography and analysis, and while I will not be delving deeply into the connections between Smyth's experience with imprisonment during her tenure with the Women's Social and Political Union and the thematic content of *The Prison*, there is clearly ample room for further analysis in this area. Finally, in her paper Amy Zigler draws connections between one of the most formative relationships in Smyth's life – her friendship and romantic affair with Brewster – and *The Prison*, which she describes as Smyth's "last musical expression of 'the struggle to escape from the bonds of self' and the dictates of society."[18] Zigler argues that the frequency with which *The Prison: A Dialogue* (Brewster's book) was referenced in their correspondence indicates that the book was used by both as a sort of metaphor for their untenable situation (I explore the

[17] Leah Broad, "'In my heart there's a dancing spark': Ethel Smyth's 'The Clown' and (auto)biography" (paper presented at The Third International Conference on Women's Work in Music, Bangor University, Bangor, Gwynedd, September 2, 2021).

[18] Amy Zigler, "'Perhaps what men call a sin…': An Examination of Ethel Smyth's *The Prison*" (paper presented at The Third International Conference on Women's Work in Music, Bangor University, Bangor, Gwynedd, September 2, 2021).

Smyth-Brewster relationship further in the section "Ethel Smyth's *The Prison* and H.B. Brewster's *The Prison: A Dialogue*"). While my own analysis of *The Prison* does not touch on this angle, I find her interpretation of the piece compelling; even decades after his death, Brewster was undoubtedly an essential element of *The Prison* and the spiritual lodestone of its composition.

Ethel Smyth as The Prisoner

An interpretation of *The Prison* that centers Brewster as the work's subject seems to be, on the face of it, perfectly logical. Brewster was clearly very important to Smyth even after his death; Virginia Woolf, who would not meet Smyth until long after Brewster had died, described him as "the man who dominated Ethel's life."[19] In addition, the text of *The Prison* is obviously derived from Brewster's book, which he described as his masterwork.[20] Zigler even mentions that Smyth referred to *The Prison* (then in progress) as the "H.B. Requiem" in her correspondence, although she apparently used this specific term for it only a few times.[21] In this light, *The Prison* could easily be read as a piece Smyth wrote in memory of her beloved friend; Wood even describes the piece as a memorial in her writings about Smyth.[22]

Still, the Brewster memorial interpretation has never sat right with me for a number of reasons. The first among these is time; Henry Bennet Brewster died in 1908, a

[19] Wiley, "'When a Woman Speaks,'" 391.

[20] Brewster, *The Prison: A Dialogue*.

[21] Zigler, "'Perhaps what men call a sin….'"

[22] Wood, "On Deafness," 59.

full two decades before *The Prison* premiered. It isn't as though Smyth was inactive during this period, either – far from it. *Songs of Sunrise*, her three-part song cycle dedicated to the women's suffrage movement, was published in 1910. If *The Prison* were meant to serve exclusively as a memorial for a dear friend, why delay? Why not release it while the memory was still sharp in the minds of his friends, family, and colleagues? As for the use of Brewster's text, Smyth's adaptation can hardly be called strict; she winnows the hundred-plus page book down to roughly three pages of poetry and inserts her own characters into the narrative (for more information on this, see the "Ethel Smyth's *The Prison* and H.B. Brewster's *The Prison: A Dialogue*" section). Brewster worked with Smyth as the librettist for three of her operas: *Fantasio, Der Wald, and The Wreckers*. I find it much more compelling to view Smyth's use of Brewster's text as a natural extension of their musical partnership, yet another example of a libretto drawn from Brewster's words.

Then there is the matter of Smyth herself. Her personality, character and habits are extremely well-documented. She is consistently described as larger than life, a giant; friends and foes alike called her a force of nature. Her self-confidence seemed to spring forth endlessly and effortlessly. This self-assuredness – some might say self-absorption, a criticism that many have leveled against Smyth[23] – is a common thread running throughout her life, and one of the biggest reasons I believe *The Prison* is at least partially autobiographical. She simply liked to talk about herself, and she liked to be the

[23] In her letters to Smyth Virginia Woolf describes her as "swollen with egotism." In his work, Wiley calls her "egotistical" and "self-centered" ("Challenges") while Wood comments on her "fanatical self-involvement" ("On Deafness"). Contemporaries and scholars alike seem both endeared to and frustrated by this aspect of Smyth's personality.

center of attention. These are not inherently negative traits in a composer, and I doubt they would even be cause for comment if she had been a man. But they do lend credence to the main thrust of my argument that Smyth saw herself in the character of the Prisoner, and therefore composed *The Prison* with that semi-autobiographical perspective in mind. The Prisoner's journey is in many ways her own journey; his struggles and triumphs are hers also, and her handling of his narrative arc represents an effort to grapple with the "death" of her career, and what came after: her legacy.

When it comes to the analysis of a historical composer's intentions, the truth is an ideal we can only grasp at; there is simply no way to know. It is possible that even Smyth herself could not tell us what *The Prison* "truly" signifies; creative motivations are a complex, ever-shifting landscape that even the composer cannot reliably navigate at times. This is especially true when the subject is intensely emotional, as *The Prison* undoubtedly was for Smyth. My thesis does not argue a single, "correct" interpretation – none exists, nor will it ever exist. What I present here is merely the interpretation that spoke with the clearest, truest voice to me in this time and place. I will consider myself blessed indeed if my reading of the piece is cause for further conversation outside of my immediate circle.

Ethel Smyth's *The Prison* and H.B. Brewster's *The Prison: A Dialogue*

In setting text to music, a composer engages in the highly significant act of musical "transmemberment": a slightly fanciful and yet invaluable term adopted by Lawrence Kramer to describe the complex processes of change inherent in combining two

functionally disparate mediums.[24] While it is often assumed that the text of a poem is merely assimilated into the coherent whole of art song[25] – at best, a kind of "musical imitation" or "creative reproduction of poetic meaning," and at worst, coarse appropriation – Kramer argues that this is not the case.[26] "A poem is never really assimilated into a composition," he writes, but rather "is *incorporated*, and it retains its own life, its own 'body,' within the body of the music."[27]

Beyond its merits as a fascinating thought-exercise, Kramer's article presents a useful approach to the analysis of art song and other texted music. His framework requires the listener to engage with *process* of uniting text and music into one coherent whole; in examining the ways in which this process results in either tension or a lack thereof, an analyst may learn more about texted music than they could by taking a song's disparate parts as their own individual objects, examining them separately, and then combining those analyses to generate meaning. As Kramer puts it, "the unfolding of a song is a volatile interplay between two attempts to be heard – that of the music and that of the poem."[28]

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[24] Kramer, "Song Reconsidered," 4.

[25] In an influential article about the analysis of German Lieder, Kofi Agawu cite Suzanne Langer as an example of a scholar who adopts an assimilationist view of art song. See Suzanne K. Langer, "The Principle of Assimilation," in *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 149–68; and Kofi Agawu, "Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied," *Music Analysis* 11, no. 1 (March 1992): 3–36.

[26] Kramer, "Song Reconsidered," 1–2.

[27] Ibid., 4.

[28] Ibid., 63.

Kramer is far from the only scholar to explore tensions between music and text.[29] However, his interpretational framework is the most appropriate for a study of *The Prison* because it places particular emphasis on the process by which texts are incorporated into musical works – a process he views as fundamentally transformational for *both* media – and it is this process that lends insight into a composer's authorial intent. I am most concerned with the interactions between Brewster's text and Smyth's music: where there is harmony, where there is strife, and what these moments tell us about Smyth's creative intentions in *The Prison*. My analysis draws from Kramer's descriptions of the three primary ways in which a song can "deny interpretive authority to its text"[30]: expressive revision, contrary imitation, and dissonant paraphrase.[31] The first, expressive revision, "occurs when the music and the text of a vocal composition are incongruous according to a fairly straightforward set of conventions."[32] In *The Prison*, this technique manifests as a frequent thwarting of text which implies rest, peace, or stasis. Smyth does this both by avoiding cadences throughout and by underpinning these moments with harmonic dissonance seemingly at odds with the content of the text. Contrary imitation, the second method, uses kinetic imagery in a way that appears to agree with the original intent of the

[29] See, for example, Agawu, who argues that "there is no necessary relationship between the words and music of song; the music may support, contradict or remain indifferent to the text" ("Theory and Practice," 30). Lawrence Zbikowski also explores tensions between text and music in his analyses of art songs. See especially his application of the cognitive-linguistic concept of "cross-domain mapping" to the analysis of art song in *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory, and Analysis* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), especially chapter 6, "Words, Music, and Song: The Nineteenth-Century Lied," 243–86.

[30] Kramer, "Song Reconsidered," 37.

[31] Ibid., 31.

[32] Ibid., 31.

text, but actually undermines it in some way.[33] Smyth uses this technique less frequently, but it arguably shows up in Smyth's musical impressions of metaphorical birds (see analyses no. 3 and no. 11). The final method, dissonant paraphrase, pertains the most to form and occurs when the music disagrees with a "goal-directed or reiterative movement" of the text.[34] Smyth employs this technique in order to constantly undercut the dramatic momentum of the piece's natural trajectory by decreasing in volume or texture at key moments. More detailed explorations of these techniques will appear throughout the analysis portion of this thesis.

There is an additional facet to Smyth's treatment of text in *The Prison* that requires its own investigation. It is a significant undertaking to adapt a full-length book – although it is perhaps an oversimplification to say that Smyth adapted Brewster's text; more precisely, she carved it down from 140 pages to just over 1,000 words (roughly ten percent of the complete work), a feat which suggests substantial creative authority over the finished product. So much so, in fact, that I argue it is best to read the libretto's text as though it were written by two authors: Brewster, and Smyth herself.

Even the act of reducing tells us much about Smyth's authorial intent – what aspects of the book she chose to omit are as enlightening as those that made it into the final cut. Zigler's research on the Smyth-Brewster correspondence indicates that Smyth would have been intimately familiar with the text of *The Prison: A Dialogue*; not only was it an important work written by someone very close to her, but the Smyth-Brewster

[33] Ibid., 34.

[34] Ibid., 37.

letters are evidently filled with references to and quotations from the book.[35] With this context, I find it quite likely that Smyth would have chosen the parts of the text that resonated the most with her, rather than selecting for text that would most accurately convey the book's original themes and meaning. In this way, the resulting libretto is less an adaptation and more akin to a "black-out poem," where an author takes an existing text from a book, newspaper, or magazine and redacts words in order to come up with their own poem. Smyth's omissions are a form of creation.

So what did Smyth create? To find out, we must compare the two. Both book and libretto convey a loose narrative arc which centers on the titular Prisoner. In Brewster's original work, this narrative is framed as a series of "found" diary entries read aloud by an individual at a gathering of his philosophically minded friends. The book alternates between the Prisoner's story and the group's reactions to it. The latter is essentially a vehicle for Brewster's metaphysical commentary and as such is not especially gripping (at least to modern audiences). Smyth's stroke of genius in handling this text is omitting this group altogether and replacing them with two new characters of her own invention. By eliminating this framing device, Smyth takes us out of the banal – an upper middle class drawing room – and into the spiritually potent, metaphorical space of the Prisoner's cell. This setting is much more well-suited to the medium of the choral symphony, a genre with divine connotations reaching back to Handel and beyond.

There are three characters whose interactions form the impetus for the piece: the titular Prisoner, wrongfully incarcerated; his Soul, a guiding figure who imparts wisdom; and the Voices, an enigmatic chorus which with unclear motives. In the context of the

[35] Zigler, "Perhaps what men call a sin…."

original text, all three characters are actually just one, since all dialogue is drawn from the Prisoner's journal entries, written by the Prisoner himself. Pronouns and verb tenses are changed from the original to create exchanges where none previously existed. By conversing with his Soul and the Voices, the Prisoner comes to terms with his impending death and the crushing sorrow of his wasted life in prison. The piece culminates in his understanding of himself as part of a vast network of death and rebirth, and he dies with the understanding that he will live on through the works of his life that touched other people, achieving a kind of immortality.

Ethel Smyth, Disability, and "Late Style"

The issue of late style is a persistent and thorny one; lately under fire for perpetuating the problematic concept of the "genius" composer, it has also become increasingly clear that the term "late style" means very little on its own. In a recent article, Joseph Straus deconstructs the myriad issues with late style as a framework for understanding a composer's output. He writes:

> Music in a late style is presumed to have certain internal qualities (such as fragmentation, intimacy, nostalgia, or concision) and to be associated with certain external factors (such as the age of the composer, his or her proximity to and foreknowledge of death, a sense of authorial belatedness with respect to significant predecessors, or a feeling of having lived too late within a historical period.[36]

[36] Straus, "Disability and 'Late Style,'" 3.

Straus is quick to point out the inconsistencies with these criteria, citing the variable ages at which composers are said to have begun writing late style works (Mozart at only thirty-three, Schubert at a laughable twenty-nine).[37] The other factors he similarly dismisses on the grounds that they are unreliably correlated and do not appear with any consistency across the lives and careers of composers whose style might be considered "late." Smyth's career would certainly not satisfy these criteria. For starters, while she was in her early seventies when *The Prison* was published, she lived for more than a decade after its premiere. She certainly didn't seem to experience a sense of belatedness; if anything, she feared her music would not receive its due appreciation until long after she was dead. She credited her lack of renown during her life to society's negative view of women composers and hoped for a less prejudiced future.

According to Straus, however, the idea of late style may not be a total wash. "Composers who write in what is recognized as a late style," he argues, "often have shared experiences of nonnormative bodily or mental function, of disability, or of impairments resulting from disease or other causes… In such cases, it may well be that the experience of living with a disability is a more potent impetus for late-style composition than age, foreknowledge of death, authorial belatedness, or a sense of historical lateness."[38] In other words, there is no late style – but there may be a *disability* style.[39]

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[37] Ibid., 3.

[38] Ibid., 6.

[39] Ibid., 6.

This approach has immediate appeal as a framework by which to understand Smyth's late works, particularly *The Prison*. Elizabeth Wood has documented at length the effects of Smyth's encroaching deafness in the years preceding the publication of *The Prison*; she describes Smyth's "struggle against her own fate as a 'death grapple' with music" and makes explicit connections to other composers who lost their hearing, including Beethoven, Smetana, Vaughn Williams, and Fauré, who was a friend of Smyth's.[40] What Smyth seemed to be facing down was not her own impending death, but the slow end of her life as it was. Reorienting late style as disability style allows us to understand the music written during this period of Smyth's career by grounding it in her real, lived experiences, rather than calling on arbitrary metrics that make little sense even in hindsight.

Moreover, this approach has value for its implicit decentering of the problematic "genius" composer. Late style theory, as Straus adeptly demonstrates, lacks a consistent internal logic in its application – more often than not, "late style" is a term that is only ever applied to the late works of composers already deemed by the institution to be "genius" or in some other way an essential part of Western canon. It is telling that few (if any) women composers or composers of color receive attention in this area. However, a theory of disability style would be much more equitable in its range of application, and would be more likely to yield a valuable and coherent view of a relatively common shared experience among composers throughout history.

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[40] Wood, "On Deafness," 33.

Disability aesthetics pervade *The Prison*. In her article about the impact of Smyth's deafness on her creative output, Wood writes:

> These compositions, I find, are all about death and sonic remembering, loss and auditory recapitulation. They are *all* memorials. But the mere fact that she could write them means they are all about life; about the complicated relationship between death and return; about revivifying the past and defying death and deafness.[41]

As Smyth's hearing loss, which began in 1919, became severe enough to encroach on her day-to-day activities, she struggled with depression and a lack of inspiration. It became difficult to muster up an interest in musical life and composing, an issue she had never before faced. Smyth underwent medical treatments which helped for a short while, but her hearing soon worsened. She developed a persistent ringing in the ears and could no longer make out names. Wood tracks, in Smyth's diary entries and in her letters, her progression from discouragement to despondency. "I know in my heart [my ears] can only get worse. And this kills all impulse to write music… I ask myself, do I wish to go on living?"[42]

Smyth did eventually find the will to compose again, although she would struggle with depression and listlessness for the remainder of her career as her hearing continued

[41] Ibid., 50.

[42] Ibid., 35.

to worsen. In 1931, the year of *The Prison*'s premiere, she was likely almost completely deaf, and afterwards gave up composing entirely. Wood writes that at the end of her life, "as it was with Beethoven," the only reliable way to communicate with her was to write in a notepad she kept on hand.[43]

It was not the death of the body that Smyth was grappling with as she gamely struggled to compose her final work, but the death of her life as a composer. With her deafness, she was forced to radically restructure her expectations for the second half of her career. This is what Wood means in the above quote when she describes Smyth's late works as "memorials"; *The Prison* is in many ways a monument, a negotiation between the legacy Smyth hoped to leave behind, and the one she actually did. But essentially, it is a negotiation on *her* terms, which is why *The Prison* has an ultimately uplifting message. The Prisoner passes on, yes, but before he does, he learns the secret of immortality: by the works of his life, by the lives he has touched, he will live on. Smyth, ever defiant in the face of adversity, could never have slipped quietly into obscurity. She had to have the last word, the final say; she no more could have given in to death and decay than she could have flapped her arms and taken to the sky. Smyth chose life, again and again. She chose to believe that even a bleak sentence – career prematurely stolen by deafness, her seat at the table of Western canon's giants unclaimed – could give way to new avenues of creation, of discovery, of *life.* That is what *The Prison* is, nearly a century after it was first conceived: one woman's voice echoing across the years, *I was here. I lived. My body is dust, but the works of my life persist; I entrust them to you, o listener.* Who can deny such a message?

[43] Ibid., 41.

Identity and Authenticity Across Mediums

One of the most fascinating relationships of Smyth's life was with feminist writer Virginia Woolf. The two did not meet until comparatively late in both women's lives; Smyth was seventy-two and Woolf forty-eight when Smyth reached out as an admirer of Woolf's works. Their relationship has fascinated music, literature, and feminist scholars alike, and much has been written about their correspondence, which offers unique insights into the generational divide between Smyth's distinctly Victorian brand of feminism and Woolf's more modernist sensibilities.[44] Christopher Wiley is particularly interested in the manifestations of the two women's shared lesbian identity in their autobiographical works, which highlights a fundamental difference in their attitudes towards authentic self-expression in a society hostile to homosexual identities.[45] Wiley's perspective is invaluable for contextualizing Smyth's approach to autobiography and the ways in which her approach may have been extended to her musical works, including *The Prison*.

The primary source of friction between the two women's autobiographical methods, Wiley writes, "lay [in] their strongly differing approaches to autobiographical exposition: while Smyth egotistically recounted stories relating to herself, Woolf deliberately excised overt authorial presence from her texts."[46] While the differences

[44] For more on this topic, see Christopher Wiley, "Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and 'The First Woman to Write an Opera,'" Elicia Clements, "Virginia Woolf, Ethel Smyth, and Music: Listening as a Productive Mode of Social Interaction," and Suzanne Raitt, "'The Tide of Ethel': Femininity as Narrative in the Friendship of Ethel Smyth and Virginia Woolf."

[45] Wiley, "'When a Woman Speaks.'"

[46] Ibid., 390.

were a matter of philosophy, they originated in each woman's individual personalities and experiences; Woolf, for her part, associated traditional biography with "Victorian patriarchal domination" and her history of abuse perpetrated by the men in her family.[47] Smyth, on the other hand, simply loved to talk about herself – that, and her writings allowed her to "conduct her life in the public domain," which she believed would drum up interest for her music.[48] The two argued constantly about which method was best, with Woolf despairing of what she perceived as rampant self-centeredness in Smyth's writings and Smyth blithely resistant to change.

For Woolf, there was an observable difference "between women's (and lesbian) autobiography, and autobiographies that were merely written by women (and lesbians), into which category she manifestly placed those of Smyth."[49] This strongly tracks with arguments emerging from feminist writers in the eighties and early nineties, who believed that authentic autobiographies penned by women would look fundamentally different from those written by men.[50] Modern feminist theory is generally dismissive of this idea as repackaged biological essentialism, but it held sway for decades, and formed the basis of Woolf's frustration with Smyth. Woolf's belief was correct in one major respect, however: unable to apply her usual forthrightness to the topic of her sexuality, Smyth chose to simply omit any references to her lesbianism in her memoirs, which obviously

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[47] Ibid., 390.

[48] Ibid., 392.

[49] Ibid., 401.

[50] For more on feminist autobiography, see Bella Brodzki and Celeste Marguerite Schenck, *Life Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, and Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*.

limited her ability to express her identity with any kind of nuance. Or, as Wiley puts it: "Woolf, by disguising her existence through the relative anonymity of pluralistic, fictitious narrative, could recount her experiences as a woman and a lesbian in ways that Smyth could not, because she wrote the silences into her works where Smyth merely left them out."[51]

But, crucially, Smyth had two modes of expression at her disposal: her memoirs, and her music. She always regarded composing as the most important work of her life, with writing as a pleasant (and useful, as her books sold well and supplemented her income) secondary endeavor. For this reason, I find it difficult to compare the two women's written works for their value as autobiographical resources. Instead, it seems more appropriate to compare Woolf's writings and Smyth's *music* for their merits as authentic feminist/lesbian expression. Along these lines, Wiley argues:

> By virtue of its ambiguity relative to other artistic media (such as literature), music is ideally suited to discussions of such notionally unspeakable subjects as the experiences of women and lesbians within oppressive heterosexual-patriarchal contexts. Correspondingly, the auto/biographical messages borne by music, although more difficult to interpret, may for the same reason prove to be even more potent than those of such pseudo-fictional paradigms as were employed by Woolf in her writings… in her music, Smyth could depart from the egotism that

[51] Wiley, "'When a Woman Speaks,'" 406.

> so displeased Woolf, by using a similar technique to that by which contemporary lesbian authors explored their sexual experiences and relationships in literature.[52]

This idea is significant in the context of this thesis because it reinforces my central argument about *The Prison*: an autobiographical interpretation of the piece vastly enriches our understanding both of Smyth's musical works and her singular experience as a queer woman composer during this time. Other scholars, particularly Wood, have already uncovered evidence of Smyth's feminism and sexual identity baked into the stuff of her music.[53] But how, then, should we interpret Smyth's written work, if not as an authentic expression of her true self?

Smyth is very clear about the function of her memoirs as a sort of advertisement for her music. They represent a kind of negotiation of legacy different from that of *The Prison*, designed to be more immediately persuasive; the closest modern analogs might be a public relations campaign, or a press tour. This is Smyth as she wished to be superficially perceived by the public and the musical institution, that fickle creature whose whims to which her career was evidently beholden. Wiley observes that "the sole viable option for Smyth" was to conform to masculine paradigms "in order to insinuate herself within the only musical tradition available – the closed circle of the male-centred, nineteenth-century canon."[54] And while the stereotype of the masculine woman who

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[52] Ibid., 411–12.

[53] See Judith Lebiez, "The Representation of Female Power in Ethel Smyth's Der Wald (1902)," Elizabeth Wood, "Lesbian Fugue: Ethel Smyth's Contrapuntal Arts," and Elizabeth Wood, "Sapphonics."

[54] Wiley, "'When a Woman Speaks,'" 408.

eschews marriage “for the sake of her work” still lies outside the rigid structure of nineteenth- and twentieth-century gender norms, adopting typically male conventions in her writing allowed her a small degree of power in her male-dominated field. Or, as Wiley aptly summarizes:

> Smyth's employment of masculine paradigms [served] one crucial function, in ensuring that her autobiographies reduced her to a persona appropriate to posterity, which identity she herself created and controlled-just as her public image resolved her lesbianism into (acceptable) male heterosexuality... Smyth's literary forays were thus an attempt to canonize her works, and herself, by speaking to the musical patriarchy in its own language.[55]

This is almost certainly what Woolf noticed – and despised – about Smyth’s writing, but her condemnation of Smyth’s memoirs as inauthentic seems to me a touch harsh. Smyth’s ability to speak the “language” of the male-dominated musical institution hardly makes her existence as a queer woman composer any less subversive, and, as Smyth often pointed out in her letters and written work, it was much easier at the time for a woman to become a successful novelist than a successful composer; a novelist need only impress one publisher, while a composer must rely on repeat performances to enter the public lexicon.

[55] Ibid., 409.

Regardless of who we might view as "correct" with our modern sensibilities, the two artists' argument offers incredible insight into the navigations of simply existing as a queer woman during this time. Moreover, an understanding of Smyth's written autobiographical works serves as an excellent starting point for comprehending how she may have written herself into her musical works. In *The Prison*, Smyth invents two characters to stand in contrast to the Prisoner: his Soul, and the Voices. While the Voices are sung by a choir, the Prisoner's Soul is scored for a soprano. Why did Smyth choose to make the Prisoner's Soul unambiguously female? Perhaps she wanted to tap into tropes of angelic, intuitive women who guide woe begotten men – but if so, why not make the Soul a guiding angel instead of an aspect of the Prisoner's own psyche? Typically, we associate souls with the fundamental parts of a person's nature. The Prisoner represents, in part, Smyth's projection of herself. I think the commingling of male and female presence in the holistic persona of the Prisoner is a play on Smyth's own sexuality: a fundamental femininity to the Prisoner's outward masculinity. While my analysis does not center on manifestations of gender sexuality in *The Prison*, other scholars have approached the piece from this angle.[56]

[56] See Mary Shannon, "Dame Ethel Smyth and The Prison: Gender, Sexuality, and the 'Bonds of Self'" for an exploration of references to gender and sexuality in *The Prison*, and Amy Zigler, 'Perhaps what men call a sin…': An Examination of Ethel Smyth's *The Prison*" for a read of *The Prison* as allegory for the confines of society.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS

My primary analytical aim is to showcase the compositional techniques Smyth employs to convey her own distinctive interpretation of Brewster's text. Rather than broadly analyzing the entire piece, I have chosen to perform an in-depth examination of salient moments where Smyth's authorial voice is especially strong. My analysis addresses nine of sixteen total movements. In many places, there is no pause between movements, and in some cases only a double bar line to indicate that a new movement has begun. Where there is confusion, I use Smyth's table of contents given in piano and vocal reduction of the score to differentiate between movements; that table can be found in the Appendix, along with the rest of the score.

Following Kramer's approach, I consider the relationships between text and music: does the music complement the text, or contradict it? Is the message of the text undermined or reinforced by the composer's choices? This framework is valuable not only for the interesting aspects of the music that it reveals, but because it illuminates the composer's interpretation of the text—an essential question for my argument that Smyth's interpretation places her inside of it as pseudo-protagonist.

The parameters I focus on the most are harmony, texture, timbre, and melody. The harmonic language of *The Prison* is highly tumultuous, and Smyth's frequent modulations contribute to an unusually unpredictable ebb and flow in the momentum of the piece. Texture and timbre, however, should not be underestimated here: much of the piece's mercurial nature comes from dizzyingly quick changes in orchestration, which I

explore in detail as well. All of the above elements directly impact narrative tension and even meaning in certain contexts.

No. 3: "The prisoner asks the secret of emancipation"

Smyth makes authorial decisions about the movement before a single note is uttered. Here the libretto is compiled piecemeal from a page of Brewster's text, carefully selected to construct a coherent moment in the overall narrative of *The Prison*. Table 1 shows a comparison of the original text and Smyth's compilation.

SMYTH	BREWSTER
I was alone with the sorrow Of my wasted life, But now the room is not cheerless any More; It is companiable as with the haze Of morning and the twitter of swallows.. Behold! in this very moment I am outliving death! What is the creed that works this wonder? Where is my philosopher's stone, My magic pebble..? What is the secret?	Thus minutes or hours went by, and all the time the yearning grew wilder, till it grew so wild that at last it tore itself away from me. It rose and soared off, and its place was filled with peace. ***The room was not cheerless any more, but companionable, as with the haze of morning and the twitter of swallows.*** Then I said to myself: these many years I have longed to master a secret so precious that its possession should grace life and make death worth dying. ***Now behold! in this very moment I am outliving death!*** Give me but this thrill of eternity and I quit you of the rest. ***What, then, is the creed that works this wonder? Where is my philosopher's stone, my magic pebble? I have none. I have no secret. I have nothing. Only the sorrow of my wasted life***...(108)

Table 1. Libretto versus book, part 1.

Despite their shared content, these passages convey different series of events. In Smyth's version, the Prisoner begins in a negative frame of mind before moving towards a more positive one. He ends the passage introspectively, which prepares the way for his Soul to respond in the next movement. In Brewster's version, however, the Prisoner recounts a positive experience but ends with a glum conclusion about his life. This falls under Kramer's third technique of reinterpretation: dissonant paraphrase, a kind of inversion of the text's original trajectory. Smyth may be quoting Brewster directly here, but no one would mistake it for an accurate adaptation of his text.

Notice how Smyth tweaks sentence order and tense to create immediacy within her selections. The Prisoner's concluding thought ("Only the sorrow of my wasted life") becomes expositional, working to set the scene: "I *was* alone with the sorrow / Of my wasted life." The next line brings us into the present moment, as "The room was not cheerless" becomes "*But now* the room *is not* cheerless any / More." These lines demonstrate a sort of adaptive economy that Smyth wields skillfully and liberally throughout her libretto, and while the end result is often a departure from Brewster's exact meaning, it is an ability that likely originated in a deep and affectionate familiarity with the text.

Smyth's setting of the text in this movement emphasizes the Prisoner's emotional trajectory. Here he sings in short bursts of a few measures each, interspersed with orchestral mood-setting. He begins morosely, with an overarching E-minor palette representing the "sorrow of his wasted life." A reedy and lilting orchestral counter-phrase rises in pitch, introducing a glimmer of sunlight. In response, the Prisoner notes that "the room is not cheerless" and concludes his phrase somewhat awkwardly over a B-major

chord. This awkwardness is largely due to the quick shift into B-major from the previous measures' three-flat tonality; these rapid modulations between distantly related pitch centers are commonplace. This pattern continues for a bit longer, with the Prisoner's melodic lines resolving more firmly as they progress and the orchestral interjections growing lush and pastoral.

This culminates in the introduction of the "swallow" motive – the first of two bird motives scattered throughout the work. The bird motives are symbols of contentment and natural life, but they are also harbingers. They come before moments of mystery, and of death. The most common type of swallow in England both today and during Smyth's life is the barn swallow. Its call is represented here musically by ascending half-step thirty-second notes in the piccolo and flute. After the Prisoner sings "the twitter of swallows," the call goes from a pleasant, intermittent ambient sound to an alarming swell of noise. Then, an abrupt cessation as the bottom drops out of the orchestra. Reinforced by the lowest voices of the orchestra, the basses sing "behold…" in tritones. The rest of the chorus follows, accompanied by the lowest registers of the low and middle orchestra: "Behold! In this very moment I am outliving death!"

The contrast between this dreadful, mystical portent and the pastoral atmosphere of the preceding moments cannot be overstated. Not only does Smyth pull out all the stops with orchestration, but she does something with the text she hasn't done before. The invention of the three characters in Smyth's libretto allows for the text to be organized as a dialogue, rather than the monologue format of the original Brewster. This was a choice Smyth likely made to insert a degree of drama into her work; it enables the Prisoner to ask questions, and rather than discern the answers for himself, he receives guidance from

"his Soul," and the ambiguous "Voices." But in addition to making the piece more narratively interesting, it also opens up opportunities for Smyth to enhance the meaning of the text through the manipulation of grammar and pronouns in the delivery. Typically, the Prisoner uses "I," his Soul uses "you," and the Voices use "we." This cements their identities as protagonist, guiding figure, and mysterious keepers of knowledge, respectively. But in this moment, the Prisoner is absent, and the Voices are the ones singing, "Behold! In this very moment *I* am outliving death."

I interpret this in two ways. First, in the context of the narrative: the voices are the keepers of mysteriously knowledge, or truth. The closer the Prisoner gets to that divine truth, the more he exists in harmony with the Voices. Recall that every word of *The Prison* is taken from what is essentially a monologue. The Voices (and the Soul) originate from the Prisoner. Just as death is an illusion in this framework, so too is the division between the characters an illusion. As the Prisoner approaches an understanding of his own mortality, these divisions will fade away. Therefore, this moment represents an instant of total understanding – total unity between the Prisoner and his truth. It fades as quickly as it came, but in it is a hint of the Prisoner's ultimate fate.

The other way I like to interpret this is the voice of Smyth herself bursting through the fourth wall, so to speak. This interpretation is admittedly fanciful, but I can't shake it. The "I" in this case would be Smyth, who is speaking to the audience from beyond the grave. *The Prison* argues that we never truly die so long as the works that we made in life continue to touch people's minds into the future. This passage gives me chills every time, because from a certain perspective it is literally true – Ethel Smyth's

words are reaching my ears almost a century after they were committed to paper. Behold! In this very moment – a dead woman is speaking to you.

No. 4, "His Soul replies"

The Prison is, as a holistic work, formally elusive. It is through-composed, with very little to indicate beginning, middle or end. Despite the militant reputation Smyth garnered during her life, there is nothing regimented about her music here. It flows organically from one idea to the next; tracking these ideas feels a lot like tracking a bee as it samples flowers in a garden. This meandering approach suits the tone and thematic content of the piece as a metaphysical reflection on the nature of human mortality; if the music of *The Prison* represents the wholly internal landscape of the Prisoner's mind, it would indeed be more unusual for it to fit neatly into a specific form.

This movement contains the Soul's response to the Prisoner's earlier question about the "secret" of immortality. The Prisoner's absence has a direct impact on the momentum of the movement; while the Soul character can and frequently does sing in a meditative recitative style, she typically only does so in tandem with the Prisoner. His absence, therefore, is marked by an increase in highly melodic settings of the text and a swifter progression of musical ideas than is typical of the piece. These traits in turn create opportunities for motivic repetition within the movement, which Smyth engages selectively.

The swallow motive, heard at the very beginning, is a holdover from the previous movement. Here it's been re-orchestrated to the middle ranges of violin and flute; the resulting timbre is considerably less distinctive than that of the original iteration, which

causes it to feel more like the memory of a swallow's call than the bird itself. By repeating it here in an altered state, Smyth is able to tie the two movements together thematically while transitioning from the pastoral atmosphere of the previous movement into the darker, more tumultuous atmosphere of the current movement. The swallow can also be interpreted as fulfilling the role of harbinger of mystery – in this case preceding the delivery of sublime knowledge, imparted by the Soul.

To create internal coherence, Smyth uses motivic material as touchstones. This allows the listener to track the action and remain oriented despite the movement's brisk shifts in tone. There are two primary motives which serve this function in different ways. The first is what I am calling the "ominous transition" motive (shown in Figure 1). It perhaps comes as no surprise that this gesture is primarily transitional in function, and it has a foreboding tone.

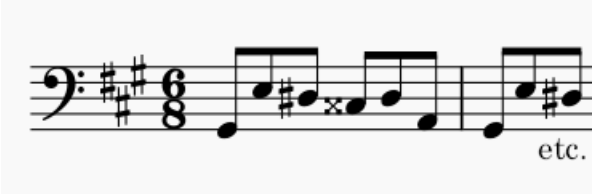


Figure 1. Ominous transition motive.

The ominous transition signals the end of an idea or line of text and ushers in a new one. In the latter case, it also indicates an imminent change in texture or mood. It also frequently works in tandem with the second motive: the "no-nonsense march," called as such because it sounds very busy and serious (Figure 2).

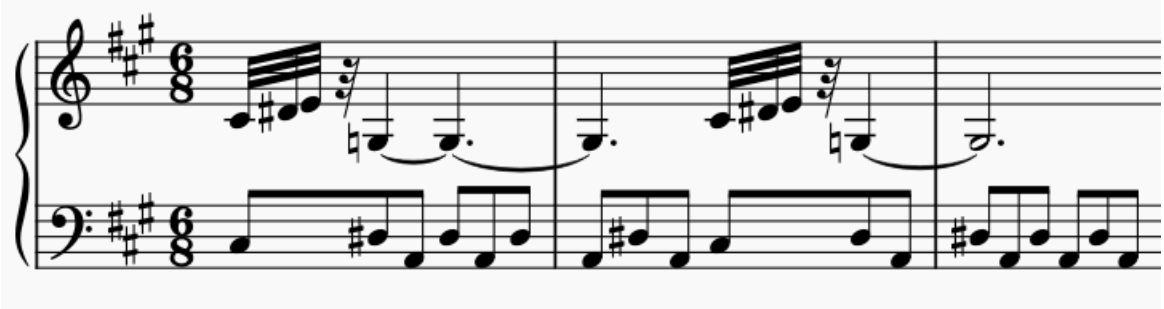


Figure 2. No-nonsense march motive.

More than other movements, no. 4 is characterized by short, discrete, often highly contrasting blocks of music which transition into and out of one another very quickly. Many movements are formed this way, but it is especially obvious in this movement because of the atypical degree of repetition. The two motives above help the listener to identify with ease when a section is either beginning or coming to a close.

Brewster's original text remains more or less untouched here, but Smyth still manages to exercise her intent in the way she sets the text to music. Table 2 below shows how she repeats, rearranges, and assigns the text as it appears in her libretto.

Table 2. Libretto versus book, part 2.

LIBRETTO	SCORE
There is no secret; Only something that overwhelms And stuns to rest. Mighty enough to break away from you, Perfect enough to need you no more, To shake you off and endure for ever. But not in you; and only for ever Because not in you. It must not be retained, It passes and wanders on to others	*SOUL*: There is no secret; Only something, **something*** that overwhelms And stuns to rest. Mighty enough to break away from you, Perfect enough to need you no more, To shake you off and endure for ever. **Endure for ever***, **and only for ever****, Because not in you. It must not be retained, It passes and wanders on to others

Table 2, continued

LIBRETTO	SCORE
Who are waiting in desolation As you waited.	Who are waiting in desolation As you waited. *VOICES*: **There is no secret!*** *SOUL*: **Only something, something that overwhelms** **And stuns to rest.***** **Mighty enough to break away from you,** **Perfect enough to need you no more.*** *VOICES*: **There is no secret!*** *repetition **reposition ***repetition of both text and music

Smyth's adjustments don't change the overall meaning of the text by much, but they do shift the focal point of the passage. By repeating from the top, Smyth effectively sandwiches the ending of the libretto passage between the beginning and a repetition of the beginning. This draws attention away from the "others / Who are waiting in desolation," an idea that is not explored in the next movement, and instead emphasizes "something…Perfect enough to need you no more." Her choice also creates a rounded binary of musical moods, so to speak; the music of the beginning is, if not hopeful, then at least not actively dour. The middle section, however, takes a sharp turn for the ominous, starting with "Endure for ever." Tritone pedals in the orchestra's dark timbral register do most of the heavy lifting when it comes to clouding the mood. Shortly after the texture begins to lighten again, and finishes with the serious but optimistic beginning section, now the end. Providing emphasis for this symmetrical reading is Smyth's highly unusual choice to use the same music for the second iteration of the lines "Only

something…need you no more." This technique is exceedingly rare for *The Prison*; Smyth will often set old text to new music, and use old music for new text, but this is perhaps the only place in the piece where she repeats both text and music together. It seems likely that she wanted to ensure the listener perceived that point of arrival as a return.

No. 5, "He asks in what shape emancipation will come" and No. 6, "The voices reply"

At this point, it is worth taking a moment to check in with the text. Brewster's book is, after all, a metaphysical contemplation of human mortality; the metaphors begin to pile up after a while, and Smyth's omissions for the sake of brevity can make it difficult to track what exactly is being said.

PRISONER: Will it return to me with the same face
As tonight, sublimely sad?
SOUL: It will perhaps return as a rapture of joy
That will sweep you away,
Or as some unwordable storm
Suddenly hushed to the pipe of a thrush.
VOICES: Who are our saviors?
There is one here tonight
Whose name is Sorrow.
Others are elsewhere, under other names,

Or nameless. They claim no bondage from us

They make no list of chosen souls.

They stroll amid the human throng

Indifferent to whom and what they touch,

And whatever they have touched is eternal.

The first order of business is determining what "it" is. The Prisoner and Soul are referring to the "something that overwhelms and stuns to rest" from the previous movement. Using context clues from the libretto and from parts of the original Brewster text that didn't make the cut, this mystery object can be most succinctly identified as the vast web of human emotion and experiences that make up every facet of the human experience. Brewster argues that these are eternal, and therefore the most divine part of us; a little piece of God inside every person, connecting them to the unending cosmos. When the Voices ask, "who are our Saviours," this refers to another omitted line from the Brewster directly preceding it: "I may not pin my worship to the cloak of any Saviour." To me, the most plausible read of this line is an expression of disbelief in a deserving object of worship, despite the alleged existence of some flavor of divinity. "Saviour" is used facetiously to describe facets of the emotional spectrum. When the Voices sing "There is one here tonight / Whose name is Sorrow," they are not necessarily referring to the Prisoner's individual feelings of sadness, but rather to the aggregate of human sorrow felt since the beginning of time: the Platonic ideal of sorrow.

Since this movement is all about the extremes of human emotion, the text painting is correspondingly strong. The Prisoner only gets one line before his Soul takes over, in

the stable and not overbearingly morose key of F# minor. When his Soul sings about "a rapture of joy" to "sweep [him] away," the orchestra swells with massive sweeping runs in the strings and upper winds. The mood takes an abrupt turn for the tumultuous as his Soul sings of "some unwordable storm" with an atonal melody to match. It is at this point that we are introduced to the second bird motive: the "pipe of a thrush" (Figure 3).

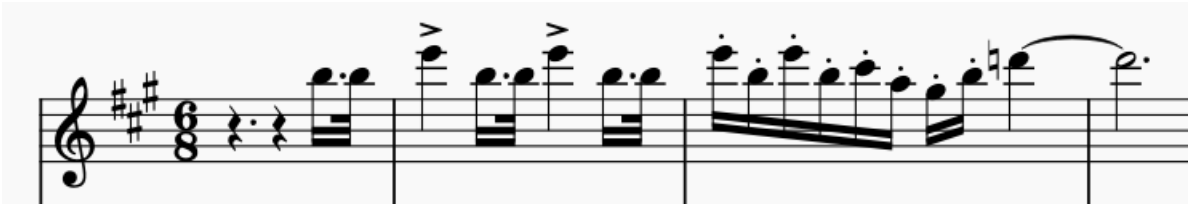


Figure 3. The pipe of a thrush motive.

Like its predecessor, this motive anticipates the arrival of the Voices, who dispense wisdom in their usual enigmatic manner. It is tonal, with a stylized shape that suggests the memory of a thrush and not necessarily the bird itself.[57] The motive's opening gesture of an ascending perfect fourth is also reminiscent of the bugle, with its military and funereal connotations.

However, the thrush motive holds significance beyond its role as a palette cleanser between sections of vastly different textures. The motive has special meaning in the context of Smyth's career as a composer because it originated as the fugal subject of a

[57] As a quick ornithological aside, there are only four varieties of thrush that exist in the United Kingdom, and I find it most likely that the motive was based on the song thrush. This bird has seen significant population decline in the past hundred years but would have been familiar to country dwellers as a frequent visitor of gardens.

piano piece written by her composition instructor, Heinrich von Herzogenberg. The piece, Prelude and Fugue in F# Major, would have been composed after Smyth's time as Herzogenberg's student, but its inclusion is telling of the regard Smyth had for her old teacher. Endings invariably spark contemplation of their corresponding beginnings; that Smyth would be thinking of those early days learning her craft in Leipzig even as her career was coming to a close is no great surprise. The motive's inclusion is undoubtedly indicative of Smyth's lasting gratitude to and affection for Herzogenberg, as well as a desire to honor him in her work. But this is *The Prison*: Smyth's final work, her negotiation of her own legacy and last desperate attempt for a kind of musical immortality. I think it likely that Smyth's motivation for including her primary teacher also sprang from this line of thinking. Herzogenberg's thrush motive is Smyth's proof of concept. It is as if to say: "this person impacted my life forever. See how he lives on in me. Now you, having listened, will carry us both into the future."

As I stated before, any read of *The Prison* that categorizes it as a memorial only is, at best, missing a giant piece of the puzzle. It is not a memorial to Brewster – his words are the starting point, but Smyth's interpretive vision supplies the true meaning of the work. Nor is the fifth movement a memorial of Herzogenberg because he posthumously supplied musical material. The piece is not even a memorial of Smyth's career, with its stumbling blocks and disappointments that might have given Smyth cause to regard her gender as a prison sentence. Rather, with *The Prison*, Smyth has made a time capsule of herself.

"The exact worth of my music will probably not be known till naught remains of [me] but sexless dots and lines on ruled paper," Smyth wrote in her 1928 book *A Final*

Burning of Boats.[58] Though this outlook does read as rather glum, it belies Smyth's hope – hope for a future for her music, even after her death. This is the impetus that drives *The Prison*: the hope that someday, with society sufficiently changed, someone might pull the capsule out of the ground and take another look at its contents.

After the thrush, there is a major texture shift as focus shifts to the Voices. With almost menacing simplicity, the sopranos and contraltos sing in close triadic harmony. The tenors and first basses follow in octaves, accompanied by the entrance of the violas, cellos, and basses. When the Voices sing unaccompanied or only lightly reinforced by the orchestra, it evokes the sanctity and dignity of the church choir tradition. Church choirs, especially before the Protestant Reformation, sang texts from scripture, believed to be the words of God. By evoking this idiom, Smyth co-opts its inherent authority, leading the listener to interpret the text here as both divine and true. However, the shift from the bright, clear timbre of the unaccompanied upper voices and the warm, rich, and deep timbre of the lower voices plus low strings keeps this section from sounding too familiar or monotonous.

Movement five launches seamlessly into movement six: Smyth's take on a fugue. It opens with a subject very similar to the thrush motive in the first violin, but this is a red herring. The real subject is in the vocal line, on the text "Others are elsewhere, under other names, / Or nameless." Its contour is marked by the distinctive bugling perfect fourth pervasive in the previous movement, followed by a step down. A secondary point of entry reverses this with a descending second followed by an ascending fourth. See

[58] Ethel Smyth, *A Final Burning of Boats* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1928), 64.

below for the subject and countersubject. Smyth is not what anyone would call strict with her subject; the imitation is an evocation of a fugue and not a fugue itself. The orchestra appears to be playing complimentary but unrelated material; through-composed and stuffed with scalar runs and arpeggiations, it keeps the movement feeling quick and busy.

Smyth's neoclassical adventures throughout *The Prison* always serve the work's narrative or themes. Yes, her choice to use imitation in this movement likely sprung from Herzogenberg's influence as the donor of the thrush motive and the original context from which it was drawn. But why this idiom for this text, this movement? A fugue is excellent for implying multiplicity; frequent, identifiable entrances and winding counterpoint can often give the impression that there are more voices than there actually are because each entrance is catalogued as a new arrival. Sung on the text "Others are elsewhere, under other names, / Or nameless," the points of imitation create a crowded sonic space implying an endless cavalcade of "others" (Figure 4).

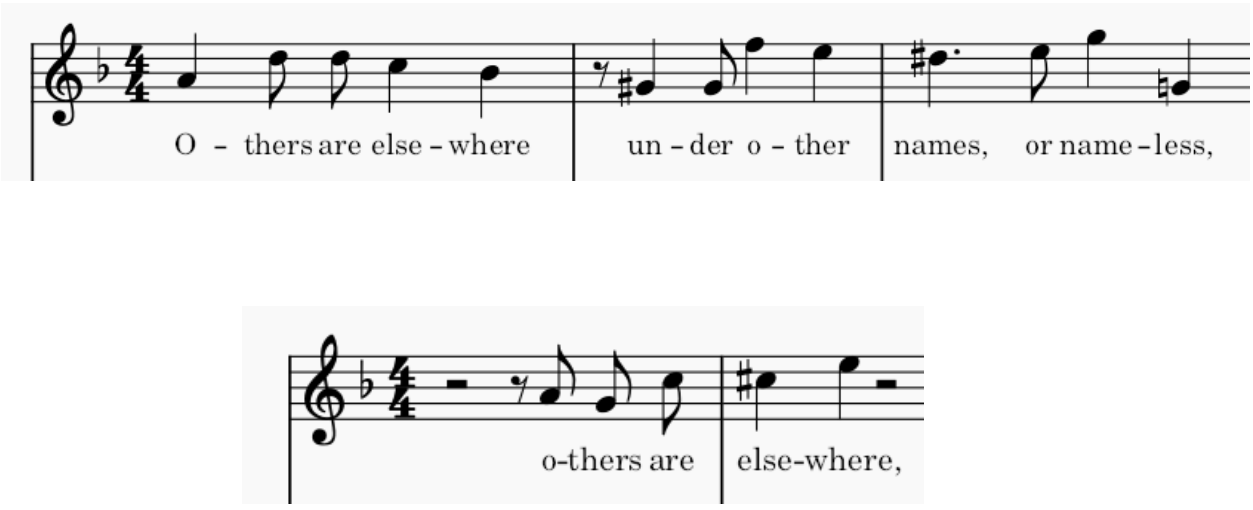


Figure 4. Points of imitation.

The Prisoner, who is presumably listening to this choir of Voices along with the audience, feels the true scope of how many "others" are out there. It's text painting on a macroscopic scale.

No. 7, "Orchestral Interlude – The first glimmer of dawn"

To fully understand the orchestral interlude, we must first find our footing in the conventional school of thought surrounding gender and composing for the orchestra. Largely in response to increasing opportunities for women in music education and composition around the turn of the century, critics developed "a system of gendered criteria for the critical evaluation of women's music" that has since become known as sexual aesthetics.[59] This system allowed critics to judge music written by women in terms of whether it was suitably feminine, in accordance with the hegemonic conventions of gender at the time. "Feminine" music was "delicate, graceful, sensitive, melodic, and confined to smaller forms, such as songs and short piano pieces," while "masculine" music was "powerful, lushly orchestrated, and intellectually rigorous both in formal structure and in harmonic and contrapuntal innovation."[60] Women who composed outside the rigid confines of feminine standards were subject to an infuriating double standard or "double bind" in criticism of their music; if a woman attempted a large-scale form and it was disliked, critics attributed its failure to the inherent limits of the composer's sex; but if a woman attempted a large-scale form and it was lauded, critics were impressed by its

[59] Gates, "Damned If You Do and Damned If You Don't," 63.

[60] Ibid., 63.

"virility" and masculine strength *in spite of* the composer's sex. It was, as Gates succinctly puts it, "damned if you do and damned if you don't."[61]

Smyth faced a great deal of this kind of criticism throughout her career. She composed no less than six operas (a form that was decidedly seated in the "masculine" category) as well as multiple works for choir and orchestra, including *The Prison*. One aspect of her music that was nearly always commented on was her orchestration or instrumentation – a skill required for working in large-scale forms, and therefore a kind of litmus test regarding a female composer's "worthiness" of the genre. Orchestration had begun to fall out of favor as a point of criticism by Smyth's time, at least in the works of male composers. In fact, as a realm of critical thought orchestration was still quite young; revolutionary new methods of instrumentation introduced by Haydn in the eighteenth century had becomes standard by the end of the nineteenth, helped along by composers like Berlioz, who elevated timbre to hitherto unheard-of prominence with his treatise on instrumentation in 1844. But by the twentieth century, Emily Dolan writes, taking note of a composer's orchestration had become passe:

> Over the course of the nineteenth century, discursive enthusiasm for the powers of the modern orchestra was tempered both by the rising formal discourse of musical analysis and by the many perceived abuses of its instruments; the notion of celebrating a composer for orchestration became dubious. In the twentieth century, when Robert Craft asked Igor Stravinsky, "What is good

[61] Ibid., 63.

> instrumentation?" the composer replied: "when you are unaware that it is instrumentation. The word is a gloss. It pretends that one composes music and then orchestrates it." … As Stravinsky insinuates, when orchestration was the subject of discussion in music criticism, it was often invoked negatively. Good orchestration was elusive, even invisible.[62]

In this light, complimentary assessments by critics of Smyth's orchestrational prowess take on a slightly insidious tone; that critics chose to comment on it at all demonstrates another way in which Smyth was othered by the professional music community. Smyth's orchestration was never going pass unnoticed simply because it was a novelty – which makes it very difficult to determine how this aspect of Smyth's music stood up to that of her male contemporaries'.

Although it may seem like an oxymoron, the most remarkable thing about the orchestral interlude is its incredible subtlety. The mercurial twists and turns of the texted movements are wholly absent here, reminding the listener that these are affective choices Smyth has been making all along, and not the fundamental character of her music. The movement is dominated by what I am calling the dawn motive (shown in Figure 5).

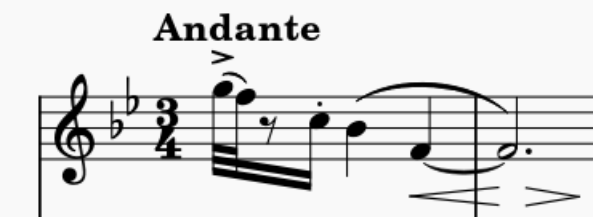


Figure 5. Dawn motive.

[62] Emily I. Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10.

It features a prominent descending fourth, making it a foil for the ubiquitous thrush motive of earlier movements and the bugling gesture of later ones. Having the descending fourth as the final interval of the motive also lends it an air of the unfinished or expectant, as though in anticipation of the new day. While this motive does undergo a few rhythmic alterations, the real through-line of the movement is the motive's timbral transformations as it passes seamlessly from instrument to instrument. The overall trajectory of the movement is a descent from the high, bright, and somewhat cold timbres of the orchestra's upper voices to the lower, rich, and murky timbres of its lower voices. This process is incredibly subtle in its execution, both at the individual level (a melody starting in the clarinet and finishing in the bass clarinet, for example) and at the ensemble level. The dawn motive is perfectly suited to facilitate this descent, as its shape is downwardly driven and its range is fairly large (a ninth). The overall texture of the orchestra also fills out subtly over the course of the movement, making its fullest moments at the end all the more satisfying.

The movement begins with solo oboe in a comfortable middle register. The flute takes over with a high chirping passage, then repeats the dawn motive in its own middle register – not so high as to be piercing, and not so low as to lose strength of tone. The texture thickens as tuba and low strings enter to steady the next woodwind passage: flute runs and trills accompanied by harp, creating a sense of shimmering movement without direction. The flute plays a descending run, the arrival point of which is reinforced by horn and high strings. Then, the clarinet takes over with a descending run of its own in the warm, soupy middle register; bass clarinet and bassoon take over for the final note of

the run, reinforced by tuba and low strings this time. The finishing touch is the slightest scrape of a cymbal, which preserves a degree of lightness in an otherwise murky timbral profile. The tone established, Smyth can begin to toss around the motive in earnest.

Motion begins with the clarinet, which descends another fourth past what is required by the motive; in the often harsh and unlovely lowest register of the clarinet, older siblings bass clarinet and bassoon once again come in to support the melody at its lowest. This frees up the clarinet to make an extended ascending and descending run over the lower instruments' drone. Since this gesture begins and ends in that extreme low register and never extends beyond the clarinet's comfortable upper-middle, it has the overall effect of swirling eddies in muddy water: beautiful, but mysterious. The descent continues as the dawn motive moves to solo viola; although this poor maligned member of the string family is often passed over for the clarity of the violin, the viola's dispersive tone and tendency to groan is absolutely an asset in the soundscape Smyth has established here. Its slightly pinched timbre in the low register is a delicious contrast to the lush tuba, bassoon, and low string accompaniment to which we have now become accustomed.

One notable aspect of Smyth's harmonic language in this movement occurs in the full orchestra clusters following the first section of motivic variation. Smyth sets up a moment of tension and resolution by moving through a continuum of dissonant sonorities. The first pair of clusters consists of two tritone pairs: F, B, G, and C#. She then unwinds this tension slightly by moving to a minor seventh chord in the next cluster (D, F, A and C), which is comparatively less dissonant. Finally, she allows the tension to fully dissipate in the last cluster, an F# major triad. While this is not a resolution in the

traditional sense, Smyth often structures her progressions this way; chords operate on a continuum of tight to loose, cold to warm, or harsh to gentle.

In addition to the varied timbres of the dawn motive, Smyth also employs novel effects like harmonics and pizzicato in unexpected places to create truly distinct musical moments. These techniques never feel overused or out-of-place, but rather disperse into the texture like a drop of wine on a cloth napkin. In the middle of the movement, the thrush motive makes a guest appearance, but unlike the dawn motive, it's never played by an instrument lower than an oboe. Smyth most likely intended to preserve the pastoral connotations that the motive carries in earlier movements.

No. 11 – "He hears his guests moving to depart"

This movement finds the Prisoner in a transitional moment of his metaphysical journey. In the previous movement, his Soul tells him that he has reached the end of his lifelong struggle; in the next movement, he disbands his ego and embraces death. But here, he has a moment to prepare and reflect before the inevitable conclusion, as well as to observe the goings-on of the "guests," represented by the Voices. Smyth has helpfully specified on the "Contents" page of her reduced score that the guests are "the elements of [the Prisoner's] personality," and they are preparing to leave him – presumably in order to rejoin the immortal ranks of human emotion alluded to in movements five and six.

Following the internal logic of *The Prison*'s libretto, the elements of the Prisoner's personality do not in fact belong to him but have simply "fallen on [him] like a drop / Of the fabulous river / Whose waters make men invulnerable." Fortunately for the Prisoner, this is the mechanism that will allow him to live on even after his body has

crumbled to dust. The guests – sung by the Voices – are part of the Prisoner, but they are also fundamentally divine; an interpretation that Smyth goes to great lengths to reinforce through music.

Much of this effort is accomplished through text setting. The movement opens with an unusually tuneful and rhythmic part for the tenor and bass voices: a pulsing melody in 6/8 time sung on "ah" (more on this melody later). Then, in staggered entrances, they *anticipate* the first few words of the Prisoner's first line of text: "I hear them." Prior to this moment, the Voices have doubled text belonging to the other two characters, and they have echoed the other characters' lines; they have even briefly appropriated another character's pronouns, as in movement three. But this is the first time they have ever anticipated a line the Prisoner has not yet sung. It speaks to the late-stage merging of characters that precedes the annihilation of the Prisoner's selfhood. Or, put another way, it indicates a disintegration of the arbitrary boundaries surrounding these three characters – arbitrary, because they have only ever been one person: the titular Prisoner, desperately conjuring those parts of himself to help him come to terms with bleak, gray death.

The Voices are only divine because the Prisoner understands them to be so. But since this is the Prisoner's story, Smyth pulls out all the timbral stops to make his vision a reality for the listener. The "ah" line is reinforced with all the orchestral authority that can be mustered; it is doubled in nearly all the low register instruments like tuba, bassoon, cello and double bass. The melody is also doubled in the flat but authoritative mid to low register of the horns, which lends it an especially monumental feel. Towards the end of the line, the rest of the orchestra with few exceptions joins in for a big, sweeping finish.

The part feels truly enormous, like a massive groundswell coming up from some deep and hidden place. This combined with the "ah" melody's long-short rhythm in 6/8 suggests movement: the imminent departure of the guests. One can almost picture the Prisoner seated in his little cell, tracking the swirling eddies of celestial bodies as they meander about the room. Smyth essentially creates an orchestral idiom to portray the Voices as a mysterious, ineffable cosmic force – a divine "truth" that precludes human error, deceit, or malice.

There are two more moments of timbral interest that make this movement shine. The first is a callback to the now well-established thrush motive; just before the Prisoner sings "And the sound of their several footfalls," the flute and violin have a pitter-patter of sixteenth note perfect fourths that is reminiscent in interval content and identical in timbral profile to the original thrush melody. This is also a simple but effective bit of text painting evoking the metaphorical steps of the guests, who are preparing to depart. Similarly, in the next few lines the Prisoner describes "the flight of…divine vultures" that carry away his "substance." The text painting here is in the solo violin, which plays a flurry of descending runs in its tight, high register – a passage that brings to mind the busy motion of a bird in flight. Although this is a fairly straightforward analog as text-painting goes, there is a touch of Kramer's expressive revision about it; vultures are typically associated with doom and gloom, and this passage is light, airy, and generally unconcerned. It helps that the texture is reduced to strings and harp only, making solo violin the highest sounding voice.

As the Voices anticipated the Prisoner's first words, so too do they echo his last words as the movement comes to a close. The tenors and basses double the line "as ice on

my forehead," but this time Smyth buries them in the orchestral texture. This is most likely to facilitate the transition into the next movement only three bars later by scaling down in intensity.

No. 14, "Voices sing the indestructability of human passions"

Here, Smyth borrows from a much older source: the Epitaph of Seikilos, the oldest notated ancient Greek song that we are currently capable of reading. I conceive of three levels of interpretation as it pertains to Smyth's inclusion of the Seikilos epitaph in this movement. First is the context provided by Wood in her article exploring the impact of Smyth's deafness on her creative output in the later part of her life:[63]

> Smyth undertook an arduous, thrilling six-week tour of Greece in 1925 with her great-niece Elizabeth Williamson, a journey she had long wanted to make, ever since Harry Brewster, her late friend and co-librettist, introduced her in the 1880s to Plato, Sophocles, and the dramatists of Classical Greece. To prepare for the journey, she read English translations of Homeric Hymns, Hesiod, Phaedrus, and Hippolytus, and learned by heart The Siege of Corinth by Lord Byron. Greece, and Brewster's Platonic dialogue The Prison (1903), inspired Smyth's last great work of memorial and recapitulation, her choral symphony, *The Prison*. Although preoccupied on that journey into antiquity with her own mortality, Smyth's aural and visual perception, indeed all of her senses, seem to have been sharpened in

[63] Wood, "On Deafness," 57.

> the dazzling light and seduced by the clear, warm air of Greece….Memory and its attendant emotions were in constant interplay with newfound and analogous sensations….Greek modes, but not necessarily these particular modes, may have remained in auditory memory when she wrote about sounds she'd heard in Greece.[64]

This passage tells us two things about Smyth's time in Greece: first, that Brewster was firmly linked to Greece, antiquity, and the Greek Classics in Smyth's mind; and second, that the aural impressions she absorbed there are likely the direct ancestors to her use of "Greek mode" in *The Prison*.

The second layer considers the original text of "Seikilos," which despite its omission nevertheless retains its significance; it hangs over Brewster's text like a ghost. Translations vary, but the essence of the poem is this:

> While you live, be happy
> don't suffer anything at all;
> life is short
> and time takes its toll.

The dedication reads, "I am a tombstone, an image. Seikilos placed me here as a long-lasting sign of deathless remembrance." There is a fascinating contradiction in the

[64] Ibid., 57–59.

relationship between music and monument; music, like a life, can only be experienced in time. Efforts to reduce either into a representative object are doomed to fall short of the colorful and vibrant *lived reality* of the thing itself. A score, like a monument, is a flattened and dead thing – we do not feel love for the stone, but for the life it represents. But a score, like a monument, is an invitation to remembrance. "A long-lasting sign of deathless remembrance." Even thousands of years after the composer's bones have crumbled to dust, they can be revived; they can exist in time again.
For Smyth, contemplating her legacy, planning her final work – the time capsule that would carry her essence into a kinder future – what could be more perfect?

This is the third layer of interpretation: the idea that music can act as a vehicle for everlasting life. The notion that a composer's authentic voice can be represented, and after their death, preserved, in their music, is only about 200 years old; this romantic notion is a Romantic invention spurred by the demand for biographical material concerning Beethoven, particularly after his death. Composers of the previous centuries in all likelihood viewed their output as professional portfolios: examples of their finely-honed craftsmanship, not some authentic outpouring of the soul. We are still very much in Beethoven's shadow even today.

Smyth, who learned to compose in Leipzig, Germany, would have been positively steeped in this tradition. The self-awareness and modern vocabulary we have to discuss the cult of personality, problematic concept of "genius," and the inherent issues with Western canon weren't even a twinkle in musicology's eye in Smyth's time, so we have no way of knowing for certain what her position would be on any of these topics. Here is what we do know: Smyth struggled with the male-dominated musical institution her

whole life, from her earliest efforts to pursue an education in music (vehemently opposed by her father), to her difficulty getting her work performed consistently, to the patronizing response of male critics. She was a self-proclaimed feminist, even spending months in jail for throwing a brick through an anti-suffrage politician's window, and she was outspoken about how her experiences as a woman negatively impacted her career as a composer even when it opened her up to ridicule from said male critics. In addition, although her musical idiom was clearly rooted in the German school, she wished to reinvigorate English music and specifically to kickstart an English opera tradition. Her opera *The Wreckers* was lauded at the time for its strong English affect.

Final movements: No. 15, "Death calls him; glorying, he obeys the summons," and No. 16, "His farewell; his triumph; his peace"

The end, when it comes, is not the long-awaited orchestral crescendo into a triumphant finish. Smyth still resolutely refuses to maintain momentum according to established conventions, instead opting to build and then dissipate energy in little fits and bursts. In one particularly disorienting twist, the choir sings in boisterous imitation, accompanied by driving quarter note beats in the orchestra and an exuberant bugling motive (more on this particular gesture later). "Let there be banners and music," they cry one after the other, until coming together in fortissimo block chords. A diminuendo and ritardando follow with the orchestra taking over, seemingly to carry the energy of the moment into the next section, where it will presumably be redoubled. But that's not what happens; instead, the whole texture drops out to be replaced with solo clarinet in A and harp. After a few measures, the orchestra returns to a completely different mood: a slow, waltz-like

feel with a quirky melody and a stratified texture. The orchestration is designed to emphasize the meter; there's even a march-like "boom-chik-chik" figure in the percussion.

Why does Smyth do this? It isn't that she is incapable of building momentum, quite the opposite; in several cases, the music amasses energy so successfully that it can actually be viscerally frustrating for the listener to hear it dissolve into nothing. My best guess is that she chose to avoid the uncomplicated, narratively satisfying big finish because that simply…isn't how people die, usually. Given this interpretation, Smyth's orchestral choices fall under Kramer's second technique for deconstructive text-music relationships: contrary imitation, where music mimics movement or a process described by the text. The Prisoner *is* dying in these movements; death calls, and he obeys the summons. In 1908, when Brewster lay dying in his bed, Smyth sat with him for hours. In her memoir *Female Pipings in Eden*, Smyth wrote of the experience:

> When H.B. was dying, the death stupor, as so often happens, yielded for a moment. At the very last he suddenly opened his eyes wide, and on his face was a look I had seen once before on the face of a dying man; that of my father. So wondering, so confident, so glad was the look, that one could almost fancy the Prisoner's desire was fulfilled – that he saw those banners, heard that music.[65]

[65] Smyth, *Female Pipings in Eden*, 113.

She describes a “death stupor” giving way to a moment of lucidity. When people die in their beds, this is how it usually goes; there are moments of wakefulness and moments of rest preceding the final cessation of life. Perhaps a climactic finale seemed to Smyth to be disingenuous.

Death is more present in these two movements than in any previous movement, represented by the “Last Post” bugle call. The call, which traditionally signaled the end of the day at British military installations, acts here as both beckoning embrace and *memento mori*. Where it first appears, it is bracketed by the Prisoner’s voice singing, “taste also the death.” The bugle is instructed to play outside the hall, which emphasizes its position as something beyond the Prisoner’s experience up to that point. Death is the one human experience we know nothing about – it is forever outside the boundaries of our understanding. The motive appears twice in movement fifteen, signaling the call of death, and once again at the end of the piece; the final note of the call is the last note of *The Prison*. Seemingly to herald the Prisoner’s final dissolution at the end of his journey, the orchestra teases the call with prominent perfect fifths.

A familiar motive appears in this movement also: the Seikolos melody from movement fourteen. At first, it’s buried in the texture of the choir with all but one voice singing on “bow down in your dream of a day.” While the basses are the only voice singing “the laughter we have laughed…,” the sopranos, contraltos, and tenors also pick up the melody a few bars later for the line starting with “and mingled with the sound of the syrinx.” The motive reminds us of the promised eternity awaiting the Prisoner. Its first two notes are also work as an allusion to the movement’s *memento mori*, as they also form a perfect fifth.

The Prisoner's imminent dissolution is also indicated by small but significant hints in the text. Nearing his end, in what the libretto indicates as "the epilogue," the Prisoner intones, "I am the joy and the sorrow / I am the mirth and the pride / The love…the silence and the song. I am the thought… / I am the Soul… / I am the home." The Voices and his Soul echo him. Notably, the Voices, who have always used collective pronouns like we, us, and our in their lines, now extend that collective identity to the Prisoner. They sing "we are not even going home," an echo of the Prisoner's earlier line, "this is no leave-taking / I am not even going home." The boundaries between the three characters are blurring, betraying the reality of the text; these characters have always been a product of the Prisoner's mind, grasping for meaning in his cell.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

It's a nice idea to say that music is immortal, but the barest knowledge of music history will show you that it's largely a farce. The very concept of artistic immortality is most likely a remnant from the very same framework the music field is currently struggling to dismantle – this idea that the best works of music will invariably rise to the top and earn their place in an everlasting (German) canon, to be beloved for all time. For one thing, the more centuries there are between the "now" and the "then," the less likely it is that we would even know about the most beloved music from the past. The Epitaph of Seikilos is well known only because it is so extraordinarily rare for ancient Greek musical manuscripts to have survived; the composer, whoever they were, remains in cultural memory today through sheer dumb luck. And what can we say about them, truly? So little is known about even the barest details of this person's life. More intangible than a ghost, faceless, shapeless – a far cry from an immortal being.

The truth is that the staying power of a composer's work has never been within the composer's power to change; music lives and dies by the values of the dominant culture of the time. Despite a lifetime of levying criticism against the patriarchal music industry of the day for its misogynistic rhetoric and exclusionary practices, Smyth still bought in to some of the institution's oldest promises. She thought that if she did everything just right, and advocated for herself, and pushed for performances, and, and, … that she would earn her place at the table. But today we know that Smyth could no more have inserted herself into the Western canon's immortal lineage than she could

have singlehandedly dismantled the power structures that kept her from accessing it – because that canon was designed to confirm the superiority of the male, white, preferably German musical "geniuses" in order to maintain a status quo of white supremacy, imperialism, misogyny, homophobia, and ableism. I think on some level Smyth must have understood this before the end. In 1928, only a few years before she would conclude her career on her own terms with *The Prison*, Smyth wrote the following in her memoir *A Final Burning of Boats*:

> If the sense of freedom, detachment, serenity that floods the heart when suddenly, mysteriously, the wretched backwater of personal fate is swept out of the shallows and becomes part of the main current of human experience; if even a modicum of all this gets into an artist's work, that work was worth doing. *And should the ears of others, whether now or after my death, catch a faint echo of some such spirit in my music, then all is well ... and more the well* [my italics].[66]

The wonderful promise of the present cultural moment is that in deconstructing Western music's legacy, we get to make decisions about the voices that we want to hear, or, put another way, the stories that we tell about our own history. Smyth repeatedly expressed the opinion in her letters that her music would probably not find a ready ear until well after she died, and that prophecy is showing every sign of coming true; *The Prison* finally received a recording in 2020 after ninety years of languishing in obscurity, and this thesis

[66] Ethel Smyth, *A Final Burning of Boats* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), 54.

is only a part of the recent upswell of interest in Smyth's music. It's hard not to see this trend as a kind of rebirth for the composer. Ears everywhere are finding something of value in her music – something worth celebrating, and sharing with others, and keeping for posterity, like a treasured heirloom.

In this thesis, I argue that Smyth grasped for immortality by placing herself at the center of her final work, *The Prison*. I do not believe I can in good conscience say that she achieved it – that she will ever achieve it. I think that perhaps the realm of immortal composers and their deathless, untouchable works is one that we need to leave in the past. But I think I can safely say that her music, and her story, has a place here, in our modern world. I want "Ethel Smyth" to become a household name; barring that, it's my dearest wish to see her integrated into our theory curriculum. However, if all that comes of this thesis is that one more person engages with that spirit, so vibrantly alive, in her music – then all is well, and more the well.

APPENDIX

SELECTED SCORE REDUCTION

THE PRISON

(CURWEN EDITION 3692)

SYMPHONY FOR SOPRANO AND
BASS-BARITONE SOLI, CHORUS
(S.C.T.B.) AND ORCHESTRA

TEXT BY
H. B. BREWSTER

MUSIC BY
ETHEL SMYTH

"I am striving to release that which is divine within us, and to merge it in the universally divine." (The last words of Plotinus: tr. A. Lang)

PART I. CLOSE ON FREEDOM
PART II. THE DELIVERANCE

PERSONAGES:

THE PRISONER	BASS-BARITONE
HIS SOUL	SOPRANO
VOICES	MIXED CHORUS

LONDON: J. CURWEN & SONS LTD., 24 BERNERS ST., W. 1
U.S.A.: CURWEN INC., GERMANTOWN, PHILADELPHIA

Orchestral parts on hire from the Publishers

CONTENTS

PART I

PART II

THE PRISON

"I am striving to release that which is divine within us, and to merge it in the universally divine." (Last words of Plotinus: tr. A. Lang)

The Text is adapted from "The Prison: a Dialogue" by H. B. Brewster. In this book, which is out of print, but which will probably be republished early in 1931, a group of friends discuss a manuscript supposed to have been left behind by some unknown prisoner.

The whole is the record of a struggle to escape from the bonds of self (the Prison), and the extracts here set to music are taken from the Prisoner's last utterances.

E. S.

PART I

CLOSE ON FREEDOM

THE PRISONER

I awoke in the middle of the night
And heard the sighing of the wind.
Even so is my life passing away..
A little rustling in the dark,
A little traceless rustling..

Then a great yearning seized me,
And I said to myself: "I would like to go out
Once more among the living!
Can nothing of it all be of good to others?
Can I not send them a farewell message..
Scatter it on leaves to the wind,
Or engrave it in blood on the stones?
If I were set free and could speak to men
What should I have to say?"

HIS SOUL

Tell them that no man lives in vain,
That some small part of our work,
For reasons unknown to us, has been tossed aloft
And garnered in for ever.
It was perhaps not our best work,
Not perhaps a great or a good work;
Maybe a moment of despair or of joy,
Of passion or of kindness..
Perhaps almost nothing,
A sight, a sound, a dream..
Perhaps what men call a sin;
But as a child drops a coin in the moneybox
His big friend keeps for him
So have we flung that stray moment into eternity,
Beyond the sun and the stars.

VOICES

We are full of immortality,
It stirs and glistens in us
Under the crust of self
Like a gleam of sirens under the ice,
And any blow which breaks the crust
Brings us into the company of the eternal ones
Whom to feel is to be as they.
That blow you surely will strike somehow,
The film you have spread you will likewise rend,
You who live and die..

We are full of immortality,
This hour that is with us now
Will endure for ever.
It has always been,
It will not be buried with us;
It has fallen on us like a drop
Of the fabulous river
Whose waters make men invulnerable,
And by so much of us as it has touched
Do we escape destruction..
Surely, surely you will slip into heaven!

THE PRISONER

I was alone with the sorrow
Of my wasted life,
But now the room is not cheerless any more;
It is companionable as with the haze
Of morning and the twitter of swallows..
Behold! in this very moment
I am outliving death!
What is the creed that works this wonder?
Where is my philosopher's stone,
My magic pebble..? What is the secret?

HIS SOUL

There is no secret;
Only something that overwhelms
And stuns to rest.
Mighty enough to break away from you,
Perfect enough to need you no more,
To shake you off and endure for ever.

But not in you; and only for ever
Because not in you. It must not be retained,
It passes and wanders on to others
Who are waiting in desolation
As you waited

THE PRISONER

Will it return to me with the same face
As tonight, sublimely sad?

HIS SOUL

It will perhaps return as a rapture of joy
That will sweep you away,
Or as some unwordable storm
Suddenly hushed to the pipe of a thrush.

VOICES

Who are our Saviours?
There is one here tonight
Whose name is Sorrow.
Others are elsewhere, under other names,
Or nameless. They claim no bondage from us
They make no list of chosen souls.
They stroll amid the human throng
Indifferent to whom and what they touch,
And whatever they have touched is eternal.

THE PRISONER

In the faint grey morning I hear
A sound as of distant surf,
I breathe the breath of the ocean,
And it seems to me that I am as a doomèd ship
Whose crew — a motley crew of hopes and thoughts and passions —
Had suddenly recollected that they could not drown,
But will surely re-appear,
And, drenched with the wine of oblivion,
Man some new craft, putting their pride again
In some gallant ship of self,
Till its sails, too, hang in rotten shreds,
And pitiful timbers give way once more.

(He sleeps)

PART II

THE DELIVERANCE

Dawn: sound of organ music in the prison chapel. (The Prisoner awakes)

HIS SOUL and VOICES

The struggle is over; the time has come,
The choice is made.
Abandon to destruction
The unity of which you are conscious,
Take refuge in the lastingness of its elements.
Bid farewell for ever to the transient meeting
Of eternal guests, who had gathered here for an hour.
They are taking leave of one another,
Never, perhaps, throughout the course of ages
To meet again — all of them and none but they —
Under the same roof!

THE PRISONER and VOICES

I hear them overhead moving to depart,
And the sound of their several footfalls
Quivers through me in sweet-bitter shudders; —
I hear the flight of the divine vultures
That bear away my substance shred by shred.
The wind of their wings is as ice on my forehead,
And, from I know not where, wells into my eyes
The tranquil glory of a boundless sunset.

VOICES

What are they waiting for, the departing guests?

HIS SOUL

Only for a word that shall set them free..

THE PRISONER

Go then, pass on, immortal ones!
Behold, I burst the bonds that pent you up
Within me; I disband myself!

THE PRISONER and VOICES

I disband myself
And travel on for ever in your scattered paths;
Wheresoe'er you are there shall I be,
I survive in you! I set my ineffaceable stamp
On the womb of time!

VOICES

The laughter we have laughed
Rose in the bulrushes of yore
And mingled with the sound of the syrinx,
The kisses that have wandered to our lips
Will never grow cold;
No hearts but ours shall ever ache and leap,
Our passions are the tingling blood of mankind.

HIS SOUL

For years you have been conning your lesson,
Learning to say "Not me, not mine",
Ashamed both of sorrow and of joy,
Till they slowly were lifted from within you
And stretched overhead
Endless and unchangeable as the milky way
Whose soft light descends indifferently
On all men, from generation to generation.
Now someone says to you:
"It is well so far; taste also the death."

THE PRISONER

Then let there be banners and music!

HIS SOUL AND VOICES

Banners and music!

THE PRISONER

This is no leavetaking,
I am not even going home.
I thank you, days of hope and pride,
I thank you, lamentable solitude,
And you, shades of those that loved me;
I sorrow with you, grieving ones,
And melt with you, O fond ones;
I triumph with those who vanquish,
I rest with those who are dead!

THE PRISONER and HIS SOUL

I / You } have nothing that is { mine / yours } but a name
I bow / Bow } down in { my / your } dream of a day
To the life eternal.

VOICES (softly)

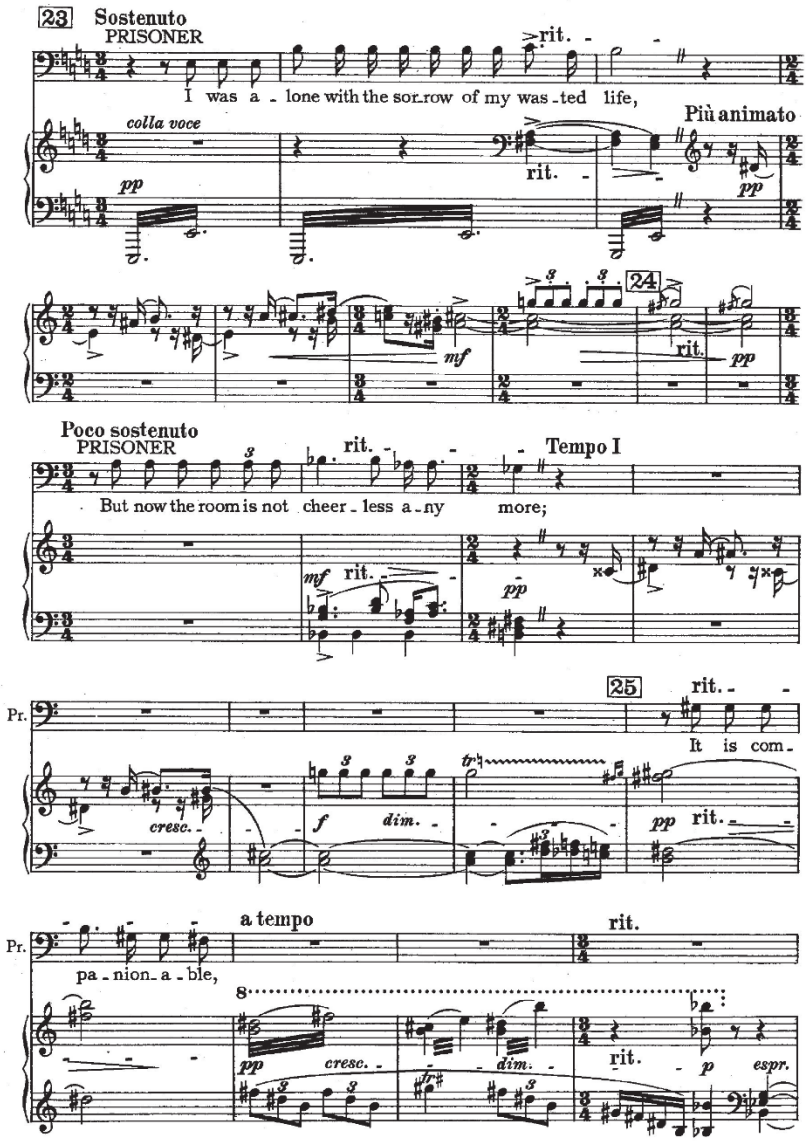
The laughter we have laughed
Rose in the bulrushes of yore, etc.
Bow down in your dream of a day
To the life eternal..

. . . . . .

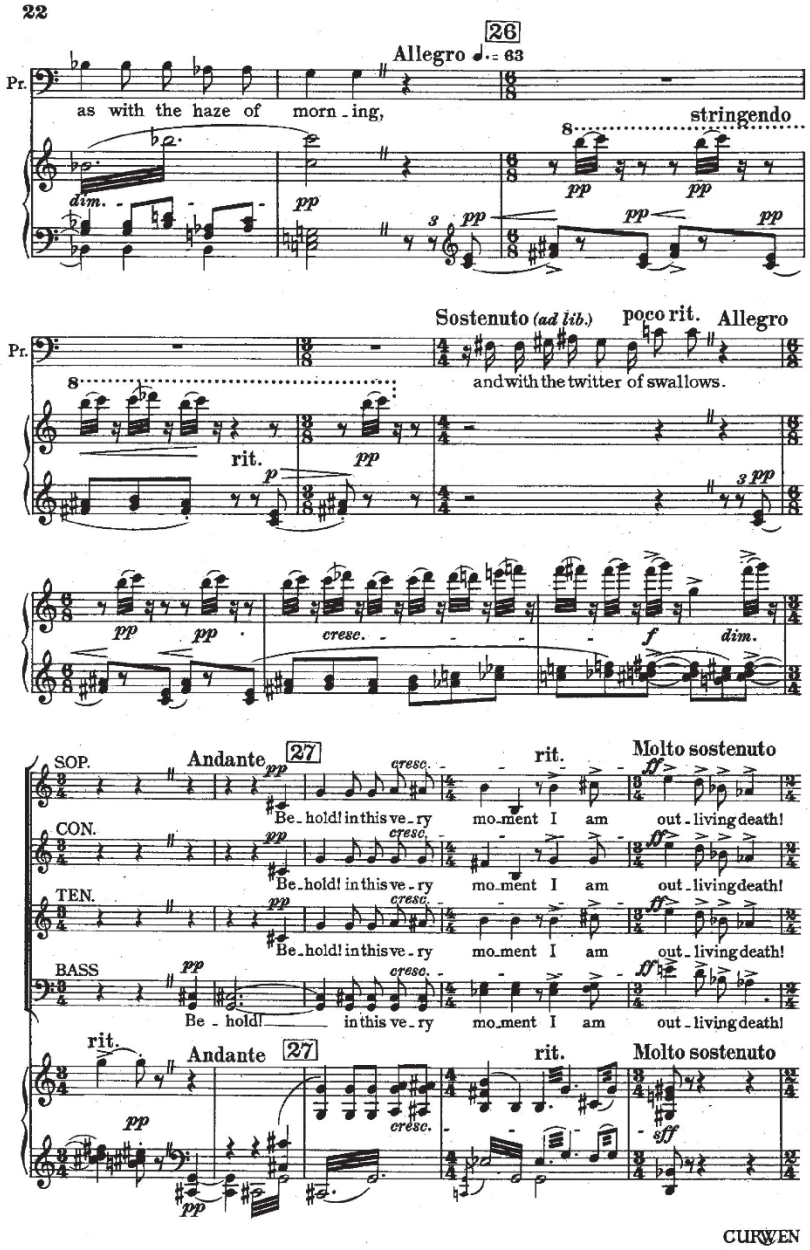
EPILOGUE

PRISONER	ECHO (HIS SOUL and VOICES)
I am the joy and the sorrow —	This is no leavetaking
I am the mirth and the pride —	(Let there be banners and music)
The love .. the silence and the song.	We are not even going home.
I am the thought ..	.. the thought ..
I am the soul ..	.. the soul ..
I am the home ..	.. the home ..

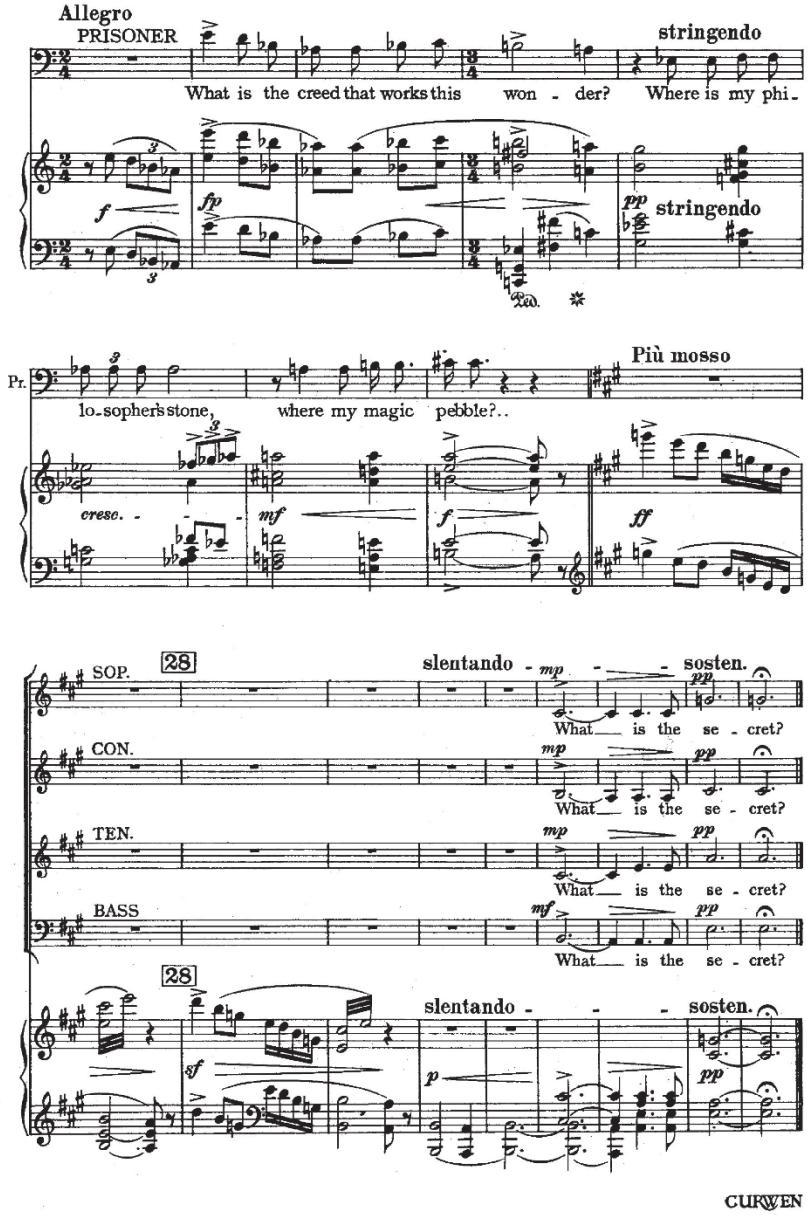
END

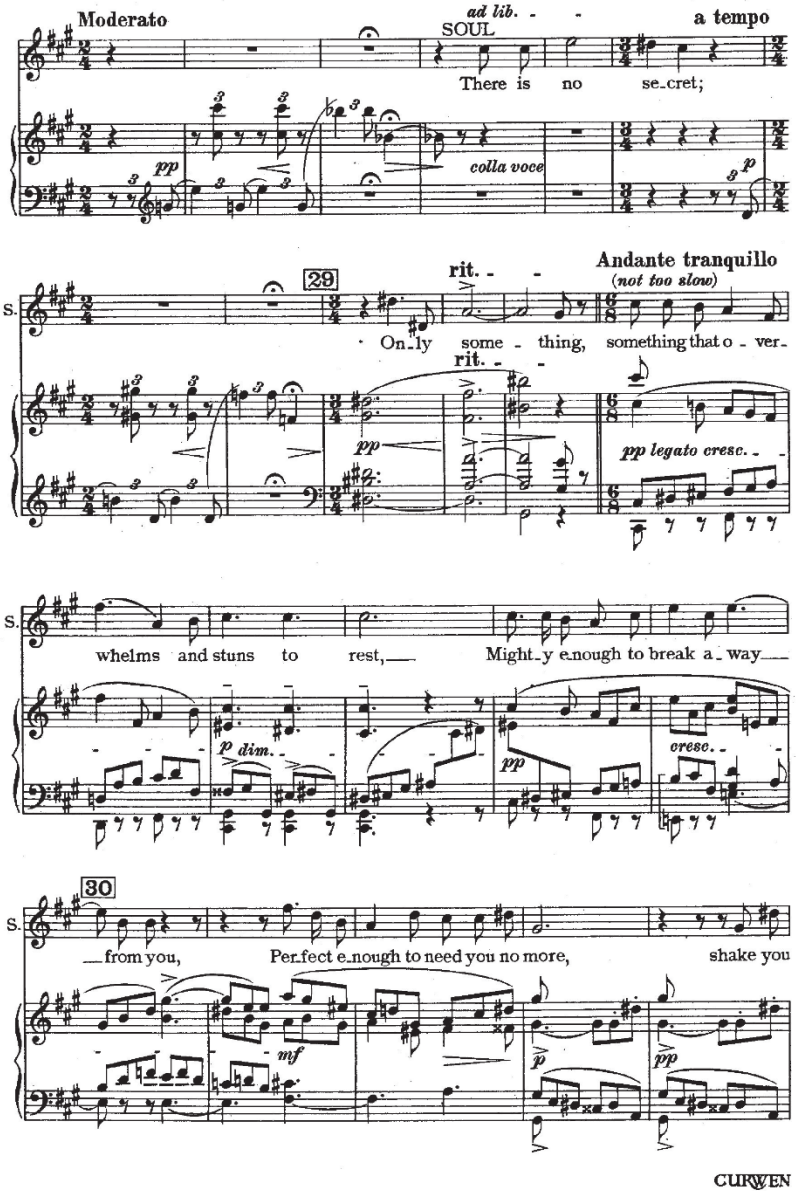

23 Sostenuto
PRISONER
I was a - lone with the sor_row of my was - ted life,
rit.
colla voce
pp
rit.
Più animato
pp
24
mf
rit.
pp
Poco sostenuto
PRISONER
But now the room is not cheer - less a - ny more;
rit.
Tempo I
mf
rit.
pp
25
rit.
Pr.
It is com -
cresc.
f
dim.
pp
rit.
a tempo
rit.
Pr.
pa - nion - a - ble,
pp
cresc.
dim.
rit.
p
espr.

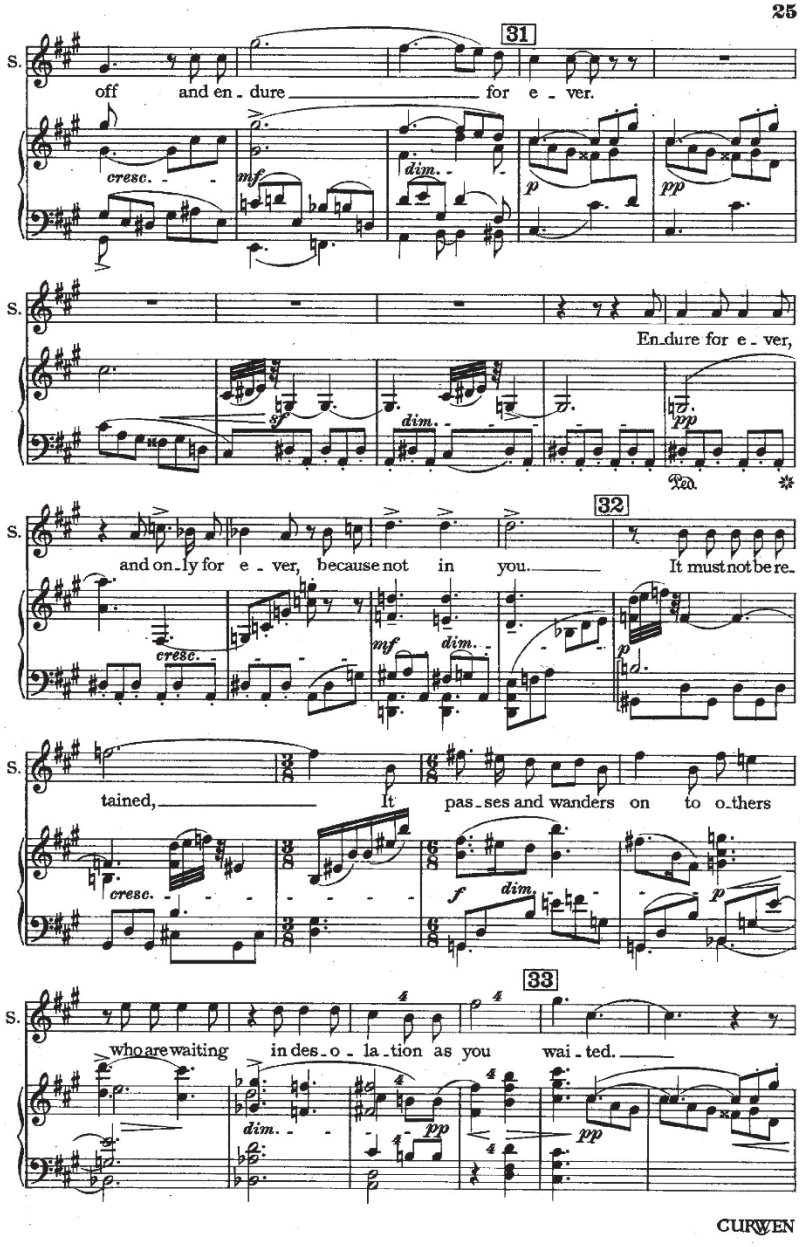
CURWEN


26
Allegro ♩.= 63
Pr.
as with the haze of morn - ing,
stringendo
dim.
pp
Sostenuto (ad lib.)
poco rit.
Allegro
and with the twitter of swallows.
rit.
crese.
f
dim.
SOP.
CON.
TEN.
BASS
Andante
27
cresc.
Be - hold! in this ve - ry mo - ment I am out - living death!
Be - hold!
in this ve - ry mo - ment I am out - living death!
Molto sostenuto
sff

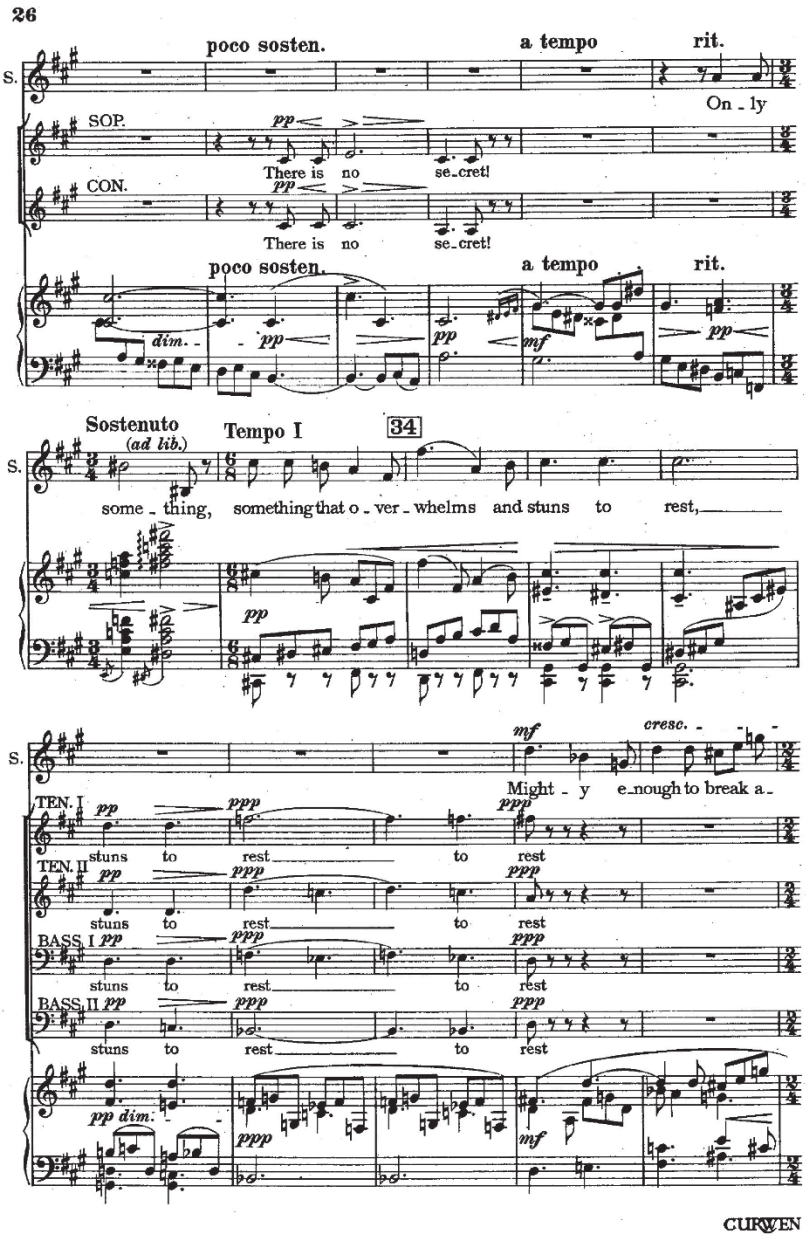
CURWEN

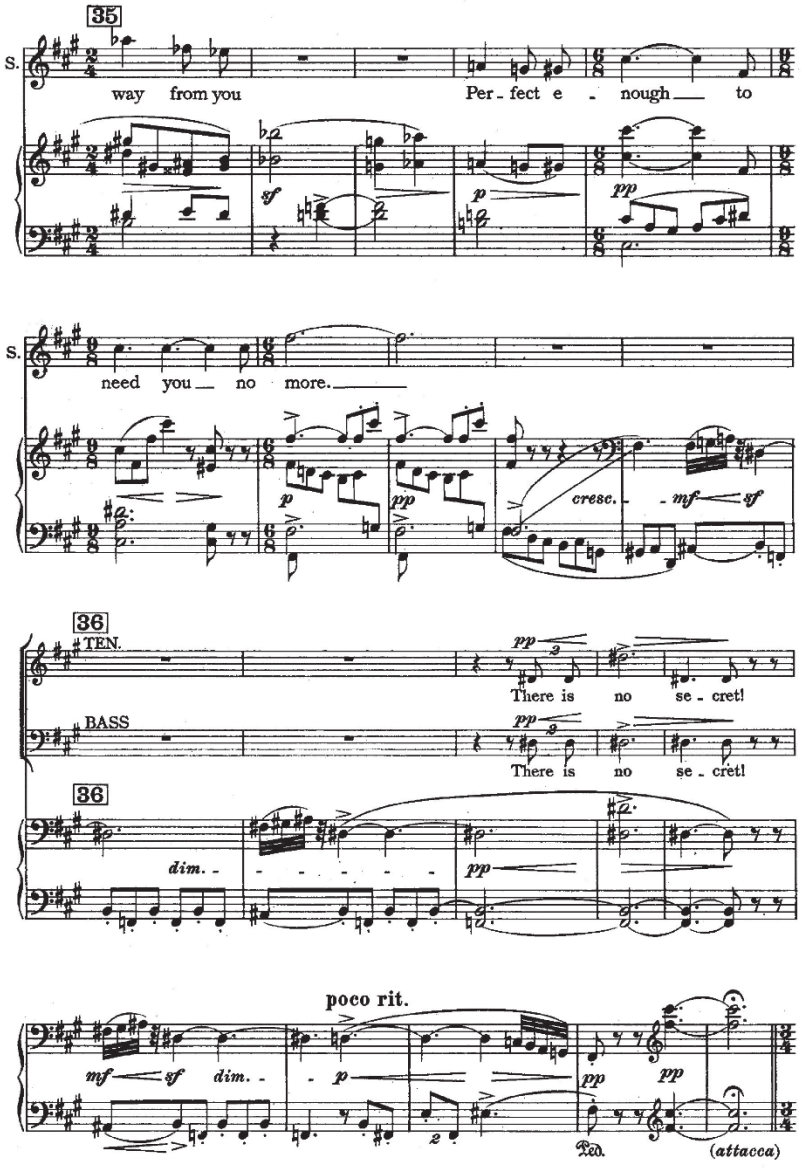

Allegro
PRISONER
What is the creed that works this won - der?
stringendo
Where is my phi -
stringendo
Più mosso
Pr.
lo-sopher's stone, where my magic pebble?..
cresc. - - -
28
SOP.
CON.
TEN.
BASS
slentando - - - sosten.
What — is the se - cret?
28
slentando - - - sosten.


Moderato
ad lib.
a tempo
SOUL
There is no se-cret;
colla voce
29
rit.
Andante tranquillo
(not too slow)
S.
On-ly some - thing, something that o - ver-
rit.
pp legato cresc.
whelms and stuns to rest, Might-y e-nough to break a-way
p dim.
cresc.
30
from you, Per-fect e-nough to need you no more, shake you
mf
CURWEN

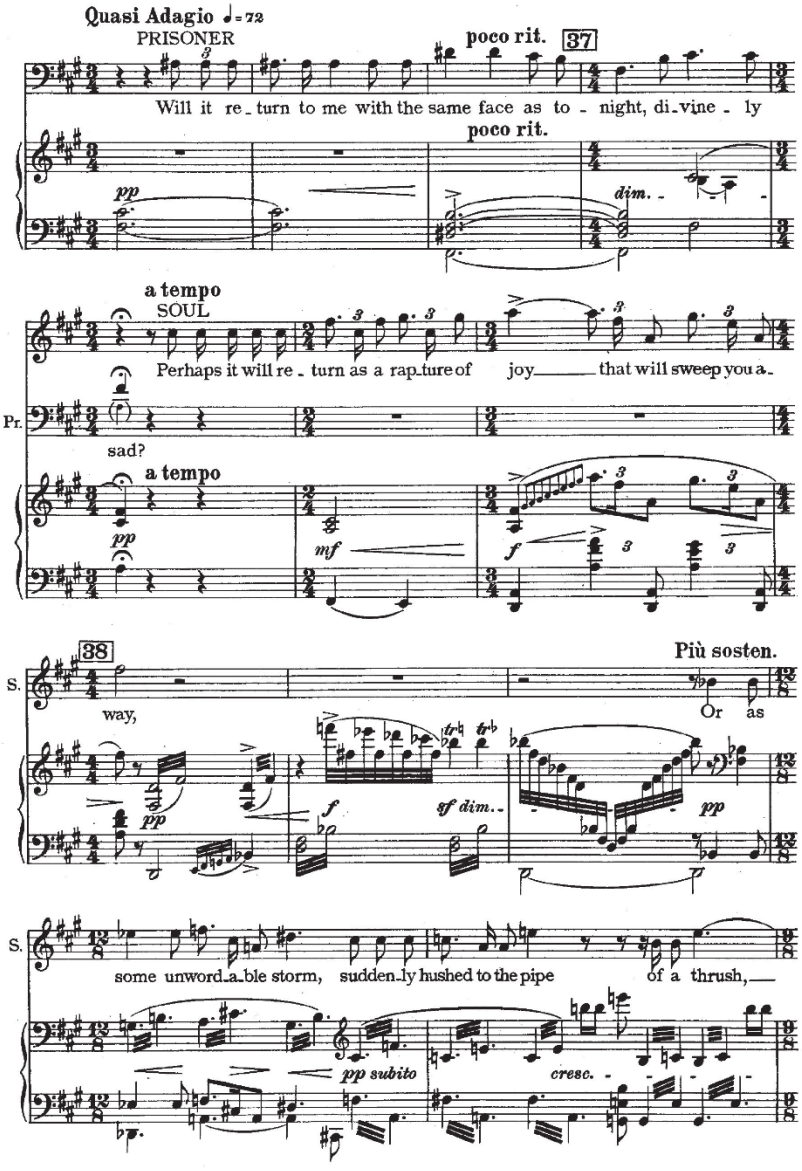

31
S.
off and en - dure for e - ver.
cresc.
mf
dim.
p
pp
S.
En-dure for e - ver,
sf
dim.
pp
Ped.
32
S.
and on-ly for e - ver, because not in you. It must not be re-
cresc.
mf
dim.
p
S.
tained, It pas-ses and wanders on to o-thers
cresc.
f
dim.
p
33
S.
who are waiting in des-o-la-tion as you wai-ted.
dim.
pp
pp

CURWEN

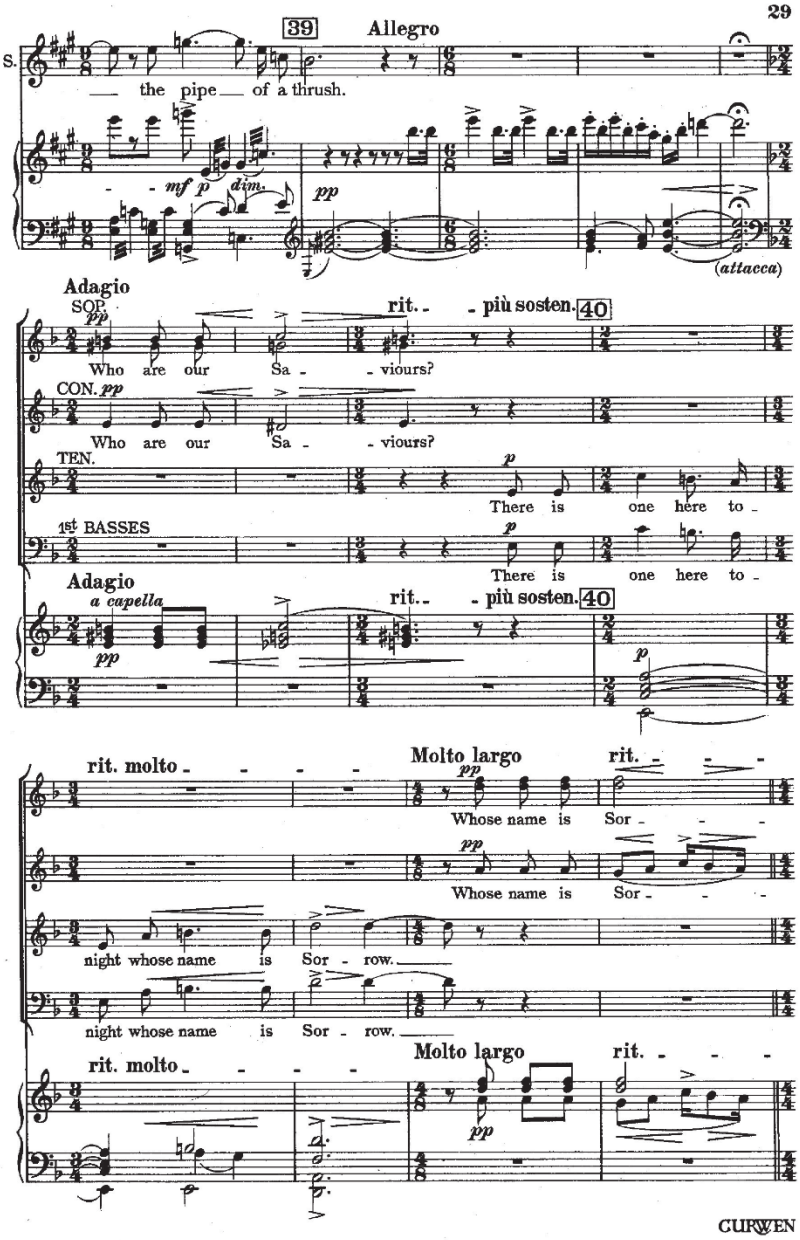

26
poco sosten.
a tempo
rit.
S.
On - ly
SOP.
There is no se-cret!
CON.
There is no se-cret!
poco sosten.
a tempo
rit.
Sostenuto
(ad lib.)
Tempo I
34
some - thing, something that o - ver - whelms and stuns to rest,
Might - y e-nough to break a -
TEN. I
TEN. II
BASS. I
BASS. II
stuns to rest to rest
CURWEN

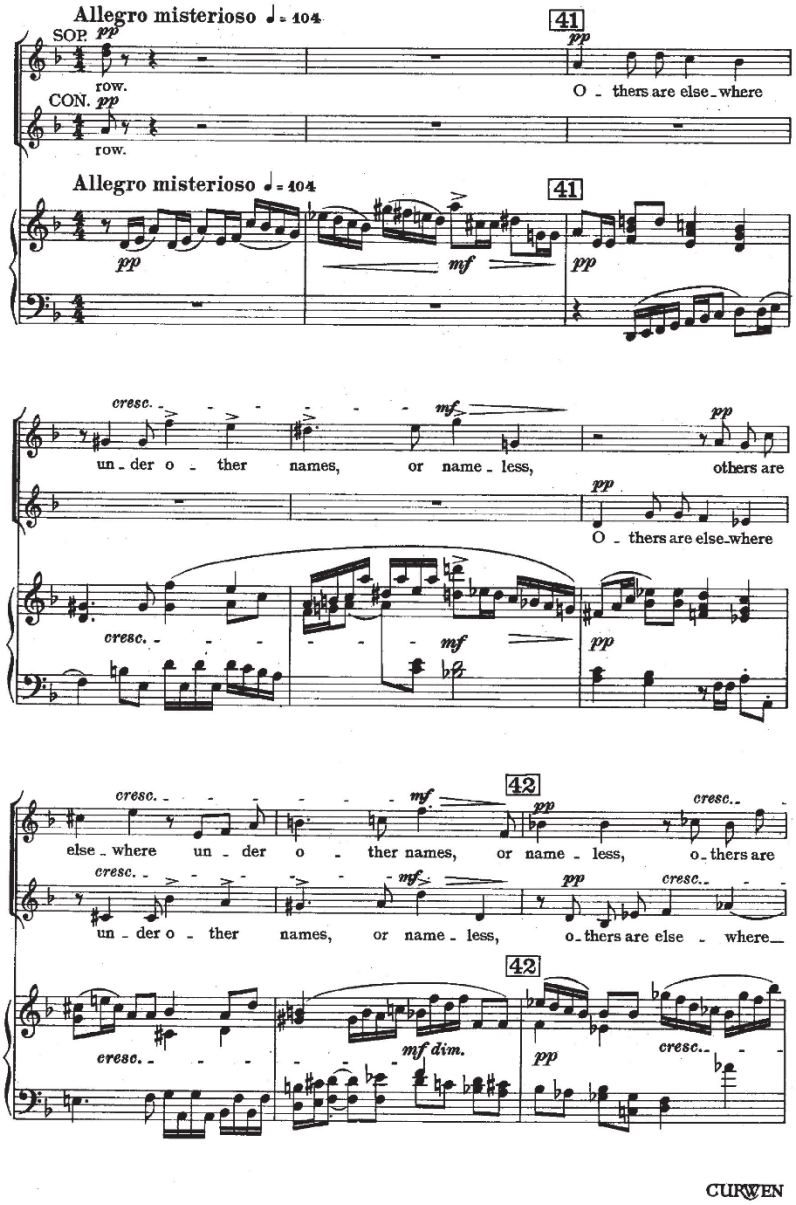

35
S.
way from you
Per - fect e - nough to
need you no more.
cresc.
36
TEN.
There is no se - cret!
BASS
There is no se - cret!
dim.
poco rit.
(attacca)

CURWEN

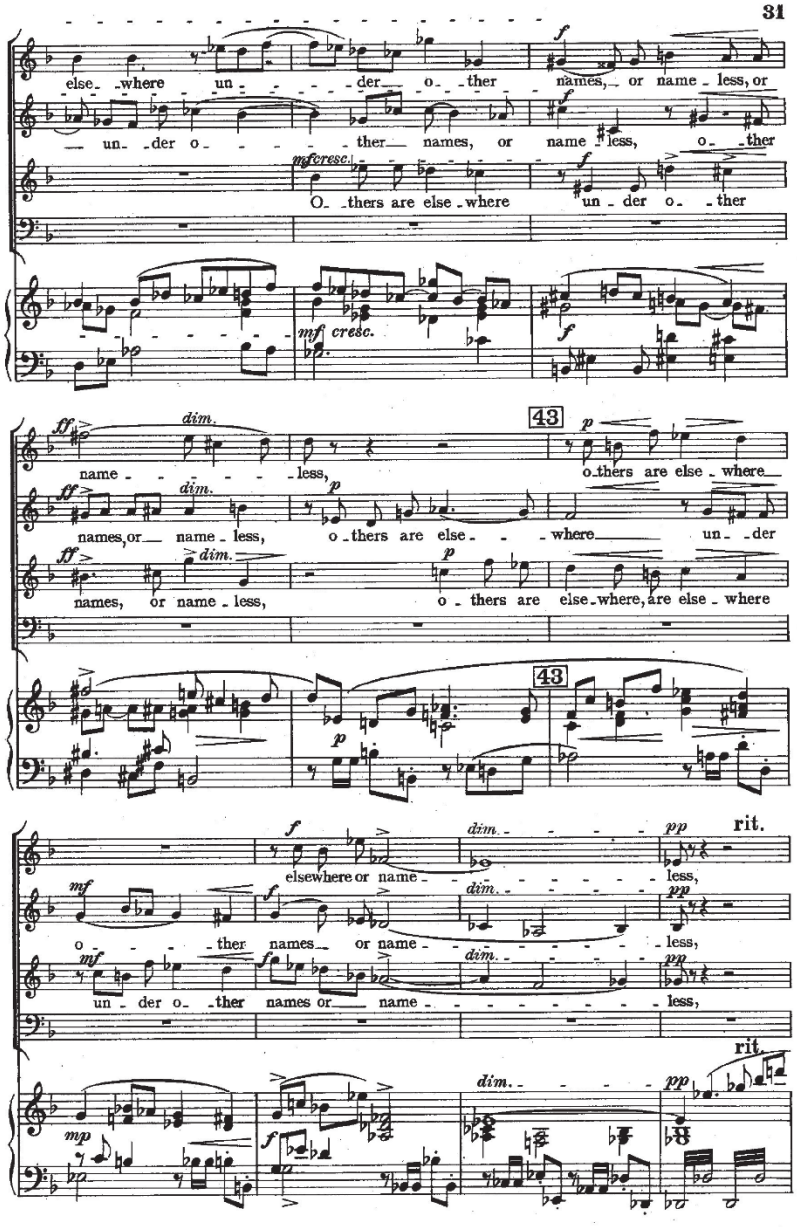

Quasi Adagio ♩= 72
PRISONER
poco rit.
37
Will it re - turn to me with the same face as to - night, di - vine - ly
poco rit.
pp
dim.
a tempo
SOUL
Perhaps it will re - turn as a rap - ture of joy that will sweep you a -
Pr.
sad?
a tempo
pp
mf
f
38
Più sosten.
S.
way,
Or as
pp
f
sf dim.
pp
some unword - a - ble storm, sudden - ly hushed to the pipe of a thrush,
pp subito
cresc.

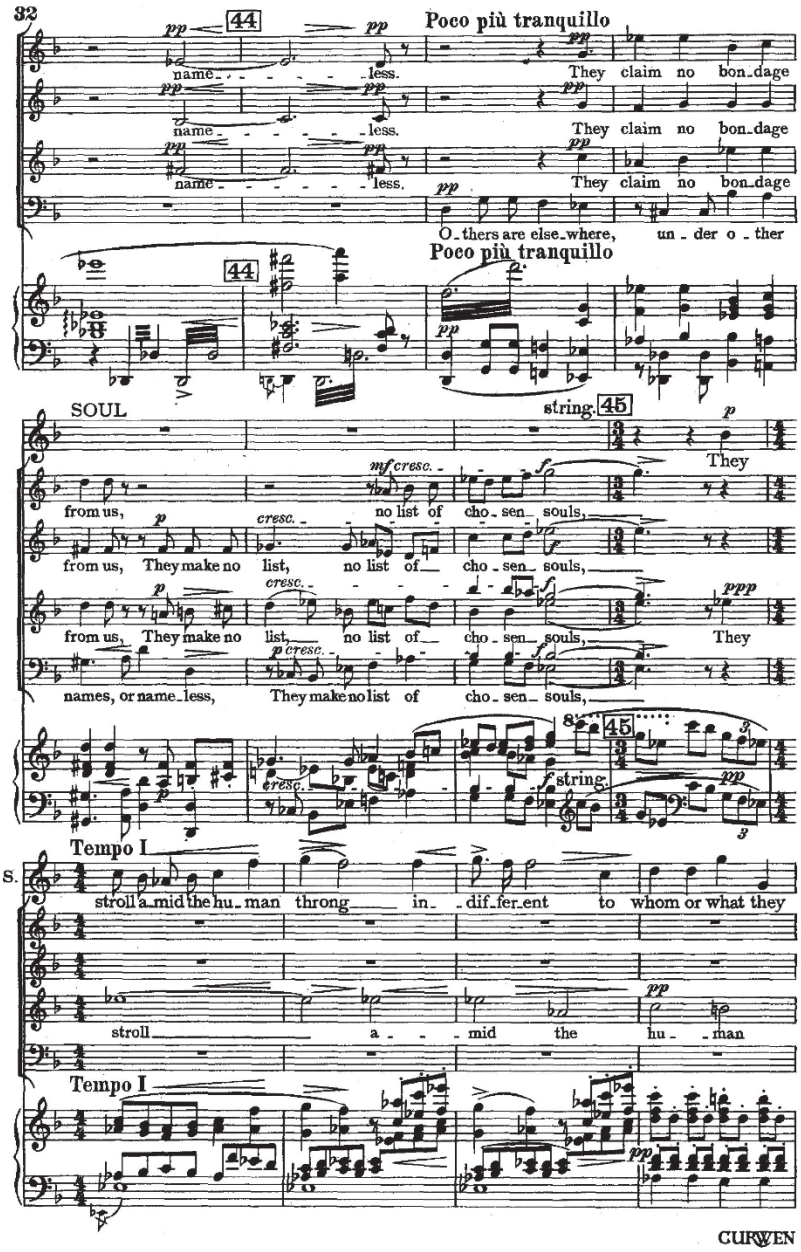
CURWEN

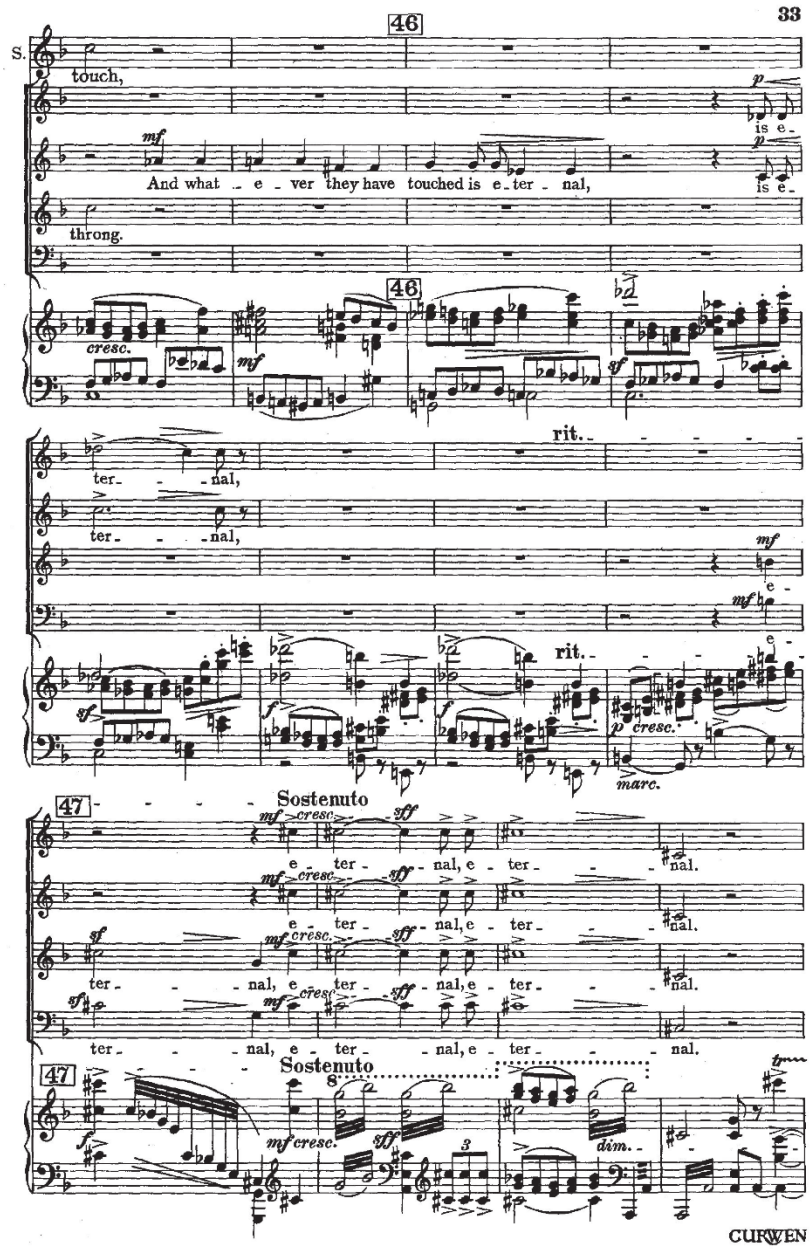

39
Allegro
S.
the pipe of a thrush.
mf
p
dim.
pp
(attacca)
Adagio
SOP.
pp
rit.
più sosten.
40
Who are our Sa - viours?
CON. pp
Who are our Sa - viours?
TEN.
p
There is one here to -
1st BASSES
p
There is one here to -
Adagio
a capella
pp
rit.
più sosten.
40
p
rit. molto
Molto largo
rit.
pp
Whose name is Sor -
pp
Whose name is Sor -
night whose name is Sor - row.
night whose name is Sor - row.
rit. molto
Molto largo
rit.
pp
CURWEN

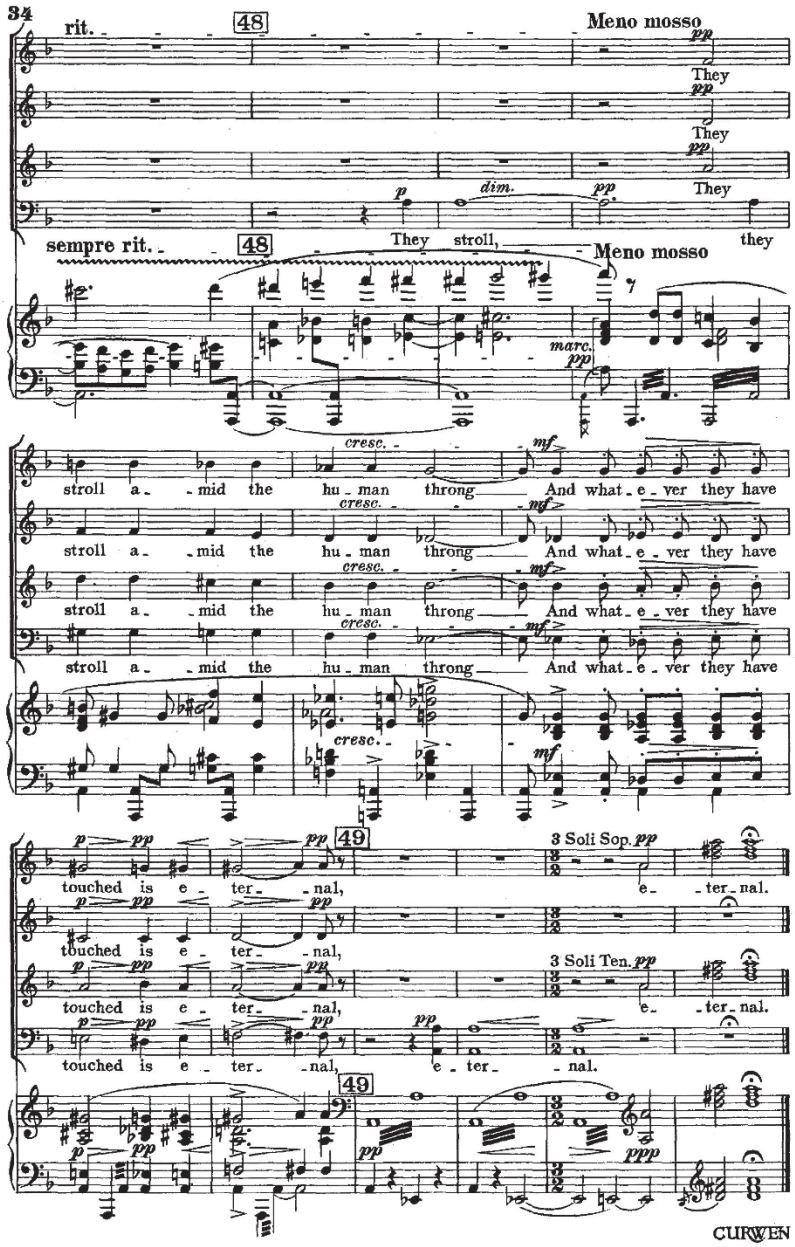

Allegro misterioso ♩= 104
SOP.
pp
row.
CON. pp
row.
41
pp
O - thers are else - where
Allegro misterioso ♩= 104
41
pp
mf
pp
cresc.
mf
pp
un - der o - ther names, or name - less, others are
pp
O - thers are else - where
cresc.
mf
pp
42
cresc.
mf
pp
cresc.
else - where un - der o - ther names, or name - less, o - thers are
cresc.
mf
pp
cresc.
un - der o - ther names, or name - less, o - thers are else - where
42
cresc.
mf dim.
pp
cresc.

CURWEN


else- -where un- -der o- -ther names, or name- -less, or
un- -der o- -ther names, or name- -less, o- -ther
O- -thers are else- -where un- -der o- -ther
name- -less,
o-thers are else- -where
names, or name- -less, o- -thers are else- -where un- -der
names, or name- -less, o- -thers are else-where, are else- -where
elsewhere or name- -less,
o- -ther names or name- -less,
un- -der o- -ther names or name- -less,
rit.
rit.
CURWEN

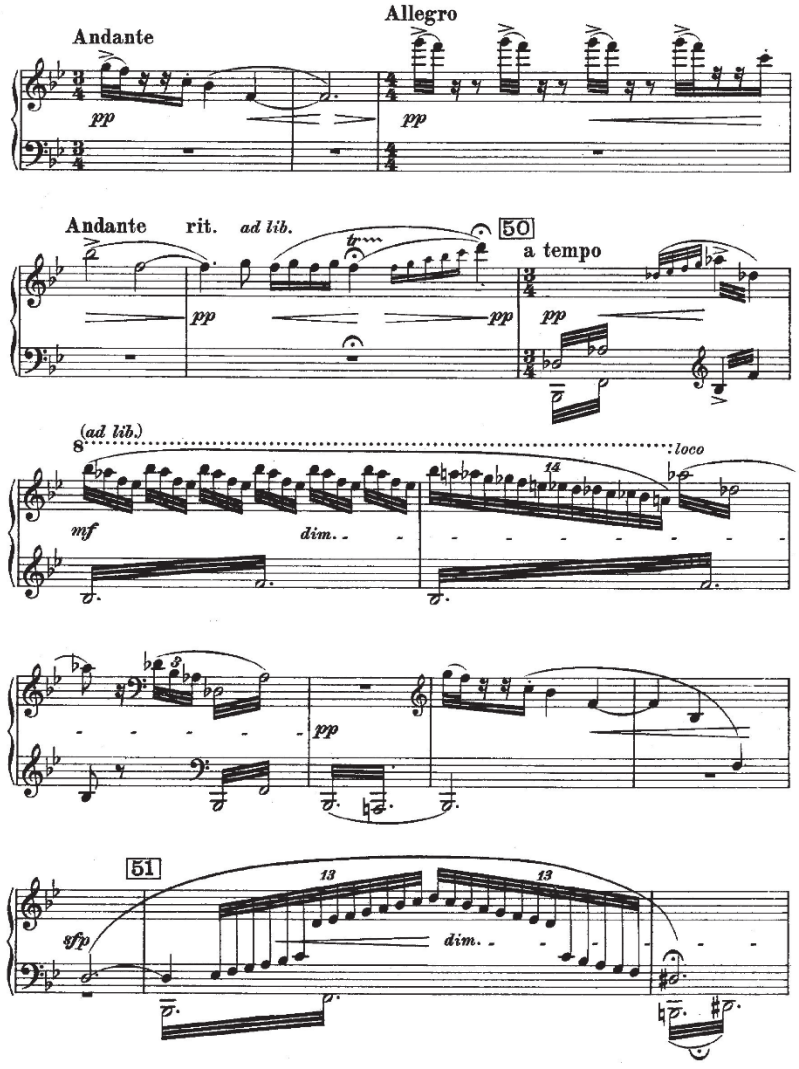

32
Poco più tranquillo
name - - - - - less.
They claim no bon-dage
O-thers are else-where,
un - der o - ther
SOUL
string.
They
from us,
no list of cho-sen souls,
They make no list,
names, or name-less,
Tempo I
stroll a-mid the hu-man throng in-dif-fer-ent to whom or what they
stroll a - - mid the hu - man
CURWEN


46
S.
touch,
mf
And what - e - ver they have touched is e - ter - nal,
p
is e -
throng.
cresc.
rit.
ter - - - nal,
Sostenuto
47
e - ter - nal, e - ter - - - nal.
sf
mf cresc.
ff
dim.
CURWEN

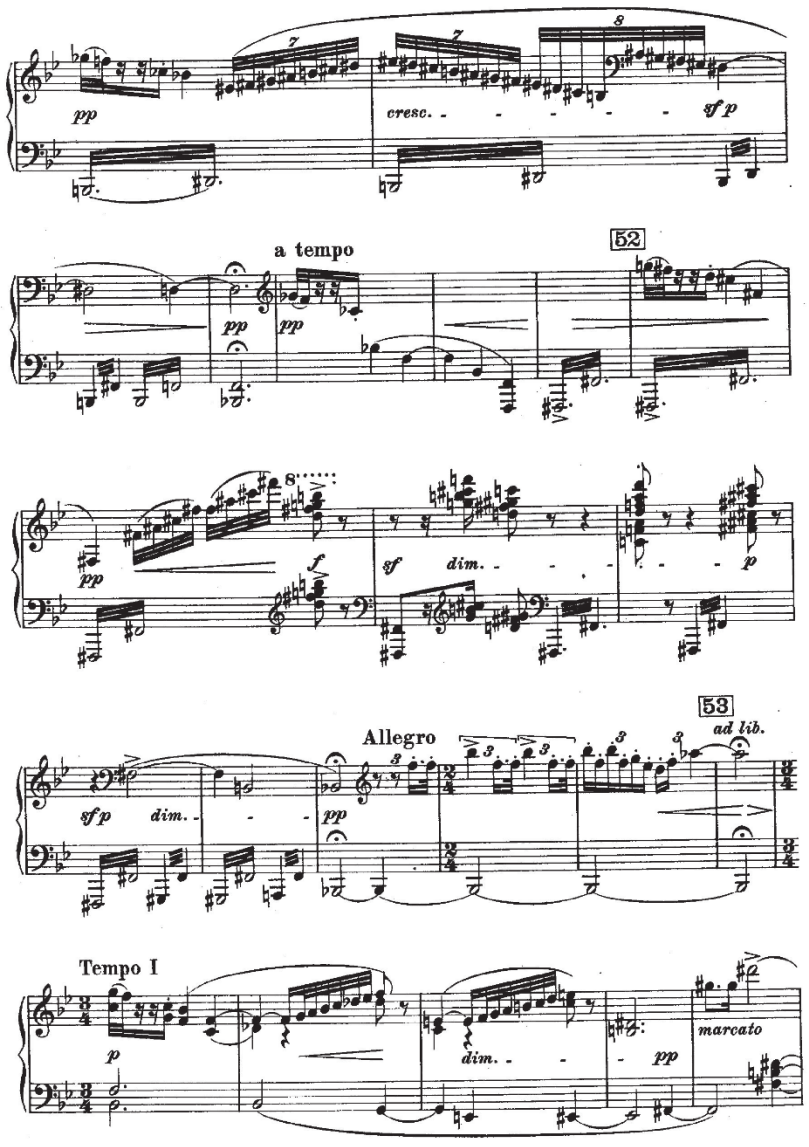

34
rit.
48
Meno mosso
They
They
They
sempre rit.
48
They stroll, they
Meno mosso
marc.
cresc.
mf
stroll a - mid the hu - man throng And what - e - ver they have
stroll a - mid the hu - man throng And what - e - ver they have
stroll a - mid the hu - man throng And what - e - ver they have
stroll a - mid the hu - man throng And what - e - ver they have
49
3 Soli Sop.
touched is e - ter - nal, e - ter - nal.
touched is e - ter - nal,
3 Soli Ten.
touched is e - ter - nal, e - ter - nal.
touched is e - ter - nal, e - ter - nal.
49
CURWEN

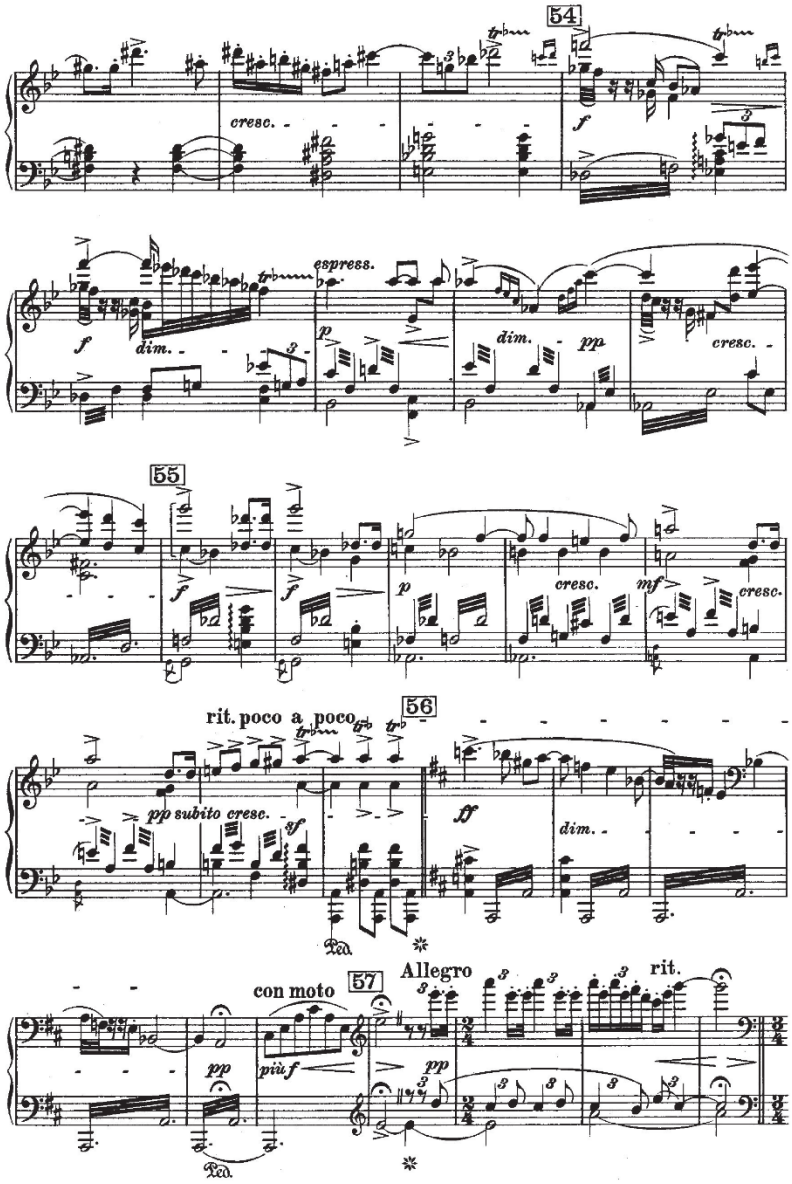
ORCHESTRAL INTERLUDE

The first glimmer of dawn

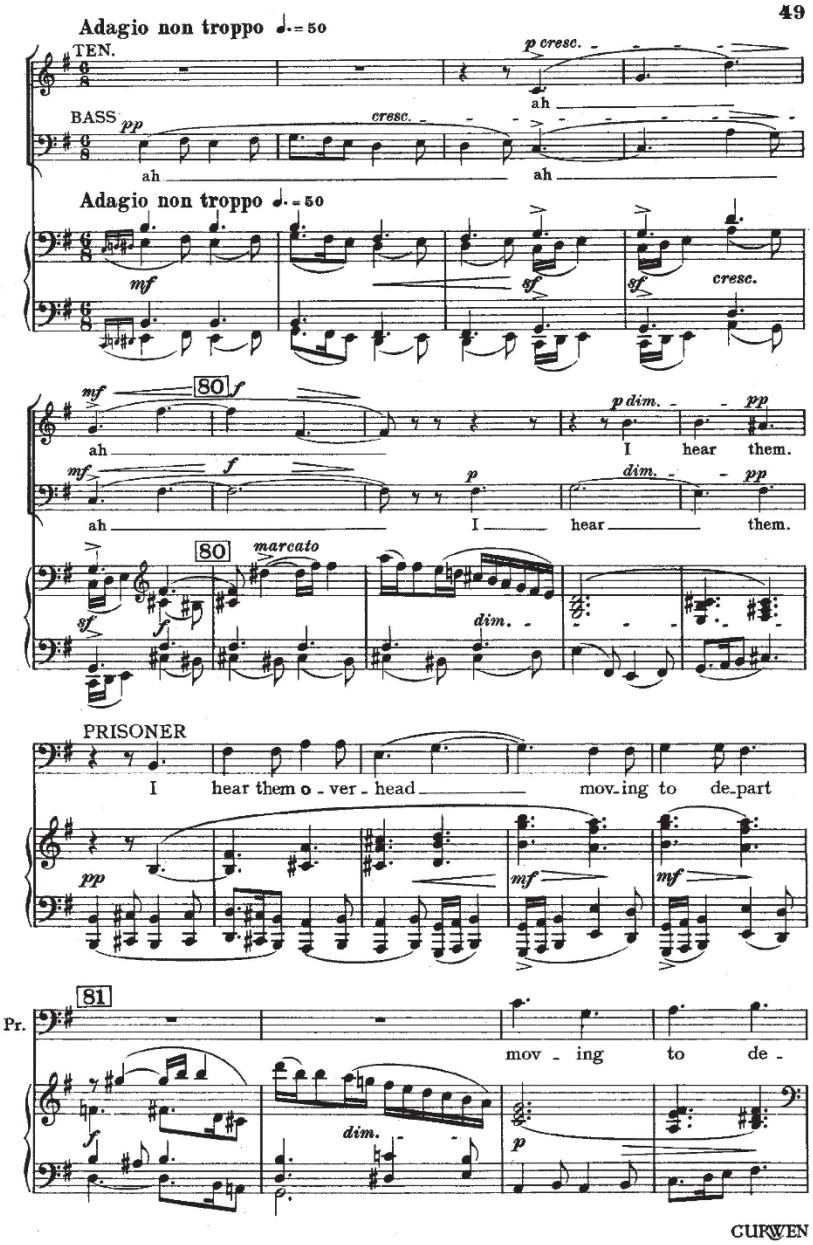


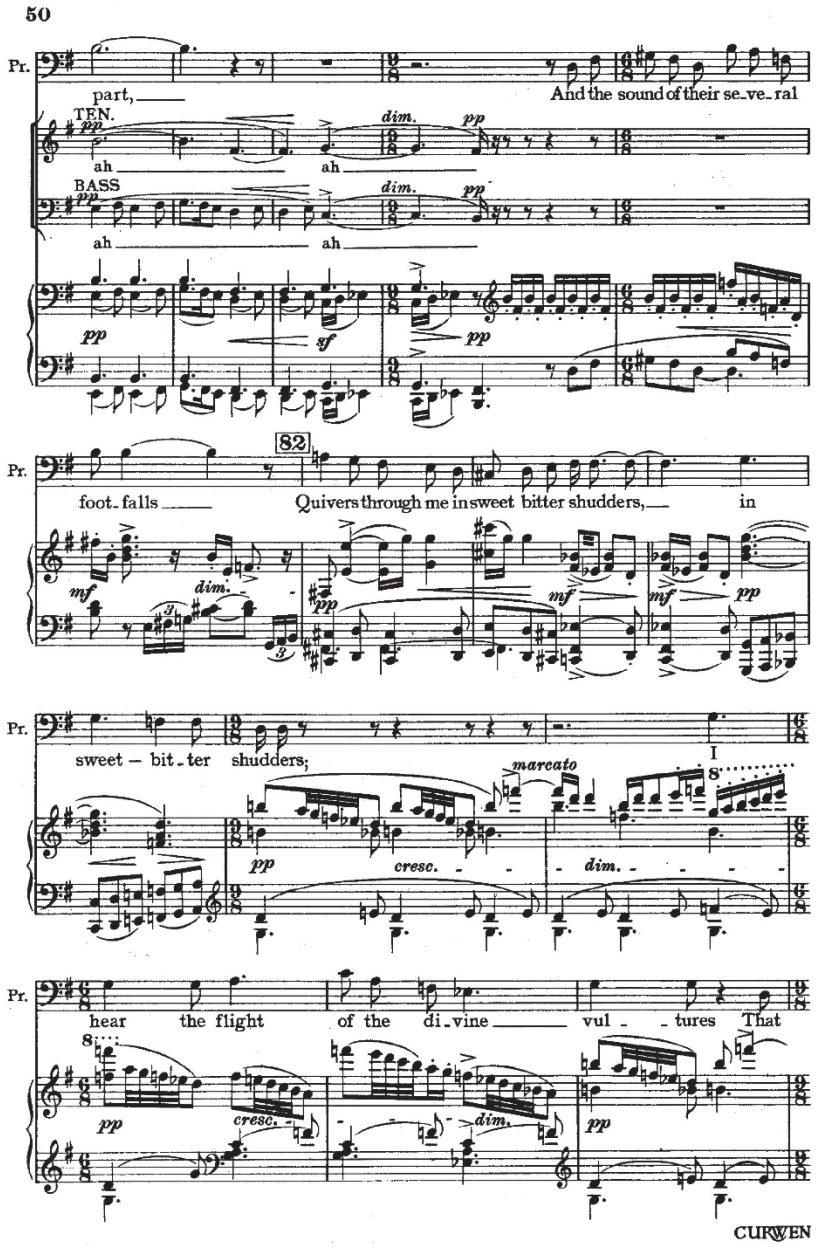
CURWEN

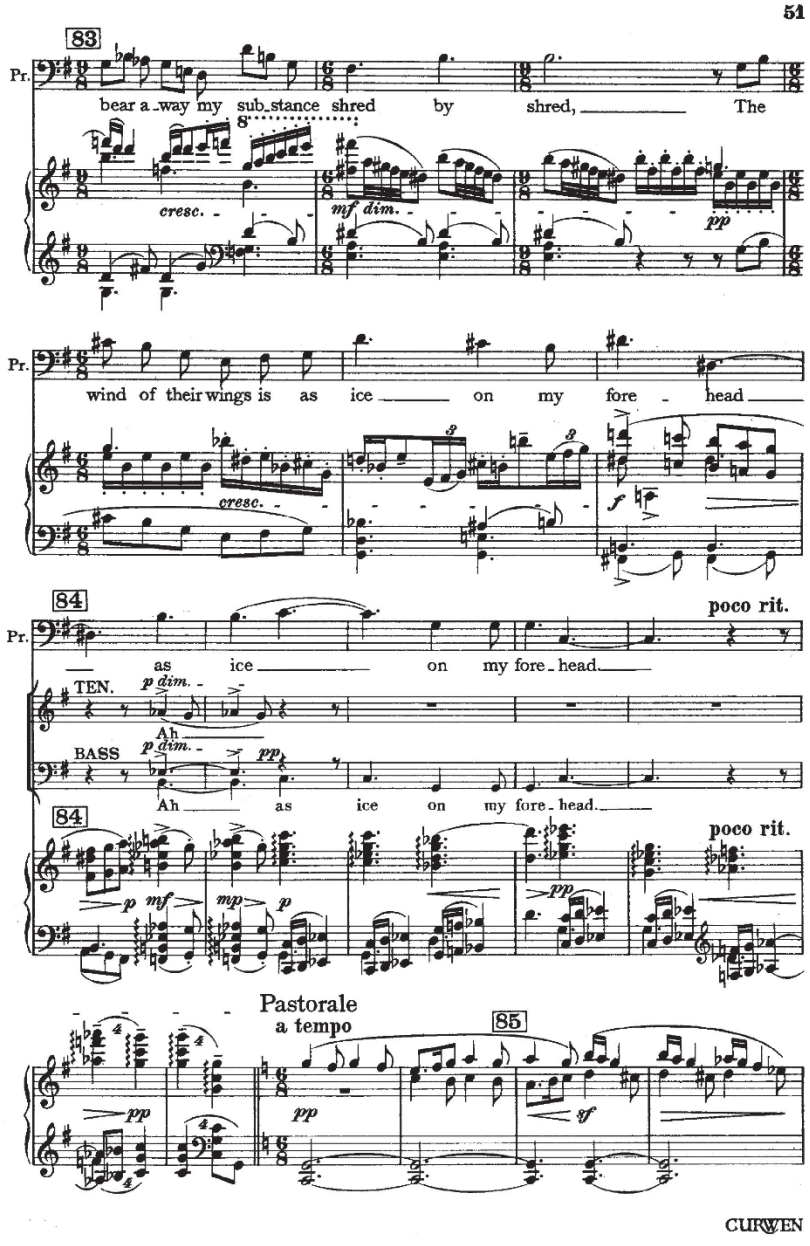

pp
cresc.
sf p
a tempo
52
pp
sf
dim.
p
53
Allegro
ad lib.
sf p
dim.
Tempo I
marcato


54
cresc.
f
espress.
f
dim.
p
dim.
pp
cresc.
55
f
f
p
cresc.
mf
cresc.
rit. poco a poco
56
pp subito cresc.
sf
ff
dim.
Ped.
con moto
57
Allegro
rit.
pp
più f
pp
Ped.

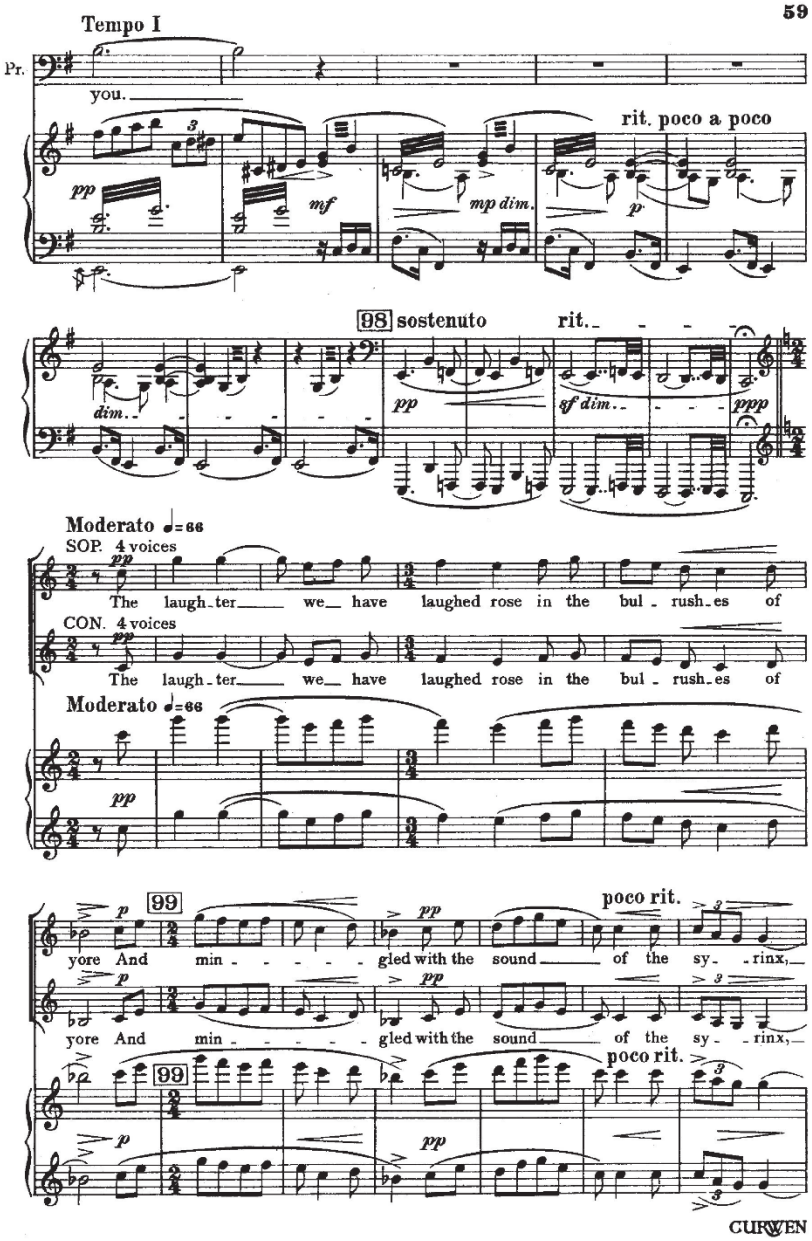
CURWEN

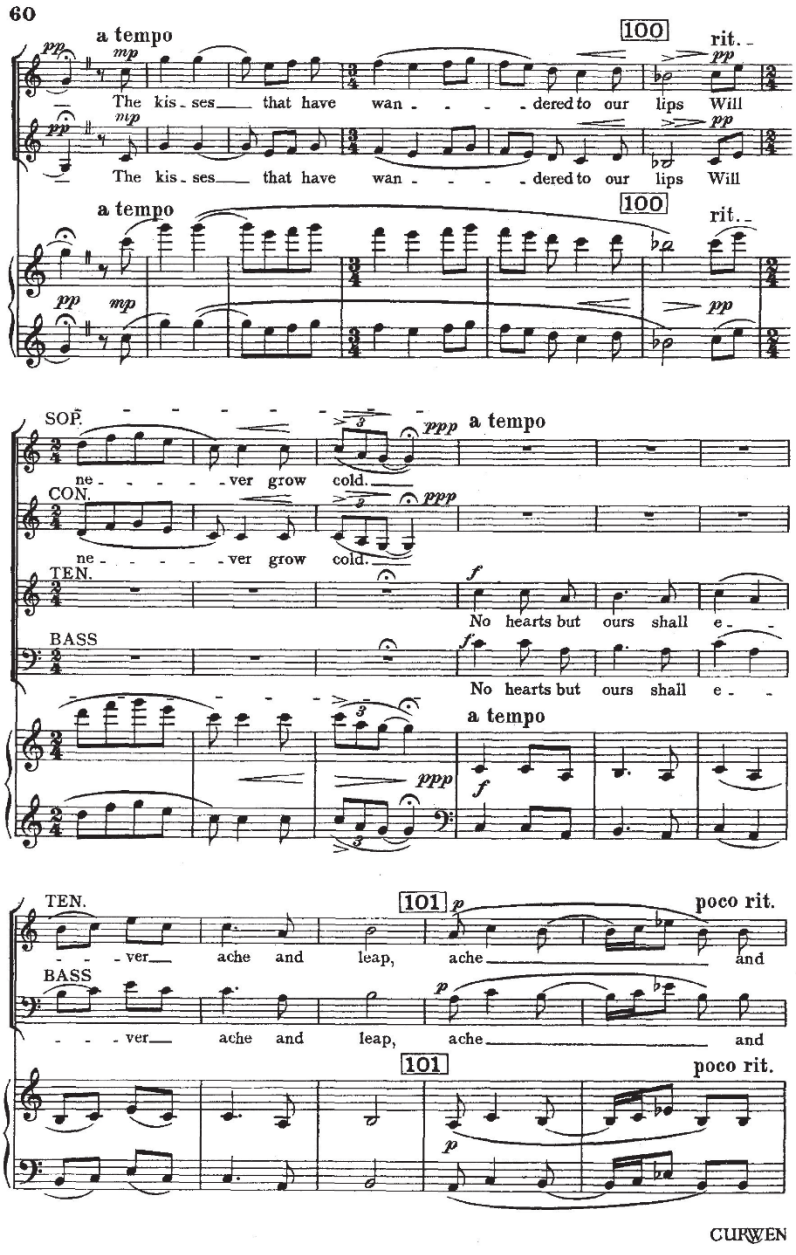

Adagio non troppo ♩. = 50
TEN.
p cresc.
ah
BASS
pp
cresc.
ah
ah
Adagio non troppo ♩. = 50
mf
sf
sf
cresc.
mf
80
f
p dim.
pp
ah
I hear them.
mf
f
p
dim.
pp
ah
I
hear
them.
80
marcato
sf
f
dim.
PRISONER
I hear them o - ver - head
mov - ing to de - part
pp
mf
mf
Pr.
81
mov - ing to de -
f
dim.
p
CURWEN

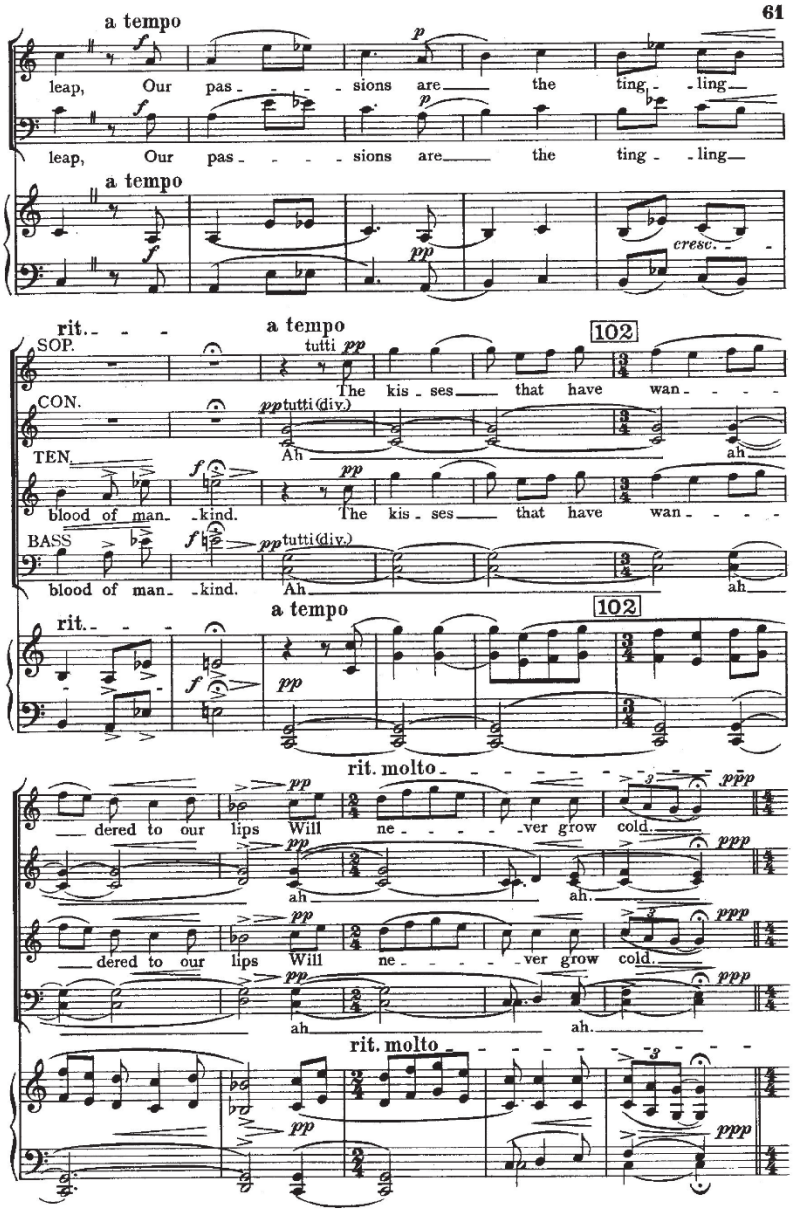

50
Pr.
part,
And the sound of their se_ve_ral
TEN.
ah
ah
dim.
pp
BASS
ah
ah
sf
82
foot_falls
Quivers through me in sweet bitter shudders,
in
mf
dim.
sweet – bit_ter
shudders;
marcato
cresc.
hear
the flight
of the di_vine
vul _ _ tures
That
CURWEN


83
Pr.
bear a_way my sub_stance shred by shred, The
cresc.
mf dim.
pp
Pr.
wind of their wings is as ice on my fore - head
cresc.
f
84
poco rit.
Pr.
as ice on my fore_head
TEN.
p dim.
Ah
BASS
p dim.
pp
Ah as ice on my fore_head.
84
poco rit.
p mf mp p pp
Pastorale
a tempo
85
pp
pp
sf

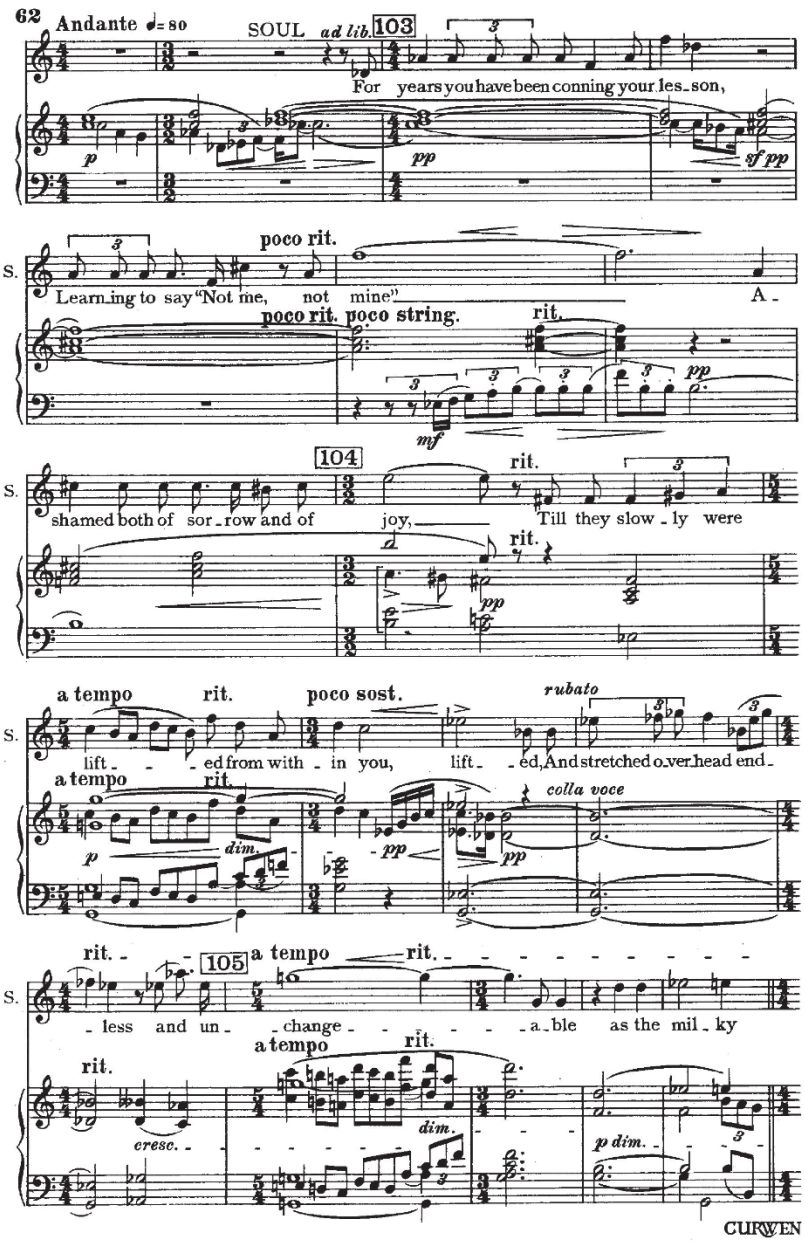
CURWEN

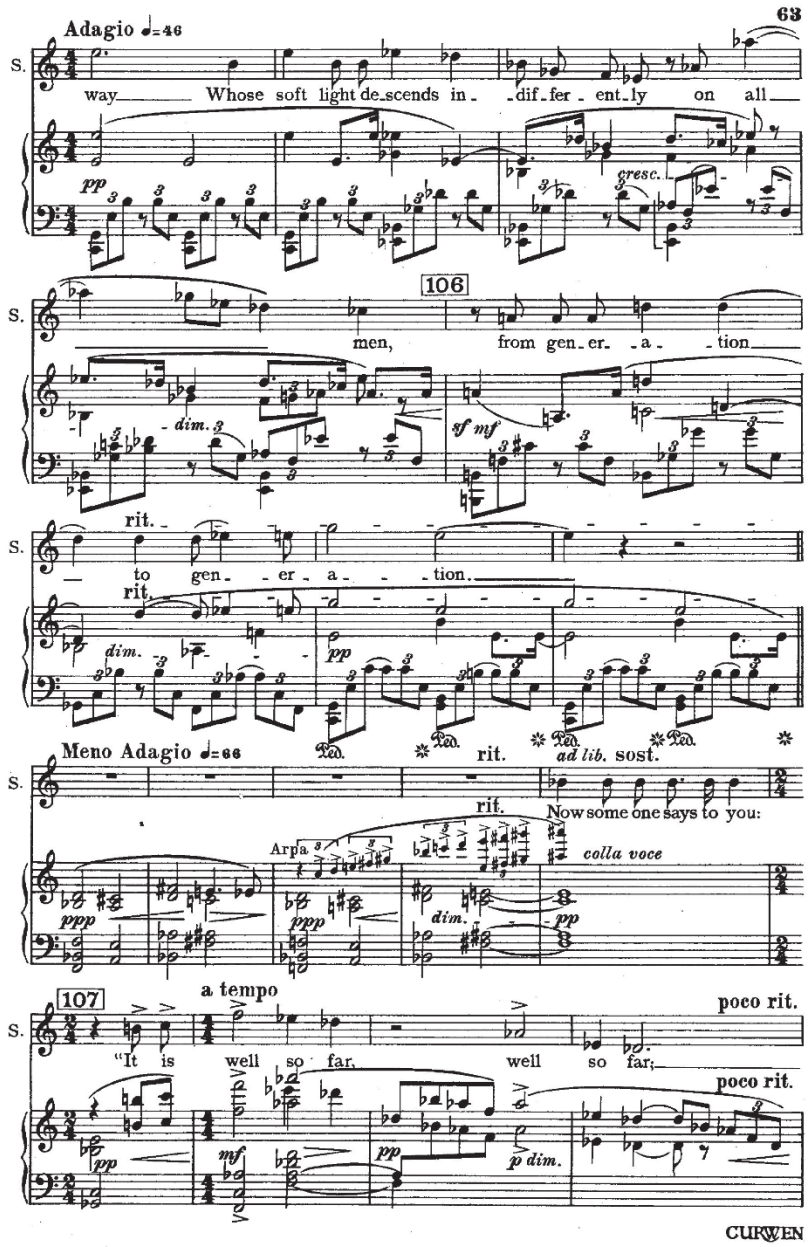

Tempo I
Pr.
you.
rit. poco a poco
98 sostenuto
rit.
Moderato ♩=66
SOP. 4 voices
The laugh-ter we have laughed rose in the bul-rush-es of
CON. 4 voices
The laugh-ter we have laughed rose in the bul-rush-es of
Moderato ♩=66
99
poco rit.
yore And min-gled with the sound of the sy-rinx,
yore And min-gled with the sound of the sy-rinx,
99
poco rit.
CURWEN

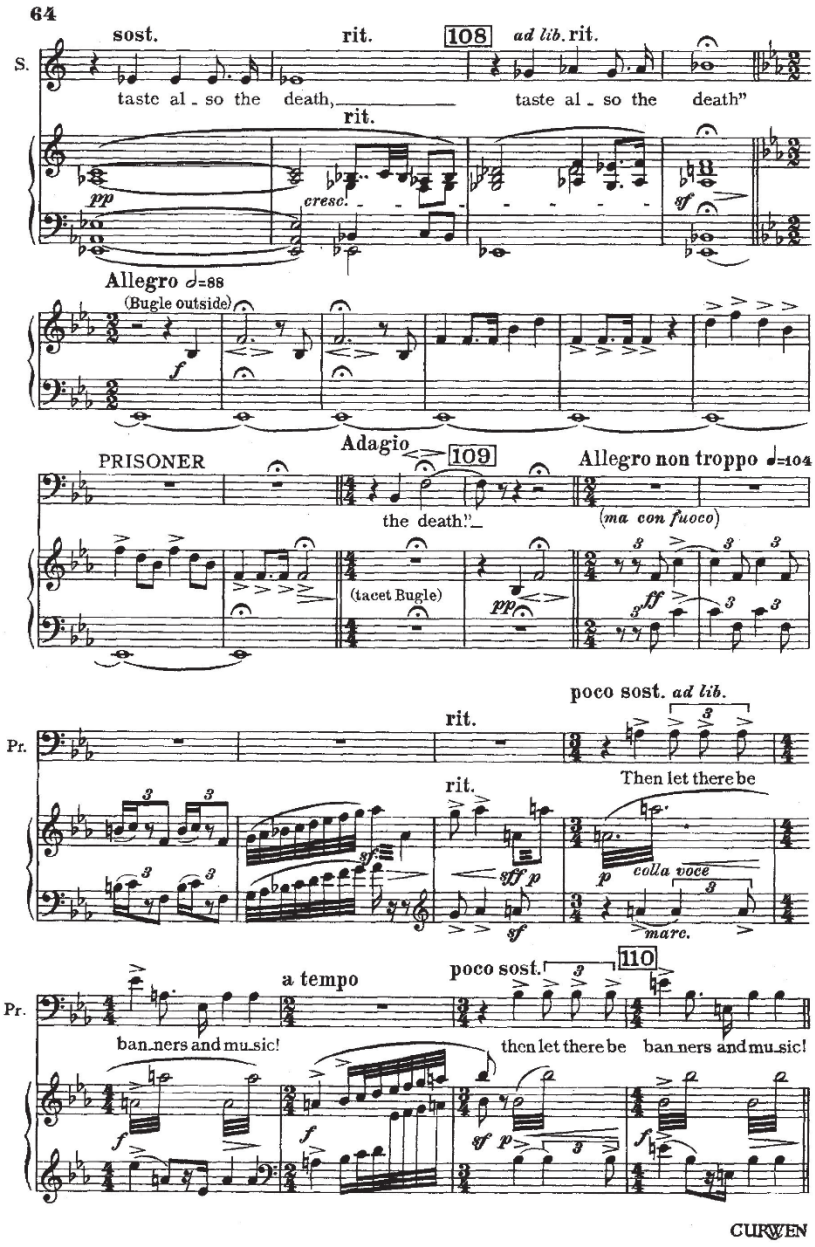

60
a tempo
100
rit.
The kis - ses that have wan - - - - dered to our lips Will
a tempo
100
rit.
SOP.
ne - - - - - ver grow cold.
a tempo
CON.
ne - - - - - ver grow cold.
TEN.
No hearts but ours shall e - -
BASS
No hearts but ours shall e - -
a tempo
TEN.
101
poco rit.
- - - ver ache and leap, ache and
BASS
- - - ver ache and leap, ache and
101
poco rit.
CURWEN

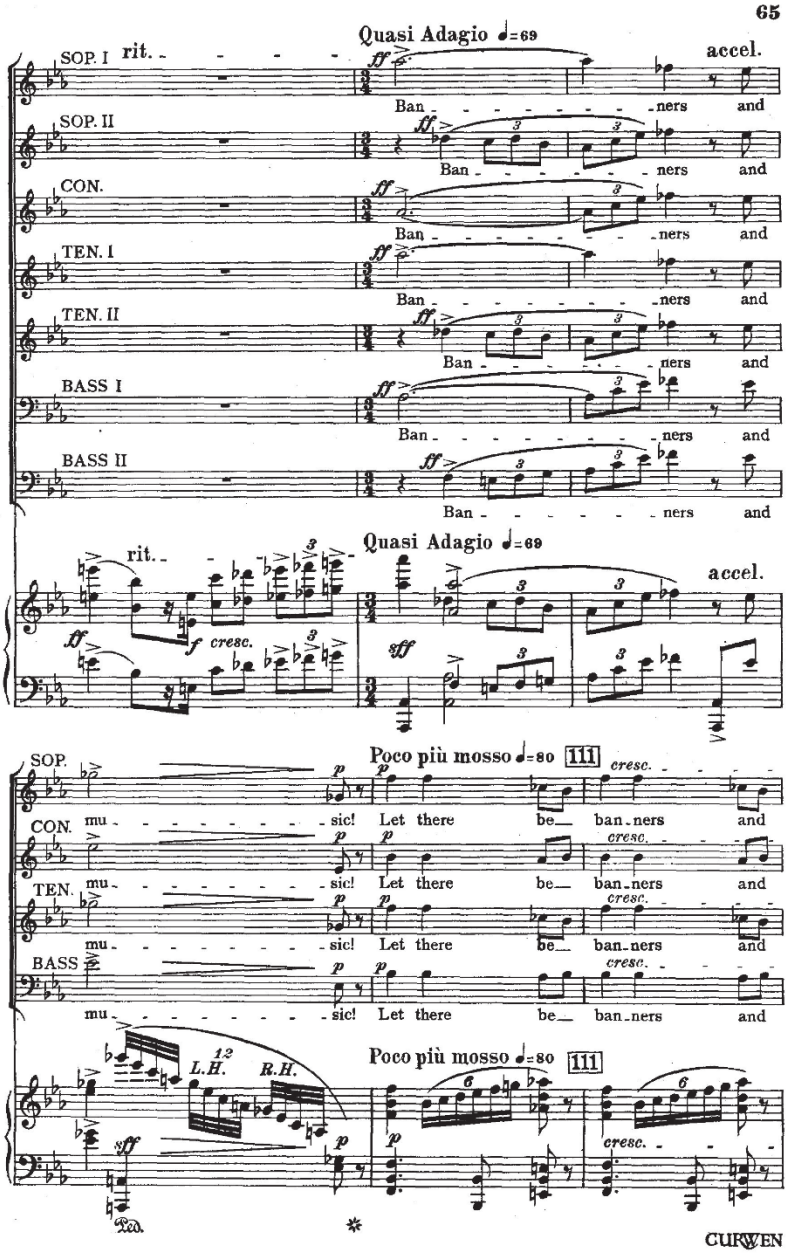

a tempo
leap, Our pas - - - - sions are the ting - - ling
leap, Our pas - - - - sions are the ting - - ling
a tempo
cresc.
rit.
a tempo
102
SOP.
tutti
The kis - ses that have wan - - - -
CON.
tutti (div.)
Ah
ah
TEN.
blood of man - kind.
The kis - ses that have wan - - - -
BASS
blood of man - kind.
Ah
ah
rit.
a tempo
102
rit. molto
dered to our lips Will ne - - - - ver grow cold.
ah
ah.
dered to our lips Will ne - - - - ver grow cold.
ah
ah.
rit. molto

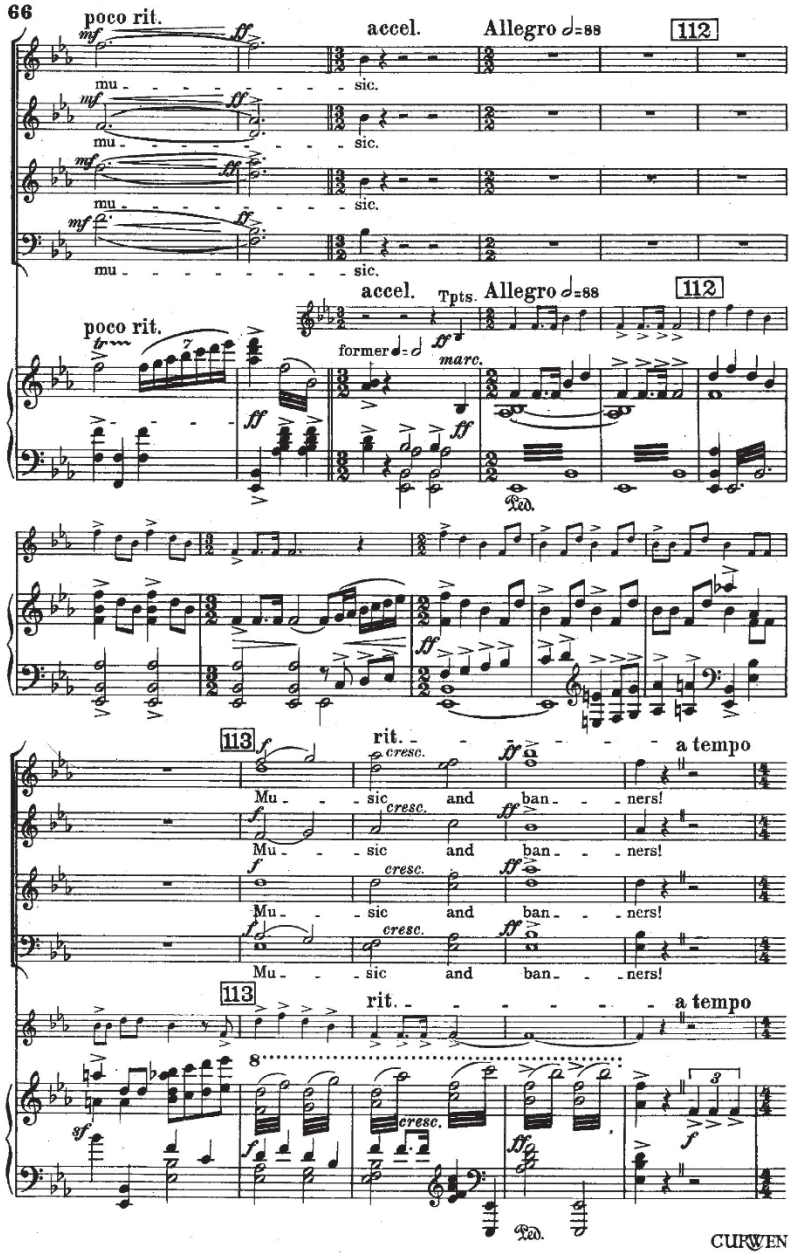
CURWEN

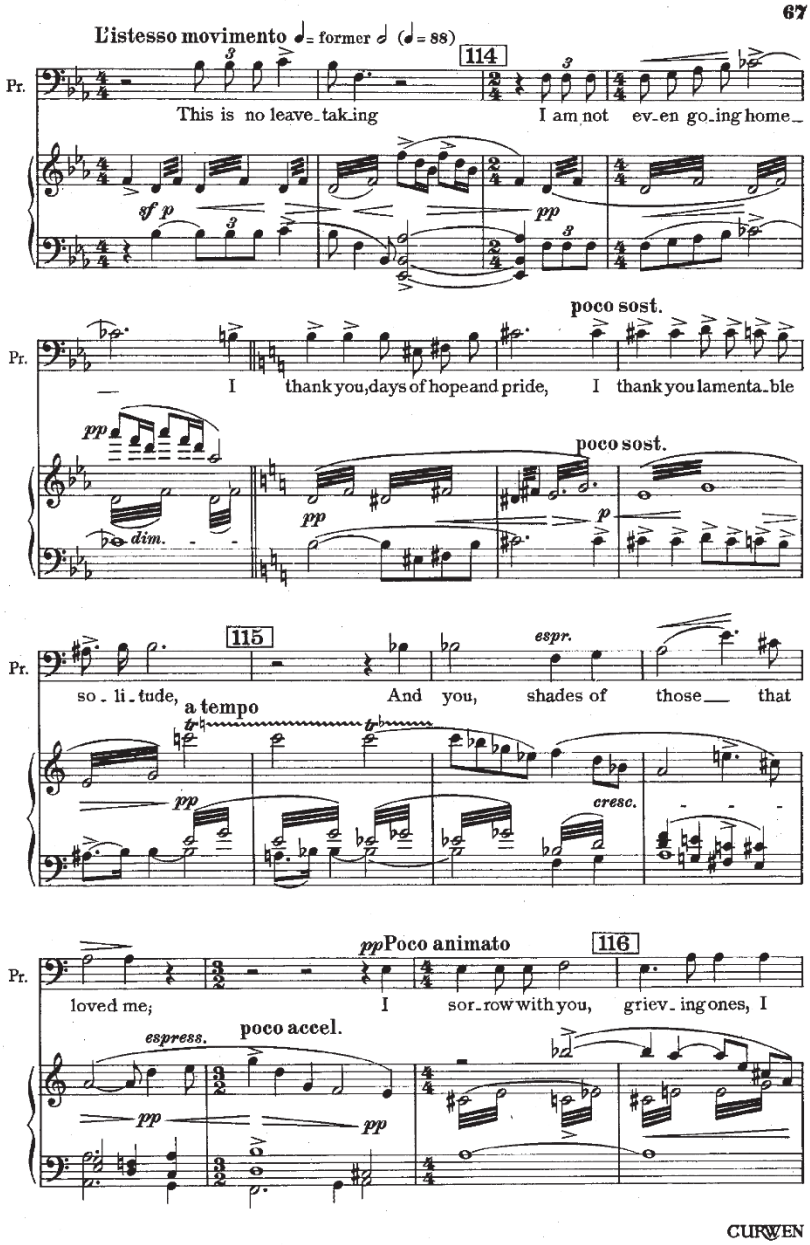

62
Andante ♩= 80
SOUL ad lib.
103
For years you have been conning your les-son,
poco rit.
Learning to say "Not me, not mine"
A-
poco rit.
poco string.
rit.
104
shamed both of sor-row and of joy,
Till they slow-ly were
a tempo
rit.
poco sost.
rubato
lift-ed from with-in you,
lift-ed, And stretched o-ver head end-
colla voce
rit.
105
a tempo
-less and un-change-able as the mil-ky
cresc.
dim.
p dim.
CURWEN


Adagio ♩=46
S.
way Whose soft light de_scends in_ _dif_fer_ent_ly on all
pp
cresc.
106
men, from gen_er_ _a_ _tion
dim.
sf mf
rit.
to gen_ _er_ a_ _ _tion.
rit.
dim.
pp
Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.
Meno Adagio ♩=66
rit.
ad lib. sost.
Now some one says to you:
Arpa
colla voce
ppp
dim.
pp
a tempo
107
poco rit.
"It is well so far, well so far;
poco rit.
pp
mf
pp
p dim.
CURWEN

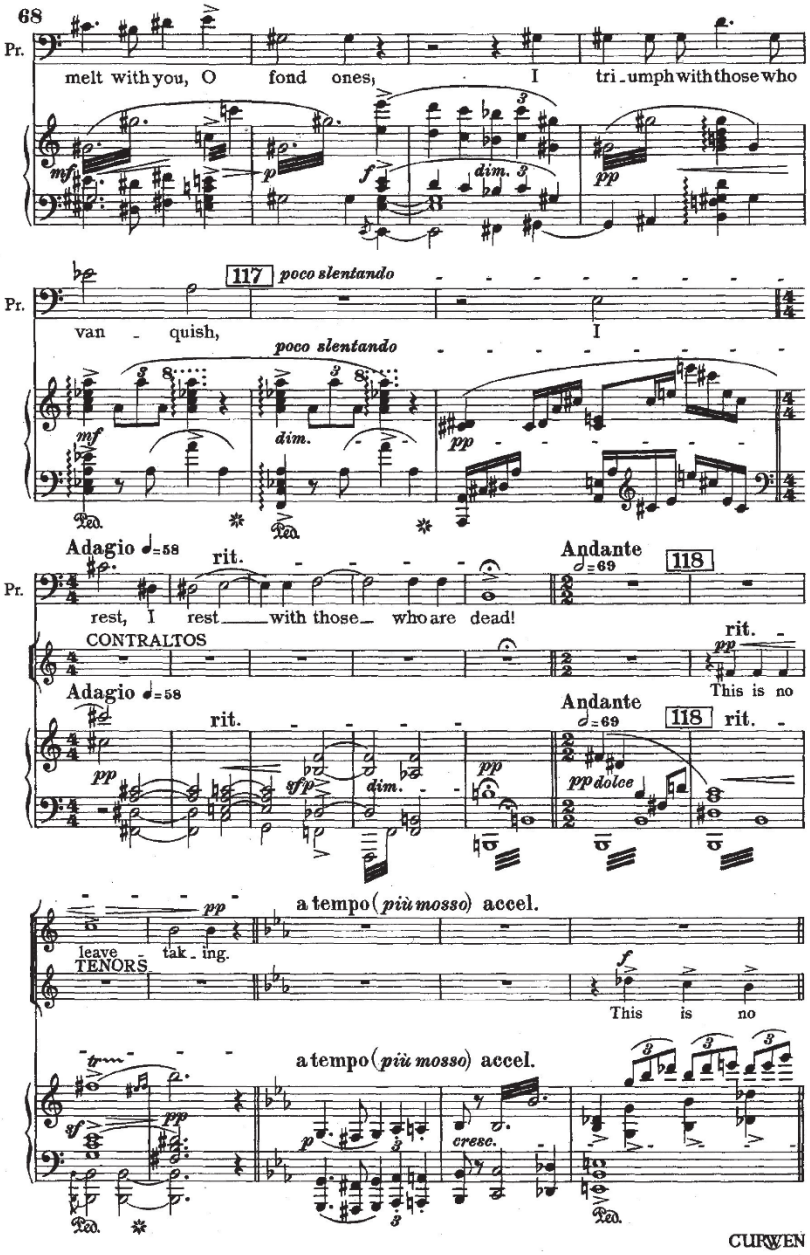

64
sost.
rit.
108
ad lib. rit.
S.
taste al - so the death,
taste al - so the death"
rit.
pp
cresc.
ff
Allegro ♩=88
(Bugle outside)
f
Adagio
109
Allegro non troppo ♩=104
PRISONER
the death."
(ma con fuoco)
(tacet Bugle)
pp
ff
poco sost. ad lib.
rit.
Pr.
Then let there be
rit.
sff p
p
colla voce
sf
marc.
a tempo
poco sost.
110
Pr.
ban-ners and mu-sic!
then let there be
ban-ners and mu-sic!
f
sf p
CURWEN

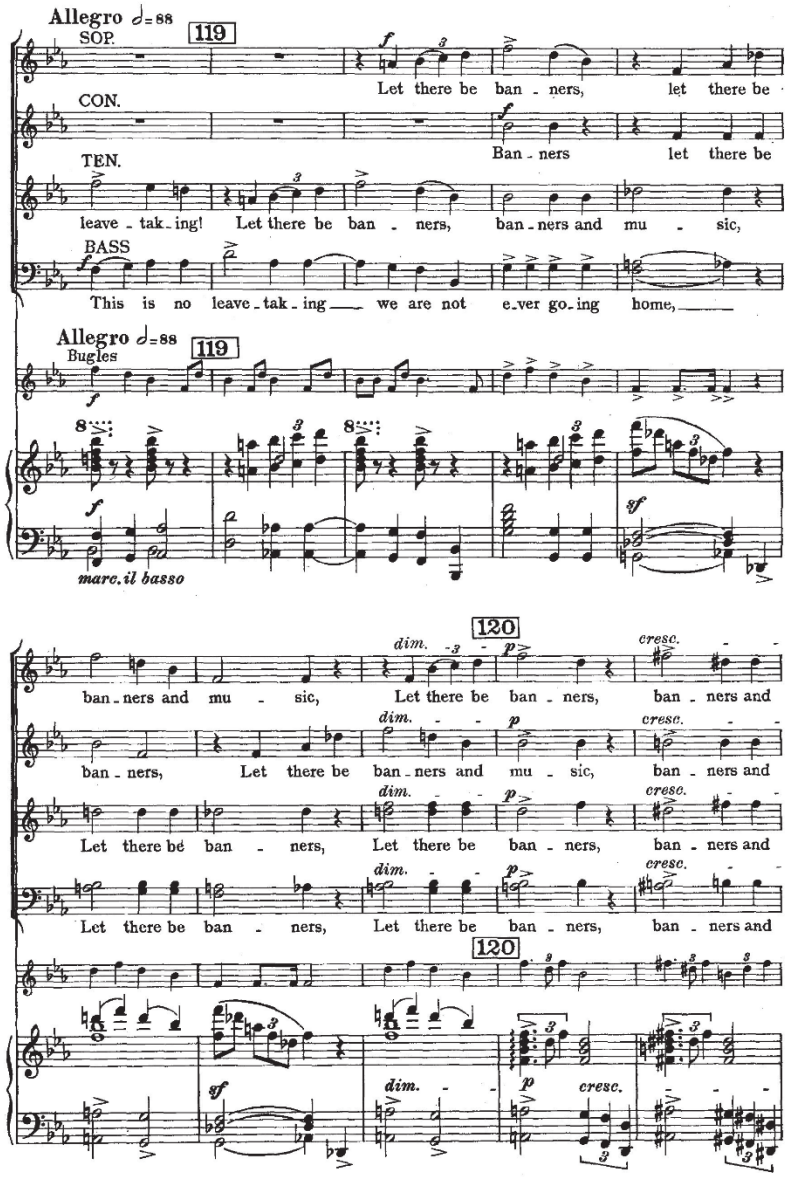

Quasi Adagio ♩=69
SOP. I
rit.
accel.
Ban - - - - - - - ners and
SOP. II
CON.
TEN. I
TEN. II
BASS I
BASS II
Quasi Adagio ♩=69
rit.
accel.
Poco più mosso ♩=80 111
SOP.
CON.
TEN.
BASS
mu - - - - - - - sic! Let there be ban-ners and
cresc.
Poco più mosso ♩=80 111
L.H.
R.H.
Ped.
CURWEN


66
poco rit.
accel.
Allegro
112
mu - - - - - - - - - sic.
accel.
Tpts.
Allegro
112
poco rit.
former
marc.
Ped.
113
rit.
a tempo
Mu - - - sic and ban - - - ners!
113
rit.
a tempo
8
cresc.
Ped.
CURWEN

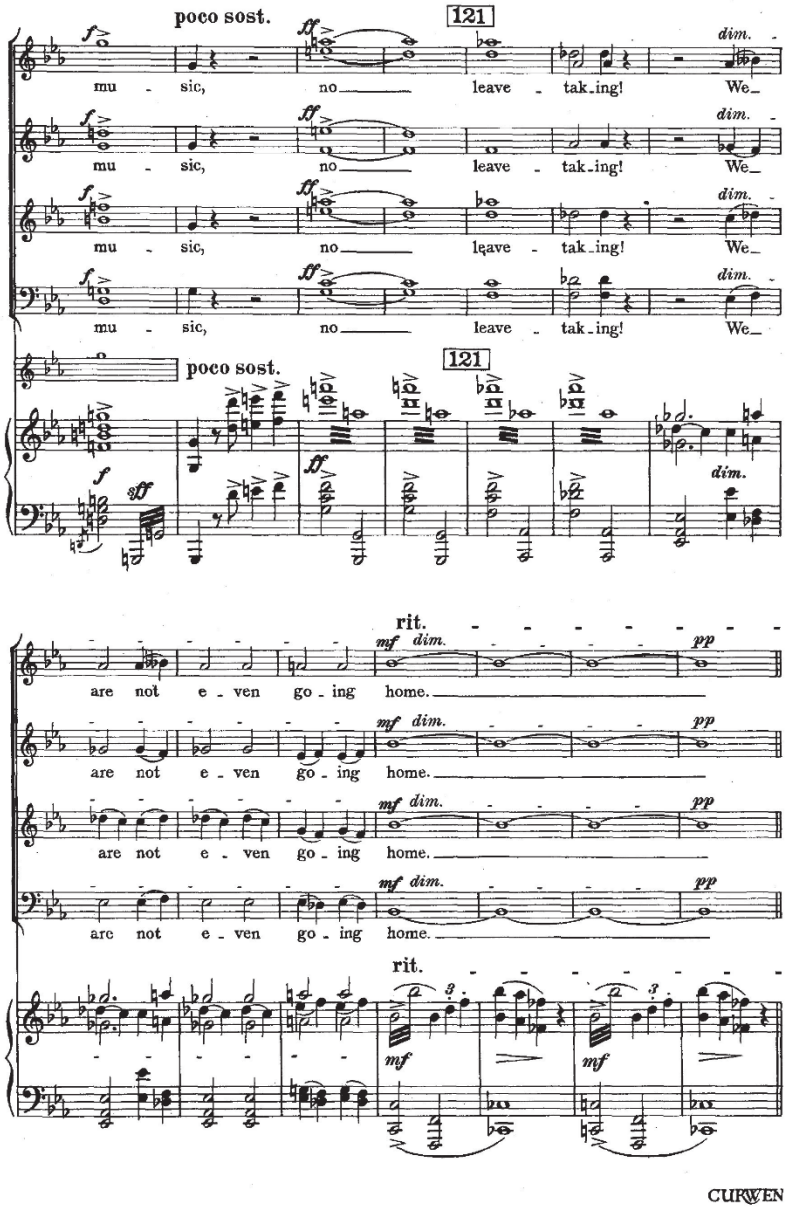

L'istesso movimento ♩= former 𝅗𝅥 (♩= 88)
114
Pr.
This is no leave_tak_ing
I am not ev_en go_ing home_
sf p
pp
poco sost.
Pr.
I thank you, days of hope and pride, I thank you lamenta_ble
pp
dim.
poco sost.
pp
p
115
espr.
Pr.
so_li_tude, And you, shades of those that
a tempo
pp
cresc.
pp Poco animato
116
Pr.
loved me; I sor_row with you, griev_ing ones, I
espress.
poco accel.
pp
pp

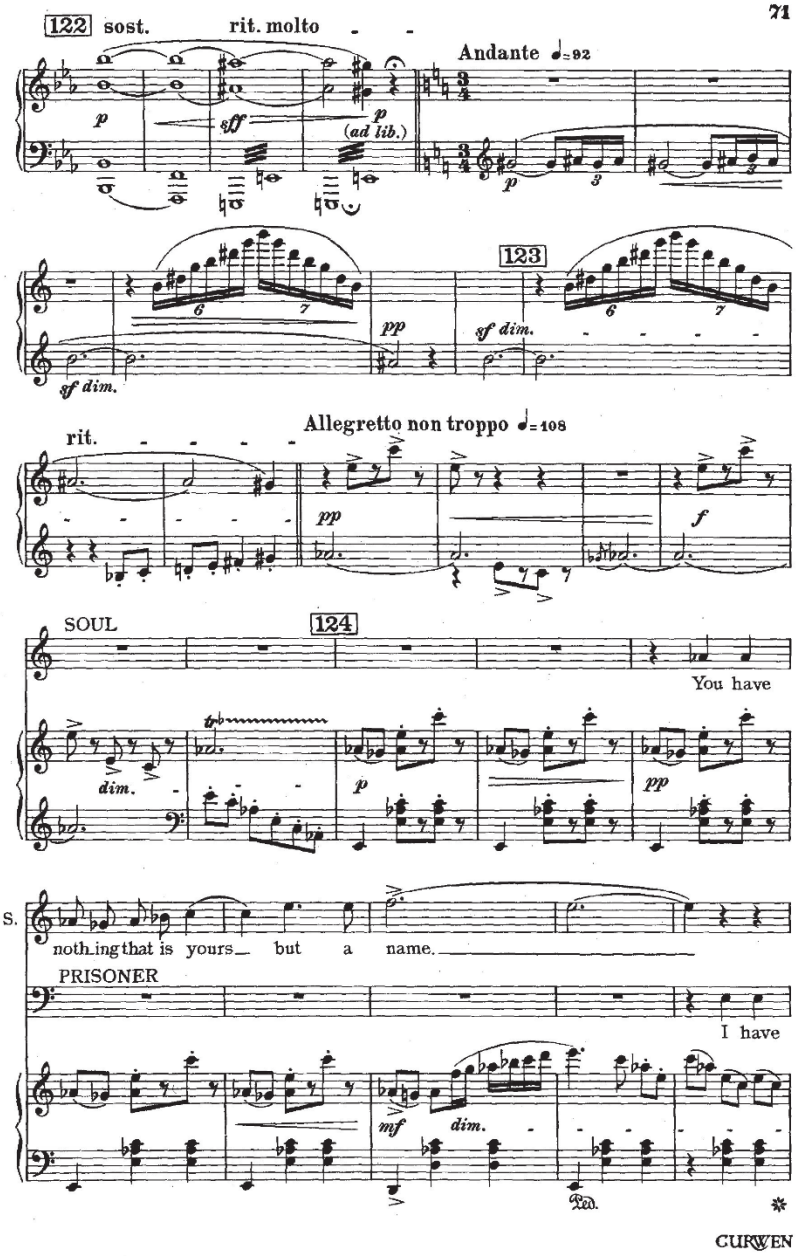
CURWEN

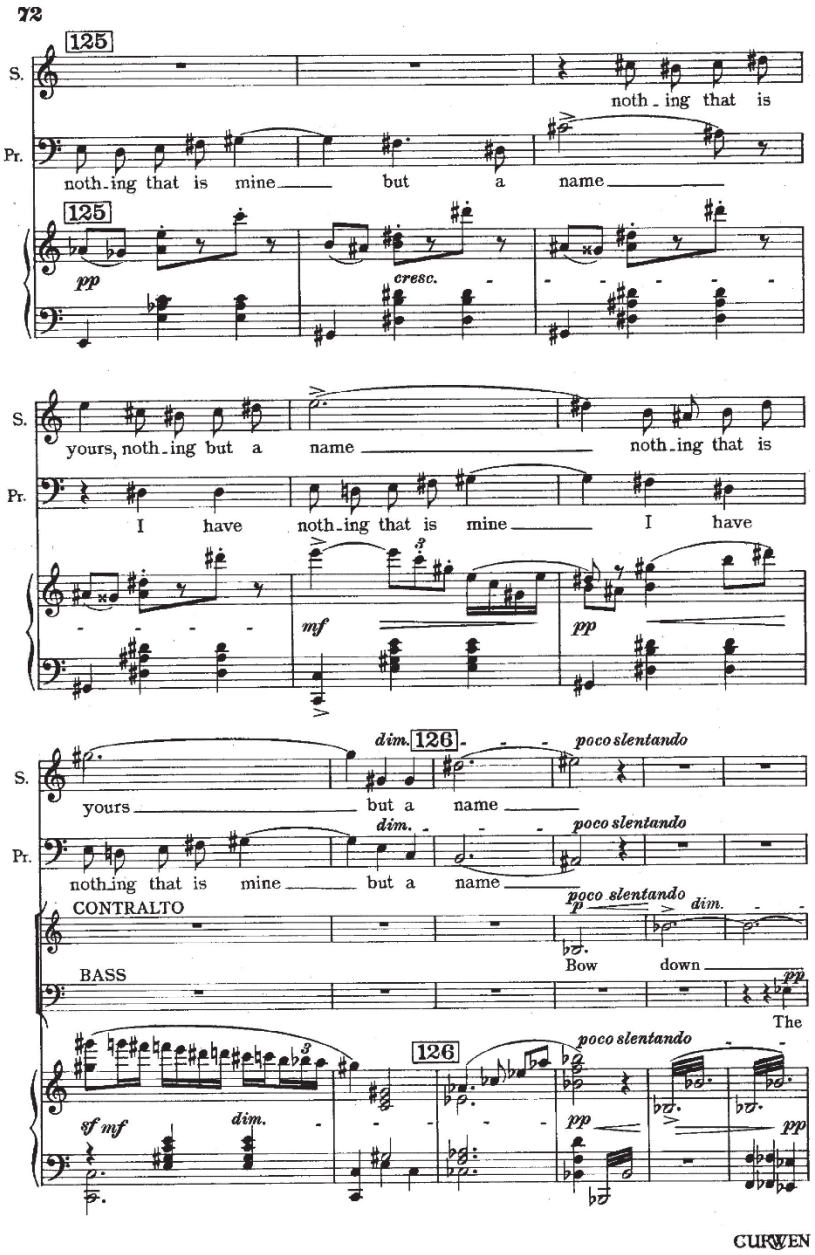

68
Pr.
melt with you, O fond ones, I tri - umph with those who
117 poco slentando
van - quish, I
poco slentando
Adagio ♩=58
rit.
Andante
118
rest, I rest with those who are dead!
CONTRALTOS
This is no
a tempo (più mosso) accel.
leave tak - ing.
TENORS
This is no
a tempo (più mosso) accel.
cresc.
CURWEN

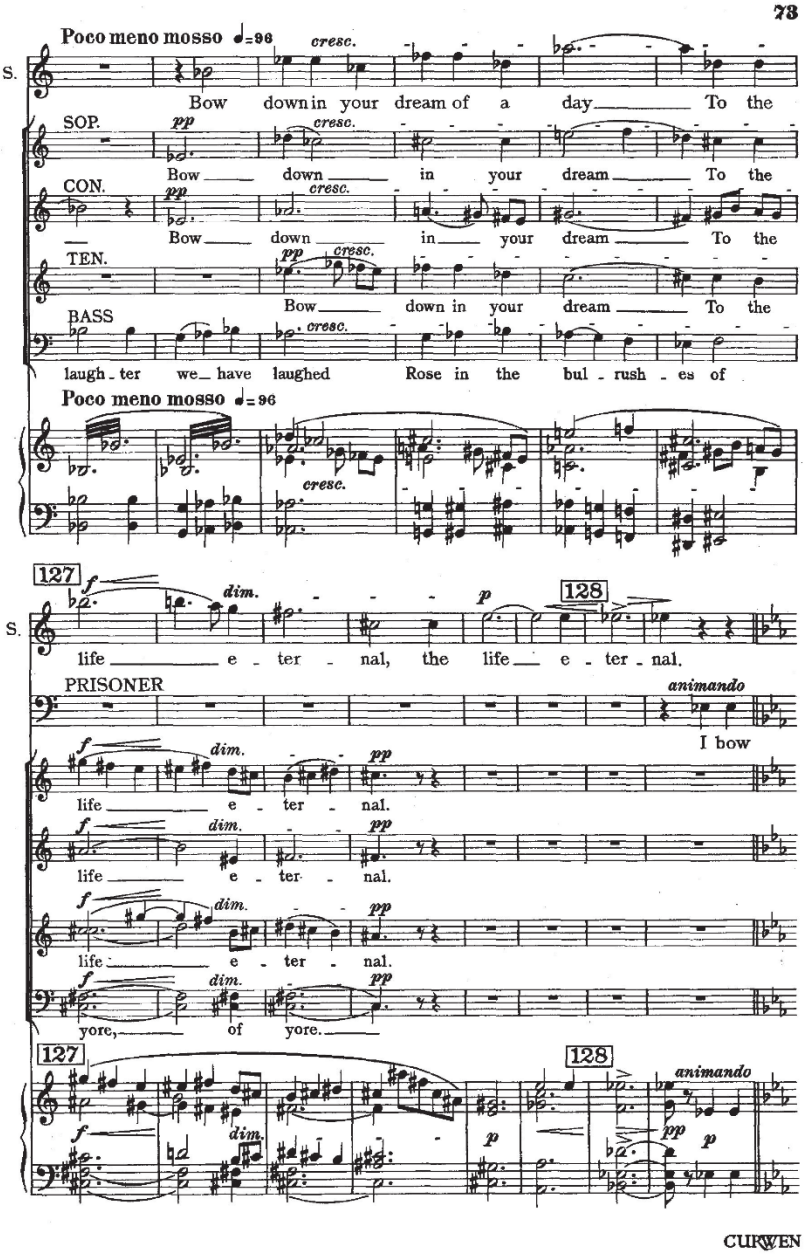

Allegro ♩=88
SOP.
119
Let there be ban - ners, let there be
CON.
Ban - ners let there be
TEN.
leave - tak - ing! Let there be ban - ners, ban - ners and mu - sic,
BASS
This is no leave - tak - ing we are not e-ver go-ing home,
Allegro ♩=88
Bugles
119
marc. il basso
120
ban - ners and mu - sic, Let there be ban - ners, ban - ners and
ban - ners, Let there be ban - ners and mu - sic, ban - ners and
Let there be ban - ners, Let there be ban - ners, ban - ners and
Let there be ban - ners, Let there be ban - ners, ban - ners and
120
dim.
cresc.

CURWEN

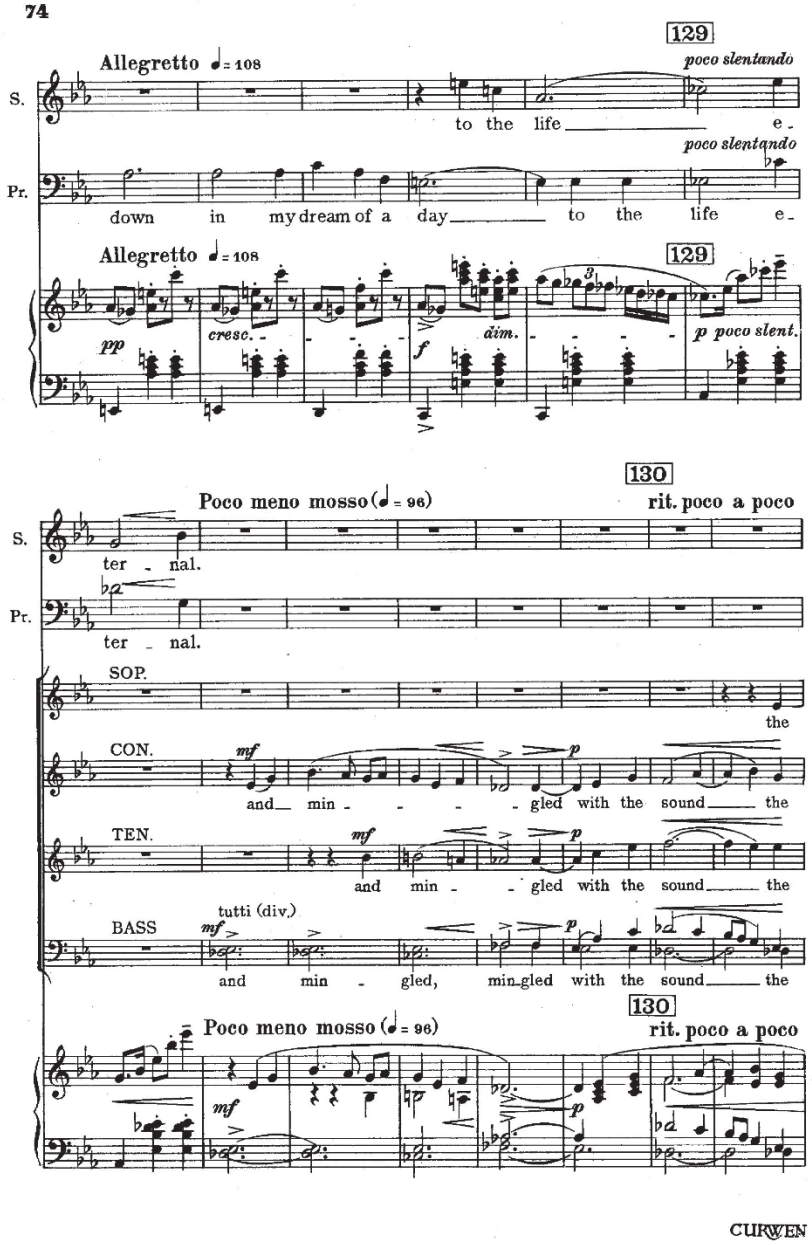

poco sost.
121
dim.
mu - sic, no leave - tak-ing! We-
poco sost.
121
rit.
mf dim.
pp
are not e - ven go - ing home.
rit.
mf
CURWEN


122 sost.
rit. molto
Andante ♩=92
p
sff
p
(ad lib.)
123
pp
sf dim.
sf dim.
Allegretto non troppo ♩=108
rit.
pp
f
SOUL
124
You have
dim.
p
pp
S.
noth_ing that is yours_ but a name._
PRISONER
I have
mf
dim.
Ped.
*
GURWEN

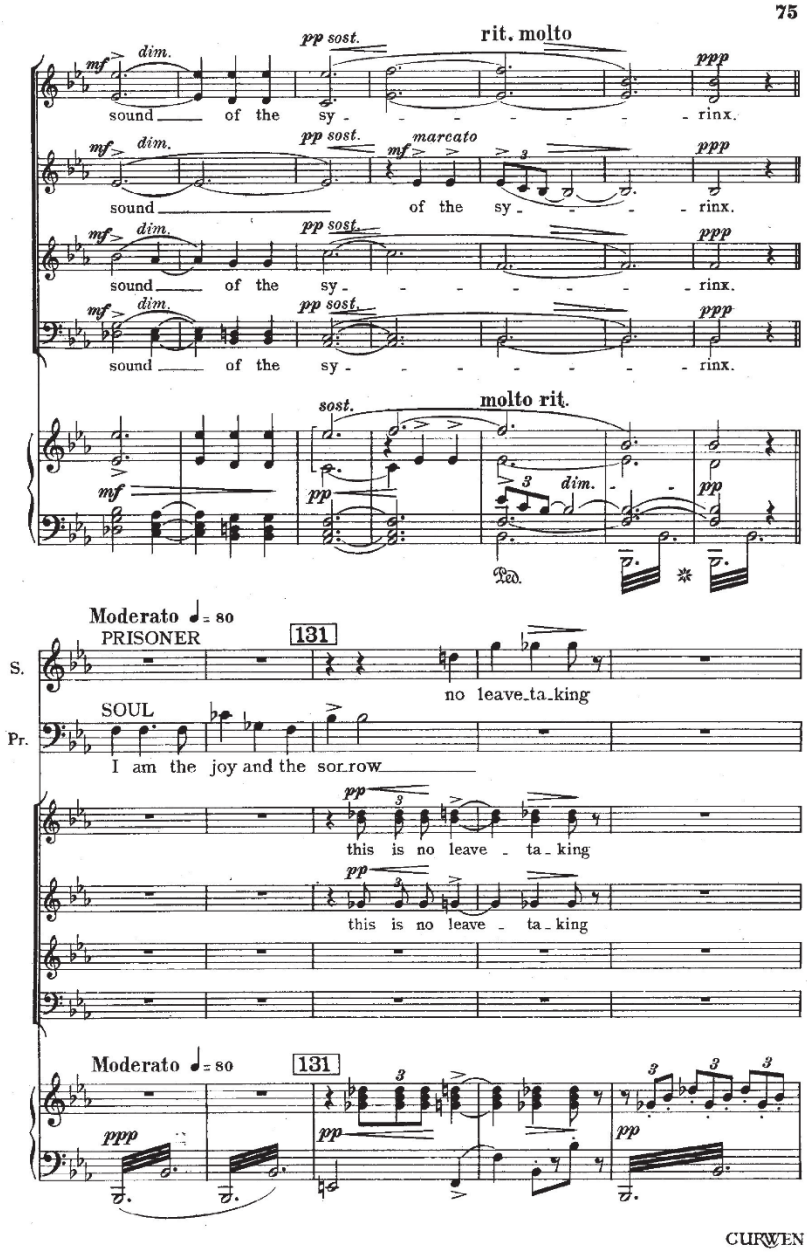

125
S.
noth - ing that is
Pr.
noth-ing that is mine but a name
125
pp
cresc.
S.
yours, noth-ing but a name noth-ing that is
Pr.
I have noth-ing that is mine I have
mf
pp
dim. 126 poco slentando
S.
yours but a name
dim. poco slentando
Pr.
noth-ing that is mine but a name
CONTRALTO
poco slentando dim.
Bow down
BASS
pp
The
126
poco slentando
sf mf
dim.
pp
pp

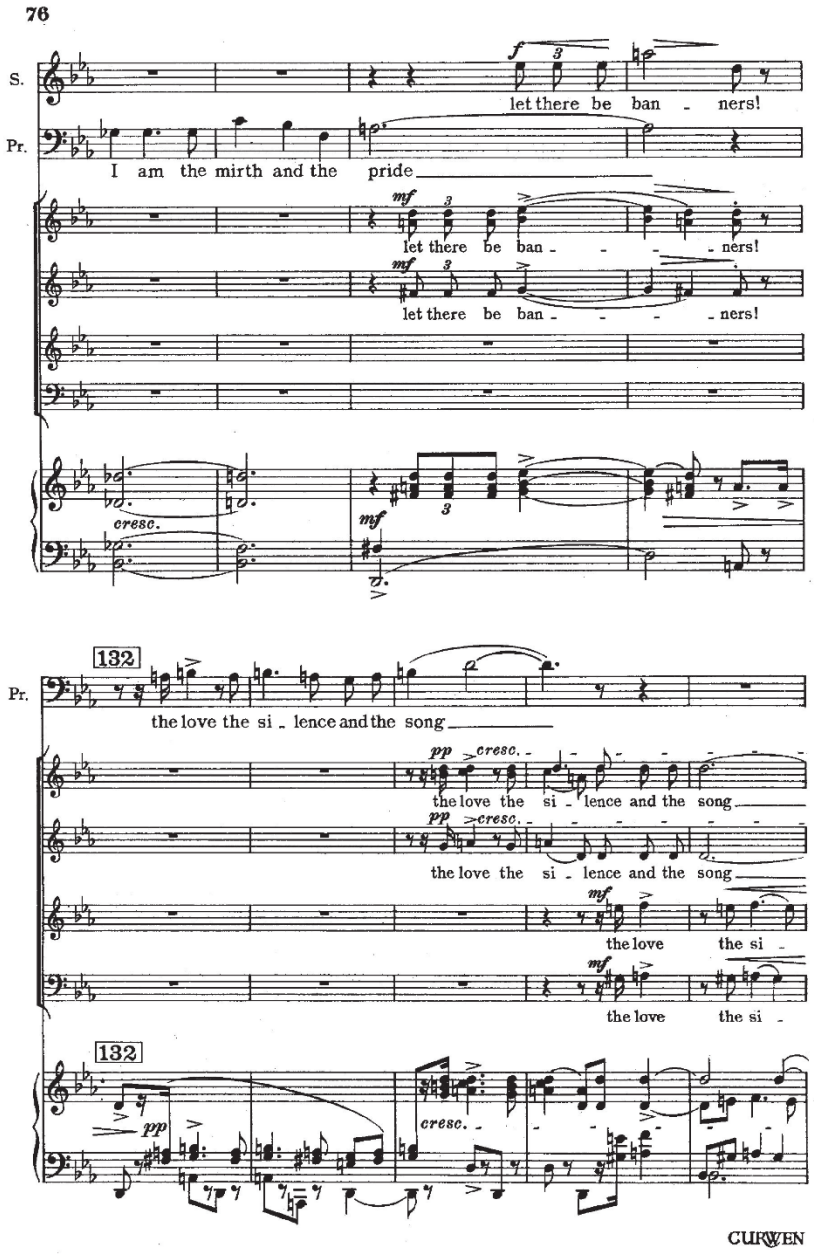

Poco meno mosso ♩=96
cresc.
S.
Bow down in your dream of a day To the
SOP.
pp
cresc.
Bow down in your dream To the
CON.
pp
cresc.
Bow down in your dream To the
TEN.
pp
cresc.
Bow down in your dream To the
BASS
cresc.
laugh - ter we have laughed Rose in the bul - rush - es of
Poco meno mosso ♩=96
cresc.
127
f
dim.
p
128
S.
life e - ter - nal, the life e - ter - nal.
PRISONER
animando
I bow
f
dim.
pp
life e - ter - nal.
f
dim.
pp
life e - ter - nal.
f
dim.
pp
life e - ter - nal.
f
dim.
pp
yore, of yore.
127
128
animando
f
dim.
p
pp
p

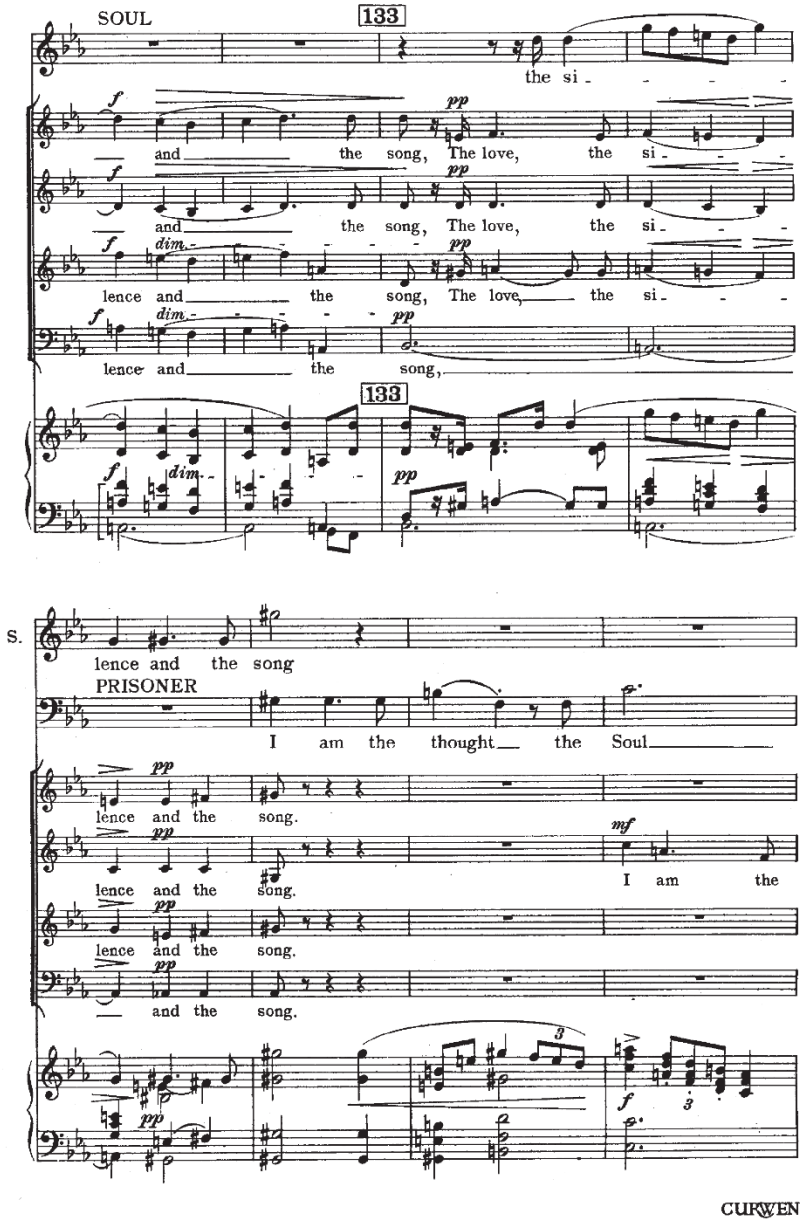
CURWEN

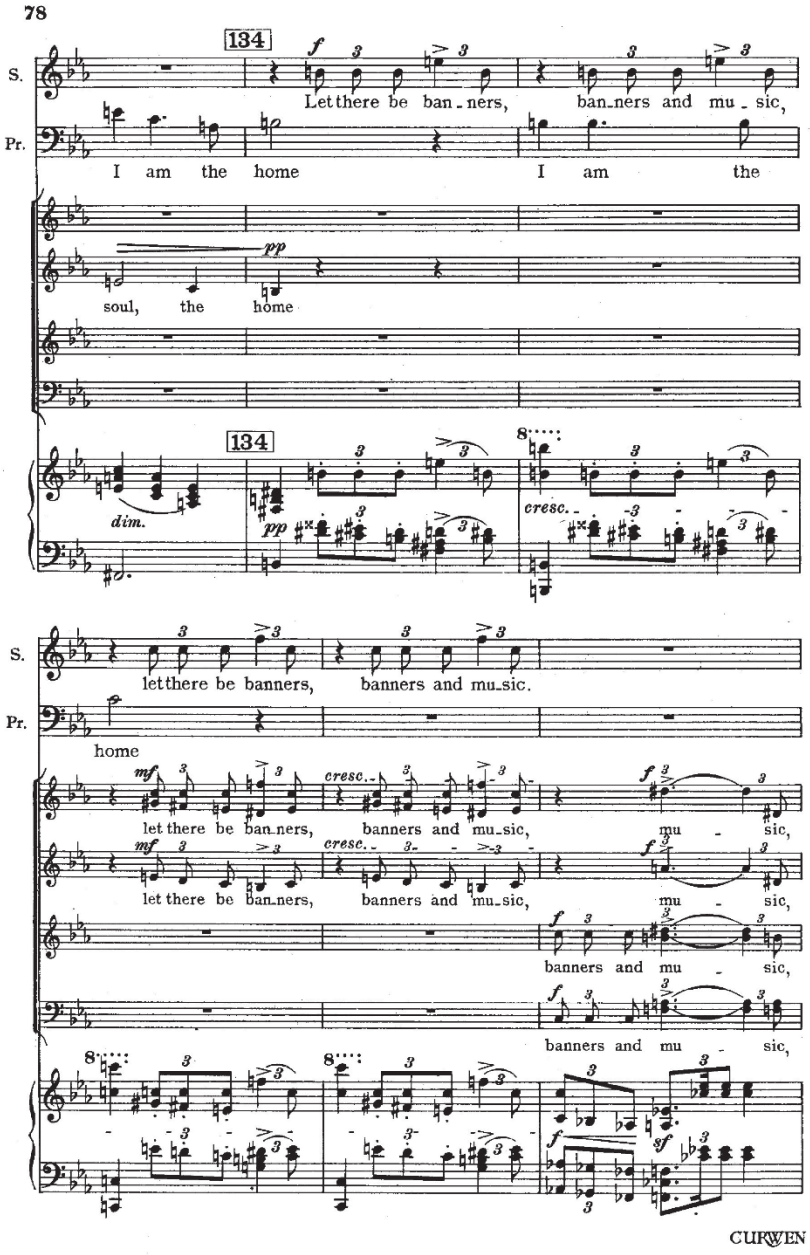

129
Allegretto ♩= 108
poco slentando
S.
to the life e-
poco slentando
Pr.
down in my dream of a day to the life e-
Allegretto ♩= 108
129
pp
cresc.
f
dim.
p poco slent.
130
Poco meno mosso (♩= 96)
rit. poco a poco
S.
ter - nal.
Pr.
ter - nal.
SOP.
the
CON.
mf
p
and min - gled with the sound the
TEN.
mf
p
and min - gled with the sound the
BASS
tutti (div.)
mf
p
and min - gled, min-gled with the sound the
130
Poco meno mosso (♩= 96)
rit. poco a poco
mf
p

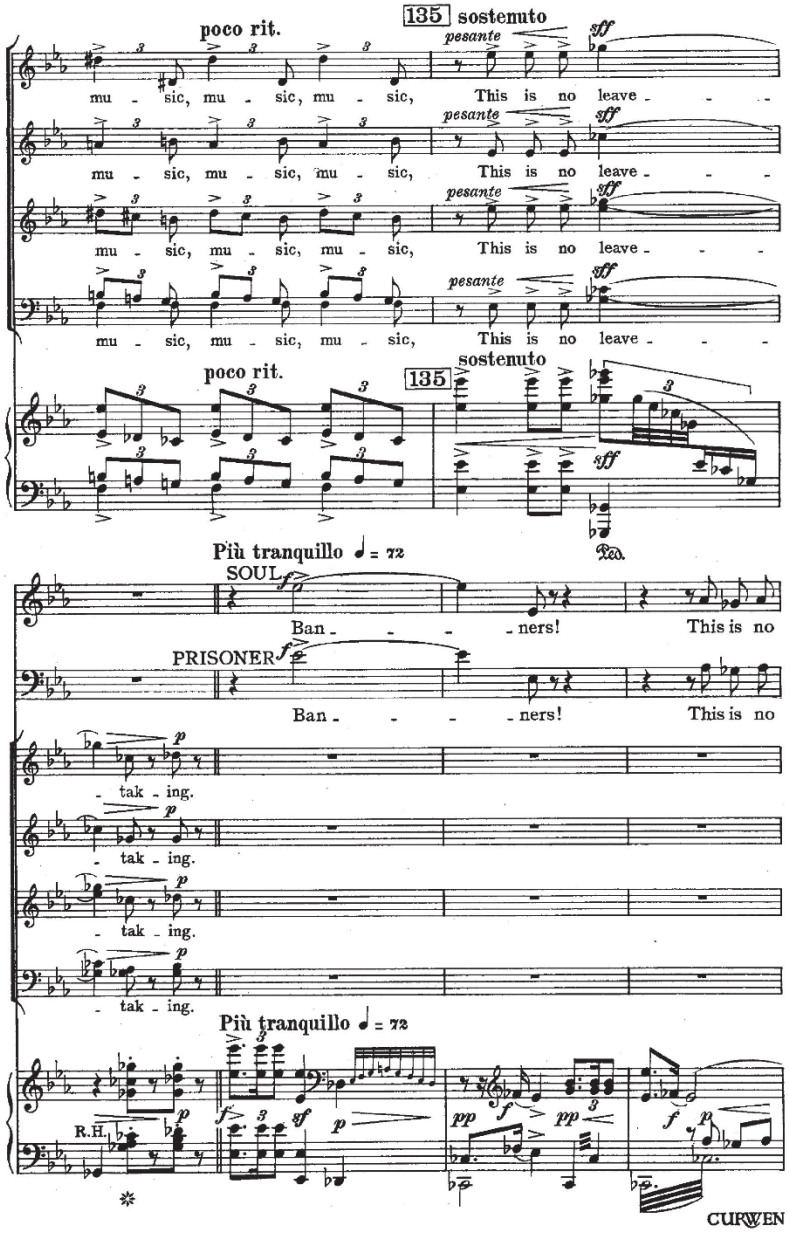
CURWEN

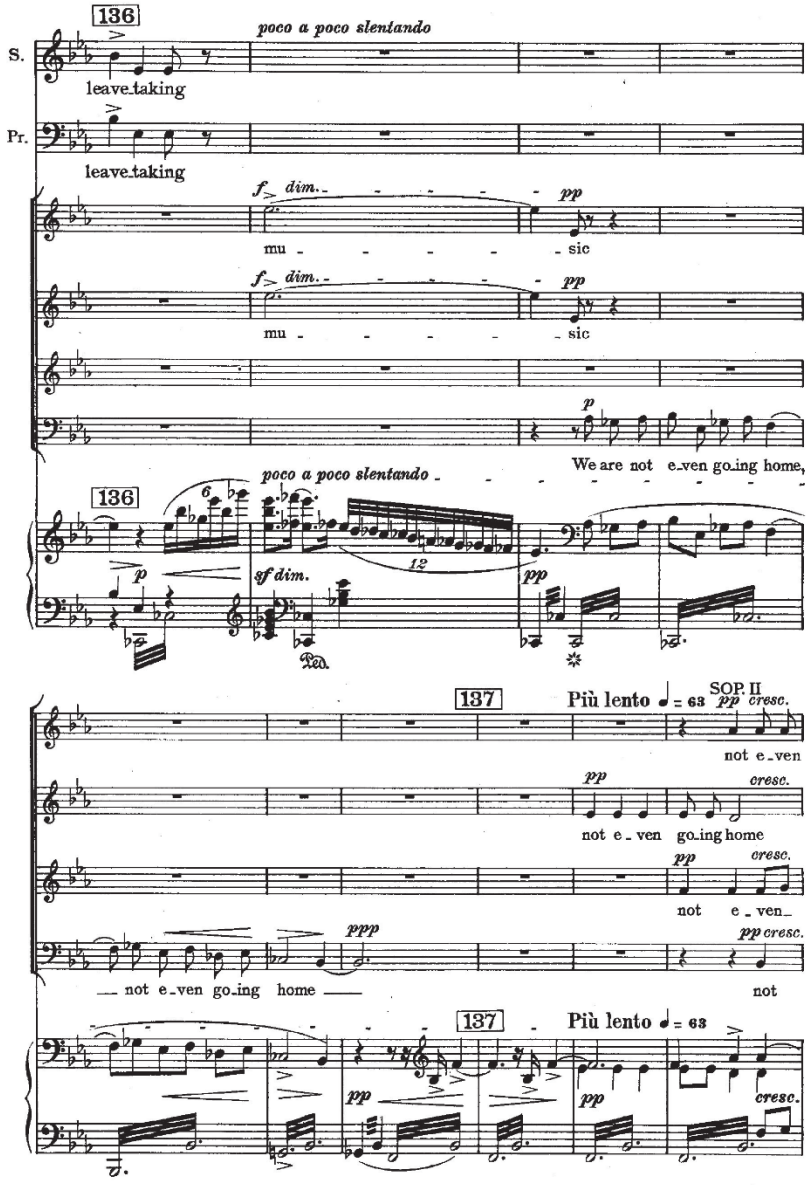

rit. molto
sound of the sy - - - - - - rinx.
marcato
molto rit.
Moderato ♩= 80
PRISONER
131
S.
Pr.
SOUL
no leave_ta_king
I am the joy and the sor_row
this is no leave - ta_king
this is no leave - ta_king
Moderato ♩= 80
131


76
S.
Pr.
let there be ban - ners!
I am the mirth and the pride
let there be ban - - - - ners!
let there be ban - - - - ners!
cresc.
132
the love the si - lence and the song
pp cresc.
the love the si - lence and the song
the love the si -
CURWEN

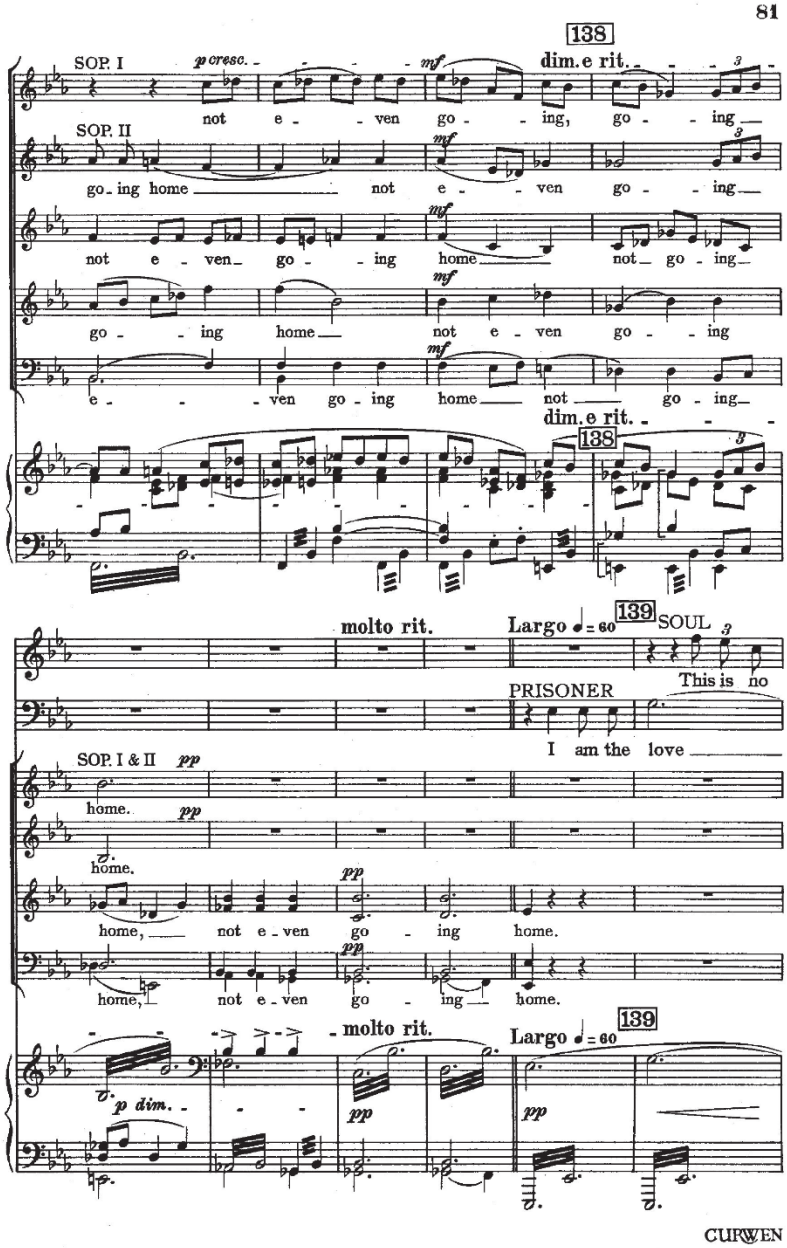

SOUL
133
the si - - - -
and the song, The love, the si - - -
and the song, The love, the si - - -
lence and the song, The love, the si - - -
lence and the song,
133
S.
lence and the song
PRISONER
I am the thought the Soul
lence and the song.
lence and the song.
I am the
lence and the song.
and the song.
CURWEN


78
134
S.
Pr.
Let there be ban - ners,
ban - ners and mu - sic,
I am the home
I am the
soul, the home
dim.
cresc.
let there be banners,
banners and mu - sic.
home
let there be ban - ners,
banners and mu - sic,
mu - sic,
banners and mu - sic,
CURWEN

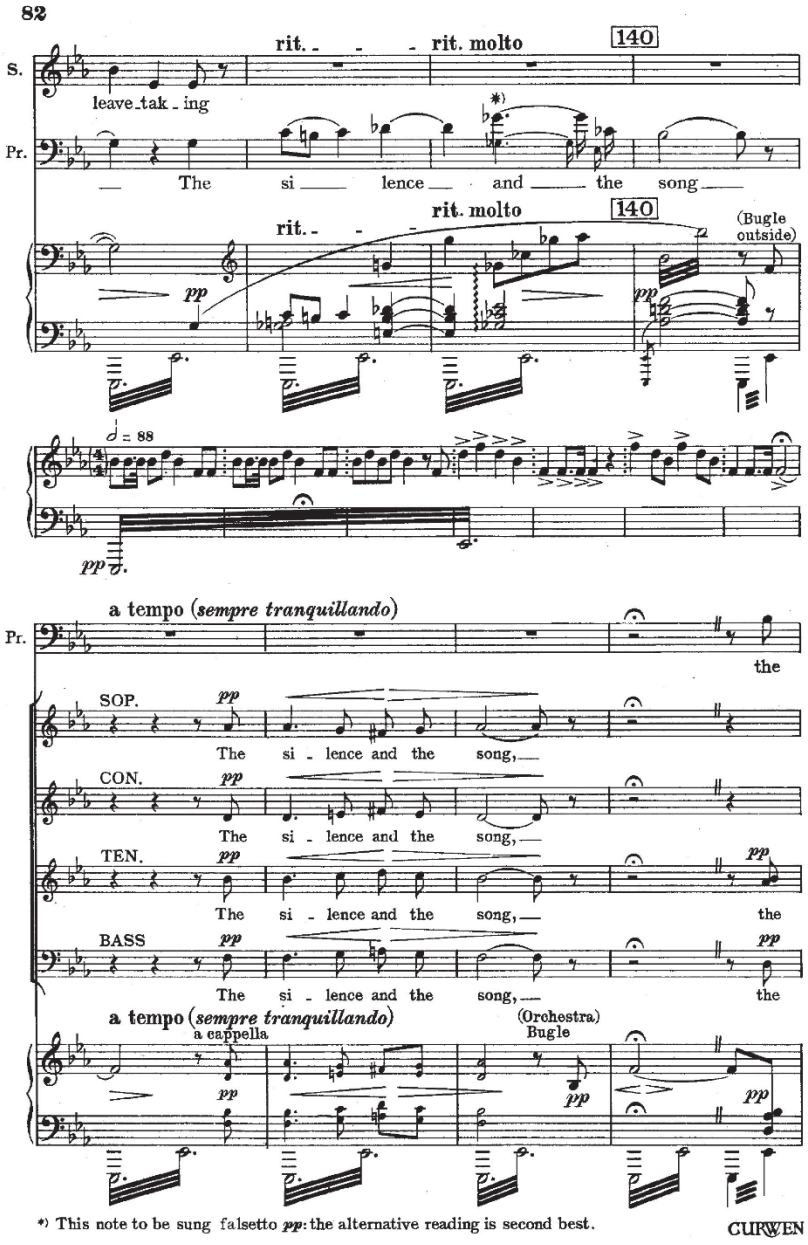

poco rit.
135 sostenuto
pesante
sff
mu - sic, mu - sic, mu - sic,
This is no leave - - -
Più tranquillo ♩ = 72
SOUL
Ban - - - - ners!
This is no
PRISONER
- tak - ing.
R.H.
CURWEN

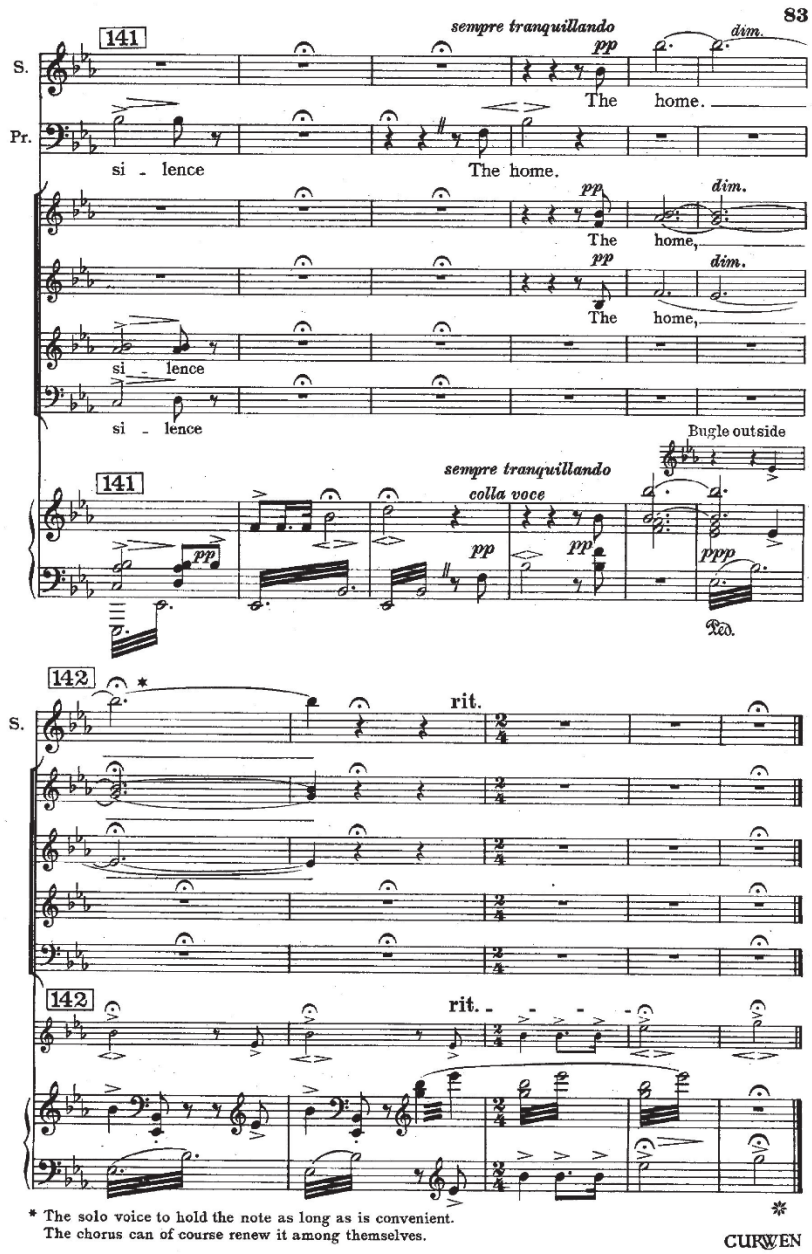

136
poco a poco slentando
S.
leave taking
Pr.
leave taking
f dim.
pp
mu - - - - - sic
f dim.
pp
mu - - - - - sic
p
We are not e-ven go-ing home,
136
poco a poco slentando
sf dim.
pp
137
Più lento ♩ = 63
SOP. II
pp cresc.
not e-ven
pp cresc.
not e-ven go-ing home
pp cresc.
not e-ven-
ppp
pp cresc.
not e-ven go-ing home
not
137
Più lento ♩ = 63
pp
pp
cresc.

CURWEN


138
SOP. I
p cresc.
mf
dim.e rit.
not e - ven go - ing, go - ing
SOP. II
go - ing home not e - ven go - ing
not e - ven go - ing home not go - ing
go - ing home not e - ven go - ing
e - ven go - ing home not go - ing
dim.e rit.
138
molto rit.
Largo ♩ = 60
139
SOUL
This is no
PRISONER
I am the love
SOP. I & II
pp
home.
home, not e - ven go - ing home.
molto rit.
Largo ♩ = 60
139
p dim.
pp

CURWEN


82
S.
leave tak - ing
rit. - - - rit. molto
140
Pr.
The si lence and the song
rit. - - - rit. molto
140
(Bugle outside)
pp
♩ = 88
a tempo (sempre tranquillando)
Pr.
the
SOP.
The si - lence and the song,
CON.
The si - lence and the song,
TEN.
The si - lence and the song, the
BASS
The si - lence and the song, the
a tempo (sempre tranquillando)
a cappella
(Orchestra)
Bugle
*) This note to be sung falsetto pp: the alternative reading is second best.
CURWEN


141
sempre tranquillando
pp
dim.
S.
The home.
Pr.
si - lence
The home.
pp
dim.
The home,
pp
dim.
The home,
si - lence
si - lence
Bugle outside
141
sempre tranquillando
colla voce
pp
pp
pp
pppp
Ped.
142
rit.
S.
142
rit.
* The solo voice to hold the note as long as is convenient.
The chorus can of course renew it among themselves.
CURWEN

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