

Office of Arts and Sciences – Grad Expo
James Ogburn: *A Prelude*
Department of Music – Composition Panel Presentation

A Prelude

I know only the bare rocks of today.
In these lies my brown sea-weed,—
green quartz veins bent through the wet
 shale;
in these lie my pools left by the tide—
quiet, forgetting waves;
on these stiffen white star fish;
on these I slip bare footed!

Whispers of the fishy air touch my body;
“Sisters,” I say to them.

-William Blake

One of the most pressing questions for every creative endeavor must be: where to begin? In the case of vocal music, where an actual text is employed, the answer is really quite simple. The text is the starting place. The meaning, rhythm, and structure of the words determine the shape of the work and guide the hand in a way that happens rarely when writing instrumental music. However, in the case of *A Prelude*, the object itself proved much more problematic than many other text-settings.

Although the language of this poem is certainly palpable – in the sense that one can almost feel or taste the words – the meaning is enigmatic. In fact, that which first drew me to the poem was the concentrated beauty of the words themselves and the intractable nature of the poem’s meaning as a whole. Essentially, a scene is depicted which (one can assume) functions as an allegory for something deeper. However, this deeper meaning doesn’t reveal itself within the poem. This elusive quality first presents itself in the title. After all, this is a **prelude**, but to what? And then there are the words themselves. Why is it “**my**” brown sea-weed? Why “**my**” pools left by the tide? What tide? Where did the **star-fish** come from and why is it **stiffening**?

Instead of searching for or infusing my own metaphorical understanding, instead of hunting down the original published version and seeing what followed so as to engage with the idea of the piece as a prelude, I thought it would be more gratifying for the listener if I were to treat these lines as discreet, beautiful objects. In fact, before I began composing, I hardly considered the symbolic meaning of the words at all. To this end metric setting – in the pursuit of clarity in some cases and its complement in others – and the formal structure of the piece served as the two most fundamental aspects from which to build my composition.

My first goal was to determine a form for the work based upon the structure of the poem. Since the demarcation of line breaks didn't give me much, other than a separation for the last sentence, I felt that the form was not entirely mandated by the poem. I had a modicum of freedom for determining form. As I read and re-read, I became intrigued by the actions of the protagonist. I took note of the places where he/she is in the act of observing other objects and those where he/she is actively engaging with his/her environment in some way. In addition, the detachment of the final lines, coupled with the comparable activity of the protagonist set them apart, formally. I took note of the punctuation, and decided that although not visually separated by a line break, the first line was also somewhat detached from the body. In some way, it is a moment of repose and reflection, which makes it an unusual way for beginning a work and, simultaneously, connects it to the last line. Finally, I felt the intervening lines were one gesture and that they worked towards the exclamation point as a point of tension.

With all of this in mind, I conceived of the form as an arc (ABA') with the middle section having a clearly directed push towards the line: "...I slip barefoot!" Each of the A sections contains one of the detached sentences. I achieved directed linearity in the central section by placing clearly directional lines in every layer of the musical texture. Finally, since the work is a prelude, I opted not to create finality with the ultimate phrase. Although the final chord is a variation of the tonic, the extended harmony does not achieve a complete cadence, rather remains unresolved.

For me, one of the most challenging tasks of composing a work with text is the necessity of placing syllabic stress intentionally, so that the meaning is either clear or deliberately obscured. Where clarity of text is the goal, this entails 1) awareness of the

stress in spoken recitation and then 2) application of metric stress according to the natural, spoken phrasing and accent. One example of my attempt to preserve clarity is in the opening line, where I placed the words so that the metric strong beat coincided with the syllabic stress. However, in many places I deliberately obfuscated the text that (although tangible) eluded a clear, symbolic meaning. In actual fact, I achieved this by placing a conflict between the metric accents (indeed the implied meter) in the three voices of the piano and then attaching the vocal part to the “weakest” metrically accented figure. Most of the vividly depicted lines of the text, those where a tangible object or creature is described, are set in this way.

Now that the work is complete, I feel I have presented it in a way that will allow the listener to engage with the allegory. I have not imposed my own understanding of the meaning of the work. Instead, I have attempted to re-compose the poem in all of its elusive beauty.