

Poetry and Spirituality (1)

(A Consideration of Two Mystical Poems by Walter de la Mare, Set to Music by Cecil Armstrong Gibbs)

This is, hopefully, the first in a series of blogs on this aspect.

The term 'poetry and spirituality' implies not only poems which are directly 'religious' but also those which are 'mystical' and 'meditative', implying 'another plane' – all directing the reader and listener to a higher plane, created by, and connecting with, God. The present writer has employed this form of spirituality during illness, and found that 'conscious communion' with the Almighty is fully possible and beneficial through such assistance.

'Things mystical' require tranquillity and calmness of mind rather than exhilaration through volume and rhythm. As the Psalmist says, "... commune with your own heart and in your chamber and be still".

For the purposes of this blog, the focus will be on 'mystical' poems by Walter de la Mare, illuminated by Cecil Armstrong Gibbs' gentle, spiritual and evocative musical settings for solo voice and piano.

'Araby' (from the play *Crossings*)

In this poem, the poet desperately wishes to reach the imaginary land of Araby, over the seas, in the East. He asks a black sailor about this land and eventually realises that there is no such place. From the opening phrase, perhaps not now politically correct but was the case in de la Mare's day, ("Dark brown sailor, tell me now/Where, where is Araby?/... 'Tis I who pine for Araby"), the poet is longing for somewhere better. In the second verse, the sailor evocatively replies "Master, she her spices showers/O'er nine-and-ninety leagues of sea/The laden air breathes faint and rare/Dreams on far distant Araby!" This question and answer technique adds to the emotional tension of the poem. How many of us wish, and have wished for some sweeter place, with such aspects as "spices" being considered?

In this through-composed song, Gibbs adds to the overall evocation of these first two poetic verses through triadic quaver figuration, underpinned by a dotted rhythm and rich chromatic harmony, representing the sea; and the use of F major to represent the poet and Ab for the sailor in the all-important opening question.

In the third verse, the poet begs the sailor to commence the journey, even though "... dangers brew". Tension starts to build, depicted by Gibbs use of chromaticism and a Db implication.

In the final verse of the poem, the poet recognises the reality of the dream. The wind and waves arise, and he finally accepts that Araby is a mere dream.

Gibbs now starts to completely alter the evocative image of his setting through the use of F minor and 'tense' duplets in the accompaniment (the sad disruption of the opening quaver

accompaniment), painting the more sinister poetic images of “Wails the wind from shore to shore”. The poet’s realisation that Araby is only part of man’s imagination is depicted by Gibbs use of further chromaticism, duplets now in the voice-line and a *forte* melodic top F on “Ah heart-beguiling Araby”, at which point the poem ends. Gibbs song is able to achieve a feature which the poem is unable to do – a return to the opening quaver figuration, thus ending the song with the evocative spirit.

‘Lullaby’

In this three-verse poem, the poet reflects on sleep, night-time, the moon, and aspects of nature (mouse, nightbird, stars, lilies, moth, a shepherd and his lamb, roses, the sea, and wind) all mysterious aspects of life. God creates these aspects of nature and are, therefore, a direct link to him and His creation, all highlighted by the evocation of the moon.

The poet clearly depicts the animals in their busy lives on a moonlit night, commencing with the words “Sleep, sleep, lovely white-soul”. Who is this “lovely white soul”? The important point is that they are “lovely” and “white” – features of Christian mysticism. The creatures are considered as follows: “The little mouse cheeps plaintively/The night-bird in the chestnut tree”. Further evocative detail is that “They sing together, bird and mouse/In the starlight”. The verse ends with the phrase “Sleep, sleep, lovely white soul”¹.

Gibbs responds to this verse by writing an introduction which sets the spiritual scene, using a barcarolle-rhythm (becoming a piano ostinato and, possibly a ‘sleep’ motif, suggesting the calmness of the moon, the length of the night, and the slow movement of time), based on D and F chords (F# v F). Chromatic harmony is placed side-by-side (e.g. A, Gmin7, F#min6) but now using a slower harmonic rhythm. The returning final phrase of the verse now employs chromatic notes B and Bb, ending on a G chord. Thus, the tonality of the song is ambiguous, adding to the overall mystery.

The poem’s second verse introduces the moth, floating among the lilies, while the mole speedily moves through his “galleries in the dark earth”. Finally, the “summer moon” is introduced, looking like “a shepherd thro’ the pane/Seeking his feeble lamb again”. Could this be a clue to the “lovely white soul”? Is it the shepherd seeking his lambs (thus creating a Biblical analogy)?

This verse of Gibbs’ through-composed song moves to floating quaver figuration in the piano, now hovering around G, representing the moth, with shorter rhythms to represent the movement of the mole. “The summer moon” has the climax of the song, falling away again to the phrase “Seeking his feeble lamb again”. The final phrase returns to the evocative D and F harmony.

The images in the final verse are quite different. Passing time and the rising wind appear, both within the concepts of “peace” and “sleep. The poem ends with the phrase “Sleep,

¹ In the original 1902 poem, each verse begins and ends with “Sleep, sleep thou lovely one!” but in the 1923 version, each verse commences only with “Sleep, lovely white soul!”; Gibbs only use the phrase once, as the ending of each verse .

sleep, lovely white soul". The phrases "Time comes to keep night-watch with thee/Nodding with roses" are depicted through neighbour-note structures (DEbD, CBbC, etc) in the piano left-hand, against chromatic right-hand harmony. The beautiful phrase "and the sea/Saith 'Peace, peace' amid his foam" is painted through static Gmin7 harmony moving to a F#min6 chord and the voice-line falling a minor 7th. The original ostinato-figuration returns for the final evocative poetic phrases " 'O, be still'/The wind cries up the whispering hill/Sleep, sleep, lovely white soul", concluding on a G chord, surely representing desired reassurance and comfort.

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