

Poetry and Music
 Robert Herrick (1591 to 1674)
 ‘A Litany to the Holy Spirit’

This poem is, indeed, a highly-charged religious poem and one which should be a comfort to many. It focuses on the poet’s imagined thoughts and prayers on his deathbed. It consists of ten verses, each ending with a short refrain (“Sweet Spirit, comfort me!”), serving as a response within a Litany. Each verse highlights a concern, or extended concerns, which a dying person might experience in their last hours. The first line or two lines of each verse seems to set a particular thought, with the next line(s) echoing a somewhat reaction on the dying individual. How real the latter must be for an individual, Christian or otherwise. These features are shown in the table below:

Verses	Scenes	Reactions
1	In the hours of my distress	When temptations me oppress/And when I my sins confess
2	When I lie within my bed	Sick in heart and sick in head/And with doubts discomforted
3	When the house doth sigh and weep/And the world is drown’d in sleep	Yet mine eyes the watch do keep
4	When the passing bell doth toll	And the Furies in a shoal/Come to fright a parting soul
5	When the tapers now burn low	And the comforters are few/And that number more than true
6	When the priest his last has pray’d/And I nod to what he said	‘Cause my speech is now decay’d
7	When God knows, I’m toss’d about/Either with despair or doubt	Yet before the glass be out
8	When the tempter me pursu’th/With the sins of all my youth	And half damns me with untruth
9	When the flames and hellish cries/Fright mine ears and fright mine eyes	And all terrors me surprise
10	When the Judgement is reveal’d/And that open’d which was seal’d	When to Thee I have appeal’d

Robin Milford set this poem in 1947 for SATB choir, dedicating it to his wife for Christmas 1947. This work show the composer’s profound belief, spirituality and deep sadness, with extreme depression, following the tragic death of his young son, Barnaby, in 1941. Barnaby was 5-years old when killed by a van.

Milford ingeniously presents each different concern using a series of choral techniques (variations), all culminating in a most exciting and interesting unaccompanied choral work. A dotted rhythm becomes a 'cyclic' motif which binds the entire work (with all its variations of melodic phrases, textures, keys, harmony, chromaticism, rhythms, dynamics, and use of voices) together.

Based on E tonality (minor and major) for a SATB choir, this work is of interest for any listener in terms of following which voice has the melody in each verse and the technique which is placed against it. The first verse, for example, presents the first half of the theme in unison, thereafter, the soprano sings the second half and the refrain, accompanied by ATB harmony.

Throughout the remaining nine verses, the melody and refrain are sung in the soprano, the tenor, in reference only by the full choir and the refrain in the bass, in reference and then soprano, the bass, the alto (transposed), split choir, reference only in *fortissimo*, and finally, in the tenor and then soprano accompanied by the alto, tenor and bass. Techniques against the varied verses include constant use of the dotted motif, *fauxbourdon*, chromaticism, melodic variations, voices alone, dialogue between the voices, pedal points in the men's voices, pedal points in the ladies' voices, repeated phrases ("comfort me"), ever-increasing chromaticism, men's voices in two parts, *fortissimo* and *agitato* choral chords, decreasing dynamics, three-part singing, *rallentando*, and *diminuendo* – all ending on an E major chord.

Further details on each verse can be seen in the table below. These show how Milford illuminates, and reflects, Herrick's poetic images. They also demonstrate the composer's skill in creating variation and interest through the use of numerous musical techniques.

Verses	Musical Settings
1	As above, characterised by the (dotted crotchet, quaver, crotchet) cyclic motif, E tonal centre, commencing on the dominant (predicting definite movement forward in this story) V-I closure on an E major chord (confirmation of E as the tonic, perhaps suggesting a satisfactory poetic conclusion in terms of 'judgement') <i>Mf</i>
2	Chromatic G# to G natural for an E minor implied opening 4-part homophonic setting, with developed use of the 'cyclic' dotted rhythm motif <i>Piano</i> V-I closure in E major
3	Tenor faux-bourdon Top notes in soprano at "Yet mine eyes the watch do keep" <i>Marcato</i> V-I closure in E major
4	Return to E minor Alto faux-bourdon Soprano and bass coupled <i>Forte, declamando</i> Melody moves to the bass for the refrain; this acts as a link to the next verse where the final note (E) becomes a pedal (<i>pianissimo</i>)
5	E major Pedal tonic E in bass, from the link above forms the bass line Melody disappears, with possible references <i>Piano</i> Chromaticism Uncertain tonal ending adds to the mystical refrain ending which overlaps with the beginning of the next verse, where the soprano final note (E) becomes a pedal in verse 6
6	Bass faux-bourdon, where the entire verse has the pedal E (as above) in the soprano, with the alto and tenor decorated the words of the previous refrain ("comfort me") Soprano, tenor and bass sing the refrain (<i>piano</i>), while the silent altos prepare for their entry of the melody in verse 7 General feeling of A minor
7	Implication of A minor Basses have the implied tonic A (developed from the previous verse) Tenors develop the dotted rhythm motif with chromaticism Soprano, tenor and bass decoration of a reference to the refrain ("comfort me") and, later, in the alto part <i>Poco agitato</i>
8	Links with the ending of the refrain from the previous verse <i>Fortissimo</i> , appropriately, for the verse relating to Satan Further developed chromaticism Refrain in tenor and bass Possible modal implication
9	Dramatic final verse, especially the opening words "When the flames and hellish cries" <i>Fortissimo</i> Soprano top notes <i>Piano</i> second phrase "Fright mine ears and fright mine eyes" Greater chromaticism (on the flat side) for the phrase "And all terrors me surprise" <i>Piano</i> refrain Silent tenor in preparation for their entry of the final verse Verse refrain links with the opening of verse 10 V-I closure in G (creating some sense of tonal security)
10	Melody in tenors singing alone ("When the Judgement is reveal'd) <i>mp</i> Full choir for "And that open'd which was sealed/When to Thee I have appeal'd" Pause <i>Diminuendo</i> final phrase, ending on an E major chord for the final resolution of the poem

For my Wife
(Christmas, 1947)
A Litany to the Holy Spirit

Set to music for UNACCOMPANIED FOUR-PART CHOIR
(or Four Solo Voices) S.A.T.B.
and suitable as an ANTHEM or as a PART-SONG

The Poem by HERRICK

The Music by ROBIN MILFORD

Con moto (3 beats)

SOPRANO *mf*
In the hour_ of my_ dis - tress, When temp - ta - tions

ALTO *mf*
In the hour_ of my_ dis - tress, When temp - ta - tions

TENOR *mf*
In the hour_ of my_ dis - tress, When temp - ta - tions

BASS *mf*
In the hour_ of my_ dis - tress, When temp - ta - tions

Con moto (3 beats)

PIANO
Or
* ORGAN
For
Practice only *mf*

*In a Church performance, however, the addition of an Organ part might be helpful to the voices

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me_ op - press, And when I_ my sins con-fess, Sweet Spir-it, com - fort

me_ op - press, And when I_ my sins con-fess, Sweet Spir-it, com - fort

me_ op - press, And when I_ my sins con-fess, Sweet Spir-it, com - fort

me_ op - press, And when I_ my sins con-fess, Sweet Spir-it, com - fort

p me! When I lie with-in_ my bed, Sick in heart and sick in head,

p me! When I lie with-in_ my bed, Sick in heart and sick in head,

p me! When I lie with-in_ my bed, - Sick in heart and sick in head,

p me! When I lie with-in_ my bed, - Sick in heart and sick in head,

And with doubts dis-com-fort-ed, Sweet Spir-it, com-fort me!

And with doubts dis-com-fort-ed, Sweet Spir-it, com-fort me!

And with doubts dis-com-fort-ed, Sweet Spir-it, com-fort me!

And with doubts dis-com-fort-ed, Sweet Spir-it, com-fort me!

When the house doth sigh and weep, And the world is drown'd in sleep,

When the house doth sigh and weep, And the world is drown'd in sleep,

marcato (ma dolce)
When the house doth sigh and weep, And the world is drown'd in sleep,

When the house doth sigh and weep, And the world is drown'd in sleep,

il tenore marcato

Yet mine eyes the watch do keep, Sweet Spir-it com-fort me!

Yet mine eyes the watch do keep, Sweet Spir-it com-fort me!

Yet mine eyes the watch do keep, Sweet Spir-it com-fort me!

Yet mine eyes the watch do keep, Sweet Spir-it com-fort me!

f declamando
When the pass-ing bell doth toll, And the Fu-ries in a shoal

f declamando
When the pass-ing bell doth toll, And the Fu-ries in a shoal—

f declamando
When the pass-ing bell doth toll, And the Fu-ries in— a shoal

f declamando
When the pass-ing bell doth toll, And the Fu-ries in a shoal

dim. *p*
 Come to fright a par - ting soul, When the
dim. *p*
 Come to fright a par - ting soul, When the
dim. *p*
 Come to fright a par - ting soul, When the
dim. *pp*
 Come to fright a par - ting soul, Sweet Spir - it! com - fort me!

dim. *p*
 ta - pers now burn blue, And the com - for - ters are
 ta - pers now burn blue, And the com - for - ters are
 ta - pers now burn blue, And the com - for - ters are
 com - fort me!

pp

few, And that num-ber more than true, Sweet Spir - it, com - fort
 few, And that num-ber more than true, Sweet Spir - it, com - fort
 few, And that num-ber more than true, Sweet Spir - it, com - fort
 com-fort me!

pp
 me! com-fort me!
pp
 me! me! com - fort me! me! me! com - fort
pp
 com - fort me! com - fort me! com-fort, com - fort me!
mp (solenne)
 When the priest his last hath pray'd, And I nod to what is
pp
mp (solenne)

com-*fort* me! Sweet Spir-*it* com-*fort*
 me! com-*fort* me! com-*fort* me!
 com-*fort*, com-*fort* me! com-*fort* me! Sweet Spir-*it* com-*fort*
 said, 'Cause my speech is now de-*cay'd*, Sweet Spir-*it* com-*fort*

poco agitato

me! com-*fort* me! com-*fort* me! com-*fort*, com-*fort*
 When, God knows, I'm toss'd a-*bout* Ei-*ther* with des-*pair* or
 me! com-*fort* me! com-*fort* me! com-*fort*, com-*fort*
 me! com-*fort* me!

poco agitato

mf la melodie marc.
p

me! com - fort me! com - fort me! com - fort me! Sweet
 doubt; Yet be - fore the glass be out, Sweet Spir - it, com - fort
 me! com - fort me! com - fort me! com - fort, com - fort,
 com - fort me! com - fort me! com - fort me!

Spir - it com - fort com - fort com - fort me! When the - temp - ter
 me! com - fort me! com - fort me! When the temp - ter
 com - fort me! Sweet Spir - it com - fort me!
 com - fort, com - fort me! Sweet Spir - it, com - fort me!

me pur-su'th With the sins_ of all my youth, And half
me pur-su'th With the sins_ of all_ my youth, And half
com - fort me! com - fort, com - fort me!
dim. poco a poco
(ff sempre)

poco stringendo
damns me with un - truth. _____
damns me with un - truth. _____
f Sweet Spir - it, com - fort me!
f Sweet Spir - it, com - fort me!
poco stringendo

Agitato *molto rit. (sub.)*
ff *p(mesto)*

When the flames and hell-ish cries Fright mine ears and fright mine eyes,

ff *p(mesto)*

When the flames and hell-ish cries Fright mine ears and fright mine eyes,

ff *p(mesto)*

When the flames and hell-ish cries Fright mine ears and fright mine eyes,

ff *p(mesto)*

When the flames and hell-ish cries Fright mine ears and fright mine eyes,

Agitato *molto rit. (sub.)*
ff *p(mesto)*

poco lento *poco rit.*

And all ter - rors me - sur - prise, Sweet Spir - it, com - fort

And all ter - rors me sur - prise, Sweet Spir - it, com - fort

And all ter - rors me - sur - prise,

And all ter - rors me sur - prise, Sweet Spir - it, com - fort

poco lento *poco rit.*

dolce solenne *mp*

me! — And that o - pen'd which was seal'd,

me! — And that o - pen'd which was seal'd,

mp When the Judge-ment is re - veal'd, And that o - pen'd which was seal'd,

me! — And that o - pen'd which was seal'd,

rallentando al fine *dim.*

When to Thee I have ap - peal'd, Sweet Spir-it, com - fort me!

When to Thee I have ap - peal'd, Sweet Spir-it, com - fort me!

When to Thee I have ap - peal'd, Sweet Spir-it, com - fort me!

When to Thee I have ap - peal'd, Sweet Spir-it, com - fort me!

rallentando al fine *dim.*

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