

Four Dialogues: I'm very lonely in Rorem's way

an essay by Elizabeth Smith

The Subway

With virtually no scenery to support the drama, Rorem creates an image of the subway through the mechanical sounds of the piano accompaniment. Dissonantly-clustered chords, *sforzando* accents, and a steady, driving tempo, quickly paint the stage with the ambiance of a clattering train car. It is without warning that the male character of the opera begins his fanfare-like announcement of the newspaper headlines. The piano accompaniment remains unchanged, continuing to “chug” along during the man’s proclamation. However, two significant musical events occur as he wonders “why wasn’t the late edition ready tonight?” The accompaniment is suddenly silent, and the meter shifts from 8/8 to 3/2. As the accompaniment and meter return to the original train music in the very next bar, this minute moment is distinctly marked. It may suggest that the man’s obsession with the newspaper transcends the confines of the subway car. The newspaper has enough importance to demand the man’s full attention—communicated with the change of meter and absence of accompaniment. Rorem’s musical setting foreshadows the drama later in the Apartment.

As the train ride continues, the accompaniment functions either as a continuation of the subway sounds, or as support for the characters’ thoughts about each other and their greater life desires. Such is the case as the man steps on the woman’s foot and suddenly expresses his desire to have her. While the woman’s response is a reiterated “No,” her melodic line moves through a variety of pitches, almost suggesting insecurity in her repeated response.

Here, the accompaniment returns to its train-like sounds, and not only is the audience reminded of the characters’ location, but also the man remembers that he must depart the train. He engages the woman—who had just repeatedly told him “no”—in a casual, yet urgent, conversation about which stop is next. He quite craftily maintains the woman’s attention, sparks her curiosity as to “where” exactly “there” is, and begins to woo her with a calm, lyrical melody. Again, they are both momentarily transported away from the clanging train as the accompaniment supports the man’s song. The woman protests to joining the man, listing a variety of previous engagements—including a marital one. Still, the accompaniment maintains the characteristics of the man’s ballad. This signifies that the woman, too, is caught up in the fantastical emotional display. Her underlying desires to be with the man are symbolized by her melody that mimics the song the man sang. He leads her with a suggestive “and” at the end of each excuse she gives. The urgency of her decision is communicated as the accompaniment returns to the train music, reminding everyone that either the love affair will end as the man exits the train at his stop or the woman will agree to leave with the man. It is only in the final four bars of the movement that the two characters sing in a rhythmic unison as their melodies mirror each other with an inverted counterpoint. Their fates are now bound together.

The Airport

After a seemingly confident end to the first movement, the woman agrees to go stargazing at the airport with the man. The second movement begins with an almost haunting minor-mode melody. The woman’s recitative awkwardly describes the car and the parking lot as lovely. Her trepidation over her decision to pursue this stranger—while engaged to another man—consumes the mood of the movement. The opening melody is transposed to various keys before returning to G-sharp minor as the two characters sing of their fears and desires. These transpositions suggest that the woman is attempting to justify her actions, approaching the situation from various viewpoints. Moving in a “stream of consciousness,” she eventually expresses each of her fears then ultimately admitting that she does desire the man. Indeed, Rorem supports her acceptance of the ensuing relationship with a shift to A-flat major. This joyous moment is quickly thwarted by the woman’s continuing fears. The harmony pivots on a G-diminished chord, which is expected to resolve to an A-flat major tonic, but instead shifts downward to F minor, as both characters sing, “fear the fire.” In layman’s terms, Rorem creates the expectation of happiness, but seamlessly returns to the anxiety of their fears. Although the third movement begins without pause, the second movement cadences with a harmony that leaves the listener salivating for the relationship to unfold.

The Apartment

A return to the lively accompaniment style from the first movement serves to establish precedence for daily activity within the new scene set in the apartment. The woman's song expresses her happiness with their relationship. Despite her sincerity, the accompaniment at the end of her song hints at conflict through the dissonant cluster-chords which sound in various octaves. Curiously, this textural change accompanies the line "I am not your bawd," which begs the question, why would the woman need to qualify herself as *not* a prostitute? Remembering back to the opening scene on the subway, the woman refers to the bluegrass of her ancestors. This may suggest a rural, country life upbringing that would be considerably below that of the man who will soon sing of his history of pampering, being born off Cape Horn, and his insurance investments. Thus, the woman may be expressing that her motivations are love and not money, however, on a grander scale, it shows a significant difference between the characters.

The movement takes a quick turn when the man accusatively barks questions at the woman who sweetly denies the mishandling of his newspaper. Remember from the subway his obsessive predilection for newspapers! The cluster chords heard at the end of the woman's song take over as a dominant motive for the accompaniment to the argument. Layered with this motive are fragments of the movement's opening material. If the opening material represents the daily activities in the apartment, pairing it with the argumentative cluster chords suggests that the couple has engaged in various squabbles. Indeed, the man's annoyance with the woman's threat of screaming can only indicate that this is yet another repetition of a familiar pattern in the couple's relationship.

One of the most crucial and exciting moments of this movement is in fact a bar of silence. As the couple's argument climaxes with the man declaring that he is going to Spain and the woman expressing "you hateful man, leave while you can," both voices become silent as the accompaniment texture thins out. All activity stops, musically portrayed by the bar of rest. Perhaps in previous arguments, at the end of this silence, the couple reconciles. The short silence shows the enormous importance of the moment: the sublime void in which peace and war are decided upon. Then, abruptly, the couple aggressively continues their climatic declamations—in rhythmic and melodic unison—both agreeing that the end has come.

In Spain and In New York

As the title of the movement clearly indicates, the two characters are no longer together. Rorem creates a sense of the dynamic emotional process that followed the abrupt resolution of their relationship by opening the movement with a stoic impressionistic drudgery of chords. This section gives way to a penitent, lyrical, and somewhat familiar melody. Each of the two pianos presents the melody individually before the vocalists enter. Here, the pianos may represent each of the characters realizing their longing *internally* before they outwardly express their emotions in the song. As the woman and the man—oceans apart—wonder of each other, their melody is based on a theme from the Apartment. They long to be together again. It is only in their separation that their desires become one, their melodies now the same.

Each continuing with thoughts of each other, their words are similar, but not exactly alike. After expressing their loneliness, the couple's final cadence concludes on an A major sonority. The strength of this cadence creates a sense of irrevocability. Steadfast to their argument in the Apartment, they each refuse to begrudge each other's loneliness. In the final silence, the two will remain apart.

Conclusion

Rorem's musical setting of Frank O'Hara's text expands the drama into the multifaceted operatic genre. With the intention of a sparse staging, the accompaniment provides the backdrop for each location, painting the stage with sound. While in the first movement the accompaniment creates the literal soundscape of the subway train, in the remaining movements the accompaniment paints the emotional background for the scenes. Anger and frustration are communicated with careful articulations and pronounced dissonances while Rorem's artful melodies express the characters' love, anxiety, and longing.