## i thank You God

## A Musical Analysis by Gwyneth Walker

There is the approach to musical analysis which focuses on discerning the goals and methods of the composition. One starts by asking the question: "What is the composer trying to accomplish or say in this work?" And then: "How does the composer go about achieving these goals?"

This approach endeavors to understand the piece as a whole, and then to describe the ways in which the specific elements contribute to the work.

The first step might be to examine the poem "i thank You God for most this amazing day" by e.e. cummings. The text appears in four stanzas, uneven in length. A salient factor might be the message. This is a poem of grandeur and of praise. When thanking God for "most this amazing day," one might form the image of vastness. Essentially, thanking God for the beauty of life, and rebirth, is a large "Thank You!"

Therefore, it might be expected that this musical setting would aim at vastness, grandeur and awakening – a venturing forth into the "infinite which is yes."

How might the music realize such goals? Noting that the work starts on low Cs, within the key of C Minor, and ends of a high C Major chord, one might view the entire piece as the journey from low to high, from Minor to Major, from the earth to the sky.

If vastness is a concept within this piece, then perhaps the arpeggio patterns in the introduction, which focus on open intervals of octaves, fifths and fourths, might create a sense of space. These arpeggios span the range of the piano keyboard. This might be a precursor to the entrances of the chorus, also on open intervals, with the words "i thank You God for most this amazing day."

A tonal overview of the work might reveal the nature of the "venturing forth" alluded to previously. The opening section delineates C Minor. The second verse (second section of the musical setting) comes at m. 21, in the key of E flat Major, the relative Major. This is hardly venturing far. However, the lines do rise more than previously, up to the climax in m. 31 on "gay great happening illimitably earth."

The first true movement to a new tonality comes at m. 41, with a shift to D Minor. This modulation brightens and "uplifts" the tonal landscape considerably. Most of the third stanza remains in this tonality. At m. 66, the colorations of Bb and Eb redirect the music to the G minor area, where it remains for the rest of this verse.

One might notice a balance in the tonal structure thus far: from C up a step to D, then down a step to B flat (or its relative Minor, G). This might be viewed as

encircling the Tonic, or taking small steps around the Tonic.

By m. 71, with the return of the phrase "i who have died am alive again today," the tonality of C Minor is once again established. But, further explorations are in order. A sequence is introduced in m. 82 which proves to be the most potent element in shaping the climax of the music. Having reached the key of D flat in m. 82 (temporarily viewed at the Neapolitan in the key of C, but then functioning as the Dominant of G flat) the progression is:

Db up a fourth to Gb, up a third to Bb Minor up a fourth to Eb Minor, up a third to Gb alternating with Eb Minor, and finally to C Major

The intent in this section is to lead the harmonic "venturing" as far as possible from the ultimate goal (C Major) in order to make this arrival at the goal (the high C Major chord) as glorious as possible. And this arrival is all the more dramatic when one notices the chord clusters in mm. 86-7. The voices are drawn closely together on the pitches Gb, Ab, Bb. Then, they open apart into the C Major chords to follow.

The goal of this piece was to create vastness and grandeur. In terms of its overall structure, it started with C Minor, in a low range, and ventured forth, at first in small steps (to D, to Bb), then in large steps (the chordal progression outlined above) until it reached its farthest tonal "expedition," the Second Harmonic Pole, G flat. Having established itself in this remote realm, it was then able to arrive triumphantly at C Major, in a high range.

That was the formal and tonal structure that was devised to speak the words "i thank You God for most this amazing day."

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