

June 2014

Sonata for viola and piano

[*Tooryn Vannin – ‘The Towers of Man’*]:

[i] *Milner’s Tower: Con moto appassionato*

[ii] *Corrin’s Lament: Andante poco lento*

[iii] *Vivo, animato*

In 2009 I attended a performance of my ‘Cello Sonata at the Isle of Man Festival. Intrigued by the mysterious outline of Milner’s Tower, guarding the bay directly opposite Port Erin, I walked up to it on a sunny, blustery afternoon. By the time I returned, a companion sonata for viola and piano had been conceived.

Milner’s Tower (1871) was meant to be a civic gesture of thanks for a kindly philanthropist’s support of impoverished Port Erin fishermen – but, upon hearing of it, Milner weighed in yet again and helped to finance his own monument. Fully exposed to whatever the Irish Sea can fling at it, the strange, hollow edifice is turned by strong winds into a huge musical instrument, producing a succession of eerie and mournful tones from its interior.

A few miles further north, another tower stands on cliffs above the little cathedral city of Peel. Erected by Thomas Corrin in 1806, this forbidding edifice is topped by crenellated battlements. Originally it commemorated Corrin’s wife and two of his children, possibly stillborn twins. Corrin laid them to rest in their own tiny, strange cemetery beside the tower. Unable to tear himself away from the the focus of his grief, he then fell to reading endlessly in an upper room: a pursuit from which he was compelled to desist when shipping began perilously to mistake his nocturnal lighting arrangements for the Peel water break signal.

The Sonata seeks to convey the emotional impact of these particular places and their past upon a visitor seeing them for the first time. Cast in fairly conventional sonata form but with a slightly condensed recapitulation, the opening movement presents an unrepentantly romantic first theme, contrasting it eventually with a pair of secondary subjects which share certain of its melodic contours and become intertwined with it in the course of a discursive central development section. In contrast, the second movement imagines Corrin seeking consolation as he reads by candlelight far into the small hours. The score is inscribed here with lines by the Chilean 20th-century poet Pablo Neruda which happened to convey exactly the emotions one imagines haunting the Tower’s solitary occupant:

Three birds of the sea, three flashes of light, three scissor-blades
intersecting the cold of the sky...

For a moment only, sleep here in the night of the living.
Loneliness, give me a sign...

All I have left is your face against the emptiness,
Your love to keep away the embrace of the dark... [Composer's translation]

The three birds are imagined as the spirits of Corrin's wife and children. After a sombre beginning whose bell-like tolling bears a conscious resemblance to *Le Gibet*, the macabre centrepiece in Ravel's iconic piano triptych *Gaspard de la Nuit*, the nocturnal solitude of Corrin's meditations is interrupted by a serene *scherzo*-like central section in which the prayer of Neruda's lines is seemingly answered, Corrin is surrounded by consoling presences and his own spirit again takes wing with them for a brief space. A recurrent motif from the piano implies the continued presence of these ghostly visitants and the viola that of Corrin himself. Gradually, however, the funereal tolling begins again, the viola returns to its former lamenting and the spirits depart. A plangent climax subsides into reminiscences of earlier music, including the opening subject of the first movement, and a final repetition of the 'spirit' motif dissolves to leave the bell sound still tolling, till this, too, becomes finally inaudible.

The finale admits of no specific connection to a single place, and accordingly has no subtitle; but its primary content suggested itself during an afternoon walk in perfect weather to the coastal point opposite the so-called Calf of Man. The music synthesises new material with that of the preceding two movements, blending into a single whole some of the key features of all three. A rapid semiquaver theme from the viola presents repeated notes in threes, an accelerated transformation of the tolling bell from movement two. A lengthy secondary subject recollects melodic contours from both preceding movements. The mood darkens until varied and energetic rhythmic activity serves to develop and explore aspects of the initial theme. A varied recapitulation of the movement's first section leads to a spacious climax, but further reminiscences of the Sonata's opening theme disperse to reveal a sorrowful echo of Corrin, still lamenting his loved ones in a passage of stilled introspection. This is abruptly cut off by a return of the finale's opening. Cross-rhythms which have been a recurrent feature of the movement precipitate the music into a headlong, jig-like *Stretto*, still embracing hints of the work's opening theme and finally achieving an affirmation of G, the tonality in which the Sonata began.