

In the past decade the contemporary British composer, John Rutter, has become one of the most influential and sought-after choral composers in England and America. Pieces such as *Shepherd's Pipe Carol*, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, and *Gloria* have received a warm reception from American choral directors. However, one early work, *The Falcon*, has not attained the same sort of popularity. This is perhaps due to the nature of the text, which is not as accessible as in a *Gloria*. The purpose of this article is to present a textual analysis of *The Falcon*. The following pages deal with each segment of text, discussing how imagery works within each segment, and how specific images relate to that text and to the whole of *The Falcon*.

The Falcon, Rutter's first large-scale choral and orchestral work, was written in 1969 while the composer was a post-graduate student at Clare College, Cambridge. The work is cast in three movements, and is scored for chorus, semi-chorus, boys choir, and orchestra. The premiere performance of *The Falcon* was given in December, 1969, in the chapel of King's College, Cambridge, by the Cambridge University Musical Society under the direction of Sir David Willcocks.

The text of *The Falcon* is comprised of biblical quotations, two medieval English poems, and four Latin hymns. These Latin hymns appear in movements two and three, and are intended as a meditation or commentary on the English lyric that precedes them. Rutter arranged these texts in temporal succession, beginning with Psalm 98, which speaks of the day when the Lord, as Ruler and King, would come to judge the earth. In Movement II, the "Corpus Christi Carol" describes, in allegorical language, the crucifixion of Christ. Rutter concludes *The Falcon* with selections from The Revelation of St. John the Divine, which speaks of the new order after Christ has been raised from the dead.

The text of *The Falcon* parallels, in some ways, the libretto of Handel's *Messiah*. The textual theme of both works is the salvation that has been

John Rutter: *The Falcon* A Textual Analysis

by Robert J. Ward

offered to the world through the life of Christ. Both works are divided into three sections, and each begins with text from the Old Testament. The second part of each work focuses on the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, and both works then conclude with text from The Revelation of St. John the Divine. However, a major difference between *The Falcon* and *Messiah* is that the latter is comprised entirely of biblical quotations.

The text for Movement I of *The Falcon* is Psalm 98, "Sing to the Lord a New Song." This psalm may be divided into three sections. Verses 1-4 speak of God's marvelous deeds, verses 5-7 call upon the people of the world, and verses 8-9 upon all creation to pay homage to God as Creator and King. The climactic moment of the psalm arrives when it is proclaimed that "He is come to judge the earth." The psalmist anxiously and optimistically awaits the Last Day when God will take his place among men, bring justice and equity to mankind, and ultimately be Lord of all.

Rutter's purpose in selecting Psalm 98 is twofold. On the surface the Psalm is bright and cheerful, which makes it an ideal text with which to open. However, Rutter feels that there is also a violent undercurrent in the psalm, which becomes manifest in verse 2: "With his holy arm hath he gotten himself the victory:"

Verse 2 of this psalm surely is a militaristic piece of imagery. Yaweh, Jehova, the God of war and vengeance, is a theme that runs through the whole Old Testament, and of course through the Psalms generally. You'll find within them quite a lot of images of war and victory, and that's something which really contrasts rather strongly, I think, with the New Testament vision of God as being a God of forgiveness, love, and peace. There is only that one verse in this psalm which presumably refers to the image of victory over the ungodly but, nevertheless, the

idea of armies, war, and violence is not very far from the surface, with the rejoicing as rather like a thanksgiving after victory.¹

In constructing the text of *The Falcon*, it was Rutter's intention that the implied violence of this Old Testament text should contrast with the tranquillity of the New Testament (Revelation) text in Movement III. This transformation of violence into peace is accomplished, according to Rutter, through the sacrifice of Christ, which is allegorically depicted in Movement II.

Movement II

The "Corpus Christi Carol," one of the few carols that is preserved in writing dating from before 1550, begins the second movement.²

Lully, lullay, lully, lullay,
The falcon hath borne my
make away!

He bare him up, he bare him
down,
He bare him into an orchard
brown.

In that orchard there was an
hall,
That was hanged with purple
and pall.

And in that hall there was a
bed,
It was hanged with gold so
red.

And in that bed there lieth a
knight,
His woundes bleeding day and
night.

At that bed's foot there lieth a
hound,
Licking the blood as it runs
down.

By that bedside there
kneeleth a may,
And she weepeth both night
and day.

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And at that bed's head there
standeth a stone,
"Corpus Christi" written
thereon.

The meaning and symbolism in the "Corpus Christi Carol" may be interpreted in different ways. The interpretations usually accepted have found symbolism in the poem suggesting the legends of the Holy Grail, the Eucharist, or Christ as the wounded knight. Erik Routley uses the term "multiple mythology" to describe the conflation of the mythologies of the Passion, the Mass, the Glastonbury thorn, and the Arthurian legends that are found in this poem.³

Middle English carols, of which the "Corpus Christi Carol" is an example, are characterized by a burden that is sung before the first stanza and repeated after that and all succeeding stanzas. The form of the burden is usually a couplet, and the recurrence of this couplet distinguishes the carol from other forms of Middle English lyrics. The burden in the "Corpus Christi Carol" is "Lully, lullay, The falcon hath borne my make away!"

The first part of the burden, "Lully, lullay," traditionally belongs more to the lullaby carols than to this Passion carol. The burdens of the lullaby carols form a class by themselves. Their characteristic feature is a free use of the soothing onomatopoeic *lullay*. The appearance of this word in the "Corpus Christi Carol" seems to be intended as a comforting element, assuring the reader that out of the death of Christ shall come peace and salvation.

The second line of the burden initiates a sequence of allegorical expression, beginning with the *make* and the *falcon*. In medieval literature *make* can mean a spouse or companion, especially a person as a bride of Christ, or it can mean strength or power, particularly that of Christ.⁴ The falcon can mean a bird of prey recognized for its power of destruction, or a small cannon of the fifteenth century. In the "Corpus Christi Carol" the falcon is best understood as a metaphor for death.

The word *orchard* appears in stanzas one and two. In stanza one, *orchard* is modified by the color

brown, indicating that this is a withered and dying orchard. Use of the word *brown* could also mean that this orchard was filled with darkness and gloom. Given the association with *make* and *falcon*, this brown orchard may represent the garden of Gethsemane or Golgotha, the places where Jesus was arrested and crucified.

In the second stanza the poet describes the contents of the orchard. The word *hall* can mean a space in a garden or grove enclosed by trees or hedges and, in medieval times, any spacious, roofed place. Following the sequential presentation of images, (*make*, *falcon*, orchard *brown*), the *hall* perhaps refers to the tomb where Christ was buried.

The word *pall* (stanza two) means something that extends over a thing or region and produces an effect of gloom. This image parallels that of the brown orchard which connoted gloom and darkness. *Pall* may also be defined in ecclesiastical terms, meaning a hanging for the front of the altar or a linen cloth which covers the chalice.

The color purple is the ecclesiastical color for mourning, penitence, and Good Friday. It is also used poetically to describe the color of blood. The combination *purple and pall* produces an image of death which, in the context of the "Corpus Christi Carol," refers to the death of Christ.

As the images in stanza two describe the contents of the orchard, so the images in stanza three describe the interior of the hall. The word *bed* can be used to denote a grave, and in stanza three the bed in the hall may be the ground where Jesus lay dead. Also the hall and bed might be considered in a larger context of representing respectively the physical church and the monstrance.

The colors red and gold are used to describe the bed. The color red often refers to blood or something stained and covered with blood. Red could refer to the garments of Christ or to the curtains of the altar, as red was the liturgical color appropriate to the Passion in the order of those days. This latter association is related to the use of *hall* to represent the physical church. The word *gold*, when used as an adjective, means something having great value or goodness. In the "Corpus Christi Carol" the word *gold* may act as a

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metaphor for the goodness of Christ, whose body lay covered with blood in a tomb.

In verse four the poet begins to describe the scene in and around the bed. The image of the knight with bleeding wounds refers to the mortal wounds of the crucified body of Christ. The bleeding wounds extend the color imagery of verse three that symbolized the Passion. The temporal reference "day and night" may symbolize the eternal suffering of Christ that granted salvation to the world.

The use of the word *hound* in stanza five marks the second time in the "Corpus Christi Carol" that an animal is used metaphorically — the first time was the use of the falcon. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that the word *hound* is transferable, in various scenes, to persons. In this carol the image of the hound seems to represent a quality as well as a person; specifically, the faithfulness of Joseph of Arimathea, as he gathered the sacred drops of blood in his vessel.

Another explanation of the hound is more secular in conception. In the late fifteenth century it was common rule that royal blood should not be shed upon the ground. When a king or one of his family was to be put to death, a mode of execution was devised so that the royal blood should not be spilled upon the earth. Though Christ did not proclaim himself a king, church tradition treats him as such (recall the image of Psalm 98 of Lord the King), and the image of Joseph of Arimathea, or the hound, gathering the sacred drops of blood may represent Christ's royal treatment by the Church.

The word *may* (stanza six) can mean a maiden or virgin, and in this context probably refers to the Virgin Mary as she knelt in tears at her son's crucifixion. The use of the phrase *night and day* parallels a similar construction in stanza four, and *weepeth* is similar to *tears* in the Revelation text of Movement III.

The stone of stanza seven may represent the stone sealing the tomb, or it may refer to the altar stone on which the monstrance rests. If taken to mean the former, a connection may be drawn between the *stone* sealing the tomb and the *hall* meaning the tomb. If the stone is taken to mean the altar stone, the table from which the celebrant of the Mass symbolically re-enacts Christ's perpetual sacrifice, then the hall is better understood as a metaphor for the physical church. Or the stone may be a more powerful symbol, suggesting the traditional image of Christ as the foundation, head, and cornerstone of the Christian faith. The climax of this carol comes in the last line of stanza seven with the words, *Corpus Christi*, a Latin phrase meaning body of Christ.

After the "Corpus Christi Carol" comes the *Ave Verum* chant, which focuses on the humanity of Christ and on the agony of the crucifixion. *Ave verum* was originally a sequence hymn written by Pope Innocent VI for the Feast of Corpus Christi.

Ave verum corpus,
natum de Maria virgine.
Vere passum, immolatum
in cruce pro homine.
Cuius latus perforatum
fluxit aqua et sanguine.
Esto nobis praegustatum
mortis in examine

O Jesu dulcis, O Jesu pie
O Jesu, fili Mariae.

Hail true body,
Born of Mary (the) Virgin
Truly suffering, sacrificed
on (the) Cross for men.
Whose side when pierced
flowed water and blood.

Be to us a foretaste
in death's agony
O Jesus sweet, O Jesus loving
O Jesus son of Mary.⁵

Whereas the "Corpus Christi Carol" was a secular and allegorical depiction of the death of Christ, the *Ave verum* is a sacred representation of the same, using bold images to depict Christ's suffering on the cross. *Ave verum corpus* is similar in meaning to *Corpus Christi*, and both texts use the blood of Christ as an image to portray his humanity: *Ave verum* uses the phrase *fluxit aqua et sanguine* ([whose side] flowed with water and blood) and the "Corpus Christi Carol" the image "his woundes bleeding day and night."

The initial and closing reference in *Ave verum* to Mary, as mother of God, recalls the maid (*may*) in stanza six of the "Corpus Christi Carol,"

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who knelt and wept, like Mary, beside the bleeding knight. The combination of references to the Incarnation and Crucifixion in one text reflects a personal type of piety common in the Middle Ages. This pious devotion emphasized Christ's human emotion and suffering, and often included the figures of Mary as mother or as the *Mater Dolorosa*, watching the agony of her child upon the cross.⁶

Ave verum also recalls ideas presented in Psalm 98. The salvation theme started in Psalm 98 is continued in this Latin hymn with the phrase *Vere passum, immolatum in cruce pro homine* (Truly suffering, sacrificed on the cross for men). Also, the eschatological thread that was begun in Psalm 98 is continued here in the phrase *Esto nobis praegustatum mortis in examine* (Be to us a foretaste in death's agony).

Following *Ave verum* is the fifteenth-century poem "Christ Triumphant." This poem uses a more direct language, in contrast to the allegorical language of the "Corpus Christi Carol."

I have laboured sore and suffered death,
And now I rest and draw my breath;

But I shall come and call right soon
Heaven and earth and hell to doom;
And then shall know both devil and man,
What I was and what I am.

"Christ Triumphant" is also different from the "Corpus Christi Carol" in that it focuses not on the Passion, but on the thoughts of Christ after his death. In this poem Christ, apparently in the tomb, looks forward to his final triumph on the Day of Judgment.

"Christ Triumphant" parallels the eschatological interpretation of the opening psalm, where the psalmist pictured the day when the Lord would come to judge the earth. Here the judgment idea is "But I shall come and call right soon, Heaven and earth and hell to doom."

As a meditation on "Christ Triumphant," and to conclude this movement, Rutter chose the chant *Surrexit Dominus*.

Surrexit Dominus
de sepulchro, Alleluia.
Qui pro nobis pendit
in ligno, Alleluia.

God has risen
from the grave, Alleluia.

Who hung from a
(sacred) tree for us, Alleluia.⁷

This chant continues the triumphant mood of the previous English lyric, as Jesus has fulfilled the prophecy that he would be raised from the dead on the third day. The salvation theme of the *Ave verum* chant is here expressed in the phrase *Oui pro nobis pependit in ligno* ([The Lord] who hung from a [sacred] tree for us). The salvation that is granted through the eternal sacrifice depicted in this second movement is realized in the text of Movement III, which is taken from the book of Revelation.

Movement III

Rev. 21:3 Behold, the city of
God is with men.
He will dwell with them, and
they shall be his people,
And God himself will be with
them.

7:16 They shall hunger no
more, neither thirst any more;
The sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
7:17 For the Lamb in the
midst of the throne will be
their
shepherd, and he will lead
them to springs of living
water.

The major portion of the text for Movement III is taken from The Revelation of St. John the Divine. Both the text of this movement and that of Movement I are eschatological. The text Rutter has selected from Revelation describes a perfect world order in the New Jerusalem. Movement I (Psalm 98) talks of the Lord as King and his final judgment over the earth. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two texts. Whereas the eschatology in the Old

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Testament (Psalm 98) is primarily concerned with this life and this age of human history, the eschatology in the New Testament (Revelation) is also apocalyptic, and therefore concerned more with the next life and the age to come.

Like Movement II, the English text in this movement is interspersed with Latin hymns, the first of which is *Urbs Jerusalem*.

Urbs Jerusalem beata,
Dicata pacis visio,
Quae construitur in caelis
Vivis ex lapidibus,
Et angelis coronata,
Ut sponsata comite.

The blessed Jerusalem,
called the vision of peace,
which is built in the heavens
from living stone,
and crowned with angels,
as a betrothed woman with
her retinue.⁸

This chant is a symbolic representation of the apocalypse, which the Interpreter's Bible defines as an eternal age created by God for the everlasting enjoyment of his followers from among the living and resurrected dead.⁹ It contains several images which describe the New Jerusalem: The "vision of peace" refers to a city without temporal end; "built in the heaven" symbolizes the intervention and ultimate control of God; and the inhabitants of that city, the "living stones," are the living and resurrected dead. The metaphor of the "betrothed woman" recalls *make* in Movement I, which is a metaphor for Christ as the bridegroom. The retinue are the righteous followers of Christ.

The final English text used in *The Falcon* is Revelation 21:4.

And God shall wipe away all
tears from their eyes,
And there shall be no more
death, neither sorrow nor cry-
ing,
Neither shall there be any
more pain,
For the former things have
passed away.

Like Revelation 7:16, this verse

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describes the New Jerusalem in terms of what it will not be. The victory described in Psalm 98 has become, through the sacrifice allegorically depicted in Movement II, a victory for the followers of Christ. The powerful King of the Old Testament is pictured in Revelation as a tender and gentle shepherd. God has taken his place among his people, and their enjoyment shall be everlasting.

Rutter concludes *The Falcon* with the *Agnus Dei* text from the Ordinary of the Mass. This text recalls a theme from each of the three movements. The word *peace* parallels the word *salvation* in Psalm 98, the *Lamb of God* refers to the sacrifice of Movement II, and "who takes away the sin of the world" is realized in the text of Movement III. The concluding *Dona nobis pacem* is a reverent plea not only for an individual spiritual peace, but for a peace that extends to all the ends of the world.

A complete performance of *The Falcon* takes approximately twenty-two minutes. Rutter feels that the work needs full orchestra, but frequently it is performed in this country with only piano accompaniment. *The Falcon* is a difficult work to perform and is not well-suited to other than a mature choral ensemble (this is particularly true of the second movement). However, it is possible to perform only the outer movements, which then makes the

piece much more accessible to a good high school or church choir. (A suggested cut is from measure 12 of the second movement to measure 187 of the same.)

The choral music of John Rutter has become well known among American choral directors. Characterized by a tunefulness and rhythmic vitality, Rutter's music seems to have an immediate attraction to both performer and audience. First published in this country in 1972, *The Falcon* unfortunately has not achieved the popularity of some of his more recent works. However, *The Falcon* exhibits all the characteristics that we have come to identify with Rutter, and will provide a challenging and rewarding experience to both conductor and chorus.

Notes

- ¹ John Rutter's letter to Robert Ward.
- ² Richard L. Greene, "The Meaning of the Corpus Christi Carol," in *Medium Aevum* (1960): 10.
- ³ Erik Routley, *The English Carol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 63.
- ⁴ *Middle English Dictionary*, edited by Sherman M. Kuhn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975).
- ⁵ *Chants of the Church*, translated by Msgr. Charles E. Spence (Ohio: Gregorian Institute of America, 1962), p. 88.
- ⁶ Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval Religious Lyric* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 18.
- ⁷ Translation by Department of Classical and Romance Languages, Michigan State University.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 12, p. 347.

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