

Robin Milford (1903 - 1959)

A Litany to the Holy Spirit

This work was written in 1947 and dedicated to the composer's wife at Christmas of that year. It is a setting of a penitential poem by Robert Herrick (1591 - 1634). Its composition demonstrates pertinent parts of Milford's temperament not only in terms of his profound spirituality but also his deep sadness, with extreme depression, at the tragic death of his young son, Barnaby, in 1941. Barnaby was 5-years old when killed by a van.

Herrick's poem 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. 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.

Set in E minor for a SATB choir, it will be a challenge for the listener to follow which voice has the melody in each verse and which form of technique is placed against each voice. The first verse presents the first half of the theme in unison, thereafter, the soprano sings the second half and the refrain, accompanied by a chordal texture.

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, *fauxbourden*, 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.