

*Huntingtower Ballad for Band* by Ottorino Respighi – A Brief Analysis

By Andrew Pease

August 25, 2008

Ottorino Respighi wrote *Huntingtower Ballad for Band* in 1932 on a commission from Edwin Franko Goldman and the American Bandmasters' Association for a tribute concert to the then-recently-deceased John Philip Sousa. His inspiration for the piece was Huntingtower Castle in central Scotland. The experience of visiting this 15<sup>th</sup>-century castle inspired Respighi to write this sometimes heroic, sometimes romantic, but mostly grim overture.

FORM AND THEMES

*Huntingtower* uses the form ABACDA, with each section focused on a specific theme or character. Most of the sections are somehow related or connected to the other surrounding sections. The A theme (example 1 in Appendix) is introduced in the opening four measures of the piece. It is a question and answer between the bass and baritone instruments in E-flat minor. While in E-flat minor, both of the theme's two sections end on unresolved pitches for that key (C-flat and F natural respectively). As such, the piece starts with a profound feeling of gloom and uncertainty. This first section continues as Respighi develops the A theme through several keys, picking the theme apart to highlight its several rhythmic and melodic features. Rhythmically, he plays with the two different dotted rhythms present in the theme, at times creating overlapping rhythmic textures. Melodically, he alters the theme in small chromatic increments, starts it at different scale tones, and at times inverts its pitch direction.

The B section, in 6/8 time, plays off the dotted character of the A theme without truly introducing any new thematic material (example 2). It builds to the return of A, this

time at a much faster  $\frac{3}{4}$  tempo and with little development.  $\frac{6}{8}$  returns at C, which features a new heroic theme in E-flat major (example 3). This theme appears only twice in full, stated fully by the trumpets and cornets the first time, and assisted by the horns the second time. At the end of the second statement, several brass instruments have small solos restating the last four notes of the theme. These repeated statements gradually become further separated in time, assisted by a *rallentando*. The repeated statements—as well as the slackening of intensity at the end of the section—set up the theme and the feel of the romantic D section.

The D theme (example 4), in  $\frac{4}{4}$  and E-flat major, borrows its opening rhythm from the repeated ending of the C theme. It is characterized by alternating duple and triple subdivisions, the presence of grace notes, and same or stepwise melodic motion with few leaps. These features lend the theme an ornamental, expressive character. A short development of this theme brings the return, via deceptive cadence, of the A theme with all its doom and gloom, back in E-flat minor and slow  $\frac{3}{4}$ . This time the A theme receives a less rigorous development to the end of the piece. The last three bars find the timpani and bass drum essentially hammering the opening figure of the A theme into the ground under the profound sound of the full band sustaining an E-flat minor chord (example 5).

### HARMONIC FEATURES

Respighi gives each section of *Huntingtower* its own unique character. The harmonic devices he chooses to use are an important feature of these character changes. The A section features tense and unpredictable harmonic changes with rhythmic play to match. Sections B, C, and the intermittent return of A all rely on pedal harmony to

highlight other spots of harmonic interest. Section D achieves a floating feeling by combining long, sustained chords with steady stepwise motion in the accompaniment. Section A returns to close the piece with the full harmonic intensity in which it was formed while connecting to the doom and gloom of the opening.

The piece begins in  $\frac{3}{4}$  with a statement of the A theme. This very clearly in E-flat minor. The statement ends with a fermata on the vii-diminished  $\frac{4}{2}$  chord, leaving the listener expecting resolution. The second statement does indeed resolve, but only temporarily as it moves quickly towards D-flat minor via an unexpected B-double-flat, settling on its VI chord (B-double-flat major) at another fermata. The trombones bring in the first hint of heroism to come as D-flat minor becomes major, but only for one measure. A building development section follows as the theme starts to swallow its own tail, the beginning and ending portions overlapping each other. The harmonies become ever more ambiguous during this section, moving rapidly through E-flat minor and D-flat minor, then suggesting B-flat minor through a series of unresolved diminished chords. Turgid stretto motion through the German sixth chord of V finally leads to a climactic i chord in B-flat minor, but in the first inversion, thereby delaying full resolution. A gong hit three measures later resets the tonality to D-flat minor as the pace of the theme slackens. The theme now generally appears in full, discrete statements, and no longer seems intent on overtaking itself. This general relaxation of the music leads back to E-flat minor. At this point the true minor mode becomes interspersed with modal (Aeolian) statements, even suggesting G-flat major at times. The section winds down further, relaxing fully into E-flat Aeolian before abruptly setting up the B section via the introduction of a new rhythm.

Galloping rhythms in the last two measures of the A section herald the quickening pace of the B section. These are the basis for the transitional melody that dominates the B section, as well as for its pedal E-flat that persists into the subsequent sections of the piece. While the E-flat uses the galloping rhythm, a C-flat is also sustained for several bars beneath that, implying the VI chord in E-flat minor. Short blasts of F from the trombones, as well as melodic motion above, move the harmonies to vii-diminished 4/2 briefly, but otherwise the harmonic motion is very limited. This motion picks up in the second half of the section, with the bass instruments driving one-bar chord changes until the end of the section.

The galloping pedal E-flat continues uninterrupted into the return of the A theme. The theme itself implies some harmonies in E-flat minor, but the pedal dominates throughout the section. To close the section, the bass instruments riff on the A theme in mostly chromatic motion while the pedal continues. They also hint at the E-flat major tonality to come.

As the C section opens, the galloping pedal moves to B-flat. The upper woodwinds sustain trills on E-flat major arpeggio tones. The trumpets play a heroic melody, also in E-flat major. These three parts taken together constitute no harmonic motion whatsoever. The motion in this section comes from the horns and baritones, who play a chromatic figure in time with the pedal. This is the extent of the harmonic motion for the bulk of this section. Even as the B-flat pedal dissolves into more chromatic movement, the E-flat pedal returns. Gradually fewer instruments play the galloping pedal, leaving the timpani alone to carry on as the end bit of the theme is repeated over a

slowly meandering, stepwise bass line that slowly moves to a resolution on an E-flat major chord at the opening of the next section.

The D section, in a slow 4/4 and in E-flat major, generally features one- or two-measure harmonic motion. Stepwise, quarter-note motion in the mid-range instruments gives the accompaniment a floating feeling as well. Meanwhile the theme soars above and provides all of this section's rhythmic intensity, with its alternating duple and triple subdivisions. The harmonic motion remains within the tonic key throughout the section, moving only as far away as a secondary dominant to IV and a ii chord over a pedal B-flat. This pedal B-flat helps build a lengthy dominant at the end of the section, leading the listener to expect full resolution as the texture of the piece builds. This expectation is thoroughly dashed when the next section begins.

Despite the upper woodwinds and low brass landing on E-flat as expected, the final A section begins on a *fortissimo* A-flat minor chord in the remaining brass, constituting a deceptive cadence from the B-flat major that came before. The A theme reappears, once again overlapping itself and building to a tense climax. A gong hit again signals a change in tonality, this time back to the original key of E-flat minor (with some Aeolian flavor), which closes the piece. Relatively simple harmonic motion allows the piece to build towards its final, doomed climax.

Respighi built *Huntingtower* out of related themes and contrasting, tonal harmonic devices. His thorough grasp of these compositional techniques makes *Huntingtower* a powerful and dramatic addition to the wind band literature, and his stature as a composer cements *Huntingtower's* importance in that repertoire.