



Giles Swayne

Stations of the Cross: Analysis by the composer

The **Stations of the Cross** last just under an hour, and use many different structural and contrapuntal techniques. Although these are better heard than read about in an essay, it may help listeners if I provide landmarks for each movement, without using too much technical jargon. The keynote of each movement is given in square brackets.

BOOK ONE

1: Jesus is sentenced to death

His back torn by scourges, his head crowned with thorns, Jesus is dragged before Pontius Pilate and condemned to death.

[F sharp] A brooding introduction on the pedals describes Jesus' weary, shackled walk to his audience with Pilate. The dialogue with Pilate is a series of melodic phrases which becomes increasingly agitated, and culminates in a thunderous descending passage on the pedals which quotes the first four notes of the plainchant *Dies irae* – alluding to a judgement rather more final than Pilate's. A mocking three-voice fugal section leads to violent chords as Jesus' guards jeer at him; and the movement ends in a passage of crudely bleak octaves in two voices (one a backwards inversion of the other) which gradually fades over a repeated four-note phrase in the pedals.

2: Jesus takes up the Cross

A heavy cross is laid upon the bruised shoulders of Jesus, who slowly sets forth on the road to Calvary amidst the jeers of the crowd.

[G] A four-note phrase in two almost parallel voices is played four times on the manuals on different steps of the mode – starting quietly, and becoming louder each time. These phrases are punctuated by two rising two-note phrases on the pedals, which appear three times, also louder each time. After the fourth version of the phrase on the manuals, the pedals' two-note phrase becomes a three-note upbeat to the ground bass which is the main part of this movement. This is heard three times: first loud and solemn, using the original version of the mode against contrasting chords in the manuals; then in the inverted mode, with two-part overlapping rapid notes in the manuals, and becoming very quiet; and finally almost on its own, decorated by rising scales in the manuals.

3: The first fall

Weakened by loss of blood, Jesus falls under the weight of the cross.

[A flat] The introduction consists of six phrases distributed antiphonally between manuals and pedals. These contain four pairs of notes four steps apart, each pair a step higher than the one before; so the melodic lines are constantly rising. The central section is a *Sarabande*, its triplet accompaniment sinking by one step at the beginning of every new bar. Each bar has one staccato note in the pedals; these also limp gradually downwards. The upper manual has a rather baroque eight-bar melody which is played three times in different modes, before breaking off, then plummeting down to the bass and the pedals, to end the movement.

4: Jesus and his mother

Jesus is met by his mother, who pours out an impassioned lament. He continues on his way.

[A] The introductory section is a dialogue between Mary (upper manual) and Jesus (lower) in which phrases are at first spaced apart but come closer each time until they overlap, as in an impassioned argument. There are three paragraphs (each consisting of three phrases and responses), interrupted after the third paragraph by a disjointed phrase on the pedals. The note-values are compressed each time, so that the effect is of increasing urgency. The central section of the movement is a grief-stricken aria in which the lower manual has an accompaniment of staccato triadic chords, while the pedals play a continually rising seven-beat phrase in triplets,

punctuated by silences. Over this, the right-hand plays a long melody which is freer, floating across the divisions of the other strands. This section fades almost to silence, and the pedals take us into the final section, in which triads taken from the prevailing modes of this movement (and their inversions) rise slowly from lowest register to highest, underpinned by vestiges of the triplet material in the pedals. This builds to a climactic held chord (of D minor) on full organ; beneath this, the pedals play a three-note phrase which ends on the dominant (E flat) of the movement.

5: Simon of Cyrene

Jesus' strength fails him, and he is unable to continue. The soldiers seize Simon of Cyrene, and force him to help Jesus carry the cross.

[B flat] This movement (like several others) is a conscious homage to Bach. Its first part consists of four verses. The first has a staccato walking (and rising) bass in the pedals, with rapid eight-note rising scalic phrases answering one another on upper and lower manuals. A short silence, then the second verse, in which the pedals introduce shorter phrases, moving twice as fast but with breaks between them – and the manuals again have eight-note scales, but this time rising in the lower manual and falling in the upper, and overlapping rather than antiphonal. After a climax, a passage for the pedals takes us into the third verse, which adds a new element: the rising and falling scales in the manuals are punctuated by an energetic, snatched two-chord figure, and the walking bass from the first verse underpins the whole. The two-chord figure takes over and brings us to another climax – after which another passage for the pedals takes us into the fourth verse. This is a simplified mirror-image of the first: the scalic passages move downwards in both hands, and are played in parallel, rather than antiphonally; and the walking bass is reduced to one note per bar. This fades to a slow, quiet phrase in the pedals; and after a silence the second section of the movement begins. Simon of Cyrene is now carrying the Cross, and his firmer footsteps are heard in the new walking bass, which rises steadily to the end of the movement. Over it, the lower manual intones the plainchant melody *Crux fidelis* as a *cantus firmus*; above this, the upper manual traces a decorative melody in the manner of a Bach chorale prelude. The last note of the plainchant is

held, while the pedals continue to walk calmly upwards, and the manuals reprise the call-and-response scalic figure from the beginning of the movement.

6: Veronica

As Jesus continues towards Calvary, covered with blood, a woman in the crowd, moved by compassion, wipes his face with a clean cloth.

[B] The walking bass from the previous movement is continued in this, but the notes are lighter and less steady, because Jesus has taken up the Cross again. They are also less regular: there are eight steps, then a first melodic phrase (on the upper manual) from the on looking Veronica; then another six steps, followed by a longer phrase from Veronica (this time continuing over the pedals, and mirrored on the lower manual), and then two steps, and finally another two steps, then silence. The two-note pedal phrase continues in the second part of this movement; over it the hands weave a wispy *legato* line on the manuals, using a 4-foot flute stop. This (representing the flimsy cloth used to wipe Jesus' face) is interrupted by a recitative-like passage for cor anglais; then it returns, ending on a trill in the manuals, and coalesces upon a quiet five-note chord which is played four times, louder each time, and which represents the cloth after it has been printed with the image of Jesus' face). This chord is alternated with a contrasting chord to form a brief coda, beneath which the two-note walking bass appears for the last time in the pedals. The movement ends with the five-note "printed cloth" chord.

7: The second fall

Exhausted by loss of blood, Jesus falls to the ground for the second time.

[C] This movement, being the last of the first book, is slightly longer than the previous movements, and marks the halfway-point of the cycle. The first section is dominated by a falling triplet figure. This is played twice on the manuals – short, loud, and interrupted by silences – and then by the pedals, which carry it further downwards. After a quiet, static interlude consisting of three phrases followed by silences, the falling triplet figure returns with a vengeance and very loud – first in the manuals, and then in an extended three-part canon in manuals and pedals which settles on a unison C. The second section is an aria of anguished grief, in which an

accompaniment in sobbing quavers moves relentlessly downwards, starting in the treble on the upper manual and passing smoothly to the lower. Below it, the pedals play a recurring ground bass which also sinks downwards, step by step. Over these two components is a recurring melody lasting eighteen beats, which sinks by two steps on each recurrence. This isometric web (to coin a jargon phrase) leads into a third section subtitled *Joking Jesus*. Centuries before the bawdy song of this name was quoted by James Joyce in *Ulysses*, the idea existed in the Middle Ages as the flipside of the suffering Christ who, in medieval belief, had the last laugh over his tormentors. I used the idea for musical and dramatic reasons: this movement needed a surprise *scherzo* moment as a foil for the prevailing darkness. The manuals have a cheeky two-part fugal invention; the pedals play the upper part in augmentation as a walking bass in quavers; but it dances rather than plods; and after eight bars it picks up the rhythm of the manuals, slightly modified (almost in waltz-rhythm), and joins the manuals. The three-part invention comes to a climax, and a new phrase is added: the two-chord figure heard in the fifth movement when Jesus's strength first failed him. This is played by both manuals and repeated seven times on different steps of the mode, while the pedals thunder out a new, one-bar theme which is also played seven times, but on different steps of the mode and varied on each repetition. All three parts now converge on C (the keynote of this movement), and the manuals, over a decorated C bass in the pedals, play the two-part invention melody in long notes – the lower manual using an inverted form of the mode and a retrograde (backwards) form of the upper manual's note-values. This recurs three times – each time quieter, with larger gaps between the notes, and in varying combinations of mode and note-values. By the end of the third version, all three lines are quiet, and the manuals have short notes separated by quite long rests. The pedals round off the movement with a three-note cadential phrase ending on low C, which exactly mirrors the end of the first movement.

BOOK TWO

1: The women of Jerusalem

At the sight of Jesus' sufferings, some women in the crowd were so touched by sympathy that they wept for him. Jesus said to them: "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me: weep for yourselves, and for your children."

[C sharp] The wailing women are characterised by a keening phrase with a decorative turn on its first and last notes; this is answered by a modal variant of itself. Each pair of phrases (call and response) varies in pitch and is slightly more compressed than its predecessor; so the keening grows in urgency, culminating in a loud reprise of the opening phrase in triple octaves on full organ – ending on the note G, which acts as the dominant of this movement. Over a boogie-like but smooth figure in the pedals (indicating the sinuous movements of the women's bodies) the keening appears again, contracting as before, but this time fading to silence. The central section of the movement is a *Threnody*, in which the manuals play a semiquaver accompaniment of broken chords over a melodic ground bass in the pedals which becomes gradually more decorated and agitated, building to a climax, at which point the keening material of the opening returns, in reverse – the material is compressed and urgent at first, and gradually thins out and fades to almost nothing. A thunderous reprise on full organ of the opening phrase ends the movement.

2: The third fall

Just before he reaches the place where he is to be crucified, Jesus falls for the third time – to be dragged up again and forced on by the guards.

[D] This is the final fall, and there is no getting up from it. Beneath rapidly falling scales in the manuals, the pedals have a series of limping three-note phrases which lead into a longer theme in the pedals. This controls the rest of the movement as a ground bass, based on the tonic and dominant notes of the mode (D and A flat). It is accompanied by a series of rapidly rising scalic figures, and interrupted five times by a two-bar chorale made of modal cluster-chords. These sink lower on each appearance, and also become quieter, as if from exhaustion. The movement ends with a final statement of the four-bar ground bass.

3: Jesus is stripped of his clothes

When Jesus arrives at the place of execution, the guards prepare to crucify him. His clothes are ripped from his body, and he stands naked in front of the crowd.

[E flat] The first section of this movement is light and mocking, made of rising figures like roughly tearing cloth, which decorate a series of staccato notes which are lightly echoed in the bass by the pedals. This ends in a brief, mocking scream on the manuals (in almost-octaves), and a quiet echo of the scream. After a silence, the central section begins: a calm and simple melody in the right hand, accompanied by slowly unfolding chords. This slowly descends through seven steps, and grows to a dark climax. After another short silence, the coda presents a long, slowly rising scale in irregular fifths on the manuals, punctuated by three furious interjections from the pedals. A musical image of the dignity of Jesus' nakedness – the more an innocent victim is humiliated and tortured, the more powerful he becomes as a symbol.

4: Jesus is nailed to the Cross

The cross is laid on the ground, and the guards seize Jesus and fix him to it by driving large nails through his hands and feet.

[E] Violent staccato cluster-chords represent the hammering of nails into Jesus' hands and feet; they are punctuated by rapid falling and rising figures on the manuals – the second of these fading to a short silence, as if Jesus has fainted with the pain. A violent solo on the pedals is picked up first by the lower manual, then the upper – the three voices in close canon creating an effect of mindless brutality. This leads into a passage in triple octaves, starting quite slow and ponderously on full organ and gradually fading as its note-values are speeded up. A jerky series of staccato chords builds to fortissimo, and after a reprise of the rapidly falling figure from the opening section the hammering music returns with much greater weight and savagery. After a short silence, the quiet, rapidly rising figure fades the movement quickly to a close: Jesus is unconscious.

5: Jesus dies on the Cross

Jesus has been hanging on the cross for several hours. After he has pardoned his executioners and entrusted his mother to the care of John, he bows his head and dies.

[F] This is the bleakest moment of the cycle: slow, very quiet, and timeless. Over a held chord, a faltering, fractured six-note melody appears, punctuated by isolated

staccato bass-notes on the pedals, like the ceasing of a heartbeat. This pattern (melody, chord and bass-notes) recurs six times, moving through various steps of the two modes (and their inversions) of this movement. It is no accident, but deliberate irony, that the bass-notes in the pedals are a slowed-down, mummified fragment from the song “Always look on the bright side of life” from the last scene of *The life of Brian* (which, with glorious absurdity, depicts the crucifixion of an innocent man). This juxtaposition of comedy with tragedy may shock some; but I see it as one of life’s truths – and also as a paradoxical consolation in the despair which haunts the human condition. Like the *Joking Jesus* in the seventh movement of the first book, and the naked Jesus exposed to ridicule in the third movement of this, the innocent victim of cruelty somehow (against all odds) transcends and belittles his tormentors. Jesus has the last laugh.

6: Jesus’ body is laid in his mother’s arms

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take the body of Jesus down and put it in Mary’s arms.

[F sharp] This is the simplest and most static movement of the cycle. On the pedals, an unchanging staccato chord (consisting of the tonic and dominant of the mode) is struck three times like some eerie, muffled bell. This recurs four times, louder each time, leading to a climax at the mid-point of the movement. Over it, the upper manual plays an expressive melodic call which is answered in the lower manual; this call-and response is heard three times, growing to the central climax – after which the process is reversed: three more melodic call-and-responses, punctuated by four more triple bell-strokes, which start very loud after the central climax, and fade to the end.

7: Jesus’ body is laid in the tomb

The body of Jesus is taken away from Mary and laid in the tomb by his disciples. the tomb is sealed with a large stone.

[G] With Jesus dead and entombed, the last movement acts as a musical tombstone, summing up his life; and it seemed right to make a conscious homage to Bach, whose musical depictions of Christ’s’ passion are two of the greatest achievements

of music and humanity. This movement (by far the biggest of all fourteen) consists of a prelude and fugue which, without aping Bach's style, unashamedly adopts his techniques. The prelude contrasts overlapping broken chords –triadic, but modified by the tritonal basis of the modes underlying this piece – with a one-bar theme in the pedals which underpins the prelude like a traditional cycle of fifths, acting partly as a shifting ostinato and partly as a ground-bass. The fugue is in five parts, and is of the formal, *cantus firmus* type. After the exposition, short extracts from all thirteen earlier pieces are woven into the fugal development, and a *stretto* (over an elaborately decorated version of the subject in the pedals) brings all five voices to a conclusion on the keynote (G) which is sounded in triumphant quintuple octaves on full organ. Symbolically, innocence and the power of music achieve a triumph over the forces of cruelty and greed.

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