

Motivic Development in "Three Epigraphs of William Blake"

This analysis describes the structure and the development of motives found in the first movement of "Three Epigraphs of William Blake" for Cello and Piano, by Phil Hanna. (The other two movements are yet to be written.) The epigraphs are taken from the poetry of William Blake:

- "It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend" ¹
- "The cut worm forgives the plow" ²
- "Did He who made the Lamb make thee?" ³

Epigraph 1 - It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend

This movement can be analyzed as an A-B-A-C-B-A form, consisting of the following:

Section	Measures	Idea
A	mm. 1-8	Enemy's betrayal, perception of hurt
B	mm. 9-15	Forgiveness
A	mm. 16-24	Friend's betrayal
C	mm. 25-36	Intensified perception of hurt
B	mm. 37-43	Attempt at forgiveness; woundedness persists
A	mm. 44-48	Echo of betrayal

¹ Blake, William. "Jerusalem, Chapter 4." *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, Anchor Books, 1988, p. 251

² Blake, William. "Proverbs of Hell." *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, Anchor Books, 1988, p. 35

³ Blake, William. "The Tyger" from "Songs of Experience" *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, Anchor Books, 1988, pp. 24-25

Section A (mm. 1-8): Enemy's betrayal, perception of hurt

Let us examine the cello part at section A, which recurs twice later in the movement.

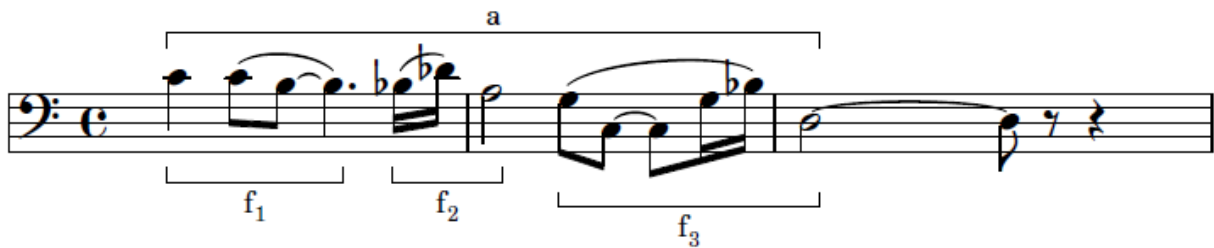


Fig. 1. mm. 1-3

Figure 1 shows the main motive (a) and three fragments: f_1 , f_2 , and f_3 . This motive provides all the thematic material for the cello in the rest of the movement. The response in the piano is motive (b), which consists of fragments 2 and 3 with interval modifications, as shown in Figure 2.

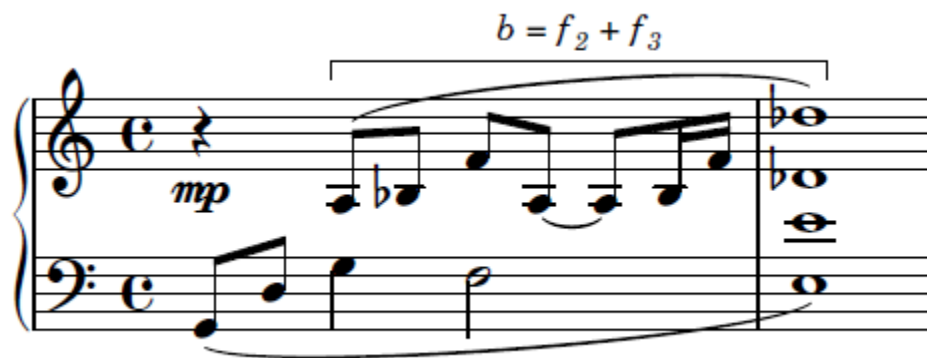


Fig. 2. mm. 3-4

The minor third in f_2 becomes a minor second, and f_3 is similarly adjusted, maintaining the same melodic contour. Motive b becomes important throughout the movement.



Fig 3. mm.5-8

In the remainder of section A, the cello part has fragment f_1 transposed and elongated followed by f_2 transposed and then f_3 at the original pitch. The piano has an accompanying figure which culminates in motive **b** in measure 8.

Section B (mm. 9-15): Forgiveness

The mood changes in the B section to a legato passage in the piano, suggested by the "forgiveness" in the epigraph (superego). The cello (ego) is silent in this section, as there is not much emotion invested in forgiving an enemy.



Fig. 4

The forgiveness passage is built on the harmonic framework shown in Figure 4, with the left hand in sextuplets and the right hand arpeggiated (mainly with inversions of the same interval).⁴

Section A (mm. 16-24): Friend's betrayal

⁴ I had originally written this harmony for a quintet for four horns and tuba.

This restatement of the opening theme is varied by the piano playing in a higher register, suggesting more intense feeling.

Section C (mm. 25-36): Intensified perception of hurt

The betrayal section is interrupted by an agitated 16th note motto built on fragment f_1 of motive **a**, inverted and elongated (see figure 5). Forgiveness is not as simple here, because memories come flooding back, and the ego cannot so easily forget.



Fig. 5

The section closes with a sequence of four ascending minor sixths (mm. 35-36), pushing the cello to its upper register.

Section B (mm. 37-43): Attempt at forgiveness; woundedness persists

The forgiveness section is repeated, but this time with the cello continuing to dwell on the betrayal with extended runs in its upper register, again built from an elongated inversion of f_1 , as well as the related motive C described above (figure 6)



Fig. 6

The piece reaches a climax with the outburst at mm. 42-43 (Figure 7), derived from fragments f_2 and f_3 , originally heard in the piano at measure 3.



Fig 7. mm. 42-43

Section A (mm. 44-48): Echo of betrayal

The B section abruptly stops and the opening theme is restated, with the roles of piano and cello exchanged, and concludes with the cello playing the betrayal motive from mm. 42-43, ending on an unresolved leading tone.

Summary

All the thematic material for the cello is derived from the three fragments of motive **a**, heard in the opening two measures. The legato passages for piano in section B (twice heard) are used as a peaceful contrast to the agitation and sorrow in the cello's role.

I did not intend this piece as "program music" - indeed, I originally had the second epigraph ("The Cut Worm Forgives the Plow") as the basis. Only in retrospect did I see how it better fit the contrasting forgiveness epigraph.

Johannes Brahms once said that composition begins with the "gift" of a musical idea, which grows and expands of its own accord. Then in a separate and fully conscious process, the composer draws all the implications and possibilities from that initial idea: "nothing is lost."⁵ This is also Arnold Schönberg's view -- that a composition is foreseen in, and then drawn step by step from, the theme.⁶

⁵ Frisch, Walter. *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*, University of California Press (1984), pp. 31-33

⁶ Ibid, p. 33