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PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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## Contemporary Musical Settings of *Beowulf*

The centuries-old *Beowulf* continues to inspire contemporary culture through a variety of adaptations and reinterpretations. Through its continual presence in the cultural memory, the poem has also made its way into music. The aim of this paper is to survey four contemporary musical settings of *Beowulf*, i.e. compositions which set the words of the poem in Old English or a Present-Day English translation of the poem. The importance of this overview lies in the documentation of a phenomenon present in contemporary music: the practice of setting Old English texts to music. However, the focus of this article are settings of *Beowulf* in order to narrow down the discussion.

The settings span from 1925 to the present, and are the following: Howard Hanson's "The Lament for Beowulf" (1925), Ezequiel Viñao's "Beowulf: Scyld's Burial" (2009), Cheryl Frances-Hoad's "Beowulf" (2010), and Benjamin Bagby's reconstructed performances of the poem (1987-). A brief discussion of the concept of cultural memory and (re)interpretation precedes the analyses of the musical settings. Each setting is examined separately; however, points of comparison are also noted and discussed. Moreover, each setting is analysed in an individual manner depending on the settings' key elements: the fragment of set text, the ideas, moods, techniques, tones, and rhythms which form the piece.

Contemporary approaches to *Beowulf* vary greatly. Even in the common medium of musical setting, the way in which the composers tell the story differs in choice of form, technique, instrumentation, and overall atmosphere. However, these are all settings of the same story which has persisted throughout the ages, and it is worth recording the contemporary perceptions of *Beowulf*—so as to sharpen the historical sense of the pastness of the past and its presence.

KEYWORDS

**Beowulf, musical setting, reinterpretation, contemporary music, music analysis**

## 1. Introduction: Old English texts in contemporary cultural memory

New texts are created not only within the current cut of culture but also in its past. Along the entire course of cultural history, “unknown” artifacts of the past are constantly being found, discovered, or unearthed either from the ground or from under the dust of a library.

—Juri Lotman, “Memory in a Culturological Perspective”

The “unearthing” of Old English (henceforth: OE) literary texts, scholarly efforts to recover their meaning and context, and artistic reworkings of those texts all lead to their subsequent presence in a society’s cultural memory. New texts arise on the basis of established texts whose meanings are in return altered by every novel approach, and so “cultural memory creates a framework for communication across the abyss of time” (Assmann 97). However, this communication is not without hindrance. Long periods of disuse, of gathering dust in archives (Assmann and Czaplicka 110),<sup>1</sup> lead to the loss of their original functions, contexts, and meanings. In oral cultures discontinuity means the death of a text; in literate cultures, however, this means the forgetting of a text and its significance within the culture. Therefore, there remains a chance for recovery, or rather, for reconstruction. Each such reconstruction, each new scholarly or artistic effort was a new interpretation of the original texts; and contemporary perceptions of OE texts both stem from and shape those interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

The concern of this article are contemporary interpretations of that most famous work of OE literature, i.e. *Beowulf*. The OE poem resides in the canon, in culture memory. Therein, it is “recalled, iterated, read, commented, criticized, discussed” in the complex processes of meaning-production (Assmann 97). To particularize further, the foci of this discussion are four contemporary musical settings of *Beowulf*: Howard Hanson’s “The Lament for Beowulf” (1925) for chorus and orchestra; Benjamin Bagby’s reconstructed performances of *Beowulf*; Ezequiel Viñao’s “Beowulf: Scyld’s Burial” (2009) for a SATB voices and percussion quartet; and Cheryl Frances-Hoad’s “Beowulf” (2010) for mezzo-soprano and piano. These settings, rather than stemming from one common strand of thought, seem to be largely unrelated to one another. They span the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century with their composers being of different origins and musical traditions. The settings may collectively be characterized as art music, i.e., music which is produced and transmitted primarily by professionals, not subject to mass distribution, usually publicly funded (commissioned by an institution), and recorded via musical notation.<sup>3</sup> However, Benjamin Bagby’s performances of *Beowulf*, while close to art music, escape axiomatic classification.

It is also worth noting that the dual production of language and music through poetic song or declamation with instrumental accompaniment may have likely been the mode in which the Anglo-Saxons delivered their poetry.<sup>4</sup> From this follows that such contemporary musical settings recontextualize both

the linguistic and musical levels of the OE text. The former level involves both the aural and conceptual aspects of the text: the Old English language has to either be translated or reconstructed phonetically, and the text's meanings comprehended or reconstructed from a contemporary perspective. The musical level, on the other hand, may be reconstructed on the basis of archeological and historical evidence or reinvented through the use of any imaginable compositional technique or style.

In order to limit this discussion to the recontextualization of *Beowulf*—both its linguistic and performative aspects—the compositions in question are settings of the original OE text or its Present-Day English (henceforth, PDE) translations. This excludes musical compositions which draw inspiration from the original OE text to create instrumental pieces as well as original lyrics or libretti. The scope of the musical works discussed is further narrowed to those compositions which are not connected to the medium of drama, thus excluding musicals, operas, and theatrical productions. This delimitation serves to omit those works which rely on extra-musical drama for meaning, in order to reduce the number of forms of expression to discuss. What is left for analysis is vocal music, the dual production of language and music, wherein “the poetry becomes the context for the music and is, itself, controlled by the context of the composition which it inspired” (Lannom 16).

In musical settings of literary texts the musical layer often carries significant meaning—be it in the reinforcement of a poem's atmosphere or imagery, or in the fact that the vehicle for the words, i.e., the voice, engages in complex prosody, in a kind of melopoeia.<sup>5</sup> In the dual production of language and music, the analysis of a musical setting involves working on at least three intersecting levels: the textual level, the musical-prosodic level (henceforth, melopoetic), and the instrumental level. The textual level is concerned with the story or narrative, the characters, the scenery, etc.; the melopoetic level looks at how words, phrases, and meaningful segments are musicalized, and which elements are emphasized; and the instrumental level looks at the choice of instruments and what they attempt to represent, and what atmosphere they create. The relationships between these levels are crucial in determining the ideas which constitute the composition as a whole: how an image or a trope may be represented in each of the levels. For example, the idea of a *scop* singing the poem may not be expressed on the textual level, but is instead represented by melodeclamation to the accompaniment of instruments.

This article is a survey of the contemporary musical settings of *Beowulf*, and does not, therefore, include thorough musical analyses of the pieces. The focus of this discussion is on the settings' crucial elements: the ideas, moods, techniques, tones, and rhythms which form the piece. Therefore, each of the four settings is examined in an individual manner. Common points for discussion include the composers' approach to the text—whether they choose to set a short,

one-scene fragment or a bigger portion of the text; the way in which the text is set to music, and the musical elements which evoke meaning, atmospheres or imagery present in the original story of *Beowulf*.

## 2. Survey of contemporary musical settings of *Beowulf*

[*Beowulf*] is now to us itself ancient; and yet its maker was telling of things already old and weighted with regret, and he expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote. If the funeral of *Beowulf* moved once like the echo of an ancient dirge, far-off and hopeless, it is to us as a memory brought over the hills, an echo of an echo.

—J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics"

Much debate has surrounded the question of the identity of the maker of *Beowulf*. Tolkien reported in his famed essay, quoted above, that critics had called the poem "the confused product of a committee of muddle-headed and probably beer-bemused Anglo-Saxons" or "a string of pagan lays edited by monks", "the work of a learned but inaccurate Christian antiquarian" and also "a work of genius, rare and surprising in the period, though the genius seems to have been shown principally in doing something much better left undone" (Tolkien 8). The creation of *Beowulf* has sometimes been deemed a collective effort of a literary tradition different and remote from our own. In speaking of a collective effort, the distinction in oral literary traditions between a song, or an epic, and its versions realized in performance must be noted. The latter is indeed the work of an author or composer, but the former is a multitude of formulae, themes, and tropes transmitted through the ages—the work of generations of poets.<sup>6</sup>

The idea that *Beowulf* arises from a Germanic oral tradition has been present in the minds of scholars especially since the 1960s with work on epic oral poetry drawing from Parry and Lord's groundbreaking work.<sup>7</sup> The singing of Anglo-Saxon tales could now be imagined to resemble the scenes from Heorot in *Beowulf* with "the Anglo-Saxon oral poet as a performer entertaining the company feasting in his lord's hall with narrative songs accompanied by a harp—a picture satisfactorily in harmony with Lord's description of the guslar in a Bosnian coffeehouse" (Opland 14). However, the notion of an Anglo-Saxon singer of tales—a *scop*—has since been disputed. The problem lies in the fact that the depictions of *scops* in OE poetry may serve as a kind of trope evoking a past which has been long gone. After all, much of the OE corpus of poetry is elegiac in character, i.e. mourning and longing for the irrecoverable past. The lyrical subjects of *the Seafarer*, *the Wanderer*, *Deor*, and *Widsith* all long for the glorious past. Similarly, *Beowulf* tells of tales from ancient times—of legendary founders, godlike heroes, and conquered monsters. Niles (2003) notices a "similar quality of nostalgia" permeating heroic and elegiac OE texts. The *scop* would then be part of the Anglo-Saxon nostalgia for their ancestral Germanic past, a kind of cultural myth; and the reason this myth arose may be found in

a desire for *the simplicity of master/man relations* in a world where the actual workings of power were becoming ever more remote and impersonal. At a time when real-life social ties were being subsumed into an impersonal, formalized, state-sponsored bureaucracy, with its systems of coinage and taxation and proxy military service, the desire for spontaneous, personal man-to-man relationships naturally became more pronounced. (Niles 39)

Nonetheless, even if the scholarly world rejected or at least began to doubt the existence of an Anglo-Saxon *scop*, the image survived in popular consciousness, albeit somewhat merged with the Nordic *skald*, Celtic *bard*, and other traditions of singing storytellers.<sup>8</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that the image, or perhaps sound of a *scop* is present in some musical settings of OE texts: especially in the case of *Beowulf* which from its opening *hwæt* evokes the telling or singing of a tale in a mead-hall or such.

However, each of the four compositions based on *Beowulf* discussed in this article take a different approach to the epic. Cheryl Frances-Hoad's *Beowulf* attempts to tell the whole story, however with "large chunks of the tale ... left out" (Frances-Hoad).<sup>9</sup> The whole performance takes an estimated 28 minutes in the form of a song cycle which, according to the composer, was "more like an opera for two musicians". Although the narrative is carried clearly by the mezzo soprano to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument, i.e. a piano, the inspiration for this is not said to be an Anglo-Saxon *scop*, but rather the event of "seeing the poem spoken live several years ago" (Frances-Hoad). Benjamin Bagby's performances of the poem tackle it at length, up to Beowulf's victory against Grendel. In the case of Bagby's *Beowulf*, the performance is that of a *scop* singing the tale to the accompaniment of an Anglo-Saxon lyre. Another setting of the epic is Ezequiel Viñao's *Beowulf: Scyld's Burial*. As the title suggests, this setting recounts the story from the very beginning of the poem—of the passing of the legendary founder of the Scyldings. In the programme notes to his work, the composer mentions *scops* as an inspiration in that he "tried to tell the story from the point of view of a *scop* (a poet in Anglo-Saxon society) who is detached from the action but who nevertheless is "of" the scene".<sup>10</sup> On the melopoetic level of the work, however, we hear choirs of warriors and the lamenting people rather than a single *scop* singing a story. Finally, the chronologically first of the settings of *Beowulf*, Howard Hanson's *Lament for Beowulf* from 1925 has no trace of a *scop* on the melopoetic level, and rather takes the approach of representing a scene from the tale, this time from the end of the epic, the funeral of Beowulf. However, on the textual level the lamenting choirs, supported by a full orchestra, sing the words of the poem translated by Morris and Wyatt, and are in fact singing a third-person narrative, and therefore a somewhat detached account of the events. For example the choir, supposedly representing the Geats, sing: "For him then they *geared*, the *folk of the Geats*. / A pile on the earth all unweaklike ...".<sup>11</sup> The four compositional approaches to the story span nearly a century and manifest a variety of ideas about *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon world. Here follows a

discussion of the settings, and primarily some of the more salient aspects of each work.

## 2.1. Howard Hanson: *The Lament for Beowulf* (1925)

Howard Hanson's setting of *Beowulf* is the earliest extant musical setting of a translation of an OE text. The story of how Hanson came to set the text demonstrates the importance of the publishing editions and translations of texts: it leads to their subsequent reworkings. Namely,

during a side trip to England, he came across a version of the epic poem *Beowulf* translated by William Morris and A.J. Wyatt. One of the earliest and most important writings in English, *Beowulf* is believed to date from 700 A.D.; it was a translation of this eighth-century version that captivated Hanson – the final pages seemed “to cry out for a musical setting,” he recalled. He began sketching the *Lament* while in Scotland, “an environment rugged, swept with mist, and wholly appropriate to the scene of my story. (Smith 3)

The musical setting for chorus and orchestra was completed in 1925 and premiered at the Ann Arbor Festival in 1926 under the composer's direction. In his musical setting of the poem, Hanson intended to “realize in the music the austerity and stoicism and the heroic atmosphere of the poem”. After all, the fragment he chose to set is in many ways the climax of the story.<sup>12</sup> In its essence the poem is, as Tolkien put it, “an heroic-elegiac poem; and in a sense all its first 3,136 lines are the prelude to a dirge: *him pa gegiredan Geata leode ad ofer eordan unwacligne*: one of the most moving ever written” (Tolkien 31). It is exactly that moving OE phrase with which the choir comes in after an orchestral prelude.

The work opens with an iambic rhythm in the string section. This pulsating and harmonically unchanging ostinato serves as a prelude to the funeral of the Beowulf. Similarly to walk-dances in triple-meter, it brings to mind a moving procession. Above this harmonic and rhythmic base the brass section, supported by the timpani, calls out in a kind of fanfare—perhaps somewhat similarly to the opening march of Purcell's *Funeral Sentences and Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary*. The procession-like character of this orchestral prelude, together with the fanfares fit the occasion of the funeral of royalty, of king and hero.

As the ebb and flow rhythm in the strings pass into a more divided rhythm played by wind instruments, which give it a more shrill sound, the tension rises. The processional prelude continues until only the timpani beats out an irregular rhythmic figure. A general pause is followed by the return to the iambic string ostinato, and the choir finally sounds. Although the work is scored for a mixed choir, the text is often divided between the male and women's choirs, sometimes combining into one mixed choir or interacting in imitation.

Divisions of the text are emphasized by brief instrumental interludes between fragments. Such a brief interlude precedes the lines "Likewise a sad lay the wife of a fore time" sung by the women choir about the widow of Beowulf. As the women choir take on the role of Beowulf's widow and her handmaidens and lament vocalizing "Ah", the male choir sings "Said oft and over/ That harmdays for herself she dreaded./ Shaming and bondage./ The slaughter falls many, much fear of the warrior", and then joins in the lament. This is one of the few fragments of the work which are not based on an ostinato rhythm.

An abrupt change of character opens the scene of setting treasures into the mound. A fanfare precedes a low and thunderous melody of the male choir supported by instruments. The women choir introduces another contrasting melodic theme which takes over. The music speeds up and the dynamic rises right onto a climax on the line "As useless to men as e'er it erst was", pertaining to the gold and treasures of the hoard. The vocals reach new heights, the timpani trembles, the brass section screams out, and the strings plaint. With each repetition of the line the music calms. A somewhat abrupt transition follows with a new ostinato rhythmic base which once more speeds up the music. This is when the funeral proper takes place with young princes riding around the mound and bemoaning their king. Another climax erupts on the lines "And love in his heart, whenas forth shall he/ Away from the body be fleeting at last", after which the music calms down entirely again.

The concluding fragment of the text beginning with the words "In suchwise they grieved, the folk of the Geats", sees a return once more of the initial iambic rhythm for two lines. A gentle ostinato on the harp accompanies the final lauds for the king: "Quoth they that he was a world King forsooth,/ The mildest of all men, unto men kindest,/ To his folk the most gentlest, most yearning of fame." The *Lament* ends with a homophonic harmonizing of "Ah", and a final peaceful harmonic resolution.

Although Hanson "has generally been considered a neo-Romantic composer, influenced by Grieg and Sibelius" (Watanabe and Perone), his *Lament for Beowulf* makes use of unconventional harmony and relies heavily on rhythmic sound and structure. All in all,

The *Lament* remains one of Hanson's finest choral works. Its harmonic language combines ancient modality with modern tonality, evoking both a harsh, tribal age and a timeless sense of bereavement. (Smith)

## 2.2. Ezequiel Viñao: *Beowulf: Scyld's Burial* (2009)

Ezequiel Viñao's *Beowulf: Scyld's Burial* sings of a similar occasion—also a funeral of a hero—however, of a different one.<sup>13</sup> The SATB choir calls this hero



"the long-loved founder of the land". This setting of *Beowulf* was completed in 2009, commissioned by The National Chamber Choir of Ireland and The Cork International Choral Festival. The fragment of *Beowulf* used in this setting was translated into PDE by the composer himself.<sup>14</sup> The scene begins with the words "Mighty Scyld was dead", and therefore states the character of the setting. However, the listener may find themselves surprised by the character of the music which is lively and bright. The setting is scored for an SATB choir and percussion instruments. The sound of these instruments is often metallic and bright. The vocal voices move quite rapidly with "an early music, straight tone" sound,<sup>15</sup> thus avoiding a sustained, sombre, dark tone; apart from the sound of the fourth stanza. In the programme notes this approach to the somewhat joyous sound of this setting is explained:

[T]he funeral of a great soldier, one that has fallen in battle, was never tragic or sad in the post-renaissance sense. (...) The imagery is quite moving: a long goodbye to a great hero. The people are sad, they mourn their loss but they also rejoice in his life and in the certainty that he is off to the land of his forefathers. (...) I didn't want to evoke a nineteenth century sense of heightened tragedy, because even though there is longing in the text, I feel it is of a more bucolic nature. (Viñao)

This "bucolic nature" is reinforced by and based on the heavily percussive, and therefore rhythmic, nature of the setting. The near constant presence of the percussive instruments, except for the final parts of each stanza, propel the music forward giving the listener a heightened awareness of rhythm—of accents and beats, despite the constant changes of metrum and varied rhythmic figures.

The percussive element of the piece is crucial to its form. The setting is divided into five larger parts in accordance with the five stanzas of the text, and an epilogue at the end of the piece. Each of the five stanzas of the text follows a similar formal pattern: the entire text of a stanza is sung, mostly syllabically, to the accompaniment of two percussion instruments, it is then repeated, with a repetition of melodic material, to the accompaniment of four percussion instruments. Once the stanza comes to an end that second time, an emphasized word from the stanza is set as a long melisma in the manner of *ars antiqua* or the Notre-Dame school of polyphony. These emphasized last words are the following, in order of appearance: "dead", "king", "far", "alone", and "truth". Each stanza is accompanied by a different set of percussion instruments: the first by anvils and claves, the second by triangles and clapping, the third by frame drums and nipple gongs, the fourth by log drums and temple blocks, and the fifth by anvils, clapping, then a nipple gong, and finally a small triangle. *Beowulf: Scyld's Burial* also features an epilogue on the first line of the fragment, i.e. "Mighty Scyld was dead" to the sounds of triangles and a gong for the final sound of the work. The stanzas, withstanding the first, are preceded by a short instrumental interlude which introduces the percussive instruments for the next fragment.

As for the unique rhythmic sequences and constantly changing time signature, they are based on a scansion of the OE text into morae, i.e. units determining syllable weight, that were then “rendered as rhythms in a metrical setting”.<sup>16</sup> Variations or rotations of this metrical setting imposed changes in meter. This compositional technique is an interesting way of reconstructing the prosody of OE poetry on the percussive level of the setting.

It must be noted that the percussion instruments are also important elements of meaning-creation. In the programme note to the piece, Viñao discloses that “the anvils at the beginning are meant to symbolize the warriors striking their blades against their shields; the sound world, metal for men, wood for women, seemed natural to me.” The same division does not really hold for the choral voices. Although the tenor and bass often hold the role of the fundamental voice as in early music while the soprano and alto move more swiftly and carry the melody, there occur reversals of these roles or fragments of rhythmic movement in all four voices—in many ways resembling the *clausulae* of the Notre Dame period. While a fundamental voice features in the setting of the first three stanzas, and they are quite similar in character, a noticeable change occurs in the fourth stanza. There is no holding voice, and all four voices move in both fragments of *contrapunctus floridus* and *nota contra notam*. The third formal segment of this stanza, a melisma on the word “alone”, has a dark, sombre, sustained, and spacious sound like that of four-part Renaissance polyphony.

The fifth and final stanza of the setting is climactic on both its textual and musical level. This is the moment when the boat carrying the body of Scyld and his treasures is set to sea—the Danes are, for the first time, explicitly said to be grave in spirit and mournful. All the instruments, representing all that has been happening up till that moment, take part in accompanying the choir. The soundscape of this final stanza is varied, vibrant, and very rhythmic—perhaps even dancelike.

After this final stanza which seemingly closes the narrative, the scene of the funeral, there is still the epilogue. Once more the opening words of the setting sound out: “Mighty Scyld was dead at his destined hour. Might Scyld was dead”. In strict *nota contra notam* two-part counterpoint first the soprano and alto sing out this line, and then the tenor and bass, closing the work *unisono*, with a final bang from the triangles and the gong.

### **2.3. Cheryl Frances-Hoad: *Beowulf* (2010)**

Cheryl Frances-Hoad's setting of *Beowulf* is an attempt to sing the story of the hero from start to finish. Rather than representing one scene, the setting resembles the singing of an epic in the manner of a bard, a *guslar* or a *scop*. The solo singer, a mezzo soprano, is accompanied by a string instrument—the piano.

However, in order to shorten the 3182-line long OE text, Frances-Hoad elides one battle of the three in *Beowulf*, i.e., the fight with Grendel's mother. Therefore, what is left is Beowulf's fight with Grendel, and then with the dragon.

Frances-Hoad's setting is based on Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*,<sup>17</sup> and it is compressed into an orderly arrangement, albeit diverting from the original. Many lines from Heaney's translation are elided, i.e. omitted without altering the overall meaning. Frances-Hoad's arrangement of the text is, as it were, a summary of Beowulf's tale with the major plot points present. Generally left out are those fragments which do not propel the action forward. Phrases from nonadjacent lines are often combined in imaginative ways, for example, when singing of the fight of Beowulf with Grendel in Heorot: "Fingers were bursting, (759) / ... Sinews split (816) / ... Every bone in his body (752) / quailed and recoiled, but he could not escape. (753)".<sup>18</sup> As seen from the original line numbers, their order is switched around to make new combinations which nonetheless evoke the same image—of a life and death fight between the hero and the monster. Another noteworthy example of this play with Heaney's translation is in the lines: "The hall clattered and hammered ... (770) / ... the timbers trembled and sang (766) / ... Then an extraordinary (781) / wail arose ... (782) / the howl of the loser the lament of the hell-serf (786)". The image of a hall "clattered and hammered" is juxtaposed with timbers which trembled and sang—the piano clatters and hammers during this fragment, and the singer emphasizes the word "sang". As for the latter part of the cited text, the verb "arose" is ambiguous in the setting fitting both the original "wail" as well as the "howl" from a few lines ahead. Both words are musically represented with an abrupt crescendo.

The fragments quoted above both come from the episode of the story when Beowulf fights with Grendel which is told in a single formal segment out of the 14 which make up the setting. Frances-Hoad's concept for the form was such: "I thought of this song cycle more like an opera for two musicians, and wanted the narrative to be very clear (even though large chunks of the tale have had to be left out)".<sup>19</sup> Therefore, this setting of *Beowulf* is an organic song cycle telling a single story. The first song begins with Heaney's ingenious rendering of the original's *hwæt*, i.e. "So!". It introduces the audience to the Spear-Danes, briefly mentions Scyld or Shield, and moves on to Hrothgar whose "mind turned to hall-building". Interestingly, the original reason for Grendel's rage is omitted in the setting.<sup>20</sup> Rather, "times were pleasant for the people there / until finally one, a fiend out of hell, / began to work his evil in the world".

The musical character of this first song resembles what one might imagine a *scop*'s performance. The initial "so" is shouted out, and only with the next words does the singer enter the singer's formant. Moreover, after the call to attention, the piano is struck, similarly to the striking of a lute, harp or lyre, in an open fifth, which

from the beginning, is the primordial sound from which Frances-Hoad derives the two-chord piano fanfare that is the setting's first motive force. Over the course of half an hour the keyboard music opens out to encompass a tremendous range of technique, imagery and expression, but what is most striking about it is the directness and almost defiantly traditional ways in which everything falls into place, from the rumbling bass sonorities of the monsters to the high detached notes, like flecks of ash, which finally ascend from the hero's funeral pyre. (MacDonald 7)

The symbiosis of the vocal voice and piano is, indeed, as an opera for two musicians. Already in the second song of the cycle titled "Grendel" from its incipit, sees an abrupt change in both the character of the singing, and the piano. The music turns increasingly grim together with the evolving narrative—the approach of Grendel and his gruesome combat with Beowulf. A calm and peaceful mood returns with the seventh song of the cycle "When Hrothgar arrived". The piano is minimalistic as it strikes individual chords or groups of two or three chords while the singer tells of Hrothgar's acknowledgment of Beowulf as a hero, and as his son. A feast follows, and "So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease; (1024)/ They sang then and played to please the hero, (1062)/ words and music for their warrior prince, (1063)".

Indeed, the song which follows is an actual song from the text, i.e. the tale of Hildeburgh. The style of this song differs from any other in the cycle. The piano resembles traditional song accompaniment, moving rapidly in the right hand, and striking chords in the left. In this song, the tale of Hildeburgh is complemented by Beowulf's words: "... It is always better (1384)/ to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning./ For every one of us, living in this world/ means waiting for our end. Let whoever can/ win glory before death ...". As Beowulf speaks through the voice of the singer, the piano goes silent. These solemn words mark the end of the first half of the setting, and the episode with Grendel.

A brief "piano onterlude" precedes the next, i.e. the tenth song of the cycle—"A Lot was to happen". These are words marking Beowulf's kingship which lasted fifty winters, and which was marred by the awakening of a dragon: "When the dragon awoke, trouble flared again. (2287)". The eleventh song, "He Rippled Down the Rock" sees the dragon wreak havoc on the Geats, and Beowulf pledging revenge. The piano's glissando perhaps illustrates the dragon's movements: his rippling with anger, and his brazing flames, as once the focus is on Beowulf, the piano is quiet and withdrawn. The singer reveals that Beowulf "was sad at heart, (2419)/ unsettled yet ready, sensing his death./ His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain".

The fight with the dragon follows. The line "then he drew himself up beside his shield" (2538) is sung as an ascending scale. The piano closely follows the dragons movements with "a rumble under ground" and rapid figuration "while

the serpent looped and unleashed itself./ Swaddled in flames, it came gliding and flexing/ and racing towards its fate (2570)". It goes silent as the dragon sinks their teeth into the hero's neck. What follows in the setting is chronologically earlier in the original story, i.e. Wiglaf's words of assurance and motivation to Beowulf. It was after these words that the dragon attacked again and inflicted the fatal wound upon the hero. In the story told by this setting, however, it is after Wiglaf's words that Beowulf manages to deal the dragon a deadly wound.

The penultimate song is Beowulf's last words: "For fifty years (2732)/ I ruled this nation. No king/ of any neighbouring clan would dare/ face me with troops/ (I stood my ground and) took what came/ ... All this consoles me,/ doomed as I am and sickening for death./ To the everlasting Lord of All, (2794)/ to the King of Glory, I give thanks".<sup>21</sup> As Beowulf falls silent, so does the piano, as if acknowledging the death of the king of the Geats.

The final song of the cycle tells of the same scene as Hanson's setting—the funeral of Beowulf. The song begins with the same line as Hanson's *Lament*: "The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf".<sup>22</sup> The similarities between the two settings end here. Frances-Hoad's setting is sombre, but not grandiose. The piano flutters in the upper octaves and roams around singular notes in the left hand, as the burial mound is being described. A change of character occurs when the lamenting Geat woman is introduced. The singer ululates as the Geat woman "sang out in grief". However, as the woman's fears are listed, i.e. "her nation invaded,/ enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,/ slavery and abasement", the music becomes calm and withdrawn. The piano may be described as playing "high detached notes, like flecks of ash, which finally ascend from the hero's funeral pyre" (MacDonald). The closing words of the setting ring out unresolved: "Heaven swallowed the smoke (3155)".

#### **2.4. Benjamin Bagdy: *Beowulf* (1987—)**

The notationless world of medieval epic song is one such musical culture (a patchwork of cultures, actually) to which I am drawn, a world in which we know that northern peoples—in their huts, their fields, their boats, on horseback, around their cooking fires, their pagan shrines, and even in the first Christian monasteries—were singing and listening to song: narrative, heroic epic, myth, instrumental music, and long sung tales of their own ancestors' deeds, real and imagined. (Bagby 182)

As a modern-day *scop*, Benjamin Bagby is fully aware of the shortcomings of "historically informed performance". Even where there is no shortage of documentation on the musical tradition of a time and place—musical notation, treatises, playable instruments, descriptions of performance, etc.—a crucial element for accurate reconstruction is irretrievably missing, i.e. "the actual

sound, the presence of a living master" (Bagby 182). The latter may be of greater importance. Even in the contemporary world which possesses audiovisual recordings of lost or geographically remote musical traditions, what comes from imitation of audio(visual) recordings yields at best a compressed version of the original: a version which resembles the original but with loss of data<sup>23</sup> A *scop*, as a professional singer, would likely be trained under the eye and ear of a master. Even if their own style were nuanced from that of their master, it would be so in a way that does not alter tradition:

The oral song (or other narrative) is the result of interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the singer's memories of songs sung. In working with this interaction, the bard is original and creative on rather different grounds from those of the writer. (Ong 143)

Moreover, the *scop* in an oral culture "knows what they can recall", and the organized knowledge of a community resides in their memories: a text, a practice, information, once forgotten by every single member of a community—is lost. It cannot lie in the ground or in an archive waiting for its rediscovery, or unearthing. The performing of an epic by a singer of tales is a retrieving from memory, singing, performing, and composing at the same time. It is believed that they have in their memory the stories, the formulae, and most likely previous performances from which they compose their own variant of the text (59). Bagby, on the other hand, studied *Beowulf* as a written text, memorized it, and now performs the text *verbatim*, and not a variant of the tale of Beowulf. While elements of improvisation are present in his performances—on the melopoetic and instrumental levels—the element of arranging text on the spot is lost. However, the element of choosing particular episodes of an epic to sing is somewhat retained, as Bagby sings the first two of the *Beowulf* episodes, i.e. the fight with Grendel and Grendel's mother, and elides the dragon episode.

Bagby begins with the call for attention; he shouts: *hwæt*. Then he draws the audience into the story, rather by speaking than by melodeclamation or song. The latter two soon make their appearance. The tale is set into motion by melodeclamation to the accompaniment of the harp. He also drifts into lyrical song especially during moments of tales within the tale: of the *scop* singing of Creation, or of Beowulf boasting about his feats when he arrives at Heorot. As Bagby explains in his insightful article on his performances of *Beowulf*:

When performing the Eddic stories or Beowulf, I enter with my voice into a world which is informed as much by the actor's art as by the singer's, and in that world I only rarely make use of the techniques suited to the needs of what we might call lyric song (say, a troubadour *canço*). (...) [F]or the storyteller's art, in which time passes at various speeds, and in which real-time events are recalled, relived, commented upon, and sometimes quite literally inhabited by the "singer of tales," the use of lyric techniques must be reserved for those

isolated moments which call out for them, usually moments of reflection and introspection. (Bagby 187)

The instrumental level of Bagby's performances is just as complex. The harp—or lyre, as its strings pass over a bridge and do not enter the body of the instrument—is a reconstructed version of remains “found in a seventh-century Allemanic burial site in Oberflacht (Germany), as reconstructed by Rainer Thureau (Wiesbaden, Germany)” (188-9). It is a six-stringed instrument which Bagby tunes according to the type of material he is playing. For *Beowulf* he chose an “open” pentatonic tuning with an octave between the highest and lowest note. According to Bagby, this tuning is “ideal for the spontaneous outbursts needed in a six-hour performance of the complete *Beowulf*, and it is the most resonant of all the tunings I have tried” (190).

Although Bagby's *Beowulf* will not bring the epic's original sound world back to life, the performances have the feel of something different than composed art or popular music. Perhaps what makes up this feeling is the element of improvisation, of the melding of word and song into one whole, in the way, we can only suppose, poetry used to be.

### 3. Conclusion

The general overview of contemporary musical settings of *Beowulf* showcases the various compositional approaches to the text. Different parts of the epic are made musical—sometimes single scenes, other times whole parts of the narrative, or simply those parts which make up the body of the story, without “stories within the story”. Each of the settings uses compositional techniques to somehow visualize, or rather audialize elements of the epic. Hanson brings to the listener's mind a funeral procession, of lamenting. He sees the segmented nature of the text, and renders the short fragment a story in its own right: the building of the pyre, the burning of the body. The woman's lament, the building of the mound, the burying of the treasure hoard, the princes' elegy and praise, and finally the closing remarks of the *scop*. Viñao's setting sings of the funeral of the legendary Scyld as of a joyous occasion—of a great warrior entering the glory of his afterlife. There is intertextuality and symbolism in his setting: the rhythmic structure is based on the prosody of the Old English original, the character of the vocal polyphony brings to mind the soundworld of Medieval music and *Ars Antiqua* in the third rotation of each stanza, the melismas highlight key words of the text, and the percussive instruments carry associative meaning—metal for the men, and wood for the women. Frances-Hoad envisions *Beowulf* as an opera for two singers. The text is sung clearly, and the piano asserts the unstable moods of the constantly changing narrative, and illustrates the action points—the moments of peace, of glory, of battling monsters, and of death. Finally, Bagby does not so much compose a setting of the poem, but creates a setting for it. He gives

the OE poem a voice, and tells it in a historically informed way, recreating the spontaneous feel of the performance despite giving it a lot of intellectual effort.

By way of closing remarks, just as each of the pieces is a reinterpretation of a poetic text from a distant past, this paper is also merely an interpretation of those reinterpretations. While some obsolete meanings of symbols may be reconstructed with reasonable accuracy, others may be lost or interpreted on grounds of the author's structure of feeling. After all,

[t]he meaning of a symbol is not constant, and so cultural memory should not be seen as a kind of storehouse containing messages that are essentially invariant and always identical to themselves. In this respect, the metaphorical expression "to store information" can be misleading. Memory is not a storehouse of information but rather a mechanism for its regeneration. On the one hand, the symbols stored in a culture carry within themselves information related to past contexts (i.e., languages), while on the other hand, in order for that information to be "awakened," the symbol must be placed in a contemporary context, which will inevitably transform its meaning. Therefore, reconstructed information is always produced in a context of play between the languages of the past and the present. (Lotman 143-4)

This article is simply another cog in the machine of cultural memory. While it may not go on to serve as an influence on contemporary understandings of OE texts and their musical reworkings, it may perhaps be someday recovered from the dust of a library or an archived webpage as documentation of past perceptions of the past—so that it may be even further reinterpreted.



## End Notes

- 1 See Assmann and Czaplicka (110): "Cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance."
- 2 It is also worth noting that only some of the studied OE corpus has made its way into popular consciousness. While *Beowulf* has earned itself an annotated list of translations and artistic depictions, the Anglo-Latin and prose traditions of Old English are rarely touched upon in artistic reinterpretations. Even though *Beowulf* was first published only in 1815 by Thorkelin in Copenhagen as Danish poetry in the Anglosaxon dialect, "in the subsequent study of Old English poetry, there was exhaustive work on Beowulf and the shorter heroic poems *Widsith*, *Waldere*, *Deor*, and *The Finnsburh Fragment*, but little attention was given to the more numerous and often more substantial religious poems, except to comment on the way in which the Christian story was Germanicized by the poetic language in which it was told, or to consider them wonderingly as works written for an unsophisticated audience" (Hill 92). See Osborn for the annotated list of translations and artistic depictions. URL of archived webpage: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180627115732/https://acmrs.org/academic-programs/online-resources/beowulf-list>.
- 3 See *Figure 1* in Tagg (42) for a set of characteristics defining the "axiomatic triangle consisting of 'folk', 'art' and 'popular' musics [*sic*]".
- 4 Following from the tradition of *The Singer of Tales* (Lord 1965), it is safe to assume that the marriage of music and poetry in song is prevalent in oral cultures. Moreover, even after the spread of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons, stories such as that of Caedmon suggest that the dual performance of poetry and music persisted. However, Opland (15-6) argues that the image of the *scop* presented in OE poetry may be misleading due to errors in parsing the text, i.e. the harper and the singer of songs may well be two separate people doing separate things. Nonetheless, the common perception of the *scop* has been grounded as a singer of tales with a harp, or rather, a lyre, such as in the reconstructive performances of Benjamin Bagby.
- 5 See Pound, Ezra, and T.S. Eliot (25). *Melopoeia* is one of the three types of poetry which Ezra Pound lists. It is a type of poetry "wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning".
- 6 As Lord (1995) noted: "The oral traditional narrative genres transmit stories and story materials together with the art of creating a text, that is, of making

verses, themes, and songs. In these cases what is remembered is a story and/or themes. In this context a poem, or song, means a story, not a given set of words, not a given text. It must be admitted that these characteristics apply especially to epic and to prose narrative". For the whole text see URL: <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6272.1-the-nature-and-kinds-of-oral-literature>.

- 7 See Lord (1995) chapters 4.-6. under the URL: [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS\\_LordA.The\\_Singer\\_Resumes\\_the\\_Tale.1995](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_LordA.The_Singer_Resumes_the_Tale.1995), as well as Magoun (446–467), and Opland.
- 8 Notable singers of tales are found throughout *Skyrim* in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, Jaskier (Eng. Dandelion) from *The Witcher* series by Sapkowski as well as the *Netflix* TV 2019 series adaptation, in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* with the song *Brave Sir Robin Ran Away*, as well as in many RPGs as a character class. Singing to an Anglo-Saxon (Sutton Hoo type) lyre is also fairly popular on video-sharing platforms.
- 9 See the programme note by the composer at the URL: <https://www.cherylfranceshoad.co.uk/beowulf/>.
- 10 See the programme note by the composer at the URL: [http://www.tloneditions.com/Ezequiel\\_Vinao\\_Beowulf\\_Scylds\\_Burial\\_program\\_notes.html](http://www.tloneditions.com/Ezequiel_Vinao_Beowulf_Scylds_Burial_program_notes.html).
- 11 I cite the text from the CD booklet: Hanson, Howard, Seattle Symphony Chorale and Orchestra, Schwarz, Gerard. *Symphonies (Complete), Vol. 1 - Symphony No. 1 / The Lament for Beowulf*. Naxos American Classics, 2011: p. 4. The program notes were written by Steven Smith, henceforth Smith (2011).
- 12 The translation on which the setting is based comprises lines 3137-3182 of the original text.
- 13 The translation on which the setting is based comprises lines 26-52 of the original text.
- 14 Given the compositional technique Viñao based his setting on, he needed a translation which would have the exact same number of syllables as the original OE fragment of the text.
- 15 This is indicated in the performance guidelines in the score. The author of this article expresses their thanks to *TLON Editions* and Mr Viñao for granting me access to a perusal score of *Beowulf: Scyld's Burial*.
- 16 Viñao, Ezequiel. "Re: question". [email] Received by Urszula Świątek, 27 March 2020.

- 17 The author of this article could not find the information as to which edition of the translation had been the basis of Frances-Hoad's setting. The translation remains the same in the editions, therefore the edition used for reference by the author can be found in "Works Cited".
- 18 The numbers in parentheses indicate the line number in Heaney's translation, and the ellipses mark that a phrase has been abstracted from a line. For example, the whole line containing the phrase "sinews split" in Heaney's translation was "appeared on his shoulder. Sinews split".
- 19 See programme note by the composer at URL: <https://www.cherylfranceshoad.co.uk/beowulf>.
- 20 See the fragment in Heaney's (2001) translation: "It harrowed him [Grendel]/ to hear the din of the loud banquet/ every day in the hall, the harp being struck/ and the clear song of a skilled poet/ telling with mastery of man's beginnings (87-91)".
- 21 Heaney's translation does not feature the phrase in parentheses.
- 22 In Hanson's setting based on Morris and Wyatt's translation the line goes: "For him then they geared, the folk of the Geats./A pile on the earth".
- 23 An insightful *YouTube* video discussing Simha Arom's book *African Polyphony & Polyrhythm* examines modelling, i.e. making a model for performance out of data collected from a performance of musicians from the original musical tradition; and how a limited or biased way of notating music leads to data loss. The modelled performance may sound very convincing, however it will never carry all the nuances of the original performance.

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