

The Power of Music.

Written by Cecil Day-Lewis.

Winner of the English Verse Prize at Sherborne School in 1923.

'I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams.'
W.B. Yeats.

God wept. The clamorous void of fire-worn space,
The black infinitude, the breathless race
Of worlds and planets round Time's thronged whirlpool,
Ordered and measured by His mightier rule,
From the tumultuous darkness of its womb
Brought forth twin lights that speared the mother gloom
And slew her: and God fashioned thus our birth.
And pondering that man is, as the earth,
A rose upon the tree of eternity;
He buds and blooms and soon must fade and die,
And fall to dung the tree with richer mould,
He wept. And, like a shower of shimmering gold,
His tears bedewed the earth, and as they fell
Made music, pulsing and throbbing like a bell
Through the enraptured air. And sea and sky,
Forest and mountain caught the melody.
And wove it with the stars and the moon's beams
To mesh the diaphanous carpet of man's dreams...

For music is a master craftsman's key
To unlock the amber gates of memory;
That mystic lotus-land, in whose dun caves
The tideless sea of dreams with placid waves
Plashes, bedight in blossoms of the foam
Of sleep.. So when beneath the darkened dome
Of some great abbey slumberous chords awaken,
My heart goes forth, this fettered self forsaken,
And sees the images of things long passed,
Like distant hills in misty blueness dressed:
Long days amid the scent of new-mown hay,
A thresher's lazy humming; barefoot play
In dew-drenched meadows at Monart; the stain
Of rusty Autumn bracken, and the rain
Drumming the window of a firelit room
In winter; lamps that flickered against the gloom
Of London nights; bright flowers in cloudy hair,
And daffodils, like incense clouding the air –
Glimpses of sky between close-huddled trees.
Come, Music, stir on the harp of the tremulous breeze,
Blow on the ashes of the past, come blow
So they may breathe again and crimson glow!...

Along the shadowy canals of sound,
Where beauty lies in deeper beauty drowned,
Music, a gondola gliding upon the tide
Of glimmering water, bears in tranced pride
Man's heart beneath the shades of fantasy –
O golden freight! O golden argosy!
I hear the solemn notes of some nocturne

Dropping like perfume from a faery urn
Upon the silence. Vision comes over me
Slow as a cool green wave, and lo! I see
A lake that lies all limpid 'neath the moon,
All beaten silver gemmed with stars: and soon
Above the rustle of the hushed night-wind,
A voice, a desolate crying soul-enshrined,
And in it all the weariness of sorrow,
The restless striving of day after the morrow;
The sadness of the night and falling leaves
And broken hopes and sin, and all that weaves
The web of death.. The darkness pales to gray;
The pitcher is emptied, its last drops ebb away...

Down in the reeking streets that sullen lie
Beneath the dullness of a labouring sky,
Where children swarm like nettles in waste ground,
Where light is gone from eyes, and the red wound
Of poverty festers in the pulsing town,
I saw an old man all alone sit down –
A blind old man, grey-bearded and forlorn –
And play a fiddle. And a sudden dawn
Fell on the children's faces, so they danced
Like waves of rippling corn, elate, entranced
By the delicate lilting measure the fiddler played.
A roaming shaft of sunlight downward strayed
And kissed some flowers in a window drooping,
As though a compassionate angle came, and stooping
Poured out a golden stream from the well of peace
To water the parched hearts, and give surcease
From their dumb thirst for beauty. The dancing strain
Changed to a plaintive song, an old refrain
Of roses and love that withered as a rose.
It brought the tears and memory to those
Who heard, and thought of things that might have been,
As a flower's fragrance sweetens after rain.
They touch the hem of glory.. The music dying...
A grayness on the street.. A child is crying...

Like bits of paper in an autumn gale,
Or butterflies soaring and swooping on their pale
Purple-veined wings, my thoughts go hovering
From flower to flower of fancy's fairy ring.
Sing now the music of the thundercloud.
Wild skirling pipes that fire man's blood; the loud
Fierce blare of bugles preluding the battle;
Tramping of steady feet, and jarring rattle
Of drums that sound the symphony of death.
Those self-same pipes across the windy heath
Have led old chieftains for the love of war.
Which summoned men but now to beat on the door
Of doom with desperate hands, yet unaffrighted.
And these no spoils of victory awaited,
No golden fleece as at their journey's end;
Their best reward the laughter of a friend.
They dined with fate for life; and when they had striven
A lonely cross beneath a lonely heaven,

Or one brief hour of triumph for their hell –
And which the greater happiness none can tell.
What is the fruit of the music of the storm?
Green life from barrenness burgeoning into warm
Spring air, watered by wine of sacrifice;
The whole world given for the pearl of price...

Torn by conflicting creeds, and idle thoughts
Of good and evil, and the ceaseless vorts
Where passion and intolerance whirl and whirl,
Snared in humanity's remorseless swirl
The soul sees life go floating like a bubble
Blown from a pipe upon the winds of trouble,
Catching, maybe, some faint reflection cast
By rainbow-tinted beauty, only at last
To burst and merge into the crystal air.
But there may come some rest from strife and care,
Out of the mournful crying of the winds,
Hearing a tranquil music; peace that binds
The spirit with a spell of heavenly dread.
Then he may see God's purpose, like a thread
Of silver running through the loom of time;
Amid earths' discords hear the theme divine.
Then he may see the seven lamps that glow
Above the throne, and angels as they go
Live restless flames; the disembodied host
Matching the stars in multitude, and the Ghost,
Which is God's mercy, brooding silently
Upon the waters of eternity...

So, when I die...
No mellow chiming of a gentle bell
Shall shake and tremble with melodious knell
Above my grave. But rather let me lie
On some headland beneath a spray-swept sky
And scudding clouds, that I may be at one
With the majestic surges' monotone,
The labouring sails, the sea-bird's lonely soaring,
The crimson cup of sunset, and the roaring
Of clean untrammelled winds. And when the hand
That grinds the quern of fate is checked, and the sand
Is spent, and embers fade behind the bars;
When the high cresset of the flaming stars
Goes flashing down; then Music, slow distilled
From all the changeful beauties that have filled
The bowl of nature, shall flood about me there
And lightly lift me up, and I shall hear
The new song swell exultingly and see
With dazzled eyes the unveiling of Mystery.