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J.R.R. Tolkien and the Music of Middle Earth

Emily Sulka

Cedarville University, esulka@cedarville.edu

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Abstract

Often referred to as “the Father of Modern Fantasy,” J.R.R. Tolkien wrote the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy between 1937 and 1949. Selling millions of copies each year, the *Lord of the Rings* is one of the bestselling books to date, and between the four books, six movies have been produced in an effort to relay the story of Middle Earth. However, movies do not stand alone as the only other art based off the trilogy. Throughout the novels, Tolkien includes poems that his characters sing, and in 1967, Donald Swann, after collaborating with the author, published a song cycle called *The Road Goes Ever On*. Based on the songs within the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, this song cycle provides what could be considered the “official” music behind the words. *The Road Goes Ever On* provides a deeper look into the musical culture of Tolkien’s world through connections between the literature and the music as well as connections to “real-world” music, all while recombining the poetry of the novels to narrate the story of a traveler.

Keywords

Lord of the Rings, music, literature, the road goes ever on, jrr tolkien, donald swann

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J.R.R. Tolkien and the Music of Middle Earth

Emily Sulka

Music and Worship — Cedarville University

Introduction

Often referred to as “the Father of Modern Fantasy,” J.R.R. Tolkien wrote the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy between 1937 and 1949. Originally a sequel to his earlier work *The Hobbit*, Tolkien quickly discovered that he had a much longer story to tell, and the sequel turned into a trilogy. Selling millions of copies each year, the *Lord of the Rings* is one of the bestselling books to date, and between the four books, six movies have been produced in an effort to relay the story of Middle Earth. However, movies do not stand alone as the only other art based off the trilogy. Throughout the novels, Tolkien includes poems that his characters sing, and in 1967, Donald Swann, after collaborating with the author, published a song cycle called *The Road Goes Ever On*. Based on the songs within the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, this song cycle provides what could be considered the “official” music behind the words. *The Road Goes Ever On* provides a deeper look into the musical culture of Tolkien’s world through connections between the literature and the music as well as connections to “real-world” music, while recombining the poetry of the novels to narrate the story of a traveler.

The Road Goes Ever On was conceived simply because Swann and his wife greatly enjoyed Tolkien’s works.¹ At the suggestion of his wife, Swann copied several of the poems from the books and wrote music to them whilst travelling, and, after getting permission from the publisher to use the poems, was put into contact with Tolkien. In hearing Swann’s settings, Tolkien approved five of the six but disagreed with the remaining one, and suggested a Gregorian chant-like melody instead. Swann acquiesced, and this later became the tune entitled “Namárië.” According to Swann, in choosing songs to compose, he searched for “the short evocative poems of mood and atmosphere,” and “began to feel their flavor as poems outside the narrative in which they appear.” Each song seemed to be tied to a character that was travelling. This inspired the title of the collection, which Swann states should be performed without pausing for applause, as each piece is written to flow into the next. While he wrote the accompaniment for piano, he states that he can also hear the parts on harp, and that a guitarist may be able to pick out most of the songs, giving them a more distinct folk flavor.

¹ Donald Swann and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Road Goes Ever On* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), v-viii.

Importance

Joseph Kerman, in his chapter “Epilogue: On Operatic Criticism” from the book *Opera as Drama*, discusses why a composer would set literature to music.² While Kerman is specifically discussing opera, his philosophical arguments can easily be applied to Swann’s work. Kerman argues that music has three uses within drama: to characterize, to cause action, and to create a world. While Tolkien’s original poetry accomplishes the first by showing the audience or reader what a character is experiencing emotionally, the songs in the cycle are not inherently tied to a specific character – someone may listen to the cycle without knowing the literary context. The second use, to cause action, is similarly irrelevant to a discussion of the song cycle as there is no action occurring in a performance other than a type of narration. However, the final use, to establish a world, is very relevant to Swann’s work. As Kerman states, “we may not respond so much to individual moments or sections in an opera as to a total drenching of the action by music of a particular sort.” This is seen in Swann’s song cycle – one may not respond strongly to one of the pieces alone, but when put together, the artistry in each piece combines to narrate an emotional journey to the audience. This is highly impactful, especially when the beginning melody repeats at the end of the cycle in such a way as to define the circular nature of the work. The cycle also helps to more clearly define the world Tolkien created, and for readers of the novels, it may help them in understanding the action and culture within these novels more effectively. It is highly important, then, to see both the impact of individual songs and the effectiveness of the cycle as a whole.

The Road Goes Ever On

The first song in the collection, “The Road Goes Ever On,” is a setting of a tune that Bilbo sings near the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* when he leaves the Shire and the Ring in order to go finish his book.³ After the events of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo is seen finally leaving his past and starting fresh, and the poetry reflects this clearly: “The Road goes ever on and on, Down from the door where it began.” From the same door he left in *The Hobbit*, he now leaves for a new life, and later, Frodo leaves on his own journey, and this is seen clearly in Swann’s setting. The song begins with the piano playing a single note which jumps an octave and repeats several times, perhaps evoking the singularity of Bilbo’s journey.⁴ As the singer joins in, the piano maintains quarter and eighth notes, as though mimicking the rhythm of steadily walking away from one’s home, as is seen in the literary context. While the harmonic structure is fairly standard, there are some departures from what may be considered normal. For example, when the singer states, “Now far ahead the Road has gone, And I must follow, if I can,” the harmony and melody rise over an octave, emphasizing that the road is ahead and pointing onwards. As the poetry discusses many roads meeting and the traveler not knowing where they will lead, the harmonic changes grow more unstable and change quickly, again illustrating the words of the poem. However,

² Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 223-226.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 35.

⁴ Donald Swann and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Road Goes Ever On* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 1-3.

the rhythm remains the same, always marching forwards – even in the face of uncertainty, one must keep walking. From these instances, one can see that Swann paid very close attention to the words of the poem when setting them to music.

Upon the Hearth the Fire is Red

The second song, “Upon the Hearth the Fire is Red,” is entitled “The Walking Song” within the context of the *Lord of the Rings* movies. In the novels, this poem is used when the hobbits are walking through the Shire and hum a walking song. According to the novel, “Bilbo Baggins had made the words, to a tune that was as old as the hills, and taught it to Frodo as they walked in the lanes of the Water-valley and talked about Adventure.”⁵ As this is a walking song, like the last, Swann’s portrayal of the poem is similar in many ways, though this piece is far more upbeat. The rhythms in the accompaniment again consist of mostly quarter notes, which gives the impression of constantly walking forward, and Swann uses word-painting much like he did in the first song.⁶ This can be seen when the poetry states, “A sudden tree or standing stone / That none have seen but we alone,” and the tempo slows and modulates from D Major to A Minor for several bars. The similarities between the first two songs are important to note; through the poetry and the music set to it, Tolkien and Swann are defining a new genre of music – the walking song. As these are songs meant to be heard within the universe of the novels, they provide evidence for the idea that Middle Earth has its own thriving music history, and add strong examples for Kerman’s idea that music may help define a world.

Swann’s portrayal of “Upon the Hearth the Fire is Red” doesn’t seem to follow the conventions of the book at first glance. The piece is playful, and for a piece that is meant to sound “as old as the hills,” it fails to follow enough conventions of older styles – including Troubadour songs and formes fixes – to give that impression to modern listeners. However, it does follow many of the conventions of folk music, something that is often considered culturally old even if it is not from the beginning eras of music history. As mentioned in the above quote, Bilbo taught the song to Frodo by way of oral tradition, one of the main ways that cultures pass on their folk music. Swann’s portrayal of the song as strophic and monophonic, with a chordal accompaniment, also follows the conventions of many folk tunes.⁷ A far different portrayal is shown in *The Return of the King*, when Pippin sings the final stanza of the poem, and the song, this time set by Howard Shore, is used as the background to a battle scene.⁸ The film setting of the poem sounds much like a Gregorian chant. Starting with a jump of a fifth, the movie version begins primarily on one note, but as it progresses, the melody is mostly stepwise. As in Gregorian chant, most of the phrases resemble an arch, and as a hint to modern listeners, the recording has an echo-like quality

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 76.

⁶ Donald Swann and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Road Goes Ever On* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 4-10.

⁷ “Folk Music.” *Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia* (2016): 1.

⁸ *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson. (Los Angeles: New Line Cinema, 2003), DVD.

to it and sounds as though it could have been recorded in a cathedral.⁹ While there are modern elements to it, this portrayal of the song seems to follow the criteria of the novel more closely – it is a tune that seems as though it could be “old as the hills.” However, taking into account the fact that Tolkien agreed to Swann’s portrayal of the song, it is interesting to see what a different view he had of Middle Earth in comparison to the filmmakers. This is especially striking when he edited one of Swann’s later settings of “Namárië” to sound more like a Gregorian chant. As will be discussed later, this is meant to show how elven culture is different from hobbit culture – one has a Medieval-like music tradition while the other has an overwhelmingly folk-like music tradition.

Despite Tolkien’s input into the cycle, the filmmakers did not necessarily reflect the hobbit culture accurately in editing one of their folk songs to sound more like chant, though it is artistically very effective in the movie. In this case, Swann’s portrayal should be considered the more accurate one, especially since the movie’s edition took the song out of its original context, and the two traditions of folk music and Gregorian chant can easily be seen as equally valid interpretations of the description of a song “as old as the hills.”

In the Willow-Meads of Tasarinan

The third song, “In the Willow-Meads of Tasarinan,” is sung by Treebeard while he is walking through the forest in *The Two Towers*, the first of the songs in the collection not originally from *The Fellowship of the Ring*.¹⁰ As Tolkien writes, “Treebeard fell silent, striding along, and yet making hardly a sound with his great feet. Then he began to hum again, and passed into a murmuring chant. Gradually the hobbits became aware that he was chanting to them.” Swann seems to have paid close attention to Tolkien’s description as he composed. While the walking songs had simple chordal accompaniments and quarter note rhythms, the piano accompaniment for this piece is far more complex, and Swann neglects to write guitar chords in as he did for the first two songs simply because it would be impossible for a guitarist to play if he did not know how to read a piano score.¹¹ This increase in complexity coincides with a relaxing of complexity in the vocal line – for most of the piece, the vocalist’s melody remains on one pitch, though there are more melodic sections, especially in the beginning when the poetry evokes images of spring and good days. As the poetry describes winter, the piece becomes increasingly chant-like – as the performer sings, “Ah! the wind and the whiteness and the black branches of winter,” he is only required to change pitch for a single syllable. While there are other settings of this piece – including one by The Tolkien Ensemble, a group given permission by the Tolkien family to create recordings of all music found in the novels – Swann’s is the only one approved by Tolkien himself.¹² However, The Tolkien Ensemble’s setting does include some important differences – two of the stanzas are spoken, and the instrumentation

⁹ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Grout, and Claude Palisca, *A History of Western Music (Eighth Edition)* (New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 3.

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 72.

¹¹ Donald Swann and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Road Goes Ever On* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 11-17.

¹² Caspar Rieff, “The History of the Tolkien Ensemble,” *The Tolkien Ensemble*.

consists of strings rather than a piano, which gives a stronger impression of folk music than Swann's edition. As this is a different culture than that of the hobbits, though, it was likely intentional that Swann's was less influenced by folk music, and keeping in mind the idea that each song setting is meant to fit within the story and take into account different cultures, Swann's setting is the more effective of the two.

In Western Lands

Swann's edition of the fourth song, "In Western Lands," is the only setting of the poem with approval from the Tolkien family or the films.¹³ In the novels, the song appears in *The Return of The King*, when Sam Gamgee reaches the top of the Tower of Cirith Ungol.¹⁴ He does not truly believe he's at the top, but cannot find another way up and feels defeated, especially because he cannot find Frodo. In this state, he begins singing songs from the Shire to comfort himself, and eventually comes to "In Western Lands." The lyrics of the poem are optimistic, speaking of springtime in western lands despite present struggles, and the poet states, "Though here at journey's end I lie / in darkness buried deep... I will not say the Day is done / nor bid the Stars farewell." However, as the singer speaks about spring, many of the chords in the first stanza are minor or diminished and remain so throughout the beginning of the second stanza as the singer mentions being in darkness. It is only when the lyrics state, "I will not say the Day is done / nor bid the Stars farewell," that the song is firmly in a major key. While the listener does not expect to hear a minor key surrounding the subject of spring, Swann made an effective choice. In Sam's despair, even talk of spring is not truly happy, but by the time he finishes the song, when he resolves not to give up and finds strength, the piece is in F Major, and the song ends triumphantly.

Namárië

According to Swann, the fifth song in the cycle, "Namárië," was revised by Tolkien to sound like a Gregorian chant.¹⁵ Meaning "Farewell," this poem appears in the books when the hobbits are taking boats to move onwards from Lórien and Galadriel sings to say farewell to them.¹⁶ This is the only song in the collection not primarily in English, and although there are interludes comprised of a piano part, the singing is a cappella. It is also the only song in the cycle that Tolkien himself wrote the melody to – while there are other settings of the poem, notably from the Tolkien Ensemble, it is important to see what the author of the song had in mind when he wrote it. Written in the fictional language Lórien, this song and its performance notes have been used by linguists to delve deeper into Tolkien's methods of creating language. However, what is most important to take note of is the idea that this music is from a far-different culture than any of the other pieces in the cycle. With the exception of Treebeard's song, the other songs are all from the Shire, while this piece is from the culture of the Elves. Accordingly, its style is far different from the other songs. In

¹³ Donald Swann and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Road Goes Ever On* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 18-21.

¹⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 888.

¹⁵ Donald Swann and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Road Goes Ever On* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 22-24.

¹⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 363.

the novel, it is described as “sad and sweet,” and accompanied by a harp. While a harp part is not included in this setting, there are instructions for a guitar accompaniment, and the “sad and sweet” melody was supplied by Tolkien. The melody itself is very similar to a Gregorian chant; it is syllabic, monophonic, and has a range of a fifth. In church music, chant was intended to enhance text declamation, and words were chanted on a single note (often A or C; in the case of this piece, it is C) with small motives marking the end of phrases.¹⁷ These characteristics are clear in “Namárië.” Along with the fact that it is written in another language, an unlearned listener could easily mistake the setting for a Medieval chant, and this helps to reinforce the type of culture that Tolkien envisioned for the Elves.

I Sit Beside the Fire

While there are seven pieces in the song cycle, only six of them are lifted from *Lord of the Rings*, and the sixth and final one of these is “I Sit Beside the Fire.”¹⁸ This song is sung by Bilbo Baggins to Frodo Baggins the night before the Fellowship of the Ring sets out on their quest, and is a fitting end to the story of the song cycle.¹⁹ The poetry is reflective, speaking of all the things that one has seen and all the things others will do in the future. The first half is in English, but the language changes to Sindarin (another fictional language from the trilogy) halfway through as Swann inserts a hymn from later on in the first book, “A Elbereth Gilthoniel,” which shows that, having travelled a long way, the traveler ultimately looks to the subject of the hymn for comfort. Swann’s setting of the hymn is to the same music as “The Road Goes Ever On,” effectively providing a fitting end to the cycle while also emphasizing the reflective nature of both poems used within the song – at the end of the cycle’s story, it reminds the listener of what was sung at the beginning of the hobbit’s journey. It also allows the listener to reflect on the idea that even at the end, the road goes ever on with the next generation, which reflects the novels in which Frodo finishes what Bilbo began with the Ring.

Conclusion

With this cyclic ending, Swann finishes the story he has been telling, and while each individual song is effective in illustrating something unique about the literature Tolkien produced, usually about the cultures he created, the cycle tells its own story as well. Drawing from the larger narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, Swann chooses to focus on the theme of travel. Beginning with two walking songs, one about setting off on an adventure and not knowing where it will lead and another about travelling but knowing that one will eventually return home, Swann sets the stage of his story. Treebeard’s song, “In the Willow-Meads of Tasarinan,” then discusses having travelled to many different lands, and how the spring of those lands has turned to winter. From here Swann sets “In Western Lands”

¹⁷ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Grout, and Claude Palisca, *A History of Western Music (Eighth Edition)* (New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 3.

¹⁸ Donald Swann and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Road Goes Ever On* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 25-31.

¹⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 271-272.

which begins with the singer feeling downcast about the darkness, but ends in looking forward to a better time. This optimism is followed by a farewell as the travelers are able to move forward in their journey. Finally, "I Sit Beside the Fire," shows a traveler after he have returned home reflecting on all he has seen. The piece ends cyclically with a melodic reference to "The Road Goes Ever On" which can also be considered a reference to the books, where the poem is quoted many different times throughout the story. In the song cycle, however, the melody is set to a hymn the travelers sing after all they've been through. Throughout the cycle, the poetry of Tolkien flows in such a way to tell a new story mimicking one of the themes from his novels, and Swann puts it together powerfully, the music and poems working together to tell both the story of *The Lord of the Rings* and Swann's own story of the road always continuing, even when one's individual travel is finished.

Swann's portrayal of Tolkien's poetry is highly effective. However, while helping to define a world as Kerman discusses, the work raises many questions, especially regarding authorial intent – other than "Namárië," none of these pieces were composed directly by Tolkien, but instead received his approval after they were written. Invariably, this means that Tolkien originally had other melodies in mind as he wrote the poetry, which raises the question of whether these tunes should be considered the "official" ones, or whether pieces shown in the movies or performed by The Tolkien Ensemble have a similar canonical validity. Many of these questions are matters of opinion, but as the book of the song cycle has Tolkien's name attached to it as author, and Tolkien was given the opportunity to have input, it seems reasonable to consider the melodies of the song canon. While reading through the novels, one can stop and listen to these settings with the knowledge that in Tolkien's mind, the lyrics one is reading corresponds to the music they would hear from a performance of this book.

The Road Goes Ever On, composed by Donald Swann with poems by J.R.R. Tolkien, is a clear view into what Kerman would define as a work which creates a world. By taking clues from the books and creating music that would fit into the culture of Middle Earth, Swann extends, with Tolkien's help, the world that Tolkien created. He shows cultural and emotional depths that cannot be seen as clearly without hearing the music, and in crafting the individual songs also tells his own story, narrating the emotional journey of a traveler. In the end, the cycle is a highly effective addition to the canon, and will allow fans and interested scholars to delve deeper into the story Tolkien created for years to come.

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