

Kerry Turner's *Abide with Me*

by Ricardo Matosinhos

The premiere of a new piece for horn is always an exciting occasion, especially when it is composed by Kerry Turner. I am currently doing research for my PhD degree aimed at identifying the idiomatic elements present in music for horn composed by horn players. One of my selected composers is Kerry Turner, from whom I commissioned a composition for horn and piano: an eight-and-a-half-minute piece entitled *Abide with Me*.

The title clearly establishes a relationship with a hymn written by Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847), a British priest with a life of suffering, who became immortalized in his hymn. Lyte was born in Scotland, soon become an orphan, and lived in relative poverty. He wanted to become a doctor but instead became a priest. The hymn *Abide with Me* was written in 1847 just a few weeks before Lyte passed away due to tuberculosis. In this hymn, Lyte asks for the divine guidance to help him overcome the disease, ending each stanza of the hymn with "abide with me." The title of this hymn comes from "Abide with us" (Luke 24:29) but Lyte replaced *us* with *me* (Romain 2018), giving the hymn a more intimate character. The year of Lyte's death, 1847, is frequently listed as the year the hymn was composed; however, there are earlier versions. Apparently Lyte wrote the final version for this hymn and gave it to one of his relatives before traveling to the north of Italy, where he expected that the sun and a warmer weather might help him recover. Lyte didn't arrive at his destination, passing away in Nice, France, on November 20, 1847.

This soon become Lyte's most famous hymn, and at least seven melodies have been written by other composers for it (Bradley 1997, 194). From all those melodies, *Eventide*, composed by the organist William Henry Monk (1823-1889), eventually became associated with the hymn. The tragic story of how Monk wrote the melody is told by his one of his daughters. According to Florence Monk (Garland 1950, 85-86), just after Monk's three-year-old daughter died, he was gazing at the sunset when the words from Lyte's hymn came to his mind: "Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee." In those ten minutes the *Eventide* melody was conceived without the aid of a piano and was imprinted in this mind.



Figure 1. *Eventide*, composed by W. H. Monk for the hymn *Abide with Me* by H. F. Lyte (Hall and Lasar 1883)

Since then, this version of the hymn has been played on several important occasions such as the 1927 FA Cup Final – the oldest Football

(Soccer) Association competition. It was one of the favorite hymns of King George V and his wife, Queen Mary, and it was performed at the funeral of the American President Richard Nixon (1913-1994). According to one of Titanic's survivors (Garland 1950, 83), this hymn was played continuously in 1911 as the ship was sinking, until the musicians were forever silenced by the water.

Turner mentioned in a personal interview that he was raised as a Christian and that he has sung *Abide with Me*, an old Protestant hymn, since his early years. It seems that all the composers involved with this hymn had a similar inspiration to create their version of the hymn. Lyte composed it just before heading to his final destination. Monk wrote the *Eventide* melody after losing his young daughter. As a performer, I feel that this piece presents a more introspective and intimate mood than most of Turner's works. Kerry revealed to me that he also was going through a very difficult period:

I was experiencing major upheaval in my life at the time of the creation of this piece. There was very little "spiritual support" or "divine interaction" taking place at a time when I desperately needed it. In fact, I very nearly lost all faith and belief in God or a god. There seemed to be no justice, no fairness, no guidance of any sort. Everything in my life was very dark. Yet that hymn *Abide with Me* kept going through my head, very very softly.

The piece that erupted out of this phase of my life is a personal, spiritual, and violent battle in my mind and soul. It explores the very depths of my faith and existence. When I sat down to compose this piece, this music represents what was going on in my head. (Matosinhos 2018)

Lyte was traveling to Italy, passed away in Nice, France, on November 20, 1847, just one day from his destination in Italy. Coincidentally, Kerry, perhaps unknowingly, continued Lyte's journey, composing his piece in Chieri, near Turin in northern Italy, between November 21-25, 2017.

Kerry Turner quotes the *Eventide* melody several times in the composition. The piece begins with a slow theme composed mostly of descending motifs. This theme is abruptly interrupted by a vivace agitato including imitations between the horn and the piano, representing a battle of emotions. After a repeat, the *Eventide* tune appears for the first time in the piano (mm. 70-85), like a pacifying element, while the horn continues with its "inner battle." The initial theme appears again in a higher range, then the horn and piano reverse roles with the agitato theme in the piano (mm. 99-106), with the horn calmly playing the *Eventide* melody. Then, in measure 131, an Andante Misterioso launches the "mystery" with elements from the themes presented in a fragmented manner in the piano while the horn plays ascending glissandi open, stopped, and muted. The *Eventide* tune appears again (mm. 161-164) in the piano, with the stopped horn playing in a soft unison.

Turner's Abide with Me



Each eruption becomes more intense with the last one appeared by the Eventide melody presented as a majestic choral in the piano (mm. 192-215), interrupted by the horn in each section of the phrase. Finally, in the same manner that Lyte did not arrive at his Italian destination, the piano presents only half of the melody (mm. 218-223), finishing with a musical *morendo* of the hymn.

Concerning the interpretation of this work, Turner repeated once more what I had heard him say a long time ago about his Sonata for horn and piano: "One of the most important things to remember when playing my music is that there is no need to do much personal interpretation. Everything the piece needs to come to life is composed on the paper." (Matosinhos 2018)

The horn part is written mainly in the middle and high range between *f* and *b*. It calls for mute, stopped horn, glissandi (both overtone and half-valve), flutter tongue, lip trills, and double-tonguing. I feel that each of these techniques appears naturally, as part of the musical expression, not to show off the horn's resource palette. As Turner mentions: "They were employed because I was pushing the very limits of what a horn could do based on the storm and battle that was, that had been for a long time, raging in my head." (Matosinhos 2018)

As a performer I feel that this piece is idiomatically written for the horn and is really a joy to play: the difficulty of the music versus the final musical result are well balanced. When asked if he considered that being a horn player somehow influenced the way he composes for horn, Turner replied: "Believe it or not, I don't." He continued, saying that he keeps an eye on the horn parts to be sure they get enough rest, but then the musical inspiration plays a role on the final result and he does not pay so much attention to the keys, ranges, and technical limitations of the horn parts. He said that several examples can be found in all of his pieces where suddenly the horn is in a very awkward key, or has a finger-twisting passage to play. He just tells musicians: "I am sorry, but that is how the music unfolded." (Matosinhos 2018) Turner confesses that, when playing his own music, he is sometimes shocked by how difficult it is. He mentions, however, that he does account for some rest for the performers and he knows the danger of jumping from low to high notes so tries to give horn players a good approach in these passages. (Reel 2010)

As a performer of the première, I confess that, as I was reading the manuscript, my first thought was that there were some tricky passages. But as I rehearsed it, I began to understand that the fast passages with jumps fit well on the double horn. Even some passages that, when played with standard fingerings, would be tricky can be grouped in pairs or groups

of three, four, or even more notes that can be played using the same fingering.



Figure 2. Turner, K. *Abide with Me* (mm. 69-75) fast passage quarter note=144 where several notes can be grouped within the same overtone series. (Turner 2017)

These type of passages can be found in other works composed by horn players. My hypothesis is that composers who are horn players, because they are the native speakers of the horn idiom, write idiomatically for the horn as part of an innate talent and are not necessarily conscious of that fact. My research will continue and hopefully reveal some light on this subject in the coming months. Regardless of the results of my study, a group of fine new works for horn, composed by horn players, has emerged, for which we should be excited and grateful.

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