

ABSTRACT

An Investigation of Music as a Response to Grief

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Music is a gift from God. It can be used to express a wide range of emotions, from joy to despair. Music is particularly helpful in processing the complex and difficult emotions that come with the death of a loved one. This thesis will investigate three examples of this. First, I examine how David, a skilled artist, poet, and composer in the ancient world, expresses grief over the losses of loved ones in his life. Then, I discuss how Jimmy Greene, modern composer and jazz musician, came to terms with the tragic loss of his daughter in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Finally, I present one of my own compositions, an arrangement of *Be Thou My Vision* for violin and piano, written in memory of my friend David Grotberg. My arrangement was played privately for his parents during a time of remembrance and celebration of his life.

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AN INVESTIGATION OF MUSIC AS A RESPONSE TO GRIEF

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most devastating experiences in life is when a person we love dies. The overwhelming grief can feel insurmountable. In response to their grief, people have often turned to music to reflect upon their pain, express their hope, and search for solace.

This claim is grounded in personal experience. When I started attending Baylor University in the fall of 2015, I met a young man named David Grotberg, who was – like me – part of the Honors College. We began a friendship then that continued into our sophomore year at Baylor, during which time we spent many hours conversing, sharing meals, biking, and playing chess together. That all changed in one unimaginable moment. On the evening of October 6, 2016, David was riding his bicycle in downtown Waco when a car collided into him. He did not survive. As I struggled to process this tragic event, I too found myself turning to music to express my grief, shock, and disbelief. David's favorite hymn was *Be Thou My Vision*, and I felt it appropriate to arrange the hymn in a manner that paid tribute to his life.

This thesis presents sacred Biblical texts written by David upon the loss of people he loved. In 2 Samuel 1, David mourns the deaths of King Saul and of his beloved friend Jonathan.¹ David expresses his profound grief through a lament but also speaks of the hope he has in God that will allow him to rejoice again. Later in his life, tragedy struck

¹ 2 Samuel 4: 5 NKJV

David again when his newborn baby became ill and passed away. He grieves deeply but states that one day he will go to him, meaning he will see the baby in Heaven.²

Since loss and the subsequent grief have touched the lives of all humans, the use of music to express and soothe raw emotions continues even today. Jimmy Greene (b. February 24, 1975) is a composer and jazz saxophonist from Hartford, Connecticut. On December 14, 2012, he received horrific news: his daughter, Ana Márquez-Greene, had been killed in the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. This incomprehensible act of murder left him reeling with shock and grief, and so Mr. Greene turned to music and composition to find solace and healing. He created music that aims to preserve the legacy of his daughter and speaks to the hope that her death could serve a higher purpose.

² 2 Samuel 12: 15-23 NKJV

CHAPTER ONE

David and the Musical Lament

The process of grieving is different for every person and everyone has their own method of coping. One such method is through music; even in ancient times, people used it as a method of expressing and accepting grief. We can see this upon examining the ancient text of the Holy Bible, and in particular, Psalms.

Though most of us experience the psalms as poetry, their connection with music is undeniable – historically, at least. About fifty psalms include superscriptions that refer to a “leader”; often this is rendered as some variant of “choir director” to better illustrate what scholars believe about how the psalms were used in Biblical times.³ More direct musical information is also sometimes available. The superscriptions of Psalms 4 and 6 indicate that they are to be played with stringed instruments, for instance, while others’ reference specific melodies that are intended to be paired with the text.⁴

³ Tucker, W. Dennis, Jr, Harold Wayne Ballard, and Marvin E Tate. *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature And the Psalms: Festschrift Marvin E. Tate*. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2000, p.40.

⁴ Tucker, W. Dennis, Jr, Harold Wayne Ballard, and Marvin E Tate, p.60.

Music clearly played an important role in the life of David, who is credited with writing many of these psalms. As a musician, he was known to be “skillful in playing”⁵, and because of this, he was hired by King Saul to play the harp at his royal court. David was usually called upon whenever a distressing spirit troubled the king; the music he played would soothe and refresh King Saul.⁶ Thus, David used his musical gifts to help others deal with difficult circumstances.

David utilized music in other ways, too. As noted by Dr. David A. Bosworth, the aforementioned psalms were often an outlet for the expression of grief. His observation is couched within a discussion of the ways that attachment theory – the idea that infants form emotional bonds with attachment figures, such as parents, and that a child’s response to separation from them is analogous to the grief of an adult – is one of the best ways to interpret Biblical expressions of grief.⁷ For Dr. Bosworth, the psalms provide several excellent examples of separation anxiety; unsurprisingly, this is the anxiety that sometimes follows separation from a loved one. He writes: “In many psalms, the speaker seeks God, and the text reflects this desire for proximity. In these cases, the speaker reacts to the

⁵ 1 Samuel 16:18 NKJV

⁶ 1 Samuel 16: 22-23 NKJV

⁷ Bosworth, David A. “Understanding Grief and Reading the Bible.” *Mixed Feelings and Vexed Passions: Exploring Emotions in Biblical Literature*, edited by F. Scott Spencer, Society of Biblical Literature, 2017, p.125-126.

apparent loss of God (Pss 13:2–5; 22:2–3; 42:2–4) and may engage in seeking (77:6) and crying out (5:2–3; 18:7; 39:13; 120:1).”⁸

More personal and specific examples of the musical expression of grief also exist within David’s story. A particularly striking example of this can be seen in 2 Samuel, when David hears of the tragic death of both King Saul, who fell upon his sword to avoid capture in a battle against the Philistines at Mount Gilboa, and of his beloved friend Jonathan.

The Report of Saul’s Death

¹ Now it came to pass ... that a man came from Saul’s camp with his clothes torn and dust on his head. So it was, when he came to David, that he fell to the ground and prostrated himself.

³ And David said to him, “Where have you come from?”

So he said to him, “I have escaped from the camp of Israel.”

⁴ Then David said to him, “How did the matter go? Please tell me.”

And he answered, “The people have fled from the battle, many of the people are fallen and dead, and Saul and Jonathan his son are dead also.”

...

⁸ Bosworth, David A., p.127.

¹¹ Therefore David took hold of his own clothes and tore them, and *so did* all the men who *were* with him. ¹² And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son, for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.⁹

In ancient cultures, the laments of poets and singers gave voice to their people's grief – in this case, that of the Israelites over the passing of their king. Dr. Nancy Lee has this to say on the topic: "Lament, in essence, provides a cathartic vehicle for human beings to express all aspects of suffering and to help maintain the value and dignity of one's humanity under hardship".¹⁰

Dr. Lee distinguishes between two main genres of lament in the Bible: the first and more common form is a prayerful plea to God for help, while the second form is a dirge about the death of another.¹¹ In response to the aforementioned deaths of King Saul and Jonathan, David wrote a lament of the second form – a funeral dirge – in 2 Samuel. A few extracts follow; the full text of this lament, known as the *Song of the Bow*, is available in Appendix A.

⁹ 2 Samuel 1 NKJV

¹⁰ Lee, Nancy C. *Lyrics of Lament: from Tragedy to Transformation*. Fortress Press, 2010, p.27.

¹¹ Lee, Nancy C., p.16.

²³“Saul and Jonathan *were* beloved and pleasant in their lives,

And in their death they were not divided;

They were swifter than eagles,

They were stronger than lions.

. . .

²⁶I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;

You have been very pleasant to me;

Your love to me was wonderful,

Surpassing the love of women.

Here, David composed a beautiful tribute to the lives of King Saul and Jonathan.

With it, all of Judah would sing together and remember them. David’s words remind the people just how great this loss is to them – they have lost a noble ruler and honorable prince. They would grieve the protection the great warrior provided them and the life of peace and stability he afforded his citizens.

CHAPTER TWO

Jimmy Greene's Contemporary Musical Tribute

James Sidney Greene, better known as Jimmy Greene, is an American jazz saxophonist and composer. Born on February 24, 1975, in Hartford, Connecticut, Mr. Greene was surrounded with music throughout his childhood. His father, James Sr., was a saxophonist, and Jimmy took up the alto saxophone as his first instrument at only six years old.¹² He graduated from the Hartt College of Music in 1997 and released his debut album, *Brand New World*, three years later.¹³ His brand of jazz quickly found great acclaim.

In 2012, however, Mr. Greene's life was shaken by a horrific event: the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting of December 14. The perpetrator, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, began his inexplicable crime by murdering his own mother with gunshot wounds to the head. At around 9:30 in the morning, he drove to Sandy Hook Elementary School, which he had attended as a child. He began firing and killing senselessly. Once it was over, Adam

¹² Collar, Matt. "Biography: Jimmy Greene." *allmusic.com*.

¹³ "Saxophonist Jimmy Greene To Teach At WestConn." *Hartford Courant*, 15 May 2012.

Lanza had taken his own life, the lives of six teachers and staff members, and – perhaps most despicably – the lives of twenty schoolchildren, all six or seven years old.¹⁴

Greene's six-year-old daughter, Ana Grace Márquez-Greene, was one of those twenty children. Initially, Greene's passion for music vanished, crushed by the fatigue and trauma that he suffered after his daughter's death. But after a few months, he began to sense that he needed to return to music, both because of the daily structure the work offered and because of its ability to help him process his emotions.

A benevolent record producer by the name of Norman Chesky took the opportunity to offer Greene free labor and studio space with which to record an album. And so, he began work on an album in Ana's memory. It was no easy task, however. Asked about this time, Greene reflected: "Sitting in my basement where I have my work area by myself and writing the songs and writing the lyrics, there was a lot of tears. There was a lot of anguish."¹⁵

Thankfully, he prevailed. Released in November of 2014, *Beautiful Life* is made up of ten tracks, each of which illuminate a different aspect of the memory of Ana Márquez-Greene. *Beautiful Life* opens with an arrangement of the classic hymn *Come Thou Almighty*

¹⁴ Ray, Michael. "Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting". *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 21 Sep. 2021

¹⁵ "Jazz Saxophonist Jimmy Greene Plays Tribute To His Slain Daughter." Hosted by Rachel Martin, *Weekend Edition Sunday*, NPR, 14 Dec. 2014.

King set primarily for acoustic guitar and saxophone. This first track is also noteworthy because it contains a brief home recording of Ana singing *Come Thou Almighty King*, accompanied by her brother, Isaiah, on piano.¹⁶ Ana's section of the music is placed at the end, as if Mr. Greene's saxophone playing served as a beautiful prelude to his daughter's musicmaking. This song is special in that it is the only one in which Mr. Greene essentially performs a musical duet with his daughter.

Ana's Way, the fourth track, is an original song that primarily explores Ana's personality. In later interviews, Mr. Greene described his late daughter as joyful, loving, sensitive to others' emotional needs. The song's lyrics, which were also written by Mr. Greene, affirm this directly: "A love that reflects God's glory / she danced and sang and laughed / and lived a life full of joyful memories / Ana, had a way about her" and, later, "Giving lots of hugs each day / she loved to pray and thank the Lord for His blessings / thoughtful notes for mom and dad / her love never lacked expressing".¹⁷ These words are moving enough on paper, but they are lent additional poignancy by the fact that they are sung by a children's choir composed of Ana's friends and former classmates.

¹⁶ Chinen, Nate. "A Wrenching Grief Assuaged With Beauty.", Rev. of *Beautiful Life*, by Jimmy Greene. *The New York Times*, 26 Nov. 2014.

¹⁷ Greene, Jimmy. *Beautiful Life*. Greene Music Works, LLC, 2014.

Understandably, Mr. Greene explained that he found it difficult to remain emotionally composed during the recording session for *Ana's Way*.¹⁸

Seventh Candle, which (appropriately enough) is the seventh track, was composed around the time the Greene family would have celebrated Ana's seventh birthday. The track's title is a reference to this lost birthday. *Seventh Candle* combines suave saxophone lines with an unassuming, jazzy piano part and reassuring, light drum set playing. The string bass and piano are both given very cheerful solos, which – when combined with the saxophone's more tender and restrained lines – very much communicate a sense of peace in which both melancholy and joy can have their proper place.

The eighth track of the album is another arrangement, this time of the song *Maybe* from the musical *Annie*. According to Mr. Greene, the original song was a favorite of Ana's; she enjoyed singing its lyrics regularly during car rides. Greene uses a soprano saxophone to play the main melody, which he felt was the closest he could come to recreating the sound of his daughter's voice. There's also something to be said of the track's upbeat tempo: it serves as an effective contrast to much of the rest of the album, but it is also important as an illustration of Ana's joyful disposition as well as the necessity of finding joy in life after tragedy.

¹⁸ "Jazz Saxophonist Jimmy Greene Plays Tribute To His Slain Daughter." Hosted by Rachel Martin, *Weekend Edition Sunday*, NPR, 14 Dec. 2014.

The album's final track, *Little Voices*, overlays Mr. Greene's smooth jazz saxophone playing with the voice of Anika Noni Rose, who reads a poem that speaks directly to the horrors of Sandy Hook: "Little voices laughing, little voices singing . . . in the blink of an eye, they are gone". The poem continues by exhorting the listener: "now it's up to you . . . will you love your neighbor, [and] not fear the neighbor who looks [or thinks] different from you? . . . will you do all you can to love, to forgive, to include, to help?" *Little Voices* sends sophisticated messages about the need to learn from tragedies and amend one's behavior in ways that meaningfully combat the destruction that inspired them. Clearly, the song is the product of months of personal reflection on Mr. Greene's part. The children's choir featured in *Ana's Way* makes a reappearance midway through the song, and they end it with the repeated lyrics *remember me, remember me, remember me*. For Mr. Greene, the call to remember Ana was of utmost importance, and so it is a fitting way to close out the album.

CHAPTER THREE

A Personal Expression of Mourning

The story of the hymn *Be Thou My Vision* originates in an old tale about saint Patrick. At just sixteen years old, Patrick was captured by pirates who sold him into slavery in Ireland. There he learned the Gaelic language, adopted local customs, and – most importantly – came to know Christ. Patrick later escaped and returned to his family; instead of staying home, however, he obtained a Latin Bible and returned to Ireland as a missionary.

On Easter day of the year 433, as part of the observation of a druid festival, Patrick's local king forbade the lighting of any flame. Wanting to honor Christ's resurrection, though, the young missionary risked his life and defied the prohibition. Early that Easter morning, the Irish woke up and saw a light burning on the highest hill in the area! Patrick aimed to show that God's light shines in darkness and that He alone is deserving of praise.

Inspired by the courage exemplified by saint Patrick's story, the 6th century Irish poet Dallán Forgaill penned *Rop tú mo baile*. This text of this poem is the predecessor to what we now recognize as *Be Thou My Vision*, but this transformation did not start until

1905, when Mary Elizabeth Byrne first translated it from Old Irish into English.¹⁹ Later translations further refined Byrne's work into the modern hymn we know.

The text of *Be Thou My Vision* is as rich as its history. For instance, the third verse has a distinctly warlike flavor, with its references to battle-shields, swords, and high towers. The use of such vocabulary is a testament to the chaotic world of Dallán Forgaill's day. The hymn is spiritually powerful, too; it speaks of the importance of maintaining a steadfast connection with God both during times of prosperity and during times of duress. The hymn also explains that asking God to become one's "vision" means letting Him guide our judgement, the things we value, and our outlook on the afterlife.

The hymn *Be Thou My Vision* is thus a significant piece of music both historically and spiritually. For that alone, it could have served as a fine tribute to the life of my good friend David Grotberg, who tragically passed away in October of 2016. But I had an even better reason to select it: *Be Thou My Vision* had, in fact, been his personal favorite hymn.

And so, almost exactly two years after David's death, I set out to arrange this melody in his memory. My work was originally conceived as a solo violin piece, since –

¹⁹ Byrne, Mary E. "A Prayer." *Ériu: The Journal of the School of Irish Learning, Dublin*, vol. 2, 1905, pp. 89-91

as a violin player – I know that instrument best. A few months later, it was rewritten to include a piano part as well as some new musical material.

The structure of the piece is tripartite. It is cast as a set of three variations on the main melody, with little to no introductory or developmental material; this is intended to mimic the structure of the original hymn, which is sung verse by verse. As will be discussed later, each variation is also meant to be a musical representation of different aspects of David's life. The work is in D major and $\frac{3}{4}$ time throughout; this was done partly to emphasize simplicity but also to recall the work's roots as an old hymn that did not require modulations or time signature shifts.

The first variation is intended as a representation of the immediate aftermath of David's death. The violin part is the melody of *Be Thou My Vision*, presented as straightforwardly as possible. It is also played rather slowly (crochet = 80). These two facts serve to recall ordinary church performances of the hymn, but they also serve to highlight the hymn's somber characteristics. I also chose to write the violin's part in its lowest registers in order to enhance this aspect of the music. The piano actually opens the work with a solo recapitulation of the last few bars of the melody, as is commonplace in church performances. It then falls back to a series of simple rising and falling arpeggios, accompanied by a very simple bass line.



Fig. 1: Extract of variation 1 (Andante)

The second variation is intended as a representation of the memory of David's life. It begins with an eight-bar section for the piano that establishes a new synchronized rhythm. In it, the accentuations for the right hand and the left hand are occasionally in sync and at other times not, leading to a jaunty feel. The violin then makes its entrance, taking over the piano's right-hand rhythm, but this time with the melodic content of *Be Thou My Vision*. It is written in a moderately challenging series of double and triple stops. Meanwhile, the piano's right hand busies itself with keeping up the rhythm during gaps in the violin part and prancing, capricious musical afterthoughts elsewhere. Note the violin rhythm, which is supported by piano when needed, as well as the grace notes and contrasting rhythm of the piano part.



Fig. 2: Extract of variation 2 (Allegro)

David was well known during his lifetime as a joyful, energetic, and witty person. Though his friends knew this to be the case through conversation, the rest of the Honors College knew it through his eager participation in the role-playing game *Humans vs. Zombies*. Every season, David would take up the mantle of the Alpha Zombie with zest, chasing down humans with relish nonstop until the games ended. Tales of his heroic stunts were shared amongst everyone.

This variation is an attempt to encapsulate this vision of David. The off-beat rhythms that are nonetheless set in the original $\frac{3}{4}$ time are meant to depict David's fun-loving, bubbly nature that was nonetheless grounded in a love of the Lord and a penchant for articulate thought and dialogue. The music's swirling, perpetual motion is another nod to his vigor and energy.

The third variation is intended as a representation of David's future in the Kingdom of Heaven. This section is marked *reverent* and *ethereal*. Both the violin and the piano have a role to play in conveying this atmosphere.

The violin part is a rhythmical variation on the hymn's main melody, and it is almost entirely written using natural and artificial harmonics. These are often used in violin repertoire to add extra technical difficulties to pieces; however, in my arrangement, I exploit them for their special, flute-like timbre. By necessity, most harmonics sound in the upper registers of the violin, and this is reflected in the violin part. The intended result is a pillow-cloud of music that lightly supports the piano part.

Fig. 3: Extract of variation 3 (Lento)

The piano part presents the main melody, almost unchanged, but two octaves higher than it was in the first variation – again, a decision meant to evoke the heavens. The right hand plays a continuous, filigree-like series of sixteenth notes. I found the combination of these sparkling, optimistic runs with a superimposed melody to be very effective in music such as Leopold Godowsky's *Gamelan* from his Java Suite, which served as inspiration for this third variation. The music continues in this fashion until the end, where both instruments' music dissolves into a high F# chord. The prevailing mood at the end of the

piece is one of quiet triumph, which is meant to parallel the tone of the final verse of *Be*

Thou My Vision:

High King of heaven, my victory won,

may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heav'n's Sun!

Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,

still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

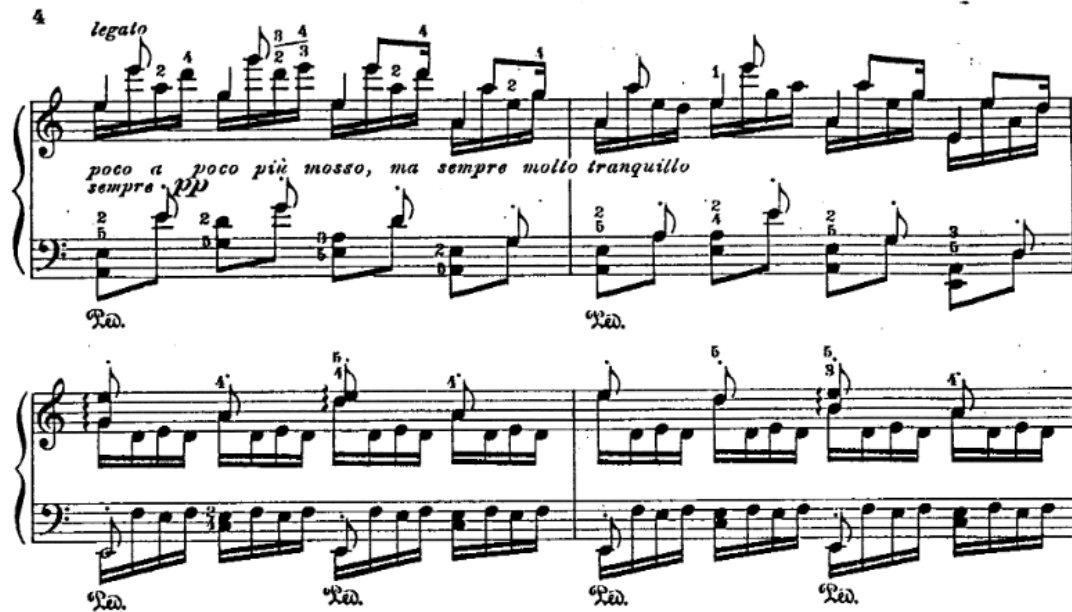


Fig. 4: Extract of Godowsky's *Gamelan*²⁰

²⁰ Godowsky, Leopold. *I Gamelan*. 1924. *Java Suite*, New York, Carl Fischer, 1925.

imslp.org, imslp.eu/files/imglnks/euimg/4/4b/IMSLP03691-Godowsky_javasuite.pdf.

One more point is to be made about the conception of the work as a whole, and that is the use of contrasting registers between variations. Variation 1 makes use of the violin's lowest registers as a means of evoking the sadness of David's death and return to the ground. Variation 2 uses the violin's middle registers, which represents his presence and life on earth. And Variation 3 uses the violin's higher registers, evoking his current residence above.

CONCLUSION

I think that the best way to encapsulate this thesis is by sharing a very special moment in my life. Three years after my friend David passed away, his family visited Baylor to reunite with his friends – which now, in their words, form a family.

Together with Sarah Heady, a pianist, University scholar, and fellow friend of David's, we performed my arrangement of *Be Thou My Vision* for the Grotberg family. They liked it so much that they asked us to perform it a second time, but it was their comments that really mattered to me.

The Grotberg parents told me that they loved hearing the story of their son's life retold through music. For them, keeping the memories of David alive in some way is an everyday priority, and so a musical tribute was a particularly vivid way for them to reconnect with their son. It was also, they told me, a way to come to terms with their grief.

That observation is what prompted me to write this thesis. If even an amateur composer like me can express something with such power and depth – I knew that I could not have been the first. And indeed, as my research has shown, music and grief have been intimately intertwined since the days of David.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Below is the full text of David's *Song of the Bow* from 2 Samuel 1. In it, he mourns the death of his king, Saul, and his beloved friend, Jonathan.

The Song of the Bow

¹⁷ Then David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son, ¹⁸ and he told *them* to teach the children of Judah *the Song of the Bow*; indeed, *it is* written in the Book of Jasher:

¹⁹ “The beauty of Israel is slain on your high places!

How the mighty have fallen!

²⁰ Tell *it* not in Gath,

Proclaim *it* not in the streets of Ashkelon—

Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,

Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.

²¹ “O mountains of Gilboa,

Let there be no dew nor rain upon you,

Nor fields of offerings.

For the shield of the mighty is cast away there!

The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.

²² From the blood of the slain,

From the fat of the mighty,

The bow of Jonathan did not turn back,

And the sword of Saul did not return empty.

²³ “Saul and Jonathan *were* beloved and pleasant in their lives,

And in their death they were not divided;

They were swifter than eagles,

They were stronger than lions.

²⁴ “O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,

Who clothed you in scarlet, with luxury;

Who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

²⁵ “How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan *was* slain in your high places.

²⁶ I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;

You have been very pleasant to me;

Your love to me was wonderful,

Surpassing the love of women.

²⁷ “How the mighty have fallen,

And the weapons of war perished!”²¹

²¹ 2 Samuel 1 NKJV

APPENDIX B

Below is the full version of my arrangement of *Be Thou My Vision* for violin and piano, as finalized in January of 2019.

Be Thou My Vision

Concert-Piece for Violin and Piano

à la mémoire de David Grotberg

Arranged December 01-02, 2018 and January 23-24, 2019 [Waco, TX]

Matthew TATEOSSIAN

Andante ♩ = 80
solemn, noble

Violin

Piano

f

6

Vln.

mf

Pno.

mp

12

Vln.

f

rit.

p

Pno.

mf

mp

18

Vln.

mf

a tempo

Pno.

f

23

Vln. *accel.*

Pno. *mf*

Allegro ♩ = 130
joyous, adventurous

31

Vln. *f* *simile*

Pno. *f* *mf*

37

Vln. *ff* *f* *f*

Pno. *f* *ff* *mf*

43

Vln. *ff*

Pno. *f* *ff* *mf*

49 *poco rit.*

Vln.

Pno.

55 *a tempo*

Vln.

Pno.

Lento ♩ = 65
reverent, ethereal
con sordino

62

Vln.

Pno.

67

Vln.

Pno.

70

Vln. *p* *mp* *p*

Pno. *f* 8

73

Vln. *mf* *mp*

Pno. 8 *ff*

76

Vln. *mp*

Pno. *f* *mf*

79

Vln. *mf* *ppp*

Pno. *mp* *ppp* 8

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