

GERMAN/ENGLISH TEXT OF PFEIFFER'S POEM

Die Weihe der Töne Gedicht von Carl Pfeiffer

Einsam lagen die Gefilde
In des Lenzes Blumenpracht;
Durch die schweigenden Gebilde
Wandelte der Mensch in Nacht,
Folgte nur dem wilden Triebe,
Nicht des Herzens sanfter Spur;
Keine Töne fand die Liebe,
Keine Sprache die Natur.

Da wollte sich die ew'ge Güte künden,
Und hauchte in des Menschen Brust den Klang!
Und liess die Liebe eine Sprache finden,
Die ihm beseligend zum Herzen drang.

Ihn grüsst die Nachtigall mit Liebestönen,
Es rauscht der Wald ihm Harmonien zu,
Des Zephyrs Säuseln füllt die Brust mit Sehnen,
Des Baches Wellen flüstern ihn zur Ruh.
Da schwinget bei der Töne heil'gem Wehen
Der Geist, befreit von jedem Erdenband,
Sich triumphierend zu des Himmels Höhen,
Und grüsst der Träume schönes Vaterland.

Heil'ge Töne, Friedensklänge
Aus der unbekannten Welt!
In des Lebens Lust und Strenge
Seid ihr treu uns zugesellt!

Bei des Kindes ersten Schmerzen
An der treuen Mutter Brust,
Dringt ihr schon zum kleinen Herzen,
Und verkehrt den Schmerz in Lust.
Auf des Säuglings Wiege leise
Zaubert ihr die süsse Ruh,
Haucht mit sanfter Liedesweise
Gold'ne Traumgebild' ihm zu.

Auch zu der Jugend fröhlichem Reigen
Ladet ihr ein mit Allgewalt,
Und die finstern Sorgen schweigen,
Wenn der jubelnde Tanz erschallt.
Schnell von der Stirn sind die Wolken entfliegen,
Heiter wird der umdüsterte Sinn,
Leicht getragen von tönenden Wogen
Schwebt der beflügelte Fuss dahin.

In der Nacht verschwieg'ner Hülle
Tönt ihr aus des Jünglings Mund;
Thuet seiner Liebe Fülle
Sehnend der Geliebten kund.
Heil'ge Töne! Liebesklänge!
Eure Zaubermacht erweicht

Des geliebten Herzens Strenge,
Und des Jünglings Klage schweigt.

Aber auch wild zum Getümmel der Schlachten
Rufet ihr mit der Begeist' rung Gewalt
Lehret den Jüngling das Leben verachten,
Wenn die Trompete zum Kampfe erschallt.
Sorgen und Furcht und Gefahren entschwinden
Hinter den siegenden Tönen zurück,
Blutige Lorbeern der Stirn zu umwinden,
Wendet sich vorwärts der feurige Blick.

Doch wenn ihr kühn und wild begonnen
Mit Kampfesruf und Schlachtgesang,
Dann winkt ihr, ist der Sieg gewonnen,
Zurück mit sanftem Friedensklang.
Dann tragt ihr auf der Andacht Schwingen
Das Herz zum ew'gen Gott empor,
Und lehrt der Sieger frohen Chor,
Dem Gott der Schlachten Dank zu bringen.

Heil'ge Töne, euer Frieden
Folgt dem Müden noch hinab,
Wenn er, von der Welt geschieden,
Einsam niedersank in's Grab.
Seiner Lieben stummen Sehnen
Flüstert ihr Erhörung zu,
Gebt den Thränenlosen Thränen,
Dem Geschied'nen ew'ge Ruh.

Heil'ge Töne, seid ihr schöne Träume
Aus dem unbekanntem Vaterland?
Seid ihr Kinder jener sel'gen Räume,
Uns als Friedensboten zugesandt?
O verlasst mich nimmer, holde Töne!
Sagt mir viel von jener schönen Welt!
Dass ich mich in eurer Heimath wähne,
Nicht der Fessel denke, die mich hält!

The Blessings of Music

Poem by Carl Pfeiffer, in a new translation by Celia Skrine

Calm, deserted, lay the meadows
glorious with the flowers of spring,
while humanity in darkness
moved between still shapes and forms,
following its own dark instinct,
not the promptings of the heart;
love had not yet found expression,
nature had no language yet.

And then God's goodness chose to announce itself
and breathe its echoing sound into man's mind;
gave love the expressive power to find a language
and reach his heart with messages of bliss.

In tones of love the nightingale salutes him,
the rustling forests murmur harmonies,
the whispering breezes fill his heart with longing,
the rippling brooklet soothes him with its flow;
then with the holy wafting of this music
his spirit, freed from all its earthly bands,
soars up triumphant to the heights of heaven
to greet the lovely homeland of its dreams.

Holy sounds and peaceful echoes
coming from a world unknown,
in life's happiness and strivings
be our best companion now!

When the loving mother cradles
in her arms her crying child,
nature's music calms its sufferings
and the little heart feels joy.
To the baby's cradle, softly,
lulling music brings repose,
and sweet melodies enfold him
in a golden web of dreams.

Likewise, the merry laughter and dancing
of youth are invited by music's power,
and gloom and worry are forced to be silent
when the jubilant dance resounds.
Soon from the forehead the dark clouds have lifted,
happiness fills the once-burdened mind;
lightly borne on the flood-tide of music,
feet follow quickly as if they had wings.

In the silent cloak of darkness
music speaks for lovers too;
as the young man's heart flows over,
aching for his absent love.
Holy sounds of lovers' music,
you possess a magic power
to console the yearning lover,
solacing his lonely heart.

But to the furious confusion of battle
you summon the young with imperious call,
you teach them the valour and rashness to dare
to hold their lives cheap when the trumpets ring out.
Terror, anxiety, danger are banished
away as the bellicose music resounds;
fiery ambition for blood-spattered laurels
spurs the young on to the thick of the fight.

But wild and warrior-like beginnings
with battle-cries and lust for blood
give way, when victory is assured,
to gentle harmonies of peace.
Devoted hearts give thanks to heaven

and send their prayers on pious wings
and teach the happy bands of warriors
to thank their God for victory.

Holy sounds, your calm and peace
accompany the one who fell
and who, his time on earth being ended,
sinks into a lonely grave.
As his loved ones grieve in silence,
you softly speak of answered prayers,
grant tears to those who cannot weep
and, to the dead, eternal rest.

Holy sounds, are you sweet intimations
coming from an unknown fatherland?
Are you children of those blessed regions
sent to us as messengers of peace?
Holy sounds, I pray you, never leave me!
Tell me all about that wondrous world!
Let me feel myself within its orbit,
scorning all the chains that hold me here!

Translator's commentary

This is not the first translation ever made of Pfeiffer's poem. A Victorian version exists: its final verse runs as follows:

Hail Holy Sound! Oh be thou of the dreams
Of that mysterious realm that o'er us gleams
Or but the child of endless space unknown,
Untried, a messenger of peace sent down;
Forsake me not! but in thy breathings bland
Glad me with tidings of thy lovely land,
And waft me to the home that gave thee birth,
Spite of the chains that bind me down to earth.

The original is, however, not nearly as high-flown and stilted as one might think from reading the version quoted above. That is not to deny that the poem is, in general tone and its sentiments, very much of the mid-19th century time. Pfeiffer's use of varying metres, however, is rather unusual, very individual, and calculated to serve a particular poetic intention. Nobody would seriously claim that it was among the greatest poems of all time, but it does have atmosphere and evocative power and, so far as one can judge, a certain originality in conception. It speaks first of the creation of sound, by which Pfeiffer means coherent, musical sound, and traces music's various influences on human life, particularly on youth and early manhood.

A glance at the poem on the printed page shows that it is made up of verses in different metres, with a variety of line lengths and rhythms. These varying metres are chosen to suit the changing moods of the moment as the poem and its argument progress. The dark, dumb hush at the beginning of creation is described in smooth, evenly-paced lines of four trochees — eight syllables, alternately stressed and unstressed — which give way to slightly longer lines, with a contrasting metre like that of normal English blank verse, to depict the stirrings of sound and, with it, love; these iambic pentameters continue as the sounds of nature multiply and man's spirit unfolds and soars. For the reflective sentiments which follow, and the tender description of mother and baby, Pfeiffer returns to the quieter, more measured metre of the opening. For the jollity and verve of youth he changes again, this time to a dancing dactylic metre, which also later conjures up the rhythm of galloping horses and racing pulses when the young men set off for battle. In between comes the verse describing the lonely lover, for whom the shorter, more even and subdued dactylic rhythm returns.

After the battle Pfeiffer chooses a metre with slightly shorter lines (four iambs, i.e. starting this time on unstressed syllables, unlike the five previous sections) and a more even rhythm, though the ends of the lines are fairly relaxed in this respect. In this verse the excitement unwinds in the relief of victory and pious thanksgiving. In the following section, remembering the tragic end of those young men who fell in the battle, Pfeiffer chooses to return to the sober walking pace of his original trochaic metre, which is the slowest, most even of them all.

The final verse is more grandiose, addressing the 'holy sounds' directly with rhetorical questions and the expression of fervent wishes. For this Pfeiffer introduces a new metre, trochaic again but with rather longer lines of alternately ten and nine syllables, to bring the poem to its somewhat lofty close.

It is this metrical variety which is the most interesting aspect of the poem in itself, and this translation attempts to imitate this unusual and effective approach as closely as possible — not an easy task as English has different natural speech rhythms from those of German. The actual content of the poem has likewise been faithfully followed, line by line, so as to convey the flavour of the original as closely as possible. Of course Pfeiffer's poem is strictly rhymed, alternate lines rhyming throughout, but no attempt has been made to reproduce the rhyme scheme. This perhaps somewhat disappointing decision hopes to justify itself by recalling Mozart's dictum that, when there are several other considerations, rhyme is a vastly overrated optional extra.