

THE PROGRAM OF MOVEMENT II: THE CELESTIAL RAILROAD

The “Comedy” movement of the Fourth Symphony is an orchestral expansion of Ives’s piano piece *The Celestial Railroad*, which is a musical depiction of the short story “The Celestial Rail-road” by Nathaniel Hawthorne. In Hawthorne’s tale (itself a trope on Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*), a man falls asleep and dreams that within his sinful world (the City of Destruction) there is a fantastic locomotive that speeds its passengers in nineteenth-century comfort to the Celestial City, where all heavenly rewards reside. Befriended by a Mr. Smooth-it-away, the narrator boards the train with other passengers just before it chugs into motion and takes off on its tracks, leaving in its wake two solitary pilgrims who have chosen a much less comfortable pedestrian journey to the Celestial Gates. The train passes many horrible sights, makes stops at temptation-filled venues such as Vanity Fair, and then finally comes to rest at Beulah Land on the river Jordan. Everyone leaves the train to take a ferry across the river to the Celestial City, having been spared the arduous foot journey of the pilgrims (who, perhaps not surprisingly, have already crossed the river and are being welcomed into the pearly gates.) Upon boarding the ferry the narrator discovers that Mr. Smooth-it-away is no longer with him but is back on the shore, having reverted to his true demonic form. The narrator realizes that all has been a hoax and tries to jump from the boat, but a splash of deathly cold water from one of the boat’s wheels shocks him awake, and the comic nightmare there ends. (“Thank Heaven it was a Dream!”, he exclaims.) In the finale of Ives’s tone poem, the composer lends the ending a hometown twist: the man awakens to the sound of Fourth of July celebrations at Concord, Massachusetts. No sooner are we enveloped in celebrations than the music abruptly ends with one final joke: the orchestra halts in its tracks without forewarning the Viola section.

Ives’s “Comedy” follows Hawthorne’s tale in this manner:

mm. 1–5: The dream begins with train bells sounding in the Solo Piano.

mm. 6–18: Depiction of the City of Destruction; boarding the Celestial Railroad.

mm. 19–37: The train’s departure from the point of view of the train passengers: Train wheels gradually accelerate (Low Strings), two pilgrims¹, possibly seen through the

¹ The tune intoned by the soli Violins here, *In the Sweet, By and By*, would seem to represent the two solitary pilgrims encountered by the narrator here and again throughout his journey. Subsequent quotations typically set the tune against a cacophonous orchestral backdrop,

train windows, are left behind as the train takes off (Soli Violins), train whistle blasts (Winds, mm. 34–35).

mm. 38–54: The train’s departure from the point of view of the pilgrims: Depiction of the pilgrims trudging along the short and narrow path (*tutti* mm. 38–42; Lower Orchestra, mm. 43–51; *tutti* mm. 52–54), depiction of the train warming up and taking off (acceleration of the Upper Orchestra, mm. 43–51).

mm. 55–138: Depiction of various horrible sights along the railroad tracks and the revelry inside the train.

mm. 139–145: Slowing of the train wheels as the train comes to a stop (Percussion, Bassoons, Saxophone).

mm. 146–148: Mr. Smooth-it-away².

mm. 149–161: A polite tea-party social at Vanity Fair.

mm. 162–207: Back on the train again, with more horrible sights and sounds along the tracks.

mm. 208–210: An initial glimpse of Beulah Land.

mm. 211–216: One “last and horrible” scream by the locomotive engine.

mm. 217–224: Depiction of Beulah Land (Violin solo) and the waters of the river Jordan (Quarter-tone Piano).

mm. 225–265: Sudden awakening from the dream to the reality of Fourth of July celebrations at Concord.

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perhaps suggesting the jeering of the unsympathetic train passengers.

² The rotating figure first sounded in the Extra Violin II in m.142 (and returning in various guises to the very end of the movement) would seem to represent the machinations of Mr. Smooth-it-away. The syrupy Violin melody at m.146, a transformation of the rotating figure, is labeled “Mr. Smooth-it-away” in the corresponding section of Ives’s piano solo, *The Celestial Railroad*, which Ives orchestrated to create this movement.