

SIMON ARMITAGE – HARMONIUM



Armitage spent his formative years in West Yorkshire. The poem describes him collecting an old harmonium that he has bought from Marsden Church. Both Armitage and his father were choristers at Marsden church and the poem is also about their relationship and how the son seems to take his father's place in life.

The harmonium had been used for services in the church when the pipe organ was not needed because the congregation was quite small. Armitage remembers it from when he and his father sang in the choir. It had been placed in the porch of the church and was intended for the skip when Armitage bought it cheaply.



His use of the brand-name of the harmonium makes the poem much more specific and immediately grounds it in fact. Armitage often sets his poems in the places that were important to him when he was growing up.

In the first stanza of the poem Armitage describes how he obtains the harmonium and sets the instrument in context:

'was due to be bundled off to the skip

Or was mine for a song'

The term 'bundled off' in the first stanza suggests that it is an eyesore and something that needs to be quickly got rid of. It is an unceremonious end for an instrument that had served in the church for over a hundred years. The idea that Armitage was able

to buy it 'for a song' reinforces the idea that it is old, unwanted and almost worthless. The use of the noun 'song' is suggestive of the singing that the harmonium had inspired and accompanied over the years, as well as the fact that it was not really worth any money. Armitage is trying to salvage some of his memories along with the harmonium.

In the second stanza Armitage reminisces about the harmonium when it was in situ, under the reflections of the stained glass windows. He alludes to the beauty and magic he felt the stained glass created.

The sun, which in so many other ways makes the church look beautiful, has aged the harmonium, just as the sun shed beautiful light on people but ages them beyond measure. This is the beginning of the personification of the harmonium:

'yellowed the fingernails of its keys'

The idea that the keys have yellowed is reminiscent of the tobacco stained fingers of Armitage's father later in the poem. Yellowing is a sign of age and wear and tear. Armitage feels sentimental about the instrument in the same way he feels sentimental about his father.

The idea that one of the keys no longer produced any sound extends the personification of the harmonium:

'and one of its notes had lost its tongue'

This again, is to do with the age of the harmonium, and the fact that parts of it were worn out. This is just like an old person whose voice has become diminished by age.

The treadles of the organ are peddles operated by the organist's feet that operate the bellows that produce the sound. There were holes worn in both of these by years of usage. Armitage can clearly remember the sight of the organist's feet as he pedalled the harmonium:

'in grey, woollen socks

And leather-soled shoes, had pedalled and pedalled'

He had probably seen this sight every choir practice for years and the image is indelibly etched on his memory. This adds detail about the images in Armitage's memory and serves to make the poem more intimate. It brings the reader closer to the poet.

The repetition of **'pedalled and pedalled'** emphasises the passage of time.

The third stanza concentrates on the memories evoked by the sight of the old harmonium:

'Its hummed harmonics still struck a chord'

The soft alliteration of the 'h' sound alludes to the breathy nature of the sounds that would emanate from the organ. It is also a reminder of the wheezy noises made by old people in general and his father in particular. Armitage uses the pun 'and struck a chord' as a reminder that the

organ could still play a tune and the common idiom for being reminded about something when seeing a particular object.

He explicitly writes about his own memory when he writes:

'where father and son ,

Each in their time, had opened their throats'

He is reminding the reader that generation after generation has sung in the church accompanied by the harmonium; especially that he used to sing in the church choir with his father. The removal of the harmonium triggers lots of emotions about the end of an era and everything that it symbolises.

The tone of the poem is joyful to reflect the singing at the end of the third stanza:

'and gilded finches – like high notes – had streamed out'

The image of song as beautiful birds is in response to the beauty of the tune of the harmonium. The adjective 'gilded' suggests that the birds, and also the songs are rare and precious. The idea of high notes continues the musical theme and confirms the joyful nature of this section. It also suggests that the singing was the high note of some of his life – an enjoyable and satisfying activity that he took part in with his father.

The final stanza deals with Armitage's relationship with his father, who has come to help him carry the harmonium out of the church. His father is old and has yellowed fingers from smoking, and is accompanied by a plume of smoke:

'Through his own blue cloud of tobacco smog,

With smoker's fingers and dotted thumbs.'

It seems that his father is suffering from the effects of being a life-long smoker. His yellowed fingers have been caused by tobacco, whereas the yellowed keys of the harmonium are caused by the sunlight on them.

The idea of them 'carting' away the harmonium is meant to sound like a body being carted away after death.

The personification of the harmonium continues with the line:

'we carry it flat, laid on its back'

Again it is as if the harmonium is a body being carried out of the church.

Armitage's father cannot resist making a joke about his being the next body that his son will carry out of the church. Armitage fumbles for a reply, shocked and embarrassed – he doesn't know what to say and acknowledges this in his poem. He uses a technique known as parallelism in

this final stanza, where the syntax of one sentence is reflected in the next to create a sense of continuity:

'And he, being him...

And me, being me'

The noun shoulder is used as a verb in this section to refer to Armitage carrying his father's coffin. It also infers the shouldering of a burden – that of a parent in old age and the idea that this carrying of his father's coffin is the last time he will feel this burden.

The internal rhyme created by the words freight and weight give the line a sense of finality. The noun freight is usually used to refer to goods being transported – the coffin is being used to transport a very precious cargo – his father.

The final lines sum up the inadequacy felt by Armitage when his father speaks of his own death – he simply doesn't have the words or the voice to make a better response than to mumble a few words that can't be heard. The final lines can be likened to the harmonium in the final stage of its life – it has known the most beautiful and inspiring music but can no longer make itself properly heard.