

PASSION SETTINGS OF THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES FOCUSING ON CRAIG

HELLA JOHNSON'S *CONSIDERING MATTHEW SHEPARD*

Robert Clark Ward, B.M., M.M.

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APPROVED:

Richard Sparks, Major Professor and Chair of
the Division of Conducting and
Ensembles

Stephen Austin, Committee Member

Greg Hobbs, Committee Member

Benjamin Brand, Director of Graduate
Studies in the College of Music

John Richmond, Dean of the College of
Music

Victor Prybutok, Vice Provost of the
Toulouse Graduate School

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Craig Hella Johnson (b. 1963) has emerged as a leader in choral music over the last 20 years. As the conductor of the Austin, TX based chorus Conspirare Johnson implemented the European model of bringing singers together from all over the country to assemble for concerts and recordings over a short period of time. He is known for his collage programs which bring together many styles of music bound by a central theme. Through these programs he has written and arranged many pieces which are now published and being performed by choirs across the globe. Johnson's most significant work to date is a 90 minute passion oratorio which details the story of Matthew Shepard, a college student murdered in a hate crime in 1998. *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016) is a wonderful example of Johnson's composition and programming style. Though not a traditional passion story, it is part of the evolution of the genre in the 20th and 21st centuries. The passion oratorio has seen a resurgence in the past 50 years and has undergone a transformation in that time. These new works pay homage to the history of the genre but have begun to stretch it in terms of form and content. This study will highlight the evolution of the passion oratorio focusing on Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard* and offer some insight into the composer's style and how this work represents a modern treatment of the passion oratorio.

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By

Robert C. Ward

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The passion oratorio has seen a resurgence in the past fifty years. It has also undergone a transformation, particularly when compared to the great passions from the Baroque era. While these new works pay homage to their predecessors, primarily the passions of Bach, they have begun to stretch the genre in terms of form and content. The purpose of this paper is to highlight this evolution and one of the latest contributions, Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Johnson's work embraces the form and tradition of the passion without engaging the passion story of Jesus Christ. This raises the logical question, is *Considering Matthew Shepard* a passion? Though it does not address the passion story, it utilizes the genre to tell the story of another man's suffering and death. The genre provides the opportunity to narrate the story and the space to reflect on its impact. Through a study of this work we will see just how the genre has evolved and how Johnson uses this form in a modern context while embracing its history.

In February 1999, a few months after the murder of Matthew Shepard, a twenty-one-year old student at the University of Wyoming, *Vanity Fair* published the article "The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard."¹ The use of the word "crucifixion" is just the sort of attention grabbing word a writer seeks to turn eyes toward the page. In this instance the term was also apropos.

Shepard's body was found tied to a split-rail fence on the edge of town. The young man who found Matt while mountain biking thought he may have been a scarecrow, a decoration left from Halloween. Though Shepard was slumped to the ground, hands tied to the fence behind him, the account of the mountain biker suggested a different posture, one resembling a scarecrow in a

¹Melanie Thernstrom, "The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard," *Vanity Fair*, March 1999.

field, or Christ on the cross. The fence became a pilgrimage sight for supporters and activists, a symbol of the event and a way to connect to something tangible. The media played an important role in the national uprising over the murder. Shepard was branded a martyr and the murder likened to a crucifixion.² The death of Matthew Shepard quickly became more than a murder; it became a national rallying cry for gay and lesbian rights. Support for the Shepard family came from leaders and celebrities across the globe; this murder, as opposed to other hate crimes, became a catalyst for gay rights.

Craig Hella Johnson, founder and conductor of the Austin, TX based professional choir Conspirare, has composed his first concert length work, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, a ‘fusion’ oratorio in three parts. The three sections, Prologue, Passion, and Epilogue trace the story of Matthew Shepard’s murder and the events that followed, including moments from the trial and the sentencing of the killers. The story, which unfolds in the Passion, is told by narrators and is supplemented by solo and choral works which offer moments of commentary and repose. The libretto³ is comprised of poetry, book excerpts, trial records, and Shepard’s own diary entries. The score includes a variety of musical styles which has become a trademark of Johnson through his work with Conspirare.⁴ Johnson originally workshopped the piece in 2014

² “The mythologizing of Matthew-his overnight transformation into a national and international symbol-has left him oddly faceless. No one has seemed interested in publishing the details of his life-as if they would detract from his martyrdom.” Melanie Thernstrom, "The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard," *Vanity Fair*, March 1999.

³ The full libretto can be found in the program booklet on the Conspirare website, <http://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-program-booklet.pdf>.

⁴ “A unique aspect of Johnson’s programming is his signature “collage” style: through-composed programs that marry music and poetry to blend sacred and secular, classical and contemporary, classical and popular styles.” Biography, Craig Hella Johnson, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://conspirare.org/about-us/craig-hella-johnson/>.

with Conspirare under the title *Considering Matthew Shepard*⁵ at the comPassion Festival in Austin, TX. At that time only the Passion portion was performed. Now in its three-part iteration, the title remains unchanged. Although Johnson considered something along the lines of *The Passion of Matthew Shepard*, the feedback he received about the workshop title provided space for the work to exist.

It was very important to me for the workshop not to call it the “Passion of Matthew Shephard” or to call it anything too specific. That sort of ties things up in a little bow. I just thought, all I'm going to say for this workshop is Considering Matthew Shepherd, so it feels like people can come and have their own experience with this. I want to create music that can allow people to have their own inner journey with the music and with the story and not dictate, here's how you need to feel. I didn't want to manipulate anything. I wanted to really be careful. Because some of this is so emotionally potent, it's easy to step into it and kind of paint it a little extra purple. I would just say: "How do I tell the story with feeling, with care, with thoughtfulness but not creating a dogma of mind for them, for the listeners?" So “Considering Matthew Shepherd” is where it landed. Then afterwards, I wondered if then, it would become the “Passion of Matthew Shephard.” I really lived with it. I just couldn't let go of “Considering Matthew Shephard.” I got some good feedback, too, about how much people really loved that title because of the space that it allowed for people.⁶

Considering Matthew Shepard premiered in February 2016 in Austin, TX with Conspirare who then travelled to Pasadena, CA where it was a featured performance at the Western American Choral Directors Association conference. Luke Quinton of the Austin-American Statesman said of the premier, “*Considering Matthew Shepard* is a stunning work, largely because it succeeds at being so audacious. It treats a deadly serious topic with surprising levity, and at the same time makes a shrewd connection to the heart of this darkness.” Johnson’s colleague, the composer

⁵ “comPassion: A Festival of Musical Passions.” Program Notes. Conspirare, June 5-15, 2014. <http://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/compassion-program-booklet.pdf>.

⁶ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

Robert Kyr called the new work “an American classic.”⁷ Though the place of this work in the scope of American music is not the purview of this paper, what is in the purview is the work’s place among 21st-century Passion Oratorios. The intention of this work as a passion is clear and one must draw parallels between the traditional settings of the passion and this new work, which is constructed as a passion but does not involve the story directly. Craig Hella Johnson has written a modern passion which shows that the genre has become a vessel that can hold non-traditional stories.

⁷ Luke Quinton, “Review: Conspirare’s ‘Considering Matthew Shepard,’ The Austin American-Statesman. Accessed May 22, 2016. <http://arts.blog.austin360.com/2016/02/25/review-conspirares-considering-matthew-shepard/>.

CHAPTER 2

CRAIG HELLA JOHNSON

Craig Hella Johnson (b.1963) grew up on the Iron Range in Virginia, Minnesota. Born in Brainerd, MN his move to Virginia brought with it a wonderful piano teacher who taught him to use a singing tone in his playing. Craig's father and the Lutheran congregation he pastored gave him free reign to explore his musical gift. He began traveling to Duluth to study organ in the 7th grade and was the church organist during his four years of high school. Johnson was also involved with school music and in the community.

My mom and I had sort of a little road show but I would put together these little performances of singing and playing. And then I would have basically a slide show, a visual kind of treatment with it. And I was creating those always and trying to tell stories with music and still images. I was interested in that sort of thing for a long time. There is some of kind of service element to it. We used to bring things out to the nursing homes and I'd go with my dad, we'd do performances and there were just a lot of community interacting stuff. There was always a sense, I think growing up in the church, that music wasn't isolated but it was connected with people and with community and service.¹

After graduating from high school Johnson enrolled at St. Olaf College (B.M. Piano Performance) where he studied piano and developed an interest in orchestral conducting.

I had a moment in my freshman year in a symphony class. It was called The Symphony. It was just a history/lit class for the January interim term. We sat in rehearsals for the Minnesota Orchestra and that was my "a ha!" moment for conducting. The conductor lifted up his arms to conduct the Overture to Ruslan and Ludmilla by Glinka and my life was changed. I just said: "Oh my gosh, to see this!" 'Cause he walked up to the podium, he looked very frail and small and then I saw when he was on the podium ready to begin this breath and life just filled him. His arms went out wide and all of the sudden it was electric for me. That was a moment that I will never forget.²

¹ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, June 2016.

² Ibid.

As he neared the end of his degree Ken Jennings, his mentor and choral director, asked if he had considered choral music as a path. “I said, ‘What?’ I really hadn't. Then in a moment, I thought: ‘Well, this is something I really love. This is something I know. Maybe I could make a contribution.’”³”

His studies took him to the University of Illinois (M.M. Choral Conducting), The Juilliard School, Yale University (D.M.A. Choral Conducting), and to the International Bach Academy (1986) to study with Helmuth Rilling as the recipient of a National Arts Fellowship. During his time there he studied and toured with Gächinger Kantorei and the Stuttgart Philharmonic and Radio Choir. “That was a really really grounding experience to be there, full on with all of the singers in Gächinger and Helmuth. I am very grateful to him. He really attended to us as students when he was present with us. He had a very busy schedule. But he was such a great artist. He is such a great artist and great musician but also a very thoughtful and generous teacher.”⁴ After returning to the U.S. Johnson served as a church musician and in a sabbatical replacement at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, SD. In 1990 he joined the faculty at the University of Texas at Austin where he led the choral program from 1993-2001. During his early years in Austin, he became the Artistic Director of the Victoria Bach Festival (1992) and founded what is now known as Conspirare. Johnson has also served as the music director for the Houston Masterworks Chorus (2001-2004) and as the artistic director of San Francisco-based Chanticleer (1998). Along with Conspirare, he currently serves as Music Director for Cincinnati Vocal Arts Ensemble and has done so since 2014.

³ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, June 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

Johnson's work has been recognized through many awards, including Chorus America's Louis Botto Award for Innovative Action and Entrepreneurial Zeal (2009) and The Michael Korn Founders Award for Development of the Professional Choral Art (2015), Chorus America's lifetime achievement award. He was inducted into the Austin Arts Hall of Fame (2008) and designated the official Texas State Musician by the Texas Legislature (2013), only the second classical musician to receive the honor to date. Conspirare has been nominated for multiple GRAMMY awards including a win for Best Choral Performance in 2015 for *The Sacred Spirit of Russia*.

Johnson is known as an innovative conductor, composer, arranger, and programmer. Though Conspirare consistently performs the pillars of the choral repertoire and is at the forefront of bringing new works to life, one of their more popular endeavors are the Christmas concerts. A Conspirare Christmas is a bricolage of musical genres bound by a central theme. These concerts have become known as collage concerts and showcase Johnson's ability to shape programs from a variety of musical influences. According to the organization's website, the collage concerts are "through-composed programs that marry music and poetry to blend sacred and secular, classical and contemporary, traditional and popular styles."⁵ This method of programming is at the heart of who Craig Hella Johnson is as a musician.

How can we as artists and simply within the musical realm demonstrate the creative, imaginative work of the spirit, if you will, or of creation itself? How can this witness be practiced by us in a way that demonstrates an inclusivity and a breadth of background and style and convictions? This is to me still why choir is this huge living metaphor, it's a music that I happen to love and I grew up loving it just as a music, as a repertoire. But it's for me also, this potential to be this living metaphor for what it is to live together in this world and to really understand--we hear so often and we say it often. We are all one,

⁵ "Craig Hella Johnson: Founding Artistic Director," Conspirare, Official Website, Accessed March 10, 2016. <http://conspirare.org/about-us/craig-hella-johnson/>.

or this idea that we all come from the same source or we are unified in God say. But this is a living practice of that in such a simple, artful way. We can demonstrate this and so that takes place in a lot of ways within choral music. Choral music can be a surprising place for this to happen too because it's been consistently experienced and seen as quite a traditional medium in the culture. No one ever thinks of choral music necessarily, do they think of cutting edge innovation. But that's one of its great assets at this point is that, it can be very specifically and precisely used to broaden one's sense of life, of meaning. And we can do this with exploring and breaking expectations of genre and presentation and consideration and style. I've done a lot of playing with blending of musical styles kind of side by side and I've never really considered that as a crossover thing. Sometimes people will reference it that's not quite--there is no problem in that but not quite how I view it. It's almost more of a sort of forcing styles together. It's been interesting because I think of myself actually as a choral musician as being quite orthodox and quite traditional in a way. I'm a Gemini in this is way so I go back and forth but--which is I think what my role has been in a lot of ways. But like all of these Christmas programs that we do, the collage programs that appear on the surface to be this smorgasbord where there is a pop song here and there's a folk song and there's Gregorian chant. It looks on the surface as just style play but really underneath it, it is a liturgy and so there's a very sort of orthodox and rootedness in my own convictions. But also, a refusal to use music as another power structure that puts someone down or holds someone up as better than. I think God is meant to invade this music that we do to say "all of us" just like Matthew Shepherd. It's the same message.⁶

Many of Johnsons compositions and arrangements have come from these concerts and have given the choral world a glimpse into Johnson's process.

Craig Hella Johnson is a genius ... [who] is moving the choral art forward ... He's fearless in terms of his programming and the way he presents the concerts. It's a kind of expansion of the choral art, taking a journey to places that can bring music into new life for the listener. He really creates a context in which everybody is welcome.⁷ —
Composer Robert Kyr

Though these concerts do not define Johnson as a conductor or composer, they represent who he is as a musician: a lover of music and words brave enough to break the mold of the classical

⁶ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, June 2016.

⁷ Craig Hella Johnson, Curriculum Vitae.

musician and, by doing so, he has opened choral music to new audiences in Austin and around the world.

CHAPTER 3

SURVEY OF 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY PASSION SETTINGS

Though it would be a worthwhile project to explore all of the passion settings in the 20th- and 21st-centuries, the aim of this chapter is to highlight significant contributions that have paved the way for a composition like *Considering Matthew Shepard*. There are certainly other works worth mentioning, a full list of which can be found in the Appendix,¹ but the works chosen were done so to highlight the following developments:

1. The passion in the 20th- and 21st-century is thought of as more than the telling and reflection of the passion of Jesus Christ.
2. The musical language deployed is done so in a manner that serves the composer's interpretation and telling of the story.
3. There is a respect and understanding of the tradition of the passion but also a freedom to explore new boundaries.

1966	<i>Passio Et Mors Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Lucam</i>	Krzysztof Penderecki (b.1933)
1982	<i>Sadduzäer-Passion</i>	Miki Theodorakis (b.1925)
1983	<i>Passio</i>	Arvo Pärt (b.1935)
1985	<i>Sankt Bach Passion</i>	Mauricio Kagel (1931-2008)
1995	<i>The Passion According to Four Evangelists</i>	Robert Kyr (b.1952)
1996	<i>Passion and Resurrection</i>	Ivan Moody (b.1964)
1997	<i>Passion to Hungarian Words</i>	György Orban (b.1947)
2000	<i>The Water Passion After St. Matthew</i>	Tan Dun (b.1957)
2000	<i>Pasión según San Marco</i>	Osvaldo Golijov (b.1960)
2000	<i>Deus Passus</i>	Wolfgang Rhim (b.1957)

¹ Appendix Entry for Passion Settings

Table 1 Passions discussed or mentioned in this chapter		
2000	<i>Johannespassion</i>	Sofia Gubaidulina (b.1931)
2007	<i>the little match girl passion</i>	David Lange (b.1953)
2012	<i>Passion of Ramakrishna</i>	Phillip Glass (b.1937)
2016	<i>Considering Matthew Shepard</i>	Craig Hella Johnson (b.1963)

Just as Brahms was famously apprehensive of composing a symphony in the wake of Beethoven, the passions of Bach may have had a similar effect. However, just as the symphony rebounded and evolved, the passion has done the same. It is important to understand how the passion has changed in recent history to be able to talk about *Considering Matthew Shepard* as a passion oratorio.

The Passion Oratorio was an important liturgical genre in the 17th and 18th centuries but as opera and symphonic music became more popular and as composers became less reliant on the church as a means of income, the genre became almost obsolete in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Although there are instances of the Passion during this time, there are none that stand out, and those composed early in the 20th century are reflections of the past. It wasn't until Krzysztof Penderecki (b.1933) composed *Passio Et Mors Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Lucam* (1966) that the genre came out of its hibernation and was reinvented in the 20th century.

I reached for the archetype of the Passion (...), in order to express not only the sufferings and death of Christ, but also the cruelty of our own century, the martyrdom of Auschwitz (...). I wanted my music to be a confession; I was looking for a genuine, modern expression of eternal themes.²

² Krzysztof Penderecki, *Passio Et Mors Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Lucam* (Kraków: PWM, 2000). Score.

Penderecki's work is a tribute to the Baroque passion, those of Bach in particular, but makes use of 20th-century techniques and themes. This is most evident in the use of serialism and of a particular ordering of the pitches known as the BACH motif. This motif is often used as a link between the experimental and conventional compositional methods, a perfect bridge between tradition and modernity.³ Penderecki distills the libretto through the elimination of marginal figures and scenes while adding traditionally Catholic liturgy such as the *Stabat Mater*. While this may seem like a small matter, the deviation from the libretto as an expressive means is a key development in the Passion of the 21st-century.

Arvo Pärt (b.1935) made the next significant contribution to the passion, setting the gospel of St. John in his *Passio* (1989). This work followed a dormant period of composition following the censorship of his *Credo* (1968) in a Soviet led Estonia. This period of dormancy resulted in the creation of Pärt's tintinnabuli style that bears a resemblance to the medieval and Renaissance music he studied during this period. Pärt eventually left Estonia for Austria so that he would no longer be under the thumb of communism. The *Passio* is "a starkly economical work, going back for its inspiration to medieval plainchant, which in pristine form is about as beautifully plain as music can be: voices in unison, no harmony and no precisely measured rhythms."⁴ The minimalist style deployed by Pärt had great influence on the future of the genre, including compositions such as David Lange's *little match girl passion* (2007), Philip Glass' *The Passion of Ramakrishna* (2012), and Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016). One feature of note is the use of an SATB quartet singing the role of the Evangelist. This treatment of

³ "Passio (Pärt), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passio_\(Pärt\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passio_(Pärt)), Accessed 22 May, 2016.

⁴ Donal Henahan, "Review/Music; 'Passio,' Arvo Pärt's Interpretation of the St. John Passion," *The New York Times*, April 6, 1990. <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/06/arts/review-music-passio-arvo-part-s-interpretation-of-the-st-john-passion.html>. Accessed May 3, 2016.

the narration does two things: it represents the universal nature of the story, the telling of the events from a corporate entity, not an individual, and it minimizes the individuality of the story, stripping it of any emotional interpretation that might be imposed by a soloist and putting focus on the text. “Pärt shares with Stravinsky and several other composers an aversion to overtly imposing his own emotional or spiritual agenda on the listener; instead his sole concern is to present the text objectively and allow it to speak for itself.⁵”

The passion form continued to expand in the decade leading up to the 21st century with works set to newly composed texts (György Orban *Passion to Hungarian Words*), combined gospel texts (Robert Kyr *Passion According to Four Evangelists*), and passions functioning within different religious contexts (Ivan Moody *Passion and Resurrection* composed in the ethos of the Orthodox Church). One other development, perhaps most important in the line toward *Considering Matthew Shepard*, is the use of the term, “Passion,” to set the story of a person’s death and suffering other than Jesus Christ. This is found in Maurice Kagel’s *Sankt Bach Passion* and Miki Theodorakis’ *Sadduzäer-Passion*, which convey the passion stories of J.S. Bach and the ancient Jewish sect respectively.

The rapid development of the Passion, rapid in comparison to the previous 200 years anyway, reached its tipping point in 2000 when Helmuth Rilling and the International Bach Academy commissioned four composers to each set one of the four gospels. 2000 was a year of symbolism, the 250th anniversary of Bach’s death and the beginning of a new millennium, marking the 2000th year since the birth of Christ. “Rilling was anxious to examine how Bach’s

⁵ Paul Kilbey, “Arvo Pärt’s Passio: An Introduction,” March 9, 2012. <https://bachtrack.com/part-passio-introduction>. Accessed May 2, 2016.

works continued to influence us today rather than merely present a survey.⁶ To choose Chinese-American composer and Buddhist Tan Dun, Argentinian and Jewish composer Osvaldo Golijov, German and Catholic composer Wolfgang Rihm, and Russian Orthodox composer Sofia Gubaidulina to tackle these projects guaranteed an exploration of the Passion beyond the traditional context. These composers did not disappoint. Dun's *The Water Passion After St. Matthew* begins with Christ's baptism and the sound of water from seventeen amplified and lit bowls that form a cross on the stage.

So many cultures use water as an essential metaphor — there is the symbolism of baptism; it is associated with birth, creation and re-creation. If you think of the water cycle, where it comes down to earth and returns to the atmosphere, only to return — that is a symbol of resurrection. I think of resurrection not only as a return to life but as a metaphor for hope, the birth of a new world, a better life.⁷

Golijov's *La Pasión según San Marco* is meant to represent a culture and how that culture has come to understand this story.

The main thing in this Passion is to present a dark Jesus, and not a pale European Jesus. It's going to be about Jesus' last days on earth seen through the Latin American experience and what it implies. What I want to do, is to relate the Passion to icons of the history of Latin America. For instance, there are some similarities between the lives of Jesus and Che Guevara. When Jesus remains silent in front of all the insults and the spitting and throwing stones, he laments and cannot believe that his own followers will leave him, but at the same time says "but that's how it's written." He's writing his own death sentence basically. I have read extracts of the diaries that Che Guevara wrote shortly before he was killed—he knew he was starving—he knew he would die—but he still had the courage to write how it would be—and that's how it was. When he died, the same people—the **same people** who betrayed him to the CIA and to the Bolivian soldiers, some peasants, went to cut locks of his hair as relics.⁸

⁶ Marcia Adair, "Eat. Drink. A Textual Analysis of the 2000 Passion Project," The Omniscient Mussel, accessed January 21, 2016, <http://theomniscientmussel.com/introduction/>.

⁷ Adair, "Eat. Drink. A Textual Analysis of the 2000 Passion Project."

⁸ "An interview with Osvaldo Golijov and David Harrington." Osvaldo Golijov, *La Pasión Según San Marcos* (New York: Italiana Music Publishing) 2002. Score.

Golijov approaches the passion story as a means for understanding his own background and culture. The music, the dancers and the staging represent the composer's understanding of the events in St. Mark bringing them into his own time and place. This is not a reimagining of the passions of Bach or Schütz but the creation of a new passion, a Latin American passion, filled with the musical styles and cultural elements important to this telling.

Wolfgang Rihm's *Deus Passus* uses a stripped down version of the Gospel of St. Luke leaving only key story and narration elements. This reduction frees the passion from elaborate prose and rhetoric and gives the bare minimum of information required to tell the story leaving the listeners free to form their own conclusions.⁹ Sofia Gubaidulina's *Johannespassion* is a dark work combining the Gospel of St. John with the Book of Revelation. Though this comparison is not uncommon in the world of art, as seen in works by Giotto in Padua (Capella deli Scrovengni) and Michelangelo on the dome of the Sistine Chapel, this is not a typical passion story.¹⁰ The result of this combination is a rather depressing telling of the passion story and it stretches the genre further from the Bach archetype.

Since the 2000 Passion project, compositions engaging the passion story have exploded. Between Penderecki's St. Luke Passion and the 2000 Passion project, roughly 14 passions were written. Since the 2000 Passion project, twice as many passions have been composed as were composed during the four decades leading up to that year. "The current crop of brilliantly varied works in many ways holds only one clear point of connection: each contains the word "Passion"

⁹ Adair, "Eat. Drink. A Textual Analysis of the 2000 Passion Project.

¹⁰ Ibid.

in the title and conveys a journey of suffering within its narrative.¹¹ Perhaps the most significant contribution to the genre in that time is David Lange's Pulitzer Prize winning composition *the little match girl passion* (2007). This work pays direct homage to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* while mirroring the suffering of Jesus with Hans Christians Andersen's *The Little Match Girl*.

The first thing that hit me – something that hits all Jewish musicians – was the way in which you spend your life dealing with Christian music, so there's a way in which you're always on the outside of the centre of this vocal tradition [. . .] I imagined what it would be like to go back to a piece which is so important and beautiful and powerful, like Bach's St Matthew Passion. It's a work I love so much, but it's always very strange listening to it, because the Jews aren't the heroes of this piece, so it's something very disconcerting for Jews to listen to this music. And so I imagined what it would be like to tell that same story with that same text and that same awe and sense of wonder and belief, but somehow replacing the suffering of Jesus with the suffering of something else. The Little Match Girl of Hans Christian Andersen seemed appropriate because of its Christian spirit [. . .] and I thought maybe I could take the story of the St Matthew Passion and take the story of Jesus out and plug this little girl's suffering in. So it's very respectful and it's not Christian but it's not exactly blasphemous either. I'm not sure I know exactly what it is, but it's trying to say that if one person's suffering is enough to build a world culture and religion around, maybe this other person's suffering is that noble as well.¹²

Lang adapted the libretto by erasing any mention of Jesus, and alternated the adapted texts from St. Matthew with the telling of Andersen's story of poverty and suffering. Lang viewed the passion not only as the story of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus Christ but as a musical genre equipped to tell the story of another.

The most interesting thing about how the Passion story is told is that it can include texts other than the story itself. These texts are the reactions of the crowd, penitential thoughts, statements of general sorrow, shock, or remorse. These are devotional guideposts, the markers for our own responses to the story, and they have the effect of making the

¹¹ Jennifer Kerr Budziak, "Passion beyond postmodernism: The choral Passion settings of Esnvalds and Lang, viewed through a liminal lens" (DMA diss., Northwestern University, 2014).

¹² Dominic Wells, "In the Footsteps of Bach's St. Matthew Passion: The Passion Settings of David Lang and James MacMillan," *Tempo* 67, no. 264 (2013): 40-51.

audience more than spectators to the sorrowful events onstage. These responses can have a huge range—in Bach's "Saint Matthew Passion," these extra texts range from famous chorales that his congregation was expected to sing along with to completely invented characters, such as the "Daughter of Zion" and the "Chorus of Believers." The Passion format—the telling of a story while simultaneously commenting upon it—has the effect of placing us in the middle of the action, and it gives the narrative a powerful inevitability.¹³

Due to the familiarity of the passion of Jesus Christ and musical settings of this story, there are a number of preconceptions surrounding a choral work that includes the word passion in the title. Most of these were standardized by the two surviving passions of J.S. Bach but were already part of a long tradition. Now, with these standards in place, the genre has become one that is ripe for interpretation. This is due, in part, to the standard practice of adding texts to the gospel in order to explore the emotional and human impact of the story. It is a genre that at once allows one to both tell and reflect on a story in the same work gaining some truth or hope from a tragic event. Seeing as there is no shortage of these stories, it was only natural for composers to begin to make the connection between the need to tell them and the passion genre which provides a canvas on which to explore them.

¹³ David Lang Music, "program note: the little match girl passion (for chorus)," Official website, Accessed January 24, 2016, <http://davidlangmusic.com/music/little-match-girl-passion-for-chorus>.

CHAPTER 4

CONSIDERING MATTHEW SHEPARD

Craig Hella Johnson is known primarily through his work as the conductor and artistic director of *Conspirare*; however, his reputation as a composer is growing. He has several arrangements and original works that have become part of the choral canon, but nothing of the size or scope of this work. For Johnson, who doesn't think of himself as a full-time composer but someone who writes and arranges out of necessity, this was a daunting task. This begs the question, why a passion for Matthew Shepard?

In 1998, when this took place it really had an impact on me powerfully, and I just carried it with me for a long time, always feeling like I wanted to respond in some way and you know I never really knew what that meant for a long time. I just thought I would love to because I felt such a powerful emotional response and felt really connected with the story uniquely. And you know years went by, years and years, and I felt that was interesting. It doesn't seem to be going away. Here it was 2007, 2008. I'm still thinking about it. And so it was just probably about a year before the workshop, I suppose in 2013, when I just thought, I think it's time to do something. And even then it didn't come crystal clear like a lightning bolt, like it will be THIS. But I thought you know, I will just take a step towards this and kind of say, I love that phrase "Take one step towards the universe and the universe takes a thousands steps back towards you." I felt I need to just take that first step.¹

That 'step' resulted in what is now the passion portion of the work, which received a workshop performance in 2014. Given the weight of the subject matter, it is not surprising that this would develop into a major work. Johnson needed a form, something with which he was familiar, that could hold the serious nature of this story. Given his knowledge of the passions of J.S. Bach,

¹ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

Arvo Pärt, David Lange and others, the passion was a natural fit. It also fit his desire to represent the story fully; this was not something that could be done in a three- or four-minute work.

I think there's an aspect of oratorio when you leave passion out of it. Just this idea of story telling that I, for my whole life I've been as a choral musician and artistic director really committed to how can we keep the oratorio tradition alive in our repertoire and in our culture. It's really the attention span of the listener has just sort of decreased significantly in this time. You know two or three minutes is about what people are used to giving something attention-wise. And I was really eager to say, "how can we keep telling the longer stories," can we... I know I believe it is in us as human beings to be available to longer, a longer musical line, a longer story, a longer thread. So I feel very connected with the oratory tradition in that way. And one of my life journeys as a musician has always been, especially living in, right down here in the middle of America, how does our music, how can we help bring it to a broader audience and how can this stay relevant?²

A work of this magnitude requires a substantial text. Unlike the traditional passion narrative that draws much of its text from the Bible, Johnson began creating a libretto³ from scratch comprised of the works of several poets, interspersed with his own words and ideas which he crafted with poet Michael Dennis Brown.

The bulk of the poetry comes from the book *October Mourning* written by Lesléa Newman. Newman, an accomplished author and supporter of LGBT causes, is uniquely close to the Matthew Shepard story. She was scheduled to serve as the keynote speaker for an event being held by the University of Wyoming's LGBT Association the week following Matthew Shepard's murder. Though the organization's leaders offered to let her out of her obligations, Newman declined and made the trip to Laramie, Wyoming. The result of her connection to the

² Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

³ The full libretto can be found in the program booklet on the Conspirare website, <http://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-program-booklet.pdf>.

events is the book of poetry from which Johnson builds the framework for *Considering Matthew Shepard*.

The structure comes from a group of poems about the fence to which Matthew Shepard was bound as his murderers beat him and then left him to die. The fence provides a structure for the libretto⁴ and an iconic image for the story, in the way the cross is an image of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The Fence became, almost immediately after the crime and then over time, an iconic symbol, a symbol of destruction, a symbol of despair, a symbol of grief, a symbol of hope, a symbol of beauty. And to me when I was writing, the first fence poem I wrote actually is “The Fence (That Night)” and originally I just called it “The Fence” because I didn’t know I’d be writing other poems from that point of view. So I realized at one point that the fence was just there being a fence and became an accessory to the crime unwillingly.

And so that was very profound to me and then later on I realized, oh yes, the fence had a life before and the fence had a life after. So when I was structuring the book it seemed that that made a lot of sense to start and end with the fence. And before I wrote the epilogue which was Pilgrimage, which was my journey to the fence, I thought that the book would just end with the fence being torn down but I was really unhappy about that because it just left nothing, I mean literally left nothing, just empty space. And I really felt, especially when I decided to publish the book for teen readers, which was not my original intent, I needed to end the book with hope. And so I just knew intuitively that I needed a last poem; I had no idea what it would be but I knew I had to go back to Wyoming to find it.

So I went back to Wyoming and I went back to the fence or the fence that's now there, it's not the original fence anymore. And I spent a long time there. I said Kaddish, which is the Jewish prayer for the dead. I just sat there. I looked back at Laramie, you know, to see the last thing that Matt would have seen before he lost consciousness even though I went during the day and that was at night. I touched the fence. I felt the ground. I felt the prairie wind. And then on the plane ride home I wrote that last poem Pilgrimage. And, you know, it was very important to me to end with a prayer, to end with

⁴ The libretto can be found in the program booklet on the Conspirare website, <http://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-program-booklet.pdf>.

something that takes lines from a lot of different traditions so that it was unifying and to give some hope to the reader and some comfort.⁵

Johnson uses these poems as the framework for the passion and as a place from which this tragedy can be observed. An inanimate object that bore witness to events that are unimaginable provides a detachment that allows the listener to imagine the sequence of events before, during, and after the murder. This serves as a parallel for giving consideration to the senseless crime and the transformation of thought regarding hate crimes before and after this tragedy.

The fence poems are so powerful. It was interesting because I had actually thought about the fence. Obviously, we all think about the fence and Matthew, it's one of the most powerful images. You know the sort of head references when one thinks about a cross and being tied to something. I know that's where a lot of the martyr stories come from too. It's big. It's really big. A wooden fence, a wooden cross. And to me, the piece that was so powerful from an early point in my process too was this fence that carried his body that came from these lodge pole pines (what they're called in Wyoming). Lodge pole pines are one of the most famous sort of natural, iconic elements in the American west, especially Wyoming. So these beautiful, noble, tall pine trees, these living things that became this functional thing, the fence - it also became this witness, this quiet observer of all the action. This fence is the only object in the sense as we think that saw everything. So they move me very deeply. It also was useful for me to think about the fences as structural points, not only as a fence of structural device itself physically, just technically speaking but it also provided a very useful place in terms of progression and for a passion setting, that seemed to be really, really important. So her poems were really critical at the beginning and foundational to where this all went.⁶

The fence serves as a character in this story, a witness to the events and a witness to the reaction to those events. The last stanza from "The Fence (One Week Later)" is, "I don't mind being a shrine, it's better than being the scene of a crime." This effectively captures the role of the fence in bearing witness to all that would transpire. "Pilgrimage" should also be seen as a fence poem as it represents humanity coming to terms with these events.

⁵ Lesléa Newman, interview by author, February 2016.

⁶ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

I wanted the fence to be both kind of a character in this piece but I also wanted people to somehow be able to relate to it as an observer. The fence has a lot of rules. It's an observer. It carries emotion. It took action in terms of holding his body but it's always the silent observer to this, to the actions, to the actions that night, to the people who bring flowers and photos, various poems, to the procession. It was thousands and thousands and thousands of people that came to this fence and placed things. So this quiet observing presence that goes through and even when it's broken up, it still has qualities of being an observing presence. So what that means, in a way, is even after sort of the death of the fence its presence still exists. To me, this was relevant and very important in terms of kind of identifying all of us, you, me, any listener or any human being is a part of that living, listening presence in a way that's mystical and that we can't really articulate very well but that is really a part of my own core experience.⁷

The passion genre carries with it a number of traditional elements in terms of characters and structure. One vital character is that of the Evangelist, or narrator. Traditionally this role is sung by a tenor though it has taken many different forms in the last half century. In *Considering Matthew Shepard*, the Evangelist is treated more strictly as a narrator, telling the story between movements in recitations. This is an indication of Johnson's desire to write an oratorio in the vernacular. In our television and movie culture, it would be strange for the narrator to sing the story line, though traditionally it might make more sense. This makes the genre more approachable to a modern audience. The recitations are taken from the accounts of the story⁸ and efficiently propel the events setting up the musical responses.

In the next piece, "In Need of Breath," a poem by Hafiz - the 14th century Sufi poet, Johnson seeks to capture the critical moment when Matt, the son of Dennis and Judy Shepard, becomes Matthew, the martyr.

⁷ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

⁸ Judy Shepard and Jon Barrett, *The Meaning of Matthew: My Son's Murder in Laramie, and a World Transformed* (New York: Hudson Street Press, 2009).

This isn't obvious but I also think of the Hafiz poem, "In Need of Breath," as also a kind of fence poem. It's really a Matthew poem. It's just a poem that takes place where the fence is central. It was kind of an evolution for me, especially as the piece progressed that the piece would evolve from Matt to Matthew. It's really in that poem, "In Need of Breath," where for me, Matt becomes Matthew. What I mean by that is he starts to, one starts to have a sense of this is where in this moment, in my own consideration, he starts to become this iconic figure that was a transformative catalyst. So for me, that's Matthew's singing from the fence where had he been able to kind of speak from not Matt's voice but from that place of the Matthew who is a part of a larger creation.⁹

This is the moment of ascension for Matthew, the moment when it becomes evident that this crime will not go unnoticed in the world. This is set up very carefully by Johnson, who added an epilogue and prologue to the passion following its workshop performance. Taking his cue from Bach who invites the congregation to hear the passion in his Exordium and comforts and challenges them in the Conclusio, Johnson introduces us to Matt and to Wyoming in the prologue and invites us to listen, to truly listen, to the story of Matthew Shepard.

The Prologue opens with Bach's *C Major Prelude* from the *Well Tempered Clavier*. *C* major is representative of the openness one needs to grasp the story, the openness of the Wyoming landscape, and the openness one needs to change their way of thinking. Johnson's use of one of Bach's most familiar works pays tribute to the tradition of the passion and its most notable composer. The prelude invites us all to the table; the first word even is the word 'all' a proclamation that this story affects everyone. From the opening harmonies of the chorus emerges a solo voice, the voice of the soloist who sings the words of Matthew Shepard, and takes the listener to the scene, Wyoming, with a simple cowboy song where the choir paints the beautiful interaction of life and nature set to Sue Wallis' poem, "Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass."

⁹ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

Ex. 1

The image displays a musical score for a scene, likely from a play. It is divided into three systems, each with four staves: Soprano (S), Contralto (Chr), and Piano (P). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor), and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked as $J = 86$. The score includes lyrics in French and English. The first system (measures 49-53) features a vocal line with lyrics: "Fre - re Jac - ques, Fre - re Jac - ques, Que - mes - vous? Que - mes - vous?" and a piano accompaniment. The second system (measures 54-58) includes lyrics: "Sonnez les ma - ti - nes, sonnez les ma - ti - nes, Ding, ding, dong, Ding, ding, dong, Fre - re Jac - ques, gent - ly down the stream, Mer - ci - ly, mer - ci - ly, mer - ci - ly, mer - ci - ly Life is but a dream, Dar - mes - vous? Dar - mes - vous? Sonnez les ma - ti - nes, Sonnez les ma - ti - nes, Ding, ding, dong, lit - le star, how". The third system (measures 59-63) includes lyrics: "Fre - re Jac - ques, que - mes - vous? He was my son, my first born, and dream, Life is but a dream, ding, ding, ding, wonder what you are." The piano part features a simple, rhythmic accompaniment with chords and melodic lines.

Ex. 1 From “Matt Sequence: Ordinary Boy” found in the prologue, Johnson combines the familiar children’s songs Matthew’s mother, Judy Shepard, recalls singing to him as a child.

The next movement introduces Matt Shepard first through his mother, Judy Shepard, and then through his own words as revealed in his diaries, shared with Johnson by the Shepard family. Johnson succeeds in giving the listener a picture of Matt in this movement titled “Ordinary Boy.” A particularly interesting moment is a layering of the children’s songs Matt liked to sing as taught to him by his Father (Ex.1). This is a wonderful example of Johnson’s ability to weave songs from any genre into a piece of music. It was important for Johnson to recognize the person who became the icon, not only to bring balance to the story but also to portray Matt as his friends and family knew him.

Judy Shepard is a mother, first, last and always. She was a mother who lost her son Matt . To the world, he then became Matthew. Matthew Shepard to the world has been this iconic symbol, a catalyst for so much change and so much reflection and transformation in individuals and in the world. It's significant - his name Matthew Shepard - I think the family and also the foundation did not set out to make him a saint. He was just a young guy just struggling like everybody struggles to grow up. He was also very, very special from all reports, just an extraordinary being of light, very generous, very enthusiastic, a beautiful presence.¹⁰

Following the introduction of Matthew Shepard comes the invitation to the audience to be a part of the telling of this passion in “We Tell Each Other Stories.” This is where Johnson sets himself apart from other composers, with his ability to engage an audience and carry them through a program. He has done this for years through his programming with *Conspirare*, but his care for the audience is even more present in this work.

The passion begins with the first recitation and the first fence poem, “The Fence (Before).” The music is a country-western waltz, a solo for male voice, the perfect music for a scene on the Wyoming prairie. The second recitation recounts the events that led to the beating

¹⁰ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

of Matthew Shepard. “The Fence (That Night)” for bass soloist and chorus is filled with the rage and innate desire to protect the young man who had been so badly beaten. A small but not insignificant musical quote of Hildegard von Bingen appears toward the end of the movement. “Most noble evergreen” refers to the lodge pole pines from which the fence is built, an important connection for Johnson.

Chronologically, the Matthew Shepard story differs from the traditional passion story at this point in that Shepard’s death takes place before the trial. There was no trial for Matthew Shepard, only for his killers. The crowds who mocked him did so at his funeral and in the next movement, “A Protestor,” Johnson brings to life the hatred of the mob. It begins with a small quote from Benjamin Britten’s *This Little Babe*, yet another allusion to Jesus Christ.

It’s some hard stuff to ask an audience to hear obviously. It had to be there...I was thinking from an audience perspective, we’ve got to say some of these things. We’ve got to kind of have some version of [this] terrible sentiment, because it was real. You may kind of have heard too, when I was in the middle of doing that, there was, of kind of creating the musical piece for that, I thought there was anger in the midst of my response. Yes, it sort of calls forth a hateful spirit. When there’s that hate speech, I actually met Fred Phelps, which was a terrible experience, but yes, that was years and years ago. I don’t know if you call it meeting him when he’s screaming things at you but we did shake hands. But yes, so in the middle of that, I would sit at the piano, I’d think what is this? What, musically, what? There was sort of, frankly, a lot of pounding. I remember one day, I pounded down. I kept really close. It was strange. I needed black keys. This couldn’t be a white keys kind of a thing, so E flat minor ended up being the key I really stuck with. Then, more and more I realized that there was kind of this organic connection that I had been sort of following with the pounding of Benjamin Britten and *This Little Babe*.¹¹

If the turba chorus wasn’t obvious enough in this setting, Johnson adds the chants of *Kreuzige*, the German word for crucify, in the female voices above the hate filled singing of the men. This scene depicts the protestors from the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas who had come to

¹¹ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

Casper, Wyoming to protest Matthew's funeral service (Ex.2). This is one of the darkest moments of the work, but it speaks to Johnson's willingness and desire to represent all aspects of the story. Michael Dennis Brown, Johnson's collaborator in shaping the text, had this to say of Johnson, "Craig has persisted in engaging these very terrible elements of this story. It causes me to think of the phrase of the great German poet Rilke, 'The possibility of love in the climate of death.' He [Johnson] went into the climate of death, but he went into it with great, great love."¹²

With the tension building in the passion, Johnson takes a moment to respond to what has happened. "Keep It Away From Me (The Wound of Love)" cries out in a bluesy riff from the electric guitar before the mezzo soloist, complete with backup singers, sings a soulful denial of the feelings that have welled up inside them, as if it is easier to look away than to look into the fire. But a fire was raging. In print and on television, people were responding to what had happened. A national outcry against the injustice of these acts and a plea for hate crime legislation swept the country and resonated across the globe. Johnson captures this primal reaction in "Fire of the Ancient Heart." Part candlelight vigil, part drum circle, part ritual, the drums and the singing build like a bonfire, anger building inside and eventually erupting as a group. Each of these movements responds to the senseless events but in very different ways - the first looks away while the latter is moved to action.

The next recitation and music addresses the trial and sentencing of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. It was difficult for Johnson to think about the killers but necessary for the work to have balance.

¹² "Considering Matthew Shepard' Post-Concert Talk," Accessed May 3, 2016. <http://conspirare.org/inspire/considering-matthew-shepard-post-concert-talk/>.

Ex.2

A PROTESTOR

words by Lesléa Newman music by Craig Hella Johnson

The musical score is for the piece "A Protestor" by Craig Hella Johnson, with lyrics by Lesléa Newman. It is written in 3/4 time with a tempo of quarter note = 98. The score includes three vocal parts (Soprano/Alto 1, 2, and 3) and a Piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Spanish: "Kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge." and "A boy who takes a... boy to bed? Where I come from that's not po - lite He asked for it, you got that right". The score includes dynamic markings like "Grave", "p crisp", and "f accented, rough".

Ex. 2 From “A Protestor” found in the passion, Johnson layers the shouts of the turba chorus crying Kreuzige over the hate filled cries of the protestors.

It was kind of deep into the process where I just felt challenged because I kept having a sense of discomfort that in the very many places I looked, it was very hard to find anything about Aaron and Russell. You'd see the pictures and you'd hear just the facts kind of how they were sentenced and they went to jail but no one in the poetry, no one in the arts no one in any of the responses seemed to be addressing them. I'm sure it's not true but I just didn't see their names mentioned. It was like, 'wow, they're phantoms.' It bothered me because they're clearly critical pieces in this story. I didn't want to think

about them. I didn't want to include them into the piece but there is a place in which I thought if I'm going to write this sort of more with balance, I need to include them and also, in a way sort of everybody wants to focus on the martyr Mathew, kind of like you referenced earlier. There is that sort of potential tendency. It was challenging to sort of think about if I bring Aaron and Russell in this field it is kind of controversial. It feels sort of provocative in a way that feels a little scary, like I want people to like my piece. If I bring these bad guys into it, but I just knew I had to.¹³

The music of this section is some of the most complex. It begins with a chant-like melody set to Rabindranath Tagore's poem *Stray Birds*, sung by the men. Tagore's words give way to Michael Dennis Browne's as they sing "We Are All Sons," the title of this movement. This is followed by an incredibly exposed moment where the composer questions, in what ways is he like the two men who murdered Matt Shepard. "I Am Like You" is sung by a solo quartet, SATB, and is very similar in musical style to the Evangelist quartet from Arvo Pärt's *Passio*.¹⁴

This music is exposed, transparent, and asks maybe the most difficult question of the entire work.

I went looking for a text. I searched and searched and searched. Of course, found nothing and I thought this is not what I think this means. I'll have to write this text. So I had to come out kind of fully. I felt like it was a coming out in that moment, like I need to come out with just what has been on my heart for this. So I just wrote down in a notebook several pages, this is what I've been feeling and thinking. Those notes eventually became shaped, changed, edited, deleted and all that but re-written into what became "I Am Like You." I felt for this - I knew - this piece just needed to feel naked, a certain nakedness to it and a raw quality. I couldn't pretty it up. It couldn't be a pretty piece of music. I also knew that it needed to have space for people to take this in. Not through composed aria or something but the space was needed so that people could hear it, absorb it, maybe ask the question themselves. It's much more a question than it is a statement. Am I like you?¹⁵

¹³ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

¹⁴ Arvo Pärt, *Passion Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Joannem* (Wien: Universal, 1985). Score.

¹⁵ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

Out of this very exposed moment comes a reprise of “We Are All Sons,” an anthem that aligns all men- guilty and innocent, gay and straight, no matter their differences. This poignant moment is followed by one last reflection, a simple solo for male voice called “The Innocence,” which reflects on a time when life was less complicated.

After returning to the fence for “The Fence (One Week Later)” and before Matt’s transformation into Matthew in “In Need of Breath,” Dennis Shepard’s statement to the court is read over a setting of Newman’s poem “Stars.”¹⁶ The poem is a concrete poem meaning that the

Ex. 3

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "I Am Like You." It features four vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass, along with a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 84 (♩=84). The lyrics for the vocal parts are: "I am like you As - ron and Has - sell" and "When I think of you and how-ut-ly I don't like to think about you but sometimes I do". The piano part provides a rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment.

Ex.3 From “I Am Like You,” reminiscent of the stark writing of the Evangelist from Pärt’s *Passio*.

¹⁶ Stars as published by Lesléa Newman can be seen in the program booklet on the Conspirare website, <http://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-program-booklet.pdf>.

appearance of the poem — how it physically takes up space on the page — adds to its meaning. In this poem, the words are scattered across the page to represent stars scattered across the sky.¹⁷ Johnson sets the poem in an aleatoric manner so that the poem very simply provides ambiance to the words of Dennis Shepard as if the words are being read at the fence under the stars, not in a courtroom.

The sequence concludes with “Gently Rest (Deer Lullaby),” a comforting lullaby for Matthew as he lay tied to the fence, sung by the elements of nature around him. We find in the next recitation that a deer was near Matthew when the Sheriff’s deputy arrived, as if it had stayed with him through the night. The next movement “Deer Song” embraces a creation element that extends beyond man and to nature, to the universe that we all occupy this world together and it is our charge to take care of one another. It is at this moment that Matt finally embraces his fate and finds comfort in that understanding.

The passion concludes at the fence with the final two fence poems. The inclusion of Newman’s poem *The Wind* carries a special significance in regard to the fence being torn down. In one respect, the wind carries Matthew Shepard to heaven, away from the pain at the fence. In another respect, though the fence has been torn down, all that has happened there must now be carried to the world - taken on the wind so that the story may continue though the fence had been torn down. The closing choral work, “Pilgrimage,” grants permission for the listener, regardless of faith — as is made clear by the many traditions of prayer offered in the movement — to go to the fence with beauty. It’s a call to not turn away from this story but to embrace it and turn it into something beautiful despite the difficult emotions and questions it raises.

¹⁷ Lesléa Newman, *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* (Somerville: Candlewick Press, 2012): 106.

The Epilogue opens with a return to C major via unison C in the strings. It is a grounding moment to steady the listener after hearing the passion of Matthew Shepard. What follows, “Meet Me Here,” a solo for treble voice, seems to come from an early American tune, part Appalachian, part Southern Harmony. This is another invitation but not to hear the story. This invitation summons us in the way one finds comfort in a gathering after a terrible tragedy. The music provokes a nostalgia that connects us to our past but provides comfort in the present and hope for the future. In the penultimate movement, “Thank You,” there is a return of J.S. Bach’s *C Major Prelude* that supports the chorus singing ‘Thank You’ in an almost improvisatory fashion and in two Native American dialects - Arapaho and Huron - as W.S. Merwin’s poem “Thank You” is recited.¹⁸ The poetry gives thanks, in a spiritual way, to all events and circumstances no matter the outcome, positive and negative. It brings to light that something good can come of bad, that one should find the lesson in all things and say thank you. Out of this arises a trio who is joined by the chorus in “All of Us,” a rousing, uplifting gospel movement. This genre, born out of the oppression of slavery and used as a rallying cry through the trials of the civil rights movement, is most appropriate here as the music calls us to overcome the hatred and fear that resulted in the crime against Matthew Shepard. In the middle of this gospel piece rises a chorale, as one would expect in a passion, but this displays Johnson’s greatest gift as a composer: the ability to manipulate and combine genres so that it feels natural, so that it taps into our experience of being connected to many different forms and sounds. For Johnson, as a Minnesotan with a strong Lutheran background, the chorale was a natural

¹⁸ W.S. Merwin’s “Thank You” can be found in Appendix B pg. 56-57.

expression of the strength garnered in the performance and perhaps from the experience of having completed this composition that he had lived with for more than a decade.

I got kind of close to the end of the shaping of the libretto and the structure. I thought "oh my gosh, there's no chorale." I'm feeling this. I know it has to be there and why isn't it there. Yes, it's so important to me. I'll tell you for a lot of reasons. Obviously, sort of historically, chorales are a way that I know how to stand tall and I mean someone who grew up in the Bronx and wasn't Lutheran would have a very different sort of approach, but to me that says backbone, that says stature, that says the oak tree has its roots. It's been through so much. I wanted the chorale to hold a lot at the end. I also felt it was incredibly important because this is a choral piece and as a piece, as a choral piece, the whole of it, the ninety minutes of it, has all kinds of different choral things. But I wanted something that just at the end said: "This is a choir. This is a choir speaking these truths in all of its myriad forms but we're coming home. We started there. We're ending here. We're a conduit for the story."¹⁹

The piece creates a sense of involvement in the audience, as chorales and gospel numbers are wont to do, which powerfully echoes the title "All of Us." The piece ends with a short reprise of Sue Wallis' poem "Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass" that brings into focus what may have been missed in the prologue. Johnson's creative spirit allowed him to represent the story fully; Matt Shepard before these events, Matthew Shepard the martyr, Aaron and Russell, the protestors, and all of us.

This chant of life cannot be heard
It must be felt, there is no word
To sing that could express the true
Significance of how we wind
Through all these hoops of Earth and mind
Through horses, cattle, sky and grass
And all these things that sway and pass
- from *Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass* by Sue Wallis

¹⁹ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

When Craig Hella Johnson set out to memorialize Matthew Shepard, he turned to a genre he knew well and that he knew could support the strong emotional content in a large enough form to tell this story. He followed the model of Bach, whose charge was to tell the painful story of Christ's arrest, trial, and crucifixion, while making it approachable and palatable to his congregants by adding familiar chorales and musical moments of reflection.

My first St. Matthew Passion. You know, the gift for me in that was that sense of "oh my gosh I got it. I got exactly what Bach was trying to do", you know. Musically, theologically, spiritually in every way, you know that was a very transformative moment for me. All of these times, these moments where Bach takes the listener into consideration, telling the story with the Evangelist and then you have a moment for the listener to acknowledge something or to confess something or to pray something or to have one of the arias bring comfort or space. Because the story itself is so difficult that, it's like care for the listener in a sense throughout. Bach is my great master and teacher... I mean with my beautiful opportunity to do this humble project. That is something I kept strongly in mind. This is such a difficult story. I mean it's so brutal and unnecessary and tragic and sad. You know, so if listeners came and I noticed it for the workshop because we kind of did most of the hard hitting stuff for that workshop and I felt "wow" it was a beautiful experience but it also, it was such a punch. It's almost annihilating to a listener, and I thought "oh that was a good thing for me to notice because I need to really take care so that we as performers and audience can stay connected throughout this journey."¹

Johnson also followed the 20th- and 21st-century models that paved the way to a passion setting such as *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Composer Robert Kyr, who has written two passions of his own, commented in the post concert talk following the premier, "I don't know another work that is able to blend classical tradition with the vernacular. There's so many American styles of music and they all flow so beautifully. It is incredibly moving to experience that together, as part

¹ Craig Hella Johnson, interview by author, February 2016.

of this culture, that we're all a part of.² Johnson's unique ability as a concert programmer, blending styles and cultures of music into one cohesive thought comes into full view in this work. What has been deemed a 'fusion' oratorio is a bricolage of musical styles, styles that are a part of the American vernacular which make *Considering Matthew Shepard* one of the most approachable major works in recent memory. As the genre continues to develop, it will be interesting to see how it further evolves now that a model exists which provides a direction away from the tradition of the story while maintaining the traditional aspects of the genre.

² “‘Considering Matthew Shepard’ Post-Concert Talk,” Accessed May 3, 2016, <http://conspirare.org/inspire/considering-matthew-shepard-post-concert-talk/>.

APPENDIX A

PASSION SETTINGS OF THE 20TH- AND 21ST-CENTURIES

Passion Settings of the 20th- and 21st-Centuries

20th Century Passion Settings

1920	St. Mark Passion	Charles Wood (1866-1926)
1933	Choral Passion	Hugo Distler (1908-42)
1942	The Passion	Bernard Rogers (1893-1968)
1946	Golgotha	Frank Martin (1890-1974)
1947	Passionsmusik nach dem Lukasevangelium	Rudolf Mauersberger (1889-1971)
1950	St. Matthew's Passion	Ernst Pepping (1901-1981)
1965	The Passion According to Saint Luke	Randall Thompson (1899-1984)
1966	St. Mark Passion	Daniel Pinkham (1923-2006)
1966	St. Luke Passion	Krzysztof Penderecki (b.1933)
1974	Turbo ad Passionem Gregorianam	Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983)
1975	Markus-Passion	Adolf Brunner (1901-1992)
1976	The Passion of Judas	Daniel Pinkham (1923-2006)
1979	Passio Aeterna	Kurt Rapf (1922-2007)
1982	Passio (St. John Passion)	Arvo Pärt (b.1935)
1982	Sadduzäer-Passion	Miki Theodorakis (b.1925)
1985	Sankt Bach Passion	Mauricio Kagel (1931-2008)
1986	St. Matthew Passion	Trond Kverno (b.1945)
1995	The Passion According to Four Evangelists	Robert Kyr (b.1952)
1992	St. John Passion	Kjell Karlsen (b.1947)
1996	Passion and Resurrection	Ivan Moody (b.1964)
1997	The Passion According to St. Matthew	Mark Alburger (b.1957)
1997	Passió	Gyorgy Orban (b.1947)

21st Century Passion Settings

2000	St. Matthew's Passion	Tan Dun (b.1957)
2000	Pasión según San Marco	Osvaldo Golijov (b.1960)
2000	Deus Passus	Wolfgang Rihm (b.1957)
2000	Johannespassion	Sofia Gubaidulina (b.1931)
2000	Passio et Résurrectio	Sergio Rendine (b.1954)
2001	Passia	Halide Hallgrímsson (b.1941)
2004	Passion and Resurrection	Jonathan Harvey (1939-2012)
2004	A Swedish St. Mark Passion	Fredrik Sixten (b.1962)
2005	Passion and Resurrection	Eriks Esenvalds (b.1977)
2006	Passion and Death of Jesus Christ	Scott R. King (
2006	The Passion of Ramakrishna	Philip Glass (b.1937)
2006	La Passion de Simone	Kaija Saariaho (b.1952)
2007	the little match girl passion	David Lang (b. 1957)
2008	St. Luke's Passion	Calliope Tsoupaki (b.1963)
2008	St. John Passion	James MacMillan (b.1959)

2009	St. Luke Passion	Kjell Karlsen (b.1947)
2009	Transylvanian Passion Music for Good Friday after the Evangelist Matthew	Hans Peter Turk (b.1940)
2013	St. John Passion	Bob Chilcott (b.1955)
2014	St. Matthew Passion	Sven-David Sandström (b.1942)
2014	Pietà	John Muehleisen (b.1955)
2014	Gnostic Passion	Brad Balliett (b.1982)
		Doug Balliett (b.1982)
2014	Passion According to an Unknown Witness	Robert Kyr (b.1952)
2014	St. Luke Passion	James MacMillan (b.1959)
2016	Considering Matthew Shepard	Craig Hella Johnson (b.1962)
2016	Kipling Passion	John Muehleisen (b.1955)

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

B.1 Transcript of Interview with Craig Hella Johnson February 2016

Craig: How are you?

Robert: I'm doing well. I'm excited to have this chat with you today.

Craig: Oh, absolutely. I am too. It's so good to hear you. Yeah, I'm so happy you're doing this.

Robert: So I've just jotted down a list of questions, but if you feel like going any direction, please feel the liberty to talk about anything that comes to mind.

Craig: Okay.

Robert: Let's go back to 1998 and you hear the news of Matthew Shepard. What was your response and what you can remember from that time?

Craig: Yeah. Well, I was working with Chanticleer then as the artistic director. So it's in San Francisco. Yeah, I remember it so well. I've been telling that story a little bit recently. It was right before rehearsal and I don't know which day exactly it was. Maybe it was October 8th or probably the 8th because I think word didn't get out till then. But it was before our 10 o'clock rehearsal that day and one of our singers, the first singer I hired with Chanticleer. Actually, interestingly enough, his name was Matt and he had tears in his eyes and came up to me and I just said, "What's the matter?" And he just said to me, tears streaming down his face, he said his name was Matt. And then I said, "Tell me what you're crying about and I want to learn and what's going on." So he shared a little bit with me and then after the rehearsal, of course, I got to see in the news and other places, just that it began to seep out into the world and began to learn about this. And the more I learned, the more I felt the impact of it. So it's a powerful time. I mean, and I think it affected a great many people across the globe, of course, over the next period of those days and weeks.

Robert: Speaking a little bit to the media reaction, they had a role in creating a story that was mostly true we could say. And Judy in particular has gone to great lengths to bring levity to the events, to the story that was portrayed, to separate Matthew Shepard from Matt, her son. Can you speak to this, of how you wanted to respect that in the work?

Craig: Yeah. I mean, Judy and Dennis Shepard are just phenomenal. They're inspirational beings. And through the work of The Matthew Shepard Foundation, which is now based in Denver, they

have continued tirelessly to go around all over the globe, really. They were in Russia in the fall. They've been just all over the place just spreading the word of love, to erase hatred and replace it with love. So they have both been tremendous and she in particular has carried on his work very powerfully.

I think some of the facts of the story are indisputable, I mean what happened. Even Aaron when he confessed, he could have told the whole story of what had happened. So some of those events are just facts and I think the Jimenez book that came out a few years ago was a big deal. I don't know if you've seen that or read about it but he was sort of trying to portray this really as in that Matt actually knew... He claims that there was some kind of a meth shipment coming in and that Aaron really wanted to know that. Yada yada yada. I mean it's crazy. I will just sort of speak more anecdotally here than sort of listing a bunch of facts. One of the things that Jimenez was trying to -- this was not really a hate crime it was a drug crime. And to me it's kind of his argument is weightless to me because even if - I mean and I don't actually believe much of it for a second that - Matt knew exactly where it is, that he was into meth. I wasn't there so I can't speak to that and know that specifically. And I don't think really anyone can if he had some sort of a secret journey there. Regardless, we have it on record that Aaron said when he was beating him, he said faggot and gay and called him all kinds of names and he said, "I'm glad I did what I did because he was gay." So I mean regardless if drugs were involved in some way minimally or more, it was a crime of hate in that moment.

Robert: Not to stop you but I've read the Jimenez book and sort of disregarded it in the way that you are talking about. But the truth to the question that I was referring to had more to do with the way the mount biker described finding Matthew which resulted in this Vanity Fair article about the crucifixion of Matthew Shepard and Matthew being referred to as a martyr and those sorts of things. And so that took on a life of its own in this story and I think Judy and Dennis tried to separate that just a little bit. I'm just curious, that sort of gets us to the idea of writing a passion and a passion story. So my question is, why a passion? Why did you decide to pay tribute to Matthew with this genre?

Craig: Well I'll step back just a second here talking about Matthew because we hadn't mentioned anything about that. I think that Vanity Fair Article was really big about the martyr piece. Some of it is just practical. Judy Shepard is a mother, first, last and always. She was a mother who lost her son Matt and I've heard her say it too me, I've read it several times but this is significant. To the world he then became Matthew. I don't know that she feels that this is insignificant or not true and I certainly don't. Matthew Shepard to the world has been this iconic symbol where he has brought... has been a catalyst for so much change and so much reflection and transformation in individuals and in the world. It's significant, his name Matthew Shepard, I think the family and also the foundation did not set out to make him a saint. He was just a young guy just struggling like everybody struggles to grow up. He was also very, very special from all reports, just an extraordinary being of light, very generous, very enthusiastic, a beautiful presence. Always

thinking of others. They talk about his empathy so much as a young boy. That was kind of unusual for a kid in junior high that he would have this empathy for people.

Both are really significant and I think the distinctions are really important and they're really practical. When I talked to Judy about it. Judy calls him Matt and in my piece kind of shifting over to your next question about the passion, I guess first I will say that the Matt and Matthew piece is for me, there is for the first part of the piece he is Matt and it was important after writing the music for the workshop which took place in 2014, which was essentially thinking about it really as a passion and were released in that vain. Yeah. So I mean, I think all that passion, consideration was sort of with Matthew in mind in a way you might say. And then after that I really realized from much thinking myself and talking to others that I really wanted to include some pictures, snap shots of Matt, musically speaking and in the libretto, can we sort of help bring this balance as you say. And I wanted to do that in this piece because I think that's really one of the most powerful aspects. Matt was very regular. You know and that this regular guy has just caused such a world transformation.

They didn't do that because he was a perfect saint and because he was most beloved of all, to be worshiped. But he became iconic because of his ordinary status. Yeah so anyway, to your question about passion let's see. It's just always was kind of the framework that had been in my head. In 1998, when this took place and really had an impact on me powerfully and I just carried it with me for a long time, always feeling like I wanted to respond in some way and you know I never really knew what that meant for a long time. I just thought I would love to because I felt such a powerful emotional response and felt really connected with the story uniquely. And you know years went by, years and years and I felt that was interesting. It doesn't seem to be going away. Here it was 2007, 2008. I'm still thinking about it. And so it was just probably about a year before the workshop, I suppose in 2013 when I just thought I think it's time to do something. And even then it didn't come crystal clear like a lightning bolt, like it will be THIS. But I thought you know, I will just take a step towards this and kind of say, I love that phrase "Take one step towards the universe and the universe takes a thousands steps back towards you." I felt I need to just take that first step. And the way I could do that, because obviously, I'm not any kind of full time composer at all and I mean there are times in my life I don't even call myself a composer. You know I compose short pieces for functional purposes and arrangements. I have a composers spirit and I feel like my experience as a composer is even kind of composing programs or creating and shaping in that way but never have I stepped down and you know said I'm going to write a 90 minute work or something. So this was with great fear and trepidation. But just kind of put a stake in the ground, knowing with a busy schedule the only way that this would work is if I force myself with a deadline. So I just asked my colleagues, can we put this in our season as a workshop performance? And that will give me kind of a lot of freedom you know and we did it and then you maybe saw that we had a festival we called ComPassion.

Robert: A little COM.

Craig: Yeah. So it's basically a passion festival and it ended with St. Matthew passion of Bach, I am sure Julie told you all about that. We did a number of things. We did John Muelheissen's piece, Pietá and we did the, it's just leaving my brain. Anyway, what was that?

Robert: The Gnostic Passion?

Craig: Yeah, right, exactly. They're fantastic. And you know we did that as kind of a short evening concert and some other things and then on Sunday night in the midst of this, we did this workshop performance, which was great too. I love the way it was sort first introduced, because to do it with the Conspirare singers felt like a real musical family. Yeah but you asked specifically about a passion and to me this was, this is what came to mind. I mean this was a way that I knew as a choral guy, obviously we choral people love the passions of Bach particularly but also you know Handel and Schütz and the tradition that goes way back.

Robert: Yes, so knowing your knowledge of the passion tradition I knew it might be intimidating to take on a genre that is steeped in history and to give it a modern treatment.

Craig: Yeah. My sense is I'll answer it in a piece today and then we'll just be talking again several times I am sure. Because it's you know, it's a large kind of layered answer I would imagine. I'll throw this out too, I think it's relevant. There's a man with whom I have worked a number of times. His name is Evans Marageas. He is the general director of the Cincinnati Opera and also the kind of the main musical administrator of the Atlanta symphony. Much more to the point, he's this kind of a wonderful musician. A really lovely man and sophisticated musician. I've been working with him and I shared some of the early passion part of this with him. Just for thoughts and comments because he knows drama and opera and kind of shaping things so well. You know, he was great in responding. I was a little scared to do it because he is sort of a big deal in terms of who he is generally dealing with composer-wise to him. But he was very, very moved and just thrilled and he's been a real advocate for it. He's really not experienced any of the stuff I've done since the workshop. So this was just the core of it. But at that time, he kind of gave it a little name. "You know I think I'll call this is a fusion oratorio" and I liked it because it's very much, as you've seen, from what you've seen, a number of styles kind of enter this piece. Held together by several common threads, but it's very stylistically diverse. It's also I would say very much, I mean I'll just say this personally, Evans commented on it too. It's very much an American piece. You know this is not a piece that would have been created in Europe. It's kind of a piece of its time too because I think there has been an evolution obviously between the partnerships between, for example, classical musicians and Indie musicians, has really been cracking wide open in the last fifteen years. I think of people like Sufjan Stevens and I mean many others on the Indie sort of side who have been playing with classical things. And then classical musicians kind of experimenting and exploring with sort of Indie roots kinds of things.

So I think this is, I like the term, we used it a little bit, Fusion Oratorio and I think there's an aspect of oratorio when you leave passion out of it. Just this idea of story telling that I, for my whole life I've been as a choral musician and artistic director really committed to how can we keep the oratorio tradition alive in our repertoire and in our culture. It's really the attention span of the listener has just sort of decreased significantly in this time ... Ever since Ipod shuffle came along and you can have four hundred different things at your disposal and just "I'm not in that mood, I'm in this mood, I wanna hear that and now this." You know two or three minutes is about what people are used to giving something attention-wise. And I was really eager to say, "how can we keep telling the longer stories," can we... I know I believe it is in us as human beings to be available to longer, a longer musical line, a longer story, a longer thread.

So I feel very connected with sort of oratory tradition in that way. And one of my I think life journeys as a musician has always been, especially living in, right down here in the middle of America. How does our music, how can we help bring it to a broader audience and how can this stay relevant. You know can aspects of that larger form contain musical elements or story elements which can be entry points for people, for example, who are not necessarily everyday kinds of classical listeners. This is always important to me about making the connection with the listener. So in some of the collage programs certainly that I've explored with have obviously been a part of the soil that this was born in. It's different because I'm not using other people's music except for one, except for the Bach.

So in terms of passion, one of my most profound experience as a young guy was with the St. Matthew passion and I don't know you might have heard it somewhere because I share it a lot but I'll share it very briefly here. It was sort of as a freshmen at St. Olaf, I grew up in the boondocks and I grew up in a mining town, Virginia, Minnesota it was not sort of a high culture and then an amazing piano teacher, brilliant organ teacher that we drove seventy miles to Duluth for and But you know it was not the hot bed of classical music performance. So I feel like really far away from a lot, it wasn't even Minneapolis. So going to St. Olaf was big deal. I had some good training from individual teachers, but really felt like that kid coming from the Sticks a little bit. I remember at St. Olaf that first year, my freshman year in March there was a performance of the St. Matthew Passion that was going to take place with, with the chapel choir at St. Olaf. You know and it was a big deal. At St. Olaf which was pretty richly steeped in music. It was like every other person in the cafeteria, even the guys on the basketball team were, "Wow, St. Matthew Passion this weekend". It is unusual. I just for some reason I wasn't, I just had made up my mind that I wasn't gonna go.

I think I remember I was examining, kind of looking back - why was that, what's up with that. But I think I really had that sense of, like many listeners have, like I don't know enough. I'm not informed enough to really have that experience and so I felt intimidated by, perhaps like I should stay away because everyone else knows what this is and I really don't. And so I mean, it was like

Sunday night or something but I was sitting in my dorm room and they do a live broadcast of it on the St. Olaf classical station, so I thought everyone else is at this party, at least I can listen in I guess. So I am sitting in my dorm room and you know, turn it on and it comes on. CHJ begins playing and humming the opening bars of the passion... but I'll never forget just hearing the opening movement and I sort of made observations and I thought it sounds important and it sounds significant, there was a somber quality and nobleness that I heard. But you know it wasn't getting in and it was pretty amazing to me, though, because the moment the first chorale was sung... [music playing in the background] You know, I was so profoundly touched. You know this is a hey! I know this. You know I've sang that and I played it on the organ when I was organist there, "oh my gosh it was this." You know I got exactly what Bach wanted to do, which was to invite the listener in immediately and allow that listener to be part of this massive structure. You know, you too are a part of this grand universe, not just my piece but the whole... And a hundred levels there were lessons and so literally, I mean the tears were streaming down my face and I just ran across campus. I threw my sweat pants on. I just didn't think back, I heard the passion as it grew...

So I ran across campus and stood there in the back and heard the rest of the entire performance. My first St. Matthew Passion. You know, the gift for me in that was that sense of "oh my gosh I got it. I got exactly what Bach was trying to do", you know. Musically, theologically, spiritually in every way, you know that was very transformative moment for me. And so for me, you know when you talk about about relationships to passions, I mean from that moment, I felt very very connected with the passion and knowing what Bach was always trying to do, for example in his Oratorio Passions and you know. All of these times that these moments where Bach takes the listener into consideration, telling the story with the Evangelist and then you have a moment for the listener to acknowledge something or to confess something or to pray something or to have one of the arias bring comfort or space. Because the story itself is so difficult that, it's like care for the listener in a sense throughout.

So certainly that and Bach is my great master and teacher is in mind. I mean with my beautiful opportunity, to do this humble project. That is something I kept strongly in mind, is the story obviously and you're gonna live with this now a lot as well so you'll be experiencing this I'm sure too. Such a difficult story. I mean it's so brutal and unnecessary and tragic and sad. You know, so if listeners came and I noticed it for the workshop because we kind of did most the hard hitting stuff for that workshop and I felt "wow" it was a beautiful experience but it also, it was such a punch. It's almost annihilating to a listener, like wow and I thought "oh that was a good thing for me to notice because I need to really take care so that we as performers and audience can stay connected throughout this journey." So anyway, we can talk more about that in detail, but just in terms of passion I feel super connected with I would say the story telling aspect of it. And also drawing attention to sort of a story of suffering. My initial purpose, I think in my heart was really as the years went by to find a way that we could remember Matthew. Because it's so easy for something like that to happen, a major event like that and it's transformative on a large scale and then it can be forgotten and one of the ways we can remember is to memorialize that in music.

And of course now, I would say the piece has sort of become much more than just a passion, so it's had its own evolution but we'll go from that for a moment.

Robert: Okay. Well, just relating to your experience when we agreed to do this project. I started reading everything I could get my hands on. My wife would come home at the end of the day and say: "What's the matter with you?" [crosstalk] this all day long is just such a heartbreaking story and to think that somebody would go through that. But in that, when I finally would get my hands on the whole piece and knowing your background, your Minnesotan-Lutheran background, I'm flipping through thinking well, there's got to be a chorale. There's got to be a chorale! Then there at the end, there it is, just the most comforting piece, it's the chorale but it's sort of inside a gospel piece. I don't know if you would characterize it differently. I'm curious about that connection of genre for you and the amount of comfort that that provides at the end of this work?

Craig: Yes. Well, good for you for knowing you needed to look for that one. It was me. Yes, I just knew it. I just knew it. It was weird because I got kind of close to the end of shaping of the libretto and the structure. I thought "oh my gosh, there's no chorale." I'm feeling this. I know it has to be there and why isn't it there. Yes, it's so important to me. I'll tell you for a lot of reasons. Obviously, sort of historically, chorales are a way that I know how to stand tall and I mean someone who grew up in the Bronx and wasn't Lutheran would have a very different sort of approach but to me, that says backbone, that says stature, that says the oak tree has its roots. It's been through so much. I wanted the chorale to hold a lot at the end. I also felt it was incredibly important because this is a choral piece and as a piece, as a choral piece, the whole of it, the ninety minutes of it, has all kinds of different choral things. But I wanted something that just at the end said: "This is a choir. This is a choir speaking these truths in all of its myriad forms but we're coming home. We started there. We're ending here. We're a conduit for the story." So yes, it's so important to me. I worked really hard with Michael Dennis Brown.

Well, he and I, he's just been a beautiful colleague to work with me on this. I went back and forth many, many, many times with that text. With all the texts we did, he was such a prince but often, I would start with a long couple of paragraphs. This is kind of precisely what I want to say but I want to say it more beautifully. Here you go. Here's the clay. Then he'd send me something back. He's incredibly open to sort of the kind of feedback and dance that we eventually grew into. I could say "yes, I love this but these two words or this doesn't quite..." Sometimes, he would send me rewrites of a, b, c, d, e, f, g kind of thing that we get up to t, u, v, w. So it's been a great journey. So the chorale is very important to me. Yes. What will I say about that? Musically, it's just, it's very grounding. When you ask me about the chorale, it's interesting because the pine tree flashed into my mind with the chorale because the pine tree is also a very sort of, it's a visual element from the natural world which is really important just in this piece, that chorale is really the pine tree standing tall that Hildegard refers to. Most noble evergreen and then Michael found a way to kind of use a little bit of that translation even in reference that most noble light. So I'm

really excited about it. Yes, I think the singers will be plenty worn out by the time we get there each night.

Robert: Right, but it will be a night fall I think just sort of corporately celebrate what has happened and find comfort in that.

Craig: I agree, I hope so.

Robert: So we talked a little bit about your working with Michael Dennis Brown but there's still one poem that is really all yours, I Am like You, which you've set to a solo quartet and to me musically, it stands out from everything else. There's sort of, I don't know how to describe it but a starkness to it, a stripped away musical essence to it. I don't want to put words in your mouth but I'm just curious. I think the poem speaks pretty clearly as to what the sentiment is, but how did you go about finding music to fit that poetry and your ideas behind it?

Craig: Yes. Well, it was kind of deep into that process, getting ready for that workshop where I just felt challenged because I kept having a sense of discomfort that in very many places I looked, it was very hard to find anything about Aaron and Russell. You'd see the pictures and you hear just the facts kind of the they got sentenced and they went to jail but no one in the poetry, no one in the arts no one in any of the responses seemed to be, I'm sure it's not true but I don't think it, but I just didn't see their names mentioned. It was like wow, they're phantoms. It bothered me because they're clearly critical pieces in this story. I didn't want to think about them. I didn't want to include them into the piece but there is a piece in which I thought if I'm going to write this sort of more with balance, I need to include them and also, in a way of sort of everybody wants to focus on the martyr Mathew, kind of like you referenced earlier. There is that sort of potential tendency.

One of the things that we haven't talked about but it was very important to me for the workshop not to call it the Passion of Matthew Shepherd or to call it anything too specific. That sort of ties things up in a little bow. I just thought all I'm going to say for this workshop is Considering Matthew Shepherd. So it feels like people can come and have their own experience with this. I want to create music that can allow people to have their own inner journey with the music and with the story and not dictate, here's how you need to feel. I didn't want to manipulate anything. I wanted to really be careful. Because some of this is so emotionally potent, it's easy to step into it and kind of paint it a little extra purple. I would just say: "How do I tell the story with feeling, with care, with thoughtfulness but not creating a dogma of mind for them, for the listeners." So Considering Matthew Shepherd is where it landed. Then afterwards, I wondered if then, it would become the Passion of Matthew Shepherd. I really lived with it. I just couldn't let go of Considering Matthew Shepherd. I got some good feedback too about how much people really

loved that title because of the space that it allowed for people. So yes, with Aaron and Russell finally. I was afraid because Robert actually, what's relevant I think in this too is sort of for me, as a gay man, to be involved in the story too. A lot of, it's a tragic story for any of us but as a gay man, who's also experienced some really difficult things, not just hateful words but I've had people in a truck drive by me in Santa Fe and throw really huge rocks at me. I was injured. Many things, you grew up gay in this country and you've had hateful things happen to you and that's not the complete story even. So it was challenging in that way to sort of think about if I bring Aaron and Russell in this field it is kind of controversial. It feels sort of provocative in a way that feels a little scary, like I want people to like my piece. If I bring these bad guys into it, but I just knew I had to.

So then I kind of went looking for a text, what could be the perfect text. I searched and searched and searched. Of course, found nothing and I thought this is not what I think this means. I'll have to write this text. So I had to come out kind of fully. I felt like it was a coming out in that moment, like I need to come out with just what has been on my heart for this. So I just wrote down in a notebook several pages, this is what I've been feeling and thinking. Those notes eventually became shaped, changed, edited, deleted and all that but re-written into what became "I am like you." I felt for this. You kind of named it in some good ways already but for me, I knew this piece just needed to feel naked, a certain nakedness to it and a raw quality. I couldn't pretty it up. It couldn't be a pretty piece of music. I also knew that it needed to have space for people to take this in. So yes, not through composed aria or something but the space was needed so that people could hear it, absorb it, maybe ask the question themselves. It's much more a question than it is a statement. Am I like you? Then of course, musically, there's some wonderful composers who have already shown a path for creating space with [inaudible] and David Lang who became so influenced by Pärt, many others but for me, this kind of starkness and no instruments, no accompaniments, just a raw voice was what was needed.

Robert: Yes, right wonderful. (44:01) Well, I'm going to give you an opportunity to bail out of this conversation now if you'd like or we could keep going and stop another time.

Robert: So the next thing, continuing with the libretto, is Leslea Newman and October Mourning. While there are several poems, the ones that stand out, that really become a framework for the story are the ones regarding the fence. So I'm just curious what about those poems stood out to you?

Craig: The fence poems are so powerful. It was interesting because I had actually thought about the fence. Obviously, we all think about the fence and Matthew, it's one of the most powerful images. You know the sort of head references when one thinks about a cross and being tied to something. I know that's where a lot of the martyr stories come from too. It's big. It's really big. A wooden fence, a wooden cross. And to me, the piece that was so powerful from an early point

in my process too was this fence that carried his body that came from these lodge pole pines. What they're called in Wyoming. Lodge pole pines are one of the most famous sort of natural iconic elements in the American west, especially Wyoming. So these beautiful noble tall pine trees, these living things that became this functional thing, the fence. It also became these witnesses, these quiet observer of all the action. This fence is the only object in the sense as we think that saw everything. So they move me very deeply. It also was useful for me to think about the fences as structural points, not only as a fence of structural device itself physically, just technically speaking but it also provided a very useful place in terms of progression and for a passion setting, that seemed to be really, really important. So her poems were really critical at the beginning and foundational to where this all went. I also found them, just they're great poems and she was so connected obviously with having been there that week, yes.

Robert: It must have been a real task to sort of separate out the ones you wanted to use as part of this and where the ones that stood out to you because the book as a whole was so powerful and well written and diverse and structured like your Fusion Oratorio her book is a fusion of poetic styles. I think it's really interesting.

Craig: You're right. It was really challenging Robert. It was a terrible task because I love the whole part. It has been set. The whole thing has been set musically. I forget what the guy's name is. I haven't heard it but I know I've seen a poster of it online a couple of times from people doing it. The whole thing's been set. Yes, it was a really terrible task to try and do that but I knew what I was looking for too so in the end, there were some things that just spoke so powerfully.

Robert: So back to the fence as character, it would be natural when you're setting these poems to keep it in the same voice part. If I'm right, the third fence poem is sung by a female and the first two by a male. Then the fourth, it's the whole chorus but the idea of the fence having been scattered and broken apart, that's shared among the ensemble so I still almost view that as a single character. It's just that it needs to be told from having been broken apart. So I'm just curious if you could comment on that at all.

Craig: Sure. Yes, yes, it felt really important. I would say just this isn't obvious but I also think of the Hafiz poem In Need of Breath as also a kind of fence poem. It's really a Matthew poem. It's just a poem that takes place really with the fence is central. It was kind of, I'll get back to your question in a moment, an evolution for me, especially as the piece progressed that the piece would evolve from Matt to Matthew. It's really in that poem in need of breath where for me, Matt becomes Matthew. What I mean by that is he starts to, one starts to have a sense of this is where in this moment, in my own consideration, he starts to become this iconic figure that was a transformative catalyst. So for me, that's Matthew's singing from the fence where had he been able to kind of speak from not Matt's voice but from that place of the Matthew who is a part of a larger creation.

He must speak from a greater divine source. To me, yes, you can put a note. I'll tell you the story about that text sometime too, just it was really the way it came in. But anyway, back to the fence, yes I wanted the fence to be both kind of a character in this piece but I also wanted people to somehow be able to relate to it as an observer. The fence has a lot of rules. It's an observer. It carries emotion. It took action in terms of holding his body but it's always the silent observer to this, to the actions, to the actions that night, to the people who bring flowers and photos, various poems, to the procession. It was thousands and thousands and thousands of people that came to this fence and placed things. So this quiet observing presence that goes through and even when it's broken up, it still has qualities of being an observing presence. So what that means in a way is even after sort of the death of the fence it's presence still exists. To me, this was relevant and very important in terms of kind of identifying all of us, you, me, any listener or any human being is a part of that living listening presence in a way that's mystical and that we can't really articulate very well but that is really a part of my own core experience. Yes, so it felt important also that different voice parts sing it. So that it can start to be seen as universal, a universal symbol but also, a universal kind of lynch pin that connects us, a kind of connector.

Robert: Well, before we jump off, I'll just ask you about one more portion of the work and that's the poem The Protester, which has a very specific poetic structure. So I'm curious, as far as working with Leslea, if you felt the need to get her approval to do a change of structure and then when you're reading a poem and there are certain lines from a poem, particularly, one as powerful as the Protester that jumped out of you. What was the process of working with a poet and adopting the poems but making them into this thing that you needed to say.

Craig: Yes. Well, in such as the work of any libretto, it is always taking text and making them work in a musical context. So some of those decisions were just musical ones. I did not actually, I've spoken with her certainly in generally but I haven't spoken with her at all about the text choices, right. They have all been licensed and approved, literally it's a long process. Money is involved and all that but yes, but there's no, not for any reason that I wouldn't have enjoyed that. It's just not the way it worked.

I sort of entered this, loving this. I got an initial permission. Can I use these poems and maybe some slight changes? So the permission of course initially was to use them, yes, within reason if there were changes, okay, but then what the request was, could we just print the poems in their entirety for that workshop, which we were so happy to do. Then we sold some books there as well but obviously, for a libretto, we didn't want to have complete poems where certain words weren't being sung and certain were. So then we had this licensing process and all that. But yes, for me, musically, there were just some decisions, maybe some words weren't words that felt right in the certain voice type or a certain type of fitting but also, I needed to have a musical form also. What I was conceiving musically for a certain particular place in the piece was not necessarily always the form of Leslea's poems. So I would say maybe some of that form, it just needed to be in collaboration. It kind of, it was sort of a consultation with what's needed here musically. I really wanted to keep the essence of her words super clear. Certainly, in the case of

The Protester, I would say and there was an initial consideration like wow, this is some hard stuff to ask singers to sing.

Robert: Absolutely.

Craig: It's some hard stuff to ask an audience to hear obviously. It had to be there but it was yes, so some of it had to do with links and structures. Some of it had to do with I think we've said that already, I was thinking from an audience perspective, we've got to say some of these things. We've got to kind of have some version of that fags burn in hell, sort of terrible sentiment because it was, that was real. It was like the crucify, crucify. Does it need to be said another four times in different ways? So those are just choices that I made in that process. You may kind of have heard too, when I was in the middle of doing that, there was, of kind of creating the musical piece for that, I thought there was anger in the midst of my response. Yes, it sort of calls forth a hateful spirit. When there's that hate speech, I actually met Fred Phelps, which was a terrible experience, but yes, that was years and years ago. I don't know if you call it meeting him when he's screaming things at you but we did shake hands. But yes, so in the middle of that, I would sit at the piano, I'd think what is this, what musically, what. There were sort of frankly, a lot of pounding. I remember one day, I pounded down. I kept really close. It was strange. I needed black keys. This couldn't be white keys kind of a thing, so E flat minor ended up being the key I really stuck with. The more and more I realized that there was kind of this organic connection that I had been sort of following with the pounding of Benjamin Britten and *This Little Babe*.

Robert: Tell me about that little reference?

Craig: Yes. Well, those were one of those kind of moments in the creative process where I thought, of course because that's a piece you and I and all of us choral guys, it's in our hearts. It's in our minds. I just remembered just kind of being in that pounding road [playing piano]. Then just as like wow, this is kind of the gestures I was playing and were coming from that. It's just the way it is. We're shaped by our influences. I thought: "Well, how amazing is this. Of course, it is." This little babe so few days old has come to rifle, Satan's fold, and so there was a way in which for me this very much was... of the inclusion of this and the reference isn't, it's strong but it's not literal, except for those first three bars. But it was my own kind of way in the midst of this to sort of stand up for Matt and say in the midst of all this, although this happened at the funeral. It wasn't chronological in that sense but even so, there was plenty of brutal stuff that Matt heard. Obviously, the event itself... But there are these moments where I feel like I sort of stand up for my friend Matt and say, even if we're going to reveal this and this piece of music, in the middle of this, you're going to know it has come to rifle Satan's fold. Damn it, this will not prevail. There was kind of a protective instinct that I really felt with that, that felt very important to me. So it's significant to me. I don't know if it reads to the average listener but it's important to me.

Robert: It makes perfect sense. I think that a lot of us are attracted to Britten's tune because it goes against the sort of let's read a lullaby and talk about the significance of Christ in this world from the power and influence that he would have long after he's gone and I think that parallel is pretty strong.

Craig: Yes, yes, yes, yes. The little babe part of it too was that the sense of innocence. That we think that we are started in such innocence and have innocence and the purity in a way through our lifetime, of course, but that's what's challenging the power of hate. There is the sense of Matt Shepherd was only five two. He was always kind of a frail guy. He was lots of things. He was sober and opinionated and all of that but he was also kind of tender and fragile and so he wore braces from age thirteen to twenty one or fourteen maybe. I forget. So there's this sort of tenderness also and innocence that now, Matthew Shepherd, his stories stand in the face of hate also.

B.2 Transcript of Interview with Craig Hella Johnson June 2016

Robert: So tell me a little bit about growing up in Minnesota.

Craig: Yeah. I was born in Brainerd, Minnesota and just lived there until the first two weeks of kindergarten. And then moved to Virginia, Minnesota and this is a town in the mining region, iron ore, and so it was called the Iron Range. And yeah, pretty small town at the time, I think it was about 14,000. And so I went to K-12 there.

Robert: Was your father a Lutheran minister?

Craig: Yes. Yeah, he's a Lutheran minister and was senior pastor there for many years at Our Savior's Lutheran Church. I had the good fortune of having a really wonderful piano teacher there in Virginia. It was far away from any major cultural centers and it's like 3.5 hours to Minneapolis and probably an hour and ten minutes to Duluth. But she was an incredibly wonderful teacher, I felt lucky that she got planted there with her dentist husband. She had a teacher who comes from a line of great teachers. A lineage through Levitzki and Dohnányi. She was interestingly really a strong teacher of technique, particularly finger technique, it was just a really fascinating approach she took. I think one of the things that I always credit her for, was this idea of a singing tone in the piano which is always how can you invite the piano to sing. And so the physical approach was always about listening for this tone that was singing from this percussion instrument, and yeah she was really special. Her name was Margaret Damberg. So I studied with her lots and then I was probably starting--I don't know how old I was, but sort of 7th grade or so--I started to go down to Duluth at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, where I studied organ for six years. And, probably by the end of whatever age, that was my 8th grade, I was the church organist for the last four years. Yeah, so I was always playing a lot and I think improvising a lot. This is a silly side note but occasionally I would have friends who would put a little kitty on the organ in a box or in a hat or something and if I would try to incorporate something into the prelude or postlude, so that got to be kind of a game over the years. Whether it was just a movie they'd seen like Star Wars or something else that was on the radio and they'd say: "You know what, incorporate this." It got to be kind of a running joke, we did a lot of that. And I think that the piece that was important for me there was having the freedom to just let it be almost a play space. I felt very at home in the congregation and the church. There were probably some people who felt a reluctance to criticize the pastors son. So there was maybe a little less of editorial review from the parishioners maybe but however, it worked, it really was a happy place. A place with a lot of freedom, so I could really explore. Yeah, a lot of improvisation. Anyway, that was kind of Northern Minnesota.

It ended up being kind of an interesting place to grow up. We had gorgeous auditoriums up there. It was fascinating. Because of the mining companies, there had been glory days at the mining companies and maybe some 40, 50, 60 years before we were there. So there was quite a lot of money, at that time, to put into schools. Every school had it's own swimming pool which I found

out later was kind of unusual. The junior highs and high schools had these gorgeous auditoriums and ours was called "Goodman Auditorium". So I did a lot of playing there and I actually started to explore there. My mom and I had sort of a little road show but I would put together these little performances of singing and playing. And then I would have basically a slide show, a visual kind of treatment with it. And I was creating those always and trying to tell stories with music and still images. I was interested in that sort of thing for a long time. They had this thing that was called The Mountain Iron talent contest. So I think I was in maybe 7th grade, I won that. Mountain Iron is a little town that's close to Virginia, Minnesota, another little mining town. It was a little talent contest that had been going on for something like 30 or 40 years by the time I was around, it was a famous thing in the region. They had this kind of big talent festival that's in a gym. The main reason I lovingly remember that is, it's nice to win of course but it was more just the--I think years ago, Judy Garland had been the winner in that talent contest. That was kind of that claim to fame. It was fun 'cause she grew up in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. They open it up and say: "This is a festival. Judy Garland was the winner of."

Robert: I find it really interesting that you were crafting these programs back then.

Craig: Yeah. It's kind of wild. There is some of kind of service element to it. We used to bring things out to the nursing homes and I'd go with my dad, we'd do performances and there were just a lot of community interacting stuff. There was always a sense, I think growing up in the church, that music wasn't isolated but it was connected with people and with community and service.

Robert: Did it always just feel like something you wanted to be involved with? I think sometimes--my dad was a church choir director, sometimes I felt like I was being drug along.

Craig: [laugh] Yeah. That might have been the case if my parents were actually the musicians. It felt like I was doing something new, in a way. The church part, maybe not. I think for me, the drag along was actually having to learn to read music. That was painful for me. In the first couple of years, my mom--I played by ear and I was playing by ear since I was very young. So what I would do for my lessons with Ms. Damberg was always to just have my mom play my piece. And I had her play once in the beginning of the week, maybe once at the end of the week just as a refresher then I would just go and play it for her, for my teacher. That worked great until that very dark day when my mother said: "I think this piece is too hard for me. I can't play this one for you."

Robert: [Laughter]

Craig: I was like: "Oh no. This is not good news." Yeah. I remember that day very vividly in my body still. It's just like the fraud has been revealed. I had to kind of start from scratch there. That was a bit of a challenge.

Robert: Obviously, you studied piano at Saint Olaf. Tracking your bio, it's hard to see where the

transition occurred from piano performance to choral conducting. How did that transition happen for you?

Craig: Yeah. I was always singing at Saint Olaf. In my freshman year, I sang in the Viking chorus and then for sophomore, junior, and senior years singing in the St. Olaf choir. Piano was my major but I had always anticipated initially that I would maybe just follow through with a career in piano performance. It never really occurred to me, that you would go into choral music as a career because it just seemed like something you just do. You wake up in the morning, you brush your teeth, you're involved with a choir.

Robert: [Laughter]

Craig: It's just the way that rolls. I hadn't put my mind there even though I loved it very much. For a lot of us and for our little kids growing up, way up in Northern Minnesota, to have some of these extraordinary touring choirs come through like The Concordia Choir, the St. Olaf Choir, the Auxburg Choir. These are very disciplined, beautiful ensembles. The likes of which I still often inspire to their goal and their musical ethics, if you will. I remember being so moved, for example, by the Concordia Choir coming through our hometown every other year or so. Just this amazing sound the young singers were producing. It was phenomenal. Then I felt the same way at Saint Olaf. When I sat in at a rehearsal in my senior year high school, it was extraordinary. Choir was shown in those places for the very, very special medium that it is. I mean, that was just something I did, naturally was always going to do. My real interest was orchestral conducting. I had a wonderful teacher, Steven Amundson. I was very moved when I first heard the principle guest conductor of the Minnesota orchestra. I had a moment in my freshman year in a symphony class. It was called The Symphony. It was just a history/lit class for the January interim term. We sat in rehearsals for the minister of orchestra and that was my "a ha!" moment for conducting. He lifted up his arms to conduct the Overture to Ruslan and Ludmilla by Glinka and my life was changed. I just said: "Oh my gosh, to see this!" 'Cause he walked up to the podium, he looked very frail and small and then I saw when he was on the podium ready to begin this breath and life just filled him. His arms went out wide and all of the sudden it was electric for me. That was a moment that I will never forget, that was my real dream and my love. It felt very grateful to be studying with Steven Amundson, whose still there, he's the orchestral director. He had just come from winning the Mozart--the big conducting prize in Salzburg. So he was probably 25 at the time, 26. This young conductor coming and just ready to take the musical world by a storm and he said, "I am going to devote it to students." It was incredible. Did lots of great ear training things with him, he was somebody who really asked my ear to stretch and all kinds of ear training games that I still use today, came right from him and all those fancy conductor classes that he had just been a part of. I did some work with some Minnesota opera. There was some sense that maybe I was going to opera conducting since I was a pianist, I could be a coach. So I did a couple of little touring shows with Minnesota opera. Going around doing regional things we did opera improvisation. I used to go around all over the place to schools and do it with a few singers and that was called: "Opera without elephants." That was quite a fun time. I just kept pushing that, in fact, my senior year in college, I was looking into orchestral

programs and one of the places I was actually looking to consider studying with it at Peabody. It was an interesting experience 'cause I was really torn between the orchestral experience, that love of wanting to do that and the piano that I always felt so natural and home to me. I just loved sitting at the piano and being there. Starting that last year in college for maybe 3, 4 years after, I was always back and forth with a dilemma about what it was I was going to be doing. When I went to audition at Peabody--I applied for the conducting program but I also knew of course that Leon Fleisher the great pianist was there. It had been a dream to meet him but to also to study with him. He was a pianist I just revered. So I got an audition with him and he had said something very interesting to me. I don't know if you know much about Fleisher but this is a point in his career, I mean brilliant dazzling career as a pianist where he had started to have some difficulties with his right hand. He had actually just gone into conducting himself. He was doing a little bit of some of the left-hand repertoire like the Ravel concerto and such but he was really starting to go into conducting some. So it was unusual when I played for him that--he listened, I played a couple of pieces for him in his studio in Baltimore. He said, "I would be willing to consider taking you as a student." which was very exciting to me, but he said, "but I need to ask you--I understand you have a mistress." And I said: "What? What are we talking about here?"

Robert: [Laughter]

Craig: He said: "I understand you're applying for the conducting program?" I said; "Ah. Yes, I did." He said: "If you were wanting to consider coming and studying here, you need to focus on piano and have to be in primary focus." I was thrilled to be accepted into his studio and challenged by the fact that I was feeling this tug to conduct. All this was happening in the last part of my senior year in college. I shared this with my beautiful choral conducting teacher Kenneth Jennings, I think of him as being really responsible for forming me, for my formation as a choral conductor. He influenced me so hugely, in every way. So I just went and visited with him about all of this. He said: "Well, have you ever considered choral music as a path?" I said, "What?" I really hadn't. Then in a moment, I thought: "Well, this is something I really love. This is something I know. Maybe I could make a contribution." It wasn't at all sort of my plan and then he had talked to some folks at the University of Illinois to see was it too late to apply. It was pretty late in the year. Anyway, one thing led to another and I did apply and I was offered a, whatever it is, a fellowship, tuition would get covered and there would be a stipend and everything, Yeah, and then I went to my Masters there for the next year in choral music. So that's where that began and yeah, long answer to your beautiful concise question.

Robert: If I skip over anything you think influential please go back to it but I am curious about your time with Rilling and going to Stuttgart for the Bach program.

Craig: Yeah. Sure. I guess I'll say just as a stepping stone there. I spent a year in Illinois and I was able to do my Masters in a year there since I had a lot of things that I could--like prerequisite things that I had already had background in. I was really grateful to work there with Chester Alwes and Louis Halsey who brought me really new perspectives to me there. I had a job in a Lutheran church there and did a Bach cantata, a little miniseries there. But that whole time I was

still new to this. I was still sort of trying this on, of being a choral conductor as a profession. I was still studying when I was at Illinois, I studied with Ian Hobson and he was a beautiful pianist another young hotshot at the time who was just landing there at the faculty at the time. He'd just won the Leed's competition and really brilliant pianist. I was really fortunate to be able to work with him. I was still playing and not giving that up and studying voice also. So I got a fellowship that year called the national arts fellowship. This could be used to further my study in my chosen field, and I thought "well what's my chosen field?" At the time I made the pitch to this, to study with Eric Ericson and the Swedish radio choir and go work with them a bit. He had initially--this is just background information, you probably shouldn't reference it--initially he said: "Yes. You can come and observe and be here." But the more I engaged with him, the less I--I mean, he wasn't in a position at that time to really communicate with me much. I think it was a terribly busy time for him. I just wasn't hearing from him very much. And so I thought well I have this fellowship. I had just recently been accepted into Juilliard as a pianist. So I always had wanted to be a part of that New York piano scene and so I had the great good fortune to study with William Masellus who is--talk about another singing pianist. I mean, just his beautiful tone. By the time I got to be with him, he was pretty deep into his struggle with Parkinson's disease. So he wasn't performing anymore but it was very moving to witness the challenges in his body during our lessons. But the second his hands would drop on the piano, it would be this extraordinary sound. Anyway, all I have to say is, it was a very great good fortune that I got to be with Sellus there. Prior to my going there, I was--that was the fall of '85 but I was still stuck wondering what am I going to do with this fellowship? I didn't want it to go to waste and I happened to be a part of the master class at the Oregon Bach Festival. I think I was, let's see, 22 or 23 at the time. So I went and remember hearing the first performance of the B Minor Mass at the opening concert there before the master class had begun. So many things just fell into place for me. I had a touch of love for Bach. I played a lot of the Bach organ works growing up and I had come through that Lutheran tradition. The quality was so high there of the performance. I was just very, very moved by that performance and felt a sense of, this is where I belong right here. So I did the master class, I had maybe been up in front of Rilling maybe once as conductor for very short piece or something and I asked him if I could audition for him, to come to Stuttgart. I think he was a bit hesitant because I was young but he agreed to hear me, I mean to meet with me and he said, "Let's meet on the stage of the big hall there." And he said, "Why don't you bring something to sing as well?" So I brought a Handel aria and a Schubert song. There was a woman who came with him, I think she was probably one of the contractors for getting your Gächinger Kantorei. I know I was very foolish at the time, I just wasn't really thinking. I didn't think to bring an accompanist or anything. They didn't say anything. So we were sitting on the stage and there is the big grand piano. He said: "Why don't you sing first?" I said, "Okay, let's see. Sure." He said, "Do you have a pianist?" I said, "No." So I sat down and just played through my Handel aria while I sang, just banging at the piano [laugh]. And in the Schubert song, the same thing. I think that was actually very helpful at the end of my audition because he could see I have the piano sensitivity and could make chamber music with myself there. I think he was so much--He said, "Well, it's a very lovely audition. " But he said, "I really don't necessarily take people unless they have their master's degree." I said: "I've got my master's degree." He said, "Well, you're very young." I said, "It's no problem." Eventually, he said, "Okay. Well, come to Stuttgart." I learned

later that he had a couple of young conductors there who just weren't prepared in terms of maturity and just didn't come with--they didn't have a place to live. So it was what he was after. Anyway, that was the beginning. Yeah, I was a year in Stuttgart with Helmuth and studying at the Bach academy. We had a class of 5 conductors for that period of that year. We would probably meet with him formally, I want to say, every 3 weeks. We would have like a day long time with him. They were often Thursdays, I remember. We would meet at the Bach academy and we would have a specific repertoire. It was an extraordinary time. I don't think this happened much after this period for long but it was a time when they had gotten funding so that outside of our regular classes, the lab orchestra would be hired and it would be like the Stuttgart chamber Orchestra or the Stuttgart Radio Symphony. There would be groups he would be performing with but then they would add time to that period for us 5 students to get to work with the orchestra and with him. This was an incredible opportunity because I learned the Verdi requiem with and on, I would say, the Stuttgart Radio Symphony. I mean, it was just incredible. The same thing with Bach cantatas and there was a Vivaldi class, and Magnificent and Gloria and all other works, lesser known. I learned those directly with the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra and Gächinger Kantorei the lab choir. So, it was incredible experience, and we did that with Verdi, we did it with Beethoven Missa Solemnis, Handel, and Bach of course, the Saint Matthew and Saint John, the B Minor Mass. I sang all of those works with him. Within the first couple of months of my being there, we went to Israel. I was in Israel for four weeks with Gächinger Kantorei and Helmuth, and the Israel Philharmonic, so we did concerts. The first, let's see, we did a Verdi Requiem there and we also did a Mozart Requiem and Haydn Harmonie Messe and a couple of other works there. We were there for all of four weeks, that, of course, was a very moving experience to be with Helmuth, a very established German conductor right there in Israel. In a visit prior to, the visit I was with him on, I was told about a very moving experience. It was some years before, but I think the first time that a German Conductor had been conducting the Israel Philharmonic since World War II and doing the Brahms Requiem this incredibly-- German work. There was a history established. It had been a painful beginning, that rehearsal part, very tense and strained beginning. And then Helmuth had facilitated a conversation right in the rehearsal, it made such an impression on me, the work he had done to cultivate those relationships. I think he was invited back with some frequency. So anyway, that was a really really grounding experience to be there, full on with all of the singers in Gächinger and Helmuth. And we went on for the rest of the year to have classes together. I toured with him in Poland and let's see Scandinavia I think in many parts of Germany, singing in Berlin with some members of the Berlin Philharmonic, I recall, anyway a really important Berlin performance of the B Minor Mass. I am very grateful to him. He really attended to us as students when he was present with us. He had a very busy schedule. But he was such a great artist. He is such a great artist and great musician but also a very thoughtful and generous teacher.

Robert: What was your path when you returned?

Craig: Yeah. It's always zig-zaggy but I came back to Minnesota and I got a job as a full-time Director of Music at Saint Andrews Lutheran Church in--Mahtomedi is a suburb of Saint Paul and it was a fast growing church, and they wanted to develop the music program there. So, we

started a Bach cantata series there. So, I was deep in it, and they were able to support this monthly series. I was only there for about seven months, probably. But that was a really great experience. I think it was during that period that I conducted my first performance of the B Minor Mass and that was at the New Ordway Music Theater and it had just been built. This was an Aids Benefit so that was in mid '80s--and right in the--one of the most difficult periods in the Aids crisis. So I wanted to see if we can make a contribution in some way to the city, to the area. So, this was billed as an Aids Benefit. It was an orchestra that was comprised of players from both the Minnesota Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. So these are the two principle Ensembles in the twin city. And so, for example, the concert master, was the concert master from Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Rommel Pacheco and the principle cellist for this event was the principle cellist from the Minnesota Orchestra. So, it really represented this crossover of personnel and people who normally don't play together at all, and the singers, it was formed, it was a citywide chorus of professional singers and professional amateurs. Soloists all donated their time. The players actually donated their time as well. It was really powerful. So I look back to that and see that the seeds of even the things that you and I talked about a few minutes ago, where our musical work keeps a connection with the community and the service and the greater good. So that was really a powerful experience coming back from Germany. After that, I did a one-year sabbatical replacement teaching at Augustana College and so I was to direct their top two choirs. This is a Lutheran School in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. So, I keep playing through all of this and keep up my piano chops and do some recitals and some chamber music thing. But yeah, so that was a great year in Augustana. And the year after that, I ended up at Yale. I was just thinking it might be a smart thing to do to complete the doctorate. And so I got a chance to be at Yale and I worked with Maggie Brooks which was great and I also studied piano there as well.

Robert: So then on to the University of Texas?

Craig: Yea, it was kind of amazing. I never actually thought I would live in Texas, ever. My funny story here is just, I came down thinking maybe this would be a good opportunity to practice interviewing. 'Cause certainly, I wouldn't live there and they probably wouldn't want a northern kid anyway. Didn't know much about Austin at all. But yeah, I came in, loved the interview process and it is a great music school, I come to find out. I had this pretty northern bias and not understanding all of the good things that were here. And this impressive music library at Texas and quite a really wonderful opportunity to come and lead this program at that young time in my life. But it was a surprise. I had interviewed at a few places and I was considering a lot of different things.

Robert: So, I guess that seeds of Conspirer were being planted at that time. So talk to me a little bit about that history.

Craig: Well, one of the things I noticed just being at the university too was, I began to really observe over and over again a lot of singers who had dedicated themselves to singing, but particularly ensemble singing and certainly, this is true in Minnesota and Texas too where people

would come from elementary school and middle school and high school and the college, and even graduate school and then all of a sudden they're done with that. There isn't a place to use that high level of skill that they've been nurturing all those years and I thought this was really unfortunate, there's really no professional track for singers who want to continue in this vein. So that was one reason as a teacher of the university level I thought this could be something that's really needed here. I think having come from Germany where the Gächinger Kantorei at that time came all over Europe really. And they would come together for a focused period of time and perform a concert. There were many who were in Stuttgart but there were others who came from Frankfurt and Heidelberg, and Munich, Strausberg. Of course the beauty of that system and the European train system is so organized that you can pop on a train and there are probably six trains a day. I just had this in my head, I thought that's a great model. I wonder if we could re-create something like that here where singers come from afar. You could have the aspiration to set a goal for just world class excellence but bring singers here to that local location. The only issue of course, was that, this is America and this vast continent and the trains weren't gonna do it. So, really it was a very expensive model and amazing really, that we were able to initiate it at all. 'Cause there were many, many people who would ask questions, " Why a professional choir, what was the value in that for you?" I had a very beautiful choir that I hear in my church. All those are so important and valid and beautiful. It was learning to really say, it's both, and. I mean it took people hearing what that level of excellence and dedication at the professional level could be in order to say, "Ah! I really get it now. Okay, this is exciting." And so, it was a brave handful of souls who supported it initially. Then eventually people caught the spirit of it and were excited about it. But it took a lot, a lot of work to build a foundation for that.

Robert: Do you think *Conspirare* is where you imagined it could go or do you still think that there are other places, other directions, where your vision was early to where it is now?

Craig: Yeah. I feel like some of those things, some aspects of those early dreams have been fulfilled and are being fulfilled. But I would say other aspects of it feel very young and fresh still. And a lot of that is simply a question of building a funding base to support that because I would love very much for audiences overseas to hear *Conspirare* more. We've done some time in France and in Denmark and in Norway this summer, but I would love for that to be a possibility. I would love for--still this idea of professional excellence combined with service, is very attractive to me as a model. And I think about places where we could go and be in residence and still perform in a very high level, but also be available to support a community. There were times in Mexico, for example, I visited some music schools. I just really had a sense like, oh, if we could spend a week here really supporting the students, supporting the faculty, it could be a real service to uphold the program. Or to be a part of a community, not even a music school and to model and share an inspirational view of art and music and poetry, integrate it in our daily lives more regularly, that these aspects of the soul that need nourishing from the arts are not just a luxury corner but are a fundamental need. That soul needs, a deep fundamental need, it's certainly, food and shelter and warmth. But yeah, these aspects still are very critical.

So, I think it's still a part of the dream that keeps expanding and I think the ongoing and ongoing aspect of this too is, within the core medium itself. How can we just as artists and simply within the musical realm demonstrate the creative, imaginative work of the spirit, if you will, or of creation itself. How can this witness be practiced by us in a way that demonstrates inclusivity and a breadth of background and style and convictions? This is to me still why choir is this huge living metaphor, it's a music that I happen to love and I grew up loving it just as a music, as a repertoire, you and I are in the same boat. But it's for me also this potential to be this living metaphor for what it is to live together in this world and to really understand--we hear so often and we say it often. We are all one, or this idea that we all come from the same source or we are unified in God say. But this is a living practice of that in such a simple artful way. We can demonstrate this and so that takes place in a lot of ways within choral music. Choral music can be a surprising place for this to happen to because it's been consistently experienced and seen as quite a traditional medium in the culture. No one ever thinks of choral music necessarily they think of cutting edge innovation. But that's one of it's great assets at this point is that, it can be very specifically and precisely used to broaden one's sense of life, of meaning. And we can do this with exploring and breaking expectations of genre and presentation and consideration and style. I've done a lot of playing with blending of musical styles kind of side by side and I've never really considered that as a crossover thing. Sometimes people will reference it that's not quite--there is no problem in that but not quite how I view it. It's almost more of a sort of forcing styles together. It's been interesting because I think of myself actually as a choral musician as being quite orthodox and quite traditional in a way. I'm a Gemini in this is way so I go back and forth but--which is I think what my role has been in a lot of ways. But like all of these Christmas programs that we do, the collage programs that appear on the surface to be this smorgasbord where there is a pop song here and there's a folk song and there's Gregorian chant. It looks on the surface of just style play but really underneath it, it is a liturgy and so there's very sort of orthodox and rootedness in my own convictions. But also, a refusal to use music as another power structure that puts someone down or holds someone up as better than. I think God is meant to invade this music that we do to say "all of us" just like Matthew Shepherd. It's the same message. So, anyway, that was a long speech, sorry you got me on one of my core passions.

Robert: No. That's really excellent. I'm glad you brought up Matthew Shepherd. I'm curious, you chose to be at the piano for this work and obviously, that's a place where you are comfortable, does that have to do with your connection with this particular work?

Craig: I know there is a really natural connection that I feel there I and think-- I mean, again, it feels like that mold-breaking kind of thing. Right now, I'm actually working on completing all the piano parts by the end of the summer so that--well refining them, they were very rough. So those will all be complete in, I would think, six to seven weeks, I hope, so that somebody can do it. And it's not just to be limited for someone to improvise. So that'll be completed, the piano parts for all the recitations and everything. As for the piano, I mean I love being there. It felt really important probably because this is so personal. And when I think personal, I think I'm sitting at that piano and there is a circle of singers that I'm engaging with. I think there is

something also about stepping out of that role of conductor that, for whatever reason there's the stepping out that sort of authority role or whatever, it's not quite the right way to say it. But sitting down from the standing up position, there is a humility in it. Like that shaker tune Lay me Low. There is something, I wanted to be a part of this, I wanted to be make sounds with the others 'cause this was my heart's expression, so I wanted to be making sounds with my colleagues.

B.3 Transcript of Interview with Lesléa Newman February 2016

Rob: Good morning. Thanks for agreeing to do this.

Lesléa: Sure.

Rob: Sure, what is your general impression of Considering Matthew Shepard now that you've been away from it a little bit, of the work and your role in it?

Lesléa: Well, I thought the concert was just beautiful. I'm not someone who normally listens to choral music so I had no idea what to expect. And so, I mean, I think that's good in a way because I just went in totally open not knowing anything and I was just blown away with the scope of the work, with the composition, with the voices that I heard, having my work within that context with other writers that I've studied my whole life like William Blake and W.S. Merwin, I mean that's just an extraordinary experience for me.

And I thought Craig really did the work justice. I was very moved by the way he used Matthew Shepard's own words from his journal. And also really I think the most powerful piece of writing in the whole thing is Dennis Shepard's court statement that they excerpt from that. So I thought he was very respectful in a way he handled the story, very compassionate and very passionate.

Rob: Excellent. Well, since you brought it up, let's talk about that statement of Dennis Shepard, which is of course set over your own poem, Stars, which received a rather interesting treatment. Could you comment on that?

Lesléa: So, you know, I saw the poem in the libretto and it's on the page, the way it's on the page in October Mourning, scattered. And I have to admit I missed it in performance.

So I didn't know, you know, I could see from the libretto where it was coming but somehow I missed it. So, you know, I'm not sure if it's because I'm not an experienced listener in this type of concert or if it needs to be brought out more or if it's supposed to be that subtle, but I did read it.

Rob: I think also to your point, the powerful words by Dennis Shepard's, your attention could go there...

Lesléa: Absolutely.

Rob: As Craig stated and as is obvious in the work itself, the fence serves as the real structure of the work. I would say that the same is true for October Mourning. Can you speak to the significance of the fence in your book and how Craig utilized it in Considering Matthew Shepard?

Lesléa: So, you know, The Fence became, almost immediately after the crime and then over time, an iconic symbol, a symbol of destruction, a symbol of despair, a symbol of grief, a symbol of hope, a symbol of beauty. And to me when I was writing, the first fence poem I wrote actually is The Fence (That Night) and originally I just called it The Fence because I didn't know I'd be writing other poems from the point of view. So I realized at one point that The Fence was just there being a fence and became an accessory to the crime unwillingly.

And so that was very profound to me and then later on I realized, oh yes, The Fence had a life before and The Fence had a life after. So when I was structuring the book it seemed that that made a lot of sense to start and end with The Fence. And before I wrote the epilogue which was Pilgrimage, which was my journey to The Fence, I thought that the book would just end with The Fence being torn down but I was really unhappy about that because it just left nothing, I mean literally left nothing, just empty space. And I really felt, especially when I decided to publish the book for teen readers, which was not my original intent, I needed to end the book with hope. And so I just knew intuitively that I needed a last poem; I had no idea what it would be but I knew I had to go back to Wyoming to find it.

So I went back to Wyoming and I went back to the fence or the fence that's now there, it's not the original fence anymore. And I spent a long time there. I said Kaddish, which is the Jewish prayer for the dead. I just sat there. I looked back at Laramie, you know, to see the last thing that Matt would have seen before he lost consciousness even though I went during the day and that was at night. I touched the fence. I felt the ground. I felt the prairie wind. And then on the plane ride home I wrote that last poem Pilgrimage. And, you know, it was very important to me to end with a prayer, to end with something that takes lines from a lot of different traditions so that it was unifying and to give some hope to the reader and some comfort.

Rob: Right, which really parallels to, again, without doing. I know I have the music from just the passion (06:00) section but then I read your book and I thought how is he not going to set this poem Pilgrimage because it fits so well in this sort of the choral music tradition. Particularly we don't ... as chorale musicians we don't often latch on to one religion or one idea because we sort of live in a lot of them and music is the access to that and so it's interesting to hear you speak it that way and clearly Craig felt the similar draw to wrap this up in a different manner than The Fence is going.

Lesléa: And I do love The Fence (after) and The Wind, that combination, I really, really love that. I don't know but just somehow made sense and I love that another artist can look at my work and see things that I would have never seen. I would have never put those two together.

They're in very different parts of the book. But, you know, The Fence is gone and The Wind remains, so that is just perfect. And so I love that, I love that combination.

Rob: Craig clearly talked of The Fence being torn down as sort of an analogy for being spread out to the world like you said, through The Wind it sort of remain the mysteries that you have, how did you perceive the fence being torn down?

Lesléa: Well, you know, the reason the fence was torn down was because the land the fence is on was sold since Matt's murder and the new owner was sick of people coming to his property. So, but then he put up a new fence not that far from it so people still come. So no, I didn't think of that. You know, I'm pretty close to the whole thing having been there so I don't have the distance to step away and see other things the way Craig does. And I think having that distance serves his artistic endeavor very well.

Rob: That's a good point. Craig lived with it for ... lived with the idea of composing this for so long, it's interesting to me that, and I'm so glad he did, he took the time to write this piece because I think he was able to capture his whole experience versus forcing something rather quickly.

Lesléa: Right, and I'm just so grateful he waited so long and then my book came out and, you know, I'd love to ask him. I don't know how he discovered my book but it just seems like it's a lovely creative marriage.

Rob: Absolutely. Well, I think, you know, that would be an interesting thing to ask him because I think October Mourning served as sort of a motivation for him to work on this. He found some inspiration. He said, This is something I can attach to, that we can sort of work together to find it. I can see it's being very daunting for him to try to tackle this work without some sort of guide and I think your book helped with that. It's very interesting. So, let's see.

I think that A Protestor might be the most important movement in Craig's work but it is also the poem that went through the most transformation. That poem has a particular form, do you think the musical treatment disrupted this in an appropriate way?

Lesléa: So the protester is a villanelle, are you familiar with the poetic point form?

Rob: Yes from the explanation in your book.

Lesléa: Right. So you see there's a rhyme scheme, you see that there's repetition. You know when someone sets your work to music, you can't be stressed about things, right? I mean, at least I feel this way because he has a vision, he has a musical ear, so he had to ... or chose to play around with some of the ways, the lines repeat or don't repeat. And that's fine because I think it really works. Frankly, the poem is really has another poem that is in concert with it, The Angel, and I really wished he had used that poem as well because The Angels are direct response to the protesters. I don't know if you know the whole story of Angel Action.

Rob: Yes, that was such a beautiful way to respond to the protestors.

Lesléa: So to me those poems really go together and they're essential to go together. So I was a little apprehensive because, you know, that poem taken out of context could really be read wrong. So I still I think to this day I really wish The Angels were in there but I think that Craig does a good job of keeping that poem in context with the entire narrative so that you really don't lift it out and see that what I'm doing with that poem is ... it could be seen as isolated, as me doing the opposite of what I'm actually doing which is, you know, I'm not supporting the protester. I'm not saying that, you know, I agree with the protester and I think that's clear within the context of my book. And I just want, you know, the irony of this protester who's full of hatred then kissing his children goodnight is a very creepy image to me.

And so it's important for me to keep that ... what's the word? You caught me before my coffee in fact.

The whole book has been set to music. I don't know if you know that.

Rob: I did. But it is set as a solo work, right?

Lesléa: Right. Right. And so it was performed in California and what happened was the protester's song was set to kind of like a hootenanny music and then The Angels are a chorus of young girls, it was a high school young women's chorus, and they were all dressed in white and they came on stage and sang the counter poem in their beautiful sweet voices and to me that was very, very moving.

Rob: What was that experience like for you? I guess you attended that performance?

Lesléa: That was also totally mind-blowing because every single poem in the book was used in order so it's the exact same narrative. There was a choir which I think was maybe about 40 people then there was this young woman's high school course, there were soloists, the pipe organ in the church was being used. It has over 4,000 pipes. I think there were two pianists, there was

a harpist, there was somebody playing bell. It was astounding. It was also extraordinary in a different way. I was more used to hearing that kind of performance so it wasn't as startling to me and I don't use startling in a bad way when referring to Craig's oratorio but it was just ... I had to wake up a different part of my brain to listen to Craig. So I'm really glad I actually heard the dress rehearsal first because I wasn't able to stay for both performances. When I went to California I heard the concert twice and that was really helpful because the first time really I was just kind of in shock but then the second time I could really take it in more.

Rob: Wonderful. What was the California reaction? Since I couldn't go, I'm curious.

Lesléa: It was really the same thing. I mean, people were astonished, people were on their feet, you know, very long standing ovation. People seemed very inspired to do something to make a difference. I think and hope that the concert would like to have more life to it and keep performing it. I mean, you know, it's a little cumbersome. I mean, it can't be performed with fewer people, you know. I'm sure you know better than I do when you have chorale music, what it takes to put a show on.

Rob: So let's continue with the reaction, the post concert talk, which is a very unique thing in the choral world. Normally, you'd go out after a concert and wonder how everybody reacted to it but after these performances a panel, yourself included, was able to sit and talk about the work. What was your experience with it? Did you take any surprise from how people responded? I expected more questions but there ended up being many testimonies.

Lesléa: Right. So, you know, I have participated in talkbacks for the Laramie Project. Have you seen the Laramie Project?

Rob: I have.

Lesléa: Okay. So you're familiar with that and also after I read from my book, *October Mourning*, I often take questions, you know, that's little different because it's a reading as opposed to a play or a concert. So often people are so emotionally drained and filled at the same time that it's hard to kind of snap back from your body into your head and ask questions. So I'm used to there being not many questions and I'm also used to people often feel like instead of a question they want to share and experience very often about themselves being, you know, a lot of gay men will talk about something that happened to them or someone will talk about a gay brother or a gay father or uncle and something that happened to them. And it's almost like people feel like they need to bear witness and they need to have people bear witness to something that's happened to them. So it didn't really surprise me. I was really thrilled to be on stage with such a stellar panel. And I think ... have you seen the photo that is with my blog post

of Craig and I? If you look at that you can see that we're just looking at each other with such adoration and I think a friend of mine who was there used to be a photo journalist so she took some pictures for me and I feel like she really captured this, I don't know, this mutual respect and admiration that we have for each other in this photo and that I think sums up my experience more than I could in words.

I know Jason Marsden, you know, I've known him for years so it was wonderful to see him again and be in the panel with him and he is so incredibly articulate. And the other poet I had never met before but I really enjoyed meeting him and I thought the moderator did a good job so I thought it was well.

I guess the only other thing I would say is that it's just so interesting to me that I find myself immersed in the world of choral music which is nothing that would have ever occurred to me in a zillion years. So, you know, I write a book and then it takes on a life of its own and it takes me to places where I never thought I'd find myself in. And I mean, that's just such a wonderful thing. It just feels like a blessing and, you know, I don't know if any of this is useful to you in your research but I just keep thinking about Matthew Shepard who I never met, who I was ... it seems like I was destined to meet because he was part of the LGBT Association in University of Wyoming that was putting on this gay awareness week and invited me to come as a keynote speaker and he had planned on being at my reading, and then he was murdered so I never met him but because of him I've met hundreds of other wonderful people. And other people have made connections because of him.

So, you know, he's doing this amazing work and yet he's absent. And I think about that all the time. I mean, everybody I met in Austin I never would have met, for example. Everyone I had met in California when I went out for that performance and everyone I met whose ever come to a poetry reading from October Mourning and all the schools that I've presented at, I mean it just goes on and on, probably thousands of people by now. So that to me is just kind of an astounding thing and I'm not really sure what to make of it but I just keep thinking about it.

You know, it's interesting because people, they just responded to Matt's story, you know, whatever form it takes, just people becoming involved with the foundation or artistically or somehow just kind of ... it just happens. I've seen that over and over.

Rob: I can testify to that certainly.

Lesléa: All right. Well, I'm going to continue packing for my trip to Hawaii, I leave tomorrow.

Ralph: Well, have a wonderful trip.

Lesléa: Thanks. Thanks, I'm glad we had a chance to talk.

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