

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION IN *CONSIDERING MATTHEW SHEPARD*

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This dissertation examines the interrelated treatment of gender, sexuality, and Christianity in *Considering Matthew Shepard*. This work comes out of a context in which there are long-held opposing views over sociopolitical issues in twentieth-century American society, particularly within the Christian Church. These factions hinge upon issues of gender and sexuality, with the conservative Christian viewpoint on one side, and the American liberal Christian viewpoint on the other. While the former features traditional gender and sexual archetypes, the latter reconciles these polarizing areas of gender, sexuality, and religion. These and other related social themes are demonstrated in *Considering Matthew Shepard*, a modern oratorio influenced by the Passion form. In this dissertation, I will show how this work both demonstrates conservative Christian themes, but also offers an alternative, more inclusive vision for America. If *Considering Matthew Shepard* highlights the tension between viewpoints surrounding these difficult topics, its overwhelming conclusion is one of love, acceptance, unity, and the humanity in all of us.

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Considering Matthew Shepard (2016), by Grammy award-winning composer Craig Hella Johnson, is an oratorio that has quickly gained traction among musicians and audiences for confronting poignant subject matter. Audiences have described the work as “gripping,” “enlightening,” “stunning,” and “healing.”¹ It continues to be programmed by community, professional, and collegiate choirs because the work tackles the American struggle of the treatment of “the other” in modern American society. The work tells the story of Matthew Shepard, the twenty-one-year-old Wyomingite, who was infamously killed in a homophobic hate crime in 1998. Matt, a college student at the time, was beaten and tied to a fence, and left for dead under the rural sky of his hometown Laramie. For almost twenty years, Craig Hella Johnson wrestled with how to respond to this tragedy. After a lengthy writing process that involved numerous additions and revisions, *Considering Matthew Shepard* was born.

At slightly over an hour and a half long, the work tells the story of Matt’s life through the lens of anonymous narrators, who also serve as members of the work’s chorus. Johnson’s libretto is deliberately eclectic: it includes both sacred and secular

¹ Quinton, “Review: Conspirare’s ‘Considering Matthew Shepard’”; Sydney Theatre and Film Reviews, “Considering Matthew Shepard - Review”; Reich, “Review: ‘Considering Matthew Shepard’ More Striking with Lessons of Hope on Ravinia’s Bigger Stage.”

texts, including original poetry, with texts by Michael Dennis Browne, Lesléa Newman, Hildegard von Bingen, adaptations from Dante's *Paradiso*, and excerpts from Matt's personal journal. Although the oratorio has been a largely sacred genre throughout music history, Johnson's inclusion of secular musical styles and narrative tropes allowed it to have wider public appeal beyond the church walls. This is important because of the growing secularization of America. He achieved this secularization while keeping the integrity of the form of a Passion oratorio, and carefully constructing the libretto to match. While writing exists about general elements and development of the Passion oratorio regarding CMS, I focus on these themes to understand the meaning of the work in contemporary America.² The influence of the Passion brings together our understanding of historical religious significance while also identifying new connections in light of contemporary divisions within the American church.

Oratorios themselves can be either secular or sacred, and both Passion oratorios and oratorio Passions explicitly refer to works written before the twentieth century, based on the death of Jesus Christ. First, oratorio Passions, like those of Johann Sebastian Bach, strictly used the Gospel as their central and historically-based narrative, even if troped with poetic meditations and Lutheran chorales. Later, Passion oratorios, such as C.H. Graun's *Der Tod Jesu* (1755), replaced biblical text with metrical paraphrases.³ In this way, the libretto departs from the exact quotation of biblical texts.⁴ The writer is freer to

² Ward, "Passion Settings of the 20th and 21st Centuries Focusing on Craig Hella Johnson's Considering Matthew Shepard."

³ Kennedy and Bourne Kennedy, *Concise Oxford Dict. Music*.

⁴ Smither, "Oratorio."

sculpt the narrative in a way that strays from religious contexts and relates to modern themes.

Considering Matthew Shepard should be seen as loosely modeled after the Passion oratorio in the sense of using historical sources about Matt Shepard, a figure who was sacrificed in a major wrong, in order to encourage us to meditate on injustice and the redemption it might afford. In the twentieth century, this model has been adapted by composers seeking to elevate the moral contributions of historical or fictional figures. Sometimes these characters are cast in the role of a martyr in their own stories, making them a sort of parallel to Jesus Christ. However, composers of Passion oratorio must choose carefully how they compare their central character's struggle with that of Jesus Christ or a Gospel narrative. The historical details in the story of *Considering Matthew Shepard* are carried by the spoken recitation. It is important now to note that the narrator is not a constant figure throughout the work, as the Evangelist appears in Bach's Passions.

Considering Matthew Shepard is a work that, through its inclusion of a diversity of musical styles, is filled with layers of symbolism and reflection. Ultimately, the work poses difficult questions about how we as a society are tasked to proceed after such a heinous crime as Matt's murder, and how societal gender roles and Matt's sexuality may have played a part in this. Religion, though not limited to Christianity, is demonstrated largely by conservative and liberal Christian viewpoints that are at odds with one another over themes in this work. Johnson uses the Christian Passion story to convey the suffering and redemption of one gay man, and in a broader context, the treatment of the gay community in a modern society that struggles with the intersection of ideas about

gender roles, sexuality, and religion. Observation of the interaction between these areas is crucial to determine how characters in this piece function in the framework of the narrative.

1.1 Context

In the early Christian Churches, the Gospels were usually commemorated in two ways, one being dramatic and the other musical.⁵ Starting in the fourth century, these commemorations were primarily dramatic readings. In the Middle Ages, the Passion story was staged as a drama with costume and music, which likely only included unaccompanied chant by a single singer. In the thirteenth century, chant could be divided into three parts, and eventually one of these parts was given to a homophonic choir.⁶ It was not until centuries later that polyphonic choir parts became standard. This is when responsorial Passions became more prevalent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which an Evangelist chants monophonic narration and a choir sings the Passion text polyphonically.

It was in 17th-century Germany that musical settings of the Passion story began to take on features of the new Italian genres of opera and oratorio. Similar to the Evangelist in responsorial Passions, a *historicus* is used in oratorios to narrate and link dramatic scenes together.⁷ These Italian influences on music led to changes in the Passion, such as

⁵ Duff, *The Baroque Oratorio Passion: A Conductor's Guide to Compositional Techniques and Their Foundations*.

⁶ Duff.

⁷ Duff.

instruments accompanying the solo and choir voices, as well as the addition of non-Biblical texts. An example of this is the chorales of non-Biblical texts that German composers added for congregational participation in the Passion narratives.⁸ Later, in the eighteenth century, the Passion oratorio was born when the Biblical text began to be replaced with poetic accounts of the Passion story. We know that the modern Passion oratorio developed over a long history, from the medieval monophonic chanted Passion, through the responsorial and polyphonic types of the Renaissance, and the operatic type of the Baroque period. A version of this form of the Passion oratorio still exists in the works of modern composers; some dealing with tragedy, or social and political events.

Artists today continue to respond to tragedy in their compositions. Their works are timestamps to look back and reflect upon mankind's greatest triumphs and tragedies. Composers from all periods and places have dealt with tragedy through choral music, using it as a political and social tool to communicate grievances. Choral music today is no different. A new repertory of choral works is aimed towards immediate audiences, who are more demanding than ever in their quest for content relevant to modern society. Composers like Craig Hella Johnson have shown to be mindful of these demands. One area that has received the most attention is the broad scope of works related to social justice. Advocacy and awareness for American social issues, and their ties to modern political movements are a large part of the works' narratives. Composers such as Julia Wolfe, David Lang, John Adams, Gregory Spears, Ted Hearne, and others have all written works that examine societal issues. Works with these themes are remarkably

⁸ Duff.

popular with modern audiences, and professional choral groups are commissioning and programming them regularly as a result. Several notable commissioning ensembles include Johnson's Austin-based Conspirare, as well as Philadelphia-based The Crossing, led by Donald Nally. Without groups like these, the musical social justice movement wouldn't have penetrated the choral circuit with such success.

One work that was a particularly important precedent for CMS is David Lang's *the little match girl passion* (2007). The libretto consists of texts focusing on the story of the Little Match Girl, by Hans Christian Andersen, as well as those drawn from J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, but with no mention of Jesus.⁹ It highlights the social issues of poverty and wealth inequality in society, in much the same way as *Considering Matthew Shepard* highlights the injustice of a life taken too soon due to homophobia. Works like Johnson's can be seen as a memorial in sound, replacing pillars of hate with a comforting tribute of hope, much like the statues replacing old Confederate monuments across the Southern United States.

Through CMS, Craig Hella Johnson has demonstrated that works of this kind can have a palpable impact upon local communities. Johnson and Conspirare performed *Considering Matthew Shepard* as part of a performance series at Goshen College on September 14th, 2018. Prior to the performance, Johnson, the Mayor of Goshen, along with the President of Goshen College, each gave short statements about their support for establishing hate crime legislation in the state of Indiana - one of just five states that did

⁹ Ward, "Passion Settings of the 20th and 21st Centuries Focusing on Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard*."

not to have such legislation in place. Their united front framed the performance of the piece in a way that was not only about the human experience, but also about establishing political change as a result. After the performance, slips of paper with Indiana politicians' contact information, including Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb, and a statement were handed out to audience members urging them to voice their support for hate crime legislation. Indiana eventually passed hate crime legislation on April 3rd, 2019, though the wording of the final bill had been altered to remove certain specified instances, which worries supporters it may offer individuals more flexibility to discriminate.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Indiana Senate Bill 198 was signed into law, and Johnson and the outreach of *Considering Matthew Shepard*, and the platform it supplied, are a part of that history.

1.2 Themes

The work's central themes stem from the death of Matthew Shepard, and the narrative that proceeds from his story. To tell Matt's story, Johnson uses real, "historical," characters, along with unnamed solo singers and narrators; both help to highlight these themes in the narrative. Examining the characters and the areas or ideas they address leads to an understanding of the complex messages of the work. This study argues that gender norms exist to serve as a baseline for character descriptions throughout, even when they are not identified explicitly. Characters argue their emotional and archetypal reasoning most effectively as figures of a specific gender. The purposefully striking texts and contrasting musical juxtapositions evoke thoughts about

¹⁰ Jurist News, "Indiana Hate Crimes Bill Signed into Law - JURIST - News - Legal News & Commentary."

how gender archetypes in our society are to blame for Matt's story. The archetypes of men are particularly pertinent. This is understandable, as the two murderers, Aaron McKinnie and Russell Henderson, are men, and their hate crime hinges upon issues of masculinity. Sexuality, too, for its close associations and sometimes dependencies on gender, is a central theme. The attraction to men held by gay men, and resultant feelings of obsession or disgust of homophobes, is another example of the influence of gender in the story's narrative. In this study, I will demonstrate how *Considering Matthew Shepard* foregrounds the importance of gender and sexuality and examine how these themes are influenced by the extremes of modern American Christianity. At the intersection of Gender, Sexuality, and Religion, this work constructs a narrative and invokes ideas that parallel twenty-first century America.

CHAPTER 2:
A DIVIDED LANDSCAPE – GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION IN
21ST-CENTURY AMERICA

2.1 Gender and The Church

Gender archetypes in the United States of America respond to our own recent political and social histories, but they also have ancient global roots.¹¹ Expectations of binary gender roles seem always to have existed in society, though they of course have evolved. Texts and visual representations of masculinity are visible in ancient societies which highlighted the fear of the loss of their manhood.¹² Men carry with them longstanding associations with roles established in religion, politics, the media, and more. Common “masculine” traits in these fields may include, but are not limited to social dominance, aptitude for war, physical strength, emotional stoicism, and strict guidelines on acceptable relationships with other men.

Following the influence of ancient societies, the Bible often reinforced these “masculine” traits. The Bible and its portrayals of how one should function in the world became particularly important in many Western, and predominantly Christian, countries

¹¹ Zsolnay, *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity*.

¹² Zsolnay.

such as the United States of America, for establishing social and cultural norms. In 1911, on the 300th anniversary of the King James Bible, Theodore Roosevelt went as far as to say that “no other book of any kind ever written in English – perhaps no other book ever written in any other tongue – has ever so affected the whole life of a people as this authorized version of the Scriptures has affected the life of the English-speaking peoples.”¹³

Starting in the Old Testament, men are often portrayed as “successful, aggressive, sexual, self-reliant, and above all anything but female,” as scholar David Cline has explained.¹⁴ The Biblical David, for example, is “skillful in playing,” “a mighty man of valour,” “a man of war,” “intelligent in speech,” and “a beautiful person.”¹⁵ These idealized “masculine” characteristics are seen throughout the Old Testament. Cline, when comparing David’s role as a man in the Bible to today’s standards, notes that “there does not seem to be much room for experiments in the role of men in the Old Testament.”¹⁶

In the New Testament, the life and portrayal of Jesus Christ is often viewed as a major influence in understanding the relationship between Christianity, masculinity and male gender roles. Since Jesus was a man, and brought salvation to the world as such, some have suggested that only men should lead the church.¹⁷ This early belief helped shape even more rigid gender roles for the development of the family unit, in which the

¹³ Roosevelt, “The Bible and the Life of the People.”

¹⁴ Clines, “David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible.”

¹⁵ Hentrich, “Masculinity and Disability in the Bible.”

¹⁶ Clines, “David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible.”

¹⁷ Poling, “The Cross and Male Violence.”

man assumes leadership in society.¹⁸ Where the Christian family unit often puts the man in charge and the woman in a position of subservience, gay and other less traditional relationship structures naturally challenge this role. If religion has played a major role in shaping all aspects of American life—as historian Robert Putnam has explained—it is perhaps unsurprising that it inflected attitudes and norms surrounding gender roles.¹⁹ Christian leaders, in particular, have conveyed gender norms in literal and subconscious forms of communication in church and in facets of everyday life. Some of these gender norms appear in society as either spoken or unspoken cultural norms or taboos. They are also reflected in media, the arts, politics, and religion, too, among others.²⁰ Homosexuality and queer identities are at odds with certain religious groups because these identities defy expected gender roles.

In twentieth-century America, women systematically challenged these rigid gender roles and fought against patriarchy, especially through the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s.²¹ However, gender roles are deeply rooted in a multitude of aspects in the modern world and continue to influence the behaviors and societal treatment of queer persons who do not fit into society’s gender strictures. Queer theory disrupts this by challenging the idea of finite and defined identity categories at all, and in this way can call into question all identities, including gender-normative and

¹⁸ Poling.

¹⁹ Putnam, *American Grace : How Religion Divides and Unites Us*.

²⁰ Collins, “Content Analysis of Gender Roles in Media: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Go?”; Cassese and Holman, “Religious Beliefs, Gender Consciousness, and Women’s Political Participation.”

²¹ Newton, “The Women’s Liberation and the Gay Liberation Movements.”

heterosexual identities. These ideas in queer theory break down all gender roles and expectations and can be seen as damaging to church teachings on Christianity. This may explain why the church, as well as affiliated religious organizations or other entities, sometimes acts with hostility against any ideas and identities that challenge heteronormativity.

As Christianity incorporated a wide variety of denominations and some diverse beliefs, even in twentieth-century America, I make no claims that the gender roles and stereotypes of men were reflected in each and every Christian church at the time. Yet, in the evangelical and fundamentalist context of the area from which Matthew Sheppard hailed, it was normal for evangelical and fundamentalist churches to hold a traditional hierarchical view of gender roles.²² We also know these gender roles and stereotypes of men were incorporated into various Christian denominations from the church sources themselves, in their doctrines, symbols and practices.²³ The creation and development of ideas about masculinity, and social constructions of gender have influenced theological and doctrinal formations.²⁴

A telling sign of the relationship between conservative Christianity and masculinity comes from the reactionary American poet Robert Bly. Bly is known as one of the leaders of the mythopoetic men's movement in the 1990s—a backlash against the

²² Sharp, Penya, Fournier, Macaluso, and Bailey, "The Attitudes Toward Gender Roles in Conservative Christian Contexts Scale: A Psychometric Assessment."

²³ Gill, "Christian Manliness Unmanned: Masculinity and Religion in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Western Society."

²⁴ Gill.

mainstream success of the feminist movement. Lamenting that feminism and industrialization had watered down the deep spiritual masculine identity of men, the mythopoetic authors argued that men could recover this masculinity through male-only gatherings and workshops. Bly and other authors, including Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, spearheaded its initial traction with their book releases.²⁵ In 1990, just several years after Shepard's death, Bly published *Iron John*, a sort of homage to a fairytale by the Brothers Grimm that discusses maleness, among other themes.²⁶ In the text, Bly rejects popular representations of Jesus Christ as a model figure of maleness, arguing that they show weakness or vulnerability.²⁷ According to Bly, a more apt description of a Jesus in touch with his definition of modern masculinity might be, "A religious figure but a hairy one in touch with garden sexuality with spirit and earth."²⁸ It seems as if Bly is trying to escape an affiliation with effeminate men and anything that will link men to less than desirable modern male traits. In a sense, Jesus needs to be made more masculine in an attempt to reinforce male gender roles in the church, and escape being seen as soft, or even "worse," as potentially gay. This is representative of the ignorant association of effeminacy with homosexuality.²⁹ What these cultures fail to take into account, however, is that there is a normal amount of variability in gender expression that is not related to

²⁵ Innes, "Why The 'New Masculine' Movement Is Just as Toxic as the Old One."

²⁶ Bly, *Iron John: A Book about Men*.

²⁷ Gill, "Christian Manliness Unmanned: Masculinity and Religion in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Western Society."

²⁸ Bly, *Iron John: A Book about Men*.

²⁹ Boswell, "Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality."

sexuality. Effeminate straight men or masculine straight women are ignored, whereas effeminate gay men and masculine gay women come to embody the stereotype.³⁰

Such narrow gender archetypes were, however, by no means limited to reactionaries in the 1990s. For example, as recently as 2003, Baptists told missionaries to oppose female pastors and wives to submit graciously to their husbands.³¹ These relationships, supposedly, follow the natural laws that exist between men and women according to their interpretation of the Bible.

At the same time, there have been attempts to liberalize these attitudes toward gender in some Christian denominations, especially recently, with the promotion of women and non-binary people to the highest levels of leadership in the Church. For example, the Episcopal church is nearing fifty years of women being priests and elected a woman to the role of Presiding Bishop for the first time in 2006.³² There are even modern movements of Catholic women priests leading more liberal parishes, though they are not approved officially by the Vatican.³³ These movements toward gender equity in some churches starkly contrast with the historical gender roles that are still commonplace in many Christian churches.

³⁰ Boswell.

³¹ Associated Press, "Baptists Tell Missionaries to Affirm New Creed - Los Angeles Times."

³² Tammeus, "Episcopal Church Celebrates 40 Years of Women in the Priesthood | National Catholic Reporter."

³³ Bobb, "What a Roman Catholic Woman Priest Looks Like | Vogue."

2.2 Sexuality and The Church

In addition to these strong gender archetypes, the Christian Church has also shaped attitudes toward homosexuality. Homosexuality has held a public spotlight at the center of many debates, including those involving various United States church organizations. Why is homosexuality so widely discussed and unfairly fixated on in Western cultures? Perhaps this is because “the intolerance of homosexuality relates to its unnaturalness.”³⁴ Attempts to construct natural and unnatural sexual orientations have often drawn on specific Christian scriptures for support. From this, a greater and religiously-charged hostility to gay persons formed. One of the most weaponized scriptures comes from Leviticus 20:13, and is sometimes interpreted to say that homosexuality is an abomination. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is often referenced as a warning to society. Interpreters believe that the cities were destroyed by fire because of the immoral actions of its citizens, including suspected gay sex. Different Bible translations and interpreters from various denominations will no doubt have disagreements about these texts. Some counterarguments to the idea that this story condemns gay sex are that the immoral actions of the citizens were those other than gay sex or that the gay sex in the story was not analogous to consensual gay sex. In the former, many argue that the real sins described in these stories are greed and lack of hospitality.³⁵ In the latter, the argument is that the story is really about homosexual rape, an act of violence that no one is advocating for, and a far cry from loving committed gay

³⁴ Poling, “The Cross and Male Violence.”

³⁵ Robinson, Krehely, and Steenland, “What Are Religious Texts Really Saying About Gay and Transgender Rights? An Interview with Bishop Gene Robinson.”

relationships.³⁶ However, even given these counterarguments, these texts have been widely used to condemn homosexuality, and continue to be used in this way today.

Meanwhile, in twentieth-century America, the gay rights movement in society at large made tremendous gains. For example, in the 1960's and 1970's, the American Gay Liberation Movement began challenging discriminatory laws, such as bans on gay sex that existed in every state.³⁷ Even as some American religious organizations have increasingly accepted diverse members, there still exists a tension between religion and the LGBTQ+ community.

This complicated relationship between sexuality and religion continues to be addressed in popular American artistic works. Novels such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* have made waves among American audiences in recent years. Recast as a television series, the show's success suggests to us that American audiences are interested in the intersection of gender, religion, and sexuality.³⁸ Each of these areas is highlighted in the show, and each is somewhat of a moral battleground for the characters. Gender is represented through the use of strong societal gender roles, where women serve to bear children. Sexuality is represented by the intentional repression of pleasure in sexual relationships for function. It is also demonstrated by the way that homosexuals are labeled as "gender traitors," and even face death for their own sexuality. The society in

³⁶ Robinson, Krehely, and Steenland.

³⁷ Bernstein, "Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained? Conceptualizing Social Movement 'Success' in the Lesbian and Gay Movement."

³⁸ Himberg, "The Lavender Menace Returns: Reading Gender & Sexuality in *The Handmaid's Tale*."

Atwood's book reflects a type of Theocracy in which all people must believe and live by the same values, much of which are steeped in gender roles, submissiveness and conformation. American viewers may see the show as an exaggerated representation of a current, repressive political climate, to which they can ultimately relate.

Western society has put a greater weight of punishment on gay persons than it has on other commonly accepted forms of sin. An example of this is hypocrisy, a sin that is elaborated on in graphic detail throughout Christian scriptures. Western society has punished gay persons in brutal and primitive ways, including castration and death, but has not done the same of hypocrites.³⁹ Although the punishments became less violent, homosexuality remained outlawed in various ways in America until the end of the twentieth century—the time of Matthew Shepherd's tragic death.⁴⁰ Since the public opinion of gay persons in the modern West began to transition, they continue to face “severe prescriptive legislation, widespread public hostility, and various civil restraints all with ostensibly religious justification.”⁴¹ “The battles over homosexuality today are most bitterly and publicly waged in religious venues, although the battlegrounds are also in college dormitories, on lonely Wyoming fences, in small Alabama towns, and in some legislatures.”⁴² Gay people in many Western nations, such as the United States of America, still face legal challenges, such as adoption rights, that their heterosexual

³⁹ Boswell, “Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality.”

⁴⁰ Whitehead and Baker, “Homosexuality, Religion, and Science: Moral Authority and the Persistence of Negative Attitudes*”; The Economist, “United States: The End Is Nigh; Sodomy Laws and the Supreme Court.”

⁴¹ Boswell, “Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality.”

⁴² Schneider, “Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology.”

counterparts do not. Remembering our earlier parallel, there are no specific laws against hypocrisy.⁴³

In the United States, though a melting pot of cultural and religious traditions, certain religious groups remain intolerant and active political opponents of gay and lesbian peoples. A 2004 Pew survey identified that 70.4% of Americans refer to themselves as Christian.⁴⁴ To those denominations and congregations that oppose them, members of the “LGBTQIA” community are polarizing figures, an “other” that is often vilified.⁴⁵ This situation has contributed to a hostile political environment in America, and explains part of the complicated relationship between homosexuality, gender identity and the church.

Christian-affiliated universities in America are one such place where this conflict remains in plain sight. Many conservative Christian colleges attempt to prescribe and enforce moral guidelines on students and faculty, often including mandatory signed “lifestyle covenants” that stipulate standards of sexual morality.⁴⁶ Some colleges go as far as to explicitly bar gay students from enrolling or graduating.⁴⁷ In recent years, many of these colleges have been advised to not exclude gays entirely, but rather prohibit “a type

⁴³ Boswell, “Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality.”

⁴⁴ Green, “The American Religious Landscape and Political Attitudes: A Baseline for 2004.”

⁴⁵ Chapman, *Culture Wars: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*.

⁴⁶ Strunk, Bailey, and Takewell, “‘The Enemy in the Midst’: Gay-Identified Men in Christian College Spaces.”

⁴⁷ Wolff and Himes, “Purposeful Exclusion of Sexual Minority Youth in Christian Higher Education: The Implications of Discrimination.”

of sexual behavior” but not “a sexual orientation per se.”⁴⁸ However, even though there has been a shift from excluding based on sexual orientation to prohibiting certain sexual behaviors, research has found that heterosexism and homophobic attitudes have persisted and that LGBT students still experience anxiety, fear, depression, and suicidal thoughts at Christian colleges.⁴⁹ Mary Hulst, senior chaplain at Calvin College, a conservative Christian college in Michigan, notes:

The suicidality of this particular population is much higher. The chances that they will leave the church are much higher. These [realities] weigh very heavily on me... You've got those two values. We love our LGBT people. We love our church of Jesus Christ. We love Scripture. So those of us who do this work are right in the middle of that space. We are living in the tension.⁵⁰

Gay faculty members have also been directly affected by conservative Christian school policies, resulting in firings and forced resignations. An example of this is found as recently as 2020, when it was uncovered that a gay professor was forced to “renounce their lifestyle” or resign from Milligan University, a private Christian liberal arts university in Tennessee.⁵¹ One such previous example occurred at Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, where two professors were fired for homosexual behavior in 2004, one resigned in protest, and another gay faculty member did not have his contract renewed. Another example took place at Covenant Christian School, a K-12 private

⁴⁸ Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, “Report: The Ad Hoc Task Force on Human Sexuality.”

⁴⁹ Wolff et al., “Evangelical Christian College Students and Attitudes Toward Gay Rights: A California University Sample”; Barton, “‘Abomination’-Life as a Bible Belt Gay.”

⁵⁰ Gjelten, “Christian Colleges Are Tangled In Their Own LGBT Policies : NPR.”

⁵¹ Keeling, “Forced Resignation of Milligan University Professor Heightens Calls for Change, Dialogue Regarding LGBTQ Community.”

Christian school in Florida, where in 2019 a teacher was outed and then fired when the school found out she was dating a woman.⁵²

This tension is further highlighted by changing attitudes to civil rights and sexuality, especially among younger generations, including Christians. Brad Harper, a professor of theology and religious history at Multnomah University, an evangelical Christian institution in Oregon, says that “Millennials are looking at the issue of gay marriage, and more and more they are saying, ‘OK, we know the Bible talks about this, but we just don't see this as an essential of the faith.’”⁵³ These conservative Christian colleges are constantly balancing these divisive issues, even having to worry about potential legal entanglement and loss of federal funding depending on changing Title IX interpretations and enforcements.⁵⁴ In this way, conservative Christian colleges in the United States illustrate the continually evolving conflict between religion and sexuality.

The conservative Christian viewpoint excludes roles and identities outside of those deemed socially and morally appropriate. An example of this is the Southern Baptist Convention that has endorsed the view that “even a desire to engage in a homosexual relationship is always sinful, impure, degrading, shameful, unnatural, indecent and perverted” and that “gender identity is determined by biological sex and not

⁵² Olsen, “Christian University Under Fire for Firing Gay Professors”; Sparvero, “Brevard Teacher Fired for Dating Same Sex Reacts to Supreme Court Protection of LGBTQ Workers.”

⁵³ Gjelten, “Christian Colleges Are Tangled In Their Own LGBT Policies : NPR.”

⁵⁴ Gjelten.

by one's self-perception—a perception which is often influenced by fallen human nature in ways contrary to God's design."⁵⁵

The liberal Christian viewpoint that some churches and Christian denominations have moved toward in the twenty-first century allows for reconciliation of these polarizing areas. From their perspective, those who do not conform to the aforementioned gender and sexual norms are accepted as an integral part of the church. This diversity, as well as other types of diversity, is often even celebrated. Inclusivity is a major theme in this type of Christianity. An example of the liberal Christian viewpoint is found in the United Church of Christ, a denomination that believes “no matter who – no matter what – no matter where we are on life's journey – notwithstanding race, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, class or creed – we all belong to God and to one worldwide community of faith.”⁵⁶ This type of American Christianity seems to be gaining popularity and visibility in more progressive areas of the country. It challenges strictly-defined masculinity and homophobia often present in conservative Christian churches, and opens up a path toward reconciliation between LGBTQ individuals and the church. The more inclusive viewpoint of this type of Christianity is seen more often in modern works, including Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard*.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Campaign, “Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues: Southern Baptist Convention.”

⁵⁶ United Church of Christ, “What We Believe.”

CHAPTER 3:
GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION IN THE MUSIC AND TEXT OF
CONSIDERING MATTHEW SHEPARD

Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard* is a work that is clearly touched by the complex relationships between religion, gender, and sexuality in modern-day America. While both conservative and liberal Christian viewpoints are depicted in *Considering Matthew Shepard*, the work traces a trajectory towards the latter a viewpoint that accepts and embraces all of us, regardless of gender and sexuality. In the work, the performers deliver solo songs, recitations, and choruses addressing themes of love/hate, grief, and community, among others. In doing so, the audience is encouraged to examine their own experiences and cultural biases, and to consider the humanity of others. Specifically, this narrative may speak to Christian audiences who are called to challenge their own religious and cultural biases toward certain groups of people.

If the story of Matthew Shepard deeply affected Johnson, it is perhaps unsurprising, for his background and life experiences meant it resonated with him in several personal ways. One factor was likely his own sexuality as a gay man, which he is open about at talks relating to the work. Another such factor may be his religious upbringing. Johnson was born to Lutheran parents, and his father was a Lutheran pastor himself. He spent much of his childhood in the church, as he studied piano and organ

from an early age. He was free to explore his musical gifts as a church musician, which allowed for a significant intersection between two parts of his life – music and faith. This combination of faith and music makes its way both into Johnson’s compositions as well as works he conducts. His lessons would have almost certainly included works by Buxtehude, Schütz, and especially Bach, who seems to have had a great impact on Johnson’s first major composition:

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.”⁵⁷

Bach’s music in *Considering Matthew Shepard* may even be considered an additional unspoken and unsung character element throughout the work, such as the voice of God. The spiritual experience through music is something Johnson has himself expressed with regard to Bach, so it is not surprising that Bach is deeply integrated into *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Sir John Eliot Gardiner made a similar association when he said, “it is Bach, making music in the Castle of Heaven, who gives us the voice of God — in human form.” Bach’s influence in the music blurs the boundaries of sacred and secular themes, and his quotations symbolize a Christian element and reference the Passion. This intersection of sacred music with a topic of homophobic hate crime, as well as the

⁵⁷ Johnson, “Craig Hella Johnson Personal Interview with Robert Ward.”

apparent juxtaposition of Bach's influence with a liberal Christian viewpoint, is particularly important in the work.

One can easily imagine why the Passion as a genre would have appealed to Craig Hella Johnson as a form for this subject. After all, the Passion has deep roots in the Lutheran tradition. Genres dedicated to the Passion of Christ and the modern-day secular adaptations modeled after it will, expectedly, carry dark undertones along with any narrative. The subject of death is central to the storyline, as is the importance of a shift to hope, or faith, that there will be some kind of redemption. In oratorios devoted to Christ's Passion, Christians come to recognize His sacrifice not as a death, but as a new life for them; Jesus Christ had to die so that their sins could be forgiven. As in other modern secular oratorios closely modeled after these Passions, Johnson seeks a resolution to the central death of Matt. He finds ways to celebrate the life of Matthew Shepard within the work, while telling the story of his merciless death, but also, importantly, focusing attention on how to move past his heinous murder. More important, still, is the projection of a better world in the wake of Matt's existence on Earth. Yet, as we will see, Johnson's work does not assert as much a clear-cut answer about how to proceed forward from Matt's death as Bach does with the death of Jesus Christ.

In Bach's Passions, and those of his contemporaries, we are given a dramatic presentation to help audiences process the redemptive value of the death of Christ. In the aria "Ach, Herr, laß dein leib Engelein," from Bach's *St. John Passion*, the text makes it clear that Christ's second coming is guaranteed, as it mentions waking from death to sing

eternal praises to the Son of God.⁵⁸ In *Considering Matthew Shepard*, we find similarities in the movement “Meet Me Here,” where a soloist, later joined by chorus, paints a picture of an eventual reunion with those who have been “lost along the way.” This is an allusion to a future where Matthew, and all others who have departed from Earth, will again be reunited with their loved ones. In this way, the contemporary oratorio mirrors depictions of life after death found in traditional Passions.

Considering Matthew Shepard is divided into three parts: Prologue, Passion, and Epilogue. The temporality of the work is not linear. The “Prologue” portion of the work is made up of three movements that primarily focus on Matt’s life. The bulk of the narrative of the historical events around Matthew’s murder exists under the “Passion” section of the work, which includes 26 movements. The “Epilogue” is a collection of four movements at the end of the work that help translate Matt’s story and its meaning into a tangible progress that we conceive for the future of human community.

Closely linked to the recitatives in traditional Passions is the Evangelist role, which is mirrored in *Considering Matthew Shepard* by the various narrator recitations. The role of the Evangelist in *St. Matthew Passion* is optimal to Bach’s work, second only, perhaps to the conductor. This is true, too, in CMS where the role of the narrator functions as the Evangelist. Johnson even implies that the narrator role is equal in importance to the conductor, suggesting they are each the “holder of the whole,” or

⁵⁸ Dellal, “Bach Cantata Translations.”

responsible for keeping the entire piece together.⁵⁹ Bach's Evangelist sings *secco recitativo*, and is accompanied only by continuo organ or harpsichord and cello. The Evangelist's recitative, or quasi-spoken declamation, permeates and unifies the entire *Passion*.⁶⁰ The Evangelist, a tenor, is so critical to the work since he sings an inordinate amount of the action. In other words, the story cannot be told in less than three hours without the role of the Evangelist.

The parallel of the Evangelist's role in *Considering Matthew Shepard* is portrayed by way of unnamed narrators. In Johnson's work, however, the Narrator is not a single constant figure from movement to movement. Multiple persons come forward from within the choir to speak these "recitations," as they are identified, which progress the storyline and set the upcoming scene. This has the effect of humanity itself telling the story, as many from the chorus are involved in the storytelling, rather than a single person. It also reinforces the idea that the chorus is representative of a collective humanity, which bolsters the feelings of unity throughout the work and makes a point that every person is involved in witnessing and telling the story of Matthew Shepard. It must be noted that the narrators of the work are not just tenors, are not fixed voice types, and both female and male in Conspirare's recording of the work.⁶¹ However, the work's use of actual spoken narration remains closely related to Bach's quasi-spoken recitative. In addition, the instrumentation for the recitations in the Johnson work bare similar

⁵⁹ Coakwell, "The Young Singer's Guide to J.S. Bach's Evangelist Role: A Trans-Generational Perspective With Acclaimed Conductors Helmuth Rilling, Masaaki Suzuki, and Craig Hella Johnson."

⁶⁰ Leibrock, "St. Matthew Passion Program Notes."

⁶¹ Conspirare and Johnson, "Considering Matthew Shepard - Recording."

orchestrations to the *Saint Matthew Passion*. For example, in Movement 8., “Recitation III,” the primary parts of the narrated texts are accompanied only by Piano and cello.⁶² Though the piano does not bare the same dry-auditory resemblance to the harpsichord, this is clearly an homage to Bach’s model for the Evangelist in his own Passions. In doing so, there remain less distractions, so the audience is able to listen to the story-dependent texts of the Narrator or Evangelist.

Strong parallels in solo movements highlight the influence that the Passion form has had on this work. There are various unnamed soloists in both the *St. Matthew Passion* and *Considering Matthew Shepard*, and they share a surprising amount of characteristics. In the Johnson, they sing texts such as, “What have you done? Hark, thy brother’s blood cries to me from the ground,” and “Where O where has the innocence gone? Where O where has it gone? Rains rolling down wash away my memory; Where O where has it gone?”⁶³ These unnamed characters reflect on the emotional toll that Matt’s death has had on the community, stemming from the homophobic murder of an innocent person. There is not much to suggest that the gender of soloists in these movements is important to the narrative of the work. This is not dissimilar from Bach’s own use of unnamed soloists, who sing (translated) texts like, “The innocent must die here guilty; this touches my soul deeply,” from the Alto’s recitative in Movement 59.⁶⁴ In each work, soloists reflect on the deaths of guiltless characters, one being Christ and the other Matthew Shepard.

⁶² Johnson, Newman, and Browne, *Considering Matthew Shepard Vocal Score*.

⁶³ Johnson and A Company of Voices, “Considering Matthew Shepard Program Booklet.”

⁶⁴ Dellal, “Bach Cantata Translations.”

Additional parallels in choral movements further highlight this influence on *Considering Matthew Shepard*. However, the modern work expands on traditional styles in the Passion form to include other musical styles and texts within choral movements. Whereas the texts in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* are also compiled from several sources, they are all sacred in nature. The texts in the choral movements of *Considering Matthew Shepard* include a variety of non-Biblical sources, such as Matt's own diary, poetry, and libretto written by the composer himself, among other authors. In this way, the modern oratorio models the framework of the traditional Passion and builds upon it to introduce additional musical and textual elements that often reinforce the narrative. The text in this work highlights gender and sexual norms by commenting on themes of inclusivity, drawing disparities between the treatment of gay people within conservative and liberal Christian viewpoints.

These textual elements in the libretto are constructed from a wide variety of sources, including some that existed beforehand and others that were written specifically for *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Aside from text written by Johnson himself, the libretto includes text from various authors and poets, relying heavily on the work of Michael Dennis Browne and Lesléa Newman, among others. As mentioned earlier, it also includes some of Matt's own words from his diary. Additionally, the work is interspersed with ten recitations that are read aloud, sometimes with underlying music. The text from these recitations come from the news reports about Matthew Shepard's murder and its aftermath. This wide variety of texts in the libretto serves alongside the diverse musical styles in the work to accompany the audience through the story of Matthew Shepard. This diversity in both text and style works together in multiple ways. It is an example of

disparate parts making a cohesive whole, much like how individual voices come together in the chorus to represent an entire community. It also works to engage audiences of different backgrounds, particularly American audiences who would be familiar with some or many of the popular musical styles.

Considering Matthew Shepard aims to leave audience members with thoughts about their own personal experiences with grief, regardless of identity or affiliation with a specific community or religious group. This is accomplished specifically by using varied text and styles alongside the tragic story, especially in some of the more emotionally-charged sections that highlight the pain that Matthew's death, and grief in general, causes in every person. It also raises tough questions about how we relate to each other, often asking us to consider new points of view. For example, at one point in the work, we are asked to consider the murderers, and then our own impulses. In this movement, "I am like you," a quartet shares their own experiences of negative emotions and actions, or what might have resulted from these outbursts. This not only asks the audience to have sympathy toward Matthew but also empathy and forgiveness for his killers. This possibility of understanding and forgiveness of our enemies is a precisely Christian value, though it has not always been present in Christian art. For example, most Passions are not sympathetic toward those who crucified Christ, contrasting with the sympathy present for Matthew's murderers. The call for empathy avoids moralizing people, as much Christian art has done in the past. Additionally, this move toward empathy and inclusion is perhaps more Christian than Bach's Passions, and in being truly more Christian, it is less explicitly and exclusively Christian. This is because Christianity needs to position itself against other religions to have boundaries, and by opening up these boundaries,

Christianity releases itself from rigid definitions of what is included in Christianity. Johnson uses the redemptive model of suffering from Passions but without the moral indignation on which the Passion story depends.

This movement may also cause audience members to wonder, is it possible that each of us is capable of doing something so terribly violent? Although *Considering Matthew Shepard* does not rigidly answer these questions for its listeners, empathy and a more loving world emerges as the heartbeat of the work. Acceptance and inclusion for all is the overarching theme by the end, as demonstrated in the text throughout the Epilogue.

By examining the libretto, commentary on the social topics make it clear that this is a work that brings Matthew's murder to the forefront of conversation, highlighting not only the LGBT community, but other oppressed persons in as prominent way. The aforementioned themes of gender, sexuality, and religion that have emerged will now be further explored through the text and music of *Considering Matthew Shepard*.

3.1 Themes in the Text and Music

Themes of gender, sexuality, humanity, and inclusive Christianity are found throughout the music and text of *Considering Matthew Shepard*. In this section, specific examples of these themes are described and characterized, and the work's treatment of each theme is analyzed. See Figure 3.1 below for a map of key themes that will be addressed throughout the work.

Highlighted Themes in Select Movements of <i>Considering Matthew Shepard</i>																		
1	2	6	7	8	9	11	15	16	19	20	21	24	28	29	30	31	32	33
Cattle, Horses, Sky, and Grass	Ordinary Boy	Recitation II	The Fence (that night)	Recitation III	A Protestor	Recitation IV	We Are All Sons: Part I	I Am Like You / We Are All Sons: Part II	The Fence (one week later)	Recitation VII	Stars	Gently Rest (Deer Lullaby)	The Fence (after) / The Wind	Pilgrimage	Meet Me Here	Thanks / Even in this Rain	All of Us	Cattle, Horses, Sky, and Grass (Reprise)
Gender																		
Sexuality																		
Humanity & Inclusive Christianity																		
	Prologue	Passion													Epilogue			

Figure 3.1: Highlighted Themes in Select Movements of *Considering Matthew Shepard*

3.1.1 Gender in the Text and Music

As mentioned earlier, gender archetypes have longstanding roots in America and the rest of the world. When it comes to masculinity, specific traits and gender roles have been seen throughout history, especially in religion. *Considering Matthew Shepard* uses particular text and musical elements to bring these undertones of gender roles and expectations to the work. Though the work does not explicitly mention gender, this theme is implicit throughout. Use of specific voice parts in some movements as well as lack of specified voice parts in other movements help to make statements about gender in relation to the story of Matthew Shepard's life, statements that may be absorbed subconsciously by the audience. Additionally, some of the libretto speaks to gender, which helps the audience make these connections.

The use of singer-specific voice parts to portray gender norms is perhaps most apparent towards the beginning of the work, in a section that spans "Recitation III" and "A Protestor." In the recitation, a speaker recalls Matt's death and the Westboro Baptist Church's picketing of Matt's funeral:

The next morning, Matthew was found by a cyclist, a fellow student, who at first thought he was a scarecrow. After several days in a coma and on life support, Matthew Shepard died on October 12, at 12:53 AM. At the funeral, which took place on Friday, October 16, at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Casper, Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church protested outside.⁶⁵

This recitation is significant for several key reasons. It represents the moment Matt passes away in the oratorio. The significance of Matthew's death is highlighted by a

⁶⁵ Johnson, Newman, and Browne, *Considering Matthew Shepard Vocal Score*.

brief moment of silence and a fermata in measure 7 of this Recitation (See Figure 3.2), instructing the reader to pause at this announcement. This work does not operate on a linear timetable, as his Earthly death announced in this recitation comes before a sequence of events that later feature Matthew again, though perhaps in another form. This is one instance where the narrative seems more traditional and linear in time, with Matthew being absent as a living character following his death, and the next movement centering around events at his funeral. In this way, we understand Matt's death as symbolic, and his reappearance(s) later in the oratorio is understood in a spirit-like sense. This recitation explicitly sets up the tension between Matthew as an individual and his symbolic significance as a representative of gender transgression against the Westboro Baptist Church, which portrays and celebrates traditional roles in "A Protestor."

Unlike the majority of other recitations which only feature an accompanying piano, "Recitation III" is somewhat orchestrated. Continuing after the silent moment holding space for Matthew's death, we observe mounting drama in the orchestra, accompanying the narrator's text about the protest. The music is similar in character to the beginning of the next movement, with an *attaca* immediately following the fermata in m. 27. This leads directly into Mvt. 9, where the gender roles of the church members are highlighted, and the nature of Matthew's gender transgressions and the associated symbolism becomes even clearer.

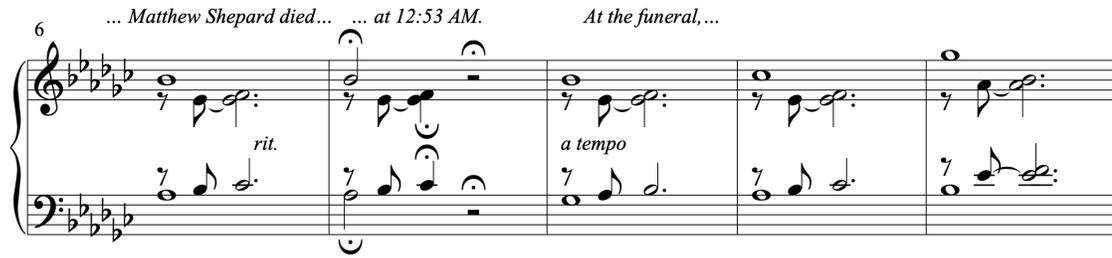


Figure 3.2: Excerpt from “Recitation III”

Also one of the work’s most unforgettable movements, Movement 9, “A Protestor,” possesses a musical and textual “shock-factor.” It stands alone as the sole moment in which the antagonists voice their feelings against Matt and queerness as a whole, while highlighting traditional gender roles by using male and female voices from the chorus in starkly contrasting ways. “A Protestor” is a pivotal movement in the work because it highlights the intersectionality between religion/spirituality, gender, and sexuality, focusing especially on gender. In the text, the men make it clear that deviating from gender and sexual norms is not acceptable, so much so that deviance is deserving of a violent death and eternity in Hell: “A boy who takes a boy to bed? Where I come from that’s not polite. He asked for it you got that right. The fires of Hell burn hot and red. The only good fag is a fag that’s dead.” The men go on to reinforce their message on gender: “A man and a woman, the good Lord said.” This references the traditional view of marriage and the gender roles within. While the men are singing these texts, the women are continuously repeating the word “kreuzige,” “crucify” in German. As the men espouse their views on gender and sexual deviance, the women are not only going along with this but rather encouraging it by chanting “crucify.” Eventually they break from the repetition in a new lullaby section: “Come on kids, it’s time for bed. Say your pray’rs,

kiss Dad good night. A boy who takes a boy to bed? The fires of Hell burn hot and red. Crucify, crucify the light!” The women take the motherly role of caring for the children, while instilling in them the thoughts their husbands adamantly promote. They directly quote their husbands: “A boy who takes a boy to bed? The fires of Hell burn hot and red.” In this way, the text highlights traditional gender roles where the men lead the families and control the values of the family, while the women support their husbands’ views, care for the children, and instill these viewpoints into their children.

The chorus, which up until this point in the oratorio has mostly only adopted the character of a sympathetic or neutral narrator, is now firmly entrenched in the role of the oppressor. In this case, the chorus represents an existing entity, specifically Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church, who famously picketed Matt’s funeral. Their identity is significant because rarely are the characters in this oratorio named, or based off of real people, and in this instance, the entire chorus represents a known religious group.

Traditional gender roles are highlighted through this portion of the movement. The chorus is divided into sections where only the men or only the women sing together. This separation of voices by gender highlights the perceived difference in gender roles between men and women in accordance with “traditional” viewpoints, representing what members of the Westboro Baptist Church might believe. The men do not sing with the women, and the women do not sing with the men; doing so crosses a boundary in the same way that queerness crosses gender boundaries. Although I am aware that some singers performing in the chorus of these works may not identify with binary gender roles or standard voice assignments, I choose to respectfully refer to the Sopranos and Altos through their roles as “Women,” and the Tenors and Basses as “Men.” This is largely to

streamline the conversation around a more binary gender structure, as the effectiveness of this movement is born out of strict gender archetypes enforced in the traditional view.

The music at the start of this movement evokes feelings of uneasiness and unrest in the listener, which is echoed in the text by the women's jarring, uneven repetition of the word "kreuzige." This is a reference to the crowd scene in the chorus of Bach's *St. John Passion*, but a more contemporary resonance may also raise the specter of Nazi Germany. Although this may not be the intended imagery, a German chorus calling for violence is a typical American trope to invoke Nazi Germany to make a political point.

The opening begins with three measures of piano quoting Benjamin Britten's "This little babe" from his *Ceremony of Carols*. Its inclusion suggests a juxtaposition of ideas about Hell, as "This little babe" references a picture of an innocent Jesus coming to surprise the gates of Hell and defeat Satan, whereas in this movement, the protestors reference Hell as a destination for Matthew and all who are like him. Overall, this suggests a subtext that innocence will prevail over evil. The parallel idea that is foreshadowed in "A Protestor" is that inclusive liberal Christianity, and a greater inclusive American viewpoint, will win out over exclusionary conservative Christianity represented by the Westboro Baptist Church.

These first few measures are followed by a chilling syncopated pattern featuring strings and percussion beginning in measure 4 (See Figure 3.3). This pattern includes short staccato figures with abrupt rests, and the end of melodic lines are sometimes left unresolved. Johnson changes the rhythmic pattern once the listeners believe they understand the sequence. This creates a feeling of uneasiness in the listener, and the

intended affect of unrest becomes clear from the very beginning, continuing from the end of the recitation.

The image shows a musical score for an excerpt from "A Protestor". It consists of two systems of music. The first system is for Piano and Strings/Guitar. The Piano part is in 3/4 time, marked "Grave" with a tempo of approximately 90 beats per minute. It begins with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic, followed by a ritardando (*rit.*) section, and ends with a piano (*p*) section marked "a tempo". The Strings and Guitar part enters in the final measure of the first system. The second system continues the Piano part, starting at measure 5, with a similar staccato rhythmic pattern.

Figure 3.3: Excerpt from “A Protestor”

In this movement, the musical sections may overlap with each other, but never with similar material or text between the men and women. They remain separate entities occupying the same space. An example of this begins in measure 11 (See Figure 3.4), where the women sing “kreuzige” on a staccato rhythm with the upper strings, while the men sing “A boy who takes a boy to bed...” with the lower strings on a more melodic line that overlaps and intersects with the women’s driving staccato pattern. While the men confidently sing their line up and down the scale, at one point even laughing their melody, the women sing an anxious staccato pattern, reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes of male confidence, strength, and bravado. In this way, the interjections of the men and women are different, yet when layered together they practically fill all rests within the section. They form a continuous section of singing, suggesting they represent the circumscribed societal roles of men and women that contributed to the culture that led

to the murder of Matthew Shepard. In this way, traditional gender roles allow for an “othering” of anyone who does not adhere to them, and the prescribed societal roles of men and women perpetuate this militant “othering.” As in the music, these roles combine to create an atmosphere that welcomes violence against those who do not fit these roles, especially as the men sing their lines that portray gay men specifically as deserving of violent deaths.

The image shows a musical score excerpt from 'A Protestor', starting at measure 11. It features four staves: two vocal staves for women and two for men. The women's parts are in the upper staves, and the men's parts are in the lower staves. The music is in a minor key with a complex, syncopated rhythm. The lyrics are: 'kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, boy who _takes a ___ boy to bed? Where I come from that's not po - lite. boy who _takes a ___ boy to bed? Where I come from that's not po - lite.'

Figure 3.4: Excerpt from “A Protestor”

The women singing “kreuzige” gives the impression that they are egging the men on, supporting them in a similar way to that of the crowds calling to Pontius Pilate for Christ’s death. Their close harmonies add extended tension followed by short periods of resolution. This text is the first to insinuate Matt as the central “Christ-like” figure in the oratorio, and its inclusion in the “Passion” portion of the work is the most literal reference to the Passion genre of all movements in this section.

While the repeated word “kreuzige” portrays the women in an active role supporting the actions of their husbands and the vocal line emphasizes this in a caricatured way, another section of this movement portrays them in a more passive or subordinate role. The text. “Come on kids, it’s time for bed. Say your prayers, kiss Dad goodnight,” may suggest a woman that is both pious and religious, and one who accepts the elevation of her husband in the household. Musically, in this section there is also juxtaposition of a sweet lullaby melody with the bedtime prayers that creates a chilling effect, foreshadowing the indoctrination of homophobic views that these children may face (See Figure 3.5). This is again noteworthy compared to the quoted portion of Britten’s “This little babe,” as the lullaby in this movement emphasizes sin and Hell, whereas “This little babe” is more about salvation from the fires of Hell. The disconnect between the meaning of these texts suggests a misguided and misdirected hatred toward gay boys that is not consistent with Christian values. The women continue, repeating word for word what the men have said just moments earlier, with “A boy who takes a boy to bed, the fires of hell burn hot and red.” They echo their husbands’ sentiments, showing total and unquestioning support in passing this violent view onto their children. In this sense, while the women may be seen as the bystanders in Matt’s story by some, they also play an active role behind the scenes in both indoctrinating their children and supporting their husbands’ actions. They do nothing to stop the men in their lives from committing heinous, violent crimes, reinforcing the homophobic message their husbands espouse, though perhaps in a seemingly more indirect way. The analogy of the bystander to the murderer holds weight. If one does nothing to stop or prevent a terrible outcome, then they themselves are also responsible for it. This stereotype of women, in this case also

religious, who serve their husbands without question, adds perspective to the unique blame this type of woman garners for their part in a society that disenfranchises queer people, including those who do not adhere to traditional gender norms.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Gordon and Meyer, “Gender Nonconformity as a Target of Prejudice, Discrimination, and Violence against LGB Individuals.”

Moderately $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 70$

42 **Soprano unis.** *mf hardened*
Come on kids, it's _ time for bed. _ Say your pray'rs, kiss Dad good

Alto unis. *mf hardened*
Come on kids, it's _ time for bed. _ Say your pray'rs, kiss Dad good

Tenor unis. *pp*
Mmm

Bass unis. *pp*
Mmm

Moderately $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 70$

pp Cello *p* + Guitar

45

night. A boy who takes a boy to bed? The fires of Hell burn hot and red.

night. A boy who takes a boy to bed? The fires of Hell burn hot and red.

Figure 3.5: Excerpt from “A Protestor”

The men in “A Protestor” represent how traditional gender norms can lead to violent hyper-masculinity. This is especially true when it comes to men who do not conform to what is viewed as traditional gender expression and sexuality. These men are hyper-focused on Matt’s sexuality. They are unswaying in their views and ways and cannot consider an opposite point of view. These men are violent, and they pedal murder. This is evidenced when they sing “Beneath the hunter’s moon he bled. That must have been a pretty sight.” in a round, while the women again encourage them, continuously singing “kreuzige” over and over (See Figure 3.6). Going so far as viewing him as prey even, “beneath the hunter’s moon,” they see Matt as an “other,” undeserving of God’s love, and of saving from damnation, and celebrate his death as “a pretty sight” for that reason. God has predetermined Matt’s place in Hell, so far as these men are concerned. They will not hear that Matt attends church, or believes in God, or tries to do right in the world. They do not recognize his Episcopal Church as a house of God.

29 Soprano, Alto I & II *poco f*
 kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge,

Soprano, Alto III *poco f*
 kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge,

Tenor, Bass I *Tenors & Basses divided evenly in 3 ff*

Tenor, Bass II *ff* Be - neath the —

Tenor, Bass III *ff* Be - neath the — hun - ter's —
 Be - neath the — hun - ter's — moon he

31
 kreu - zi - ge,
 kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge,
 hun - ter's — moon he bled. That must have been a
 moon he bled. That must have been a pret - ty
 bled. That must have been a pret - ty sight!

The image shows a musical score for a vocal ensemble and piano. It consists of two systems of music, starting at measure 29 and ending at measure 31. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal parts include Soprano (Alto I & II, Alto III), Tenor, and Bass (I, II, III). The piano accompaniment is written for grand piano. The lyrics are in German and English. The tempo/mood is marked 'poco f' and 'ff'. The score includes dynamic markings, articulation marks, and phrasing slurs.

Figure 3.6: Excerpt from “A Protestor”

The men in this movement represent part of a problematic trend of aggression against gay men. This homophobically-motivated aggression is exacerbated by the previously mentioned culture of masculinity seen throughout history, both in the church and in society as a whole. In the United States, gay men account for over half of people targeted for bias-motivated aggression offenses.⁶⁷ Like in the case of Matthew's death, the perpetrators are often young white men.⁶⁸ Unlike the men who killed Matthew, the men in "A Protestor" aren't physically committing a violent act, but they show aggression in the text and musical line, where there is a strong 3-part canonic section on the "hunter's moon" text, shown previously in Figure 3.6. They also actively contribute to the perpetuation of the beliefs that lead to actual violent offenses. Colleen Sloan notes that these motivations can be "understood as a way to preserve exclusive masculine identity and in-group status by punishing those men who step outside rigidly constructed gender boundaries, rather than a reaction to target sexual orientation alone."⁶⁹ In this way, these violent offenses are likely more based on the perception of these men not conforming to gender norms, rather than being based on their sexuality itself.

Another aspect of this type of violent behavior may have to do with the correlation between size and perceived strength. Consider the appearance of Matthew Shepard. Matt's size is explicitly mentioned in "Ordinary Boy," when the chorus sings "and his frame was rather small." At just twenty-one, Matt is described as short and

⁶⁷ Sloan, Berke, and Zeichner, "Bias-Motivated Aggression against Men: Gender Expression and Sexual Orientation as Risk Factors for Victimization."

⁶⁸ Sloan, Berke, and Zeichner.

⁶⁹ Sloan, Berke, and Zeichner.

extremely thin by Doc O'Connor, a cab driver from the area recalling an instance when he once picked up Matt. Doc O'Connor is quoted in *The Laramie Project* as describing Shepard as "a little guy, about five-two, soakin' wet, I betcha ninety-seven pounds tops." Studies show that men are perceived as more masculine if they are taller and heavier.⁷⁰ Matt's size may have made him a target, as size and strength are correlations associated with a masculine archetype.

Aside from the masculine stereotypes that help shape a largely heterosexual archetype, an archetype exists among homosexual males as well. As Gregory Herek has documented, gay men have been historically misunderstood and stigmatized using outrageous stereotypes, one after the next.⁷¹ In the nineteenth century, sexologists theorized that male homosexuals "had a female soul trapped in a man's body, and therefore possessed the personality characteristics of women."⁷² This led to associations with effeminacy, which has long been perceived as a cultural norm and stereotype among the homosexual male community. Some gay men choose to positively embrace effeminacy in their everyday dress, and some, too, choose not to worry about stereotypes at all. Other men choose either not to believe in or not to embrace any physical distinction at all.

⁷⁰ University of St Andrews, "Size Matters: Men Perceived as More Masculine If They Are Taller and Heavier, Regardless Face Shape."

⁷¹ Herek, "Heterosexuals' Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men: Correlates and Gender Differences."

⁷² Cole, "'Macho Man': Clones and the Development of a Masculine Stereotype."

The portrayal of gender is continued later in the work, again in the grouping of choral voices in ways that bolstered gender norms. This means that audiences will associate tenor and bass voices with men (because of expected biological range) and their characters with a masculine point of view, even though women can sing in these ranges. Mvt. 15: “We Are All Sons Part I,” begins with a chorus of tenors and basses (perceived as men) singing in unison to poetry by Michael Dennis Browne: “We are all sons of fathers and mother, We are all sons.” The theme of this text is a shared human experience, particularly among “sons.” It alludes to the depth and strength of relationships among men, which are all too uncommon and unknown to some men: “We are all rivers, the roar of waters, we are all sons.” This language also evokes biblical themes about the lineage of man and Abraham. The piano begins on a single unison note, repeating quarter note pulses. It then briefly moves down a whole step before resolving to a warmer progression concurrent with the entrance of the chorus of men in m. 3. Certainly, the text and instrumentation here share commonalities in theme and purpose. A single unison note in the beginning of the work acts almost like a heartbeat that connects each of the men. This uniformity, along with the text by Browne that stresses the same experiences of these men, works to create a “oneness” between all elements. The men are united in voice due to their position in the world as sons and men, including all male characters in the work.

The end of the movement continues directly into Mvt. 16: “I Am Like You / We Are All Sons: Part II,” where a quartet of singers begins. In this movement, the four solo voices from the chorus represent everyday people wondering if they are in any way like the men who murdered Matt. In this way, “I Am Like You” seeks to connect with the

humanity of Matt's murderers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. The text demonstrates an understanding that they, too, are human and had goals and family members they loved. The quartet's thoughts of this male-driven violence is captured in the text, "I am so horrified and just so angry and confused and scared that you could do things to another boy, they were so cruel and undeserved..." They are emotionally reacting to the fact that these two boys were able to harm another boy – even though all of them share the common human experience as "sons." The quartet is perhaps horrified and scared because they wonder if they, too, are capable of such atrocities.

The quartet share their own instances of imperfection, where they have become upset, made mistakes, or have done something that they now regret. This movement highlights the aforementioned violence that men sometimes demonstrate toward non-conforming men but extends those feelings to all members of the quartet, and in consequence, all genders. An example of this extension of feelings to all people begins in m. 60, when all four parts sing together "I've come unhinged and made mistakes and hurt people very much," indicating that all people, regardless of gender, are capable of hurting others.

After the quartet finishes, this movement transitions back into the "We Are All Sons" theme, where all men sing together again. In this way, the men are united by their gender and share common human experiences, particularly the experience of navigating a society where hyper-masculinity is celebrated. This is perhaps best illustrated in the ending text of this movement, "If you could know for one moment how it is to live in our bodies within the world, if you could know, you ask too much of us; you ask too little." Coming out of "I Am Like You," this second part of "We Are All Sons" takes on new

meaning, now eliciting thoughts that Matt's murderers are included among these "sons," and that they, too, had to deal with a world in which it is difficult to navigate relationships with other men.

3.1.2 Sexuality in the Text and Music

Much like gender archetypes, attitudes about sexuality have historically been shaped by religion. Many Christian churches have drawn on biblical scriptures to justify intolerance of homosexuality, and this underlying attitude is present in *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Both the music and text are used strategically to remind the audience that this discrimination, thoroughly embedded in our society, is ultimately what ended Matthew's life. At the same time, Johnson aims not to make sexuality a main theme of the work.

Throughout the oratorio, Matt is never given the chance to speak about his sexuality. We see the first suggestion of Matt's sexuality by one of the speakers in "Recitation II," an anonymous figure adopting a narrative function, recalling that Matt attended a meeting of the LGBT club at his college on the same the night he was attacked:

Tuesday night. Matthew attended a meeting of the University of Wyoming's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association, then joined others for coffee at the College Inn. Around 10:30, he went to the Fireside Bar, where he later met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Near midnight, they drove him to a remote area, tied him to a split-rail fence, beat him horribly, and left him to die in the cold of night.⁷³

⁷³ Johnson, Newman, and Browne, *Considering Matthew Shepard Vocal Score*.

The fact that he attended the University of Wyoming's LGBT Association meeting alludes to his sexuality. This recitation by a narrator highlights how quickly Matt went from being surrounded by people who likely supported him and celebrated his identity at the meeting to being in a place where others violently attacked him for the same identity. In this way, the text both hints at Matt's sexuality and illustrates the difficulty LGBT people have moving through the world, as some spaces are not always safe.

The most direct reference to Matt's sexuality comes not from Matt or a family member, but rather by the chorus of protestors in Mvt. 9: "A Protestor," as we have already seen. In this movement, the chorus, representing the Westboro Baptist Church, protest Matt's sexuality and his salvation, as they preach that for "a boy who takes a boy to bed," "the fires of Hell burn hot and red." Though the sex act of taking another boy to bed is explicitly mentioned, which is something the Westboro Baptist Church would assume of all gay men including Matt, his sexual identity as a gay man is never overtly mentioned. Outside of these few implications, the absence of the word "gay" is startling because the idea that we must know he is gay is seemingly central to the work. The point of Matt being portrayed as ordinary in this work is significant because his sexuality had always made him unordinary.

The identity of Matthew Shepard, including his sexual identity, is revealed to us gradually and in specific ways throughout the work. Matt is described by himself, his family, and in texts by various authors of the libretto. His portrayal is affected by the development of the narrative of the work, which sees Matthew's legacy rise from Matt's life. The movement that most describes Matt's life in *Considering Matthew Shepard* is Mvt. 2: "Ordinary Boy." There is both joy and pain in the memories shared in this

movement, including celebrating Matt's life, along with his likes and dislikes. Craig Hella Johnson wrote the text for "Ordinary Boy," but also included texts by Judy Shepard, Matthew's mother, and by Matthew himself, from a journal he owned in his youth, excerpts of which are available in the Smithsonian online.⁷⁴ These texts were likely included to give the audience a sense of how Matt viewed himself and how he was viewed by his family. The narrator begins the movement in saying, "Let's talk about Matt." The chorus then sings a repetition of the title text, "Ordinary boy."

Two characters, also soloists, start by introducing Matthew, before he later makes an appearance. Throughout the movement, the chorus interjects frequently with more depictions of Matt's life. In the very beginning of the movement, Matt is briefly introduced by a Narrator who covers some basic background information about Matt. Here, the narrator is specified as a female voice, and this is the only movement that includes a sung, specified portion of the narrator role(s). This is significant in that the female narrator's voice may portray a sense of empathy and sympathy for the tragic loss of Matt's life. The narrator introduces his month of birth, his birthplace, and the names of his parents and sibling. Last, the narrator foreshadows the importance of Matthew's life and legacy in saying, "and one day his name came to be known around the world." Though his sexuality is not explicitly mentioned here, it is implied and clear to those who already know the story that this remains connected to his identity, as Matt will forever be "known around the world" for the murder that was motivated by his sexuality.

⁷⁴ Smithsonian Institution, "Matthew Shepard."

Judy Shepard is next to talk about Matt. She begins with, “You knew him as Matthew; to us, he was Matt.” This is important, because we begin to pay more attention to how Matthew’s name is portrayed throughout the oratorio, changing between Matt and Matthew. Judy’s suggestion here is that Matthew Shepard is often viewed through the lens of his horrific murder and the attention and changes it brought to law. Matt is Judy’s son, and as the text begins, an “Ordinary Boy.” Matt is an “Ordinary Boy”: human, son, and child of God, and Matthew Shepard is a tragic, gay icon. In this way, he is multifaceted, being both an ordinary human and child of God in his life and celebrated as a gay icon after his death, two identities that are seen as mutually exclusive by many Evangelical Christians.

This is a rejection of a conservative Christian interpretation of the Bible verses used to condemn homosexuality, as Matthew is able to be viewed as both a child of God and a gay icon. These differing identities are seen elsewhere throughout the work. For example, Matt’s faith is highlighted in “Stars,” when his father said that as Matt lay dying, he had “one more friend with him. One he grew to know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark’s in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew’s in Laramie.” Matthew is also alluded to as a gay icon in the work, as in “The Fence (one week later),” when droves of people come to visit the fence and create a shrine of “flowers and photos, pray’rs and poems, crystals and candles, sticks and stones” to commemorate his life and death.

From m. 36 of “Ordinary Boy,” the chorus sings about the things Matt did in his lifetime, and his hobbies, but perhaps most importantly his relationship and interaction with his family. At the end of the first sequence, Matt is described as having sung “songs

his Father taught him,” with the inclusion of the melody in *Freres Jacque* on the folk song’s text. Judy Shepard enters again in m. 63, recalling her wonderful relationship with her son, and how much she is reminded of him - the good memories, and the painful tragedy that is implicitly linked to his sexuality.

Finally, Matt appears and speaks for himself, singing texts direct from journal entries that he had written when he was younger. It must be noticed that he does not explicitly mention his sexuality, though he does think of himself as a sensitive, warm person who especially loves theatre and performing, which may imply his sexuality to some people. In fact, the inclusion of a large section of text from the journal may be making a comment about his sexuality by not explicitly commenting on it – that is to say that Matt had a variety of likes and dislikes, just as any person would, and these things do not overtly indicate one sexuality or another. Images of these entries became famous among followers of Matt’s story and are now housed in the Smithsonian Institution.⁷⁵ Our narrator for this movement introduces this context to us, and Matt begins describing how he views himself, and quickly moves into a list of things and activities that he “likes” or “loves.” The narrator acts as a passageway between past and present, freely moving between realms; one where a young Matt shares his zeal for everyday life, and another in our modern world where he is most often remembered as Matthew. The expansive list of Matt’s likes includes Wyoming, Europe, positive people, and driving, to name several. The chorus enters singing Matt’s texts of his likes and concludes with a clever dramatic climax in the music on Matt’s love of theatre. After this point, we are drawn back to the

⁷⁵ Smithsonian Institution.

title theme of the movement, as the chorus sings again, describing Matthew as an “Ordinary Boy.”

Matt’s “ordinariness” was emphasized so early in the work for several reasons. A general audience of concertgoers coming to see this work might include some who know very little about Matt. Two of the most common themes or words associated with Matt’s story, in a most simplified reading, are that he was both “gay” and “murdered.” The two are connected by a tragic event and both contribute to the narrative at hand. Yet we are introduced to Matt as he might introduce himself to anyone else, and it helps us avoid the prejudice of the media and our ideas of Matthew from his legacy alone. His life seemed generally a happy one, and his identity here is not tied to the grief that we associate with his final days on Earth. Furthermore, this movement may serve to remind those in the audience who view his sexuality as aberrant that he was first and foremost an ordinary human, just like everyone in the audience. Matthew’s identity is not overly reliant on his homosexuality, which is not often mentioned explicitly in the work, though it is implicitly a running theme. We are made to reframe our entire perception of Matthew before the Passion (middle) section of the work. Matt’s story is typically defined ranging from trailblazing gay rights advocacy laws inspired by his death to the simpler things he enjoyed and struggled with in life. In a way, the work sets this as Matt’s framing of Matt’s own story, leaving out overt activism altogether, which rejects both the view of Matt as a queer icon by some and an unnatural deviant by others.

By focusing less on sexuality and other key “hot topic” social issues, Matt is made a less polarizing figure, which is important to the mass appeal of the oratorio. One must imagine that though some in the audience, even, may not agree with the extent of

equal rights that LGBT Americans enjoy today, this work attempts to find common ground in Matt's life, with an emphasis on love and the value of humanity. The audience learns very quickly that Matt's humanity will be celebrated in this work, and that the oratorio won't just be a tragic retelling of his story. The work gives an audience space to grieve, to think, and to ponder, as they attempt to move forward in this work with a fuller understanding of who Matt was. In this way, *Considering Matthew Shepard* is not the type of social justice work that explicitly tells audiences what to do and think but rather uses Matthew's story to change hearts and minds, which is possibly the only way certain people will come to real social change.

While Matt's humanity, implicitly including his sexuality, is portrayed as normal and ordinary near the beginning of the work, later in "A Protestor," his sexuality is made to be a defining factor by those who view it as a sin leading to Hell. As noted earlier, this movement intersects gender, sexuality, and religion, with sexuality being the specific thing that the Westboro Baptist Church focuses on. Later in the movement, after the men have concluded singing, the women make a final appearance. They put their children to bed, singing and accompanied by themes that are reminiscent of a lullaby. However, they then revisit the text, "A boy who takes a boy to bed, the fires of hell burn hot and red." They sing this to their children, on the same lullaby-like tune. They are knowingly spreading their own ideology to their children. The disconnect between the text and the music is staggering. They finish by singing "crucify the light," as we imagine their children drifting off to sleep.

The men in this movement are more forthright in their feelings about gay people. Their words blame Matt for his own death and paint him as unnatural:

A boy who takes a boy to bed?
Where I come from that's not polite
He asked for it, you got that right
The fires of Hell burn hot and red
The only good fag is a fag that's dead.⁷⁶

This text is accompanied by an equally abrasive rhythm and theme. The style of singing for the men in this section is noted as “accented, rough.” Phrases often end with a punched, off-beat, accented note, such as “dead” in m. 19 (See Figure 3.7). The men of the chorus are empowered in the company of like-minded men, represented by the growing number of entrances each time their initial verse repeats beginning in m. 29. The chanting chorus of hatred grows louder, with more men entering totaling four parts. Finally, they are moved to a cynical laughter with “Ha” repeated in a style noted as “mocking! heavy accents” (See Figure 3.8).

⁷⁶ Johnson, Newman, and Browne, *Considering Matthew Shepard Vocal Score*.

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kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge,

kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge,

hot and red. The on - ly good fag is a fag that's dead.

hot and red. The on - ly good fag is a fag that's dead.

Detailed description: The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "A Protestor". It begins at measure 17. The score is written for voice and piano. The key signature has four flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat, D-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal lines are in German and English. The piano accompaniment consists of chords in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The lyrics are: "kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge," followed by "hot and red. The on - ly good fag is a fag that's dead." The piano part provides harmonic support for the vocal lines.

Figure 3.7: Excerpt from “A Protestor”

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The musical score is for a piece in 7/8 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). It consists of six staves. The top two staves are vocal lines, both starting with the word 'Mmm'. The third staff is the vocal line for the lyrics, starting with 'red.' and followed by a series of 'Ha ha ha!' with 'mocking! heavy accents' written above. The fourth staff is the bass line for the lyrics, starting with 'Ha ha ha!' with 'mocking! heavy accents' written above. The fifth staff is the bass line for the lyrics, starting with 'ha ha ha!' with 'mocking! heavy accents' written above. The bottom two staves are the piano accompaniment, featuring a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand.

Figure 3.8: Excerpt from “A Protestor”

3.1.3 Humanity and Inclusive Christianity in the Text and Music

Religion is integral to the issues and themes discussed in *Considering Matthew Shepard*. We have already seen how religion has shaped attitudes toward gender and sexuality and how these themes are represented in the work. On the other hand, the movement toward a liberal Christian viewpoint, described earlier, is its own major theme throughout the work. Johnson uses specific music and text to not only create religious undertones throughout the work, but to explicitly call for a fully inclusive environment, where all people come together in unity and acknowledge one another’s humanity.

Though the work was not composed to be performed for a church congregation, the great many nuanced mentions of God in text and affiliated musical quotes/styles, and its parallels to the Passion model leads us to associate some of its themes through a

Christian lens. In this case, it is relevant that our lens is a modern American, Christian one. This modern liberal Christian viewpoint that some churches and denominations have moved toward in the twenty-first century allows for reconciliation of these polarizing areas. Diversity of gender and sexuality, among other things, are welcomed, accepted, and celebrated in ways that are in stark contrast to exclusionary Christian views that do not allow for identities outside of those deemed appropriate.

These religious undertones begin in the very first measures of the work, where Johnson quotes J.S. Bach's *Prelude in C Major* from Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. He continues to quote Bach's music in strategic instances throughout *Considering Matthew Shepard*. These moments can give the audience a subconscious association with God or religion, as much of Bach's music is known to do, giving him the nickname of "The Fifth Evangelist."⁷⁷ His music is known to evoke a feeling of experiencing God even in those who are not religious. For example, the radical skeptic Friedrich Nietzsche admitted upon hearing some of Bach's music, "One who has completely forgotten Christianity truly hears it here as gospel."⁷⁸ Even a self-admitted atheist of conviction, Piotr Jaworski, commented on Bach's music by saying, "And I love sacred music, especially Baroque sacred music, what leads us to Bach - also his Passions, Cantatas, organ works...If there is a God - IMO - He is exactly in such works."⁷⁹ Perhaps

⁷⁷ Christianity Today, "Johann Sebastian Bach: 'The Fifth Evangelist.'"

⁷⁸ Wohlfarth, *Johann Sebastian Bach*.

⁷⁹ Bach Cantatas Website, "Bach and Religion: Part 1."

this is one reason why Johnson chose to include Bach's music throughout the piece, resulting in spiritual and/or religious overtones without explicitly being mentioned.

This inclusivity among nature and humanity, leading to eternal life together, is highlighted in several other movements through specific use of text and music. "The Fence (that night)," begins with the basses singing a translation of a famous text from Hildegard von Bingen in unison chant-like melody. The translation, from Barbara Newman's *Symphonia*, reads, "Most noble evergreen with your roots in the sun, you shine in the cloudless sky of a sphere no earthly eminence can grasp, you blush like the dawn, you burn like a flame of the sun."⁸⁰ Johnson and Conspirare would go on to sing and record this same text in the ninth movement of Kevin Puts' work, "To Touch the Sky." Ivan M. Granger, author of the Poetry Chaikhana Blog, describes this evergreen in the poetry as evoking an image of the Tree of Life, an evergreen which is often used to symbolize eternal life.⁸¹ This evergreen stays vibrant through all seasons, even winter, "the season of death and withdrawal." Christ is also connected to this evergreen imagery, as he too is eternally alive and has overcome death, which in terms of Matthew Shepard's story, may be associating the gay icon of Matthew as eternally alive, having overcome and transcended his death. Additionally, the Messiah is prophesized to be "the branch" and then ends up crucified, "hung on a tree." Granger says that, for these reasons "when Hildegard, a Catholic nun, sings to the evergreen, she is singing to Christ, the Beloved,

⁸⁰ Hildegard von Bingen and Newman, *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the "Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum" (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations)*.

⁸¹ Granger, "Hildegard von Bingern - O Most Noble Greenness."

the Living One.”⁸² The evergreen that represents greenness is an unmistakable representation of the life force for all living things, consistent with the themes of inclusivity, liberal Christianity, and spirituality in the work. After this unison chant-like melody setting of “most noble evergreen...,” a bass soloist, portraying the fence, continues singing of Matt’s heaviness as he “held him all night long.” The chorus integrates their “Most noble evergreen,” into the closing lines of the bass solo. The idea of evergreen equating to everlasting, even in death, also makes an appearance in the text of “Deer Song.” “Welcome, calling, Always evergreen, always here.” Even as Matthew’s death has been announced, we come to understand that Matthew is very much alive in some sense.

Later in the work, Johnson alludes to the biblical crucifixion of Christ in Movement 9, “A Protestor,” when he includes the German text “kreuzige, kreuzige!” repeatedly as an obvious homage to Bach’s model. The inclusion of German language, which appears in no other movement within the work, is extremely deliberate and poignant in its use. The English text translation is literally, “crucify, crucify!”, signifying an important parallel to the Passion genre. In the *St. Matthew Passion*, similar texts appear in the set of choruses where the crowd accosts and insults Jesus. For example, in Movement 50b., the chorus proclaims “Lass ihn kreuzigen!” which translates to “Let him be crucified!”⁸³ Both choruses mock and call for violence against the accused at the center of their stories. In Bach’s model, a set of choruses toward the end of the work

⁸² Granger.

⁸³ Dellal, “Bach Cantata Translations.”

represent a “crowd scene,” where Jesus is condemned, as previously mentioned. In *Considering Matthew Shepard*, Matt is already dead, yet the protestors (in this case, the Westboro Baptist Church) picket his funeral to wish him eternal damnation in hell. Johnson includes the scoffing and insults that Bach’s models establishes but flips the timeline on its head entirely to include it after Matt is already deceased. Wishing Christ dead, as in Bach’s work, and wishing Matthew eternal damnation after death, as in the Johnson, show the same hatred from the crowd. The evocation of a common Passion text in the native language of Bach and other early German master composers, and the inclusion of a crowd scene, draws two strong parallels between the works and strengthens the theme of religion in *Considering Matthew Shepard*.

Later in the work, calls for unity, love, and light further emphasize and underscore the theme of Christian inclusivity. Mvt. 11: “Recitation IV,” compiled by Johnson and Michael Dennis Browne from news reports, discusses how Matt Shepard’s death made headlines everywhere. The last line of the recitation is particularly striking, as it summarizes the response of many, who were moved to gather at candlelight vigils in memory of Matthew: “As the news began to spread, many people across the country gathered together...to (silently) speak for life over death, love over hate, light over darkness.” The texts here demonstrate how we are called to emerge from this tragedy. It is communicated that to proceed and triumph, one must actively work in the name of life, love, and light to overcome the death, hate, and darkness that plague our society. Matthew’s life and legacy remind us that we are not there yet. There is much work to do, but the first step is to gather, as a community, together. A community that includes Matthew and “others” is compatible with this inclusive liberal Christian viewpoint.

This theme of coming together is portrayed explicitly in Mvt. 19: “The Fence (one week later),” when the fence describes the many people who came to leave “flowers and photos, pray’rs and poems, crystals and candles, sticks and stones,” turning the fence into a sort of shrine for Matthew. The soloist, representing the fence, stays strong and firm, as the people “come in herds” to “pay homage, and pray, and grieve.” As people come and go from this fence, a shrine, they touch the fence “in unexpected ways, and then move on.” In the libretto included in the vocal score, a quote by a religious leader was included just before this movement. The words of Reverend Stephen M Johnson, a Unitarian minister, underscore the themes in this movement when he said, “I have seen people come out here with a pocketknife and take a piece of the fence, like a relic, like an icon.”⁸⁴ This further implies Matthew as a martyr, as something sacred, in line with the tradition of Christian relics for other martyrs. The droves of people who came to visit the site of Matthew’s tragedy symbolize the many more who have come to experience his story, memorialize him, and then attempt to move on, though they are often touched by his story “in unexpected ways” just as the fence was touched.

The theme of inclusivity in the work is often strengthened by imagery of nature, one section focusing specifically on a connection to the night sky. Mvt. 20: “Recitation VII,” sets up the next movement “Stars,” stating that Matthew’s father made a statement to the court. Mvt. 21: “Stars,” begins with free, ethereal solo piano. Over this piano texture, Matthew’s father reads his statement, which describes Matthew’s surroundings as he tried to survive overnight and into the next day after being beaten and tied to a fence.

⁸⁴ Johnson, Newman, and Browne, *Considering Matthew Shepard Vocal Score*.

He speaks directly to the two boys who killed Matthew, saying, “You left him out there by himself, but he wasn’t alone.” He had his “lifelong friends” there with him:

First, he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time...He had one more friend with him. One he grew to know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark’s in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew’s in Laramie.⁸⁵

This imagery of stars goes beyond Christianity, perhaps to astrology and/or a vaguer picture of spirituality, or even other faith traditions. It indicates that Matthew’s spirit is a part of something larger, something that may not be fully captured in Christianity.

Behind this statement, groups of voices begin entering in an aleatoric fashion with each group often singing one syllable of a word and another group finishing the word, which has the effect of stars sparkling in the night sky. The lyrics that are passed around between groups are “scattered across the sky, blinking in dismay, unable to help being lightyears away, blinking, blinking, blinking...” The word blinking is repeated over and over, with voices gradually fading and exiting, until they disappear. By using human voices in an aleatoric manner to simulate stars, a connection is made between the stars that were there that night with Matthew, his “best friends,” and the humanity that was there with him in spirit. All of humanity experiences the stars of the universe, and this connects us to one another. In this way, the stars here illustrate a call for unity in humanity. Furthermore, Matthew’s father’s allusion to God as also being there with

⁸⁵ Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

Matthew that night – the “one more friend” he grew to know at church – continues the imagery of a unified, accepting Christianity.

In similar fashion to “Stars”, Mvt. 24: “Gently Rest (Deer Lullaby)” furthers the imagery of nature and serenity of the image of Matthew’s suffering as he lay there on the fence. Much of the language in this movement has religious, even specifically Christian, overtones in this way, including phrases such as “child of angels” and “resting in creation.” The phrase “with you always in your starry shelter” evokes the same star imagery mentioned earlier and again emphasizes unity and universality, as Matthew has the universe holding him always. These religious overtones, combined with stars that were with Matthew, again point to a world that values Matthew’s humanity, and one that is consistent with the message of inclusive Christianity.

This music in the movement is comprised mainly of a soft, gentle lullaby on the syllable “doh,” with the various voice parts singing detached but legato notes that make up a full melody only when the parts are layered over one another. Later, the altos enter with the full melody on the text “Gently rest now, you, the child of angels; spirit shining, resting in creation. Universe is holding you so deeply...brother breathing; with you always in your starry shelter, dreaming in the holy home of wonder...” The text is vaguely Christian but just specific enough to elicit imagery a child in Heaven. This tender melody lilts up and down, repeating every two measures, accompanied by the scattered yet connected doh’s of the other voice parts (See Figure 3.9). It represents a deer singing a lullaby to Matthew as he gently makes his way toward heaven, the “holy home of wonder.”

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The musical score is for a piece in D major (two sharps) and 3/4 time. It features eight parts: Soprano I (S. I), Soprano II (S. II), Soprano III (S. III), Alto (A.), Tenor I (T. I), Tenor II (T. II), Bass I (B. I), and Bass II (B. II). The lyrics for the Alto part are: "Gent - ly rest now, you, the child of an - gels; spir - it shin - ing, rest - ing". The score includes vocal lines with solfège syllables (doh) and a piano accompaniment. The tempo/mood marking is *mp*.

Figure 3.9: Excerpt from “Gently Rest (Deer Lullaby)”

This imagery of nature continues with Mvt. 26: “Deer Song,” which portrays the image of a doe that was said to be keeping him company and providing comfort at the fence. The movement imagines a conversation between the deer, a treble chorus, and Matthew. It is important to distinguish this attribution to the character of Matthew here, as outlined in the score, and not Matt, as we recall from Mvt. 2: “Ordinary Boy.” In the

performance notes in the score, Johnson clarifies that “the specific character roles can be performed by different individuals, based on the vocal characteristics of each piece. For example, the solo parts for “Matt Shepard” in Movement 2 could likely be a different singer than for “Matthew Shepard” in movement 23.”⁸⁶ In this movement, Matthew answers the deer, who remind him that he is “welcome” in the next life, in saying:

I'll find all the love I have longed for,
The home that's been calling my heart so long
So soon I'll be cleansed in those waters,
My fevers forever be gone;
Where else on earth but these waters?
No more, no more to be torn;
My own one's, my dearest, are waiting
And I'll weep to be where I belong.⁸⁷

Matthew is delivered from Matt's cruel injustice on Earth. He is no longer in pain. The lullaby style and similar themes of comfort and arrival in heaven in the text suggest a connection to the final lullaby “Ruht wohl” in Bach's *St. John Passion*.

Other aspects of nature that can represent inclusivity, including wind, are used later in the work. One such example can be seen in Mvt. 28: “The Fence (after) / The Wind.” The lyrics and music in this movement are used to transition from controversy and discord toward unity, as portrayed by a growing wind. The initial lyrics highlight the controversial nature of a population that wrestled with social ideas, with voice parts trading words and phrases such as “prayed upon,” “frowned upon,” “revered,” “feared,” “adored,” “abhorred,” “despised,” and “idolized.” In this way, it reflects the reality that Matthew's story, and the value of his life, is viewed in contrasting ways by different

⁸⁶ Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

⁸⁷ Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

groups of people. At the end of this section of the movement, the choir sings the lyrics “gone, but not forgotten,” illustrating the impact that this story had on many people, before transitioning meters into a homophonic section where the choir represents the “winds of the world” that are carrying Matthew “home,” which can be interpreted again as Matthew’s journey into heaven (See Figure 3.10). A unified chorus of voices describes the four winds:

The North Wind carried his father’s laugh,
the South Wind carried his mother’s song,
the East Wind carried his brother’s cheer,
the West Wind carried his lover’s moan.⁸⁸

These “winds of the world” are not Christian, but evoke a sense of something beyond Christianity, to the power of nature and the Universe itself. This may even be in reference to Native American or other belief systems that give particular significance to the four directions.

This imagery of wind carrying Matthew to heaven by a chorus of voices powerfully creates momentum and crescendos to the climax of the movement, at which point “the winds of the World move together a pray’r, to carry that hurt boy home.” Again, themes of religion, nature, and unity abound as Matthew is ushered “home” through unified voices singing “together a pray’r.”

⁸⁸ Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

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South Wind car-ried his moth-er's song, — the East Wind car-ried his broth-er's cheer, —

South Wind car-ried his moth-er's song, — the East Wind car-ried his broth-er's cheer, —

South Wind car-ried his moth-er's song, — the East Wind car-ried his broth-er's cheer, —

South Wind car-ried his moth-er's song, — the East Wind car-ried his broth-er's cheer, —

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the West Wind car-ried his lov-er's moan; the winds of the World move to -

the West Wind car-ried his lov-er's moan; the winds of the World move to -

the West Wind car-ried his lov-er's moan; the winds of the World move to -

the West Wind car-ried his lov-er's moan; the winds of the World move to -

Figure 3.10: Excerpt from “The Fence (after) / The Wind”

After Matthew is “carried home” by the wind, there is again a build from singular to multiple voices that emphasizes a growing inclusivity in the following movement, “Pilgrimage.” As the title implies, here the chorus evokes imagery of walking together. It begins softly with the basses, then each subsequent voice part enters and joins the pilgrimage (See Figure 3.11). The sound slowly builds as the chorus “walks to the fence.” Beauty is evoked explicitly as being all around, “above me,” and “below me” as one by one, voice parts are added to show a growing number of persons taking a physical journey to the fence. As the chorus continues, soloists interject free and spontaneous-like solos with lyrics evoking religious messages from a variety of faith traditions. First is “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” a biblical text, followed by “Yit’ gadal v’ yit kadash,” of the Jewish tradition. Next is “Om Mani Padme Hum,” a Buddhist mantra, and “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit,” another biblical text. This is the most explicit reference to a variety of faith traditions, though they have been implied in some imagery throughout. This fits with the openness and universalist language that liberal Christianity espouses. In a way, this most liberal Christian viewpoint is no longer purely Christian, as it does not set the same narrow boundaries that define Christianity. In *Considering Matthew Shepard*, we have moved away from a work inspired by a purely Christian Passion oratorio, to a new sort of oratorio that allows for inclusive spiritual themes beyond Christianity itself.

The eclectic mix of spirituality in “Pilgrimage” is especially fitting, as this suggests a unity of all peoples and religions walking together on a journey surrounded by beauty. Eventually, the lyrics change to “I reach the fence...” and later “I leave the fence, surrounded by beauty.” At this point, the pilgrimage has come full circle. The audience

has “come to the fence” and experienced the beauty of Matthew’s life, before “leaving the fence.”

The musical score is for an excerpt from "Pilgrimage". It features four vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass, and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into two systems, starting at measure 7 and measure 13.

System 1 (Measures 7-12):

- Vocal Parts:** Soprano and Alto have rests. Tenor and Bass enter at measure 7 with the lyrics "I walk to the fence, I". The Tenor part is marked *pp* and includes the instruction "stagger breathing, one continuous phrase".
- Piano Accompaniment:** Features a steady accompaniment of chords. A *pp* dynamic marking is present, along with the instruction "(for rehearsal only)".

System 2 (Measures 13-18):

- Vocal Parts:** Soprano and Alto have rests. Tenor and Bass continue the phrase "I walk to the fence with beau - ty. I". The Tenor part is marked *pp* and includes the instruction "stagger breathing, one continuous phrase". The Bass part is marked *p* at the end.
- Piano Accompaniment:** Continues with the same accompaniment pattern.

Figure 3.11: Excerpt from “Pilgrimage”

Directly following this pilgrimage is a call to unity in Mvt. 30: “Meet Me Here,” which begins the Epilogue section of the work. Again, the use of a single voice growing into a full chorus is used as a musical tool to audibly portray this developing unity. A single soloist begins, singing, “Meet me here, won’t you meet me here, where the old

fence ends and the horizon begins?” Soon after, the choir enters with a hum under the soloist, as they begin to heed the call to “meet me here.” The soloist goes on to sing about the difficulties of this “long, hard climb” on which we have “carried ancestral sorrow for too long a time,” calling on us to lay our burden down and join them. The dynamics build as slowly the choir begins to transition from hums to singing the text along with the soloist. Imagery of the old fence ending and the sun beginning on the horizon are repeated, symbolizing a movement from the tragedy of Matthew’s story into a new beginning. Eventually, together “we’ll come to the mountain, we’ll go bounding to see that great circle of dancing, and we’ll dance endlessly.” This imagery, too, seems to have religious undertones about heaven/the afterlife, where all are invited to dance joyously forever. Arriving at the *fortissimo* climax of the movement, the choir sings “And we’ll dance with all the children who’ve been lost along the way. We will welcome each other, coming home this glorious day,” Matthew being one of the children who was “lost along the way.” In this way, not only is the imagery of humanity united in this climb toward paradise, but one of reunification with Matthew himself in a place of paradise. Coming out of this section, the choir reverts back to hums while the soloist enters again with the message that “We are home in the mountain, and we’ll gently understand that we’ve been friends forever, that we’ve never been alone,” highlighting an achieved unity of humanity in the afterlife. There is a sense of realization that “we’ve been friends forever,” which illustrates the commonality that all humans share, a commonality that is often forgotten when dealing with divisive issues. The movement then ends as it started, with only the soloist singing, “We can learn to offer praise again, coming home to the light,” which

completes the transition from the grief and pain of Matthew's story, often experienced alone, to the joy, light, and unity that appears waiting for all of us on the other side.

Johnson continues to use musical quotations of Bach overlaid with specific text that create undertones of religion while moving toward a message of humanity and inclusion. This happens again in Mvt. 31: "Thanks/Even in this Rain," a revised movement only included in the 2nd Edition of the Choral Score by Hal Leonard. It replaced Mvt. 31: "Thank You," from the 1st Edition of the same score. It is the largest notable change between the editions, in terms of text content. For our purposes, I will use the latest text from the 2nd edition and refer exclusively to Mvt. 31: "Thanks/Even in this Rain." The movement begins again, quoting Bach's melody from *Prelude in C Major*. The chorus enters almost immediately, repeating the phrase "Thank you" over and over, sometimes singing other words of gratitude such as "Amawe." Individual voices enter over this texture of Bach and the choir singing "Thank you," taking turns reciting the poem "Even in this Rain" by Michael Dennis Browne.⁸⁹ The poem starts with the lines "Even in This Rain, signs of You everywhere, signs in the darkness," the capitalized "You" being reminiscent of biblical capitalizations referring to God. The text lists the places that signs of God ("You") are seen, in the "fires," "hurt streets," "tents," "tunnels," in the "tiniest beating heart," with a cry of thank you to be sung. It then alludes to the horrors of the world, including "bloody lullabies," "the mouths of children lost in the furnaces," and "the beaks of buried eagles," and repeats that a cry of thank you is to be sung. This poem can be taken to mean that even when encountering the most awful parts

⁸⁹ Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

of humanity (“this rain”) we say “Thank you” to God and see signs of God everywhere. This text is in some ways a stark contrast to the gentle piano melody underneath it, especially when describing the horrors of humanity. However, this juxtaposition is fitting in that the piano may symbolize these “signs of You everywhere,” as the quotation of Bach’s melody grounds the audience in a sense of God. Even as the poem is read above, this gentle piano melody remains, as the choir continues to sing “Thank you.”

Perhaps the movement that most highlights inclusivity in this work, is the penultimate movement, Mvt. 32: “All Of Us.” The text of this movement is consistent with a united message, with the word “love” and the phrase “all of us” being sung countless times. A key part of the harmony of humanity in this movement is the portrayal of the human experience, including fear, grief, and forgiveness, all present in the story of Matthew Shepard. A trio of soloists asks us “Where begin again? Who could meet us there?” likely referring to beginning anew after the pain and grief of Matthew’s story. They go on to answer this question when they sing “Ordinary boy, Only all of us, Free us from our fear.” The ordinary boy, referring to Matthew and the earlier movement by the same name, is asked to free us from fear and help us move forward to “begin again.” As the movement progresses, the choir enters again and asks, “How can we let go? How can we forgive?” and leads us toward an image of rain from heaven washing us, binding up our wounds and grief, leading us to forgive and believe. This transitions into the Chorale section of the work which is full of religious imagery and references to a higher power:

Most noble Light, Creation’s face,
How should we live but joined in You?
Remain within Your saving grace
Through all we say and do
And know we are the Love that moves
The sun and all the stars?

O Love that dwells,
O Love that burns
In ev'ry human heart⁹⁰

In this section of the work, the words “Light,” “Love,” “You,” and “Your” are capitalized, which are similar to biblical capitalizations that refer to God. This, combined with a Chorale-style that again references Bach, evokes a deeply religious message of God as Love, which is a general message of inclusivity and unity.

The second Chorale section makes reference to a translation of a text by Hildegard von Bingen, “Most Noble Evergreen.” It appears as if the text of this Chorale would apply to both Christ and Matthew at the same time:

This evergreen,
this heart, this soul,
Now moves us to remake our world,
Reminds us how we are to be
Your people born to dream;
How old this joy,
how strong this call,
To sing Your radiant care
With ev'ry voice,
in cloudless hope
Of our belonging here⁹¹

The evergreen imagery, as mentioned earlier, may be interpreted as an allusion to Christ, the cross, and the idea of “forever-lasting,” but might be interpreted in this context also as Matthew and the fence. A universal heart and soul are the driving force of this story that move humanity toward a better world, a world where we are reminded that we are “born to dream.” This strong call to sing with every voice is a call for unity of all humanity.

⁹⁰ Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

⁹¹ Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

In terms of the music, “All Of Us” is primarily in a slow, powerful gospel style with a distinct middle section in the style of a chorale. The music begins with driving, virtuosic piano lines, leading into three soloists singing freely together in a gospel style. It is important to note that these soloists, as well as all of the other soloists throughout the entire work, are instructed to come from within the choir itself, furthering a theme of community.⁹² After this opening section and a fuller chorus, the movement draws contrast with a Chorale-like section. Bach, one of the ultimate authorities in chorales, immediately comes to mind. In m. 30, the text “Most Noble Light,” is set to a four-plus part hymn-like texture.⁹³ The melody follows a sort of climactic arc and reminds us of modern-American hymnody that recalls the past. In m. 50, the “B” section chorale tune returns, but with even more added voices and denser harmonies.⁹⁴ The Chorale section transitions with the phrase “Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up!” repeated and modulated into a key change that begins a second verse of the chorale, now with the trio of soloists overtop singing in a gospel style. In a way, the music is indicative of a strophic text setting, though it is not strictly so. Johnson’s recollection of chorale-like textures and melodies is yet another example of Bach’s influence on the work and his intentional use of Bach’s style that evokes themes of God and religion.

After the second verse of chorale text, the music transitions back into a slow gospel style, with overlapping dance-like repetitions of the phrases “Only all of us” and

⁹² Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

⁹³ Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

⁹⁴ Johnson, Newman, and Browne.

“Only in the Love.” This section is almost entirely made up of densely packed major chords, which combine with the overlapping lyrics to create an effect of everyone included in singing and dancing together (See Figure 3.12). The trio of soloists enter partway through this section above the choir singing “Heaven, wash me!” The section continues to build, as the choir divides into double chorus, one continuing the dance-like repetitions, with the other holding sustained harmonies on the text “All, Of, Us.” This builds to what is perhaps the climax of the entire work, with the choir singing three repetitions of “All” and the soloists overtop them singing “Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up” on a grand *fortissimo* fermata. This punctuates the theme that is apparent throughout this movement and the work as a whole – all are included in this message of love, acceptance, unity, and inclusivity.

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The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "All Of Us". It consists of five systems of music. The first system is a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The second system is a vocal line with a treble clef and lyrics: "On-ly all of us, On-ly all of us, All of us, On-ly all of us, On-ly all of us, All of us,". The third system is another vocal line with a treble clef and lyrics: "us, On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, in the Love, On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, All of". The fourth system is a vocal line with a treble clef and lyrics: "On-ly all of us, On-ly all of us, All of us, On-ly all of us, On-ly all of us, All of us,". The fifth system is a vocal line with a bass clef and lyrics: "us, On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, in the Love, On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, All of". The sixth system is a piano accompaniment with a treble clef and a bass clef, featuring a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

Figure 3.12: Excerpt from “All Of Us”

This theme of humanity and inclusive Christianity makes its way into the last movement of the work, where at the conclusion of the Epilogue and the work itself, Johnson returns to quote that same Bach melody from *Prelude in C Major, Book I, Well-Tempered Clavier* in Mvt. 33: “Cattle, Horses, Sky, and Grass (Reprise).” The symbolism of beginning and ending a work with the same quote from Bach is particularly striking. The inclusion of the verbalization of beautiful images of Wyoming and nature brings a sense of comfort in knowing that the world has a heartbeat and an order. Even after a tragedy, there is hope for a new day, and in this case, a hope for a better future for generations of youths like Matthew, one in which each person’s humanity is valued in a more inclusive world.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

This dissertation has demonstrated how *Considering Matthew Shepard* foregrounds themes of gender, sexuality, and inclusivity. Key points have been highlighting the historical relationship between gender, sexuality, and religion; the musical background of the modern oratorio; and examples in the text and music of *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Additionally, the stereotypical “masculine” traits seen throughout history are often reinforced by Biblical gender roles.

These gender norms have been conveyed by Christian leaders and have been adopted by society as either spoken or unspoken cultural norms or taboos. These gender roles are also reflected in media, the arts, politics, and religion, and have persisted over time. Though movements advancing gay rights, such as the American Gay Liberation Movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s, made tremendous gains and challenged discriminatory laws, gender roles are still deeply rooted and continue to influence the behaviors and societal treatments of gay persons. It has also been demonstrated that these views of gender, especially heteronormativity and a hierarchical view of gender roles, have been common in most twentieth-century evangelical and fundamentalist churches and even in Christian-affiliated universities today. Certain religious groups remain intolerant and active political opponents of gay and lesbian peoples. Although public

opinion of gay persons in the modern West is evolving, gay people continue to face legislative hurdles, public hostility, and civil restraints with religious justification.

On the other hand, the liberal Christian viewpoint that some churches and Christian denominations have moved toward in the twenty-first century allows for reconciliation of these polarizing areas. In this viewpoint, those who do not fall within previously mentioned gender and sexual norms are accepted as an integral part of the church. This diversity, as well as other types of diversity, is often celebrated. This contrast between liberal and conservative Christian views highlights this complicated relationship between gender, sexuality, and religion, a relationship that continues to be addressed in popular American works.

We see these polarizing issues and questions about humanity addressed in the narrative and music of *Considering Matthew Shepard*. By loosely informing his work on the Passion model, Craig Hella Johnson was able to bring out the dark undertones of Matthew's story and foreground hope for redemption. The oratorio leaves audience members with thoughts about their own personal experiences with grief, regardless of identity or affiliation with a specific community group. It also raises tough questions about how we relate to each other, often asking us to consider new points of view. By examining Johnson's commentary on the social topics that appear in the work, it is clear that his compassionate storytelling brings Matthew's murder to the forefront of conversation, highlighting not only the LGBT community, but other oppressed persons in a prominent way.

The libretto and music of *Considering Matthew Shepard* use this modern oratorio form to highlight these themes. The theme of gender is clearly important throughout the

piece, with particular heteronormative gender roles portrayed in “A Protestor,” as men and women sing separately. Themes of sexuality are also present throughout the piece, though not usually explicitly, and both gender and sexuality are intertwined with religion. Perhaps the idea that carries through the entire work in the most compelling way is the advocacy for a humanity that allows for inclusive Christianity. Throughout the work, religious overtones through the use of J.S. Bach’s musical quotations and other allusions to God in the text, as well as calls for unity and inclusivity are found both in the libretto and the music itself. This theme is found to be especially poignant toward the end of the work.

Because this dissertation examines these still-controversial themes of gender, sexuality, and religion in a modern work, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, it can be used as a model to analyze other modern works that focus on these issues. This work has an impact on audiences, and exploring these themes in the work is important in understanding the potential influence it may have in affecting thoughts and attitudes around Matt’s story, as well as the implication on gender and sexuality in larger society. While *Considering Matthew Shepard* highlights the tension between viewpoints surrounding these difficult topics, its overwhelming conclusion is one of love, acceptance, unity, and the humanity in all of us.

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