

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

“We Tell Each Other Stories”: Musical Dramaturgy in Craig Hella Johnson’s

Considering Matthew Shepard

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

by

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2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Musical Arts

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor James K. Bass, Chair

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of choral organizations which pay their members has increased greatly. Along with the emergence of these professional choirs, there is an increased focus on considering the audience experience. One of the ways that professional choral organizations are seeking to elevate the audience experience is through storytelling. Consequently, professional choirs are commissioning and performing oratorios with greater frequency. *Considering Matthew Shepard*, a modern chamber oratorio composed by Craig Hella Johnson, serves as an archetype of this new era of musical dramaturgy in choral music. Interviewing conductors of professional choirs and investigating practices in script-writing, the author applies modern concepts of narrative discourse to oratorio. The author explores musical dramaturgy within *Considering Matthew Shepard* using “action analysis” and suggests performance practices which highlight the musical dramaturgy within the work.

The dissertation of Ryan Russell Brown is approved.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document has been a labor of love, but completing it would not have been possible without the help and support of my mentors, colleagues, and closest friends who cheered me on throughout the entire process. Thank you to my committee for helping to guide this project and my writing. I am particularly grateful to Dr. James Bass who, for over a year, dedicated countless hours to working with me on this research. My deepest thanks also extend to the generous contributions of Sam Brukman and Dr. Trey Davis who kindly answered my questions, and especially to Dr. Craig Hella Johnson who entrusted me with this amazing work. Lastly, I would like to thank every teacher throughout my life who gave me the opportunity to pursue my dreams. I hope to provide my students with the same kindness, love, and support you have all extended to me. Thank you!

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We tell each other stories so that we will remember
 Try and find the meaning in the living of our days

Always telling stories, wanting to remember
Where and whom we came from
Who we are

Sometimes there's a story that's painful to remember
One that breaks the heart of us all
Still we tell the story
We're listening and confessing
What we have forgotten
In the story of us all

We tell each other stories so that we will remember
Trying to find the meaning...

~ Craig Hella Johnson

CHAPTER I: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Choral music has the ability to impact and transform an audience through captivating and innovative performances. While many choral performances appeal primarily to a small audience of music-lovers, professional choral organizations are sustained by broadening their audiences through accessible performances and relevant programming. Sam Brukhman, artistic director of Dallas-based professional choir Verdigris, is among several conductors of emerging professional ensembles across the United States who believe that “we, as a choral profession, have a distinct responsibility to be able to put forward what choral music can be.”¹ He explains that relevant concert programming is critical to the success of his ensemble. “When I’m programming, I’m thinking, ‘What is needed within our community? What is happening right now that we can talk about? How can we structure [our performances] in such a way that we provide a look into history, but also [begin a] conversation about what’s going on right now?’”² Interestingly, composers have taken notice of relevance in choral music, resulting in a shift in compositional trends. Choral composers in the twenty-first century are incorporating more prose and transcripts of real-world events than they did in the twentieth century. Brukhman claims that transcripts “present the ability to provide narratives. Narratives are really, really important because they provide something that audiences can latch onto. [...] They allow a bridge for [the audience] to enter and to be able to understand what’s going on.”³ In fact, storytelling can be a deeply impactful way to engage an audience and break down the walls of choral elitism. John Niles, author of *Homo Narrans*, posits,

¹ Sam Brukhman (Artistic Director of Verdigris), interview with author, February 22, 2021.

² Brukhman, interview with author.

³ Brukhman, interview with author.

Stories are the houses we live in. They are the food we set on the table, consume, and absorb into the blood. [...] They well up to our inner eyes and resound in our inner ears in the process we call memory. Storytellers are thus the architects and masons of our universe. They build arcs of invisible stone that span huge banquet rooms. They also build the commonplace rooms that shelter us routinely. Whether in grand or humble styles, storytellers serve us the spiritual food we live by, both the plain truths and the more delicious lies.⁴

Our capacity for storytelling begins as soon as we learn to speak. Throughout history, stories have helped people cultivate connections with each other and to navigate a complex world. This research is an effort to answer four essential questions about the role that stories play in twenty-first century choral music.

First, why should we tell stories in choral music? Although the choral profession has advanced throughout the United States, professional choral organizations typically belong to a much younger, less developed generation than orchestras, ballets, opera companies, and theater companies. With an overwhelming supply of trained singers in the United States there is an abundance of potential for the emerging professional choral ensemble; however, this professional model can only be sustained when there is a conscious effort to engage a broader audience.

Second, how are stories told in 21st-century oratorio? An investigation of storytelling as a human practice reveals important implications for composers of the form. Knowledge of how scriptwriters and narratologists construct stories helps in understanding how stories can influence musical composition and performance of oratorio.

Third, how does Craig Hella Johnson tell a story in his *Considering Matthew Shepard*? This oratorio is an archetype of contemporary choral storytelling. An investigation of musical dramaturgy will reveal how Johnson tells a story within the work.

⁴ John D. Niles, *Homo Narrans* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 64.

Finally, how might we highlight the musical dramaturgy of *Considering Matthew Shepard* in performance? A discussion of inherent musical drama will unveil important performance considerations.

1.2 Development of the Professional Choir in the United States

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, several new professional choirs emerged in America—so many that some singers have been able to forge full-time portfolio careers as ensemble musicians traveling from city to city.⁵ This career path would have been nearly impossible for these same singers even a decade ago. But professional organizations in America have been slowly emerging for nearly a century—beginning with Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians in the 1920s.⁶ In the 1940s, Robert Shaw “formed the New York Collegiate Chorale, which later became the Robert Shaw Chorale, the first fully professional choir to focus primarily on serious repertoire.”⁷ In 1946, Roger Wagner created the Roger Wagner Chorale in Los Angeles which garnered a reputation for its work in Hollywood films. By 1964, the Roger Wagner chorale had become the Los Angeles Master Chorale, a resident company of the Los Angeles Music Center alongside its resident orchestra, The Los Angeles Philharmonic. The success of these organizations offered hope for aspiring regionally-based professional choirs across the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. “Choirs like the Dale Warland Singers in St. Paul, MN and the Kansas City Chorale took the baton from earlier innovators, extending opportunities for semi-regular employment to local professional talent. This model stood for many years as the standard for success in professional choral singing in

⁵ Kathryn Mueller, “A New Career Path for Singers,” Chorus America, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.chorusamerica.org/singers/new-career-path-singers>.

⁶ Kyle Nielsen, *A Comparative Analysis of the Business Models of Three Project-Based Professional Choirs* (DMA Diss: University of Miami, 2017), 1.

⁷ Nielsen, *Professional Choirs*, 1.

America.”⁸ In 1991, Chanticleer, an all-male ensemble based in San Francisco began offering full-time employment for its singers. Cantus, another all-male ensemble based in Minneapolis, became the second major full-time choral ensemble when it transitioned to professional status in 1999.

Meanwhile, choral groups like Conspirare,⁹ an Austin-based professional choir led by Craig Hella Johnson, began flying in its singers from around the country for project-based work. Johnson recently spoke with me about how this new project-based model was something he had experienced in Germany.

It was really part of our mission early on to really try and professionalize choral music. [...] I had just come from Germany a little while ago and I saw all these musicians coming from all over Europe on the train. And it was a thrilling thing that happened, you know, when they'd all come to Stuttgart to work with Rilling. They didn't meet every Tuesday night or anything like that but they would come together for five days and it was an extraordinary thing. The sounds they could make and the music they could make was at a level just way above anything I'd heard and so I wanted to emulate that really and see if we had an American version of it. [...] We saw it in Scandinavia a lot earlier. [...] There were these great choirs in Scandinavia, in Stockholm, and Oslo and in Copenhagen—just fantastic choirs like the Swedish Radio Choir that was just kicking it.¹⁰

Ultimately, Johnson sought to professionalize the American choir using Conspirare as a model. He confessed that many of his colleagues in America thought that he was crazy to hire, transport, and house these non-local singers for a project; nonetheless, the Conspirare model has been sustainable for nearly three decades. Just a few years later, additional professional project-based ensembles appeared in major American cities; most notably the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, Seraphic Fire, and The Crossing. Kyle Nielsen, who is part of this new wave of professional

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Conspirare is a compound word formed from two Latin Roots: “con” (with) + “spirare” (to breathe). Conspirare means “to breathe together.”

¹⁰ Craig Hella Johnson (Artistic Director of Conspirare and Composer of *Considering Matthew Shepard*), interview with author, March 1, 2021.

choral singers in America, claims that “project-based chamber choirs [...] such as Conspirare (Austin, TX), Seraphic Fire (Miami, FL), and the Santa Fe Desert Chorale (Santa Fe, NM) have consistently taken the artistic standard to another level in twenty-first century choral America.”¹¹ As a result, this project-based model has become the gold standard for emerging professional choirs across the nation. Kathryn Mueller, a soprano who frequently travels to sing in these ensembles writes that “as the fly-in model has spread, the singers who travel the professional choral circuit have formed a loose national network. They aren’t sure how large it is, but they do know they’ll see familiar faces at every stop.”¹² Mueller claims that “there are currently at least twenty-five American choral ensembles that bring in some or all of the members from out of town.”¹³ Among these newer ensembles are Skylark, The Thirteen, True Concord, Spire Chamber Ensemble, Clarion Ensemble, Verdigris, and Red Shift. Joshua Habermann, Artistic Director for the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, believes that “when we look back on this period 50 years from now, we’re going to say this was a great flowering of professional vocal ensembles in the United States.”¹⁴ However, compared with the professional orchestra, the professional choir as an institution remains underdeveloped.

Professional orchestras are designed to function as cultural wellsprings for the cities they inhabit. Viewed as such, they tend to receive greater public funding than professional choirs in those same cities. Why is it that professional choirs are just now emerging while professional orchestras have been a cultural centerpiece in America for much longer? I asked this of Craig Hella Johnson:

¹¹ Nielsen, *Professional Choirs*, 3.

¹² Mueller, “New Career Path.”

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Joshua Haberman to Kathryn Mueller, “New Career Path.”

I would say that the orchestra had a good hundred-fifty years ahead of us in that so many people, when they came from Europe, you know, the folks who were building culture or sort of bringing culture to America, basically said, ‘you know, in order to be an important cultural center, to be an important city, you need S-O-B. You need a symphony, opera, and ballet.’ People did not say ‘you need a professional choir,’ you know, so that was never part of the thinking. And that’s why we’re kind of in the infancy stages right now.¹⁵

Consequently, philanthropic efforts in major cities tend to overlook professional choral organizations. What if professional choirs were cultivated and supported at the same level as professional orchestras and other major cultural institutions? We would begin to see professional choirs in every major metropolitan area across the country. This regional model used by most professional orchestras is similar to that of the Los Angeles Master Chorale, a resident ensemble that serves as a cultural gem within a particular city. Players generally are able to live and work in the same city. On the other hand, a “fly-in” model means that “in order to make a full-time salary, you essentially have to be a digital nomad,”¹⁶ which can be incredibly difficult to sustain. Mueller explains that “looking to the future, many of these musicians envision that over time they’ll change the balance of ensemble singing versus solo work, teaching, and non-musical endeavors.”¹⁷ A greater number of highly skilled professional choirs would mean that we would be able to employ more of the highly trained singers across the country who are unable or unwilling to travel. The number of highly trained choral singers in America is growing quickly along with the development of choral training programs across the country. Furthermore, institutions of higher learning have begun to adjust their curricula to address this new career path; although, after investing in expensive training programs, many singers who study voice find themselves without work. Sam Brukman of Verdigris explains that “we don’t have enough

¹⁵ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁶ Brukman, interview with author.

¹⁷ Mueller, “New Career Path.”

demand for the supply that we're creating. [...] We're [training] all of these singers, these classical singers, most of whom are quite good, that can't find a job."¹⁸ The further development of the professional choral ensemble will create opportunities for these highly skilled singers to find work as chamber musicians. In a world where classical music is chronically undervalued, how can we reposition the professional choral ensemble as an important cultural institution of a city? It is important to acknowledge that this repositioning will occur only when there is a keen effort to engage a wider audience. Many of the professional choirs already discussed have remained committed to this goal since their inception and are turning to storytelling as a way to build and connect with their audiences.

1.3 Choral Storytelling in the 21st-Century

Ensembles all across the country are telling stories through choral music with increased frequency. Brukhman describes that presenting concerts within a narrative framework is critical to the financial success of his ensemble. In advertising for Verdigris performances, Brukhman is able to use these narratives to attract an audience: "I think that's really important because it's really [all about] the sale. The more that someone knows about a product, [...] the more likely they'll [...] purchase the product or, in this case, attend a concert."¹⁹ Choirs around the country are approaching choral storytelling in different ways. These include concert curation, oratorio, and what Vince Peterson, Choral Chameleon's artistic director, calls "choral theater."²⁰

Choral theater is the practice of incorporating staging, lighting, dialogue, or other theatrical elements into the performance of choral music. Peterson, a self-described "purist,"

¹⁸ Brukhman, interview with author.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Judith Malafronte, "The Emerging Art of Choral Theater," Chorus America, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.chorusamerica.org/conducting-performing/emerging-art-choral-theater>.

came to the conclusion that “just standing there and moving our mouths” results in much weaker audience responses than performances which include theatrical elements.²¹ This trend, however, presents new challenges. Judith Malafronte writes about this growing trend in an article for Choral America: “The blocking, choreography, and costuming change an ensemble’s rehearsal trajectory.”²² Grant Gershon, artistic director for the Los Angeles Master Chorale recalls the laborious rehearsal process for their 2018 staged production of *Lagime di San Pietro* by Orlando di Lasso: “Whereas the LAMC will schedule anywhere from four to nine rehearsals for a typical concert (including initial piano and onstage rehearsals), its staging of *Lagime di San Pietro* required 27 rehearsals.”²³ The inclusion of theatrical elements leads to higher expenditures as well. Handel faced a similar problem when he attempted to import Italian opera into England in 1712 which is one of the reasons he turned his attention to oratorio. Regardless, the practice of theatricalizing choral music has become an undeniable trend in the twenty-first century as an effort to increase accessibility and relevance to the modern audience. Malafronte describes that “[Peter] Sellars’s name appears again and again as a collaborator on non-traditional choral projects. Many artists mention his 2010 direction of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* with Simon Rattle, the Berlin Philharmonic, and the Berlin Radio Choir as transformative in their understanding of what theatrical staging can do to break the barrier of formality in performance.”²⁴ Choral storytelling often involves reflecting on and retelling real-life events. Donald Nally, conductor of The Crossing explains that “choral-theater work is just one of those genres in which we try to describe our world, occasionally make sense out of the chaos, better

²¹ Malafronte, “Choral Theater.”

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

understand ourselves, which is really what we're doing. We're telling stories, whether staged or not. That's our job: telling stories about the world we live in."²⁵ These narratives are particularly relevant in a time when real-world stories dominate the media that we consume. And as a society, we are consuming more media than ever before. In addition to the fetishization of news media in modern America, the obsession with social media reflects a culture's insatiable hunger to consume real stories in the world. In our increasingly digital world, posting a "story" on Facebook and Instagram has become a common practice to control the narratives we tell about ourselves and others. Perhaps this explains why historical accounts and other real-world stories are being told through choral performance with greater frequency. So, how are conductors of professional ensembles telling stories through programming?

One approach to choral storytelling is through intentional curation of disparate works. While many conductors pursue storytelling through multiple works, few are able to achieve narrative cohesion. Common techniques that do not result in narrative organization include using concert themes, chronological organization, and programming of cantata and choral song cycles. Chronological organization serves to demonstrate the process by which an artistic work was created, but this method is often really only of interest to musicians. Curating choral stories is about programming eventfully. Cantus, a full-time professional ensemble based in Minnesota, is committed to this kind of eventful programming. The members regularly present a masterclass titled "Telling A Story Through Song" where they lead participants through the process of curating a choral performance based on a particular extra-musical story. In 2019, Cantus presented this workshop for students at the University of Southern California. During the workshop, they used *Little Red Riding Hood* as the basis of the experiment. They begin by

²⁵ Ibid.

plotting out the major events of the folktale—the introduction of Little Red, the journey through the woods, the meeting of the wolf, and so on. By the end of the workshop, the choir had created a complete concert-length program, including existing popular works as well as those that they would need to find. This narrative approach is one that Craig Hella Johnson also enjoys taking with *Conspirare*. Frequently, he searches to find the perfect work to represent an event but encounters complications when he is unable to find something within the choral canon. Consequently, he tends to compose or arrange much of the music on the programs that *Conspirare* presents. This approach to eventful programming can be problematic because the choral canon tends to lack the resources needed to perfectly assemble such a program. It can also be difficult to consider additional programming choices such as variation, tempo, and mood when narrative programming becomes the priority. Finally, the music curated for these narratives isn't specifically composed with the narrative in mind so narrative cohesion is often lacking. Fortunately, many contemporary composers are writing concert-length choral works such as oratorios.

While it is true that storytelling has become increasingly popular in choral music, it is by no means a new concept. Unlike the aforementioned narrative programming strategies, oratorio is written as a cohesive unit designed to tell a story. Craig Hella Johnson acknowledges this inherent truth:

I think there's an aspect of oratorio, [...] just this idea of storytelling, that, for my whole life, I've been [...] really committed to—how we can keep the oratorio tradition alive in our repertoire and in our culture. [...] How can we keep telling the longer stories? [...] I believe it is in us as human beings to be available [for] longer — a longer musical line, a longer story, a longer thread. So I feel very connected with the oratorio tradition in that way. And one of my life journeys as a musician has always been, [...] 'how can we help bring [our music] to a broader audience, and how can this stay relevant?'"²⁶

²⁶ Craig Hella Johnson, interview with Robert Ward, February, 2016.

Despite the fact that oratorios have been an important pillar of the Western musical tradition for hundreds of years, the term is not universally understood. One of the reasons behind this confusion is the shifting attributes and contexts of oratorio over time. Thurston Dox, author of *American Oratorios and Cantatas*, compiled a list of American oratorios from colonial times to 1985. At the outset of this catalogue, Dox explains:

The quest for definition of the terms ‘oratorio’ and ‘cantata’ necessarily leads through a web of shifting attitudes. As a result, a static definition, concisely stated and reliably applicable for all works from any period of history, is impossible. Since the eighteenth century, an oratorio has been commonly perceived as an accompanied work for chorus and vocal soloists, based on a sacred narrative-dramatic libretto. [...] Nevertheless, these common characteristics are not present in all the works designated as oratorios. Such variables as the use of minimal staging, designated character roles, a secular libretto, the particular place and purpose of performance, and the length of the composition also need to be considered. In the eighteenth century, the term ‘cantata’ was applied to accompanied works for soloists, with vocal ensembles or chorus. Both sacred and secular text were used.²⁷

The inclusion of the orchestra is yet another frequently considered parameter. The terms “oratorio” and “cantata” are often used interchangeably in the 21st-century; however, unlike the overwhelming majority of works labeled as “cantata,” “oratorios” have consistently functioned as dramatic compositions since their seventeenth-century inception at the Oratory of St. Philip Neri in Rome.²⁸ For the purpose of the present study, “oratorio” is characterized by concert-length musical works which feature the chorus and convey a story. Oratorios may be sacred or secular, staged or unstaged, a cappella or accompanied.

²⁷ Thurston, Dox, Introduction to *American Oratorios and Cantatas: A Catalog of Works Written in the United States from Colonial Times to 1985* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press), x.

²⁸ Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio, Vol 1: The Oratorio in the Baroque Era: Italy, Vienna, Paris Centuries*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 9.

What then is the main difference between oratorio and opera if both are intrinsically dramatic concert-length forms? A comparative assessment of these genres reveals that opera places greater emphasis on the soloist, whereas oratorio places greater emphasis on the chorus. Furthermore, there is no distinct line between the two genres; operas which make extensive use of the chorus find themselves squarely situated in the category of “operatorio” as Helen Greenwald calls it.²⁹ Nonetheless, significant efforts have been dedicated to the defining of these genres. A staunch proponent of “Gesamtkunstwerk,” Richard Wagner rejects the notion of oratorio as a valid musical form altogether. Referring to oratorios as “geschlechtslose Opernembryonen” or “sexless operatic embryos,” Wagner claims that they are somehow less moving because they are unstaged and sacred.³⁰ As the Oxford Handbook of Opera notes, “standard genre distinctions between opera and oratorio insist that the former is staged and the latter is not; opera is secular, oratorio is sacred. Yet there are numerous works, from secular oratorios to oratorio-like operas, that challenge these facile formulas—as does the remarkably prevalent practice of putting oratorios directly onto the stage.”³¹ In fact, “both genres were kindred ways of ‘visualizing drama.’ Staged performances of supposedly ‘undramatic’ oratorios [...] appeared very frequently, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”³² Another myth of the oratorio is that it is a “monumental” genre that employs large orchestras and massive choral forces. Howard Smither professes:

Before Handel an oratorio was a relatively modest work. With the Italians of the earlier seventeenth century [...] an oratorio was a rather brief work with a religious subject and intended for performance in an oratorio. Such works can be intense, moving but not monumental—at least not in our terms. [...] The twentieth century has seen a reaction

²⁹ Helen M. Greenwald, *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 73.

³⁰ Richard Wagner. *Gesammelte Schriften Und Dichtungen* (Leipzig: E.W. Fritzsche, 1887), 101.

³¹ Greenwald, *Handbook of Opera*, 73.

³² Greenwald, *Handbook of Opera*, 77.

against what are called the ‘excesses’ of the Victorian age. [Among the] oratorios intended for small ensembles, one of the very best is Frank Martin’s *Le Vin herbé*. The reaction against Victorian gigantism, however, has not prevented twentieth-century composers from projecting the significance of their lofty oratorio themes by writing music intended for monumental performances [...] by Honegger, Messiaen, Schoenberg, and Tippett, among many others.³³

While oratorio is most often an accompanied genre, we must acknowledge that a growing number of a cappella chamber oratorios are being written for the professional ensemble.

Oratorio has played an important role in Western classical music for hundreds of years but its popularity has shifted significantly over time. One might argue that it was Handel who bolstered the form to its cultural apex in eighteenth-century England. This enthusiasm toward the form continued throughout most of the nineteenth century with the increasing popularity of the choral singing societies comprised of large groups of amateur singers. However, “in the twentieth century composers have been less inclined than in the past to include the subtitle ‘oratorio’ on title pages. [...] When it is used, the term ‘oratorio’ tends to be even more ambiguously applied in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth.”³⁴ While the oratorio suffered a decline in performance during the twentieth century, it is experiencing a serious resurgence with the growing popularity of professional choral performance.

Several contemporary chamber oratorios for the professional choral ensemble include Eric Whitacre’s *The Sacred Veil* (2019), commissioned for the Los Angeles Master Chorale. *The Sacred Veil* tells the story of Julia Silvestri, the wife of Whitacre’s close friend, Charles Anthony Silvestri, and her battle with cancer. Charles recounts the painful journey.

My wife, Julie, died in May 2005 after a long battle with ovarian cancer, just a few days shy of her 36th birthday, leaving me and our two small children to navigate the world without her, our guiding star. Julie was a gentle soul, but with a tenacious and stubborn

³³ Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio, Vol 4: The Oratorio in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 713-715.

³⁴ Smither, *Vol 4*, 631.

spirit, and she approached her diagnosis with grit and determination to survive. She had always wanted to be a mother; and now with the fulfilment of that dream all around her, she faced the anguish of leaving her babies and resolved to beat this disease.³⁵

Throughout the work, the audience listens as a series of events unfolds before them. After being introduced to Charles and learning more about his relationship with his wife, the audience is introduced to their children by the use of a poem Julie constructs out of refrigerator magnets during her pregnancy. She learns of her diagnosis shortly after as the choir sings some of the text taken from her medical charts. As Julie journals and writes to her friends, she begs them to pray for her as she fights for her life. In the penultimate movement, “You Rise, I Fall,” Whitacre paints her final exhausting breaths. After she dies, her family is left to pick up the pieces. The eventful nature of this choral work satisfies its classification as an oratorio rather than a cantata or choral song cycle.

Julia Wolfe’s *Fire in my mouth* is another example of this new contemporary iteration of oratorio. Wolfe explains that “*Fire in my mouth* is based on the garment industry in New York City at the turn of the century.”³⁶ The approximately hour-long work is structured in four movements, each serving as a major event in the collective narrative of the young immigrant women who died in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York. The first movement features Mollie Wexler, a survivor who “recalls the trepidation and excitement of heading for a new life in New York.”³⁷ During the second movement titled, “Factory,” we hear the women working as the sound of sewing machines is juxtaposed with Italian and Yiddish folk songs the

³⁵ Charles Anthony Silvestri, introduction to *The Sacred Veil*, Eric Whitacre (Hal Leonard, 2019), vi.

³⁶ “Fire in My Mouth,” accessed March 30, 2021, <https://juliawolfemusic.com/music/fire-in-my-mouth>.

³⁷ “Fire in My Mouth,” accessed March 29, 2021, <https://nyphil.org/concerts-tickets/1819/fire-in-my-mouth>.

women may have sung in the workplace. In the third movement, “Protest,” we learn about the despicable working conditions of these factory workers and how poorly they were treated. Finally, the last movement, “Fire,” paints a scene of panic and chaos as the factory is burned and workers killed.

In both cases the oratorios cited are works about death. These works, while not labeled as Passion oratorios outright, reflect a resurgence of the Passion form. One of the reasons for this growing trend is the early music revival movement, particularly a fascination with the *St. Matthew Passion* by Johann Sebastian Bach. The Passion story, the narrative of Christ’s death, has taken several forms since the Middle Ages. Howard Smither notes that “an extremely important antecedent of the oratorio is the Passion [...] and the musical presentation of that text has an unbroken history beginning in the early Middle Ages. Furthermore, from the early Baroque on, the relationship between the Passion and the oratorio grew ever closer.”³⁸ In the last twenty years, composers have begun to appropriate the Passion label, applying it to any dramatic choral work about the death of any central figure. Other modern Passion oratorios include Tan Dun’s *Water Passion after Saint Matthew* (2000), Osvaldo Golijov’s *La Pasión según San Marcos* (2000), Kaija Saariaho’s *La Passion de Simone* (2006), David Lang’s *little match girl passion* (2008), and of course Craig Hella Johnson’s *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016). The popularity of Passion oratorios in the twenty-first century indicates that we are just at the beginning of a renaissance in the creation and performance of oratorios.

So, why is the chamber oratorio becoming more popular? As mentioned already, there are more professional choral ensembles available from which composers receive commissions. Smither notes that “at the close of the twentieth century, few composers are writing oratorios.

³⁸ Smither, *Vol 1*, 19-20.

Oratorio has become largely an occasional piece. Although a composer sometimes writes an oratorio without a commission and without an assured performance, purely to make a religious or philosophical statement to which he is committed, most await a commission.”³⁹ Additionally, many composers are particularly drawn to the chamber oratorio as a chance to write a large work for a professional choir. When I asked Craig Hella Johnson why he thought composers were writing more oratorios, he responded with the following:

As you know, it’s just [a] trickle-down effect in that composers are wanting to write for choirs like crazy, and that wasn’t the case when we were getting started. [...] Chanticleer played a huge role in getting composers interested. [...] The composer started to see that there were going to be groups that could actually execute some really challenging things and some really interesting things. [...] This is different even from ten years ago and fifteen years ago. It’s a remarkable shift. And so, I am just thrilled about it and continue to support [it].⁴⁰

We must acknowledge that oratorios are being written for professional ensembles not only because composers are being commissioned and have an interest in the ensemble, but because oratorio performance plays a major role in the success of a professional choral organization. The advancement of the oratorio in the twenty-first century is part of a larger movement toward choral populism, an effort to appeal to a larger and more diverse audience. While the professional choral ensemble is a relatively new enterprise in the United States, we can look to the history of the professional orchestra for guidance. In order for professional orchestras to survive, they learned, nearly a century ago, that they would need to broaden their audience.

Gayle Murchison reminds us that

During the 1930s Copland himself entered a new phase. [...] He found that he was composing for a different audience. No longer was he content to write for the small concert hall audience. Wanting to reach a broad audience, he no longer saw direct imitation and American importation of European styles as a solution to the problems American composers faced. [...] The depression-era audience needed an accessible music,

³⁹ Smither, *Vol 4*, 715.

⁴⁰ Johnson, interview with author.

and the composer had to change his or her style. [...] Copland incorporated vernacular idioms in this streamlined style, not, however, the vernacular music of contemporary American culture. This deliberate turn toward an accessible modern style may be called populism. Copland's populism led him away from urban music toward abstractions of folk music of the past, drawing on regional, national, and ethnic folk music in creating nationalist modern American music.⁴¹

Today, orchestral populism tends to manifest in one of two ways: popular music concerts, often called "Pops Concerts," and program music based on preexisting stories. Professional choirs who are drawn to broadening their audiences are beginning to follow the same populist path that orchestras paved nearly a century ago. The popularity of the contemporary a cappella ensemble has already begun to reach widespread commercial success rivaling other commercial genres. Likewise, professional choirs are beginning to incorporate storytelling into the very fabric of their performances. Unlike orchestras, choirs have the ability to convey texts in incredibly impactful ways. Furthermore, this brand of populism allows the organization to maintain its roots in classical performance while perpetuating the existence of the entire enterprise. As Brukhman says, "We've got to do something more, we've got to create something, we've got to find ways of connecting. [...] If we can get people to appreciate choral music then they'll pay for choral music. And if we can get people to pay for choral music, they'll become patrons and they'll become donors, they'll become our future livelihood."⁴² So this begs the question, "should every performance tell a story?" While some choral organizations are specifically committed to this mission, it is not a practical solution for all choral organizations. To discard all music that doesn't tell a story would be heinous; but it is important to acknowledge the impact of choral

⁴¹ Gayle Murchison, "Toward A New National Music During the 1930s: Copland's Populism, Accessible Style, and Folk and Popular Music" in *The American Stravinsky: The Style and Aesthetics of Copland's New American Music, the Early Works, 1921-1938* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 148-151.

⁴² Brukhman, interview with author.

storytelling and its role in the success of the professional choral model in the past, present, and future.

1.4 Choral Storytelling and Intrinsic Impact

As a human species, we crave stories. They are essential and they are our gateway to understanding the world. Robert McKee writes that “some see this craving for story as simple entertainment, an escape from life rather than an exploration of it. But what, after all, is entertainment? To be entertained is to be immersed in the ceremony of story to an intellectually and emotionally satisfying end.”⁴³ Choral music, particularly when it involves a narrative, can transform the ways we relate to the world and to one another. But what does it mean for art to be “impactful” or “transformative” and how are these mysterious experiences measured?

WolfBrown, a renowned arts agency at the forefront of audience impact research uses detailed surveys to gather intrinsic impact data. They acknowledge that “the impact of a live performance is deeply personal, highly situational, and, some argue, impossible to measure. Yet these impacts are observable, as when an audience laughs together, or applauds enthusiastically.”⁴⁴ In 2016, Chorus America commissioned WolfBrown to conduct intrinsic impact research across a wide variety of choral organizations around the country. In order to understand the various ways that choral performances impact audiences, WolfBrown investigated various categories of impact including captivation, emotional resonance, intellectual stimulation, aesthetic enrichment, and social bridging and bonding. The aggregate of these components results in what WolfBrown describes as “summative impact,” or overall impact. WolfBrown explains:

⁴³ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structures, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 12.

⁴⁴ Alan Brown et al., “Assessing the Audience Impact of Choral Music Concerts” (Chorus America, 2016), 29.

Our practice is to frame the question about summative impact in terms of memorability—the likelihood that one will remember the experience after the initial effect wears off. [...] Research in the field of cognitive psychology underscores the role of emotion in creating memory. When arts experiences are memorable, we can recall them consciously and relive the same feelings we felt at the original events.⁴⁵

Memorability is, therefore, the result of summative impact. In movement three of Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard*, the soloist begins "We tell each other stories so that we will remember" and Johnson's understanding of what it means to "remember" is significant.⁴⁶ To remember is to understand who we are and where we've come from, the trauma that we've endured as a human race, and the lessons we've learned as a result. Johnson explains that "so much of our violence toward one another comes from that forgetting and it comes from that betrayal of ourselves."⁴⁷ It is only through reflection, which is wholly intrinsic to narrative, that we are able to "remember."

McKee professes that a captivating narrative is the nexus between the rational and the irrational, the emotional and the intellectual. WolfBrown defines captivation as "a participant's sense of awe, wonder, rapture; being absorbed in the moment and achieving a state of 'flow.'" The Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [...] argues that achieving a state of heightened focus and immersion in activities such as art, play, and work is the root of happiness.⁴⁸ Using a regression analysis, WolfBrown discovered that "captivation levels, overall, are central to the calculus of impact. [...] Captivation levels explain 26% of the variance in overall impact."⁴⁹ Across all of the choral programs that participated in this research, WolfBrown found that "very

⁴⁵ Brown, "Audience Impact," 52.

⁴⁶ Craig Hella Johnson, Libretto to *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016), <https://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-Libretto-LA-June-2018.pdf>, 5.

⁴⁷ Johnson, interview with author.

⁴⁸ Brown, "Audience Impact," 30.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 32.

high captivation scores were reported by audiences at full-length oratorios and other classical programs such as Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Mozart's *Requiem in D Minor*, Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, and Vaughan Williams' *A Sea Symphony*.”⁵⁰ In fact, the very highest average score for Captivation was reported by audience members at a performance of Handel's *Messiah* (4.4). On the contrary, some of the least captivating programs were holiday performances which tended to feature several shorter works. These programs however, reported higher levels of social bridging and bonding.

Wolfbrown describes social bridging and bonding as a “sense of connectedness” that occurs between members of an audience or the sense of community that is formed as a result of a common experience. John Niles, author of *Homo Narrans*, describes this experience:

When people gather together to hear stories or songs performed, they share a single space. Crowded together, perhaps, they may push against their neighbors, drink the same beer, smell the same scent of smoke, sweat, and wool. In the intervals between songs people may embrace, trade news, or flirt; fights may break out; friendships may be cemented or business deals brought to a head. [...] With luck, [...] ‘Existential’ or ‘spontaneous’ *communitas* will carry over into spheres of actions where group solidarity can make the difference between plenty and want, peace and dissension, survival and death.⁵¹

Similarly, Craig Hella Johnson thinks about the concert as a place for people to come together and experience their humanity both separately and with one another.

A concert is a sacred space to me (sacred in the most broad sense, not in any religious sense, but a wholly sacred experience) where people come together. You have a kind of contract with each other when somebody buys a ticket and comes [to a performance]. My end of the contract, and the singers', is to create the space where people can have an experience of music itself just as literature, and for ideas and for exchange of all that we know the repertoire to be. They come in to experience a greater sense of their own humanity. And it's a ritual act, you know, to come together in a concert setting human to human.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid, 31.

⁵¹ Niles, *Homo Narrans*, 79.

⁵² Johnson, interview with author.

This contract that performers have with the audience is an exercise in trust. Stories don't just help us form a bond with others present, they can also help us understand who we are as a people, community, and culture. Stories involve the characterization of individuals and groups—"ethos" (ἔθος). These characterizations, both personal and ethnographic, provide listeners with the tools to understand who we are and why we behave in the ways that we do. In the third movement of *Considering Matthew Shepard*, the soprano soloist continues: "Always telling stories, wanting to remember / Where and whom we came from / Who we are."⁵³ Furthermore, effective narratives involve "pathos" (πάθος), or collective "suffering." This kind of impact is what WolfBrown describes as "emotional resonance."

Emotional resonance describes "the intensity of emotional response, regardless of the nature of the emotion, and the degree of empathy with the performers and therapeutic values in an emotional sense."⁵⁴ When we are thinking about the impact of choral concerts, we must acknowledge that "in several cases the underlying story or idea carries a good deal of emotional weight."⁵⁵ In fact effective narratives are often designed to arouse great levels of pity or fear, an Aristotelian understanding of "katharsis" (κάθαρσις) or an emotional "purification" or "cleansing." But how can stories lead an audience through this process? McKee claims that "we do not move the emotions of an audience by putting glistening tears in a character's eyes, by writing exuberant dialogue so an actor can recite his joy, by describing an erotic embrace, or by calling for angry music. Rather, we render the precise experience necessary to cause an emotion, then take the audience through that experience."⁵⁶ In other words, the audience is exposed to the

⁵³ Johnson, *Libretto*, 5.

⁵⁴ Brown, "Audience Impact," 30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁶ McKee, *Story*, 242.

underlying cause of a character’s emotional response—behaviors motivated by conflict and resolution, rise and fall, tension and release. While art can result in emotional resonance, WolfBrown posits that it can also cause “a heightened cognitive state resulting from being provoked or challenged by the art itself or by an idea or message transmitted through the art.”⁵⁷ This is what WolfBrown describes as “intellectual stimulation.”

Intellectual stimulation is defined as “the acquisition and consideration of new information about an issue, idea, or culture.”⁵⁸ In the study by WolfBrown, they found that lower levels of intellectual stimulation occurred at holiday concerts and other loosely connected programs while higher levels of intellectual stimulation occurred at performances organized around an idea or story.

The final pillar of summative impact is “aesthetic enrichment,” what WolfBrown defines as “exposure to new or unfamiliar art.”⁵⁹ Aesthetic enrichment is an excellent indicator of demographic breadth. Higher levels of aesthetic enrichment means that higher percentages of the audience were unfamiliar with the works presented, or perhaps with the artform altogether. WolfBrown discovers that “a deeper look at first-time [concert-goers] suggests that the most common ‘gateway programs’ [...] are the warhorses (*Messiah, Carmina Burana, St. Matthew Passion*).”⁶⁰ Consequently, these oratorios and cantatas were associated with higher levels of summative impact.

Another way of thinking about summative impact is “transformation”—a change in perspective or even a change in behavior following a performance. Trey Davis, Artistic Director

⁵⁷ Brown, “Audience Impact,” 30.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 45.

of Louisiana’s Red Shift Vocal Ensemble, is particularly interested in the ways that text sourcing can lead to a more transformational choral performance: “I find that many choirs choose poetry settings or multi-movement sacred genres as their default repertoire, so I am also intrigued at the concept of story/prose/non-traditional texts in general. [...] I think it is possible that through experiencing a transformative choral performance, a listener may reexamine their own stories or the stories around them.”⁶¹ The process of critical reflection can be seen as an element in the understanding or production of “meaning.” Robert McKee calls the result of this process “aesthetic emotion.”

Aesthetic emotion describes the encounter between idea and feeling, or logos and pathos.

McKee likens this simultaneous acquaintance to that of a religious experience.

Your intellectual life prepares you for emotional experiences that then urge you toward fresh perceptions that in turn remix the chemistry of new encounters. The two realms influence each other, but first one, then the other. In fact, in life, moments that blaze with a fusion of idea and emotion are so rare, when they happen you think you’re having a religious experience. But whereas life separates meaning from emotion, art unites them. Story is an instrument by which you create such epiphanies at will, the phenomenon known as aesthetic emotion. The source of all art is the human psyche’s primal, prelinguistic need for the resolution of stress and discord through beauty and harmony, for the use of creativity to revive a life deadened by routine, for a link to reality through our instinctive, sensory feel for the truth. Like music and dance, painting and sculpture, poetry and song, story is first, last, and always the experience of aesthetic emotion—the simultaneous encounter of thought and feeling.⁶²

McKee also explains that aesthetic emotion is the very purpose of story itself: “a story well told gives you the very thing you cannot get from life: meaningful emotional experience. In life, experiences become meaningful *with reflection in time*. In art, they are meaningful *now, at the instant they happen*.”⁶³ Choral music is certainly an artform which can connect idea with

⁶¹ Trey Davis, interview with author, February 25, 2021.

⁶² McKee, *Story*, 110-111.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 111.

emotion. The composer and performer are well-equipped with seemingly endless musical tools to build these connections. Likewise, narratives themselves have an ability to fuse our thoughts with our feelings. We experience these impactful, personal, moments as we navigate our way through plays, movies, and books. Finally, oratorio inherently combines these two artistic media—thereby maximizing the potential to impact and transform a choral audience. This is a new era for the professional choral ensemble in America.

In the next chapter, we will consider narrative theories and explore the ways that narratives function in our lives as “homo narrans”—story-telling humans. We will investigate the anatomy of narrative by observing principles in modern script-writing.

CHAPTER II: Musical Dramaturgy and the 21st-Century Oratorio

2.1 Introduction

We are all of us both storytellers and story hearers. We must be both these things if we are to navigate the world in which we live, each part of which (as philosophers, anthropologists, and psychologists all assure us from their different standpoints) is partly our own making. Barring some terrible trauma, these twin faculties of storytelling and story hearing are inalienably ours from a very early age. Throughout life these faculties remain at the core of our intelligent being, shaping our thoughts, calling us back from error, and guiding us incrementally toward whatever our future may hold. [...] In that sense, alone among the creatures of this planet, we are blessed in our birthright as members of the species *Homo narrans*.⁶⁴

“Homo narrans,” or “storytelling human” is one of many binomial names for the human race that describe a central pillar of our existence. Fredric Jameson, author of *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, purports that narrative is “the central function or instance of the human mind.”⁶⁵ In fact, storytelling is a prominent behavior within essentially every culture and religion across the globe. Narratives form a collective mastermind, teach us cultural values, and help us connect with one another as social beings. Narratives are present throughout our entire lives and shape the way we perceive and remember the world. Roland Barthes explains that “narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society. [...] All classes, all human groups, have their narratives. [...] Narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.”⁶⁶ Oral narrative has existed since the development of language but the media through which we tell stories today has significantly changed. In the age of streaming services like Netflix, we frequently consume highly-developed scripts in movies and television

⁶⁴ Niles, *Homo Narrans*, 65.

⁶⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 13.

⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 251-252.

shows. Robert Scholes, author of *The Nature of Narrative*, highlights the popularity of narratives in the twenty-first century:

We are living in the age of the Narrative turn, an era when narrative is widely celebrated and studied for its ubiquity and importance. Doctors, lawyers, psychologists, business men and women, politicians, and political pundits of all stripes are just a few of the groups who now regard narrative as the Queen of Discourses and an essential component of their work. These groups acknowledge narrative's power to capture certain truths and experiences in ways that other modes of explanation and analysis such as statistics, descriptions, summaries, and reasoning via conceptual abstractions cannot. Phrases such as 'narrative explanation,' 'narrative understanding,' 'narrative as a way of thinking,' and 'narrative identity' have become common currency in conversations inside and outside the academy.⁶⁷

On the contrary, Robert McKee purports that the rise of reality television and social media is resulting in the decay of narrative discourse in our culture.

The art of story is in decay, and as Aristotle observed twenty-three hundred years ago, when storytelling goes bad, the result is decadence. Flawed and false storytelling is forced to substitute spectacle for substance, trickery for truth. Weak stories, desperate to hold audience attention, degenerate into multimillion-dollar razzle-dazzle demo reels. In Hollywood, imagery becomes more and more extravagant, in Europe more and more decorative. The behavior of actors becomes more and more histrionic, more and more lewd, more and more violent. Music and sound effects become increasingly tumultuous. The total effect transudes into the grotesque. A culture cannot evolve without honest, powerful storytelling. When society repeatedly experiences glossy, hollowed-out pseudo-stories, it degenerates. We need true satires and tragedies, dramas and comedies that shine a clean light into the dingy corners of the human psyche and society.⁶⁸

This “razzle-dazzle,” and “histrionic” kind of storytelling is at the core of the social media movement. For better or worse, the explosion of social media at the beginning of the century has shown how narratives can play a role in the ways we define ourselves and our identities. In fact, “our very definition as human beings is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our

⁶⁷ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 284-285.

⁶⁸ McKee, *Story*, 13.

own lives and the world in which we live.”⁶⁹ However, it is critical to acknowledge that the narratives we share and consume on social media do not reflect our lives on the whole, but instead, represent a particular story through intentionally curated narrative discourse. This often features carefully selected pictures, videos and written word. This dichotomy exemplifies what renowned narratologist H. Porter Abbott describes as the “story–narrative discourse theory.” In this chapter, we will investigate the ways that narrative discourse is present in musical compositions with dramatic texts, a concept called “musical dramaturgy.” Furthermore, we will explore the ways that musical dramaturgy can function in the composition and performance of the contemporary chamber oratorio.

In order to understand how stories are told in oratorio, we must learn what stories are and how they function in our lives. Niles explains that “the world of oral narrative is one that we have all inhabited since infancy.”⁷⁰ Likewise, Paul Auster, author of *The Invention of Solitude*, offers that “a child’s need for stories is as fundamental as his need for food.”⁷¹ Fairy tales and allegorical stories can shape the way a child sees the world. Abbott points out that “we make narratives many times a day, every day of our lives. We start doing so almost from the moment we begin putting words together. As soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is a good chance we are engaged in narrative discourse. ‘I fell down,’ the child cries, and in the process tells her mother a little narrative.”⁷² But as we mature, the stories we tell become longer, more eventful, and more elaborate. As we gather with our friends, we tell them about the events of our

⁶⁹ Peter Brooks, “The Law as Narrative and Rhetoric” In *Law’s Stories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 19.

⁷⁰ Niles, *Homo Narrans*, 61.

⁷¹ Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 154.

⁷² H. Porter Abbot, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, second edition (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.

day—the encounters on the subway, in traffic, in school, or at the bar. We tell each other stories about the people we meet, how and where we meet them, and the ways that we flirt or fight with one another. In other words, stories are the metaphors of our lives: “A storyteller is a life poet, an artist who transforms day-to-day living, inner life and outer life, dream and actuality into a poem whose rhyme scheme is events rather than words—a two-hour metaphor that says: Life is like this!”⁷³ Stories recreate our experiences not only for others but for ourselves—placing them in the container of meaningful instances that we call “memory.” The text of Johnson’s *Considering Matthew Shepard* succinctly summarizes some of the powerful roles that stories play in our lives.

We tell each other stories so that we will remember
Try and find the meaning in the living of our days
Always telling stories, wanting to remember
Where and whom we came from
Who we are.⁷⁴

We tell stories to “find the meaning,” but what exactly does this mean? While the use of the word, “meaning” is debatable in the field of narratology, it generally represents ideas or judgements about a particular narrative.⁷⁵ Scholes describes that “meaning, in a work of narrative art, is a function of the relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author and the ‘real’ world, the apprehendable universe. When we say we ‘understand’ a narrative we mean that we have found a satisfactory relationship or set of relationships between these two worlds.”⁷⁶ In other words, meaning refers to the “connections” between artistic narratives and concrete ideas.

⁷³ McKee, *Story*, 25.

⁷⁴ Johnson, *Libretto*, 5.

⁷⁵ Abbot, *Introduction to Narrative*, 67.

⁷⁶ Scholes, *Nature of Narrative*, 82.

Secondly, we tell stories to remember “who we are.” Narratologists, sociologists, and psychologists tend to agree that “identity” itself is forged through a web of self-narratives. Abbott explains that “one truism about narrative is that it is a way we have of knowing ourselves. What are we, after all, if not characters? That is, we seem to be characters, and characters are one of the two principal components of most stories, the other being the action. [...] It is only through narrative that we know ourselves as active entities that operate through time.”⁷⁷ In 1945, sociologist Ervin Goffman coined the term, “dramaturgical analysis,” which seeks to explain social behaviors through the language of the theater, a metaphor for life itself. Psychologists often focus on the role of self-narratives in the development of identity. “Self-narratives are about constructing an identity in a social world. This world comes into being as a personally narrated one characterized by personal relationships with the other.”⁷⁸ Consequently, humans have the ability to change aspects of their identity by changing their self-narratives: “The development of identity thus becomes a process, a never-ending story, always open for change.”⁷⁹ Stories can help to fulfill some of our basic psychological needs, particularly the need for “belonging and love,” and “safety” as indicated by Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Dr. Paul J. Zak, Professor of Neuroeconomics at Claremont Graduate School claims that consuming character-driven narratives can cause oxytocin synthesis resulting in higher levels of empathy, trust, and connection:

As social creatures, we depend on others for our survival and happiness. A decade ago, my lab discovered that a neurochemical called oxytocin is a key ‘it’s safe to approach others’ signal in the brain. Oxytocin is produced when we are trusted or shown a kindness, and it motivates cooperation with others. It does this by enhancing the sense of empathy, our ability to experience others’ emotions. Empathy is important for social

⁷⁷ Abbot, *Introduction to Narrative*, 130.

⁷⁸ Wolfgang Kraus, “The Eye of the Beholder: Narratology as Seen by Social Psychology” in *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2005), 279.

⁷⁹ Kraus, “Eye of the Beholder,” 268.

creatures because it allows us to understand how others are likely to react to a situation, including those with whom we work. More recently my lab wondered if we could ‘hack’ the oxytocin system to motivate people to engage in cooperative behaviors. To do this, we tested if narratives [...] would cause the brain to make oxytocin. By taking blood draws before and after the narrative, we found that character-driven stories do consistently cause oxytocin synthesis. Further, the amount of oxytocin released by the brain predicted how much people were willing to help others; for example, donating money to a charity associated with the narrative.⁸⁰

In the case of a concert, one can imagine that higher levels of oxytocin could mean more ticket sales, particularly if the character-driven narratives are used in advertising materials.

Furthermore, these higher levels of oxytocin could explain why WolfBrown found higher levels of social bridging and bonding at choral performances that featured stories.

The deep-rooted practice of linking narratives to musical performances can be traced back as far as the fifth century BCE when music was incorporated into ancient Greek dramas.⁸¹ By the middle ages, the music of “bards” (professional orators and musicians) resounded throughout the Celtic regions. And by the thirteenth century, “bhats” (Indian orators and musicians) were in high demand for their bardic prowess. Throughout the last four centuries opera has dominated in its ability to combine music with drama, a process called “musical dramaturgy” which describes the way that music is organized and performed to serve the dramatic narrative. Therefore, musical dramaturgy is a type of narrative discourse, a musical representation of story elements.

2.2 Story–Narrative Discourse Theory

In order to understand how impactful stories are told, we must first recognize that the term “story” and “narrative” do not refer to the same thing. Abbot explains:

⁸⁰ Paul Zak, “Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling,” *Harvard Business Review*, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling>.

⁸¹ Edward Primrose, *Music in Context: An Exploration of Music and Dramaturgy* (PhD Diss.: The University of Newcastle, Australia, 2014), 36.

Most speakers of English grow up using ‘story’ to mean what we are referring to here as ‘narrative.’ When in casual conversation, English speakers say they’ve heard a ‘good story,’ they usually aren’t thinking of the story as separate from the telling of it. When a child wants you to read her favorite story, she often means by that every word on every page. Leave a word out and you are not reading the whole story. [...] The distinction between story and narrative discourse is vital for an understanding of how narrative works. [...] Narrative is the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse; ‘story’ is an event or sequence of events (the action); and ‘narrative discourse’ is those events as represented. [...] Story is always mediated (constructed by narrative discourse).⁸²

By using the term “narrative discourse” we are referring to the telling of a story, not the story itself. The way that stories are told influences how they are perceived. This is something that Aristotle understood over two thousand years ago. He describes how stories can be “colored” through narrative discourse:

Objects with which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, ‘Ah, that is he.’ For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the colouring, or some such other cause.⁸³

The “learning” that Aristotle is referring to here is the making of “meaning,” the acquisition and application of information within a new context.

The meaning that we make from stories is formed by the way they are told as narratives and the elements of stories are highly malleable within narrative discourse. For example, narrative discourse allows the storyteller to reveal events in any order and does not reflect the order in which they occur within a story. Abbott confirms: “All stories, like all action (except possibly at a subatomic level), go in one direction only—forward in time. Narrative discourse, by

⁸² Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, 18-21.

⁸³ Aristotle, “Poetics” in *Introduction to Aristotle*, translated by Ingram Bywater (New York: Random House, 1947), Chapter 4.

contrast, can go in any temporal direction its creator chooses.”⁸⁴ Abbott points out that even some of the most well-known stories of ancient Greece began “in medias res” or “in the middle of things.”⁸⁵ Despite experiencing temporally disjunct events, the audience is able to reconstruct the plot or “the dynamic, sequential element in narrative literature.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, the implied mood of the discourse can tamper with the absorption of plot within an emotional context. The second element of stories is characters and other entities. The storyteller, however, can bring these characters to life through characterization. “Characterization is the sum of all observable qualities of a human being, everything knowable through careful scrutiny: age and IQ; sex and sexuality; style of speech and gesture; choices of home, car, and dress; education and occupation; personality and nervousness; values and attitudes.”⁸⁷ Each of these traits helps the audience begin to “make meaning” or understand a character’s needs, wants, struggles, and other motivations. The third primary element of a story is setting. There are three elements of setting which are particularly important: story period, story duration, and story location. Story period refers to the general temporal placement of the story. For example, the story period could be a year, a month, or a time of day. Story duration, on the other hand, refers to the amount of time that occurs from start to finish. The story duration of a particular scene can be measured just as the story duration of a narrative on the whole can be measured. While both story period and story duration serve as indicators of time, story location is about place. A story location can refer to the place of a particular event or a more general location in which all story events occur. Narrative discourse theory allows the storyteller to represent each of these indicators of time and place. Let’s recall

⁸⁴ Abbot, *Introduction to Narrative*, 17.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁶ Scholes, *Nature of Narrative*, 207.

⁸⁷ McKee, *Story*, 100.

the story that was discussed earlier: “I fell down.” How might this story become more captivating? We are able to use narrative discourse not only to represent the event, but also how the character feels about the event, her motivations behind the event, and the setting in which the event occurs. Here’s a more narrative version: “Last night (story period) I (character) fell flat on my face (hyperbole indicating mood). I was running late for my date at Applebee’s (Story Location) because I wanted to finish an episode of *Survivor* and left my house too late (Characterization). By the time I arrived, he had already left (Story duration).” While narrative discourse theory allows the storyteller to recount the events out of order, the listener reorganizes the events in story time. The listener receives these events in a playful mood as indicated by the narrator’s use of hyperbole. The narrator characterizes herself by revealing a behavior and the motivation behind it. Finally, the narrator provides details about when and where the events took place so that the listener is able to visualize the event. Ultimately, narrative discourse is the presentation of a story.

How are effective stories presented? We can learn a lot about effective storytelling by studying scripts—easily the most widely consumed narrative medium in the twenty-first century. Movies and television heavily rely on well-crafted scripts that hold the attention of audiences for long periods of time. What is the structure of such a captivating narrative? Ultimately, no story is told the same exact way; however, most script-writers agree that a narrative should include a beginning, a middle, and an end. Recall the advice by the King of Hearts in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*: “‘Begin at the beginning,’ the king said, very gravely, ‘and go on till you come to the end: then stop.’”⁸⁸ Aristotle argues that every good tragedy should have

⁸⁸ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1865), 75.

a beginning, middle, and an end.⁸⁹ Robert McKee however argues that a well-crafted story is actually constructed in five parts: the inciting incident, progressive complications, crisis, climax, and resolution.⁹⁰ He explains that “the inciting incident radically upsets the balances of forces in the protagonist’s life.”⁹¹ Furthermore, he describes how “when the protagonist steps out of the inciting incident, he enters a world governed by the Law of Conflict.”⁹² Conflict itself is what “hooks” the audience’s interest through time. Each event following the inciting incident contributes to the addition or subtraction of conflict and can pose or answer questions. The need to answer the question “why” is an inherently human trait which Abbott calls “causation.” We can observe this need in young children whose curiosity about the world leads them to ask the famous question, “Why?” Abbott explains: “We are made in such a way that we continually look for the causes of things. The inevitable linearity of story makes narrative a powerful means of gratifying this need. [...] If this can make narrative a gratifying experience, it can also make it a treacherous one, since it implicitly draws on an ancient fallacy that things that follow other things are caused by those things.”⁹³

At the core of each story are essential elements: events, entities, and setting. Additional elements like a seed or a theme allow the narrative to become more dynamic and meaningful. Ultimately, the way that these elements interact is the lifelong work of the dramaturg. A deeper understanding of these elements is necessary to the analysis of dramaturgy.

James Thomas, author of *Script Analysis*, advocates for a dramaturgical inquiry called “action analysis.” In this type of analysis, there are two primary types of events: external events

⁸⁹ Aristotle, “Poetics,” chapter 4.

⁹⁰ McKee, *Story*, 181.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 210.

⁹³ Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, 42.

and internal events. An external event is a very simple description of what happens. For example, in the second movement of *The Sacred Veil*, Eric Whitacre's oratorio, the external event is "Tony falls in love with Julie." The chain of external events which follow is called "plot." Internal events, however, connect the external event to what Thomas describes as the "seed." Internal events allow the audience to assemble a more indirect meaning from the external events. Kent Puckett, author of *Narrative Theory*, explains how tensions between obvious events and subtle connections help the audience to make meaning: "Tension between the particular and the general, the local event and the whole of a plot, is a tension essential to Aristotle's understanding of narrative as a system of discrete parts that add up to a significant, coherent, and proportional whole."⁹⁴ Narrative discourse allows the story to be told using a variety of perspectives and moods. Mood or "tone" of the narrative discourse wraps events within a cloth of emotion. Thomas explains that "mood refers to the particular state of mind or feeling embodied in a character."⁹⁵ Syntax and delivery of the narrative can color both events and characters with powerful meaning. In fact, character and event depend on each other throughout the narrative process. Scholes agrees: "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"⁹⁶

Characters are examples of what Abbott describes as narrative "entities."⁹⁷ Entities are present in all narratives and can take the form of characters or objects that may serve as symbols. Thomas defines character as "a habitual pattern of action identified with a specific figure."⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Kent Puckett, *Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 43.

⁹⁵ James Michael Thomas, *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*, Sixth edition, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 9.

⁹⁶ Scholes, *Nature of Narrative*, 160.

⁹⁷ Abbot, *Introduction to Narrative*, 19.

⁹⁸ Thomas, *Script Analysis*, 114.

Through character analysis, the tragic flaw of the protagonist is revealed. Thomas explains that the tragic flaw, or the “hamartia” is “a concept Aristotle used to identify a particular trait in the hero that brings about her/his downfall.”⁹⁹ Once identified, the performer is empowered to highlight this character trait in a process called “characterization.” Protagonists are entities who are characterized to gain sympathy from the audience. They generally have goals, or “super objectives,” and take actions to achieve these goals. Robert McKee explains that “no matter whether the story’s protagonist is single, multi or plural, no matter how he is characterized, all protagonists have certain hallmark qualities, and the first is willpower.”¹⁰⁰ The string of actions taken by the protagonist to achieve their “super objective” is called “through-action.” Through-action is essentially a character-driven plot which, in some narratives, develops to the furthest extent possible. “The protagonist has the will and capacity to pursue the object of his conscious and/or unconscious desire to the end of the line, to the human limit established by setting and genre.”¹⁰¹ Likewise, antagonists are characterized through counter super-objectives and counter through-action. Character development work can be a very laborious process. McKee explains: “Of the total creative effort represented in a finished work, 75 percent or more of a writer’s labor goes into designing the story. Who are these characters? What do they want? Why do they want it? How do they go about getting it? What stops them? What are the consequences?”¹⁰² Therefore, performers are responsible for developing a full understanding of the characters they represent. This allows the audience to embody a character and their “point of view.” Aristotle describes two primary points of view, “mimesis” and “diegesis.” Mimesis is the root for the

⁹⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁰ McKee, *Story*, 137.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 139.

¹⁰² Ibid., 19.

word, “imitation,” and involves direct discourse in the first or second person. The character themselves are represented dramatically. Diegesis on the other hand is employed when a story is told by a narrator in the third person as is common in epic poetry and other folklore. The point of view allows the character to gain a variety of perspectives and more easily absorb the tensions and releases as designed within the narrative.

Another critical element of narratives is “setting,” the placement of events and characters in time and space. Marie-Laure Ryan writes that “narrative is not just the wire-frame plot captured by summaries, but the expansion of this wire frame into a total imaginative experience, into a spatio-temporal world to which we react intellectually, emotionally and sometimes aesthetically.”¹⁰³ Abbot claims that the organization of time through narrative is an important human trait: “Narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time. [...] and it certainly makes evolutionary sense. As we are the only species on earth with both language and a conscious awareness of the passage of time, it stands to reason that we would have a mechanism for expressing this awareness.”¹⁰⁴ As previously mentioned, the temporal element of setting consists of both “period” and “duration.” The physical element of setting involves “place,” both general (cultural) and local. Representation of the setting allows the audience to deepen their imagination of events and characters.

In addition to events, entities, and settings, many storytellers are able to achieve narrative cohesion through “seed” and “theme.” Thomas explains that “the seed of the play is its emotional and intellectual essence.”¹⁰⁵ The seed is usually of a very universal nature and serves as the glue

¹⁰³ Marie-Laure Ryan, “On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology” in *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2005), 10.

¹⁰⁴ Abbot, *Introduction to Narrative*, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas, *Script Analysis*, 6.

which connects each of the events in the narrative. Craig Hella Johnson explained to me that “we get connected through our stories. And this is an ancient old lineage, I mean, millennia, that we’re passing these stories down, but we passed them down to find the meaning which in my own experience is about something really broad.”¹⁰⁶ The seed is often as simple as “love” or “jealousy”—universal human experiences. The string of internal events connected by a seed results in what Abbott describes as a “masterplot”: “There are stories that we tell over and over in a myriad of forms and that connect vitally with our deepest values, wishes, and fears. [...] We seem to connect our thinking about life, and particularly about our own lives, to a number of masterplots that we may or may not be fully aware of.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, “themes” are often of a universal nature and typically represent the outcomes of the seed and the tragic flaw. The objective of the theme is to create tension and internal conflict. Storytellers can heighten this sense of tension by highlighting a theme in opposition to the seed or hamartia. Conductors of dramatic and especially eventful music should emphasize these elements through performance just as actors and actresses do. In fact, the study of dramaturgy and narrative discourse is important to any type of artist attempting to tell a story.

2.3 Musical Dramaturgy as Narrative Discourse

We now know that narrative discourse is the telling of a story through its essential elements, but these elements can be represented in a variety of ways. In fact, “[a story] may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject [...] of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. There are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them,

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁰⁷ Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, 46.

it is a story that we follow.”¹⁰⁸ The core of the story is carried across media. However, “when it comes to narrative abilities, media are not equally gifted; some are born storytellers, others suffer from serious handicaps.”¹⁰⁹ For example, a picture might be incredibly useful as a vehicle of setting while a song might be more useful to convey characterization and mood. Marie-Laure Ryan explains how media can change the impact that a narrative has on an audience:

There are, quite simply, meanings that are better expressed visually or musically than verbally, and these meanings should not be declared *a priori* irrelevant to the narrative experience. [...] For instance, the sound track in a movie conveys certain moods and elicits emotional responses much more powerfully than the image and the dialogue can do. I notice for instance that when I cry during movies, it is always in moments when music is playing; and I cry in movies much more easily than I do while reading.¹¹⁰

Music has an ability to appeal to the emotions by “coloring” events and entities within a given “mood.” In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he acknowledges the dramaturgical hierarchy of transmedial narratives: “Epic poetry and tragedy, comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. [...] Even dancing imitates character, emotion, and action.”¹¹¹ To the extent possible, a narrative medium can be “mimetic,” or imitative.

Byron Almén claims that “narrative derives its character from coordination and synthesizing multiple elements within a work to achieve a global perspective. Topic, symbol, program, and other types of meaning become data points to be considered in fleshing out that perspective.”¹¹² But to what extent can absolute music be narrative? To what extent can it convey

¹⁰⁸ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY, 1978), 20.

¹⁰⁹ Ryan, *Narratology*, 1)

¹¹⁰ Ryan, “Transmedial Narratology,” 10-11.

¹¹¹ Aristotle, “*Poetics*,” 1.

¹¹² Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 14.

“meaning”? Douglass Seaton explains that absolute music, music without sung text, can carry a narrative:

Entirely apart from literary content, a musical work can satisfy the two requirements of narrative that transcend artistic medium: plot and voice. Plot is established in instrumental music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the definition of character through rhythmic/melodic identities and the articulation of action through harmonic patterns of stability, rising tension, climax, resolution, and dénouement. Voice—the narrative persona—is created in various ways, sometimes embodied in musical forms but often, too, in verbal cues, in musical behaviors surrounding the performance and hearing of a work, or in reception.¹¹³

Narrative in this case refers to information able to be gleaned—meaning. While this conceptualization of narrative is possible in music, it must be acknowledged that absolute music cannot possibly tell a story without the additional aid of program notes or other supplementary media to represent particular events, entities, or settings. Music with text, however, does have the ability to tell a story. Longer vocal forms such as opera and oratorio can tell elaborate stories not only through the libretto alone but through the music, visual elements, and other media working together in concert.

Oratorio, opera, and musical theater reveal that music as a narrative medium can be particularly “dramatic,” but what exactly does this mean? Etymologically, the term “drama” comes from the Greek “dran” (δρᾶν) meaning “to do” or “to act.” The term dramaturgy is the combination of the Greek “dran” and “urgy” meaning “work.” Therefore, dramaturgy is the study of action. Consequently, “musical dramaturgy” is the nexus of action and music. Helen Greenwald, author of *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, defines the term: “To avoid any ambiguity, the phrase ‘musical dramaturgy’ will be understood here in its etymological sense as

¹¹³ Douglass Seaton, “Narrative in Music: The Case of Beethoven’s ‘Tempest’ Sonata” in *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2005), 66.

the ‘production (ἔργον) of theatrical action (δρᾶμα) through music.’”¹¹⁴ We learn from Greenwald’s definition that musical dramaturgy not only refers to the story as conveyed through narrative but also to the performance of the story. Consequently, a musical-dramaturgical analysis of dramatic forms such as the oratorio can influence musical performance.

2.4 Musical Dramaturgy and the 21st-Century Oratorio

As discussed in Chapter One, the development of the contemporary American oratorio has been particularly linked with the emergence of professional choral ensembles across the United States. Ensembles like *Conspire*, *Verdigris*, and *Red Shift* are committed to telling stories through concert-length works. The overwhelming majority of these oratorios are based on secular stories, historical content, or current events, but this trend really began to develop in the twentieth century. Howard Smither explains:

Many twentieth-century oratorios have librettos based on the types of subject matter that had been used since the seventeenth century. Of these traditional subjects, the ones on themes from the New Testament are the most numerous, and they are followed in prominence by subjects from the Old Testament and the lives of saints. Most oratorios of the twentieth century, however, have librettos on subjects of a type rarely encountered earlier. These include non-religious political, patriotic, and nationalistic themes, and subjects based on literary works, mythology or legend (exclusive of legends of saints), historical events, and texts expressing philosophical or religious ideas that are not exclusively Jewish or Christian but broadly humanistic.¹¹⁵

Oratorios based on an apocalypse can also be found by composers Fritz Büchtger, Paolo Gallico, Eugene Goossens, Jean Guillou, Alan Hovhaness, Otto Jochum, and Charles Tournemire.¹¹⁶ The American oratorio has continued to secularize and spotlight particularly relevant non-fiction stories encompassing immigration, social justice, global warming, technology, and historical events. *Anthracite Fields*, an oratorio written by Julia Wolfe in 2014, is about the poor working

¹¹⁴ Greenwald, *Oxford Handbook of Opera*, 177.

¹¹⁵ Smither, *Vol 4*, 632.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 649.

conditions at a Pennsylvania coal mine that led to the death of numerous workers, many of them immigrants to the United States. The first movement begins by listing all of those miners who died between the years 1869-1916 and whose first name was “John.” *Mass Transmission*, an oratorio written by Mason Bates in 2012, examines the role of telecommunication in an increasingly globalized twentieth century through the story of a mother and daughter who are able to communicate between Holland and Java using innovative radio transmission technology. Of the oratorios written at the turn of the twenty-first century, most utilize non-fiction stories over fiction. Furthermore, these non-fiction stories tend to utilize primary source materials that are often used within the libretto. Sometimes these source materials are transcriptions of spoken events. Such is the case in Kile Smith’s *The Consolation of Apollo* written in 2014. Throughout this work, Smith makes use of the communication between astronauts on the 1969 Apollo 8 mission, providing an opportunity to set text likely unsung in other contexts: “How’s that steam pressure, Bill?”¹¹⁷ Another example of innovating text sourcing can be found in Caroline Mallonée’s *Search*, a composition which assembles text from Google’s autofill: “Why are yawns contagious? What are people so mean? Why are polar molecules asymmetrical?”¹¹⁸ Media in the modern era is dominated by real-world stories from documentaries, news outlets, and late-night comedy to various social media platforms. Contemporary oratorio is increasingly following suit.

Oratorio is an inherently dramatic form, a concert-length musical work that features the chorus and conveys a story. Consequently, the librettos contain interconnected events and entities. Principles of narrative discourse allow these stories to be told in a variety of ways. Consider “point of view,” a concept in narratology; a libretto can include elements of narration,

¹¹⁷ Kile Smith, *The Consolation of Apollo* (Philadelphia, PA: MusicSpoke, 2014), 10.

¹¹⁸ Caroline Mallonée, *Search* (Ink to Paper, 2014), 4-6.

reflection, or direct discourse in action. This “point of view” is what dramaturgs often describe as “poetic genre”. The three poetic genres are “epic,” “lyric,” and “dramatic.” Howard Smither describes that “in an epic the poet looks back at and narrates a great event or series of events in the distant past; in lyric poetry he reflects upon and expresses his immediate, intense feelings about a subject or event in the present; and in dramatic poetry the poet in a sense loses himself in the characters, whose dialogue reveals the action as it proceeds toward an inexorable goal.”¹¹⁹ Libretti, however, can include elements from all three points of view. Many oratorios include the role of a narrator. In some cases, a character, named or unnamed, can play a diegetic role. In other cases, the choir sings narrative text and moves the story forward. Abbot explains that “the device of the narrator, like the subject of point of view, with which it overlaps in a number of ways, has been intensely studied in the last fifty years. Out of the many discriminations that have been made with regard to the narrator, the three most useful are those of voice, focalization, and distance.”¹²⁰ Voice refers to who the story is about in relation to the narrator. Is the narrator using first person (I/we), second person (you), or third person language (he/she/they)? Focalization, “the lens through which we see characters and events,”¹²¹ involves the characterization of the narrator herself. Distance explains the narrator's level of involvement in the story. Lyric elements of the libretto involve the reflection or projection of events rather than the narration or imitation of the events themselves. A good example of this is the chorales of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, in which time is taken away from the direct dialogue of the characters and the narration by the Evangelist. Finally, oratorio libretti include dramatic points of view featuring direct imitation of action or dialogue between characters. Dramatic moments can

¹¹⁹ Smither, *Vol 4*, 64.

¹²⁰ Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, 69.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

resemble events that occur presently or particularly active recollections of events. As in film, a variety of perspectives allows the listener to more readily make meaning from the narrative on the whole.

Oratorios feature three primary musical textures: recitative, aria, and chorus. However, some oratorios only make use of one or two of these textures. Eric Whitacre's *The Sacred Veil*, is an example of an oratorio that does not make use of recitative or aria. Instead, the chorus is utilized as a flexible performer wielding epic, lyric, and dramatic points of view throughout the work. A recitative, or sung recitation, usually serves an epic function moving the narrative forward through the narration of events; however, it is not uncommon for recitatives to also serve a lyric function. A character may ponder an event in their past or future and recitative can resemble this feeling of contemplation through atemporality. Less commonly, recitative functions dramatically to imitate real events in time. While a narrative or epic point of view is commonly found in recitative, it is rarely found in aria. Arias tend to serve a more lyrical purpose, helping the audience enter the thinking space of a particular character; however, arias can be more dramatic and convey events in the present. One of the properties that distinguishes oratorio from opera is the chorus. In oratorio the chorus is the primary performer and, as such, can function in a wide variety of ways. Aristotle writes about the role of the chorus in Greek drama: "The chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action."¹²² As in Greek drama, the most common role of the chorus in oratorio is to reflect on events as an "everyman" figure, but one of the most exciting uses of the chorus is the "turba chorus." In a turba chorus, the members of the chorus serve as individual characters within a crowd. Bach makes use of a turba chorus in his *St. Matthew Passion* as the

¹²² Aristotle, "Poetics," 36.

chorus of Jews demands of Pontius Pilate that Jesus Christ be crucified shouting, “Lass ihn Kreuzigen!” Just as in any great story, most oratorios have a clear beginning, middle, and end. In fact, oratorios in the Baroque period by Bach and Handel were typically written in three distinct parts. Some claim that the very definition of oratorio includes this three-part model; however, oratorios in the twenty-first century tend to be significantly shorter than that of the 20th century and earlier.

Since oratorio is a dramatic form, it is subject to musical dramaturgy—an understanding of the ways musical composition and dramatic elements intermingle as narrative discourse. By completing an action analysis, the composer and performer can unveil events, entities, settings, seeds, and themes within the narrative in order to strengthen the partnership of music and drama. Greenwald explains how we are able to gain an understanding of musical dramaturgy through not only musical and dramatic analysis, but a constant interaction between the two:

If music analysis is concerned with breaking down a work into its constituent parts and examining how they fit together, how they function to produce something that is artistically meaningful to the listener, then the analysis of [dramatic musical forms] can, at best, be considered an extremely complex discipline in which music analysis—itsself a complicated act—forms only part of the process. [...] To analyze its constituent parts and then to see how these fit together, musical and dramatic is a multifaceted process that requires a considerable amount of intellectual gear-changing.¹²³

If a composer is to pursue writing an oratorio or other dramatic form, they might begin with an action analysis of their libretto. Musical dramaturgy is about the musical representation of story elements as determined through an action analysis. An action analysis includes the following: external events, internal events, mood, and characterization of the protagonist, character objectives, actions taken to achieve these character objectives, symbols, setting, seed and theme. While it is not necessary to think of these specific parameters, the composer must

¹²³ Greenwald, *Oxford Handbook of Opera*, 250.

attempt to create musical links with narrative material in its holistic complexity. Composers have unlimited tools in their quest for narrative representation through musical composition: pitch, rhythm, prosody, emphatic repetition and other rhetorical devices, style, dynamics, articulations, textures, motives, quotation, and form. The role of performers is to decode this musical language to highlight the musical dramaturgy as constructed by the composer. Sometimes musical dramaturgy happens intentionally; other times it is a natural result of the composer's muse. Regardless, the performer has a responsibility to help illuminate these impactful connections. This mission to elevate the audience experience through narrative performance explains the growing trend of "choral theater" discussed in Chapter One. Musical dramaturgy can inform not only musical performance choices, but also extra-musical performance choices including staging, lighting, costumes, set design, or the inclusion of additional media to create a multisensory experience. These extra-musical features can facilitate the inherent musical dramaturgy through representation of essential narrative elements. In the next chapter, Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard* is subject to an analysis of musical dramaturgy, a process that reveals critical performance considerations.

CHAPTER III: A Dramaturgical Analysis of *Considering Matthew Shepard*

3.1 Craig Hella Johnson and the Making of *Considering Matthew Shepard*

In addition to serving as Conspirare's founding Artistic Director, Craig Hella Johnson is also one of the most well-known living choral conductors in modern America. Highly trained as a pianist, conductor, and singer, Johnson has held several prestigious conducting positions with professional choral organizations—Conspirare, Cincinnati Vocal Arts Ensemble, Victoria Bach Festival, and Chanticleer. I asked Johnson why he chose a career in choral music. His response:

I was just always singing in choirs growing up, you know? At church, my dad was a preacher and so I was just always in the choirs there as a kid. And by the time I was in eighth grade, I was an organist at our pretty big church and also singing in the adult choir and it always just seemed like it was a part of my life. [...] Through college, I sang in the St Olaf choir which is the touring choir at the college. And it kind of felt like full-time choir so it just never occurred to me, you know, to actually go into choral music. I thought, "I'm already fully in it," you know? So I was looking at other things; I was certainly focused on piano and then orchestral conducting, and that was really the repertoire I was studying. [...] I got to the end of college and a number of things happened. [...] I was offered a full assistantship and tuition waiver [...] at University of Illinois. Then, [...] I went to Juilliard for a little while [to study] piano. Then, I was out at the Oregon Bach Festival and got to experience [my] first time sitting in a rehearsal with Helmuth Rilling and he was doing B-minor mass at the time. And just something clicked in, like [...] falling in love with someone that was right next to you for a long, long time. [...] So then I left Juilliard then went to Germany to the Bach Academy and that's really when [...] I said, "this is what I want to do."¹²⁴

By 1991, Johnson decided to gather together a group of singers for the New Texas Festival Chorus. This project-based ensemble drew singers from around the country to perform for a week. By 1999, these singers were performing more regularly around Austin and the organization changed its name to Conspirare, a name which, as discussed earlier, derives from the Latin "con" (with) and "spirare" (to breath). Breathing together is an important community-building practice that Johnson enjoys leading during Conspirare performances. In an interview

¹²⁴ Johnson, interview with author.

with me, Johnson explains this *Conspirare* tradition: “One thing that I know we can say we all have in common [is] our breath and we paint on the canvas of breath so I want to feel like we’re in a circle with the audience. [It’s] not two dimensional but it’s round and it’s full and it’s engaging. We’re truly with each other in that experience.”¹²⁵ This tradition is one of many ways that Johnson tries to connect with a broader audience. *Conspirare* is known for elaborately curated concert programs featuring a wide variety of music, texts, and perspectives. Johnson frequently creates musical “mash-ups” using disparate musical sources to create something meaningful, a technique called “collage.” The sources from which Johnson frequently draws encompass a multitude of musical styles, a bold choice which is sometimes criticized by Johnson’s contemporaries. Despite judgment from more “traditional” peers, Johnson’s ability to connect with the audience through improvisation is unparalleled. He explains how important improvisation is to him: “Freedom is at the core of what I would just say is in my musical heart. I’m an improviser first and a composer second. [...] I fiercely protect whatever it is that occurs in improvisation that brings such presence. So I always try and think about how I can compose something that has that same connection with this moment.”¹²⁶ While Johnson positions himself as an improviser, his compositions are incredibly effective at engaging a broad audience. Ultimately, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, Johnson’s first oratorio, is the product of his disciplined handling of musical collage and improvisation.

A dramatized depiction of events, *Considering Matthew Shepard* features a secular narrative, a small orchestra, and sometimes minimal staging. Johnson calls the work a Passion oratorio because it focuses on events leading up to the death of a central character. However, it

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

has also been called a “fusion oratorio” because it draws from many genres of music. Elizabeth Harper Neeld who frequently leads pre-concert talks for performances of *Considering Matthew Shepard* explains that “it is a very American piece because it’s a ‘fusion oratorio’ which means it has a lot of different kinds of music: jazz, and blues, and country, and gospel, and then it has operatic arias, and chant, and it seems to me to really fit the American subject which is, of course, a young American boy, but also the American West, you know, the wide grasses of the state of Wyoming.”¹²⁷ Johnson agrees that the work is fundamentally American: “This is not a piece that would have been created in Europe. It’s a piece of its time too because [...] the partnerships between classical musicians and Indie¹²⁸ musicians have really been cracking wide open in the last fifteen years.”¹²⁹ Johnson is at the forefront of these partnerships and represents a new wave of choral composition in America.

Johnson decided to write *Considering Matthew Shepard* because he was particularly impacted by the story of this young man who was murdered for being gay. In a 2018 PBS special about the work, Johnson describes the moment he learned of Shepard’s murder:

There’s something culturally...it feels like there is a huge wound that gets addressed that has affected all of us. There was a day in 1998 in October and one of the new singers whom I’d hired, his name was Matt, Matt Alber. And Matt came up to me just before the rehearsal started, and I could tell he’s been crying, and he said something really terrible had happened and he told me about it. This young man in Wyoming had been brutally beaten. And then Matt wept, we cried together as I heard the story. It went in so deeply and as I learned more and more, of course like so many of us, the painful events of those days, his story just went into my heart and ever since that time, I’ve always wanted to respond to that in some way musically.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Elizabeth Harper Neeld in *Considering Matthew Shepard* (PBS, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

¹²⁸ Independent musicians not associated with large record labels.

¹²⁹ Johnson, interview with Robert Ward, February 2016.

¹³⁰ Craig Hella Johnson in *Considering Matthew Shepard* (PBS, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

Johnson spent nearly two decades contemplating and composing the work:

I had in my mind, of course, that this might be kind of a Passion setting, a Passion story of Matthew Shepard and that's where this all began and it kind of comes out of that tradition. But in order to tell the story, it felt important to include a variety of, sort of, musical approaches that hopefully come together to tell the story in a way that is very different than anything I've done. And I really made a commitment early on to listen to what the heart was telling me.¹³¹

Early in the process, Johnson met with Judy Shepard, Matthew's mother, to seek permission to write the work. Johnson tells me about a lunch that they shared when he was first considering the composition.

That's when we, kind of, first bonded. I didn't want to dump a bunch of scores in her lap. That would have been of no use [...] I had written down that poem of Hafiz, 'In Need of Breath,' translated by Daniel Ladinsky and I said, 'I can't give you a lot of ideas [because] we're at a restaurant here [...] but what I'd like to just share is this poem because I had this sense that if Matt would have been singing that night tied to that fence...if his spirit could have sung to the moon and the stars that night, these are the words that I believe he would have sung.' And so, I just handed that to her. She had been very, very, very quiet up to that point in our lunch and tears just streamed down her face and she wrote her phone number, her cell phone on her business card. She said, 'you call me anytime. I want you to do this piece.' So [...] we kind of bonded in that moment and [I'll be] forever grateful.¹³²

Since Matthew's brutal murder in 1998, Judy and the Matthew Shepard Foundation have become major voices in the national dialogue about anti-gay hate crimes. In 2009, Judy and Dennis Shepard stood beside President Barack Obama as he signed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act into law. Shepard had already become a national icon by the time Johnson decided to write the work in 2014, so he would need to track the story very carefully.

While *Considering Matthew Shepard* features the story of Shepard's murder, it is also the story of Shepard's life. Judy Shepard writes in the preface of her book, *The Meaning of Matthew*,

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Johnson, interview with author.

“You knew him as Matthew. To us he was Matt. [...] It would be unfair to Matt if only Matthew’s story was told. Matt was so much more than ‘Matthew Shepard, the gay twenty-one-year-old University of Wyoming college student.’ He had a family and countless friends. He had a life before the night he was tied to that fence.”¹³³ It was important to Johnson that Matt, as opposed to just Matthew, be featured in his oratorio.

I realized I had Matthew Shepard in the piece, but not Matt Shepard. That’s what his mother had talked to me [about] once when I asked her, ‘How do you do all this work in the world? I carry this personal grief forward all these years. You keep having to sort of remind yourself about it and isn’t it painful?’ It’s just amazing how she [responded] to me. [...] ‘We do the work of Matthew Shepard and every day we continue to grieve the loss of our son, Matt.’¹³⁴

Johnson acknowledges this distinction in the prologue of the piece where the choir sings, “I am open to hear this story about a boy, an ordinary boy who never had expected his life would be this story, (could be any boy).”¹³⁵ In 2012, Lesléa Newman published a cycle of sixty-eight poems about Matthew Shepard and the story of his murder. Newman captures Judy Shepard’s sentiment by acknowledging the irony of the Matthew Shepard story. Her poem “Then and Now” exposes this dichotomy:

Then I was a son
Now I am a symbol

Then I was a brother
Now I am an absence

Then I was a friend
Now I am a memory

Then I was a person
Now I am a headline

¹³³ Judy Shepard, preface to *The Meaning of Matthew: My Son’s Murder in Laramie, and a World Transformed* (New York, NY: Hudson Street Press, 2009), xi.

¹³⁴ Johnson, interview with author.

¹³⁵ Johnson, libretto, 5-6.

Then I was a guy
Now I am a ghost

Then I was a student
Now I am a lesson¹³⁶

One of the ways that Johnson features “Matt” in the oratorio is by using Matthew’s own words in the story. Johnson explains, “His journals played such a lovely, huge role. I got to hold them in my lap and sit with them and [it was] very sweet, and touching, and heartbreaking.”¹³⁷ Johnson includes these words from Shepard’s journal in the second movement of the prologue, “Ordinary Boy.” In this movement the character of Matt characterizes himself as he writes in his journal: “I am funny, sometimes forgetful and messy and lazy. I am not a lazy person though. I am giving and understanding. And formal and polite. I am sensitive. I am honest. I am sincere. And I am not a pest. I am my own person. I am warm. I want my life to be happy and I want to be clearer about things. I want to feel good.”¹³⁸ In the 2018 PBS special about the work, Judy Shepard acknowledges how meaningful it was to her that Johnson included the text from Matt’s journal: “Everybody can identify with either what happened to Matt or his family or people trying to change the world in Matt’s name and it hasn’t been told this way before. So it’s a unique opportunity for people to actually get to know Matt in a different way—it’s Matt’s words.”¹³⁹ Involving Matt in the story of Matthew Shepard humanizes the character of this historically iconic tragedy.

While gay rights in America had come a long way since the 1960’s, there was still a long

¹³⁶ Lesléa Newman, “Then and Now” in *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* (York, PA: Candlewick Press, 2012), 40.

¹³⁷ Johnson, interview with author.

¹³⁸ Matthew Shepard, “I Love” poem in Libretto to *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016), <https://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-Libretto-LA-June-2018.pdf>.

¹³⁹ Judy Shepard in *Considering Matthew Shepard* (PBS, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

road ahead for the LGBT community in the 1990s. Scott Hoffman describes the ethos of the era in which Matthew Shepard was killed:

October 1998 felt full of potential for many lesbians and gays. True equality seemed within reach. Decades of political activism starting in the 1960's had ended the days when the FBI kept lists of suspected homosexuals or when consensual sex between two adult men (so-called 'sodomy') could easily result in prison sentences or even time in a mental institution. After years of government inaction on AIDS, activists had pressured Washington into finally addressing the crisis. Popular polls indicated that a growing number of Americans viewed lesbians and gays more favorably. [...] Yet, there was still a long way to go on the road to equality. Sodomy laws remained on the books in many states, though rarely enforced. Polls, while favorable, indicated that a majority were still intolerant of gays and lesbians. [...] There was still open hostility. People shouted homophobic slurs from their pick-up trucks. Letters regularly appeared in the student newspaper comparing homosexuality to pedophilia or even bestiality, all without repercussion. Homophobic violence often went unreported out of fear.¹⁴⁰

By the time Matthew Shepard was murdered in 1998, the country was primed to begin speaking out against this kind of hate. As a result, "Matthew's torment, [...] from the first reports-evoked an extraordinary response. Across the country, the story drew front-page coverage for days. *Time* magazine's cover, which was headlined THE WAR OVER GAYS, was a photograph of the fence. [...] The fence had become the crossroads of a civil-rights movement, and Matthew the most significant symbol of violence against gays in the history of the country."¹⁴¹ While the murder of Matthew Shepard provoked a nationwide cultural response in 1998, gay hate crimes had become relatively normalized by the 1990s. Thernstrom explains that "Matthew was not the first gay victim of an attack that year, or that week. The most recent FBI statistics on hate crimes in the U.S. showed more than 1,400 attacks on gays in 1997. A 1996 study showed that such attacks resulted in 21 fatalities. Moreover, studies show their deaths are often particularly

¹⁴⁰ Scott Hoffman, "Considering Matthew Shepard: The Power of Remembering" (Austin Public Broadcasting Service, 2020), <https://austinpbs.org/consideringmatthewshepard/remembering>.

¹⁴¹ Melanie Thernstrom, "The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard" in *Vanity Fair* (March 1999), <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/1999/3/the-crucifixion-of-matthew-shepard>.

vicious; many victims are brutalized beyond recognition.”¹⁴² This was certainly the case with Matthew Shepard whose face had been so mercilessly fractured by the repeated blows of a .357 Magnum revolver. Another notable hate crime which garnered massive media attention was the 1993 killing of transgender teen Brandon Teena and his friends in Nebraska. Daniel Cockayne notes that “the outpouring of public sympathy—for example, in the candlelit vigils for Shepard held across the United States—was striking given the otherwise hostile attitude toward LGBTQ people in the context of—among other factors—the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and the increasingly restrictive policing of sexuality in urban spaces in the 1990s.”¹⁴³ Why is it that the Matthew Shepard murder culminated in such a widespread response? Thernstrom argues that the strength of this cultural response stemmed from Matthew’s character. He was just an ordinary boy.

Parents throughout the country felt that Matthew could have been their son, an idea many had never contemplated before about a gay person. In part, this may have been a result of the fact that while he was described as gay, the press—in unwitting collusion with homophobia—did not portray Matthew as a sexual adult. He was depicted as having parents, rather than partners—loving, affluent, married American parents. He had an allowance; he wore braces. He was a member of the U.W. Episcopal Canterbury Club. He had a fragile, childlike look—a look of pale purity, the translucent beauty favored in religious art.¹⁴⁴

Craig Hella Johnson highlights these qualities in the second movement of *Considering Matthew Shepard* titled, “Ordinary Boy.” Another reason Matthew Shepard’s murder provoked such a massive response is that it occurred in one of the most rural areas of America—Wyoming.

Residents of rural America generally take much longer to acknowledge and accept people within

¹⁴² Thernstrom, “Crucifixion.”

¹⁴³ Daniel Cockayne, “Considering Matthew Shepard: Normative and Anti-Normative Queer Spatial Narratives and the Politics of Performance in Choral Music” in *Cultural Geographies* 26, no. 4, 471-472.

¹⁴⁴ Thernstrom, “Crucifixion.”

the LGBTQ community. Thernstrom explains: “Many Laramie residents describe themselves as not homophobic. One resident explains: ‘we don’t have phobias—we have values.’ But people mock gay reporters sent to cover the crime. ‘I’m from the *San Francisco Chronicle*,’ they imitate unselfconsciously, assuming fey voices.”¹⁴⁵ But Shepard’s murder changed the political landscape of homosexuality in rural America. Scott Hoffman, author of “Considering Matthew Shepard: The Power of Remembering,” describes how “his murder was a formational experience that propelled many of us towards greater awareness and action. [...] Sodomy laws were overturned. The military ended its policy of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’ allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly. The Supreme Court gutted DOMA and declared same-sex marriage the law of the land. The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Hate Crimes Prevention Act finally passed in 2009.”¹⁴⁶ While the state of LGBTQ rights is much improved since 1998, gay hate crimes still occur on a regular basis. Judy Shepard explains that “Matt’s story is not unique. [...] It represents a lot of other stories that happen in the world, in the past and right now. Any way we can tell the story to make people aware that these things are happening and to touch them in a way where they feel like they would like to do something to help, to respond in a positive way, to educate them. One of our goals is to keep Matt’s story going.”¹⁴⁷ Since 1998, Judy Shepard and the Matthew Shepard Foundation have supported several artistic responses to the event. *Considering Matthew Shepard* is but one of these works of art contributing to the Matthew Shepard “Archive.”

The University of Wyoming houses a physical archive of documents, books, and artistic

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Hoffman, “Remembering.”

¹⁴⁷ Judy Shepard, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

works which deal with the Matthew Shepard story; however, Daniel Cockayne argues that there is an even greater “archive” of media about Matthew Shepard and what his life and death meant for so many in the LGBTQ community. “Feminist and queer writers have used the term ‘archive’ to refer not only or necessarily to a literal physical or digital archive of documents, but to a set of cultural products that share a topic or theme across medium.”¹⁴⁸ *Considering Matthew Shepard* is an incredibly important addition to that archive. I asked Johnson about this:

Ryan: This work is part of the larger Matthew Shepard Archive, formally kept by University of Wyoming but kind of, informally, held by all of us. As you know, there are several important works—*The Laramie Project* and others. So, I’m wondering, are there any artistic responses to the Matthew Shepard murder that influenced your compositional process?

Craig: Um, not directly, no. I mean, certainly I knew *The Laramie Project* very well and I’ve seen it several times as a play, and I’ve read it, and then I watched the HBO [version] a couple of handfuls of times at least. I’m very moved by that and all the work that Moises Kaufman and the whole crew did but I wouldn’t say it directly influenced this piece. There’ve been a number of poems that I’ve appreciated, a few songs that have come down the pike too. [...] Obviously it goes without saying that Lesléa Newman’s poems were very important to me.¹⁴⁹

Within the oratorio, Johnson sets eight of the poems published within Newman’s *October Mourning*. These poems are a wellspring from which Johnson crafts the overall form of the oratorio.

3.2 Form

Considering Matthew Shepard is divided into three primary sections—Prologue, Passion, and Epilogue. Originally, Johnson wrote the Passion section which was designed for a smaller workshop performance, but he quickly realized that he needed to place it within a larger musical context. Johnson speaks about why he chose to write a prologue and epilogue:

¹⁴⁸ Cockayne, “Queer Spatial Narratives,” 472.

¹⁴⁹ Johnson, interview with author.

Ryan, you know, I had to do it because when I did the workshop at first, I only had some of the central portion, the Passion part, and what that experience was for the listener was very annihilating. I mean, people were walking in the parking lot, just sort of numb, kind of like they'd been hit by this brutal story but I didn't know yet how to care for them with this story and so I knew I needed to [do] two things, really. I wanted to take the listener's hand; thankfully Bach has been such a great teacher in the *St. Matthew Passion*, not the *St. John* so much, but the *St. Matthew* to say, 'I'm going to hold your hand through this and every time you might need a little moment for consideration, for contemplation, for comfort, to just be reminded, we're doing this story together.' He would provide a chorale or an aria or some needed space. And so I said, 'Thank you. I will try and take your lessons here, Bach.' But I really needed to learn how to do that which meant we needed to enter the story and we needed to come out of the story in a concert setting.¹⁵⁰

Ultimately, the addition of the prologue and epilogue greatly strengthen the work as a dramatic composition. The primary function of the prologue is to introduce essential topics, especially setting, characters, and an inciting incident. The audience learns very quickly in the first movement that the story takes place in rural America. By the second movement, we are solidly situated in Wyoming as we learn about the life of Matt Shepard. Cockayne notes that "the prologue and epilogue [...] set the scene and speak outside of the temporal flow of the narrative in the Passion by breaking the fourth wall and speaking directly to the audience."¹⁵¹ This is certainly true of the third and final movement of the prologue where Johnson prepares the audience to hear the painful tragedy about Matthew Shepard. Following the Passion section, Johnson again breaks the fourth wall and thanks the audience for listening. An experienced concert curator, Johnson follows this direct address to the audience with "All of Us," a finale which drives home the central message of the work. This is followed by a calmer encore which reprises the opening and feels as though the audience has returned "home."

The Passion section is the main body of Johnson's oratorio and is structured using four poems by Lesléa Newman. Newman writes these poems about Matthew Shepard from the

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Cockayne, "Queer Spatial Narratives," 476.

perspective of the fence. The first of these four “fence posts,” poses the question, “Will anyone remember me after I’m gone?” This ordinary fence ponders an existential question that so many LGBTQ people face in rural America. “Out and alone / on the endless empty prairie / [...] will I always be out here / exposed and alone? / [...] Will somebody someday / stumble upon me?”¹⁵² Serving as a narrator, the fence vividly recollects the night of Shepard’s beating in the second fence poem, “The Fence (that night).” The audience is introduced to the dramaturgical “theme” of compassion as the fence sings, “I saw what was done to this child. I cradled him just like a mother.”¹⁵³ The third fence poem recollects the emotional strength it took to serve as a memorial for Shepard just one week after his murder. Following the deconstruction of the fence, the fourth and final fence poem answers the initiating question, “Will anyone remember me after I’m gone.”

Prayed upon
Frowned upon

Revered
Feared

Adored
Abhorred

Despised
Idolized

Splintered
Scarred

Weathered
Worn

Broken down

¹⁵² Lesléa Newman, “The Fence (*before*)” in *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* (York, PA: Candlewick Press, 2012), xv.

¹⁵³ Lesléa Newman, “The Fence (*that night*)” in *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* (York, PA: Candlewick Press, 2012), 16.

Broken up

Ripped apart
Ripped away

Gone
But not forgotten.¹⁵⁴

Interestingly, two of the four fence poems included in *Considering Matthew Shepard* occur after Matthew's murder. As a result, the work is generally more dramatic or eventful in the first half than the second. Between these fence posts are ten spoken recitations moving narrative events along through time, and a variety of choral and solo movements deepening the narrative experience through dramatic action, reflection, characterization, symbolism, and other dramatic agents.

3.3 Action Analysis: Events, Characters, Symbols, and Settings

An action analysis of *Considering Matthew Shepard* reveals critical story elements including events, characters, symbols, and settings which Johnson depicts through musical narrative. This depiction of the story through musical composition and musical dramaturgy allows the listener to become immersed in the action. The importance of these dramatic elements will be highlighted below using iconic examples of musical dramaturgy throughout the work. A full analysis of musical dramaturgy will be saved for the following chapter.

The most important aspect of an action analysis is an account of external events. In *Considering Matthew Shepard*, external events are frequently conveyed through spoken recitations. The first external event of the work occurs in the second movement, "Ordinary Boy," when the audience is introduced to the character of Matt Shepard. Soon after, the audience learns

¹⁵⁴ Lesléa Newman, "The Fence (*after*)" in *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* (York, PA: Candlewick Press, 2012), 82.

about the events that took place the night Shepard was killed. Late in the evening, Matthew visited a local pub in Laramie, Wyoming called the Fireside Bar. There he met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson who took him to a remote area, tied him to a fence, pistol-whipped him, and left him to die. Following this recitation where the audience learns of these events, Johnson personifies the fence who recalls the evening of the murder. One of the most dramatic scenes in the work occurs at Matthew's funeral when members from the Westboro Baptist Church protest against homosexuality singing such painful words as "The only good fag is a fag that's dead!"¹⁵⁵ An angry candlelight vigil is led by a cantor singing as the choir builds a musical fire singing "We all betrayed the ancient heart."¹⁵⁶ Shortly after this, Aaron and Russell are convicted. Mourners visit the fence to grieve and Matthew is heard singing to the moon and imagining what it would be like to enter a "divine realm." The end of the work is more reflective than active which allows the audience to truly "consider" what the life and death of Matthew Shepard mean. These external events lead the audience through a narrative; but as we have learned, narrative events are inherently connected to entities such as characters and symbols.

The primary character or protagonist of this story is, of course, Matthew Shepard. A character analysis reveals a very simple super-objective: to love. During the second movement, Johnson uses Matt's childhood journal to characterize him as kid who simply loves life:

I am funny, sometimes forgetful and messy and lazy. I am not a lazy person though. I am giving and understanding. And formal and polite. I am sensitive. I am honest. I am sincere. And I am not a pest. I am my own person. I am warm. I want my life to be happy and I want to be clearer about things. I want to feel good.

I love Wyoming
I love theatre

¹⁵⁵ Lesléa Newman, libretto to *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016), <https://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-Libretto-LA-June-2018.pdf>, 9.

¹⁵⁶ Browne, Michael Dennis, and Craig Hella Johnson, libretto to *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016), <https://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-Libretto-LA-June-2018.pdf>, 11.

I love good friends
I love succeeding
I love pasta
I love jogging
I love walking and feeling good.

I love Europe and driving and music and helping and smiling and Charlie and Jeopardy.
I love movies and eating and positive people and pasta and driving and walking and
jogging and kissing and learning and airports and music and smiling and hugging and
being myself.

I love theatre! I love theatre!
And I love to be on stage!¹⁵⁷

This innocent text prepares the audience to develop greater empathy for Matthew as they learn of his killing. Matthew's tragic flaw was that he lived freely as a gay man. This character trait of course brought about his downfall. Johnson confirms that "Matt was really himself very much as all the friends with whom I spoke and family members. [He] just was kind of lit up with being an original version of himself, you know, [...] something that, in this world, brought challenges and got him into trouble. Although this is still just, you know, pure and simple, a hate crime."¹⁵⁸

Living as a gay man in rural America can be incredibly difficult. Lesléa Newman writes a poem called "The Drag Queen" depicting the ethos among the LGBT community in Laramie following Shepard's Murder:

The minute it happened
my silver sequin slingbacks
slid back
into the closet

The minute it happened
my glittery gold gowns
slipped back
into the closet

The minute it happened

¹⁵⁷ Matthew Shepard, libretto to *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016),
<https://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-Libretto-LA-June-2018.pdf>, 4-5.

¹⁵⁸ Johnson, interview with author.

my fluffy feather boas
slithered back
into the closet.

The minute it happened
my wavy waist-length wigs
slumped back
into the closet

The minute it happened
I dragged my sorry ass
back
into the closet

slapped the door shut

and swallowed the key¹⁵⁹

While Matthew was ultimately killed for living freely as a gay man, his courage in doing so empowered many LGBTQ people in rural communities to fight for change. Throughout the work, Matthew is characterized as a person whose life served this specific purpose. The text of movement three: “I am open to hear this story about a boy, an ordinary boy who never had expected his life would be this story, (could be any boy).”¹⁶⁰ Perhaps the most striking characterization of Matthew is that of Jesus Christ. In a 1999 *Vanity Fair* article titled “The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard,” Melanie Thernstrom reveals that this notion of Matthew depicted as Jesus on the cross likely began at Matthew’s funeral. Matthew’s godfather, Steve Shering, speaks during the service: “There is an image seared upon my mind when I reflect upon Matt on that wooden cross rail fence. [...] However, I have found a different image to replace that with and that is the image of another man, almost 2000 years ago [...] When I concentrate on the

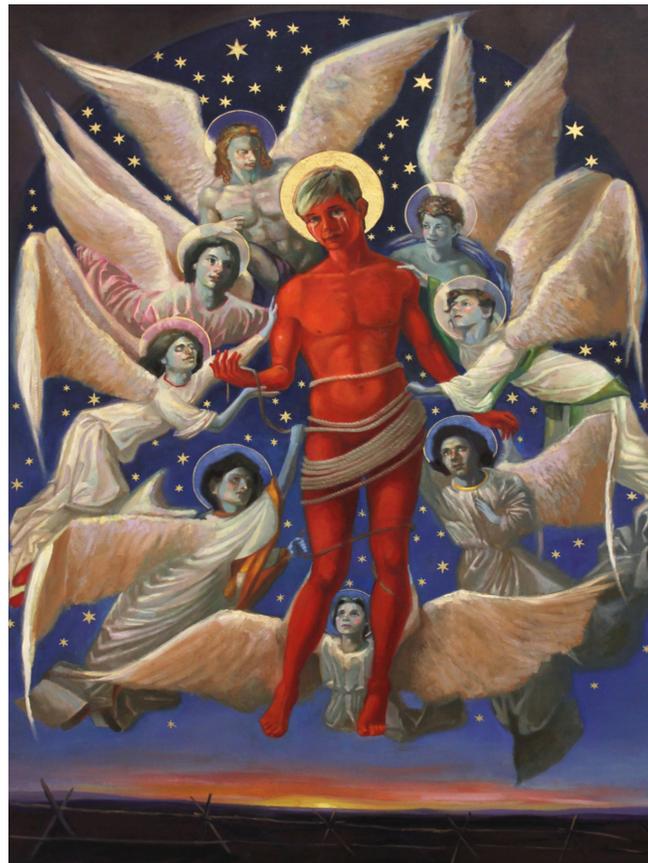
¹⁵⁹ Lesléa Newman, “The Drag Queen” in *October Mourning* (York, PA: Candlewick Press, 2012), 54.

¹⁶⁰ Johnson, libretto, 6.

Son of God being crucified, only then can I be released from the bitterness and anger I feel.”¹⁶¹

Other artists like American painter, Carl Grauer, depicts Matthew as a holy entity. The painting below by Grauer is titled “The Ascension of Matthew Shepard.” Katherine Standefer of Colorado’s High Country News describes the painting:

In the painting, Matthew Shepard’s hands are finally free. The length of rope that once lashed him to the buck and rail fence drapes loosely around his waist; the caked blood that made his body look like a scarecrow to a passing cyclist is now a gleaming, rich red. He rises into the air surrounded by angels, each beating the face of Saint Sebastian—patron saint of those who conceal their identities to avoid persecution. The angel’ wings stand tall and arched, like the wire and cloth wings Shepard’s friends wore at his funeral in 1998 in Laramie, Wyoming to block out anti-gay protesters from the Westboro Baptists Church.¹⁶²



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¹⁶¹ Steve Shering quoted by Melanie Thernstrom in “*The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard*,” 209.

¹⁶² Katherine E. Standefer, “The Ascension of Matthew Shepard,” *High Country News*, October 12, 2018.

¹⁶³ Carl Grauer, “The Ascension of Matthew Shepard” (2018). Reprinted with permission by the artist.

While *Considering Matthew Shepard* references parallels to the Passion story of Jesus Christ, Johnson was careful not to depict Shepard as a religious figure: “It was stressful to try and track the story in the right way. [...] The Shepards are also quite uncomfortable with thinking Matt as a martyr. You know, a lot of works will make him a Christ figure and certainly that happens because of the iconic imagery. [...] They’re very clear to say, ‘Matt, we don’t think of him in that martyr way’ and, ‘he’s not a Christ figure.’”¹⁶⁴ Despite efforts to avoid making Matthew into a religious figure in *Considering Matthew Shepard*, Johnson organizes the work as a Passion oratorio. Daniel Cockayne asserts that “the use of the term ‘Passion’—a musical setting of Christ’s crucifixion—is the most obvious Christian symbolism in the piece.”¹⁶⁵ This use of the term “Passion” is one way that Johnson justifies some of these religious parallels: “So those references are there and it is a Passion so [...] I kind of find my free space with that to say, ‘I’m borrowing from the Passion tradition as much as I’m making Matt into the Christ figure’ but one could argue that it’s a fine line.”¹⁶⁶ One particularly clear moment that alludes to the crucifixion of Christ occurs in movement nine where the anti-gay protestors sing “kreuzige, kreuzige, kreuzige!” This is a reference to a turba chorus in Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, “Lass ihn Kreuzigen!” where an angry mob demands Pontius Pilate to order the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Additional references to a crucifixion are found throughout *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Cruciform¹⁶⁷ melodies, such as the infamous B-A-C-H (Bb - A - C - Bb) cryptogram, are particularly prevalent in scenes involving the fence.

¹⁶⁴ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁶⁵ Cockayne, “Queer Spatial Narratives,” 476.

¹⁶⁶ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁶⁷ A cruciform melody is a set of four notes whose outer pairing and inner pairing intersect when connected by a straight line.

The fence is an incredibly significant entity within the Matthew Shepard story. Cockayne furthers that “the fence plays a key role in the Matthew archive [...] functioning as a symbol of rurality and remoteness. [...] Though usually used to signal Wyoming’s apparently desolate and abandoned landscape, the actual location of the fence where Shepard was left was distinctly suburban, near a new housing development and a Walmart.”¹⁶⁸ Regardless, Newman elevates the fence to the rank of a character in *October Mourning*. By adopting these poems, Johnson chooses to personify the fence in *Considering Matthew Shepard* as a character. In an interview with Robert Ward, Johnson speaks about the significance of the fence character in the narrative: “Lodge pole pines are one of the most famous sort of natural, iconic elements in the American west, especially Wyoming. So these beautiful, noble, tall pine trees—these living things that become this functional thing, the fence. It also became this witness, this quiet observer of all the action. This fence is the only object [...] we think that saw everything.”¹⁶⁹ Throughout *Considering Matthew Shepard* the fence serves as a narrator recalling life before, during, and after Shepard’s beating. As Cockayne notes, “the fence also functions as the crux around which Shepard is made into a martyr through a comparison with Christ on the cross. The image of Shepard hung [...] from the fence evokes an impression of his body as splayed out, arms outstretched, allowing the media to play on visual comparisons to a crucifixion or lynching.”¹⁷⁰ Depiction of the fence as a cross is found in Newman’s poetry as patterns of four. Take for example Newman’s first poem, “The fence (before)”:

Out and alone
On the endless empty prairie

The moon bathes me

¹⁶⁸ Cockayne, 478.

¹⁶⁹ Johnson, interview with Robert Ward, 21.

¹⁷⁰ Cockayne, 478.

The stars bless me

The sun warms me
The wind soothes me

Still still still
I wonder

*Will I always be out here
exposed and alone?*

*Will I ever know why
I was put here on this earth?*

*Will somebody someday
Stumble upon me?*

*Will anyone remember me
After I'm gone?*¹⁷¹

Visually, Newman's use of italics makes it clear that the poem is divided into two sets of four stanzas. Additionally, there are four primary entities mentioned in the poem: the moon, the stars, the sun, and the wind. Newman likely gleaned these four entities from Dennis Shepard's statement to the court where he describes Matthew's "friends" who accompanied him that night:

You, Mr. McKinney, with your friend, Mr. Henderson, left him out there by himself, but he was not alone. There were his lifelong friends with him—friends that he had grown up with. You're probably wondering who these friends were. First, he had the beautiful night sky and the same stars and moon we used to look at through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him. And through it all, he was breathing in the scent of the pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind, the ever-present Wyoming wind for the last time.¹⁷²

Johnson likewise characterizes the fence using patterns of four. Below is the clarinet line in the beginning of movement nineteen, "The Fence (one week later)." Each of the measures is treated

¹⁷¹ Lesléa Newman, "The Fence (*before*)," *October Mourning*, xv.

¹⁷² Dennis Shepard, libretto, 14-15.

as individual links in the buck and rail fence making contact with the ground in four places. Johnson marks the section “portato” in order to highlight this pattern of four.

With quiet motion ♩ = ca. 76
portato

mf

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Another example of numerology occurs in movement seven, “The Fence (that night).” In this movement, the fence recalls witnessing Matthew’s attack. As Matthew falls onto the fence, the orchestra features rapidly jagged descending lines while the fence sings “I cradled him just like a mother.” The highest note sung by the bass soloist occurs at the same moment the electric guitar plays a shimmering inverted C-quartal chord, the only chord played by the electric guitar in the entire movement. In this moment, it is easy to embody the empathy and pain that the fence is feeling.

W/VOLUME PED

El. Gtr.

pp

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Dashon Burton, the bass soloist who plays the role of the fence in *Conspirare*’s recording, comments: “It’s incredibly moving to think that something so mundane as a fence held such a significant part of this story. [Craig] devotes so much to that character, [the fence], in a way, so much air time, so much compositional energy. You take that aspect of Matthew being held by the

¹⁷³ Craig Hella Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard* (Hal Leonard, 2016), mvt.19, mm.1-3.

¹⁷⁴ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.7, m..82.

fence, being cradled by the fence, and it's very transformative."¹⁷⁵ In fact, the character of the fence is integral to the narrative as told through this work.

I knew the fence was going to play a big role just from the moment I thought of writing this piece. The fence had to play a role. I had to play a role. And when I really started to write this in earnest, I was beginning and thinking, "How am I going to do it?" I tried all kinds of [things]. I was kind of scratching out things and what the perspective would be. And so I'd asked a lot of those questions and then, much to my delight, it was like one of those natural gifts from the universe or something, but I encountered her poems and, inspired by them, asked her if I could include them and she said, "Yes!"¹⁷⁶

The perspective of the fence allows the audience to gain a closer and more compelling point of view than a traditional narrator who may be more removed from the event, a principal which Abbot defines as "distance."¹⁷⁷

Secondary characters include Aaron and Russell, protestors, and even a deer which keeps Matthew company at the fence. Throughout the work, Matthew's murderers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, are treated with a great deal of empathy. In movement sixteen, "I am like you," Johnson asks the audience to consider that Aaron and Russell are simply stray birds who "get lost along the way." The protestors appear at Matthew's funeral shouting anti-gay slurs. Johnson imitates this scene described by Melanie Thernstrom: "At Matthew's funeral in Casper, protestors including Reverend Fred Phelps from the Westboro Baptist Church stood in the snow and rain, carrying signs and chanting, 'Fags die, God laughs!' Mourners blocked them and sang 'Amazing Grace.'"¹⁷⁸ Another one of the secondary characters, the deer, plays an important role in *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Johnson was particularly moved by the idea that a deer kept Matthew company throughout the night:

¹⁷⁵ Dashon Burton in *Considering Matthew Shepard* (PBS, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

¹⁷⁶ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁷⁷ Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, 74.

¹⁷⁸ Thernstrom, "Crucifixion," 209.

Reggie Flutie was the sheriff, a woman who came to officially sort of find his body and she spoke of the deer that was there. The way she spoke of that was just so powerful, you know? And she said [that] she really looked in that deer's eyes. And she said it was just profound and compelling and you can just feel it when she speaks about it. [...] But she said, it was as if the deer was saying to her, you know, I've been in protective mode here and you need to take care of this boy. And then, you know, when she went to feel the grass, it was really warm and in one of her interviews, she said it was hot...like you could tell that deer had been there for many hours throughout the night.¹⁷⁹

Two movements at the end of the Passion section provide the deer's point of view: "Gently, Rest (Deer Lullaby)," and "Deer Song (Mist on the Mountains)." While these entities serve as important characters and provide a unique perspective, secondary entities are also important to the work. These include well-developed symbols such as the "light", the "evergreen," and the "heart."

The symbolism of light is present throughout *Considering Matthew Shepard* and represents several ideas. Consistent throughout the work is the pairing of the word "light" with a descending minor third. Descending minor third motives are also paired with Matthew throughout the work. I asked Johnson, "Is Matthew the light?" He explained that the light actually represents several entities:

Yes, absolutely, and so are you as a listener. [...] This is definitely a story about Matt and then, even more so, it's a story about the listener. [...] At the end of the day, the light is the light, you know? But I'm interested in that light which is also truth, which is also love, which illuminates...it simply is and needs no apology, needs no sort of support and defense. What is that [light] that is in each of us?¹⁸⁰

Light is therefore an antidote to the darkness in our world—the consequence of memory over forgettery. Johnson's use of the poem "In Need of Breath" also speaks to his commitment to the symbolism of light. Hafiz, a Sufi poet, believed that the world was a manifestation of light:

When the Nameless One debuts again
Ten thousand facets of my being unfurl wings

¹⁷⁹ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

And reveal such a radiance inside

I enter a realm divine
I too begin to sweetly cast light,
Like a lamp,
I cast light
Through the streets of this
World.¹⁸¹

be - ing un - furled wings and re - veal such a ra - di - ance in - side,

uh mmm

uh mmm

uh mmm

uh mmm

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On the climax of the phrase, the choir sings the neutral “uh,” shedding light onto the spectral canvas. Another musical representation of the light occurs in movement two, “Ordinary Boy,” where the choir climbs in intensity singing,

Just an ordinary boy living ordinary days with extraordinary kindness
Extraordinary laughter extraordinary shining
Extraordinary light and joy
Joy and light.¹⁸³

The following six bars dispel the pent-up energy created by metric modulation, register, tempo, and orchestration.

¹⁸¹ Hafiz, Libretto to *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016), <https://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-Libretto-LA-June-2018.pdf>, 15-16.

¹⁸² Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.23, mm.27-30.

¹⁸³ Craig Hella Johnson, Libretto to *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016), <https://conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/CMS-Libretto-LA-June-2018.pdf>.

202 **Broader** ♩ = ca. 92 *rit.*

Cl. *ff* luminous *mf*

Ac. Gtr. *ff* D(add2)

Perc. Sus. Cym. Anklet Bells Triangle

S. *ff* *dim.* *rit.* *p*
light, light and joy, and light.

A. *ff* *dim.* *p*
light, light and joy, and light.

T. *ff* *dim.* *p*
light, joy and light, light.

B. *ff* *dim.* *p*
light, joy and light, light.

Semi-Chorus

S. *ff* *dim.* *p*
light and joy, joy and light.

A. *ff* *dim.* *p*
light and joy, joy and light.

T. *ff* *dim.* *p*
light and joy, joy and light.

B. *ff* *dim.* *p*
light and joy, joy and light.

Pno. *ff*

Vln. *ff* luminous *mf* *rit.*

Vla. *ff* luminous *mf*

Vec. *ff* luminous *mf*

D.B. *ff* luminous *mf* *pp*

The evergreen is also an important symbol within the oratorio. The notion of the evergreen represents several things: the pine trees of Wyoming, Matthew, and an “ever-newness” or “eternalness.” Even the fence in Laramie was constructed of Wyoming evergreen trees. Johnson describes how the symbol of the evergreen is connected to many of the entities and ideas used throughout the work:

The Hildegard¹⁸⁵ is the most literal [evergreen reference] and then it comes again in the chorale but it’s related to that light because [...] the truth that is underlying all of this is [a] before, an after, [and] an intertwining [of] all stories. And it is that evergreenness. [...] It still makes me excited to this day that it landed in the way that it did. [...] It connected with the sense of place, these big lodgepole pine trees from Wyoming [...] and that’s what they make all their fences out of. [...] This true literal evergreen tree [...] is then the symbol in this piece for eternalness, for “evergreenness,” ever refreshment of this life force.¹⁸⁶

The Hildegard reference which Johnson refers to occurs in movement seven where he sets a translated excerpt from her *Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*.¹⁸⁷

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.¹⁸⁸

Johnson interprets the “roots in the sun” to mean a world that is upside-down, forgetting, or incorrect: “It’s all paradox. [...] When we start to get a sense of what’s really true in this, it has everything to do with that upendedness. Like, ‘we’re getting it all wrong here.’ Once again, back to that betrayal, the forgetting of who we are, ‘our roots are in the sun,’ you know? Our

¹⁸⁵ Hildegard Von Bingen was German poet, composer, philosopher, and Christian mystic in the High Middle Ages.

¹⁸⁶ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁸⁷ *Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum*

¹⁸⁸ Michael Dennis Browne, libretto, 8.

grounding comes from that which is, at least symbolically, above us, shining over us, shining in us, through and through and through.”¹⁸⁹

The heart also serves as a recurrent symbol in *Considering Matthew Shepard*. An emblem of compassion and the very life force within each of us, “heart” is important to Johnson’s narrative. The first movement, which Johnson playfully refers to as “a dance of life,” includes a pulsing heartbeat, an indication of life itself.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. The top staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "puls - ing, puls - ing, puls - ing, puls - ing, mmm" and a long horizontal line indicating a sustained sound. Below it are two empty staves. The next two staves are piano accompaniment, with the lyrics "I'm a - live, I'm a - live, I'm a - live" written under both. The piano part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords, with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic marking. The bottom two staves are for the grand piano, with the instruction "(for rehearsal only)" written in the left hand. The page number "190" is at the bottom right.

“Heart” also refers to a burning compassion. Following Matthew’s death, candlelight vigils are held around the country. In Movement Twelve, Johnson depicts one of these candlelight vigils led by an angry cantor. The choir builds a metaphorical fire through layered chants in the style of an African drum circle. The chorus begins to roar with “we all betray the ancient heart” and “his

¹⁸⁹ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁹⁰ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.1, mm.101-103.

heart, my heart, your heart, one heart.” This one ancient heart, our collective compassion and love for one another, has been injured with the murder of Matthew Shepard.

all be-tray_ the an - cient heart, we all be-tray_ the an - cient heart, *pp*
 ev - 'ry one of us, all of us; ev - 'ry one of us, all of us; *pp*
 his heart, my heart, your heart, one heart, *pp*
 mo - ment the fi - re rag - es it will burn a - way a hun - dred veils. *pp*
 Burn - ing, break - ing, grasps - ing, rag - ing. *pp*

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The heart also represents Matthew. Movement Twenty-Three features a duet between the deer and Matthew where they contemplate the afterlife together. In this movement, Matthew is referred to as the “evergreen heart” so it is apparent that these symbolic entities take on a variety of meanings throughout the work.

“Setting,” the third element of story, was on the forefront of Johnson’s mind when writing *Considering Matthew Shepard*. As previously defined, “setting” is a representation of time (period and duration) and place (location). As we examine the score in preparation for performance, we find moments which seem to speed forward through time and others that feel timeless altogether. The terms “temporal” and “atemporal” will be used to refer to musical moments intended to be perceived in time versus more lyrical, timeless reflections. These lyric

¹⁹¹ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.12, mm.36-37.

movements occur with greater frequency in the second half of the work, allowing the listener to “consider” the story. Johnson’s oratorio is about the American West, particularly Wyoming, at the turn of the century. Cockayne underscores the significance of Wyoming in the *Considering Matthew Shepard*:

The role of Wyoming in media representation of the Shepard story is one that plays into the traditional trapping of depictions of queer life in rural America. [...] Johnson, often through Newman’s poetic descriptions of the fence, clearly romanticizes Wyoming in *Considering Matthew Shepard*, in ways that play into some of the narratives that fetishize rural America. The fence is ‘out and alone / on the endless empty prairie’, ‘exposed and alone’. [...] Despite these romanticizations, and against common descriptions of Wyoming and rural America as unfit for and hostile toward queer lives and bodies, *Considering Matthew Shepard* refrains from acting as a normative warning against queers living in or visiting Laramie. In the prologue, the baritone soloist, giving voice to passages from Shepard’s diary, emphasizes his affection for the state. [...] Wyoming is depicted as idyllic, pastoral, big-sky country with the choirs’ refrain ‘Cattle, horses, sky, and grass/ these are the things that sway and pass.’ The soprano soloist, later joined by the choir, sings, ‘meet me here, where the old fence ends and the horizon begins.’ Elsewhere, Wyoming is depicted through poetic themes that emphasize its natural beauty.¹⁹²

This “big-sky country” of Wyoming is brilliantly depicted in the very first choral entrance of the work.

The musical score shows four vocal staves. Each staff starts with a whole rest, followed by a series of notes and rests. The lyrics 'All, _____ All, _____ All, _____ All, _____' are written below each staff. The dynamics are marked 'mp' for mezzo-piano. The notation includes various note values, rests, and phrasing slurs.

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¹⁹² Cockayne, 477-478.

¹⁹³ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt. 1, mm.12-18.

These expansive chords represent the expansive landscape of the Wyoming prairies and are followed by a short melody sung by the “lone cowboy.” Another location commonly portrayed throughout the work is the fence at nighttime. Movement Twenty-One, “Stars” is performed aleatorically while Dennis Shepard reads his statement to the court about Matthew’s “friends”: the moon, the stars, the sun, and the wind.

3.4 Action Analysis: Seed & Themes

In addition to the primary elements of story (events, entities, and settings), the “seed” and “themes” are critical to the impact of *Considering Matthew Shepard*. The seed in this work is “all of us.” Johnson describes his intention for the work: “We say the story is about Matt, but truly the story, and my conceiving of it, is really about, in part, also the listener. And I want that listener [...] to feel as they consider Matthew Shepard, as they consider this story and then the larger human story, that they are beginning to consider themselves and, frankly, to wake-up.”¹⁹⁴ Johnson wants his audience to wake-up to the reality that we all have a role in who we are and who we want to become. In other words, this issue of hate crimes does not belong to those who endure them but it belongs to all of us. We know that a seed or theme is generally something very universal to all humans. Johnson describes how stories can reflect this universality:

Our stories are like drops of water, but our real essence is ocean, you know, and it’s incredibly vast and it’s a mystery and, until you start to get a glimpse of it, it sounds like ‘who-who talk’ [and] sounds ridiculous. But I’ve had to kind of understand that that’s how this works. When you start to get glimpses of the bigness, the hugeness of the vastness of it, it starts to make a lot of sense. [...] We are so much vaster than these individual life’s dreams and so much of our violence towards one another comes from that forgetting and it comes from that betrayal of ourselves. That’s really at the heart of this piece.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Johnson describes that the idea of “consideration” is inherently reflective and that this consideration is at the core of what he hopes the audiences will experience:

I love the word, “consideration” because it’s a slowdown. [...] When I think of “considering” I really think of [...] taking that time for reflection. [...] Slowing down and reflecting on the value of a life, the value of Matthew Shepard. This is very much not just about Matt Shepard. I mean, the piece itself is really about all of us. And so when I think of the title, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, it has to do with that invitation to reflect, to be quiet—in a way to kind of remember who we are. So very much, this is sort of an inquiry for me about how we can get back home to remembering who we are and to remember the inherent full value of all life, of every living being.¹⁹⁶

Johnson’s skillful incorporation of “all of us” is multifaceted. One of the ways Johnson achieves this is through a compositional practice called “collage.” There are two types of collage which Johnson uses within the work: intertextual collage and intermusical collage. Intertextual collage refers to an interaction that occurs between multiple textual sources. The libretto for *Considering Matthew Shepard* not only includes texts written by Johnson and his librettist, Michael Dennis Browne, but also includes a number of poems by Lesléa Newman, historical documents, Matthew’s journal, and even tourist pamphlets from Wyoming. The work contains not only a wide variety of musical sources ranging from J.S. Bach to Arvo Pärt, but also a wide variety of musical genres from country music to gospel. Richard Taruskin, author of *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*, notes that collage was relatively common in modernist mainstream concert repertoire.¹⁹⁷ In some ways, collage has been a part of the very fabric of musical composition for much longer. Even Handel created “mash-ups” between music of the *prima prattica* and *seconda prattica*. While Johnson regularly employs the collage technique in concert curation for *Conspirare*, it serves as a way to represent “all of us” in *Considering Matthew Shepard*:

¹⁹⁶ Craig Hella Johnson in *Considering Matthew Shepard* (PBS, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

¹⁹⁷ Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 422.

This kind of mosaic or collage [...] can feel like crazy person stuff in terms of what we've grown up with and our traditions [...] but it's not; it's very intentional. [...] It's very important that [the Rumi and the Hafiz] are there and that's not even ancient enough, but it went back far enough to make the point. William Blake, Hildegard von Bingen—these are “all of us” references for sure. These quotations are just simply allowing their voices to be heard in the mix. And it also makes it much bigger and more universal because those references are there.¹⁹⁸

Johnson also uses musical quotation and paraphrase in *Considering Matthew Shepard* to create a larger choral tapestry. He describes that the seed, “all of us,” gave him the freedom to use a wide range of sources: “Everything was a possible source for this piece because the container was ‘all of us.’ [...] But in terms of quotations, [...] ‘all of us’ also has to do with a procession of time. [...] We are related to the beings who were in this human procession in 1685 and in 1750 and in 1827, you name it.”¹⁹⁹ These dates are no coincidence for Johnson whose life work has largely revolved around the music of J.S. Bach. Johnson reveals that the music of Bach is found throughout the work. One example can be found in the penultimate movement, “All of Us:”

The solo trio [in “All of Us”] is, you know, a gospel type of trio, but [...] for me, those three soloists were also hinting a relationship with that chorale and the three oboes in a Bach Cantata. [...] I was so touched when Scott Jarrett, who does all kinds of Bach stuff all the time up in Boston, came up and was very sweet to me behind Symphony hall after we performed it there, and he had tears in his eyes and he said, ‘I heard the oboes.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, that’s so dear to me’ because only someone who is immersed in Bach would really sort of know to take that in.

Another particularly influential musical source used in *Considering Matthew Shepard* is Britten’s *A Ceremony of Carols*. Movement nine “A Protestor” begins with a direct quotation from the fourth movement of the Britten, “This Little Babe.”

¹⁹⁸ Johnson, interview with author.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

9. A Protestor

LESLÉA NEWMAN

CRAIG HELLA JOHNSON

Grave ♩ = ca. 90

Piano

ff

rit.

p a tempo

Strings, Guitar

200

Johnson explains why he chose to use this quotation in this movement:

I was thinking, from an audience perspective, we've got to say some of these things. We've got to have some version of terrible sentiment, because it was real. [...] I would sit at the piano, I'd think "what is this?" What, musically, what? There was sort of, frankly, a lot of pounding. I remember one day, I pounded down...I kept really close...It was strange...I needed black keys. This couldn't be a white keys kind of a thing, so E-flat minor ended up being the key I really stuck with. Then, more and more I realized that there was kind of this organic connection that I had been sort of following with the pounding of Benjamin Britten and "This Little Babe."²⁰¹

The movement continues in the same manner of "This Little Babe" culminating in a mockingly hateful three-part canon: "Beneath the hunter's moon he bled. / That must have been a pretty sight! / The fires of Hell burn hot and red. / Ha ha ha!"²⁰² A heightened awareness of Britten's *A*

Ceremony of Carols reveals yet another quotation in movement twenty-six, "Deer Song."

mf

Wel- come, wel- come, sounds the song, call - ing, call - ing

clear. Al - ways with us, ev - er - green heart.

Where can we be but there?

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²⁰⁰ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.9, mm.1-4.

²⁰¹ Johnson, interview with Robert Ward, 26.

²⁰² Lesléa Newman, libretto, 9.

²⁰³ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.26, mm.23-30.

doesn't include [...] all types of music, but I needed to get enough in there to say, "I'm not kidding. Everything is included here. All of creation is included here." And it was really to make that point [...] not too subtly.²⁰⁸

Choosing to compose popular styles for classical musicians can be controversial, particularly in an era when music degrees rarely reflect the music that is most consumed in our world. "All of us" provided further reason for Johnson to follow his musical instincts and include a variety of styles.

We may remember that Matthew's tragic flaw is that he lived openly as a gay young man. The counterpart of this "flaw" is homophobia, toxic masculinity, and distorted ideas of strength. Johnson describes that these themes were important to him as he wrote the work:

I would say that something that's really important is that this is also an American story that's really all about the American West and ideas of maleness that have come down from the American West—from John Wayne, and these ideas of strength, these kind of misguided ideas of what strength is, and this incredible human disease that we have to project all that it unresolved in ourselves onto another. [...] It becomes, over time, so heightened that it becomes violence, brutality. At first it just happens verbally. It happens in our hearts, you know? And it's micro at first, it's real small, but then it builds and builds. So that's a piece that's essential to me—sort of the Western aspect, the sort of violence of our human nature.²⁰⁹

Throughout the work, Johnson references these distorted ideas of strength and gently suggests an alternative—compassion.

Johnson explains that the theme of compassion served as a guiding question throughout his compositional process:

The operating question was always simple. I wrote this piece [...] because I was asking the question myself; this was a personal thing. In the face of such darkness and such confounding evil, is Love, with a capital L, the flame of love, is it anywhere to be found in the midst of this or are we just to become cynical beings and just build up our defenses? As we grow older from childhood to adulthood, every time we get hurt, we kind of strengthen our armor a little more. So that was a real sincere question. The six-

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

year-old inside of Craig was still wanting an answer on this and my writing this was, in large part, to try and listen for an answer.²¹⁰

Throughout the work, Johnson purposefully strives to include moments of compassion. One such moment is during movement fourteen, “Stray Birds.” This chant by Rabindranath Tagore speaks about compassion towards those who have lost their way, particularly Aaron and Russell. This selection was performed as the anthem at Matthew Shepard’s 2018 Celebration of Life and Interment ceremony at Washington National Cathedral.

So far, we have discussed the narrative elements of event, character, symbol, setting, seed, and theme as they are present in Craig Hella Johnson’s *Considering Matthew Shepard*. In the next chapter we will observe how these narrative elements are represented in musical context and discuss musical considerations that will empower the performer to prominently feature this musical dramaturgy.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER IV: Performing *Considering Matthew Shepard*

This chapter serves as a performance guide for any conductor who may be planning to perform *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Having discussed dramaturgical elements of the work, we may now begin to investigate musical agents used within each movement to represent these important story elements in performance. In many instances, Johnson's musical score suggests performance practices which highlight the musical dramaturgy; in other instances, the score leaves room for interpretation. It must be acknowledged, however, that no single interpretation of the score is without flaw. Daniel Cockayne agrees: "*Considering Matthew Shepard* [defies] the simplicity of any single interpretation, allowing for a multiplicity of affective responses from both audiences and performers that resist the hegemonic or singular codification of such a status quo."²¹¹ Regardless of any performance decisions I suggest, a greater awareness of musical agents Johnson uses to represent the musical drama will undoubtedly influence performance decisions including execution of dynamics, articulation, timbre, balance, and tempo. As previously noted, the work is structured in three parts: Prologue, Passion, and Epilogue.

4.1 Musical Dramaturgy in Performance

Movement 1, "Cattle, Horses, Sky, and Grass" is described by Johnson as "a real dance in the universe of all of us."²¹² The work opens with an incomplete quotation of J.S. Bach's *Prelude in C*, a work that many listeners would recognize. Johnson explains why he chose to begin the work with this quotation: "That prelude is such an iconic work and I wanted to begin the piece with [...] something that was simple and could read to a good number of people because it was familiar. [...] And so that was meant to be that open C-major key that was sort of

²¹¹ Cockayne, 472.

²¹² Johnson, interview with author.

the universe in harmony with itself.”²¹³ In fact, Johnson uses the key of C-major throughout the work to represent “all of us,” the universal seed of the work. In performance, this section should be played as simply as possible without too much rubato. This quotation is interrupted by the entrance of the choir singing the word “All” on an expansive C-major chord. It is important that the final “l” consonant be slightly lengthened so as not to confuse the choral entrance as “ah.” The word “all,” as we know, is very important to the narrative design. The open voicing of this chord represents the spacious Wyoming landscape, an almost timeless scene. Due to the atemporality of this pristine expanse and the almost religious significance of the word “all,” these opening chords should be performed with little to no vibrato in order to highlight these features. The Wyoming setting is reinforced by the entrance of a lonely cowboy who “wants you to be free.” This ironic inclusion suggests an alternative to the perception of strength and masculinity as portrayed by characters in the American West such as John Wayne. This introduction of the cowboy should also be performed with a simple, speech-like tone since it foreshadows a later solo in movement seventeen, “The Innocence,” where the cowboy reflects on easier times. This “dance of life” begins with an equally-weighted “four-on-the-floor”²¹⁴ pop rhythm played by the woodblock suddenly creating a greater awareness of time. This dance proceeds by laying rhythmic patterns in the style of a drum circle. Emphasis of strong and weak syllables culminates here in a varied and interesting musical texture in perpetual motion—a depiction of life itself. Johnson comments on this section: “The ‘ordinary’ that is part of this dance, you know, that which is enlightened, is not out there far away. It’s not esoteric or philosophical. It’s right here with our own dance of ‘Cattle, horses, sky and grass.’”²¹⁵ By

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ A term which refers to the kind of metric equality present in popular music such as disco.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

measure forty-one, the polyphonic dance of “the things that sway and pass” comes to a head. Perceptually atemporal, this six-measure homophonic utterance resembles bowed strings as if a “halo” around all that is enlightened—sky, cattle, horses, grass, dancing. As such, it should be performed very legato and with little vibrato. On the contrary, bar seventy-three features a very different kind of interjection: “I’m Alive!” This should be sung with the most animated vibrato. This inner life force is also represented by a heartbeat as the performers sing “pulsing, pulsing, pulsing” making sure to inflect “pulsing” as the “lub-dub” of a heartbeat.

A musical score for a vocal ensemble. The top staff shows a vocal line with the lyrics "puls - ing, puls - ing, puls - ing, puls - ing, mmm" and a long, sustained note. Below it are two piano parts. The piano parts feature a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and rests, with the lyrics "I'm a - live, I'm a - live, I'm a - live," repeated three times. The piano parts are marked with *pp* (pianissimo). The score ends with the number 216.

This heartbeat of the “mighty throbbing earth” is also found in the soprano line at bar sixty-seven. Here, Johnson clearly marks the following pairings with tenuto and staccato articulations.

A musical score for two soprano voices, labeled S. I and S. II. The score is marked with the number 67. Both voices have the same rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and rests, with the lyrics "doo-doo" repeated five times. The score ends with the number 217.

²¹⁶ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.1, mm.101-103.

²¹⁷ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.1, mm.67-69.

The text of this movement comes from a poem by Sue Wallis, a former Republican member of the Wyoming House of Representatives who had attended the University of Wyoming at Laramie, the same school Matthew Shepard attended when he was killed.

That poem was just a gift. I'd been looking for a Wyoming poem that was going to be just right and who knew if it existed? I mean, I was so thrilled because it doesn't just reference Wyoming things like "Cattle, horses, sky, and grass" but [...] this deep compassion, everyone who suffers and struggles "[through] all these hoops of earth and mind." [...] It takes specific references that feel like they could be local and turns them into universal references. [...] "Cattle, horses, sky, and grass" are just placeholders for all the things you and I have in our context, in our world: the good, the bad. [...] They are a symbol for "hoops of earth and mind" and things we move through in our lives.²¹⁸

Johnson depicts this compassion in the section that follows. As the choir sings "doh doh doh", they pass off one measure of music at a time to another section who empathetically listens and responds. In order to illuminate these empathic musical responses, the singers should knowingly look to other sections to make this musical conversation clear to the audience.

The musical score consists of five staves. Each staff begins with a dynamic marking: *mf*, *mf*, *p*, *p*, and *mf* respectively. The music is written in a style that suggests a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Below each staff, the syllable "doh" is written, indicating the vocal line. The score shows a sequence of musical phrases being passed between different sections of the choir, with some sections resting (indicated by a dash) while others play. The dynamics vary throughout, creating a sense of conversation and empathy.

Movement 2, "Ordinary Boy" is the audience's introduction to Matt who is characterized as a loving child. This movement also functions as a representation of Wyoming and reflects Johnson's concern to reimagine American ideas of male strength. Matt's "strength"

²¹⁸ Johnson, interview with author.

²¹⁹ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.1, mm.78-81.

is love and it is reflected by the words in his childhood notebook. In a PBS documentary about *Considering Matthew Shepard*, Johnson describes the words used from the notebook: “They are very simple, I mean, they are just Matt being Matt.”²²⁰ In live performances by Conspirare, images of Matt’s journal are displayed during this movement. However, Johnson also musically foreshadows Shepard as a symbol of Jesus on the cross in this movement, an idea which becomes increasingly apparent later in the work. As discussed in the previous chapter, patterns of four as a metaphor for a cross are found throughout the work when associated with the fence. This numerology is also used as the choir sings Matthew Shepard’s name for the first time.

1 2 3 4
pp rit.
 Mat - thew — Shep - ard.
pp rit.
 Mat - thew — Shep - ard.
pp rit.
 Mat - thew — Shep - ard.
pp rit.
 Mat - thew — Shep - ard.

221

Observing the ritard, these two measures resound in different temporal space than the measures around them. For these two bars only, the strings double the choir. This is similar to the way Bach treats the recitatives sung by Jesus in his *St. Matthew Passion*. Taking extra time on these

²²⁰ Craig Hella Johnson in *Considering Matthew Shepard* (PBS, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

²²¹ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.2, mm.24-25.

two measures heightens the significance of Matt’s introduction. We may also observe that the soprano line features a cruciform melody, a four-note melody wherein a straight line drawn between the inner pair of notes intersects with a straight line drawn between the outer pair of notes. Lest the critic believe this is coincidence, we can also observe these patterns as Johnson introduces Shepard’s parents at measure fifteen.

The musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is the vocal line with lyrics: "to a father and a mother. Judy. Judy. Den - nis Den - nis". Red numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 are placed above the notes in the first two phrases to highlight a cruciform melody. The accompaniment is shown on four staves below, with some notes appearing in the third and fourth staves. The page number 222 is at the bottom right.

In performance, we might separate the notes slightly in order to articulate the cruciform melodies. Judy sings a short solo a few measures later: “You knew him as Matthew; to us, he was Matt.” Johnson marks her solo as “freely” which creates a new temporal space for the character of Judy. A slower tempo in this moment characterizes Judy as an adult operating at a slower pace than Matt. The tempo nearly returns in the next section where we learn more about Matt. Again, Johnson creates a new temporal space for Matt’s father as the choir sings a “mash-up” of various folk songs he sang to his son. Each of these folk songs should have their own distinct character to allow the listener to hear each song simultaneously. Though dynamically

²²² Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.2, mm.15-18.

indicated as soft, the note changes of the rhythmically augmented “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” melody should be performed non-legato and immediately brought down in dynamic to make way for other less-sustained melodies.

S.A. I *Magical, in 2* ♩ = ca. 68
ppp feather-weight
 Row, row, row your boat gen - tly down the stream;

S.A. II *ppp feather-weight*
 Fre - re Jac - ques, Fre - re Jac - ques, dor - mez - vous, dor - mez vous? Son - nez les ma - ti - nes, son - nez les ma - ti - nez!

A. *ppp feather-weight*
 Fre - re Jac - ques, Fre - re Jac - ques, dor - mez - vous, dor - mez vous?

T. *pp*
 Twin - kle, twin - kle, lit - tle star; ...

B. *pp*
 Twin - kle, twin - kle, lit - tle star; ... 223

What follows is an excited description of Matt which makes use of metric modulation and grows in intensity. The performer can accentuate this excitement by emphasizing each new metric accent. This section culminates in the word “light.” Again, Johnson illuminates the significance of this word by creating a new temporal space. He marks the new section “Broader.” Like a setting sun, the light chord begins high and slowly falls. While the string parts are marked “luminous,” there are no timbral instructions for the voices. The singers in this moment can illuminate this symbol by singing with a brilliant tone. We also hear elements of pop in this movement reflected by the inclusion of a rhythmic motive called the Cuban tresillo as reflected by a 4 (3+3+2)/4 meter.

²²³ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.2, mm.50-55.

mf
I love Eu - rope__ and driv - ing__ and mu - sic__ and help - ing__ and

mf
I love Eu - rope__ and driv - ing__ and mu - sic__ and help - ing__ and

mf
I love Eu - rope__ and driv - ing__ and mu - sic__ and help - ing__ and

mf
I love Eu - rope__ and driv - ing__ and mu - sic__ and help - ing__ and 224

By accentuating these rhythms, the choir can help the audience to hear this pop influence, an agent of “all of us.”

Movement 3, “We Tell Each Other Stories,” is the final movement of the prologue and features a poem by Johnson encapsulating his philosophy on choral storytelling: “It comes from my heart and I guess you could say [my] philosophy would be everything that is in the lyric.”²²⁵

We tell each other stories so that we will remember
Try and find the meaning in the living of our days

Always telling stories, wanting to remember
Where and whom we came from
Who we are

Sometimes there’s a story that’s painful to remember
One that breaks the heart of us all
Still we tell the story
We’re listening and confessing
What we have forgotten
In the story of us all

We tell each other stories so that we will remember
Trying to find the meaning...²²⁶

²²⁴ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.2, mm.129-133.

²²⁵ Johnson, interview with author.

²²⁶ Johnson, libretto, 5-6.

At the end of the movement, Johnson “cares for the audience” by invoking a soothing mantra to be embraced by the listeners. The choir repeats three simple words: “open, listen, all.” The final word of the prologue, “all,” creates a textual bookend of the entire prologue whose first movement begins with the same word. This final chord not only encapsulates the seed but also the pain with which the story is heard as evidenced by the IV_{4-3}^{9-8} “all” cadence.

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/3. The lyrics for all parts are: "lis - ten, o - pen, — lis - ten, all." The score includes dynamic markings: *pp* at the beginning, *rit. e dim.* in the middle, and *ppp* at the end. The final cadence is a IV_{4-3}^{9-8} chord. The page number 227 is located at the bottom right of the score.

While not indicated in the score, the performer can expose the tension and release of this pain through a small *mesa di voce* on the word “all.”

Movement 4, “Recitation I,” begins the Passion section of the oratorio. Here we are placed in “Laramie, southeastern Wyoming, between the snowy Range and the Laramie Range. Tuesday, October 6, 1998.”²²⁸ While a narrator communicates the general period and location of the “setting,” Johnson’s musical underscore suggests a more specific location—at the fence. This seven-measure underscore is grouped into three sets of four chords. These groupings can be

²²⁷ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.3, mm.41-45.

²²⁸ Browne, libretto, 7.

highlighted in performance by adding a lift between each set. Phrasing each set with rubato also helps to create an evenness between the four legs of the fence and represents the “ever-present Wyoming wind.”²²⁹

This musical imagery is appropriate in context given the movement that follows—the first fence aria.

Movement 5, “The Fence (before),” serves as a formal introduction to the character of the fence. It is characterized as a noble countryman who wonders if he will ever be remembered. A harmonically simple waltz, this movement features acoustic guitar played fingerstyle and with a “light country swing.”²³¹ The piano accompaniment is slightly arpeggiated as if imitating the guitar. Marked “spacious,” a reference to the open Wyoming prairie, this movement allows the performer to lean into the country style by emphasizing the first beat and deemphasizing the second and third (long-short-short, long-short-short). Primarily a solo movement, the choir interjects and sings, “still, still, still,” the fence’s mantra and evidence of its inner strength. These

²²⁹ Dennis Shepard, “Statement to the court,” libretto, 14-15.

²³⁰ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.4, mm.1-7.

²³¹ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.5.

choral moments are primary opportunities for text painting in performance. Performed *senza vibrato* and soft, the choir represents these inner thoughts of the fence through perceptual atemporality. The fence soloist, however, emulates a more external existence in time using vibrato and greater bodily freedom. At the beginning of this movement, four important symbols are introduced by the fence: the moon, the stars, the sun, and the wind. The instinct of the dramaturgically aware performer may be to emphasize these words and bring the text to the mental foreground of the audience, however, Johnson places each of these words on a weak beat which suggests that these symbols are designed to function at a subliminal level—only gaining significance once the audience hears Dennis Shepard’s statement to the court later in the work.

In **Movement 6, “Recitation II,”** a narrator explains what happens on the night of Shepard’s murder. The underscore references the fence using four chord phrases once again. The performer should lift before the final chord in order to highlight this four-chord phrase as before. The final chords of the recitation are in a $\frac{6}{4}$ meter allowing more space for the final four actions taken by Aaron and Russell.

Near midnight, they drive him to a remote area, tied him to a split-rail fence, beat him horribly, and left him to die in teh cold of night

10 232

The d-minor chord at measure ten should be played as if a clock-tower striking midnight. With each successive action as told by the narrator, the bass line sinks a little deeper—a parallel to the sinking feeling in our hearts as we learn of these horrific details. Like a sinking heart, the chords should be played very legato with no space between them until the final chord so as to highlight the pattern of four—the presence of the fence at the beating.

²³² Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.6, mm.10-14.

A weaker heartbeat motive returns at the end of the movement and reflects that time has passed and that Matthew’s life is slowly slipping away. The most dramatic musical event in this movement, however, is the description of the beating itself. Johnson depicts the physical blows to Shepard’s head followed by a stumbling downward onto the fence.

Performance of this section should take heed of Johnson’s dynamics and articulation.

Extramusical features that would heighten this drama involve blocking or even flashes of light. Johnson captures “setting” in this movement quite vividly. The fence describes the scene of the crime: “The cold wind wouldn’t stop blowing. We were out on the prairie alone.”²³⁷ A sudden

²³⁶ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.7, mm.76-81.

²³⁷ Newman, libretto, 8.

shift in musical texture and meter paints a swirling scene of Matthew and the fence together struggling against the elements. Consequently, this section should be performed in a driving, agitated manner. This section culminates in the emotional release of the fence as he cries out, “I cradled him just like a mother.”²³⁸ To Johnson, this moment is incredibly significant not only to the narrative of Matthew Shepard but to a larger narrative about distorted ideas of strength and toxic masculinity. The bass who performs the role of the fence should take deep care to perform this moment with tender compassion—lingering in the vulnerability of this atemporal, a cappella, tear-like descent. This isn’t the only place that Johnson depicts tears in the movement. Measure thirty-three features the entrance of the clarinet which plays slowly descending sigh motives as the fence explains how “tears fell from [Matthew’s] unblinking eyes.”²³⁹

Movement 8, “Recitation III,” features a long and significant spoken narrative. Johnson carefully crafts the underscore of this recitation to reflect the text. The narrator reveals that “after several days in a coma and on life support, Matthew Shepard died on Monday, October 12, at 12:53 AM.”²⁴⁰ Writing a fermata on a rest, Johnson indicates a moment of silence for Matthew Shepard. Immediately following this pause, the narrator begins to describe the funeral service that would occur just four days later. Here the cello softly introduces the “protestor motive” as if from a distance.



The extreme sadness depicted in the beginning of this recitation quickly turns to anger as the scene transitions to the protest occurring outside Matthew’s funeral. The protestor motives are

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Browne, libretto, 8.

²⁴¹ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.8, mm.8-10.

played by the strings in imitation with growing intensity as if the audience is approaching the protestors themselves.

Movement 9, “A Protestor,” depicts a crowd of anti-gay protesters from the Westboro Baptist Church in the style of a Bach turba chorus—an angry crowd chorus. Led by Fred Phelps, these parishioners attended the funeral to condemn homosexuality. In an interview at the funeral, Phelps explains: “Uh, we wanna inject, uh, hope, to inject, a little sanity and, uh, Gospel truth into what’s, uh, shaping up fast to be some kind of an orgy of, uh, homosexual propaganda and lies. It’s like a Cecil B. DeMille film going on here! It’s not okay to be gay. [...] These people don’t deserve to have any special laws, they’re sinners.”²⁴² This movement serves as an important commentary about distorted ideas of male strength. Johnson found inspiration from Benjamin Britten’s “This Little Babe,” a depiction of baby Jesus as a warrior. In fact, the movement begins with a direct musical quotation from the work. Johnson explains why he chose to use the quotation:

There was something about the vision in that text of this little tiny infant coming to take on the evil of the world, you know, in name, Satan. [...] Matt was pretty frail. You’ve probably read [that] he wasn’t tall. He was very delicately framed, kind of a vulnerable [...] physical frail form in a way. So here he is, this sort of slight-of-form young man whose life and death have had such incredible impact. [...] Another way of using that musical quotation [is] to reference our ideas of strength. Maybe we think of strength in those ways of someone who is 6’3” and 220 pounds and grunts words out and has been taught not to feel, but just to be.²⁴³

In addition to the introduction of the movement, Johnson imitates the driving and canonical style of “This Little Babe” using the protester motives sung by the tenors and basses. Presented in the manner of a crowd chorus, the sopranos and altos shout “Kreuzige, Kreuzige, Kreuzige!”

²⁴² Fred Phelps, in *Considering Matthew Shepard* (PBS, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

²⁴³ Johnson, interview with author.

meaning “crucify, crucify, crucify!”. This is an homage to the Passion of Christ where the crowd demands for Jesus’s crucifixion. Performed in patterns of three, Johnson represents the Holy Trinity. Performance of this section should emphasize the third iteration of “Kreuzige” as Johnson indicates by separating the pattern into two consecutive affronts followed by a singular indignity.

8 Soprano, Alto *p* *crisp*
 *Kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge,
 Soprano, Alto *p* *crisp*
 *Kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, kreu - zi - ge, 244

These lines culminate with maniacal laughter which should be sung with short, sharp articulations as if ridiculing those entering the funeral. After a long day of protests, the sopranos and altos repeat the protest motive to their children as a bedtime lullaby singing, “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.”²⁴⁵ Cockayne describes this chilling moment: “These words evoke the everyday homophobia that children may learn in spaces like the home from early ages—irrespective of whether that home is in a rural or urban place—that polices both same-sex desire and particularly mandated forms of cisgendered performativity.”²⁴⁶ For many children in these households, Matthew Shepard’s death shed light on the way homosexuals were treated in America. Johnson consistently represents the symbol of light as a descending minor third. Later in the work, Matthew is depicted using the same in two pitches (Db–Bb).

²⁴⁴ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.9, mm.8-9.

²⁴⁵ Newman, libretto, 9.

²⁴⁶ Cockayne, 497.



“The light” should be performed legato so that it takes on an atemporal musical aesthetic entirely distinct from the in-time “crucify, crucify.” This juxtaposition is used as dramatic allowing the audience to feel some heightened degree of empathy.

Movement 10, “Keep It Away From Me,” is a lyric aria sung by an unnamed character—a mezzo soloist. Breaking the fourth wall, this reflective aria provides a moment outside the direct events about Matthew Shepard’s murder. The mood of this movement begins with anger as indicated by the distorted power chords of the electric guitar. With the entrance of the blues rhythm section, the mood toggles anger, defiance, and sadness. Three female backup singers provide soulful support for the soloist. Rather than event, character, or setting, this movement is about the seed and the pain that the Matthew Shepard story brings to “all of us.” Commitment to musical style and mood is critical for the functional success of this movement. This brief respite away from the Matthew Shepard story is how Johnson endeavors to “care for the audience.” Sometimes we just need a moment away when things get too intense.

Movement 11, “Recitation IV,” primarily functions as transition material so that we may reenter the story of Matthew Shepard. The narrator establishes the setting of the following scene while the music prepares the audience for the pensive mood of a candlelight vigil. What follows, however, is anything but pensive.

Movement 12, “Fire of the Ancient Heart,” begins with the clanging of tubular bells which shakes the audience awake. This is followed by a full-bodied baritone soloist singing the role of an angry cantor. Throughout the movement, the cantor cultivates an almost ritualistic

²⁴⁷ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.9, mm.50-52.

group fury. The choir begins as if singing Anglican chant: “Called by this candle, led to the flame, called to remember, enter the flame.”²⁴⁸ After the third strike of the bell, a reference to the playing of bells during the “Sanctus” of a mass, the ensemble begins to build a collective fire, a collective anger. The choral ensemble roars forward a collective “Howl, Broken, Burst, Rage, Swell, Shatter, Wail, Fire!”²⁴⁹ Having reached maximum dynamic intensity, the score departs from traditional tools of intensification in the Western idiom. Johnson turns to the musical language of an African drum circle to create a collective rage. It is important to note that the choral score, full score, and recording by *Conspirare* each include a different number of repetitions of this rhythmic figure so the conductor will need to decide which score they will be using for this movement ahead of time.

It is important for the singers to use strong inflections to create these rhythmic layers. An observation of the collective rhythm created by strong syllabic stress reveals that beat four is the longest, most significant beat. When assigning singers to various groups, they might add additional singers to group three so that beat four is heard. Group three also represents the collective heartbeat. To emphasize this collective “oneness,” group three might think of the first

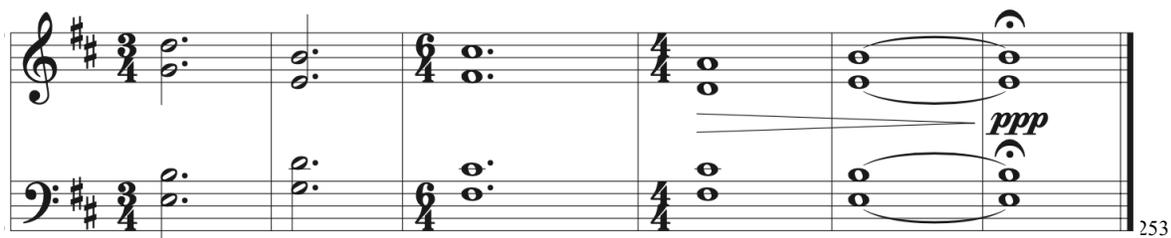
²⁴⁸ Browne, libretto, 10.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.12, mm.32-33.

three utterances as questions and the fourth as a statement: “His heart? My heart? Your heart? One heart!” While this helps the audience to make sense of what they are hearing, it also indicates pitch inflection to the singers who are otherwise provided with no guidance about pitch. This rhythmic chanting builds to a rousing “Break down all walls! Open all doors! Only this love!” Here, this rowdy compassion takes the place of toxic masculinity. Culminating in “lumina, lumina, lumina, open us all!”²⁵¹ Johnson not only refers to the light created by a raging fire, but the light that is collective compassion and love within all of us.

Movement 13, “Recitation V,” invites the listener to consider Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. The narrator explains that, over a year after the attack, Matthew’s murderers are put on trial and receive consecutive life sentences. The underscore in e-dorian is marked “almost colorless” and employs parallel fifths played on the piano. The right hand, however, is comprised of material from the “Dies Irae” chant.²⁵²



Given the “Dies Irae” melody, the pianist should play right hand slightly stronger than the left. Certainly, the trials of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson served as their “days of

²⁵¹ Latin for “light”

²⁵² Latin for “Day of Judgement,” “Dies Irae” is a Latin sequence used within the Requiem Mass.

²⁵³ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.13, mm.7-12.

judgement.” Regardless, Johnson is conscientious to illuminate the humanity of Matthew’s perpetrators in the movements that follow.

Movement 14, “Stray Birds,” characterizes Aaron and Russell as boys who simply lost their way. Featuring a wandering chant line sung by the tenors and basses, this movement is the “centerpiece” of the work according to Johnson.

On the word “dear,” the preceding atemporal, closed, chordal accompaniment begins to open and breathe in time. Johnson implies here that kindness and compassion result in greater freedom. The agogic accent of the melody and the peak of the phrase align together on the word “dear” as if to suspend a breath before exhaling. Johnson describes how this moment impacts him in performance: “One of my favorite moments in the piece is [...] when the men sing to each other, ‘we wake up to find that we were dear to each other,’ and [at] almost every performance, it sort of stops my breath.”²⁵⁵

Movement 15, “We Are All Sons” is a continuation of compassionate reflection sung by the tenors and basses. While sung in unison, this movement is performed with greater temporal

²⁵⁴ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.14, mm.16-19.

²⁵⁵ Johnson, interview with author.

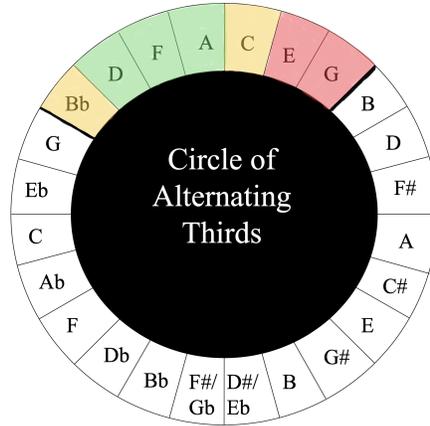
regularity than the “Stray Birds” but is quickly cut short. **Movement 16, “I Am Like You”** is unlike any other movement in the work. Sung by a solo quartet, this movement creates space for the listener to contemplate if they are in any way like Aaron or Russell. The quartet concludes that, in fact, “I am like you. I get confused and I’m afraid. And I’ve been reckless, I’ve been restless, bored, unthinking, listless, intoxicated. I’ve come unhinged and made mistakes and hurt people very much.”²⁵⁶ Performed almost colorless, this text reflects the very personal question that was in Johnson’s heart.

I went looking for a text. I searched and searched and searched and, of course, found nothing. [...] I [needed] to write this text and [...] I felt like it was a coming out in that moment, like I needed to come out with just what has been on my heart for this. So I just wrote down in a notebook several pages [...] what I’ve been feeling and thinking. Those notes eventually became shaped, changed, edited, deleted, and all that but re-written into what became “I Am Like You.” [...] I knew this piece just needed to feel naked, a certain nakedness to it and a raw quality. I couldn’t pretty it up. It couldn’t be a pretty piece of music. I also know that it needs to have space for people to take this in—not through composed aria or something—but the space was needed so that people could hear it, absorb it, maybe ask the question themselves. It’s much more a question than it is a statement. Am I like You?²⁵⁷

This uncomfortable question is reflected in the tentative way Johnson sets it in the musical score. Imitating Arvo Pärt’s Tintinnabuli style, Johnson uses notes primarily in the d-minor triad. Sung tones outside of the triad are typically part of a more melodic line. This movement, however, applies the Tintinnabuli idea to notes not only in the d-minor triad but also the upper and lower extensions of the d-minor triad. Using the Circle of Alternating Thirds, we can see that the notes “E” and “G” are farthest away from the d-minor triad. This concept is introduced by the opening line. While the first phrase establishes the primary chord of d-minor, the second phrase adds the upper extension, “C,” and the third phrase adds the lower extension, “Bb.”

²⁵⁶ Johnson, libretto, 12-13.

²⁵⁷ Johnson, interview with Robert Ward, 29.



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Cello

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Understanding the harmonic language reveals the melodic content within the score. Below is the first sung phrase in the movement.

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Notice that the extended notes alternate between the soprano and alto indicating that they share the melodic content. Consequently, if the quartet decides that the alto and soprano lines should be sung slightly more prominently than the tenor and bass lines, the audience will more readily

²⁵⁸ Circle of Alternating Thirds. Green represents the notes of the d-minor triad. Yellow represents extended tones. Red represents distantly related diatonic tones.

²⁵⁹ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.16, mm3-5.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, mm.17-19.

feel the discomfort of this bizarre question. Given the contemplative nature of the music, this movement will benefit from a natural speech-like prosody throughout. Upon concluding that we are indeed like Aaron and Russell, Johnson carefully leads the audience out of this dark contemplative space by reprising the unison “We Are All Sons.” Defeated, the tenors and basses cry out in sudden harmony, “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.”²⁶¹ Here, Johnson replaces toxic masculinity with brotherhood and vulnerability.

Movement 17, “The innocence,” provides a moment away from the dramatic events to remember what life was like before waking up to the dark facets of our human experience. These simpler times are represented by a single tenor who sings a nostalgic folk ballad, “Where, O where has the innocence gone? Where, O where has it gone?”²⁶² Johnson’s use of this folk style is powerful here because it speaks to the possibility that even rural communities can “have some experience of an ‘aha’ moment or an awakening...something that just might say, ‘Oh, the story was kind of a piercing to me.’”²⁶³

Movement 18, “Recitation VI” features a narrator who explains that “people came to the fence to pay homage, and pray, and grieve.”²⁶⁴ **Movement 19, “The Fence (one week later),”** is sung by the fence, now characterized by a soprano who explains what this experience was like to serve as a memorial: “Some of them touched me in unexpected ways, and then move on.”²⁶⁵ As discussed in chapter two, this movement begins with a clarinet playing cruciform melodies. The cruciform melodies give nod to the fence as a symbol of a crucifix upon which

²⁶¹ Johnson, libretto, 13.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Johnson, interview with author.

²⁶⁴ Browne, libretto, 14.

²⁶⁵ Newman, libretto, 14.

Matthew was tied. The chorus in this movement represents “all of us” who mourn at the fence placing “flowers and photos, pray’rs and poems, crystals and candles, sticks and stones.”²⁶⁶

Consequently, the chorus should perform this section with a diffuse and somber vocal timbre.

The use of minimal staging and props can be incredibly impactful in this movement and can help the audience to visualize the scene.

Soprano *p liltng, tender*
 Flow-ers and pho-tos, pray'rs_ and poems, crys-tals and can-dles, sticks_ and stones;

Alto *p liltng, tender*
 Flow-ers and pho-tos, pray'rs_ and poems, crys-tals and can-dles, sticks_ and stones;

Tenor *p liltng, tender*
 Flow-ers and pho-tos, pray'rs_ and poems, crys-tals and can-dles, sticks_ and stones;

Bass *p liltng, tender*
 Flow-ers and pho-tos, pray'rs_ and poems, crys-tals and can-dles, sticks_ and stones; 267

Musically, Johnson relates these moments to Matthew by using a recurrent musical motive in the above soprano line which recalls melodic material from “Ordinary Boy.”

121 *mf* **Moving along** ♩ = ca. 132
 I love thea - tre, I love good friends, I love suc - ceed - ing, I love 268

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.19, mm.17-20.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., mvt.2, mm.121-124.

Johnson also draws upon the theme of strength in this movement by depicting the fence as emotionally sturdy. The fence's mantra ("Still, still, still") from Movement Five is transformed to inner strength as the soprano fence sings: "Some of them touch me in unexpected ways without asking permission, and then move on. But I don't mind. Being a shrine is better than being the scene of the crime. I keep still, I stand firm."²⁶⁹

Movement 20, "Recitation VII," serves as a brief introduction to **Movement 21, "Stars."** Depicting the shimmering Wyoming night sky, Johnson notates an improvisatory and atmospheric instrumental texture that paints the scene Dennis Shepard describes in his statement to the court:

By the end of the beating, his body was just trying to survive. You left him out there by himself, but he wasn't alone. There were his lifelong friends with him—friends that he had grown up with. You're probably wondering who these friends were. 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—one more cool, wonderful autumn day in Wyoming. His last day alive in Wyoming. His last day alive in the state that he always proudly called home. And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of Wyoming wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last 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. I feel better knowing he wasn't alone.²⁷⁰

Lesléa Newman extracts four primary literary symbols from this speech: Stars, Moon, Sun, and Wind. Johnson's setting of her poems represents these symbols musically. Coordinating the vocal lines in this movement to represent stars is relatively difficult. Some performances of this movement omit the sung text since the text is imperceptible in the way that it is set. It serves rather as moments of light, an added color among the aleatoric instrumental texture.

²⁶⁹ Newman, libretto, 14.

²⁷⁰ Dennis Shepard, "Statement," libretto, 14.

Movement 22, “Recitation VIII,” features a narrator who describes how “Matthew was left, tied to the fence for almost eighteen hours.”²⁷¹ In the dramatic aria that follows, **Movement 23, “In Need of Breath,”** Matthew sings a poem by Hafiz, what Johnson imagines Matthew would have sung the night of the beating.

My heart
Is an unset jewel
Upon the tender night

Yearning for its dear old friend
The Moon.

When the Nameless One debuts again
Ten thousand facets of my being unfurl wings
And reveal such a radiance inside

I enter the realm divine
I too begin to sweetly cast light,
Like a lamp
I cast light
Through the streets of this
World.

My heart is an unset jewel
Upon existence
Waiting for the Friend’s touch.

Tonight

My heart is an unset ruby
Offered bowed and weeping to the sky.
I am dying in these cold hours
For the resplendent glance of God.

My heart
Is an unset jewel
Upon the tender night

My heart is an unset ruby
Offered bowed and weeping to the Sky.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Browne, libretto, 15.

²⁷² Hafiz, “In Need of Breath,” translated by Daniel Ladinsky, libretto, 15-16.

There are two literary symbols in this poem which Johnson represents musically: Heart and Light. In fact, Johnson’s composition serves as a commentary on love and light as one and the same. Matthew’s solo begins with an ascending minor third from “Bb” to “Db.”

7 **Tenor Solo**

mp

My heart is an un-set jew-el _____ 273

This heart motive is the direct inverse of the descending light motive heard in movement nine, “A Protestor.”

pp *slowly* *a tempo* *slowly* *ppp*

Cru-ci- fy, cru-ci- fy the light! Cru-ci- fy, cru-ci- fy the light! _____ 274

Later in the movement, Johnson again sets “light” using a minor third from “Bb” to “Db.”

44

I cast _____ light

275

Johnson’s most obvious depiction of light in this movement uses the chorus to add a warm, shimmering timbre.

²⁷³ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.23, mm.7-11.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, mvt.9, mm.50-52.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, mvt.23, mm.44-45.

28 Tenor Solo *poco f*
wings and re-veal such a ra-di-ance in-side,
Soprano *mf* uh mmm
Alto *mf* uh mmm
Tenor *mf* uh mmm
Bass *mf* uh mmm
f

276

Performance of this moment would be greatly enhanced by the use of stage lighting or other visual effects.

Movement 24, “Gently Rest” and **Movement 26, Deer Song,”** feature lyric choruses about the deer who stays with Matthew at the fence on the night of his beating; however, it isn’t until **Movement 25, “Recitation IX,”** where the audience learns about the deer. In the score, Johnson writes that “as an option, ‘Gently Rest’ may be cut from the overall performance.”²⁷⁷ I would go as far as to suggest cutting this movement given that it is followed by “Deer Song,” another lyric aria which serves the same dramaturgical function as “Gently Rest.” The movement begins with a lilting wind-like introduction which places the audience at the fence. This accompaniment should imitate the gentle breeze and be performed legato.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., mvt.23, mm.28-30.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p.160.

Delicate, lilting ♩ = ca. 142

278

Quoting Benjamin Britten’s “Wolcum Yole,” “Deer Song,” finds Matthew and the deer contemplating being welcomed into an afterlife. Both characters are played by the choral sopranos and altos. As a result, the audience is unable to delineate between the two characters unless they are following along with the libretto. Having the tenors and basses sing Matthew’s line in this movement helps the audience to understand that it is indeed Matthew speaking.

In Movement 27, “Recitation X,” the audience learns that “the fence has been torn down.”²⁷⁹ This is followed by **Movement 28, “The Fence (after)/The Wind.”** In this final fence poem, the audience hears the fence being “broken down, broken up, ripped apart, [and] ripped away”²⁸⁰ as evidenced by the jagged polyphonic writing for the chorus. This action can be more easily understood as such if performed in a dry manner.

281

²⁷⁸ (CMS, mvt.26., mm.1-3.

²⁷⁹ Browne, libretto, 17.

²⁸⁰ Newman, libretto, 17-18.

²⁸¹ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.28, mm.12-13.

Achieving this collective updraft requires a great deal of listening between sections so that the ensemble sounds as one. Despite the fence having been torn up, people from all over the world visit Laramie to remember Matthew Shepard.

Movement 29, “Pilgrimage,” is the final movement of the Passion section where we “walk to the fence,” a metaphor for listening to this story about Matthew Shepard.

I walk to the fence with beauty before me
The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want

I walk to the fence with beauty behind me
Yit'gadal v'yit' kadash (may his great name grow)

I walk to the fence with beauty above me
Om Mani Padme Ham (Om! The jewel in the lotus, hum!)

I walk to the fence surrounded by beauty
Wail of wind, cry of hawk

I leave the fence surrounded by beauty
Sigh of sagebrush, hush of stone

*(Beauty above me, beauty below me
By beauty surrounded)*

Still, still, still, I wonder...

Still still still²⁸⁵

Incorporating several languages and religions, Johnson demonstrates that this story affects all of us. Newman, who visited the fence herself, comments on her poem which was used in this movement:

The first line of each stanza of this poem is modeled after a traditional Navajo prayer. The second lines of the first four stanzas are taken from prayers from other traditions as follows: the second line of the first stanza is taken from the twenty-third Psalm. The second line of the second stanza is taken from the Kaddish, the Jewish mourner's prayer.

²⁸⁵ Lesléa Newman, “Pilgrimage,” *October Mourning*, 85.

The second line of the third stanza is taken from the traditional Tibetan Buddhist prayer of compassion. The second line of the fourth stanza is taken from Matthew 5:5.²⁸⁶

The combination of religions and languages was important to Johnson and important to the seed of the work, “all of us.”

The primary dramaturgical function of the epilogue is to represent the seed. **Movement 30, “Meet Me Here,”** begins with a solo voice and slowly builds to represent our collective strength. In the key of C-major, the key of “all of us,” this movement refers back to the “dance of life” that Johnson created in the first movement. Composed in a thickly-voiced gospel texture, this movement is all about gathering together and the gratitude that accompanies that act. The movement concludes, “we can learn to offer praise again, coming home to the light.”²⁸⁷ Here, Johnson finally clarifies that light refers to kindness and love—the way we treat one another.

A highly experienced concert curator, Johnson is accustomed to thanking the audience for attending before ending with a finale. This is exactly how **Movement 31, “Thank You,”** functions in the work. Referring to the first movement, Johnson again quotes Bach’s “Prelude in C-major”—this time in its entirety. In a PBS documentary about the work, Johnson explains why he wrote this movement:

I want people to get a sense of the whole arc of this so that they can take in the whole story. [...] I led that as a composer and as a shaper of the libretto. But also I felt that [...] Matt guided our process—his story, his death, his life, even his presence that I often felt during the composing of this. [...] It was interesting, somebody asked me if he were here, if Matt Shepard were here with me, what would I want to say to him. [...] I would wanna say “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Lesléa Newman, explanation of poetic forms, *October Mourning*, 107.

²⁸⁷ Johnson, libretto, 20.

²⁸⁸ Johnson in *Considering Matthew Shepard* (PBS, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

Above the Bach prelude, a double choir, three soloists, and several narrators create a collage of gratitude by offering thanks in English, Arapaho, and Huron.²⁸⁹ Creating a sonic tapestry, the sung voice parts become the background upon which the narrator speaks. Given the dense musical texture, the narrators should use a microphone so that the audience can hear and understand the poem by W.S. Merwin. While this movement serves as an excellent reference to the beginning of the work, I would cut this movement entirely since the second half of the piece already includes extensive lyric (reflective) material.

Movement 32, “All of Us,” is the rousing finale of the work. Here Johnson drives home that the work is not only about Matthew Shepard but about “all of us.” This movement is the culmination of important symbols and ideas throughout the work. A collage of musical genres, Johnson combines his love for Bach, a historically “white” genre of music, with his love for Gospel, a historically “black” genre of music. In this way, the work is uniquely American. Johnson explains that the opening Gospel trio was in fact inspired by the three oboes that could be found playing within a Bach cantata. What follows is a grooving chorus which is abruptly interrupted by a Lutheran-style chorale including a plethora of previously mentioned symbols:

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 every human heart.

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;

²⁸⁹ Arapaho are a people of Native Americans that are indigenous to Colorado and Wyoming. Huron is a member of a confederacy of American Indian people.

How old this joy, how strong this call,
 To sing your radiant care
 With every voice, in cloudless hope
 Of our belonging here.

Historically, the creation of the Lutheran chorale is associated with Martin Luther’s commitment to translating sacred songs into the vernacular so that the congregation could take part in the singing of them. Johnson enjoys creating flash-mob experiences in performance where guest choirs who are scattered throughout the audience suddenly stand to sing the chorale. The effect can be utterly overwhelming to the listener. Modulating to C-major, Johnson once again returns to the key of “all of us” to finish out the movement. This rousing movement concludes just as the work begins—an expansive “All!”

84 *rall.* Solo 1, 2 *mf* Solo 3 *ff*
 On-ly in the Love, Love that lifts us up...
rall. Us. All. *ff*
rall. Us. All. *ff*
rall. Us. All. *ff*
rall. Us. All. *ff*
rall. e cresc. On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, All, All, All. *ff*
rall. e cresc. On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, All, All, All. *ff*
rall. e cresc. On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, All, All, All. *ff*
rall. e cresc. On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, On-ly in the Love, All, All, All. *ff*
rall. e cresc. *ff*
 290 8ve. 1

²⁹⁰ Johnson, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, mvt.32, mm.84-86.

Lest the audience leave without an encore, the work quickly reprises material from the first movement. In **Movement 33, “Cattle, Horses, Sky, and Grass,”** Johnson reminds the audience that even the rural cowboy “wants you to be free.”²⁹¹

4.2 Additional Performance Considerations

In addition to musical dramaturgy, there are many facets of *Considering Matthew Shepard* that must be considered before performing the work. These include instrumentation, soloists, amplification, potential omissions, and the use of extra-musical dramatics. The full score calls for a small instrumental ensemble similar to that of a pit orchestra:

- Piano
- Clarinet
- Violin
- Viola
- Cello
- Bass
- Percussion (5 Octave Marimba, Cajon, Medium Bass Drum, “B” chime taken from set, Triangle, Small Suspended Cymbal, Anklet Bells, and Small Glockenspiel)
- Guitars (Electric and Acoustic)

This ensemble can, however, be reduced if financial or space concerns necessitate a smaller ensemble. Of these instruments, the following are particularly essential to the musical narrative:

- Piano
- Clarinet
- Violin
- Percussion (Marimba, Cajon, Medium Bass Drum, Chime)
- Guitars (Electric and Acoustic)

One of the challenges in preparing *Considering Matthew Shepard* is coordinating which singers will be performing each of the thirty-three solos within the work. The chart below includes the location of each of these solos and some notes to aid the conductor in selecting these performers.

²⁹¹ Johnson, libretto, 23.

Movement	Voice Type	Notes
1.20-28 Cowboy song	Tenor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs to be able to yodel • Sing with twang
1.100-110 “Pulsing”	Four sopranos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should be able to sing lightly in their medium-high range • Probably no mic needed
2.1-30, 80-81 Narrator/Female Soloist	Mezzo-soprano or Soprano	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good actor
2.31-34, 63-77 Judy Shepard	Mezzo-soprano	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternal figure if possible
2.82-129 Matt	Baritone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innocent sounding, younger • Good actor
2.157-163 “And I love to be on stage”	Tenor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dramatic tenor, operatic
3.6-27 “We tell each other stories”	Soprano	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to have a high mix
4.Recitation 1	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural speech should sound rural, American
5.The Fence (before)	Bass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a country style, “Noble”
6.Recitation 2	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Straightforward, solemn
7.The Fence (that night)	Bass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More operatic. • Ideal if performed by the same singer as in the fifth movement
8.Rectiation 3	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A
10.Keep It Away From Me	Mezzo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to character
10.Keep It Away From Me	SSA Trio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sung as gospel back-up singers
11.Recitation 4	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathetic

12.Fire of The Ancient Heart	Bass Baritone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operatic • Angry
13.Recitation 5	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A
16.I Am Like You	SATB Quartet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soloist can sing with a clear yet diffuse tone • Excellent ensemble skills
17.The Innocence	Tenor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sung with folk simplicity
18. Recitation 6	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solemn
19.The Fence (one week later)	Soprano	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sung in a formal tone
20.Recitation 7	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A
21.Dennis Shepard Recitation	Male Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent Actor
22.Recitation 8	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A
23.In Need of Breath	Tenor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supple voice, • Can sing Gb-F-Eb while dim.
25.Recitation 9	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A
26.Deer Song	3 Soprano soloists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent ensemble musicians
27.Recitation 10	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solemn
29.Pilgrimage	4 Soprano soloists, 2 Bass soloists, 3 Alto Soloist, 1 Tenor soloist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 primary soprano soloists should have relatively similar voices
30 Meet Me Here	1 Soprano Soloist, 3 Soprano Back-up singers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 sopranos, should sound nice together in mixed voice
31.Thank You	Narrator 1: N/A Narrator 2: N/A Soli 1: Bass/Baritone Soli 2: Mezzo/Alto Soli 3: Sopranos Soli 4: Altos Soli 5: SATB Quartet Soli 6: SATB Quartet Soli 7:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tracking the score is very difficult if a soli switches between their lines and the chord lines

	Tenor/Baritone/Bass Soli 8: Mezzo Soli 9: Basses & Altos Soli 10: 1 Soprano Soli 11: 1 Alto	
32.All of Us	SAA Trio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sung soloistically in a gospel style
33.26-35	Tenor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should be the same tenor that sang in the first movement

Given the pervasive inclusion of many musical genres included throughout the work, the conductor might also consider amplification. Depending on the performance space, the chorus may need to be amplified. Solos should be amplified by default. When *Conspirare* performs the work, each of the singers are equipped with body microphones allowing the singers to move freely about the stage as needed. Unfortunately, this approach makes it very difficult for the sound engineer responsible for coordinating all of the solos. If providing each singer with a body microphone is impractical for the performing organization then four stand microphones is sufficient.

While body microphones can facilitate staging, they are not necessary if only planning to use minimal blocking and other extra-musical dramatics. Props are another way to help the audience visualize dramatic action. *Conspirare* uses an evergreen buck and rail fence like those found in Wyoming. Using a spotlight on the fence and the soloist portraying the fence can help the audience to understand that the fence itself serves as a character. Protest signs can be very impactful in Movement Nine where the choir serves as members from the Westboro Baptist Church. Using news footage from outside the funeral in 1998, protest signs may be replicated.²⁹²

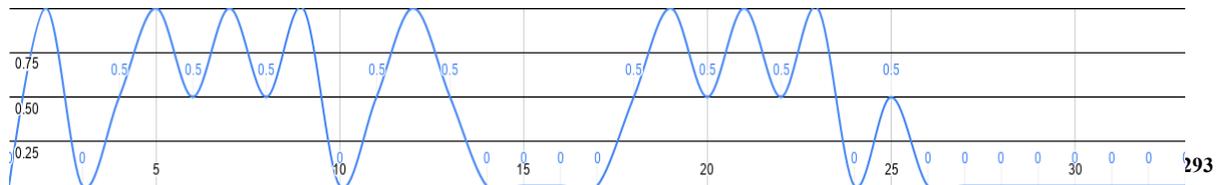
²⁹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iN-1HVVHfpZ4>

Some of these signs read, “Fags Die, God Laughs,” “Aid Cures Fags,” “Matt in Hell,” “No Fags in Heaven,” and “2 Gay Rights: Aids & Hell.” Professional choirs generally wear the same clothing across all performances such as “concert black.” Another possibility in this work is to wear casual attire inspired by Wyoming fashion. Jeans, boots, flannel and other Wyoming fashion trends can help the audience perceive the performers as characters in the story. Finally, photographs and videos can play a large role in the way an audience perceives the musical performance. Conspirare uses an incredible multimedia package in their performances. This excellent visual package is available for a licensing fee of \$250.00 and includes a keynote file containing images of Matthew, Aaron, Russell, Wyoming landscapes. It also includes loops, videos, and titles for each of the movements. This file is joined by a cue script and technical specifications on how to use the file itself. To obtain this file, visit www.conspirare.org/performcms. This website is also where the performer must register their performance and obtain permission to reprint the libretto.

When considering performing the work, a conductor may also decide to omit some of the material as needed. As mentioned in Chapter Two, there are three primary musical textures which are present in oratorio—recitative or recitation, aria, and chorus. Additionally, there are three primary points of view—dramatic, epic, and lyric. A dramatic point of view means that the movement contains an external event. Epic refers to a narrative point of view. Lyric is a reflection upon the events rather than a depiction of the events in real time. The chart below places each of the movements in *Considering Matthew Shepard* according to musical texture and dramatic point of view.

	Chorus	Aria	Recitation
Dramatic	2.Ordinary Boy 9.A Protestor 12.Fire of the Ancient Heart	5.The Fence (before) 7.The Fence (that night) 19.The Fence (one week later) 23.In Need of Breath	21.Star/Recitation 7 (Monologue)
Epic	X	X	6.Recitation 2 8.Recitation 3 11.Recitation 4 13.Recitation 5 18.Recitation 6 20.Recitation 7 22.Recitation 8 25.Recitation 9 27.Recitation 10
Lyric	1.Cattle Horses, Sky, Grass 14.Stray Birds 15.We Are All Sons 16.I Am Like You 24.Gently Rest 26.Deer Song 28.The Fence (after)/The Wind 29.Pilgrimage 30.Meet Me Here 31.Thank You 32.All of Us 33.Cattle Horses, Sky, and Grass	3.We Tell Each Other Stories 10.Keep It Away From Me 17.The Innocence	4.Recitation 1

Implied within the title, this work contains several lyric movements, particularly reflective choruses. The chart also reveals that the majority of these lyric choruses happen at the very end of the work. This results in a dramatic pacing which is front-heavy as indicated by the graph below.



Consequently, if omissions are necessary, the performer might consider cutting a movement or two toward the end. Johnson suggests that “Gently Rest (Deer Lullaby)” may be omitted. If omission is necessary, I would suggest also omitting “Thank You” to shorten the duration of consecutive lyric movements.

One final consideration that greatly enhances the performance is the inclusion of a flash mob chorus in Movement Thirty-Two, “All of Us.” When *Conspirare* performs the work, they frequently collaborate with a local choir who, in performance, suddenly stands to sing the Lutheran-style chorale within the movement. This is meant to be a surprise and an incredibly effective way to drive home the seed of the work—“all of us.” It is recommended that these singers sit within “clumps” throughout the audience. In proximity to their peers, the singers can find the courage to stand and sing. Spreading out in small groups throughout the audience can maximize the effect it has on the audience. In my personal experience with the work, this flash mob moment can be entirely transformational.

²⁹³ Dramatic = value 1, Epic = Value .5, Lyric = Value 0

Before concluding this chapter, it must again be acknowledged that there is no single way to interpret or perform this work. With that said, performers of this work must be aware of the numerous musical connections that the composer creates with key dramatic elements in order to highlight this musical dramaturgy in performance.

4.3 Final Considerations

The present research is of primary usefulness to composers and librettists interested in writing oratorios, and performers interested in choral storytelling. As revealed through a multitude of narratological perspectives, the telling and consumption of stories is fundamental to human existence. Stories can be captivating, emotionally charged, or even transform the way that we perceive our world. Likewise, choral storytelling has incredible potential to impact an audience. The present research is a consequence of the growing interest in choral storytelling among professional choirs in twenty-first-century America. Conductors are beginning to recognize that stories are an important tool to grow and sustain this newly-embraced professional artform; however, many composers and choral directors are unsure how exactly to tell a story through choral music. A luminary of choral storytelling, Craig Hella Johnson turns to a centuries-old form, the oratorio, to cultivate a broader audience for *Conspirare*, one of the most well-known professional choirs in modern America.

Oratorios are inherently “dramatic” in that they contain “actions” connected to a particular story and include categories of literary narrative including events, characters, symbols, settings, seeds, and themes. An action analysis can reveal topics within each of these categories which can, in turn, be represented through musical composition. Understanding this musical dramaturgy should be at the center of score preparation for the performer of oratorio. In *Considering Matthew Shepard*, Craig Hella Johnson skillfully crafts musical agents to represent

each of these story elements as is revealed through an action analysis. This composition serves as an icon of modern oratorio that I hope will not only endure the test of time, but also inspire many other composers to write chamber oratorios for professional choral ensembles. In the words of St. Olaf's Anton Armstrong, "Music can be a force that transforms for the good and that's what I believe *Considering Matthew Shepard* is and will be in the future."²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ Anton Armstrong in *Considering Matthew Shepard* (PBS, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/considering-matthew-shepard-iprdd7>.

APPENDIX A: Craig Hella Johnson Interview Transcript

Date: Monday, March 1, 2021

Craig:
Hi, Ryan.

Ryan:
Hi, Craig. Good to see you. How are you?

Craig:
I'm doing well. How are you?

Ryan:
I'm doing good. [...] I'm really excited to talk to you today because I've been following your work for over a decade now and I'm just fascinated with the work that you do with Conspirare. And *Considering Matthew Shepard* is a piece that immediately struck me and immediately impacted me so I've sought every opportunity to hear it as much as I possibly can and I perform it when possible. And since that first listen, I've just been on the search for why it had such an impact on me. [...]

Craig:
Beautiful. Well, I'm very touched by that and honored certainly by your interest in and engagement around this. It means a lot to me. I'm looking forward to this very much. And, um, yeah, and as, as you work on this, you can always just once will, can lay a foundation, but feel free to be in touch with me as things come up too.

Ryan:
Great, thank you!

Craig:
You bet.

Ryan:
So, the first question I'm wondering is, "why did you choose a career in choral music?"

Craig:
I always thought I was going to do something with piano and recording. And you know, when I was a kid, the dreams were all about being in the recording studio so I used to write to recording studios around the country and get all their little packets and brochures. [...] I was just always singing in choirs growing up, you know? At church, my dad was a preacher and so I was just always in the choirs there as a kid. And by the time I was in eighth grade, I was organist at our pretty big church and also singing in the adult choir and it always just seemed like it was a part of my life. [...]. Through college, I sang in the St Olaf choir which is the touring choir at the college. And it kind of felt like full-time choir so it just never occurred to me, you know, to actually go into choral music. I thought, "I'm already fully in it," you know? So I was looking at

other things; I was certainly focused on piano and then orchestral conducting, and that was really the repertoire I was studying. So [...] I got to the end of college and a number of things happened: [...] I was offered a full assistantship and tuition waiver [...] at University of Illinois. Then, [...] I went to Juilliard for a little while [to study] piano. Then, I was out at the Oregon Bach festival and got to experience [my] first time sitting in a rehearsal with Helmuth Rilling and he was doing B-minor mass at the time. And just something clicked in, like [...] falling in love with someone that was right next to you for a long, long time. [...] So then I left Juilliard then went to Germany to the Bach Academy and that's really when I started devoting...I said, "this is what I want to do." And college singing experiences were [also] very, very special to me. Kenneth Jennings was just a very beautiful musician and really formative in so many ways from me. [...] He was such a fine musician that I got so much from it. I think if it hadn't been for him, this wouldn't have been interesting to me, but he was one of the first people I really saw who dealt with the choir, the choral instrument, like an art song singer. [...] I was always so moved by singers like Janet Baker and Fischer-Dieskau, and so many of these very special solo singers. But I felt like I was getting that same kind of nuanced transmission when I used to hear Jennings and the way he would leave the St Olaf choir. It's been rare that I've heard anything like that since and I think, my whole life, I've been sort of trying to find my way into that. I mean, I really want to inhabit that space because he was so unique. [...] I remember there was a time when I said, "this is what I'm going to dedicate to." I love singing. I love the fellowship aspect. I love [that] we want to be working at a world-class level. We want to have high expectations of our artistry and our output, but at the same time, experience a true fellowship and a true community. So that's a little bit of my why.

Ryan:

Thank you! It's interesting to hear you talk about your experience and I can kind of hear some of those experiences in *Considering Matthew Shepard*—all those Bach influences which would be great to talk about it as well. So, Conspirare has been a beacon of light and a leader in the professional choral world for several years. In your opinion, why do you think so many professional choral ensembles have emerged in the last decade or so?

Craig:

Yeah. I think it's true. We've been around for like 27 years now. As a nonprofit, it's kind of amazing. [It] just feels like five years really. I was teaching at the University of Texas and I was witnessing all across the state all these great singers who [...] developed these extraordinary skill sets and there was really nowhere to go for them with these skill sets. [...] And that, to me, just seemed really unfortunate because it was a whole population of just, you know, wonderful singers. And they came with really unique training and skill sets and many of them didn't even know it. Now it's very different. There are even training programs like Yale, which is very much about chamber music, and others that have emerged, but, at the time, there wasn't anything like that. [...] Folks who were really great solo singers, who were getting great technical training, becoming fine musicians, and also singing in ensembles, they got it. Their athleticism, their physical endurance [...] was just extraordinary [as well as] their capacity, musically and technically. I thought it was really unfortunate that they didn't have a place to make music and that, in this country, there weren't very many professional opportunities available. So, it was really part of our mission early on to really try and professionalize choral music. And certainly there were professional choirs in New York and Dale Warland in Minneapolis. Chanticleer was

doing its thing [...] but really not very many opportunities at all. I'd seen companies like the ballet company in Austin...I knew that they were a group that started. Now, it's a professional resident company that has been around for, I think, 30, 35 years. But when they started, they just had eight dancers and they came from, you know, two came from New York or three and maybe one came from Brussels and somebody came from LA and it was just kind of a thing. So in order to establish it, you needed the professional artists there to do it. So, I had just come from Germany a little while ago and I saw all these musicians coming from all over Europe on the train. And it was a thrilling thing that happened, you know, when they'd all come to Stuttgart to work with Rilling. They didn't meet every Tuesday night or anything like that but they would come together for five days and it was an extraordinary thing. The sounds they could make and the music they could make was at a level just way above anything I'd heard and so I wanted to emulate that really and see if we had an American version of it. We were very intentional about saying let's broaden the field. You know, we don't speak about it much, but it was really at the core of our early mission statement. And so we feel very thrilled—I do, to see this expansion. I mean, it's just extraordinary because it was absurd when we did it ourselves for the first time to say, "we're going to fly these singers in." And, you know, people would roll their eyes like "What, that's such an expensive model. What are you talking about?" And so [...] there are a lot of factors and we're not the only factor that had influence on this, but I think that [when] they saw that [we're] still doing it after five years, and then after 10 years, and after 15, it was starting to be seen as a model. And then, anywhere I'd go, I'd talk about it and say, "you could start a professional group." But I had many conductors calling me about, you know, "what did you do? How'd you start it?" You know, all the basic stuff, like just starting a 501c3 but then all the other aspects of it too—you know, "how do you build the personnel, the board, the fundraising?" All that kind of stuff. So it's been beautiful to see it. I'm excited by it. As you know, it's just trickle down effect in that composers are wanting to write for choirs like crazy and that wasn't the case when we were getting started. [...] Thankfully Chanticleer played a huge role in getting composers interested because, you know, the composer started to see there are going to be groups that can actually execute on some really challenging things and some really interesting things. The fact that so many composers have been drawn to it too, is a thrilling aspect of it, you know, and this is different even from 10 years ago and 15 years ago. It's a remarkable shift. And so I am just thrilled about it and continue to support that going forward, always.

Ryan:

You talk about how composers are eager to write for choir and I'm wondering if you notice any kind of trends happening as a result of this new choral medium, the professional ensemble?

Craig:

Yeah. Well composers can write things that are frankly more difficult. The level of challenge in this scores has been increasing over the last many years here. I mean, it's been really wonderful to see because they know that singers can do it, you know, in terms of technical ability, also in terms of endurance. It's not like it's a brand new thing. I mean, Rachmaninoff wrote the All-Night Vigil and St. John Chrysostom and all. So these acapella works existed, but all of a sudden, you know, we're starting to see, [more]. We saw it in Scandinavia a lot earlier, you know, because there were these great choirs in Scandinavia, in Stockholm, and Oslo and in Copenhagen—just fantastic choirs like the Swedish Radio Choir that was just kicking it. I mean, Erik Erikson's group was just fantastic. And so they got the message over there in Europe and

Scandinavia a lot earlier than the American composers did. And so you can see that it's about literally 10, 15, 20 years before all of this in America. You see things that are technically more demanding. You see things that are, frankly, musically very broad-ranging and very interesting. And you can sustain a one-to-two-hour program a capella because there are singers who can do it. The spectrum of choral music right now that's being composed is just broad and diversified so it's a very exciting time overall in choral music.

Ryan:

What's interesting to me is that the professional orchestra in America really seems like it's about eighty or ninety years ahead of the professional choir in terms of paying their artists. It's certainly a different model from the fly-in model a lot of the time but it's interesting how orchestras reached out to their audiences—their programming choices as a result of being a professional model. And I'm wondering, how do you think about the audience experience at *Conspirare* performances?

Craig:

Well, yeah. [...] I would say that the orchestra had a good hundred-fifty years ahead of us in that so many people, when they came from Europe, you know, the folks who were building culture or sort of bringing culture to America, basically said, "you know, in order to be an important cultural center to be an important city, you need S-O-B. You need a symphony, opera, and ballet." People did not say you need a professional choir, you know, so that was never part of the thinking. And that's why we're kind of in the infancy stages right now. I mean, it's a hundred, maybe a hundred-twenty years ago with symphony orchestras. Right now major corporations will say, [...] let's say Samsung...corporate higher-ups will say to employees, "we want you to do community service. We want you to be on boards and, you know, maybe the symphony at opera ballet or the museum or something"...but that's been built into the philanthropic DNA because of that tradition and it really comes from Europe. "Want to be a really cool, great city? Get your S-O-B going on!" And so, whether or not we want to adopt that and be S-O-B-C, I don't know. [...] Philanthropically speaking, I think that is the history of it and I speak to that a lot. [...] Um, I think the fact that the human voice is what we're dealing with here is what makes it so distinctive and unique and that every person in the audience has a voice. You know, not every person in the audience plays the violin or plays the trumpet, but every person sitting there knows what it is to use breath, to create sound through this means whether it's singing in the shower or humming; even people who say they are bad singers, they can relate to it because they have a vocal instrument. [...] I want to create an experience for a listener. I don't have any interest in manipulating or controlling what I think the audience ought to experience, but I am very interested that they have the possibility to be in an experience. A concert is a sacred space to me (sacred in the most broad sense, not in any religious sense, but a wholly sacred experience) where people come together. You have a kind-of contract with each other when somebody buys a ticket and comes [to a performance]. My end of the contract, and the singers', is to create the space where people can have an experience of music itself just as literature, and for ideas and for exchange of all that we know the repertoire to be. They come in to experience a greater sense of their own humanity. And it's a ritual act, you know, to come together in a concert setting human to human. One thing we can connect around is this fire of music which is being expressed through the human voice and, to this day, we have such a foolish name from a branding standpoint, *Conspirare*, but it is definitely who we are because, you know, it's all about the

breath. And that's the one thing that I know we can say we all have in common—our breath. And we paint on the canvas of breath so I want to feel like we're in a circle with the audience. We're not two dimensional, but it's round and it's full and it's engaging. We're truly with each other in that experience,

Ryan:

You've spoken to the concert as an experience of our own humanity. One of my favorite movements in *Considering Matthew Shepard* is movement three where we tell each other stories to learn who we are. I noticed that it was also released as part of the suite this week as well so it seems like this movement is an especially important part of the composition—It's certainly one of the most impactful parts for me. Is this your philosophy on storytelling?

Craig:

Yeah, it's a special movement to me too, Ryan and, I mean, it's a place where I felt like I did get pretty personal so I think you're reading that right. [...] I knew what I wanted to express really clearly in a kind of a visceral way and I was looking and looking and looking for a text and looking and looking and looking and looking and not finding and not finding...And I had that feeling coming up like, "I need to, to write this one because I wasn't finding it." [...] So, I thought, "I've just got to do this myself." So I went about that in a very direct way. [...] I mean, "philosophy"—it's a good word. It's a big word you know. [...] I haven't ever put that stamp on it, but what I will say is, it's really direct. It's really clear. It comes from my heart and I guess you could say it is a philosophy of sorts and the philosophy would be everything that is in the lyric. First of all, "We tell each other stories so that we will remember, trying to find [the meaning," etc]. [...] My understanding, what feels like my inner knowing, feels from my life experience—that these are just stories, and as important as they are, [...] it's a real paradox here because each of our stories are really important. [...] I really do believe that it is also a story that we are something actually much larger than this story. So I'll speak for myself. [...] I've had a lot of things I could tell you, my biography, I could tell you what's hurt me, what's held me up, what's inspired me, what has been an obstacle—and they're really interesting. And that is how we find our way into the deeper story, which is, "This just isn't all that I am." [...] You know, our stories are like drops of water, but our real essence is ocean, you know, and it's incredibly vast and it's a mystery and, until you start to get a glimpse of it, it sounds like "who-who" talk" [and] sounds ridiculous. But I've had to kind of understand that that's how this works. When you start to get glimpses of the bigness, the hugeness of the vastness of it, it starts to make a lot of sense. [...] That's a really important, sort of, philosophy to me because I think we have forgotten deeply; we have forgotten that [...] "We've all betrayed the ancient heart." That's a chant that's in the middle of "The Ancient Heart,"—"We've all betrayed the ancient heart." [...] That's what that's referring to. We have betrayed the truth that we all come from divine essence. And we return there and we are so much vaster than these individual life's dreams and so much of our violence towards one another comes from that forgetting and it comes from that betrayal of ourselves. That's really at the heart of this piece. I love that movement so much because it [...] is what my heart deeply wanted people to experience with this piece. And yet, if I were to write some song about "you are vastness, you are ocean, you are"...and I do that too early? Nobody's listening. No, you just lose them right at the [beginning] because we get connected through our stories. And this is an ancient old lineage, I mean, millennia, that we're passing these stories down, but we passed them down to find the meaning which in my own experience is about something really broad.

Ryan:

Yeah, it's really interesting, you know, talking about stories and how they help us find the meaning. There's literature out there that backs you up on this, you know? It's not just an understanding; it's a part of our human experience.

Craig:

Absolutely.

Ryan:

You talk about finding the meaning or finding the essence of the piece. I'm wondering, in your mind, what would be the essence of the work, or the seed?

Craig:

Well, you know, any truth is sort of like a mountain and you have to kind of go around the base, you know? [...] But, first thing that comes up is just "all of us." That's the first thing that popped up when you asked. Another kind of tender part to my heart that's at the core of it, probably one of my favorite moments in the piece, is in the [Rabindranath] Tagore chant, "Stray Birds." [...] When the men sing to each other, "We wake up to find that we were dear to each other," you know, that's sort of the very centerpiece for me, and [at] almost every performance, it sort of stops my breath.

Ryan:

And you write it that way too. It's the moment where the mode changes and it stops our breath too. We know you care about that word.

Craig:

Yeah, absolutely. [...] I would say something that's really important is that this is also an American story that's really all about the American West and ideas of maleness that have come down from the American West...from John Wayne, and these ideas of strength, these kind of misguided ideas of what strength is, and this incredible human disease that we have to project all that is unresolved in ourselves onto another, you know? If I'm unsettled, I project all of that inner angst and inner disease out on you and on you, and you...and then it becomes, over time, so heightened that it becomes violence, brutality. At first it just happens verbally. It happens in our hearts, you know? And it's micro at first, it's real small, but then it builds and builds. So that's a piece that's essential to me...sort of the Western aspect, the sort of violence of our human nature. [...] I want to invite the listener on a journey. So, you know, we say the story really is about Matt, but truly the story, and my conceiving of it, is really about, in part, also the listener. And I want that listener [...] to feel, as they consider Matthew Shepard, as they consider this story and then the larger human story, that they are beginning to consider themselves and, frankly, to wake up...to have some experience of an "aha" moment or an awakening...something that just might say, "Oh, the story was kind of a piercing to me." And, you know, from a musical and dramatic standpoint, one of the [...] very effective tools in this is that Matt's story, and the way he died, is deeply piercing. I mean, I've met no one who doesn't sort of stop dead in their tracks the first time they hear the story about Matt Shepard, you know? It's like, "Oh, really?" And so that tells me a lot about compassion...that people actually do feel compassion in their hearts. You know, I

think that is at core. [...] The operating question was always simple. I wrote this piece [...] because I was asking the question myself...this was a personal thing. And it was kind of my guiding question to say in the face of such darkness and such confounding evil, "Is Love, with a capital L, the flame of love...Is it anywhere to be found in the midst of this or are we just to become cynical beings and just build up our defenses." As we grow older from childhood to adulthood, every time we get hurt, we kind of strengthen our armor a little more. So that was a real sincere question. The six year old inside of the adult Craig was still wanting an answer on this and my writing this was, in large part, to try and listen for an answer.

Ryan:

Yeah, I absolutely can pick up on this...this question throughout of "Is there love?" and "Do we have to act in such a way with one another or can we be more compassionate?" And I see signs of love throughout the piece. And certainly speaking to notion of "all of us," one of the things I really love and admire about your design is the C-major in the beginning. The first word is "all" and the last word is "all"...both in the same voicing. It kind of frames the story through all of us, I think, really effectively.

Craig:

Thank you. And it's the last word of the third movement too, yeah. And then it kind of drives it home during "All of us," yeah. That's why I kind of started out [that way] when you [asked] "what's the main gist of it?" And it's...it is "all."

Ryan:

Yeah. Are there any other ways that this idea of "all of us" plays out in your narrative design?

Craig:

Yes. I mean, I think "all of us" because I wanted Aaron and Russell to be present. If they're not present, then "all of us" sort of just only goes skin deep. It's just a victim story with only one side to it. "All of us" [also] includes nature and that's really important for me. The "Deer Song" is really special, you know? That comes out of the story, which I imagine you know, of the sheriff, Reggie Flutie [...] when the cyclist had first called her. He was just riding by on his bike and thought [Matthew] was a scarecrow. Reggie Flutie was the sheriff, a woman who came to officially sort of find his body and she spoke of the deer that was there. The way she spoke of that was just so powerful, you know? And she said [that] she really looked in that deer's eyes. And she said it was just profound and compelling and you can just feel it when she speaks about it. [...] But she said, it was as if the deer was saying to her, you know, I've been in protective mode here and you need to take care of this boy. And then, you know, when she went to feel the grass, it was really warm and in one of her interviews, she said it was hot...like you could tell that deer had been there for many hours throughout the night. And so there's that sense of the animals [and] nature. That was very moving to me thinking about the existential question that so many times we might ask as humans or as a species, "are we alone in the universe?" It was extraordinary to sort of feel all creation kind of taking care of itself. This is a very important moment in the story, you know? "All of us" includes the protestors and "all of us" includes all kinds of music. [...] It felt like it took a lot of courage for me to do this. I had to really "shore up" because, you know, I was trained very much in the classical traditions and hung out with academic types my whole life, and scholars. There's a committee for everything and, you know,

music has a lot of classifications and hierarchies too. I think we're just at the beginning, barely scratching the surface of where we're going to start to really pierce some of these categories and even question fiercely, I hope, what the Canon is and who was excluded...but even just types of music, you know? It felt as harsh as homophobia or racism. To me it's like, "this music is good and acceptable." We turn a nose to the air, you know? We look down towards [other genres.] I think [using] a lot of different music was very intentional, of course...trying to build as broad of a universal tent as I could. And it doesn't include obviously, you know, by any stretch, all types of music, but I needed to get enough in there to say, "I'm not kidding. Everything is included here. All of creation is included here," and it was really to make that point, you know, and not too subtly. So I think those are some ways. There are lots of different ways as we kind of navigate through this. Maybe some other things will come up but those are some biggies.

Ryan:

Yeah. Certainly in the "All of us" movement, I don't think it's subtle at all. I think it's kind of "in your face" in a way that's really impactful. The juxtaposition of this gospel style with the Lutheran Chorale, which is in itself this "all of us" gesture..the Lutheran chorale, you know...

Craig:

It is, isn't it? I love that.

Ryan:

Martin Luther and [the idea that] everyone should be able to sing.

Craig:

Right, right.

Ryan:

You also mentioned that it's an American piece, so it's interesting to think about the ["All of Us" movement] and what gospel music represents—what the Lutheran choral tradition has kind of been about. So we hear this kind of [historically] black music and white music interplaying as one which is a very American experience.

Craig:

It's definitely ours, isn't it? It's our melting pot to figure out together, you know? [...] The solo trio is, you know, a gospel type of trio, but [...] for me, those three soloists were also hinting a relationship with that chorale and the three oboes in a Bach Cantata. [...] I was so touched when Scott Jarrett, who does all kinds of Bach stuff all the time up in Boston, came up and was very sweet to me behind Symphony Hall after we performed it there, and he had tears in his eyes and he said, "I heard the oboes." And I was like, "Oh, that's so dear to me" because only someone who's immersed in Bach would really sort of know to take that in. So that was really sweet.

Ryan:

I was actually at that performance!

Craig:

Oh my goodness!

Ryan:

And I was sitting in the third row and right behind me were...

Craig:

Oh, some of the singers!

Ryan:

Yeah. Some of the singers in the audience...another kind of symbol of all of us, right?

Craig:

Right!

Ryan:

And when that moment happened where they stood to sing the chorale, I just lost it.

Craig:

Yeah. Oh, that's beautiful! Yeah, It's meant to be kind of stealth when we do that.

Ryan:

Yeah. I think it's a really effective, kind of, performance practice that so many are adopting too!

Craig:

Oh, that's good.

Ryan:

Yeah! So you mentioned this interview with Reggie Flutie and the deer... So this work is part of the larger Matthew Shepard Archive formally kept by University of Wyoming but, kind of, informally held by all of us. As you know, there are several important works...Laramie Project and others. So, I'm wondering, are any other artistic responses to the Matthew Shepard murder that influenced your compositional process?

Craig:

Um, not directly, no. I mean, certainly I knew the Laramie project very well and I've seen it several times as a play, and I've read it, and then I watched the HBO [version] a couple of handfuls of times at least. I'm very moved by that and all the work that Moises Kaufman and the whole crew did but I wouldn't say it directly influenced this piece. There've been a number of poems that I've appreciated, a few songs that have come down the pike too. There are many things, as you say, a lot...there's sculptures and there are lots of...so obviously it goes without saying that Lesléa Newman's poems were very important to me. [...] I knew the fence was going to play a big role just from the moment I thought of writing this piece. The fence had to play a role. I had to play a role. And when I really started to write this in earnest, I was beginning and thinking, "how am I going to do it?" I tried all kinds of [things]. I was kind of scratching out things and what the perspective would be. And so I'd asked a lot of those questions and then, much to my delight, it was like one of those natural gifts from the universe or something, but I encountered her poems and, inspired by them, asked her if I could include them. And she said,

yes! So that obviously is hugely important to me and all of her poems...frankly, the whole collection. I don't know if you have them...

Ryan:
I do!

Craig:
Yeah, that whole collection is pretty amazing and I think it was informative to me too. First of all, pretty early on, I'd already written some music before I met the Shepards and I was meeting them in order to get permission and blessing to do this. It was a happy memory to get to meet them. And they don't Greenlight a lot of projects and they don't sort of give their blessing to a lot of projects. I didn't really know this before I knew them as well as I do now so it meant a lot. So, first of all, their blessing was everything. I don't think I would have gone forward had they not said, "yes." [...] In that first meeting, we had a very sweet moment around the Hafiz poem from "In Need of Breath" which I shared with her. I think that meant so much in the formation of this work. And I think the knowledge that they didn't bless a lot of projects, frankly, was instructive to me, you know, whatever it meant to get it right. But, you know, it was stressful to try and track the story in the right way. Obviously these aren't works of our response to Matthew, but, you know, his journals played such a lovely, huge role. I got to hold them in my lap and sit with them and [it was] very sweet, and touching, and heartbreaking. [...] There are a lot of ways that the story gets told that I'm not comfortable with. The Shepards are also quite uncomfortable with thinking of Matt as a martyr. You know, a lot of works will make him a Christ figure and certainly that happens because of the iconic imagery. You know, obviously you're spread out, it looks like you're on a cross but, you know, they're very clear to say, "Matt, we don't think of him in that martyr way" and, "he's not a Christ figure." Mostly they say that because they just want to keep it real. "This was our son, Matt. He was a wonderful, beautiful illuminated guy who also was stubborn and opinionated and a regular old teenager and full of angst and so [it was] a challenge.

Ryan:
Speaking to this idea of Matthew is a Christ figure, I think we see a little bit of that in this piece with the "kreuzige, kreuzige" Bach St. Matthew Passion "crucify him, crucify him" and kind of the fence as a symbol of the crucifix. There's one moment, and I'm wondering if you did this on purpose, [...] where there's this kind of four-note figure [singing] in the clarinet.

Craig:
I see what you mean. Yeah, yeah, yeah. In the aria.

Ryan:
Yeah. I kind of interpreted that as the sign of the cross motive. Is that what you were going for there?

Craig:
It crossed my mind about two weeks after I wrote it and I thought, "Oh, I can sort of see that." And so in the great mystery of things, who knows if that was what intended to come up but it wasn't my direct intention. More my intention with that was something angular, jagged, and

searching [singing], something making registrable jumps...very much a seeking, searching quality. But I'm not ever surprised when, you know, I've spent so much time with some of those cross motives and, you know, the music of the Passions and all that, that some of that stuff just happens too. And I think in terms of the "kreuzige," yeah, Judy and Dennis jumped to that saying...you know, they're just very humble and modest people too... So I think that they're kind of trying to say, "our son is not the savior of the world" [because] that takes it out of the human story of "we lost our son," you know? And if there was some divine purpose and Matt's life was intended to do this thing, I think any parent would sort of feel uncomfortable about it even though some aspect of it might be, in some way, relevant. Yeah. So it's not just an easy answer there. The "kreuzige" thing. I just think it [...] resembled sort of that mob mentality. There's a lot going on in that little movement.

Ryan:

It's an amazing movement!

Craig:

Thanks. It's got the Britten references which have their own underpinnings, and then that "Kreuzige" stuff, and the poem is a difficult one to ask singers to sing [because of] those words. So those references are there and it is a Passion and so [...] I kind of find my free space with that to say, "I'm borrowing from the Passion tradition as much as I'm making Matt into the Christ figure," you know? But one could argue that it's fine line. Yeah.

Ryan:

Yeah. As a [storytelling device], it's really effective to think this parallel happening [even while] knowing that Matthew was a real person. But I think the way we tell stories is isn't always fully [representative] of the real story, and the way that you tell the story here is really effective.

Craig:

Thanks. You know, there's obviously a lot that isn't just a direct linear narrative path. There are some discussions now and there've been some producers who've wanted to see, "is there a way to theatricalize this and could it be something that's a Broadway kind of production?" And so I think there'd have to be a lot of new music. So, I'm in conversations about that right now with people. I started out very cautious and protective because, you know, the theatrical thinking so often is you just need to tell the story and it's just the story and what I'm going for is bigger than the story.

Ryan:

It almost seems to be an oratorio within a cantata.

Craig:

Yeah. I don't know if you've probably seen what Evans Mirageas has called it, a "fusion oratorio." He was the one who minted that and I said, Oh yeah, I'll live with that. That's kind of nice but I like cantata within an oratorio or oratorio within a cantata, either way. Yeah.

Ryan:

Yeah. It's interesting. The idea of "considering," I think, is perfect as this kind of cantata feature and then the "Matthew Shepard" is the oratorio feature.

Craig:

Yeah, that was the title of the workshop because I was just, you know, I didn't want to call it a thing because I was so nervous that I might somehow not get it quite right and so a workshop felt safe. So we'll just say "Considering Matthew Shepard" and then I thought, "certainly I'll call it something else after that workshop." And then, after living with it a long time and getting some good feedback too, it was so clear to me. I loved the word "consideration" so it just had to stay.

Ryan:

So I wanted to just loop back around to movement nine. You mentioned these Britten references and we talked about how there's lots of Bach throughout and I certainly see Pärt references especially in movement 16, "I am like you" as well. But, there's one Britten reference which I'm not sure is intentional or not and I'm wondering if I could just confirm with you?

Craig:

Yeah!

Ryan:

It's in the "Deer Song" actually.

Craig:

Tell me what you're hearing.

Ryan:

[Singing] "Welcome, welcome, sounds the song. Calling, calling, here. Always with us, evergreen heart. Where can we be but there?" which is the same kind of [singing] "Wolcum, Wolcum, Heavenly King" as in *Ceremony of Carols*. It's the same exact kind of contour after two welcomes. Was this intentional?

Craig:

Yeah. You know, it's a great question. It's so fun and it's only been asked one other time so good job. Yeah, I actually wrote it first and then it was, again, one of those things like two, three days later, I thought, "Huh? Did I just borrow that?" So I think it was an innocent entry that...I mean, with the ninth movement, I was absolutely kind of in black key "This Little [Babe]" mode—no question about it. But with that one, I think it was just kind of a part of the air that I breathe because I've done that piece so much too that it may have kind of slipped in that way. And I'm proud to say I kind of have stolen [or] borrowed it then, yeah.

Ryan:

Yeah. It's fantastic. So, how do you think about musical quotation or paraphrase when creating a larger work?

Craig:

Well, I mean, everything was a possible source for this piece because the container was "all of us." [...] Everything was a resource, and I say that this sometimes comes from a funny little bumper sticker that a friend in San Francisco had on his bathroom mirror, "Everything is Grace." And I used to think, "Oh, I don't really like that. I don't think that's true. Is it?," you know? I start [making] a list of "this isn't grace" and "this isn't grace," but as you know, this is a good friend and I visited him many times in my two years out there. And I go to the bathroom each time there and I'm like, "Oh, I have to confront this again. Everything is grace." And I came to really love it; so everything is a resource for this. Anyway, the Bach stuff...I think I do it really organically. I certainly don't kind of go in with a philosophy but freedom is at the core of what I would just say is in my musical heart, you know? I'm an improviser first and a composer second. And there's something [that happens] when I'm composing, I fiercely protect whatever it is that occurs in improvisation that brings such presence so I always try and think about how I can compose something that has that same connection with this moment, you know, which is an improvisation. [...] And so one of the painful parts of composing for me is that, you know, you have to decide to say it only one way. But in terms of quotations too, I mean, "all of us" also has to do with a procession of time. [...] There's an inner knowing, like I know in my body, um, that we are related to the beings who were in this human procession in 1685 and in 1750 and in 1827, you name it.

Ryan:

Another kind of "all of us!"

Craig:

Oh, it's a total "all of us," yeah! Yeah it's that time dimensions...yeah. And it's also the texts, you know, this kind of mosaic or collage or whatever [that] can feel like crazy person stuff, you know, in terms of what we've grown up with and our traditions. And I get that but it's not. It's very intentional. I mean, like, the Rumi and the Hafiz...It's very important that they're there and that's not even ancient enough, you know but it went back far enough to make the point. William Blake, Hildegard von Bingen...these are "all of us" references for sure. These quotations are just simply allowing their voices to be heard in the mix. And it also makes it much bigger and more universal, you know, because those references are there...but it also is very personal as a creator. These are things that have touched and influenced me and, frankly, they're elements that I want to call upon and they're presences that I want to call on. The Britten: [singing] "This little babe so few days old has come to rifle Satan's fold." There was something about the vision in that text of this little tiny infant coming to take on the evil of the world, you know, in name, Satan. [...] Matt was pretty frail. You've probably read, he wasn't tall. He was very delicate framed, kind of a vulnerable [...] physical frail form in a way. So here he is, this sort of slight-of-form young man whose life and death have had such incredible impact. I just find that incredibly moving. I write about it earlier in the third movement, you know, "Hear a story about a boy, an ordinary boy who never thought his life would be a story." It's incredible to think [about] the power of this one frail ordinary boy that has impacted people around the world, you know? [...] Another kind of way of using that musical quotation [is] to reference our ideas of strength. Maybe we think of strength in those ways of someone who's 6'3" and 220 pounds and grunts words out and has been taught not to feel, but just to be. All these silly, old [ways] we see strength manifest and that's in the Hafiz poem too, that reference of how he becomes a light in the streets of the world. All of these are very interrelated for me. The Bach: that prelude is such an iconic work and I wanted to begin the

piece with [...] something that was simple and could read to a good number of people because it was familiar. But also, C-major, the circle of fifths in that that it goes through. [...] And so that was meant to be that open C-major key that was sort of the universe in harmony with itself. Then it comes back later to be used again and we throw all kinds of dirt on it with that Merwin poem. You know, "This is our reality now. The universe is still existing. It was at the beginning, in a sense, you might say, forgive this, I've never said it quite like this, but "is now and shall evermore be," you know, "a world without end." But that's existing as we tell our stories as we live these stories so Bach, better than anybody, can hold that. The Dante that happens in the Bach Chorale: "And know we are the Love that moves the sun and all the stars." This is a very powerful reference [from] Dante. [...] I just feel like these spirits are open to being borrowed from [...] but it absolutely taps into this interconnectivity of, you know, "who wrote this piece, anyway?" Yes, I penned it. I, my body-formed Craig Hella Johnson kind of did the typing it in finale, or just did the sketches on my manuscript paper and spent, you know, many, many, many, many, many weeks, months, in hard labor with it. So yeah, I did. And yet, am I not also the expression of all that has come before me in some new culminating form? I think it's really interesting. So the quotes have a way of enlarging the tent even more, yeah.

Ryan:

You also mentioned this idea of musical borrowing as a kind of freedom. What's interesting to me is that if you kind of look at the story as a kind of a Greek tragedy, Matthew's tragic flaw is that he lived freely and openly which, of course, brought about his downfall and so "freedom" could be a kind of narrative theme. [...] I'm wondering if there are any other ideas of freedom that incorporate into the piece?

Craig:

Yeah, Matt was really himself very much as all the friends with whom I spoke and family members [mentioned. He] just was kind of lit up with being an original version of himself, you know, [...] something that, in this world, brought challenges and got him into trouble. Although this is still just, you know, pure and simple, a hate crime too. If they wouldn't have found Matt, they would have found someone else because they were ready to...yeah. Freedom, yeah, all over the place. I mean, freedom certainly is evident in the musical styles, the music, my sort of openness to busting forms and traditions, [...] allowing popular music and folk or country to, God forbid, touch each other; that's a piece of the freedom. [...]

Ryan:

Yeah. I feel like the fact that so much of the recitation is spoken is also a kind of freedom.

Craig:

Yeah. I mean, I think certainly there are oratorios that have had spoken elements for sure so I don't think it's brand new. Yeah, I love that kind of storytelling. [...] so much about this just sort of steps outside certain norms and it's very intentional, you know? It's a gay man writing the piece too. Yeah, there's even kind of a coming out, I think, for people. [...] It felt like a coming out for me as well, certainly as a composer of hundred-minute-long piece because I hadn't been doing any of that but also just to come out and say, "I'm not going to use the same hierarchies musically that have been handed down and I'm not going to carry the same weight of sort of casting out judgments that certain musics are less than. I was raised and cultivated as a trained

and devoted classical musician, you know, with high exacting standards [but] there's a lot of different stuff in my playlists. I listen to all kinds of music and so there's sort of a freedom, a willingness to be in that broader space and just to sort of stop apologizing for it, you know, because, at first, I felt like I kind of needed to [change] at the very beginning but It was more [about] other people's discomfort. [...] I've come a long way to [say] "this is your thing to work out, but this is the music in our world."

Ryan:

That's one of the things that struck me first about your work with *Conspirare*, actually. One of my favorite pieces that *Conspirare* has performed is "What If," your Eric Whitacre transcription which crosses genres in a variety of ways. That's something I've always appreciated about you.

Craig:

I appreciate that a lot, Ryan. It's been interesting because [...] I almost took it on as a thing in my life to advocate for. [...] When I was at Yale, I remember just hearing the use of "sacred" and "secular" for example and I thought it almost verged on the fundamentalist to the way people would sort of distinguish between sacred and secular. And sacred is such a broad word, of course but you know, the way we refer to it in most academic settings is just religious. It comes from, you know, the church tradition of some kind and it just felt so limiting. And when I raised it with a couple of scholars there, they sort of cast it off like it was a silly question not to be asked. And I thought, "it's like very fundamental," you know? This is a word, I mean, we're at Yale university. Words have meaning to all of us, don't they? I kept trying to find someone who would sort of resonate. Finally, I did. He said, "yeah, you're onto something but it sort of messes up the power structures," you know? Try and mess with some of those traditions within the Catholic church about men and women being priests and if you start to get even twenty miles near the hem of that garment then they start swatting it down. Someone once said, "you're trying to do this work as a shuttle diplomat kind of going between worlds" and it was an interesting descriptor because it's kind of what it's felt like sometimes...

Ryan:

And it's who we are as a society. I mean, we're so globalized. We consume music of all kinds. Why are we putting ourselves in boxes like that?

Craig:

Yeah. Well, it's getting better, isn't it? But it's still kind of bad, I think. Yeah, no, it is better, but it's, uh, it still carries some of the same exclusionary language as you hear around race and around gender, you know? it's really surprising to me but people don't catch it as much in music and it's always bothered me a lot, you know? So that's probably why you've seen a lot of that too. And then, you know, I just decided with my colleagues here, "let's do it with a lot of joy." Yeah, it's definitely part of our creative lab here.

Ryan:

Yeah. And you kind of forged the path for so many of us who appreciate that and who can see its value so I'm really thankful for that. I wanted to ask you about a symbol that I think I'm picking up on in the work, the symbolism of light. You use the word a few times throughout the work and then "lumina, lumina" as well. Like in movement nine, [singing] "crucify, crucify, that

light," a descending minor third, which you also see in the piece associated with Matt. So, is Matthew the light?

Craig:

Yes, absolutely, and so are you as a listener. [...] This is definitely a story about Matt and then, even moreso, it's a story about the listener and so yes, and then yes to that little addendum. So as long as people kind of catch that, that's where my heart gets excited. [...] At the end of the day, the light is the light, you know? But I'm interested in what is that light which is also truth, which is also love, which illuminates...it simply is and needs no apology, needs no sort of support and defense. What is that [light] that is in each of us? I mean, my true deep conviction is that that light is present in all of us. That truth, that love is present in all of us and, many days, it's my conviction and, other days, it's my deep hope, but it is more of my conviction month by month. [...] So It is an important aspect that I was bringing back and forth. Something else that's real important to me, it just came up when you asked that, is this idea of evergreen.

Ryan:

I was just about to ask you about evergreen!

Craig:

Nice, nice! Good, good! Yeah, [...] of course the Hildegard is the most literal and then it comes again in the chorale. But it's related to that light because [...] the truth that is underlying, all of this is before, an after, an intertwining [of] all stories. And it is that evergreenness. [...] It still makes me excited to this day that it kind of landed in the way that it did. [...] It connected with the sense of place, these big lodge pole pine trees from Wyoming. You know, they're so skinny; they go way, way up and the green stuff's just way on top. And that's what they make all their fences out of, you know? And so here's this thing, this true literal evergreen tree, which is then the symbol in this piece for eternalness for evergreenness, ever refreshment of this life force. And that was present through the beating, through holding the body. It was present afterwards; the fence was still there. [...] You might say the 'dead wood,' I don't know if we would, but there's still organic material in that dead wood which is part of [its life] cycle. And so [it] was just very thrilling to make that reference early on, and then to have it come from Hildegard, and to come from a woman, and then that beautiful translation by Barbara Newman of the Hildegard. Well, most of all, "Evergreen, with your roots in the sun," it's right there. I mean, it's all paradox, it's all paradox. What is that? What roots in the sun? I mean, it's upended here. And so when we start to get a sense of what's really true in this, it has everything to do with that upendedness. Like, "we're getting it all wrong here." Once again, back to that betrayal, the forgetting of who we are, our roots are in the sun, you know? Our grounding comes from that which is, at least symbolically, above us, shining over us, shining in us, through and through and through. And the Hafiz poem, "In Need of Breath" when Matt is very much hanging on his fence or, you know, that wooden cross if you want to have that in the back of your mind too [...] I'll go back to Judy Shepard. That's when we, kind of, first bonded. I didn't want to dump a bunch of scores in her lap. That would have been no [use], you know. I tried to say, "what's the right amount to share with this amazing woman" who's quite bashful actually. And so I, kind of, navigated that conversation very carefully and thoughtfully. But at the end, I had written down that poem of Hafiz, "In Need of Breath," translated by Daniel Ladinsky and I said, "I can't give you a lot of ideas." I mean, "obviously we're at a restaurant here and I don't even know if you'd want to hear

all the thoughts and ideas, but what I'd like to just share is this poem because I had this sense that if Matt would have been singing that night tied to that fence...if his spirit could have sung to the moon and the stars that night, these are the words that I believe he would have sung." And so I just handed that to her. She had been very, very, very quiet up to that point in our lunch and tears just streamed down her face and she wrote her phone number, her cell phone on her business card. She said, "you call me anytime. I want you to do this piece." So [...] we kind of bonded in that moment and [I'll be] forever grateful. And I mentioned it because that has to do with that evergreen. I mean, it's that eternalness that was in Matt that I envisioned singing in him, even as his body was dying. That's very powerful. And it's very moving to me to not just think about it, but to actually kind of have this visceral experience. [...] We mentioned Matthew Shepard. We tell his story; it has a living quality to it, you know, an eternalness, an evergreen quality. I'm blown away by it really! There were times, Ryan, when I thought I was going to write this as kind of a Memorial piece, just as a historical remembrance. I didn't want us to forget. But it has such aliveness and I felt like I got to know Matthew himself during this process. It was just incredible. I've never met him, of course, but that evergreenness is [...] where Matt transforms into Matthew so that's a really pivotal moment for my way of thinking too. And then the evergreen quality comes up in a very direct reference: "This evergreen, this heart, [this] soul," as if to say to the listener, "You are that evergreen. Not only is it in you, but you are that and your expression can be coming from that very large eternal sense." So Evergreen's a biggie, yeah. All of the fence poems reference that, of course in one way, because they're all present with that evergreen tree, yeah.

Ryan:

Yeah. And you mentioned how they kind of represent Wyoming.

Craig:

Yes.

Ryan:

I see lots of Wyoming references, musical references throughout. At least the way that I hear it, and I don't know if this was intentional or not, that first chord, the "all" chord, the openness of it...it just seems so vast. I Imagine the Wyoming Prairie.

Craig:

Yeah, yeah, for sure.

Ryan:

And in the first movement, you place us there just like any great movie.

Craig:

It's kind of the overture, a little bit, without quoting other themes, but yeah. You know, I love that. And that poem was just a gift. I'd been looking for a Wyoming poem that was going to be just right. And who knew it existed? I mean, I was so thrilled because it doesn't just reference Wyoming like things like "Cattle, horses, sky, and grass" but then, I mean, "This chant of life cannot be heard. It must be [felt]. There is no word [to sing] that could express" this whole idea of moving "through all the hoops of earth and mind," this deep compassion, everyone who

suffers and struggles all of these hoops of earth and mind. Then, all of a sudden, what's so cool about this, [and] what is really "oratorio" about it too, is that it takes specific references that feel like they could be local and it turns them into universal references. That poet did it so brilliantly. I mean, it was his doing, um, you have cattle, horses, sky, and grass" and all of a sudden "cattle horses, sky and grass" are just placeholders for all the things you and I have in our context in our world: the good, the bad... [...] But all of a sudden, that local thing becomes a symbol for "hoops of earth and mind' and things we move through in our lives. So it's pretty cool. I love that poem.

Ryan:

It's Brilliant. It's a perfect Juxtaposition of the oratorio and cantata pieces that we talked about.

Craig:

Right, right.

Ryan:

This is two things; it's the Matthew story and it's our story, and it's right in that first movement.

Craig:

Yeah, I love that you caught that too because that movement is very special to my heart. [...] I wanted it to be a dance, a real dance of the universe of all of us. And it needed to be that. [...] And the ordinary that is part of this dance, you know, that which is enlightened, is not out there far away. It's not esoteric or philosophical. It's right here with our own dance of "cattle, horses, sky and grass." And then the fragility of that, the transient nature of the elements, "these are the things that sway and pass." Yeah.

Ryan:

This idea of prologue and epilogue isn't new in oratorio but I think the use of it in this piece really functions to kind of frame it in a way that adds to its meaning. And isn't just to entertain, you know? It really adds to the meaning [of Matthew's story] and holds meaning on its own.

Craig:

Ryan, you know, I had to do it because when I did the workshop at first, I only had some of the central portion, the Passion part, and what that experience was for the listener was very annihilating. I mean, people were walking in the parking lot, just sort of numb kind of like they'd been hit by this brutal story but I didn't know yet how to care for them with this story and so I knew I needed to [do] two things, really. I wanted to take the listener's hand; thankfully Bach has been such a great teacher in the St. Matthew passion, not the St. John so much, but the St. Matthew to say, "I'm going to hold your hand through this and every time you might need a little moment for consideration, for contemplation, for comfort, to just be reminded, we're doing this story together." He would provide a chorale or an Aria or some needed space. And so I said, "Thank you. I will try and take your lessons here, Bach," but I really needed to learn how to do that which meant we needed to enter the story and we needed to come out of the story in a concert setting. So that was one thing, just to take care of folks and figure out how to do it. And the other was really because I realized I had Matthew Shepard in the piece, but not Matt Shepard. That's what his mother had talked to me [about] once when I asked her, "how do you do all this work in the world? I carry this personal grief forward all these years you keep having to sort of remind yourself about it and isn't it painful? And it's just amazing to me how she [responded] to

me. "Matthew Shepard, and that's the name that people know around the world. We do the work of Matthew Shepard. And every day we continue to grieve the loss of our son, Matt. And that hit me because Matt was not present in my story. I'm just all about Matthew, kind of his own death and dying story and there was no Matt. I needed to introduce Matt or this piece wasn't going to work. So the whole prologue was to, you know, get us started—introduce Matt prior so people would know this is a person who had a life. That's what "Ordinary Boy" was really all about. And then, number three is to invite people into the story more deeply.

Ryan:

Yeah, I think that that second movement, in my mind, is the most important movement in the whole piece. [...] There's so much in that, in that second movement,

Craig:

Yeah, I needed to drop a lot in there. "Here's Matt in five minutes."

Ryan:

Yeah, exactly. Well, I'm just so grateful that you were so giving with your time and your answers and I've had so much fun getting to know this piece and I feel like I've been getting to know you a little bit through the piece. It's been a pleasure.

Craig:

That's so nice, Ryan. It's so nice to get to know you right now in this context and you have a lot of me in this piece too because my heart is definitely in it. That was my one promise to myself. I said, "let this keep coming from my heart and not from any need to write it in any kind of way that might impress somebody or be sophisticated in a way that doesn't tell the story." Well, I said, "just serve what the story needs and let it come from the heart." So, you've got that right in front of you. So, I really appreciate it and I'm excited to see where it all goes for you. I think it's great and it feels like it's the right home for this [piece] given what you've shared with me so far. Well, congratulations on everything you've done this far. It's wonderful.

Ryan:

Thanks! And I've been watching the Conspirare virtual performances, which have been incredible so congratulations to you on all of that too. I know it's a major pivot.

Craig:

Thanks a lot. Yeah. It is a, it's quite a pivot. We've had a lot of fun and we've just worked really hard too. It's exhausting but "thank you." That means a lot. Um, we have some great collaborators and we're very lucky about that too. [...] All right, take care, my friend and you'll be in touch if you need anything, okay?

Ryan:

Okay. Thanks so much!

Craig:

Bye.

Ryan:

Bye.

APPENDIX B: Sam Brukman Interview Transcript

Date: Monday, February 22, 2021

Ryan:
Hey, Sam!

Sam:
How's it going?

Ryan:
Good. How are you?

Sam:
Good! Every day I live this dream, you know?

Ryan:
Yeah, exactly. It's been so long since we've gotten a chance to connect, so it's great to finally have that opportunity.

Sam:
Yeah.

Ryan:
I'm super excited to touch base with you because of your work with Verdigris Ensemble; I've been following you in the last couple of years and, in some ways, I feel like we really care about some of the same things so it'll be exciting to get your perspective.

Sam:
Sure, absolutely! Any way I can help, Ryan.

Ryan:
Yeah, I appreciate it. So the first thing I'm wondering is [...] 'why have you chosen a career in choral music?'

Sam:
It's a really hard question because I don't really feel like I'm totally in a career in choral music. I think my career is in a lot of things. It's in blockchain, it's in music, it's in marketing, it's in grant writing, it's in all sorts of stuff—and as a result of that, I don't really feel like I can safely say that I've chosen a career in choral music because the things that I do are so much more than [...] the music. [...] But to answer the question, the reason that I'm doing choral music is because I believe in the power of choral [...] singing and I believe [...] that there's so much that we can share in terms of humanity, in terms of connection, in terms of building bridges through vocal

music. [...] I've seen that firsthand and, because of that, [it has] motivated me [...] to continue pursuing choral singing and entrepreneurship. So I feel like I'm making a huge difference.

Ryan:

Thank you. You mentioned the power of choral singing. Can you talk about that a little bit? What does that mean to you?

Sam:

Okay, so I'll give you an example. We did a performance in 2017 of Kile Smith's *Consolation of Apollo*, along with some [...] Meredith Monk. [...] We collaborated with a planetarium to simulate for audiences what the Apollo astronauts would have seen as they were saying the words that Verdigris ensemble was singing. [...] I remember people coming up to me and [saying] "Wow, I never thought that choral music could be so interesting!" That was, you know, a backhanded compliment, of course, but it showed me that choral music is not for the select few; [...] choral music is for everybody and it's all about being able to give context and also being able to give some sort of hook or latch point for people who don't know anything about choral music. That was really interesting because a lot of our audiences [...] have not been to a choral performance before. A lot of our audiences are theater people, they're classical orchestra people, they're dance people, they're [...] visual art people. [...] I've seen people's eyes open over the four years that I've done Verdigris. [...] It has shown me that Verdigris or choral music in general is not just an archaic way of making music; there are really cool ways of forming it into something meaningful and there are ways of conveying [...] effective, transformational viewpoints to people through choral music that actually does affect them and make a difference. And so, from that perspective, I really believe that choral music can be a vehicle for transforming the way we discuss things [...] whether that's politically, philosophically, socially, or in other ways. I think that's like a really profound reason to continue doing choral music.

Ryan:

I love that Kile Smith piece as well and I just think it's so cool the way that he uses transcriptions from the Apollo 8 mission. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on the use of choral transcription as it relates to the modern audience?

Sam:

I think it's essential. I think it's essential. I [...] have so many thoughts on this. [...] When I was starting Verdigris Ensemble, I had like so many people [...] basically say like, 'it's a very cute idea, but don't expect it to last because there's no money in new music' and I actually felt like the opposite. There's so much more money in new music than there is in classical music. At the end of the day, it's a lot more effective because new music gives us the opportunity to document what people are feeling in the moment. So for example, [...] Julia Wolfe's *Anthracite Fields*. When we did that, even though it was in Texas, it was still very relevant to people. People walked away from that [performance] being like, 'Holy moly, I don't even understand what I just saw fully, but I'm going to go research the hell out of Central Pennsylvania coal mines.' Or when we did Tony Maglione's "Dust bowl," which was not directly meant to fuel conversations about climate change. [...] I think it's a lot more powerful to address the issue indirectly [...] as opposed to directly. [...] What "Dust Bowl" did for us was [bring] attention to climate change through the lens of what happened in the panhandle of Texas and Oklahoma and the surrounding area in the

twenties. That was a [big deal] because many people in Dallas still remember that moment. [...] And so what transcripts and what other texts actually do is they present the ability to provide narratives. Narratives are really, really important because they provide something that audiences can latch onto. [...] Transcripts are really important because they are a direct reflection of what's going on in the world. [...]. There are really effective ways that poetry has been set [...] but at the end of the day, we no longer live in a society where people pay attention as much as they used to. Prose and beautiful spoken word; people pay attention to news headlines, they pay attention to CNN, they pay attention to social media, they pay attention to things that are a lot more crass and a lot less delicate. For that reason, we have to listen [...] and provide that to audiences as a connection point. Now, that's not to say that poetry is any less effective; that is to say that [...] transcripts allow a bridge for normal people, non-choral people, to enter and to be able to understand what's going on.

Ryan:

I really like a lot of these analogies that you're using: the connection point, hook, latch, bridge, all of these things, to make a connection with an audience. [...] You mentioned narrative. What does that mean to you?

Sam:

A narrative to me means some sort of story or some sort of progression of events. It's really important to be able to set audiences' expectations when they walk in the door. And what does that mean? In some cases that means like setting their expectations for how long they're going to be sitting in a room. In other ways that is setting their expectations about what they're about to hear. And what narratives do is they provide an arc by which audiences can come and expect [...] a beginning, a middle and [an] end. And within that there's catharsis and, you know, the main drama point and, you know, whatever, all this different stuff. [...] When you talk about it within that [narrative] framework, you're able to [...] set expectations and make audiences understand, on a subconscious level what they're about to hear and what they're about to get. [...] I think that's really important because it's really [about] the sale. The more that someone knows about [...] a product [...] the more likely they'll [...] purchase the product or, [...] in this case, attend a concert. [...] And what a narrative means for me is a storytelling arc that sets expectations for audiences and also gives them a framework to understand what choral music is because many audiences don't even know what it means to [attend] a choral performance. All they know is what they go to. [They] go to see their son's school choir performance or their nephew [...but] those are super boring and they're not interesting, you know? [...] There's so much more to choral music than that.

Ryan:

So, [narrative is] the storytelling arc that sets experiences. You mentioned [...] sales. Why is that important to you?

Sam:

Everything is about marketing. This goes into the idea of supply and demand. [...] You cannot be successful in the world without getting attention for the work that you do. You cannot be successful in getting the attention for the work that you do without bringing attention to that work. [...] This is something that is very frustrating to me. I never, at Westminster, learned

anything about marketing. I never learned anything about creative strategy. [...] Now, the other part is, [...] we don't have enough demand for the supply that we're creating. [...] We're [training] all of these singers, these classical singers, most of whom are quite good, that can't find a job. And what we're not creating is the ability for people to create organizations, to create work for the amount of good supply that there is. [...] Very few [high school choral] programs are able to present something that is really compelling and interesting, not just for students, but for parents as well. If we cannot do that, then the public will latch onto this idea that choral music is boring. And that's why marketing matters. We, as a choral profession, have a distinct responsibility to be able to put forward what choral music can be.

Ryan:

Yeah. I appreciate your, your perspective. [...] I'm interested in some of the things you said about not being taught choral entrepreneurship and why that might be. I mean, in the last 20 years, the professional choral ensemble has established itself in a way that it hadn't in the past, particularly in America. It's becoming a valid career for some of these singers graduating from college and, even ten years ago, we wouldn't have been able to say that. There are singers making full-time incomes traveling from choir to choir, or were before the pandemic and I'm wondering, in your opinion, "why do you feel that that's the case?" "Why have more professional choirs emerged in the last 20 years?"

Sam:

I think it's a good question. To be honest with you, [...] I'm not totally sure [but] if I had to take a guess, I would say [that] people have woken up to the possibility that choral music can be sustainable in some cases. Although, I will say, even though we are making progress, it's not nearly as much as we could be doing.

Ryan:

It's not as lucrative as orchestral music for example.

Sam:

Well, right. In order to make a full-time salary, you essentially have to be a digital nomad. [...] You can't live in one place, and I think that that is kind of terrible, right? At the end of the day, it takes so much energy to get on a plane every other week or every other month or whatever, to get to another place. So, we're still not where we should be. We should be able to make a livable wage [iving] in one place or two places, [...] not flying all over the place to make full-time wages. I think it's society waking up to the possibility of choral music being sustainable. We have moved as a society so far and we've become [...] more entrepreneurial. We now have things like Facebook, social media, and YouTube where more people can view and appreciate music where they could not before. And I think that has really fueled an influx of new performers and new ensembles that come into the space [...] because it's, in some cases, monetizable [...]. You can hear the entire world sing! So, I don't really know the answer to that. I don't know why choirs have sort of emerged over the last 20 years, but I would guess it has a lot to do with technology. [...]

Ryan:

Thanks. Yeah, nobody seems to have a perfect answer for that question but these ideas, I think, are very valid. We have so many new tools like social media, and we're just more connected than ever before. [...] So, you've mentioned the audience experience at Verdigris concerts and I know that, right on your website, the motto states, "Bringing Choral Music to the Modern Audience." What attracted you to this idea?

Sam:

Joe Miller did such a great job with Westminster Choir in the sense that he would create these sort of like interactive programs that had some sort of storyline to them. Looking back on it, they're not as accessible as they possibly could have been. They were very attractive to people like me because they were totally out of the box of what we were used to. But, compared to the programming that we do within Verdigris, [the way] Dr. Miller [programs] is still somewhat inaccessible to most audiences. This thought really started in college towards the end, [around] senior year: "We've got to do something more, we've got to create something, we've got to find ways of connecting this material because it's just too good not to be heard. The idea of bringing choral music to [broader] audiences was honestly a financial point for me. If we can get people to appreciate choral music, then they'll pay for choral music. And if we can get people to pay for choral music, they'll become patrons and they'll become donors, they'll become our future livelihood. That is really important because many of the donors that we currently have are dying. Ross Perot in Dallas, who ran for president back in the day, just died. He was a huge supporter at the Dallas Symphony and huge supporter of several choral arts organizations but his kids don't want to support the arts the way that they used to because choral music and classical music has not adapted enough to the times, in my opinion. It's not captivating. It's not something that's bringing in young people. And so from my perspective, if we can bring this to people, bridge gaps and find really significant bridges, then we can really change, make a difference in choral music, and we can make a difference in classical music. How do we do that? One way that we can do that is through creative concert programming. Another way that we can do that is by pushing choral music to perform with interdisciplinary arts organizations, collaboration. And then I was like, well, how else do we do that? Maybe there's a way to have movement and staging and to use spaces in unconventional ways. And so [...] we're gonna see how far we can take it. And to this day [...] we're still exploring what that means. So that's basically how Verdigris and the idea of bringing choral music to modern audiences came about; it was acknowledging this problem that choral music is very exclusive and then like figuring out how to bring it to like normal people that don't know anything about choral music.

Ryan:

So what are some objectives that you have when programming for Verdigris?

Sam:

First and foremost, the product has to be of a very high quality [...]. First of all, the idea for the production has to be strong so, when I'm programming, I'm thinking, "what is needed within our community?," "What is happening right now that we can talk about?." How can we structure this in such a way that we provide a look into history, but also innovation and a conversation starter about what's going on right now? [...] So, goals in my programming begins with [...] a really, really good idea. [...] Relevance really plays a huge part in this. Texas is probably not going to be very interested in what's happening in New York or what's happening in New Jersey. Texas is

very interested in what's happening in their own state and Texas is very interested in poetry that is coming from their own locally sourced people. We have to consider relevancy and what's happening in our state, what's happening in our city. And the third thing is, "how do we make a difference?" "How do we effect change?" With every production I have very specific goals. [...] It's this kernel of something that is interesting, that provides a bridge for people to identify with, and then there's an action item. At the end of the performance, I want the audience to leave feeling [a certain way.] And that is the entire [idea behind] *Verdigris*. [It] is the copper patina that coats copper, when exposed to the elements. It provides a different color and perspective to the metal that you wouldn't find in its pristine state. And that's exactly what we want audiences to feel from the time that they walk into the performance and the time that they leave—a different color, a different perspective to an event, to their life, to something else, to something that they can identify with. [...] The third question I always ask is "what's the action?" "How [is] our audience going to be changed? [...] And then finally, [...] of course, all of the technical stuff. What can the choir handle? What is it that they're going to be really successful with? And honestly, what's going to interest the choir because the more dedicated the choir is to the piece, the better result that we're going to get. So I always have to keep [that] in mind also. [...] And how do we, in doing all of this, also innovate? [...]"

Ryan:

Are there any choral composers or compositions that you feel are particularly effective at storytelling?

Sam:

I honestly think that any piece of music can be transformed into something that tells a story. There are two approaches that I take. I'll tell you what the things that have been most successful are Julia Wolfe's *Anthracite Fields*, Mason Bates' *Mass Transmission* and Nick Reeves' *Betty's Notebook*. Yeah, *Dust Bowl* by Tony Maglione was really effective. "Velveteen Rabbit," which was our first concert, which is very different from the stuff that we've done since then because it was like a segmentation of the children's book with random choral music interspersed throughout, that was really effective but that was through a conglomeration of different works. That was more of a traditional thing to do. Kile's *Consolation*, like I said, was very successful. [...] For the Bernstein Centenary we did his *Chichester Psalms* and a bunch of his other choral music. So it's not really like a singular piece of music, but it's a conglomeration of different works that we did in juxtaposition with some of the letters that he wrote over the same years that he composed. And you can certainly see elements of the letters that he wrote in his music which is very interesting. So, that was really effective but I think, honestly, anything can be effective as long as it's planned and executed properly. Those are the most successful that we've had so far.

Ryan:

So that's most of my questions...

Sam:

Okay, cool. Well, listen, let me know if there's anything else I can do, and I'm always happy to support you in any way that I can. [...]"

Ryan:

Great. I really appreciate that.

Sam:

Of course.

Ryan:

Great chatting, Sam!

Sam:

Yeah, you too! Keep in touch.

Ryan:

Yes, thank you!

APPENDIX C: Trey Davis Interview Transcript

Date: Thursday, February 25, 2021

Ryan:

Why have you chosen a career in choral music?

Trey:

Vocal music was always a safe space even from my early childhood, being rocked by both of my grandmothers as they sang to me while I begged them not to stop, and later in my adolescence and teenage years, never wanting church and school choir rehearsals to end. When I sang with the Texas All-State Choir in high school, I remember having a very concrete dream of standing in front of that ensemble and other great choirs some day as their conductor. As I further trained and developed as an artist, musician, and teacher, I realized that I wanted to devote myself to this calling because I loved both the connectedness that came from creating something new within a community and the spark of discovery and joy in my students

Ryan:

Why do you feel that more professional choirs have emerged in the last twenty years?

Trey:

Conductors of professional choirs have the opportunity to practice their craft at higher levels and with repertoire that is less accessible to their school, church, and/or community choirs. Some pro choir conductors may appreciate the faster rehearsal process, which may not necessitate as much pedagogy, though I find that with the sporadic nature of our projects, voice and ensemble building is still paramount to the process because we do not hear each other as regularly. For most conductors, I do not think that pro choirs offer much financial incentive, so passion and an artistic outlet is probably the driving force. There is a social/community component in many of the best pro choirs in the U.S., as well, and a few of the very best ensembles started as a group of friends who wanted to sing interesting music together without even a guarantee of compensation (splitting the box office, for example).

Ryan:

Are there any specific objectives that you have in mind when programming for Red Shift?

Trey:

I must be captivated by the music and/or text that we are committing ourselves to sharing before I can set in motion the significant challenges and financial investment in working towards the project. I am less interested in performing works that have already been recorded hundreds or thousands of times by other choirs or presented in our community recently (though there is still certainly value there, especially if we can present a new interpretation or pair the expected with the unexpected). Innovation and elements of surprise are priorities, as is advocacy for what the choral arts are capable of achieving at the very highest levels. I program by considering cohesion and balance between the varied elements from the beginning to the end of the concert, and I imagine both the performers' and audience's musical and emotional journey throughout. Sometimes that story is a sequential narrative, and sometimes it takes more of an abstract form.

Ryan:

How do you think about the audience experience at Red Shift performances?

Trey:

I feel that we have accomplished some of our aims if the audience considers the music itself or the topics that the works put forth in a new or more profound way. It is not our job to simply entertain or present beautiful sounds; rather, since this choir is its own entity and not inhibited by any political or academic constraints, we have the freedom to be provocative, to program selections that are difficult to the ear and not immediately gratifying, and to present “art” in the truest meaning of the word. The average audience member tends to associate choirs with amateurs, students, and/or a religious context; however, I believe that choirs can be as thrilling and compelling as the finest symphony orchestras with the most advanced musicianship and expressivity. Our choristers function equally well as soloists, which is the expectation in the instrumental world. I hope that Red Shift opens audiences to the possibility of this type of excellence in choral art music.

Ryan:

Has the ensemble performed any contemporary oratorios? If so, why were they selected for performance?

Trey:

It would be interesting to further define or expand “oratorio” in the twenty-first century. *little match girl* is an oratorio Passion in terms of its structure, [...] but it is secular. Michael Gilbertson’s *Returning* is both multi-movement and features an Old Testament story.

Ryan:

The Red Shift motto is “Resonant Storycraft, Amplified Perspectives.” What attracted you to these ideas?

Trey:

Resonance and amplification are both music/sound words, so they were appealing, and I spend much time addressing resonance in rehearsals as a priority (though that matters less from an audience perspective). Because one of our missions is to shift perspectives about resonant (or meaningful/timely) topics that we explore, I liked the idea of creating a new word, and there is also a sense of whimsy and approachability to storycraft. I find that many choirs choose poetry settings or multi-movement sacred genres as their default repertoire, so I am also intrigued at the concept of story/prose/non-traditional texts in general. [...] I think it is possible that through experiencing a transformative choral performance, a listener may reexamine their own stories or the stories around them.

Ryan:

Are there any choral composers or works that you feel are particularly effective at compositional storytelling?

Trey:

David Lang's *the little match girl passion*, Kile Smith's *The Consolation of Apollo*, Joby Talbot's *Path of Miracles* ... I could go on and on. These are recent projects that feature texts that are not just poetic in nature. [...] In terms of an example from the canon, non-living composers, Schumann's multi-movement secular works have been on my list for a while.

Ryan:

Thank you very much for your thoughtful answers. I really appreciate it.

Trey:

Happy to help!

APPENDIX D: Abridged List of Oratorio and Cantata 2000-2021

- Adams, John. *El Niño* (2000)
- Adams, John. *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* (2013)
- Adams, John Luther, William Brittelle, Glenn Kotche, Shara Nova, Paola Prestini. *The Colorado* (2016)
- Bansal, Juhi. *We Look to the Stars*. (2020)
- Bates, Mason. *Children of Adam*. (2017)
- Bates, Mason. *Mass Transmission*. (2012)
- Beaudoin, Richard. *Another Woman Of Another Kind*. (2016)
- Bolcom, William. *The Miracle: 9 Madrigals after Giovanni Pascoli* (2000)
- Campbell, Mark, Paul Moravec. *A Nation of Others* (2020)
- Carson, Cooman. *As We Are Changed* (2019)
- Chilcott, Bob. *Birdland*. (2019)
- Chilcott, Bob. *Circlesong*. (2004)
- Chilcott, Bob. *Millennium Tales*. (2000)
- Chilcott, Bob. *Move Him Into The Sun*. (2018)
- Chilcott, Bob. *The Angry Planet: An Environmental Cantata* (2015)
- Chilcott, Bob. *The Voyage*. (2016)
- Christian, Heather. *Oratorio for Living Things* (2020)
- Cipullo, Tom. *Credo for a Secular City* (2015)
- Conley, Michael. *Appalachian Requiem* (2017)
- Conte, David Conte. *The Dreamers* (2002)
- Cooman, Carson. *The Acts of the Apostles* (2009)
- Cooman, Carson. *The Revelations of Divine Love (Metaphors From Sea and Sky)* (2009)
- Crouch, Shawn. *The Road from Hiroshima* (2005)
- Danielpour, Richard. *An American Requiem* (2001)
- Danielpour, Richard. *Toward A Season of Peace* (2012)
- Dun, Tan. *Buddha Passion* (2018)
- Dun, Tan. *Water Passion* (2000)
- Dunphy, Melissa. *American DREAMers* (2018)
- Dunphy, Melissa. *Jack And The Beanstalk* (2012)
- Dove, Jonathan. *A Brief History of Creation* (2016)
- Dove, Jonathan. *Arion and the Dolphin*. (2015)
- Dove, Jonathan. *For an Unknown Soldier*. (2014)
- Dove, Jonathan. *On Spital Fields* (2005)
- Dove, Jonathan. *There Was A Child*. (2009)
- Elder, Daniel. *Absalom* (2019)
- Esenvalds, Erik. *The First Tears* (2014)
- Esenvalds, Erik. *The Pleiades* (2018)
- Garrop, Stacy. *Terra Nostra* (2015)
- Glass, Philip. *The Passion of Ramakrishna* (2002)
- Golijov, Osvaldo. *Ainadamar* (Fountain of Tears) 2003.
- Golijov, Osvaldo. *La Pasión según San Marcos* (2000)
- Gordon, Michael, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe. *lost objects: an oratorio* (2001)
- Gordon, Michael, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe. *Shelter* (2013)

- Gordon, Michael, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe. *The Carbon Copy Building* (1999)
- Gordon, Michael, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe. *Water* (2008)
- Grau, Gonzalo. *Aqua* (2011)
- Gunn, Wally. *Moonlite* (2019)
- Hagan, Jocelyn. *Amass* (2011)
- Hagan, Jocelyn. *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* (2019)
- Hagan, Jocelyn, and Timothy C. Takach. *This is How You Love* (2017)
- Hailstork, Adolphus. *Knee on The Neck* (2021)
- Harris, Matthew. *A Child's Christmas in Wales* (2002)
- Hearne, Ted. *Place* (2018)
- Hearne, Ted. *Sound From The Bench* (2014)
- Hearne, Ted. *The Source* (2014)
- Hill, Edie. *From the Wingbone of a Swan* (2013)
- Jackson, Gabriel. *Airplane Cantata* (2012)
- Jackson, Gabriel. *Choral Symphony* (2013)
- Jackson, Gabriel. *Exile Meditations*. (2017)
- Johnson, Craig Hella. *Considering Matthew Shepard* (2016)
- Karasis, Michael James. *An American Civil War Memorial* (2002)
- Karasis, Michael James. *Government Issue* (2014)
- Kean, Ron. *The Journey of Harriet Tubman* (2018)
- Keyes, Tim. *Colorado* (2014)
- Kyr, Robert. *A Time for Life* (2007)
- Kyr, Robert. *Infinity to Dwell* (2003)
- Kyr, Robert. *Paradiso* (2015)
- Lang, David. *battle hymns* (2009)
- Lang, David. *love fail* (2012)
- Lang, David. *the little match girl passion*. (2008)
- Larsen, Libby. *The Ballerina And The Clown*. (2002)
- Larsen, Libby. *Chain of Hope*. (2010)
- Leshnoff, Jonathan. *Hope: An Oratorio* (2011)
- Leshnoff, Jonathan. *Sacrifice of Isaac* (2021)
- Lichte, Erick, Timothy C. Takach. *All Is Calm* (2019)
- Lloyd, Thomas. *Bonhoeffer* (2013)
- MacMillan, James. *All The Hills And Vales Along* (2017)
- Mäntyjärvi, Jaakko. *Vain sana* (2004)
- Moravec, Paul. *Sanctuary Road* (2017)
- Moravec, Paul. *The Blizzard Voices* (2008)
- Muehleisen, John. *A Kipling Passion* (2018)
- Muehleisen, John. *Pietà* (2012)
- Muhly, Nico. *How Little You Are* (2015)
- Oliver, Curt. *For The Healing of the Nations (Peace Oratorio)* (1999)
- O'Regan, Tarik. *A Letter of Rights* (2015)
- O'Regan, Tarik. *Mass Observation* (2016)
- O'Regan, Tarik. *The Phoenix* (2018)
- Paulus, Stephen. *To Be Certain Of The Dawn* (2005)
- Prestini, Paola. *Aging Magician* (2017)

- Ramsey, Andrea. *Suffrage Cantata* (2020)
- Ratcliff, Cary. *Ode To Common Things* (2015)
- Rouse, Christopher. *Requiem*. (2002)
- Saariaho, Kaija. *La Passion de Simone* (2006)
- Shaw, Caroline. *The Listeners* (2019)
- Shelby, Marcus. *Beyond The Blues: A Prison Oratorio* (2015)
- Shelby, Marcus. *Harriet Tubman* (2007)
- Smith, Gabriella. *Requiem* (2018)
- Smith, Kile. *The Consolation of Apollo*. (2014)
- Smith, Kile. *The Dawn's Early Light* (2019)
- Snider, Sarah Kirkland. *Mass for the Endangered* (2020)
- Stein, Joel Henry. *Mirror For America* (2012)
- Stroope, Z. Randall. *Carmina Pax* (2019)
- Talbot, Joby. *Path of Miracles* (2005)
- Tin, Christopher. *To Shiver The Sky* (2020)
- Todd, Will. *If I Had Wings* (2018)
- Todd, Will. *Choral Symphony No.4 (Ode to a Nightingale)* (2011)
- Trotta, Michael John. *For A Breath of Ecstasy* (2017)
- Trotta, Michael John. *Light Shines In The Darkness*
- Trumbore, Dale. *How To go On* (2017)
- Twining, Toby. *Euridice*. (2011)
- Whitacre, Eric. *The Sacred Veil* (2019)
- Whitbourn, James. *Annelies* (2004)
- Wolfe, Julia. *Anthracite Fields* (2014)
- Wolfe, Julia. *Fire in my Mouth* (2019)
- Wolfe, Julia. *Steel Hammer* (2009)

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