THE ROLE OF THE CHORUS MASTER IN THREE CONTEMPORARY OPERAS

ADDRESSING SOCIAL CONFLICT: A DRAMATIC ANALYSIS OF POUL RUDERS'

(B. 1949) THE HANDMAID'S TALE (1998), JAKE HEGGIE'S (B. 1961) DEAD MAN

WALKING (2000), AND KEVIN PUTS' (B. 1972) SILENT NIGHT (2011).

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ABSTRACT

In opera, the opera chorus actively shapes the dramatic structure through interactions with the soloists, commentary after events, and momentum provided toward scene endings. Since the chorus traditionally represents the voice of the people, it also provides a natural access point by which audiences may connect to the unfolding drama.

To realize its dramatic potential, an opera chorus must have a resonant, vibrant sound that is more "soloistic" than other genres of choral music. Indeed, there are quantifiable acoustic differences between classical solo and choral singing. The characterizations of the chorus must also be convincing. Yet there is only minimal research, to date, describing a systematic approach to rehearsing the opera chorus and applying those rehearsal techniques to specific musical examples.

In this disquisition, I summarize existing research regarding choral rehearsal strategies and the role of the chorus master. I then synthesize and apply this research in the form of a chorus master's analysis of choral excerpts from three contemporary operas recently produced by The Minnesota Opera: Norwegian composer Poul Ruders' (b. 1949) *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), Jake Heggie's (b. 1961) *Dead Man Walking* (2000), and American composer Kevin Puts' (b. 1972) *Silent Night* (2011). I argue that a chorus master's rehearsal strategies for these works must invite efficient, classical vocalism and a dramatic, textually informed interpretation of the elements of melody, harmony, form, rhythm, texture, and timbre.

The composers of these three operas hoped to engage audiences about specific social issues: whether absolute power corrupts any ideology in *The Handmaid's Tale*; whether capital punishment should be allowed in *Dead Man Walking*; and from the historical wartime truce in *Silent Night*, whether violent conflict is the direct result of our failure to seek connections with

others who hold convictions different from our own. But social learning requires dialogue. The

opera chorus, in giving voice to the people, can be a bridge between the audience and the greater

social lessons to be learned from these operas. It can inspire audience members to share their

experience and begin this dialogue. Thus, for the chorus master, there is much at stake.

DEDICATION

With thanks to my family, friends, and teachers.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Does opera, a musical genre over four hundred years old, continue to be relevant? Those

unfamiliar with this art form might dismiss it as mere entertainment, appreciated by a narrow

audience of classical music lovers. I disagree. The three contemporary operas I selected as the

focus of this dissertation, Poul Ruders' (b. 1949) *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), Kevin Puts' (b.

1972) *Silent Night* (2011), and Jake Heggie's (b. 1961) *Dead Man Walking* (2000), remind us

that conflict and its various escalations, including war, can be minimized or resolved peacefully

if we continue to seek connections and engage in dialogue with those who hold different

convictions from us.

The composers of these three operas wanted to engage audiences about specific social

issues that continue to trouble and divide us. Author Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) hoped her

novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) (upon which Poul Ruders' opera is based), would illustrate

the tyranny that results when a government wields absolute power, regardless of its ideology.[1]

When Ruders read Atwood's novel, he quickly recognized its operatic potential for

communicating that message.[2] Jake Heggie hoped that *Dead Man Walki*ng would encourage

dialogue about the issue of capital punishment and its larger implications about how a society

should respond to criminal acts of violence.[3] Kevin Puts hoped that *Silent Night* would illustrate

that war is possible only in the absence of familiarity and connection to one another.[4]

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[1] David Sander, "Minnesota Opera's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Issuu,* June 16, 2014, https://issuu.com/minnesotaopera/docs/handmaid503 (Accessed Feb. 14, 2019): 10-14.

[2] Lauren Rico, "*Handmaid's Tale*: Interview With Poul Ruders and Dale Johnson," May, 2003, http://music.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/0305_handmaid/ (Accessed Feb. 14, 2019).

[3] Jake Heggie, "Minnesota Opera's *Dead Man Walking*," Jan. 16, 2018, https://issuu.com/minnesotaopera/docs/lowresforref_prg_mnop_dmw_0118 (Accessed Feb. 17, 2019): 11.

[4] "Kevin Puts on *Silent Night*," Unison Media, https://youtu.be/lHs7EfchO_4, Accessed Feb. 7, 2019 ("I would say it was an enormous privilege to write *Silent Night*, and to make a statement through it, which I've always believed: That it is distance, and a lack of familiarity with one another, that leads us to the atrocities of war; That once you see your sworn enemy as not so different from yourself, the whole thing falls apart.").

It is no coincidence that the stories in these operas are connected to real-world events. *The Handmaid's Tale* was inspired after Atwood witnessed the Ayatollah Khomeini's theocratic revolution during her 1978 trip to Iran.[5] The main character in *Dead Man Walking*, Joseph De Rocher, is a fictional composite based on the non-fictional accounts of Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J., in her book of the same name, describing her volunteer work in the 1980s at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola) in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana.[6] *Silent Night* dramatizes a historical event, a spontaneous Christmas Eve truce during World War I (1914-1918) between Scottish, French, and German soldiers.[7]

Thus, these three contemporary operas have powerful messages to convey, and the opera chorus plays an important role in this process. As I discuss in Chapter Two, the chorus traditionally represents the voice of the people, as one or more segments of society. Audiences often more readily identify with a group of everyday characters, depicted in the chorus, than with the soloists playing individual roles. Yet if the choral scenes in an opera are dramatically unconvincing, there is a very real danger that the audience may not fully connect with the opera through the chorus, and by extension, to the opera's larger social message.

In professional opera companies, a chorus master is hired to rehearse the opera chorus and guide them through the entire production process, ensuring that they cohesively integrate with the soloists, the orchestra, and the conductor. The chorus master transforms the opera chorus into the character(s) it represents in an opera. Yet there is minimal research, to date, describing a systematic approach to the chorus master's rehearsal strategies for achieving the dramatic, resonant, and efficient vocalism required of an opera chorus, with applications of these

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[5] "Minnesota Opera's *The Handmaid's Tale*" at 10-14.
[6] "Minnesota Opera's *Dead Man Walking*" at 11.
[7] See Kevin Puts, "*Silent Night*," http://silentnightopera.com/ (Accessed Oct. 28, 2017).

rehearsal tools to specific musical examples.[8] This scarcity may be due to the wide variety of

demands that different operas may make upon the chorus, as well as the idiosyncratic nature of

the choral rehearsal: no two chorus masters are the same, and even a single chorus master may

use radically different rehearsal strategies within an opera season, or within a single production.

A notable resource is a dissertation by choral conductor Jonathan Draper, who is also a chorus

master, in which he analyzes the process from his own experience. Additional sources, such as

interviews of respected chorus masters, provide guidance that is more anecdotal than analytical.

In this disquisition, I argue that the chorus master's primary responsibility is to realize the

dramatic potential of the opera chorus, and that he must use unique tools and rehearsal strategies

for achieving that goal. I support this assertion with a historical survey of the dramatic function

of opera choruses in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, I synthesize existing research regarding

choral rehearsal strategies and efficient classical vocalism into a chorus master's "toolbox." In

this chapter, I also draw upon my own experience as a paid chorister in several production

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[8] For example, the writings of vocal pedagogue Richard Miller (1926-2009) comprehensively describe efficient, classical vocal techniques, but the application of those techniques to a choral ensemble is less straightforward. See Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing: System and Art in Vocal Technique* (Boston: Schirmer Books, 1996); Miller, *Solutions for Singers: Tools for Performers and Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

The published interviews of esteemed opera chorus masters such as David Stivender (1933-1990), Donald Palumbo (b. 1948), and Susanne Sheston (b. 1970) provide advice that is more anecdotal than didactic. Bruce Duffie,"Chorus Master Donald Palumbo," *Opera Journal* 34, no. 3 (Sep. 2001): 43-53; Oliver Henderson, "Working with Operatic Soloists in the Ensemble: A Conversation with Susanne Sheston," *Choral Journal* 55, no. 9 (Apr. 2015): 47-52; Amy Kaiser, "The Chorus Line," *Opera News* 59, No. 4 (Apr. 1995): 30; J.D. McClatchy, "Indispensable," *Opera News* 53, no. 11 (Feb. 1989): 16.

Other esteemed conductors, such Helmuth Rilling (b. 1933) and Robert Shaw (1916-99), provide general choral rehearsal strategies but do not delineate the specific demands placed upon an opera chorus. William R. Braun, "The Education of a Chorus," *Opera News* 74, No. 1 (Jul. 2009): 32-33; Sharon Hansen, *Helmuth Rilling: Conductor-Teacher*, (Dayton, Ohio: Roger Dean Publishing Company, 1997).

Dissertations by Jonathan Draper and Dean Frederick Lundquist provide insider views of the rehearsal process but does not apply those techniques to specific musical examples. Draper, Jonathan. "The Role of the Chorus Master in Opera Production," PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1995 (ProQuest AAT 9614017); Dean Frederick Lundquist, "The Challenges of Opera Direction," Masters thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2000 (ProQuest AAT 1401763).

seasons with The Minnesota Opera, as well as my doctoral program work as a pit conductor and chorus master. In Chapters Four through Six, I apply these tools to specific examples of choral writing in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Dead Man Walking*, *and Silent Night*.

In each of these operas, then, the chorus master's role is of the utmost importance. If the chorus master has succeeded in his task, the audience is more likely to connect with the chorus. That connection may inspire them to share their experience and engage in discussion about the opera's themes. This is how the larger social messages in an opera can transcend the context of the original performance.

These three operas dramatize the violence and social conflict that may result when communication is abandoned. Unfortunately, we continue to struggle with this lesson. In today's political climate, especially, the discourse focuses more on being "right" rather than understanding those who hold different convictions than our own. The recent government shutdown, which lasted thirty-five days and was the longest in our nation's history,[9] is a particularly striking example of our society's current inability to communicate. Dialogue is the path to our social growth and learning. Through both historical and fictional stories, opera illustrates that our inability to talk about our differences poses a very real danger. It reminds us why we must continually strive to recognize what we have in common with each other. In short, opera reminds us of our humanity.

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[9] Martin Crutsinger, "Fed survey finds adverse impact from government shutdown," *The Washington Post*, Mar. 6, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/fed-survey-finds-adverse-impact-from-government-shutdown/2019/03/06/1307fd3c-4049-11e9-85ad779ef05fd9d8_story.html?utm_term=.188037030025 (Accessed Mar. 9, 2019).

CHAPTER 2. HISTORICAL SURVEY OF OPERA CHORUSES

Introduction

The chorus in many contemporary operas serves an important dramatic function. However, the importance of the chorus to operatic plot development should not be assumed. Indeed, the historical legacy of the opera chorus is one of variety, with dramatic contributions that have ebbed and flowed. In "choral protagonist operas,"[10] the chorus's contributions may be as substantial as a main character's. In other operas, the chorus may contribute little because the soloists almost entirely propel the dramatic momentum.

Similar variety is present in the historical function of the opera chorus. In the earliest operas, the chorus provided structural support to the drama, commenting after scenes just as the chorus does in the Greek tragedies that that inspired the genre's creators, the Florentine Camerata.[11] Over the next four centuries, the role of the opera chorus evolved to include interacting with soloists, giving voice to psychological subtext, providing atmosphere, and even acting like a "choral protagonist," among other functions.

Consequently, the role of the chorus in contemporary operas can be understood only when placed in its historical context. In this chapter, I examine notable developments in the opera chorus in operas from the sixteenth through the twenty-first centuries.

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[10] David Stivender (1933-1990), former Chorus Master of the Metropolitan Opera, coined the term "choral protagonist operas" to describe the substantial plot contributions of the chorus in operas such as Henry Purcell's (1659-1695) *The Fairy Queen*, Giuseppe Verdi's (1813-1901) *Nabucco*, Modest Mussorgsky's (1839-1881) *Boris Godunov*, and Benjamin Britten's (1913-1976) *Peter Grimes*, to name a few. See *The Metropolitan Opera Encyclopedia*, ed. David Hamilton (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987): 84.

[11] Donald Jay Grout, *A Short History of Opera*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965): 34-39; H.C. Montgomery, "Some Later Uses of the Greek Tragic Chorus," *The Classical Journal* 38, no. 3 (Dec. 1942): 148-55.

The Opera Chorus: A Model Rooted and Inspired by Ancient Greece

Opera originated in the late sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance.[12] The Florentine Camerata, a group of nobles, wanted to recreate ancient Greek drama with music.[13] They lacked extant musical examples from ancient Greece but hypothesized that such music would ideally serve the poetic text.[14] They based this hypothesis on the extant Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.[15] Their solution, the recitative, was a single vocal line, delivered in a declamatory style.[16] Three Camerata members, poet Ottavio Rinuccini (1562-1621), and composers Giulio Caccini (1551-1618) and Jacopo Peri (1561-1633), utilized this new recitative style in 1600 to produce the earliest surviving opera, *Euridice*.[17]

In the Greek tragedies that inspired the Camerata members, the Greek chorus was regarded as one of the actors, sharing in the action and contributing to the dramatic whole.[18] There are interactions where the chorus exchanges dialogue with and stimulates responses from a character.[19] The chorus emotionally participates in the drama by commenting or lamenting upon a character's experiences. The Greek chorus also unifies the dramatic formal structure, providing momentum toward a scene's climax or conclusion. Casting Greek chorus members of the same

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[12] Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 34-39; Montgomery, "Later Uses of the Greek Tragic Chorus" at 148-60.

[13] Id.

[14] Id.

[15] Id.

[16] Id.

[17] Rinuccini and Peri had collaborated two years earlier to complete their first opera in 1598, *Dafne*. However, that music has not survived. Peri's *Euridice* was publicly performed in Florence in 1600 and published in Venice a few years later. In the printed preface, Peri described recitative as "more than speech but less than song." See Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 34-55. The orchestration included a violin, chitarone, lira grande, liuto grosso, and harpsichord that realized the figured bass harmonies. Caccini participated in the creation of Peri's *Euridice*, and later borrowed heavily from it to compose and publicly perform his own version of *Euridice* in 1602. For this reason, the work from 1600 is referred to as Peri's *Euridice*. Id.

[18] Id.

[19] Montgomery, "Later Uses of the Greek Tragic Chorus" at 148-60.

gender and approximate age as the opera's principal character also encouraged a visible connection to the drama.

The lineage of the chorus in Greek drama is evident in Peri's *Euridice*. Peri's chorus interacts with the main characters, starting in the very first scene with a choral ritornello, "Al canto, al ballo" ("The singing, the dance"). This dramatic exchange between the soloists and the chorus occurs four times. In the fourth scene, antiphonal choirs sing "Poi che gl'etemi imperi" ("Then let me, empire"), creating a texture of dialogue. The chorus also structurally unifies the opera with choral singing at the end of each of the opera's five scenes.[20]

The First Operatic Masterpiece: Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*

Peri holds the distinction of having composed the first surviving opera. However, it was Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), an established madrigal composer and a court musician to the Duke of Mantua, who unleashed the dramatic potential of opera. His *L'Orfeo*, produced in 1607, continues to be recognized as a masterpiece, as evidenced by its place in the standard operatic repertory.[21]

Monteverdi attended the public performance of Peri's *Euridice*,[22] and he may have been able to obtain a copy of Peri's score, published in 1601.[23] Consequently, the influence of Peri's model is discernible. Both operas share the same subject, the myth of Orpheus. Monteverdi adopted Peri's approach of using straightforward recitative for calm narration or dialogue, and

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[20] In early Italian opera, it was acceptable for soloists to sing the choral roles in addition to their solo roles. Notably, Peri wrote in his introductory notes to *Euridice* that "fourteen singers of the cast are sufficient to sing the choruses." The distinction between choruses versus ensembles comprised of soloists becomes more delineated in Classical and Romantic operas. Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 35.

[21] Id.

[22] R.A. Streatfeild, *A Sketch of the Development of Opera,* London: Project Gutenberg, 2005, eBook.

[23] Victoria Rose Meredith, "The Use of Chorus in Baroque Opera during the Late Seventeenth Century, with an Analysis of Representative Examples for Concert Performance," PhD diss., University of Arizona, 1993, ProQuest (AAT 9328559): 13-15.

more rhythmically and melodically active recitative for heightened emotion. Like Peri, Monteverdi also used the chorus to unify scene endings: At the end of Act one, two choruses return in reverse order, resulting in an arch form.[24]

Yet Monteverdi's dramatic genius also resulted in several operatic innovations. *L'Orfeo* contains more elaborate harmonies than Peri's *Euridice*. It uses different instrumentations to convey character moods, as well as instrumental refrains, or *ritornelli*.[25] Monteverdi placed more dramatic responsibility on the chorus by calling for specific choral roles throughout the work, such as shepherds, nymphs, or spirits.[26] The importance of the chorus is also reflected in the full orchestration Monteverdi used to accompany some of their scenes.[27]

The Decline of the Chorus in Italian Baroque Opera

Peri's and Monteverdi's operas utilized recitative as the ideal musical realization of text and assigned a dramatically significant role to the chorus. Yet within a few decades, operatic tastes in Venice shifted, prioritizing musical conventions, particularly the soloist's aria, over dramatic function. By 1637, when the first public opera house opened in Venice, the Teatro San Cassiano, the chorus had become dramatically obsolete.

Rather than using the chorus to structure the drama, Venetian operas organized scenes by arias and recitatives. Yet these arias also did a disservice to the drama, emphasizing the beauty and technical virtuosity of the soloists more than the meaning of the text. The melodies in these arias, marking the beginning of the *bel canto* or "beautiful singing" style, are lyrical and

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[24] The two choruses that close Act one are "Vieni Imeneo" (Come Hymen) and "Lasciate i monti" (Leave the hills). See Meredith, "Chorus in Baroque Opera" at 13-15; Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 51-60.

[25] Id.; see also Dennis Shrock, *Choral Repertoire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 191-96.

[26] The choral roles include the following: shepherds in *Chori di Pastori che fecero la Moresca net fine*; nymphs and shepherds in *Choro di Ninfe, e Pastori*; and infernal spirits in *Choro di Spiriti infernali*. See Meredith, "Chorus in Baroque Opera" at 13-15; Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 41-60.

[27]The Act two chorus, *Ahi, caso acerbo* (Ah, bitter event), in one example of full orchestral accompaniment. See Meredith, "Chorus in Baroque Opera" at 13-15; Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 41-60.

expressive, yet also contain melismas, trills, high notes, and various other technical flourishes. These dazzling vocal displays were taken to new heights with the invention of the *da capo* aria, a ternary form in which soloists often added technically brilliant embellishments upon the return of the opening melody. Due to the textual repetition of the *da capo* form, this type of aria halted the dramatic momentum.

Virtuosic, solo *bel canto* melodies in *da capo* arias predominated in Italian operas throughout the Baroque period. Italian composers such as Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) and Vicenzo Bellini (1801-1835) refined the *bel canto* melody to perfection.[28] As opera became an international medium in the mid-seventeenth century,[29] the influence of the *da capo* aria also increased, as seen in the operas of George Frederic Handel (1685-1759) that were produced in England in the early eighteenth century.[30]

Interestingly, the rise and fall of the early opera chorus parallels the history of the chorus in Greek drama. Starting with the choral odes of Euripides, Greek playwrights began using songs in plays that didn't directly serve the plot.[31] Eventually, the chorus disappeared from the Greek stage. According to one theory, increased interest in the actors and their dialogue may have caused the decline of the Greek chorus.[32]

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[28] Norman Lyle Jennings, "Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848): The Evolution of His Style Leading to the Production of *Anna Bolena* in 1830," PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1987 (Proquest AAT 8714336) at 85-163.

[29] Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 4-20.

[30] Dennis Shrock, *Choral Repertoire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 235. In Handel's *Almira* (1704), for example, recitatives connect beautiful, melodic airs in solo arias. However, there is very little choral writing. The most substantial contribution of the chorus comes at the end of the work, when it sings a final number signaling applause and the conclusion of the drama. Id.

[31] Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 9-21; Montgomery, "Some Later Uses of the Greek Tragic Chorus" at 148-51.

[32] Id.

The Revival of the Chorus in Seventeenth Century French and English Baroque Opera

Although opera had become an international genre within a few decades of its creation, France and England did not import the Italian *bel canto* model wholesale. Opera composers in France and England molded the genre to their own tastes, adding innovative uses of the opera chorus and reestablishing its importance.

In France, the modifications of Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687), as court composer to King Louis XIV (1643-1715), resulted in a new, French operatic style.[33] For dramatic effect, recitatives were spoken, not sung.[34] Lully also avoided the Italian model of highly embellished singing. His solo and choral writing contains lyrical and rhythmic melodies that reflected the French court's emphasis on dance.[35] Lully also reestablished the prominence of the chorus in festival, prayer, and battle scenes.[36] By contributing to the physical action in these scenes, the French opera chorus plays an important role dramatically.

In England, Henry Purcell (1659-1695) synthesized both Italian and French opera styles by incorporating dance, recitative, and choral scenes to actively shape the drama.[37] In *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), the chorus, portraying courtiers, witches, and sailors, serves several dramatic functions.[38] The chorus provides form by appearing in the finales of acts 1 and 2.[39] It propels the drama by interjecting after solo arias, commenting on, or foreshadowing events to come.[40] It also

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[33] Charles E. Koch Jr., "The Dramatic Ensemble Finale in the *Opera Comique* of the Eighteenth Century," Acta Musicologica 39, fasc. 1 (Jan.-June 1967): 72-83; Thomas Betzwieser, "Musical Setting and Scenic Movement: Chorus and choeur danse in Eighteenth-Century Parisian Opera," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 12, no. 1 (Mar. 2000): 1-28.

[34] Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 122-134.

[35] Betzwieser, "Eighteenth-Century Parisian Opera" at 1-28.

[36] Id.

[37] Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 135-146; Victoria Rose Meredith, "Magic and Majesty: Spirited Choruses in Henry Purcell's Semi-Operas," *Choral Journal* 36, no. 1 (Aug. 1995): 9-17.

[38] Id.

[39] Id.

[40] Id.

creates emotional context, such as the chorus of mourning Cupids that follows Dido's death

song.[41] In *The Fairy Queen* (1692, rev. 1693), a chorus of fairies interacts with the Poet, even

assuming a singular character when it homophonically sings, "I press her hand gently, look

languishing down."[42] The quantity of choral writing in this opera is also notable, comprising one-

third of the music.[43] In musicologist Donald Jay Grout's (1902-1987) opinion, the choruses in

Purcell's operas contain some of his best music.[44]

Gluck's Restoration of Dramatic Function to the Chorus in Classical Opera

Purcell proved that dramatically significant choruses could coexist with *da capo arias* in

the same opera. However, composer Christoph Willibald von Gluck's (1714-1787) dealt the *da*

capo aria a fatal blow. Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), first published and performed in

Vienna, is considered a reform opera because it avoids the vocal embellishments of *bel canto*

opera, despite its Italian libretto.[45] In the score's written dedication, Gluck declared that the

"useless and superfluous ornaments" in florid *da capo* arias hindered the "true office" of music,

which he described as "serving poetry."[46] Gluck also called for simplicity, naturalness of

expression, and emotional truth in opera. Notably, the choruses in *Orfeo ed Euridice* advance the

drama by acting as a collective protagonist to the principal characters.[47]

Gluck's return to opera's dramatic roots influenced a prominent successor in Vienna,

composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). In Mozart's serious operas, or opera *seria*,

such as *Idomeneo* (1781), there is a substantial amount of choral writing in service to the

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[41] Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 140-46.
[42] Id.
[43] Id.
[44] Id.
[45] Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 215-45; Patricia Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1963): 80-82.
[46] Id.
[47] Id.

drama.[48] Yet in Mozart's comic operas, or opera *buffa*, such as *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786), there is minimal choral writing.[49] Thus, Gluck's reforms did not unequivocally restore the dramatic function of the opera chorus, as even a single composer's operatic output might utilize the chorus unevenly.

Increasingly Sophisticated Dramatic Functions of the Chorus in Romantic Opera

In the Romantic period, the opera chorus fulfilled even more sophisticated dramatic functions. Composer Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), for example, elevated the importance of the chorus by writing memorable melodies for them, representative of the voice of the people. Verdi's "Va, pensiero" chorus from *Nabucco* (1841) is immortalized as the rallying theme for the Italian unification movement, or *Risorgimento*.[50]

In *Nabucco*, Verdi divided the chorus into multiple groups to embody the conflicting political and social forces of the drama. The *Nabucco* chorus presents the diverse roles of Babylonians, Hebrew soldiers, Levites, Hebrew virgins, and the populace.[51] The opening chorus of *Nabucco*, one of the longest in Italian opera, presents three separate ideas: a storm chorus in E minor, the Levites' melody in G major, and the virgins' reply in E major.[52] Opera scholar Julian

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[48] James A Shrader, "The Choruses in Mozart's Opera seria: Practical Performance Possibilities," PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1995 (ProQuest AAT 9541767): 57, 88, 91, 125-33.

[49] Id.

[50] Verdi's patriotic opera choruses symbolize the revolutionary strength of the masses by their powerful unity of expression, and often by their sheer numbers and volume on stage. The "va, pensiero" references the popular music of the people via techniques including predominantly unison or homophonic writing, compound meter, lilting triplet and dotted rhythms, and moderate tempi. See Philip Gossett, "Becoming a Citizen: The Chorus in 'Risorgimento' Opera," *Cambridge Opera Journal*: 2, no. 1 (Mar. 1990): 41-64. https://search.proquest.com/ docview/ 753580948?accountid=6766.

[51] James Parakilas, "Political Representation and the Chorus in Nineteenth-Century Opera," *Nineteenth-Century Music* 16, no. 2 (1992): 181 ("one element. . . in the dramaturgical transformation of opera in the nineteenth century: the division of the chorus into groups that embody the conflicting political and social forces of the drama. Before the nineteenth century, the operatic chorus was not often divided onstage.)"

[52] Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi, Vol I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 98-107.

Budden (1924-2007) explains that the chorus in *Nabucco* is as important as the soloists because "the underlying sadness is that of a whole people, not of a single hero or heroine."[53]

Other Romantic composers, such as Georges Bizet, brought a new psychological realism to opera. In the final scene of *Carmen*, the protagonist, Don José, loses control upon learning of Carmen's infidelity and murders her in a jealous rage.[54] As described by musicologist Donald Jay Grout (1902-1987), the Parisian audiences at the Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique had never encountered the subjects of murder and infidelity as musical entertainment.[55]

Bizet's innovative use of the chorus in *Carmen* is similarly realistic. Notably, in rehearsals for *Carmen's* premiere in 1872, the choristers reportedly rejected the dynamic, realistic staging that was being asked of them.[56] They were accustomed to simple, stationary blocking in clear sightlines of the conductor.[57] Yet in *Carmen*, the choristers move through the streets, flee into the hills, and even fight and smoke in their roles as factory workers, soldiers, smugglers and gypsies.[58] Although its premiere was not financially successful, *Carmen's* vivid orchestration, its infectious adaptation of melodies from folksongs, such as Sebastian Yradier's (1809-1865) habañera tune, and its infusion of Spanish dance rhythms to Bizet's original melodies, as in the toreador's song in Act two, has made *Carmen* one of the most popular operas in the standard repertory.[59]

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[53]Verdi elevated the importance of the chorus by composing some of his most memorable melodies for them, as the voice of the people. Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi, Vol. I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973): 98-107.

[54] David Sander, "Minnesota Opera's 2015 *Carmen* Program," Issuu, Apr. 20, 2015, https://issuu.com/minnesotaopera/docs/mnop_car_prg_0415_lr_forweb. Accessed Apr. 4, 2019.

[55] Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 426-27, 436.

[56] "Minnesota Opera's 2015 *Carmen* Program" at 12-13.

[57] Id.

[58] Id.

[59] Id.

As in the Classical period, however, Romantic composers assigned varying importance to the opera chorus. Composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) completely eroded the Italian operatic form of arias, recitatives and choruses in his later operas by utilizing an "unending melody."[60] A single aria in *Lohengrin* (1850) might contain several different moods, tempi and formal patterns. In this opera, the chorus sometimes enters the action in real time, but at other places in the story, only comments on the action, like a spectator "in the manner of a Greek tragedy."[61] Yet in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (the "Ring Cycle") (1874), the action never takes a pause for applause until the end of the acts, and there is almost no choral writing. Grout suggests that Wagner's innovative orchestral writing may explain the absence of choral writing in this operatic cycle.[62] The orchestra responds to the unfolding drama with repeated motives associated with specific characters, or *Leitmotives*, providing wordless conclusions and commentary.[63]

Eclectic Functions of the Chorus in Twentieth-Century Operas

After Wagner, twentieth century composers had complete freedom to assign significant or minimal functions to the opera chorus. In Benjamin Britten's (1913-1976) *Peter Grimes* (1945), for example, the chorus functions as a protagonist, commenting upon the actions of the townspeople, and even giving voice to the main characters' unspoken thoughts.[64] Yet in Britten's

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[60] Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 411, n.16.

[61] Ryan Minor, "Wagner's Last Chorus: Consecrating Space and Spectatorship in Parsifal," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 17, no. 1 (Mar. 2005): 1-36. https://search.proquest.com/docview/203585717?accountid=6766.

[62] Wagner's other operas, such as *Parsifal* or *Die Meistersinger,* utilize more choral writing. In *Die Meistersinger*, the choruses are tuneful, contain elaborate part writing, and are accompanied by imaginative orchestrations. See Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 392-424.

[63] Id.

[64] During an argument between the main characters, Ellen and Peter, the chorus gives voice to the characters' unspoken thoughts by signing liturgical music in a nearby church. See Grout, *A Short History of Opera* at 544.

chamber opera *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), the chorus is merely two soloists drawn from the total cast of four female and four male singers.[65]

A single composer assigning uneven importance to the opera chorus is not a twentieth century phenomenon; we previously observed Mozart's contrasting use of the chorus in his *opera buffa* and *opera seria*. What is unique to this period, however, is the eclecticism displayed in operatic compositional techniques and choral functions. The twelve-tone technique of Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), the neo-classical style of Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), the minimalism of John Adams (b. 1947), and the pantonality of Dominick Argento's (b. 1927) represent some of the compositional diversity in this period.

Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* (1932) is the first completely twelve-tone opera.[66] The chorus plays a significant role in the drama, appearing in every scene. The chorus also divides into opposing sections, as in Act one, scene 3, with half supporting Moses, and the other half opposing him.[67]

Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* (1951) displays neoclassical writing, in addition to referencing other historical techniques.[68] These techniques place unique demands upon the chorus. In Act two, scene 2, the chorus sings and dances a Minuet, a dance form of the French Baroque. The chorus is also assigned rhythmic speaking passages reminiscent of Lully's choral recitative. As in Greek tragedy, the chorus sometimes comments upon the action and heightens the mood. Yet at other times in the drama, the chorus converses with the soloists.

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[65] See Grout, *A Short History of Opera* a 543-44; *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 503; Linell Gray Moss, "The Chorus as Character in Three American Operas of the Late Twentieth Century," PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 1999 (ProQuest AAT 9905355): 26-26.

[66] Grout at 538, 571-72; Moss at 22-23

[67] Id.

[68] Grout at 538, 569; *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* at 807-10; Moss at 26-28.

The choral writing in Adams' *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) comprises seven separate choruses that provide structure to the unfolding drama.[69] These choruses serve various functions throughout the opera, providing commentary, interacting with soloists, and adding choral characterizations identified by contrasting textures (e.g., unison choruses, two-part writing in SA/TB or ST/AB combinations, as well trios of SSA against TBB). Most of the choruses are homophonic and contain repeated melodic and rhythmic patterns, which are a hallmark of Adams' minimalistic style.[70]

In Argento's *Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe* (1976), the chorus converses directly with the character of Poe in a variety of techniques, including talks, shouts, howls, *Sprechstimme*, laughter, and whispers. The chorus also sings one of the most memorable melodies from the opera, a hymn-like setting of "There is a land all rich and gold" that is constructed from a twelve-tone row.[71]

Conclusion

Throughout opera's history, the dramatic contributions of the chorus have been uneven. As envisioned by the Florentine Camerata, the opera chorus actively shapes the dramatic structure through interactions with the soloists, commentary after events, and providing momentum toward scene endings. In *bel canto* operas, that role became secondary to conventions unrelated to the text, like recitative-aria forms and virtuosic solo writing. Gluck's reforms restored the dramatic function of the opera chorus, and Romantic composers further developed the chorus's role, assigning it memorable melodies and dividing it into multiple

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[69] *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* at 1070-81; Moss at 98-105.
[70] *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* at 1070-81; Moss at 98-105.
[71] Moss at 43-58.

characters onstage. By the twentieth century, composers had a variety of techniques at their disposal.

In the next chapters, we will see in contemporary operatic examples by Ruders, Heggie and Puts how the plot would be incomplete without the contributions provided by the opera chorus. This marks a return to the dramatic origins of the opera chorus, as envisioned by the Florentine Camerata and realized in the earliest operas. These contemporary composers have redefined the dramatic role of the chorus through the musical elements of melody, form, rhythm, texture and timbre.

CHAPTER 3. THE CHORUS MASTER'S TOOLBOX

Introduction

My first casting in the chorus of a professional opera company was in 2012 for the Minnesota Opera's fiftieth anniversary season, which opened with Giuseppe Verdi's (1813-1901) *Nabucco* (1841).[72] I was star struck by the virtuosity of the soloists, the high caliber of the chorus, the lavish costumes and dancing, the rich orchestral timbres, and the complex sets. Every aspect of the production was thoughtful, detailed, and dedicated toward bringing the story and its characters to life. Yet one aspect of this production stood above the others. For me, the chorus delivered the most memorable moment in the opera when it sang "*Va, pensiero,*" or the "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves." With a flowing, beautiful melody, a dramatic placement in the middle of Act two, and inspiring lyrics, it is easy to understand why "*Va, pensiero*" is one of the most famous and beloved choruses in the operatic canon.[73]

The "Chorus of Hebrew Slaves" is but one example of the impact the chorus can make in an opera. As we saw in the historical overview in chapter two, the musical and dramatic contributions of the chorus often significantly shape an opera's storyline. Ryan Taylor, President and General Director of the Minnesota Opera, describes the opera chorus as a complex character and the only group that can function both as a participant and an observer in a scene.[74]

Indeed, the chorus can portray multiple characters throughout an opera. The chorus may appear as a collective, adding context to the given circumstances of time and place. Yet the

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[72] This chorus featured prominently in the Minnesota Opera's 2011-12 marketing season; the chorus even sang it live on Garrison Keeler's radio program, "A Prairie Home Companion."

[73] The "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves" has a particularly significant historical context. Given its timing and the acronym made from the composer's last name, the chorus became a rallying cry in the nineteenth century movement for Italian unification and independence. See Sheridan J. Ball, "The Opera Chorus as Choral Concert Repertoire: An Examination of Choruses by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)," PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1995 (ProQuest AAT 9630738.

[74] "Minnesota Opera Chorus," Minnesota Opera, Nov. 7, 2016, https://youtu.be/I040dKOUa6E.

chorus may also divide into two or more opposing groups, intensifying the dramatic tension. Members of the chorus may even emerge as individuals from the whole, speaking for the larger group. In the concluding scene of *Silent Night* for example, individual soldiers, identified by nationality and number (e.g., Scottish Soldier #1, German Soldier #2) sing from the chorus.

These varied characterizations and dramatic functions of the opera chorus — individual versus collective action, protagonist versus minor roles, atmospheric versus contextual functions, psychological versus literal actions — take musical form in various ways. Sometimes the chorus may sing no more than a few measures of music, briefly reacting to the unfolding drama. The choral music may also be wordless, providing atmospheric sonorities. Yet the chorus may also sing extended passages when it interacts with the soloists, adding commentary after events or creating momentum toward scene endings. In these passages,[75] the choral writing may contain some of the most memorable melodies in an opera, such as in *Nabucco*. Thus, in many operas, the chorus is integral to the success of the overall production. Given this importance, the task of preparing the opera chorus for performance is generally assigned to a specific individual: the chorus master.

In essence, the chorus master's task is to realize the dramatic potential of the choral writing in an opera, regardless of whether the appearance of the chorus is brief or extended. As David Stivender (1933-1990), former chorus master for the Metropolitan Opera, observed, "the great conductors have always come out of the theater. [] Music is color, it's character."[76] In rehearsals, the chorus master's understanding of the opera's drama must inform every stylistic

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[75] Former Metropolitan Opera Chorus Master David Stivender (1933-1990) describes operas where the chorus plays a substantial role in the drama as "choral protagonist" operas. David Stivender, "The Chorus," in *The Metropolitan Opera Encyclopedia*, ed. David Hamilton (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987): 84.

[76] J.D. McClatchy, "Indispensable," *Opera News* 53, no. 11 (Feb. 1989): 17.

and musical choice. For example, even the type of vibrant, resonant, and efficient vocalism that distinguishes operatic choral singing from other choral music[77] is intended to serve the drama. These musical and stylistic choices, in turn, form the objectives that the chorus master sets for each rehearsal.

The Chorus Master's Advance Preparations

Individual Score Study

To translate dramatic understanding into rehearsal objectives, the chorus master must undertake individual score study and research well in advance of the first chorus rehearsal.[78] Specifically, the chorus master must read and translate the opera's libretto, study the musical elements of the vocal score, and research the style of the aesthetic period (including the historical and cultural context). This process includes any source material upon which a libretto is based. Since a libretto may only represent an adaptation or excerpt of the source material, it may not present the dramatic themes as completely as the original version. Thus, the source material can be an important resource to the chorus master's understanding of the drama of the opera.

To understand how each musical moment serves the drama, the chorus master must add a word-by-word translation of the libretto in both the vocal and orchestral scores. This activity, while being a time commitment, is rewarding. The point is not to produce a scholarly translation; indeed, other staff in a professional opera company will have already selected the translation that will appear as supertitles to the audience. Rather, it is the process that is beneficial and valuable. By writing out the translation, instead of merely reading it, a chorus master interacts with the text

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[77]Katherine L. P. Reid, Pamela Davis, Jennifer Oates, Densil Cabrera, Sten Ternström, Michael Black, and Janice Chapman, "The Acoustic Characteristics of Professional Opera Singers Performing in Chorus versus Solo Mode," *Journal of Voice* (2007): 35-45.

[78] Jonathan Draper, "The Role of the Chorus Master in Opera Production," PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1995 (ProQuest AAT 9614017); Sharon Hansen, *Helmuth Rilling: Conductor-Teacher*, (Dayton, Ohio: Roger Dean Publishing Company, 1997): 66; Pamela Elrod Huffman, "Essential Building Blocks," *Southwestern Musician* 81, no. 7 (Feb. 2013): 41.

and experiences the drama as it unfolds moment by moment. This interaction also inspires

preliminary ideas about stylistic choices, such as diction, pronunciation, and vocal color.

The final step to understanding the drama is researching the stylistic period during which

the opera was composed. This inquiry includes researching past performances of the work, the

musical developments during the stylistic period, enduring performance practices, cultural

influences from the time, and biographical information about the composer and the librettist. The

goal of this activity, as in the translating, is personal: to deepen the chorus master's

understanding of the drama and how the composer utilizes the music and the text in telling the

story of the opera. Notably, inspiration may also accompany these gains. For example, during

rehearsals for the Metropolitan Opera Chorus, it was common for David Stivender to share with

the chorus a quote from a letter of the composer, a section from the source play or novel, or an

anecdote about the librettist or composer.[79]

With a dramatic understanding informed by the chorus master's research into the source

material, the libretto, and the aesthetic period, the chorus master begins annotating stylistic and

musical choices directly in the score, and if preferred, in additional notes[80] that identify the

sections involving the chorus. Conductor Helmuth Rilling (b. 1933) recommends a systematic

approach to this kind of annotation.[81] For example, a chorus master's score marking might

address only one musical element per reading, such as rhythm, instrumentation and voices,

harmonic analysis, form, texture, and text.[82] The chorus master's annotations should provide

identifying information regarding the act, scene, and page numbers; the scene title; the voicing

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[79] McClatchy, "Indispensable" at 17.
[80] Since an opera libretto involves substantial text, making separate charts of the scenes may be advisable for the chorus master.
[81] Sharon Hansen, *Helmuth Rilling* at 66-67.
[82] Id. at 100-108.

and scoring demands (e.g., SATB + soloist); and a brief dramatic synopsis. This is also an ideal time to insert uniform rehearsal numbers into the vocal and orchestral scores.

The individual score study undertaken by the chorus master must be rigorous. Rilling warned that, without meticulous, advance preparation of the score, a conductor would be unable to efficiently lead rehearsals.[83] For Rilling, advance preparation of the score resulted in memorization, often before the first rehearsal.[84] Similarly, Stivender studied the score to the point of knowing almost every note by heart.[85] Robert Shaw (1916-1999), former conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorale, also advised making as many musical decisions and annotating the score as much as possible before the first rehearsal.[86] These examples suggest that the chorus master's planning and rehearsal decisions are rooted in the analysis and annotations made in advance after individual study of the score.

Planning The Chorus Rehearsal Schedule

With score annotations in mind, the chorus master may propose a rehearsal schedule, allocating a certain number of days for chorus rehearsals within the opera's overall performance schedule. For each opera to be rehearsed within a company's season, the chorus master must draw up a chorus rehearsal schedule.

Score annotations may also assist the chorus master in pre-season administrative planning. For example, the chorus master's opinion may be sought regarding the choral

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[83] Id.

[84] Rilling generally conducted from memory in performances. However, even he advised using the score in rehearsals, as a conductor cannot control all details of the rehearsal without knowing exactly what is on the printed page. Id. at 100-102, 108.

[85] McClatchy, "Indispensable" at 17.

[86] Huffman, "Essential Building Blocks" at 41.

performing forces required by each opera.[87] The conductor or artistic director may also request

pre-season meetings with the chorus master to discuss stylistic interpretations.[88]

Notably, the chorus master's rehearsal schedule should account not only for time leading

chorus rehearsals, but all subsequent times that the chorus is called during the production and

performance schedule. For example, Sandra Horst, chorus master of Opera Theatre of Saint

Louis, as well as the Canadian Opera Company, is present whenever the chorus is called, even

for staging rehearsal which are typically led by someone else.[89] Although the chorus master does

not lead the staging or production rehearsals, his input is generally invited. Conductor Claudio

Abbado (1933-2014), for example, typically welcomed communication between conductors and

directors, observing that collaboration generally results in "find[ing] something better."[90] It is the

chorus master's responsibility to alert the conductor or stage director of any obstacles the chorus

may be facing. Creatively and collaboratively, the chorus master must solve these obstacles to

ensure an optimal ensemble sound. Thus, the chorus master's presence ensures consistency and

reminds the chorus that someone is always watching them and valuing their contribution.

Throughout the production schedule, the chorus master is presented with opportunities

for collaboration. In production rehearsals led by the conductor, after the chorus has integrated

with the soloists, the chorus master will attend to any stylistic differences called for by the

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[87] The chorus master may even personally audition the choristers, who are typically contracted per opera. In determining the number of singers needed for any opera, Metropolitan Opera Chorus Master Donald Palumbo typically confers with the Music Director; together they consider various factors, including production logistics (e.g., an intimate production with smaller sets might prohibit a bigger chorus), costume and budget considerations, and most importantly, musical considerations. Bruce Duffie, "Chorus Master Donald Palumbo," *Opera Journal* 34, no. 3 (Sep. 2001): 46-47.

[88] For example, former Metropolitan Opera Chorus Master David Stivender developed such a rapport with Maestro James Levine that they rarely scheduled pre-rehearsal meetings about standard operatic works; instead, their collaboration generally occurred after the chorus came onto the stage, where position, balance and rhythmic subtleties could be adjusted in real time. McClatchy, "Indispensable" at 17.

[89] William R. Braun, "The Education of a Chorus," *Opera News* 74, No. 1 (Jul. 2009): 32-33.

[90] Meiron Harries and Susie Harries, *Opera Today* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1986): 125, 151.

conductor. In staging rehearsals, the chorus master must ensure that the chorus is able to hear their cues, see the conductor's gestures, and produce an optimum sound with the new staging the director will give them. A director will likely welcome input from the chorus master in this regard, finding collaborative solutions that achieve the dramatic goal while preserving an optimum choral sound. Then, when the orchestra is introduced at the *Sitzprobe* ("sitting run-through"), the chorus master assesses the chorus' ability to respond to new timbral colors. During the performance run, the chorus master may lead pre-show chorus warmups and give feedback from each previous performance.

Setting Rehearsal Objectives

After establishing the broad parameters of the chorus's rehearsal schedule, the chorus master may set objectives for specific chorus rehearsals. Rilling planned exactly how much he needed to accomplish during each rehearsal, allotting a specific amount of time per individual movement or scene, and adjusting, as needed, based on the number of remaining rehearsals.[91]

Yet effective rehearsals depend upon more than advance planning. To achieve specific rehearsal objectives, a chorus master must constantly assess, in the moment, the ensemble's progress and energy and select appropriate rehearsal techniques. Rilling described this as reading the "stress level" of an ensemble and using appropriate psychology to get the optimal result.[92] In essence, what Rilling is describing is effective rehearsal pacing.

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[91] Sharon Hansen, *Helmuth Rilling* at 67-72. There is also a difference between rehearsing a new versus familiar work. As former chorus master for the Metropolitan Opera Donald Palumbo observed, "Any new work needs more teaching of text, diction, basic notes and rhythms. The chorus master must plan ahead and schedule more rehearsals for less- known or new works." Duffie, "Chorus Master Donald Palumbo" at 46-47.

[92] Sharon Hansen, *Helmuth Rilling* at 67-72.

<center>**The First Choral Rehearsal**</center>

Establishing Effective Rehearsal Pacing

Rehearsal pacing refers to the manner in which a chorus master rehearses music with an ensemble. Effective pacing requires a chorus master to tailor specific rehearsal strategies to the ensemble's progress in real time. Through variety in individual style and rehearsal techniques, a chorus master may effectively accomplish specific musical goals within the finite number of chorus rehearsals.

Notably, Rilling minimized interruptions during his rehearsals, stopping his ensembles only when he had a minimum of three instructions to give, and even then, using short sentences and being "clear with every word."[93] For Rilling, clarity in instructions meant giving specific musical terms and measure numbers when requesting an expressive effect from the ensemble.[94]

Pacing also requires a chorus master to prioritize competing objectives. For example, Raymond Hughes, chorus master at the Metropolitan Opera from 1997-2007, characterized his rehearsal approach as sometimes painting with broad strokes, but at other times, looking through a microscope at a split-second rest or a specific vowel color.[95] Donald Palumbo, chorus master at the Metropolitan Opera since 2007, describes his pacing as trying to get the basic sound in place, then focusing on the "microscopic" details such as phrasing, dynamic contrasts, and expression of the text, with care paid to rhythm and diction.[96] Thus, effective pacing requires the chorus master to balance varied rehearsal objectives, always keeping the production schedule in mind. From the initial read-through through the final performance, the chorus master's pacing with the

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[93] Sharon Hansen, *Helmuth Rilling* at 67-72.

[94] Id.

[95] "It's challenging to get the right balance between the general and the specific. In choral concert work, that's where the microscope can come out and one can really get the balance and detail clearly, because the people don't move around while they're singing." Amy Kaiser, "The Chorus Line," *Opera News* 59, No. 4 (Apr. 1995): 30.

[96] David J. Baker, "Fine Blend," *Opera News* 73, no. 4 (Oct. 2008): 40-41.

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ensemble must reflect the unique objectives of rehearsal, continually updated to reflect the ensemble's progress to date.

Focusing Singers' Energies in the Choral Warm Up

Given the limited number of rehearsals and the professional caliber of many opera choristers, a chorus master may be tempted to dispense with a choral warm up. Yet spending a few minutes on a choral warm up can yield physiological, didactic, and psychological benefits.[97] The choral warm up is an opportunity for the chorus master to focus the choristers' concentration while setting the pace for the upcoming rehearsal. In fact, research suggests that the conductor's approach to the rehearsal process is the biggest influence on a choir's tone.[98] Thus, building the choral sound and inviting each chorister's individual vocal color begins in the choral warm-up.

A natural choral warm up progression tracks the singer's sequential management of energies: physical alignment, breath, resonator (via a speech-like configuration of the larynx), and articulators. Indeed, vocal pedagogue Richard Miller characterized singing a physical act that requires more exertion than speaking, with particular attention paid to spinal alignment and balance.[99] Thus, the chorus master may start with physical stretching to ready the body for singing.[100]

Next, phonation exercises absent a vowel, such a tongue trill, will encourage the free release of breath. Vocal scientist Ingo Titze observes that the tongue trill, as "semi-occluded vocal tract" exercise, has the therapeutic benefit of teaching a steady "supraglottal pressure" as

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[97] Brian J. Winnie, "Contemporary Vocal Technique in the Choral Rehearsal: Exploratory Strategies for Learning," DMA diss., University of Washington, 2014 (ProQuest AAT 3618368): 10.

[98] Winne, "Contemporary Vocal Technique in the Choral Rehearsal" at 10.

[99] Richard Miller, "The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble," *Choral Journal* 35, no. 8 (Mar. 1995): 31-36; Miller, *The Structure of Singing: System and Art in Vocal Technique* (Boston: Schirmer Books, 1996): 20-30.

[100] Id.

demonstrated by constant volume and airflow.[101] Since a key variable between speaking and

singing is continuous breath flow, the chorus master's warmup and vocal instructions may safely

call attention to the breath energy required to execute melodic lines. As Thomas Hampson

cautions, nonflowing air will result in the throat doing all the work via localized tension.[102]

With the physical environment and breath energies in place, the chorus master may add

vocalises that differentiate between lateral and non-lateral vowels. For example, an arpeggiation

on [i] and [u], helps attune choristers' ears to resonance balancing (speech-like vowels),

maintaining a constant vocal quality throughout changing vowels and pitches.[103]

The Initial Read-Through

In the first rehearsal, the chorus master's objectives and pacing are markedly different

than in subsequent rehearsals. In an initial sight-reading of the choral music, the goal is

obviously not to finalize matters of musical interpretation. Rather, this is an opportunity to

engage choristers in the opera's plot, challenge their sight-reading ability, familiarize them with

any overarching or general diction choices, and according to Jonathan Draper, former chorus

master for the Australian Opera, even entertain them.[104]

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[101] Ingo Titze, *Principles of Voice Production* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994): 91-94; Ingo Titze, "Getting the Most from the Vocal Instrument in a Choral Setting," *Choral Journal* 49, no. 5 (Nov. 2008): 34-41.

[102] Randi von Ellefson, "An Opera Soloist Reflects on Choral Singing: An Interview with Thomas Hampson," *Choral Journal* 37, no. 2 (Sept. 1996): 37-37. Hampson notes that inexperienced singers may disconnect the tripartite singing mechanism in various ways, such as by interrupting the free flow of air. Id. For this reason, even if a singer is marking, chorus master Susanne Sheston calls for "maximum text, minimum tone" to encourage consistent breath flow. Oliver Henderson, "Working with Operatic Soloists in the Ensemble: A Conversation with Susanne Sheston," *Choral Journal* 55, no. 9 (Apr. 2015): 47-52.

[103] Miller, "The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble" at 31-36; Miller, *The Structure of Singing* at 20-30.

[104] Jonathan Draper, "The Role of the Chorus Master in Opera Production," PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1995 (ProQuest AAT 9614017): 11-13.

Subsequent rehearsals are more focused, of course, attending to specific musical details and the dramatic needs of individual scenes. Yet care should be paid to the quality of the opera chorus's sound even during this first rehearsal.

Inviting Individual Vocal Colors Through Efficient Vocalism

For every scene, a chorus master must have an appropriate sound ideal in mind. Palumbo characteristically focused first on the quality of the ensemble's sound before turning to other musical details.[105] He described his sound ideal as requiring "an individual vocal commitment from each singer."[106] Palumbo's call for an individual vocal commitment is essentially an invitation for individual vocal color.

Palumbo is not alone in building a choral sound with individual vocal colors. Richard Miller observed that "there cannot be one vocal timbre that encompasses the entire group" because each vocal instrument has its own timbre.[107] Robert Shaw also invited individual colors from the singers in his ensembles. In fact, Shaw regarded demanding one vocal quality from his choristers to be as illogical as requesting all the instruments in an orchestra to play with the same timbre. [108]

Notably, individual vocal color has scientifically quantifiable properties. Studies have measured the acoustical formants of trained singers in both solo and choral contexts. In solo singing, the singers' tone was harmonically rich, featuring more acoustic energy in the singer's formant region.[109] In choral singing, the singers dampened this resonance, producing a tone that

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[105] Baker, "Fine Blend" at 40-41.
[106] Id.
[107] Miller, "The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble" at 31-36.
[108] Huffman, "Essential Building Blocks" at 41.
[109] Katherine L.P. Reid, Pamela Davis, Jennifer Oates, Densil Cabrera, Sten Ternström, Michael Black, and Janice Chapman, "The Acoustic Characteristics of Professional Opera Singers Performing in Chorus versus Solo Mode," *Journal of Voice* (2007): 35-45.

was lower in intensity and contained fewer upper partials.[110] Thus, a trained singer can utilize or dampen his singers' formant, or "soloistic" vocalism. This acoustical data is particularly instructive to the chorus master, since he can call for this resonance to serve the drama. Notably, a chorus master does not have to sacrifice individual vocal colors to achieve a cohesive ensemble sound. As Ternström asserts, cohesion depends upon each singer adopting a consistent approach.[111] Thus, if each singer sings with "soloistic" vocalism, uniform vowel and consonant articulations, precise rhythms, and accurate intonation in pursuit of a common dramatic objective, the ensemble's sound will be cohesive and balanced.[112] Conversely, if every member of the ensemble dampens his "soloistic" resonance, no individual singer should stand out. However, as explained herein, a dampened sound would generally not serve the dramatic demands of an opera chorus, unless desired for a specific effect in a scene. Thus, a chorus master's request for individual vocal color and vibrancy is essentially an invitation for choristers to utilize their optimal vocal technique. As Richard Miller explained, the most efficient vocalism, whether from the solo singer or from the chorister, produces the most aesthetically pleasing vocal timbre.[113] Quite simply, a singer's best sound is revealed through efficient vocalism.

When requesting individual color from choristers, a chorus master must choose his words carefully. Horst specifically avoids the term "blended," fearing choristers would misinterpret the instruction by attempting to match the vocalist next to them, compromising their individual vocal technique in the process.[114] Susanne Sheston, chorus master at the Santa Fe Opera, avoids

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[110] Id.
[111] Reid, Davis, Oates, Cabrera, Ternström, Black, and Chapman, "The Acoustic Characteristics of Professional Opera Singers" at 35-45.
[112] Id.
[113] Miller, "The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble" at 31-36.
[114] Id.

pedagogy terminology; preferring tangential language that allows each individual chorister to dictate the vocal process according to their individual training, while also avoiding the undesirable consequence of making singers self-conscious or perhaps inducing involuntary reactions like pharyngeal, jaw or tongue constriction.[115] For example, she may describe a tone as "focused" or "leaner" instead of simply directly the chorus to sing more quietly.[116] To invite more soloistic resonance, she may invite choristers to use a "fuller" and "more colorful" tone.[117]

In efficient vocal technique, vibrato is generally present.[118] Sheston views vibrato as a reflection of a singer's commitment to solo singing and an aspect of their vocal color.[119] This view is consistent with Ingo Titze's (b. 1941) studies, in which he concludes that vibrato is generally present as an indication of good muscle balance, if not a definitive indicator of vocal health.[120] Yet there may be occasional choral scenes where the drama requires a different effect, perhaps a tone *senza* vibrato in brief passages.[121] Notably, opera singer Thomas Hampson (b. 1955) regards "straight tone" as not per se problematic unless it is produced incorrectly.[122] When requesting a *senza* vibrato sound from her chorus, Sheston again avoids direct language, preferring tangential instructions that invite singers to listen to more than just their own sound ("Make sure you're listening here).[123] By focusing her singers' attention on the quality of sound and vowels they are hearing from the other singers, Sheston achieves the desired, *senza* vibrato effect.[124]

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[115] Henderson, "Working with Operatic Soloists in the Ensemble" at 47-52.
[116] Id.
[117] Id.
[118] Miller, "The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble" at 31-36.
[119] Henderson, "Working with Operatic Soloists in the Ensemble" at 47-52.
[120] Titze, *Principles of Voice Production*: 289-92.
[121] Henderson at 47-52.
[122] Ellefson, "An Interview with Thomas Hampson" at 37.
[123] Henderson at 47-52.
[124] Id.

Given the advanced vocal training of the typical professional opera chorister,[125] a chorus master may expect a high level of individual accountability, efficient vocal technique, and resulting individual color from them. This permits the chorus master to use tangential, rather than pedagogical language. Yet as Conductor Raymond Leppard (b. 1927) explains, a professional musician must be able to reduce any stylistic instruction to its technical lingo.[126] Thus, a chorus master's instructions will have maximum authority and context only if he has a solid foundation in classical vocal technique. As To that end, Richard Miller's (1926-2009) codification of *bel canto* singing technique is an invaluable resource.

Miller uses the speech model to evaluate efficient functioning of the tripartite singing instrument (breath, resonator, and articulators).[127] In efficient speech, the inhalation lowers the pressure in the lungs, allowing outside air to silently flow in to the point of equilibrium; phonation releases the breath through a speech-like configuration of the larynx (buoyantly suspended from the hyoid bone) without pressure or restriction while the ratio of vocal fold tension to air velocity remains in balance and the articulators (jaw, tongue, and lips) are freely functioning. The speech model also incorporates the prerequisite physical environment of balanced spinal alignment.[128] Thus, the speech model is a reference for each component of

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[125] The typical professional operatic chorister has a substantial skill set, including advanced vocal training encompassing languages, music theory and *bel canto* technique. Draper, "The Role of the Chorus Master in Opera Production" at 26-35. For example, a recent survey of the Santa Fe Opera chorus revealed that each of the 43 choristers had undergraduate degrees in voice, most also had a master's degree, and all were aspiring toward a solo operatic career. Henderson, "Working with Operatic Soloists in the Ensemble" at 47-52. Given this advanced skill set, it is not surprising that many of the choruses in professional American opera companies are represented by the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA). Id.

[126] Harries, *Opera Today*:

[127] Miller, "The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble" at 31-36; Miller, *The Structure of Singing* at 20-30.

[128] Spinal alignment is not something the singer sets up and locks into place. The movements of inhalation and exhalation, including the changing pressure in the lungs during singing, require minute, dynamic recalibrations to spinal alignment. Id.

singing technique. When efficient vocalism is present, the speech model, a singer's best sound, is the result.[129]

When a chorus master requests efficient vocal technique from the chorus, the result is not only a beautiful sound, but also a unique vocal color that is specific to each ensemble. To be dramatically effective, the chorus master's rehearsal strategies must balance those colors into a cohesive whole. Thus, cohesion in the opera chorus is not achieved by suppressing individual vocal color, but through each chorister's uniform execution of vowel colors and consonant qualities, precise rhythms, accurate intonation, and pursuit of a common dramatic objective.[130] These are the chorus master's goals in all subsequent rehearsals after the initial read-through.

Subsequent Choral Rehearsals

Balancing the Ensemble Sound into a Cohesive Whole

After the initial read-through, the chorus master attends to the stylistic demands of specific choral scenes according to his rehearsal schedule. For every chorus entrance, the chorus master must also familiarize the ensemble with the orchestral and vocal cues that immediately precede their entrance. These cues are typically included in the excerpted vocal scores sent in advance to each chorister, as well as additional notes from the chorus master, possibly even a word-by-word translation written directly in the score.

As with rehearsal pacing, the chorus master's understanding of the drama informs the choice of rehearsal tactics and expressive choices. Finding the right approach depends upon the needs of the ensemble and the specific musical objectives of each choral scene. Admittedly, an

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[129] In efficient vocalism, a singer does not simply select a desired singing timbre and attempt to mimic it. Said another way, acoustical changes are not consciously controlled by the classical singer but happen naturally from efficient vocalism. The singer must sequentially manage the processes of breath, resonator and articulators. Miller, "The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble" at 31-36; Miller, *The Structure of Singing* at 20-30.

[130] Encouraging individual vocal colors from choristers will also make them more independent, which is desirable because the stage blocking may separate them from their similar voice type. Draper, "The Role of the Chorus Master in Opera Production" at 26-35.

effective chorus master must draw upon a broad skill set. These skills in the chorus master's "toolbox" include clear conducting technique, keyboard technique, and proficiency with languages. He should be comfortable whether rehearsing in front of an ensemble or coaching an individual. He also has a technical understanding of classical singing technique and familiarity with the musical and dramatic conventions present in operatic works spanning over four centuries.[131]

Most importantly, the rehearsal process is fluid. A chorus master may make additional decisions as the dramatic needs of each scene become clearer to him. From choosing the right conducting gesture to seating choristers in different arrangements or speaking the text in rhythm, the chorus master ultimately strives to cohesively realize the dramatic potential in every choral scene.

Serving the Dramatic Needs of Each Choral Scene

Similar to Sheston's use of tangential language, Stivender used dramatic imagery to achieve musical results. He described his approach as grounding any musical gesture or instruction in the text, specifically the character or dramatic situation. Stivender's use of dramatic language addressed matters of clear phrasing, rhythmic vitality, dynamic contrast, attacks and cutoffs, and efficient vocal production. For example, to when the opening series of intervallic sixths in Giuseppe Verdi's *Anvil Chorus*[132] sounded muddy and jumpy, Stivender reminded the male chorus that the sun is rising in this scene. The dramatic result was a smooth,

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[131] Former Metropolitan Opera chorus master David Stivender's broad skill set included serving as a vocal coach to several of the company's soloists, conducting several performances at the Met and translating several librettos for the Met's official series. McClatchy, "Indispensable" at 17.

[132] The "Anvil Chorus" is the English name for the "Coro di Zingari," a chorus from Act two, scene 1 of Giuseppe Verdi's 1853 opera *Il trovatore*.

clear crescendo of sixths.[133] Metropolitan Opera artistic director James Levine (b. 1943) praised Stivender's approach as producing a renowned opera chorus that offers a character to the audience each night.[134]

Conductor Mark Elder (b. 1947) agrees that dramatic intention must inform musical interpretation: "What I'm interested in working with the singers on is clarity of intention, thought, color, text ... getting them to color the words, getting them beyond the crotchets and quavers and the complexities of the music in to the thought behind the music."[135] Thus, the dramatic intention of the music should inform everything that sounds and appears on stage.

Yet when specificity is required, a chorus master must also be able to provide concise instructions in musical terms, as Rilling advised.[136] Although Palumbo typically focused first on the vibrancy and sound of the whole ensemble, inviting each chorister to add unique vocal color to the larger group, he also attended to smaller details of rhythm, diction, and intonation in musical terms.[137] In a single rehearsal, one writer observed that Palumbo sang the principals' cues, occasionally spoke rhythmic subdivisions over the music, noted troublesome intonation areas, directed the sopranos' attention to vowel clarity in one phrase hovering in their mid-top range, and instructed the chorus in a different section to pay attention to the upbeat so that they could begin the next tempo precisely in rhythm.[138]

Conducting Gesture

The chorus master is the first conductor that choristers will experience in a production, as their musical rehearsals precede the staging and production rehearsals over which the orchestral

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[133] McClatchy, "Indispensable" at 17.
[134] Id.
[135] Harries, *Opera Today*.
[136] Sharon Hansen, *Helmuth Rilling* at 67-72.
[137] David J. Baker, "Fine Blend," *Opera News* 73, no. 4 (Oct. 2008): 40-41.
[138] David J. Baker, "Fine Blend," *Opera News* 73, no. 4 (Oct. 2008): 40-41.

conductor assumes leadership. Thus, the chorus master must have clear conducting technique and effective rehearsal techniques for addressing the musical elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, diction, and operatic vocal production.

For Rilling, clarity in conducting required showing clear beats, precise cues, and differentiation between the functions of the right and left hands.[139] In addition, Rilling described an effective conductor as "a convincing actor" who can portray all the human emotions and "becomes identified with the music he conducts."[140] For Rilling, the art of conducting required both technical mastery and a command of its non-verbal, emotional language.[141] In opera, this emotional language is the drama that unfolds in every scene.

Diction

Diction is a comprehensive topic covering all aspects of pronunciation, including open versus closed vowels, consonant articulation, and modifying vowels in service of the rhyming scheme, among other details. It is a fundamental component of solo and choral singing. Without cohesive diction, an opera chorus will not be dramatically effective. As Peter Burian, Chorus Master at Covent Garden since 1984, observed, the intelligibility of a word or a dramatic moment may hinge upon clear delivery of the text, or perhaps even a single final consonant.[142] Consequently, a chorus master must attend to diction in his rehearsals.[143]

Diction choices are often made well in advance of the first rehearsal, during the chorus master's individual score study.[144] The chorus master may find it beneficial to make written notes

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[139] Sharon Hansen, *Helmuth Rilling* at 49.
[140] Id.
[141] Id. at 62.
[142] Harries, *Opera Today*.
[143] Diction is usually the responsibility of the chorus master or a language coach, although a director may also give some diction notes to the chorus, especially if they are singing in his native tongue. Large opera companies sometimes may also have assistant chorus masters who specialize in a particular language.
[144] For chorus master Draper, choices about diction often begin during his initial reading of the libretto, well in advance of the first chorus rehearsal. Draper, "The Role of the Chorus Master" at 11-13.

during this process and/or prepare a phonetic transcription using the International Phonetic

Alphabet (IPA). These notes may serve as a handout to singers or be written directly in the

scores provided to them. This process is also fluid, as the chorus master may make additional

decisions about diction in subsequent rehearsals, or he may receive input from the director and

conductor in subsequent collaborations.

For any specific diction choice, the chorus master must rehearse the ensemble for

uniform execution. Indeed, cohesive intonation is not otherwise possible due to the distinct

acoustical formants of each vowel.[145] Horst cautions that individual singers may have

idiosyncratic approaches to diction.[146] She avoids disputes by emphasizing the final product,

explaining that the text must "read" to the audience.[147] For example, she may request her

choristers to add a shadow vowel to a final "n" consonant (singing "en-nuh") in the interest of

clarity and projection.[148] When teaching diction, it may also be beneficial to speak the text in

rhythm, a strategy discussed below.

Speaking the Text in Rhythm

The underlying pedagogical concept of speaking the text in rhythm is simplification. By

removing one or more elements, choristers may concentrate on the task at hand. Although the

technique of speaking the text may be utilized more frequently during the first few rehearsals of

a scene, short drills may be effective at any point in the rehearsal process.

Speaking the text in rhythm and with syllabic emphasis can be highly effective in

teaching musical phrasing, diction and articulation. The acoustical distractions of the music, as

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[145] Dean Frederick Lundquist, "The Challenges of Opera Direction," Masters thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2000 (ProQuest AAT 1401763).
[146] Braun, "The Education of a Chorus" at 32-33.
[147] Id.
[148] Id.

well as any concerns of vocal technique, are removed; choristers may focus only on the text. In rehearsals, chorus master Draper has found that speaking the text provides choristers with immediate feedback regarding the length of their vowels, the timing of their consonants, whether they are rhythmically cohesive with the ensemble, and syllabic emphasis.[149]

Conductor Robert Shaw valued the importance of speaking the text in rhythm before adding pitches.[150] This approach lends clarity to the syllabic stress of each word, the ensembles' articulation of consonants (which usually sound in advance of the beat), and vowels (which generally occur on their respective beats or sub-beats). If additional intermediary steps are needed before returning to the pitches, Shaw advised singing the rhythm on a unison pitch or in a four-note whole-tone cluster (e.g., D, E, F#, and G#).[151] Both approaches will highlight the rhythm, rather than obscuring it in the SATB choral texture.

Sheston agrees that speaking the text can improve rhythmic clarity, diction, and even color.[152] Indeed, speaking the text in rhythm reinforces the aesthetic of Richard Miller's speech model: a balanced ratio of airflow to vocal fold tension (although absent the continuous air velocity and the broader range of pitches required in classical singing). However, Sheston cautions that a chorus master must still remind singers of freely releasing their breath, even if they are only speaking the text.[153] Accordingly, she is careful to watch out for under-energized speech habits.[154]

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[149] Draper, "The Role of the Chorus Master" at 11-13.
[150] Huffman, "Essential Building Blocks" at 41.
[151] Huffman, "Essential Building Blocks" at 41.
[152] Henderson, "Working with Operatic Soloists in the Ensemble" at 47-52.
[153] Id.
[154] Id.

A variation on speaking the text in rhythm is to have choristers sing a difficult passage on

the same vowel or the same note before adding the melodic contour back in. If a disjunct interval

is troublesome, possibly because of the tessitura (e.g., a leap that crosses over the singers' break),

singing the passage in rhythm but on a unison pitch and/or vowel can be effective at reminding

singers of the ideal result: the speech model.

Horst also utilizes speaking the text in rhythm rehearsal, both for learning the music and

later, for memorization.[155] In small sections of the music, she gradually layers in elements until

achieving the final product of correct pitches, text and rhythm.[156] In some rehearsals, this

rehearsal strategy may equal the time she allocates for working on other musical aspects, such as

tone color and style.[157]

Using Varied Seating Arrangements

A chorus master's choice of seating arrangement in rehearsals may also encourage an

individual contribution from each chorister. To encourage vocal independence, Draper

recommends changing the seating plan for each rehearsal.[158] Draper believes creating a variety in

seating arrangements will yield different aural experiences for the chorus each time.[159]

Notably, a doctoral research study of choristers ranked their seating preferences in

specific categories found observable preferences.[160] For ease of singing and perceived choral

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[155] Braun, "The Education of a Chorus" at 32-33.
[156] Braun, "The Education of a Chorus" at 32-33.
[157] Id.
[158] Draper, "The Role of the Chorus Master" at 11-13.
[159] Id.
[160] Debra S. Atkinson, "The Effect of Choir Formation on the Acoustical Attributes of the Singing Voice," DA diss., University of Mississippi, 2006 (ProQuest (AAT 3245987).

sound, the choristers in the study preferred a spread, mixed formation.[161] However, the choristers valued a spread, sectional arrangement for listening to other singers in their section.[162]

Draper's seating options include having choristers sit a seat apart from others within their section, mixed format, where all voice types are freely mingled, and quartets, octets and random groupings. Hughes often utilized a mixed-voice arrangement with a sound cushion of three or four empty seats between individual singers. Shaw frequently utilized a variety of seating arrangements in rehearsals, including block sections within each voice type (S1, S2, A1, A2, T1, T2, B1, B2); a large circle with sectional or mixed voice types; two concentric circles (with tenors and basses in the outer circle); a four-leaf clover shape with the conductor in the middle of the clover; and mixed SATB quartets.[163] Each of these formations provides a different aural experience to the chorister. Whereas sectional seating may facilitate learning in the early stages of rehearsals, mixed formations and large circles will encourage vocal independence in later rehearsals. That vocal independence will also prepare choristers to meet any staging configurations that separate them from others in their voice part.

Inspiring the Chorus

Although a chorus master must combine a varied skill set, Horst believes that there is no particular personality required to be an effective leader.[164] If the chorus master is serious about communicating the demands of the score and the final product, as well as his expectations of the choristers, "it doesn't matter who you are."[165] After observing Horst's rehearsal process, one interviewer summarized the defining characteristics of Horst's leadership to be her enthusiasm

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[161] Id.
[162] Id.
[163] Huffman, "Essential Building Blocks" at 41.
[164] Braun, "The Education of a Chorus" at 32-33.
[165] Id. at 33.

for her work and her encouraging manner.[166] Similarly, Levine described Stivender's leadership as incredibly knowledgeable, and more importantly, able to inspire his singers on a daily basis.[167]

Choral conductor and educator Dr. Ramona M. Wis believes a fundamental, psychological change has occurred among conductors in their approach to leadership, "a shift from ME to THEM; from a focus on position and power to one of leading by serving."[168] She encourages conductors to focus on developing the individuals in their ensembles, rather than viewing an ensemble as a means to their own artistic accomplishments.[169]

Wis also believes that effective service as a conductor requires passion, of remaining "open to the possibility that there is something out there we still don't know or haven't experienced."[170] Choral conductor and educator Howard Swann describes this passion as remaining "a student of the music and its composer."[171] Passion, in turn, fuels the conductor's vision, his or her search to develop and realize the full potential of the ensemble. Vision is each conductor's unique opportunity "to add value to others in a way that makes a difference."[172]

Dr. Wis acknowledges that inspiring choristers is not possible without trust. She builds trust through consistency in her actions and being authentically herself, both on and off the podium.[173] Although conductors work in a group setting, Dr. Wis seeks to relate to every chorister as an individual.[174] Howard Swann also agrees that an ensemble comes alive through

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[166] Id.
[167] McClatchy, "Indispensable" at 17.
[168] Ramona M. Wis, *The Conductor as Leader: Principles of Leadership Applied to the Podium*, Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2007: xi.
[169] Id.
[170] Wis, *The Conductor as Leader*: 41.
[171] Charles Fowler, et al., *Conscience of a Profession: Howard Swann, Choral Director and Teacher*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Hinshaw Music, Inc., 1987: 75.
[172] Wis, *The Conductor as Leader*: 45-47.
[173] Id.
[174] Id.

individual personalities.[175] In essence, a conductor inspires an ensemble by relating to each of them as individuals. Through these individual connections and consistent, authentic interactions, trust between the conductor and the choir will form.[176]

These anecdotes illustrate that the role of the chorus master must be a labor of love, guided by one's passion for both the music and the craft of performing, analyzing and studying. Through clear, expressive gestures and instructions, a chorus master embodies the music and serves the drama in every rehearsal and performance. An effective chorus master thus combines his passion for the music with technical clarity.

Conclusion

As the advocate of the chorus, the chorus master navigates the daily demands placed upon the chorus, starting with his leading of the initial choral rehearsals. This advocacy continues through subsequent production and technical rehearsals and concludes only with the final curtain call. Maintaining a constant presence through the entire rehearsal process and performance run is the only way a chorus master may ensure a consistent final product and balance an ensemble of solo singers into a vibrant, resonant and cohesive sound.

Throughout all rehearsals and performances, the chorus master listens to matters of musical style, including whether each chorister's execution of rhythm, diction, phrasing and intonation is consistent. He also evaluates whether each chorister's individual colors contribute to a balanced whole, including the choral balance within voice parts and in relation to the soloists and orchestra. Ultimately, the chorus master ensures that the ensemble has an appropriate sound to cohesively serve the drama for every choral scene.

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[175] Fowler, *Conscience of a Profession*: 74, 115.
[176] Wis, *The Conductor as Leader*: 55.

To equip choristers to fulfill these important functions, how should a chorus master structure his rehearsals? To answer this question in the following chapters, I analyze various choral examples from three operas recently produced by The Minnesota Opera: Poul Ruders' (b. 1949) *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), Jake Heggie's (b. 1961) *Dead Man Walking* (2000), and Kevin Puts' (b. 1972) *Silent Night* (2011). After setting each choral scene within the progression of the opera's storyline, I examine specific connections between the music and the drama and offer rehearsal strategies for realizing each scene's dramatic potential.

CHAPTER 4. A DRAMATIC ANALYSIS OF *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Introduction

Poul Ruders' (b. 1949) opera, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), with a libretto by Paul

Bentley (b. 1942), is based on Margaret Atwood's (b. 1939) novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985),

about a fictional religious regime, The Republic of Gilead (formerly the United States of

America). Both the novel and the opera portray the oppression and loss of individual liberty in

this society through the eyes of the protagonist, a handmaid named Offred.

The leaders of the Republic of Gilead, who call themselves the Sons of Jacob,

Commanders of the Faith, are organized in the name of improving America's moral fiber. Yet

their methods, and the theocratic society they established in the wake of their violent, military

coup, bear little resemblance to Christian morality. During their coup, they assassinated the

President and members of the U.S. Congress. They also deployed nuclear weapons, resulting in

large, uninhabitable toxic areas called the Colonies. After assuming control, they abolished

previous American freedoms, including those of speech, religion, and self-determination. They

particularly targeted women with prohibitions against working, owning property, reading, and

writing. They also created social classes, each with a prescribed function.[177] Dissenters and those

deemed no longer productive to Gilead were brutally punished, executed by hanging in a public

space called The Wall or sent to clean up toxic waste in the Colonies, which was essentially a

death sentence.

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[177] The Commanders are the ruling social class. They instruct the militia, the Guardians of the Faithful. The Eyes of God are the Commanders' domestic spies, who report any violations of Gilead's laws to the Commanders. The Wives, who are married to the Commanders, maintain the Commanders' households. They are assisted in this task by their maidservants, women past their childbearing years called Marthas. See David Sander, "Minnesota Opera's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Issuu*, June 16, 2014, https://issuu.com/minnesotaopera/docs/handmaid503 (Accessed Feb. 14, 2019): 10-14.

Most of the Commanders' wives were rendered sterile by the nuclear aftermath. To ensure their legacy, the Commanders created the social class of Handmaids in which the opera's protagonist, Offred, belongs. The name of her class, Handmaids, refers to a passage in the Book of Genesis,[178] in which Rachel instructs her husband, Jacob, to go in unto her handmaid, Bilah, so that she may bear them a child "upon my knees." Like Bilah, the Handmaids in Gilead are involuntarily assigned to be birth surrogates in the Commanders' households. In this capacity, Offred is subjected to "The Ceremony," a monthly impregnation ritual (rape) by the Commander, committed in the presence of his wife, Serena Joy. As if this servitude were not brutal enough, the Handmaids are further stripped of their individuality by Gilead's naming convention, which reflects their assignments (e.g., Offred, assigned to Commander Fred's household, is "Of Fred").

When composer Poul Ruders read Atwood's novel, he immediately recognized the dramatic potential in its visually striking descriptions of tyrannical abuse resulting from absolute power.[179] Yet the abuse that most resonated with him was Offred's forced separation from her daughter.[180] In Act one, scene 9, Aunt Lydia reveals that all of the Handmaids' children from the "Time Before" were reassigned to homes with more "fit" parents). Ruders wanted Offred's heartbreaking tenderness and love for her absent daughter to be a recurring theme in the opera, as portrayed in Offred's memories in the flashback scenes.[181]

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[178] See Genesis 30:1-3 ("And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And she gave him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her. And Bilhah conceived, and bare Jacob a son.").

[179] Lauren Rico, "*Handmaid's Tale*: Interview With Poul Ruders and Dale Johnson," May, 2003, http://music.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/0305_handmaid/ (Accessed Feb. 14, 2019).

[180] Id.

[181] Id.

The story's warning about the abuses that result from absolute governmental power similarly resonated with Dale Johnson, Artistic Director of The Minnesota Opera, the company that produced the North American premiere of Ruders' opera in 2003.[182] For Johnson, the story seemed less a political statement and more an exploration of the ideas of freedom and individuality. Indeed, the opera illustrates not only the loss of individual liberty, but also the assault upon an individual's identity and freedom to love.[183] It was Offred's enduring love for her stolen daughter that inspired Ruders' setting.[184]

This dramatic convention of using flashbacks – shifting time between Offred's experiences in Gilead in the present and her memories of her life in America before the coup – is a key difference between Paul Bentley's libretto and the novel.[185] In the opera, a character called The Double sings Offred's role in the flashbacks. Notably, Offred experiences these memories in real time; she interacts with her Double and even sings in duet with her. To signify the shift in time, Ruders juxtaposes sharply contrasting musical styles. To depict Offred's challenges in the present, or the "Time Now," Ruders composed music he describes as "fairly grim."[186] It ranges from atmospheric sonorities in Offred's reflective moments to aggressively rhythmic, atonal ostinato patterns in moments of intense exchanges. The music in Offred's flashbacks to the "Time Before" stands in stark contrast; Ruders describes it as lighthearted, minimalistic, and tonal, almost in the style of musicals.[187]

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[182] Id.

[183] Id.

[184] Id.

[185] David Sander, "Minnesota Opera's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Issuu*, June 16, 2014, https://issuu.com/minnesotaopera/docs/handmaid503 (Accessed Feb. 14, 2019): 10-14.

[186] Lauren Rico, "*Handmaid's Tale*: Interview With Poul Ruders and Dale Johnson," May, 2003, http://music.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/0305_handmaid/ (Accessed Feb. 14, 2019).

[187] Id.

Yet Atwood's warning message about absolute power, and the opera's contextualization of the grim realities of the Republic of Gilead, would be incomplete without the contributions of the chorus. The opera utilizes various groups of choristers, including Aunts, Handmaids, Guards. Each group sings music that illustrates its respective societal functions. The Aunts are the social class assigned to train the handmaids for fulfilling their duties as surrogate birth mothers. They sing declamatory, conjunct, chant-like unison melodies with texts describing the religious values of Gilead. The Handmaids share these chant-like melodies; the repetition is a nod to the responsorial performance practice of psalmody. The guards embody the political enforcement arm in the regime. They sing lyrics different from those of the Aunts or Handmaids, yet their melodies are also chant-like, underscoring the theocratic aspect of the government's rule. These choral motives (e.g., "Behold my handmaiden," "Thou shalt not steal" and "Amazing Grace") reappear throughout the opera, providing dramatic coherence amidst the flashbacks and plot twists. With each recurrence, they underscore the unyielding application of Gilead's laws and social classes.

The Symposium Prologue

The opera begins with spoken dialogue in a Symposium Prologue, in the year AD 2195, where a historian named Professor Pieixoto is addressing the Twelfth Symposium on the Republic of Gilead. His topic is the new discovery of Offred's collection of cassette tape recording. After providing some brief background information about Gilead including the handmaid reference in Genesis, chapter 30, verses one to three, Professor Pieixoto concludes by inserting a cassette tape into a player. This commences the musical start of the opera. Pieixoto returns only at the end of the opera, when he ruminates over the incomplete information provided

by the cassette tapes: neither Offred's full name nor her eventual fate after guards seized her from Commander Fred's household were ever discovered.

The music starts with orchestral strings sustaining an atmospheric cluster (a C# half-diminished chord voiced with the ninth and the diminished fourth). The scene shifts to the "Time Now." This designation refers to Offred's experiences in Commander Fred's household. Against the atmospheric backdrop of the strings, Offred sings an apology that she didn't have happier events to record (mm. 7-51). Although her melody is rhythmically varied, its offbeat entrances, ties over the bar line, and andante tempo against a backdrop of sustained strings obscures any sense of rhythmic pulse. Descending eighth-note arpeggiations in the harp only occasionally disrupt this stillness.

Example 4.1. *The Handmaid's Tale*, vocal score, mm. 1-13.

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The reflective mood of Offred's apology doesn't last long; the scene abruptly shifts to a flashback to Offred's life with her husband, Luke, and her daughter before The Republic of Gilead was formed, in the "Time Before." In this initial flashback, armed guards restrain The Double (Offred) and force her to watch as other guards drag her husband and daughter away. In the orchestra, a serious of dissonant, sixteenth note ostinato embody the frenetic violence of this scene. Offred's flashback concludes with Offred exchanging places with her Double, who is still restrained by the guards. This is followed by the immediate entrance of the chorus of Aunts, who symbolically dress Offred with a red Handmaid's habit.

Just as the uniform of the red habits visibly signifies the Handmaids' assigned role in Gilead's society, several signature musical elements are used in their choruses. These features include singing in unison rather than parts, declamatory rhythms, conjunct, chant-like melodic contours disrupted by small intervallic leaps, and short phrases. However, varying the tempo markings and intervallic leaps radically changes their dramatic impact. In a slow tempo, these elements sound meditative and chant-like. In a fast tempo, however, the result is kinetic and dramatic. I examine several of these choral passages below.

Choral Example 1: The Red Centre Prelude

At the end of the Symposium Prologue, the Handmaids sing their first chorus from offstage. Their text is the Genesis passage from chapter 3 ("Behold my Handmaiden") and they sing in unison. In contrast to the shifting tonality of Offred's opening aria, this unison chorus is harmonically stable, singing a conjunct melody (mm. 75-89) that outlines the 5th, 6th and tonic degrees of the C major scale (the pitches G4, C5, and C6). The melodic contours in these brief phrases, each two or three measures in length, feature repeated notes interrupted by an intervallic leap of a perfect 5th.

As chorus master, I would encourage a resonant, full-bodied tone with an even, moderately loud dynamic throughout, similar to psalmody with a recitational tone. The rhythm is slow and even, exclusively quarter and half notes in an Andante tempo (quarter note pulse of 92). A conducting gesture that emphasizes more horizontal motion than vertical height in the right hand will convey this smooth, even quality of sound. The left hand can indicate syllabic stress, which generally coincides with strong beats and higher pitches in each phrase. The timpani provides a diatonic countermelody to the Handmaids' unison chorus melody, alternating between the 1st and 5th scale degrees of the C major scale, while the strings drone a C major triad. Yet this chorus is not static; for the final phrase of the Genesis text, the chorus's melody outlines the interval of F# and C#, resulting in bitonality against the continued C Major triadic drone in the strings (mm. 75-89). I would rehearse the chorus for consistent volume, steady rhythm, and legato phrasing. If the intervallic leaps disrupt the steady, even quality in the first few rehearsals, I would rehearse the handmaids' chorus on a unison before reinserting the pitches.

Example 4.2. *The Handmaid's Tale*, vocal score, mm. 73-84.

In the Red Centre Prelude, Act one, scene 1 (mm. 106-199) that immediately follows, however, these same musical elements are used to a different effect. The stage setting is a classroom, and Aunt Lydia is teaching Gilead's commandments to the Handmaids (e.g., "Thou shalt not steal," "Thou shalt not commit adultery.") In reference to the responsorial style of psalmody (a soloist alternating verses with the chorus), this Handmaids chorus repeats in unison every short phrase sung to them by Aunt Lydia (mm. 106-139).

Like the opening chorus, these melodic phrases contain several repeated notes followed by an intervallic leap. Unlike the consonant interval of a perfect 5th in the Prologue, however, the featured interval in this chorus is the dissonant tritone (G#4 to D5). In addition, the fast tempo marking of "Presto feroce" (quarter note = 144) gives intensity to the quarter and eighth note rhythms. As the phrasing between Lydia and the chorus of handmaids frequently overlaps, the

chorus master must rehearse the chorus to enter confidently on their "offbeat" entrances, which are further complicated by the frequent metric modulations between 4/4 and 5/4 in this chorus.

As chorus master, I would call for equal intensity between Aunt Lydia and the chorus of Handmaids in this responsorial exchange. Ruders deliberately composed Aunt Lydia's vocal line with a high tessitura to give her a shrill quality,[188] and the handmaids' chorus must match this quality with a bright tone, clear vowels, crisp consonants, precise rhythms, and confident entrances. The frequent metrical shifts between 5/4 and 4/4, as well as entrances on weak beats, make this section a good candidate for speaking the text in rhythm. The chorus master's conducting gesture must clearly indicate each of these entrances, as the chorus will depend on his entrance cues in the early stages of rehearsal. Unlike the opening, intonational chorus, the conducting gesture must be more compact, with more vertical motion and rebound energy to reflect the rhythmic intensity. These conducting cues may speed the choristers' learning curve in rehearsals. In performance however, their memorization and familiarity with the passage will make specific choral cues unnecessary.

[188] Rico, "Interview with Poul Ruders and Dale Johnson."

Example 4.3. *The Handmaid's Tale*, vocal score, mm. 116-20.

  The Handmaids' recitation of commandments escalates into Offred's confession of the

teenage abortion she had after she was raped by a gang (m. 144). The responsorial format

continues, with the Handmaids questioning Offred in rhythmic, eighth note accusations ("Why

did you do it"). Notably, the chorus in this section no longer sings in unison. They respond in

dissonant harmonies such as a minor second interval (m. 147-148) or a major seventh interval

(Ab4 and G5), resulting in additional tritone dissonance between the G5 and the C# in the orchestral accompaniment.

Here, the chorus master must rehearse for melodic precision, as dissonant intervals make for more challenging entrances. In m. 147, the chorus enters on the minor second interval of D#5 and E5. In rehearsal, I would recommend that choristers find their note from the orchestra's trilling of E with its lower chromatic neighbor (D#). Although Lydia's preceding phrase also contains an E5, it does not make for as accessible of a cue because of its quickly moving, chromatic melodic contour. Conversely, for their next entrances (m. 153 and m. 157), the chorus may find it easier to cue from the ending notes of Lydia's phrase (A4 and G#4) for their major seventh opening interval (Ab4 and G5), rather than the orchestra drone of C# and the sixteenth-note string ostinato of C#, F x and G#. As in the preceding chorus, the conducting gesture is compact, with rhythmic energy and rebound.

Example 4.4. *The Handmaid's Tale*, vocal score, mm. 145-48.

Act one, scene 1 ends with the chorus of Aunts singing Gilead's equivalent of the Beatitudes (m. 203-222) (e.g., "Blessed are the meek for theirs is the Republic of Gilead, Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God, Blessed are the silent for they shall hear God"). Similar to the recitation tone in the Handmaids' opening choruses, the Aunts sing stepwise, albeit chromatic, ascending and descending unison phrases that outline, and mostly end, on B4.

As chorus master, I would call for a dramatic, focused tone color to emphasize the role played by the Aunts in the story. That sternness in timbre is matched in the unrelenting, even quarter-note rhythms in their phrases. I would also rehearse the chorus of Aunts for pitch independence. At the beginning of this chorus, the timpani outlines the 5th and tonic of the B minor scale, like the recitation and intonation tones of a chant, and the unison handmaids' chorus continually begins new phrases on F# that ascend in chant-like, stepwise fashion to the tonic B. Yet as if to question the sincerity of their worship, Ruders adds modal mixture, alternating the D natural of the minor scale with the D# of the parallel B Major scale. This D# appears in some of the handmaids' phrases, as well as a recurring orchestral motive played after each of their phrases. The Aunts' singing must remain as confident in this section, despite the chromaticism. A smooth, more horizontal conducting gesture will invite a smooth, confident vocal quality from the chorus.

Example 4.5. *The Handmaid's Tale*, vocal score, mm. 206-17.

Choral Example 2: Act one, scene 3 (Offred's Bedroom)

When Offred first meets Serena Joy, Commander Fred's wife, Serena Joy, she can't place

why Serena Joy seems vaguely familiar. As Offred is shown her bedroom, she realizes that

Serena is a former gospel singer whom she had seen singing a televised performance of

"Amazing Grace." She had been sharing a hotel room with Luke when Serena came on the

television. In her own room, Serena Joy inserts a videotape of this performance, and the vocal

melody beings in D Major, accompanied by the organ and a diatonic, four-part choral harmonization. Offred simultaneously experiences a flashback to the hotel room in "The Time Before."

An offstage SSAA wordlessly harmonizes Serena's performance of "Amazing Grace" with four-part humming (Example 4.6). Yet their contribution does not make this familiar tune sound hymn-like. Rather, this rendition sounds expressionistic and frenetic because of textural, rhythmic and harmonic tension between the soloists, the chorus, and the orchestra. This tension begins with the 2/4 time signature: since Amazing Grace is in a triple meter, its notation in a duple meter results in frequent ties across the bar line that do not coincide with downbeats of the 2/4 measures. The choir provides four-part harmonization to Serena Joy's solo, but in a duple pulse.

Adding to this complex texture are The Double and Luke, engaged in a sung dialogue during Serena Joy's performance. The couple sings in bursts of eighth notes and in short, irregular phrase lengths. Their syllabic dialogue interrupts the smooth rhythms and melismatic text setting of "Amazing Grace." Harmonically, the couple is also singing in a different tonal center than Serena Joy. They share the same modality as the orchestra. The orchestra adds rhythmic and harmonic tension with eighth-note ostinati patterns in a modality of four flats (identified either as Bb dorian, based on the low orchestra Bb eighth notes in mm. 699-717; or Eb mixolydian, supported by the shift to an orchestral Eb pedal tone in mm. 718-859). Thus, the bitonality and rhythmic stratification between the soloists, the chorus and the orchestra results in a frenetic, slightly insane rendition of this well-known hymn.

Example 4.6. *The Handmaid's Tale*, vocal score, mm. 711-16.

Example 4.6. The Handmaid's Tale, vocal score, mm. 711-16 (continued).

As chorus master, I would rehearse the chorus for absolute rhythmic independence from

Serena Joy's melody. Although not quite as rhythmically active as Luke and The Double, the

chorus sings chords on every quarter note beat. They are not quite as noticeable in the texture,

however, because they are only humming. Nevertheless, the choral sound must be warm, full-bodied and resonant. The conducting beat pattern is in one, due to the rapid tempo and 2/4 time signature. This makes it even more important for the chorus master to indicate the phrasing and melodic contour to the chorus through gestural variations, such as using the left hand, using a circular pattern, or changing the plane of the conducting ictus. The chorus must also have the independence to hold their diatonic, D Major tonality against the orchestra's bitonal accompaniment. Although Serena's melody shares this key of D Major, the orchestra's Eb pedal points create harmonic ambiguity. Fortunately, the chorus receives some tonal support from the organ, which is also firmly rooted in the key center of D Major.

Like Ruders' recurring use of the opening three choruses in the Prelude, the chorus returns to the four-part harmonization of the "Amazing Grace" text several more times in the opera. In Act one, scene 10 (m. 1876) (p. 137/248) a four-part, SATB chorus since an excerpt during the monthly impregnation ritual (mm. 1876-1883). It returns in Act two, scene 3, during the Commander's sexual encounters with Offred.

Choral Example 3: Act one, scene 10 (Joy's Sitting Room)

In this scene, four choral groups join forces with Aunt Lydia and Janine, a Handmaid, to participate in the birthing of Janine's baby. In a nod to *cantus firmus* technique, the Guards intone a low, declamatory setting of Joshua 1:2-5 in Latin. [189] The text describes God's assurance to Joshua and the Israelite tribes, living in exile, that he would deliver land to them.[190] The guards intone in quarter note rhythms on Db3. The orchestra supports them in the same modality

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[189] (" . . . *Surge, et transi Jordanem istum tu et omnis populus tecum, in terram, quam ego dabo filiis Israël. 3 Omnem locum, quem calcaverit vestigium pedis vestri, vobis tradam, sicut locutus sum Moysi. 4 A deserto et Libano usque ad fluvium magnum Euphraten, omnis terra Hethæorum usque ad mare magnum contra solis occasum erit terminus vester. 5 Nullus poterit vobis resistere cunctis diebus vitæ tuæ : sicut fui cum Moyse, ita ero tecum : non dimittam, nec derelinquam te*.").

[190] See "Joshua 1," MIT. http://web.mit.edu/jywang/www/cef/Bible/NIV/NIV_Bible/JOSH+1.html. Accessed Feb. 14, 2019.

of Db Lydian. In contrast, the chorus of Handmaids, Wives, and Aunts sings an English text on declamatory, eighth note rhythms in the tonal center of G Major.

The Handmaids coach Janine with breathing cues, providing a bitonal counterpoint against the Db intoned by the guards. The Aunts sing the text of Genesis 3:16 "Unto the women he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow shall bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband." There is also a brief quotation from George Frideric Handel's (1685-1759) oratorio, *Messiah* (1741), on the text "For Unto Us a Child Is Born." This chorus also reappears later in the opera, including in Act two, scene 5: The Wall.

As chorus master, I would rehearse the choruses separately, according to their respective tonal centers, to ensure their confidence once they are combined into the bitonal texture. The chorus of Guards receives harmonic support from the orchestra, particularly from the Db pedal point. In contrast, the Handmaids, Wives and Aunts outline G major triads, a distant key from the orchestra's tonal center of Db Lydian. (The only common tones between Db Lydian and G Major are G and C). As a result, their intonation depends upon internal tuning within their three-part, triadic texture.

I would request a resonant, legato line from the quarter note melody sung by the Guards. Their tone must be steady and darker that the choruses of Handmaids, Wives, and Aunts who sing triadic harmonies in the opposing tonal center of G major and in more rhythmically active phrases. The Guards enter a full measure before the others, in m.2116, so the chorus master's conducting gesture can indicate a smooth, legato pattern before switching focus to the Handmaids, Wives and Aunts in m.2117, who starkly contrast the droning quality of the Guards with a brighter timbre and rhythmically active eighth-note recitations.

Example 4.7. *The Handmaid's Tale*, vocal score, mm. 2116-17.

Example 4.7. The Handmaid's Tale, vocal score, mm. 2116-17 (continued).

Conclusion

Offred's interactions with the choruses of Aunts, other Handmaids, and Guards help us to see the dangers of the Republic of Gilead more clearly. It is the chorus master's responsibility to bring Gilead's social classes to life. If the choruses of Handmaids, Aunts, Wives and Guards are not dramatically convincing, Atwood's warnings about the dangers of religious intolerance and absolute power will lose their urgency. The opera's portrayals of the harm inflicted upon both

society and the individual by a theocratic state are meant to be shocking, prompting the audience into thoughtful reflection or dialogue.

Opera can be a medium for social change, and the chorus master plays an important responsibility in this mission. If this seems idealistic, consider that the fictional government of Gilead was inspired by real life events: Atwood wrote her novel after making a trip to Afghanistan in 1978 and witnessing the ensuing revolution in Iran, which established the theocracy of the Ayatollah Khomeini. As Atwood explains, "The inclination toward tyranny, the wielding of absolute power by the few over the many, knows no ideological boundaries and is not confined to one time or space."[191]

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[191] David Sander, "Minnesota Opera's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Issuu*, June 16, 2014, https://issuu.com/minnesotaopera/docs/handmaid503 (Accessed Feb. 14, 2019): 10-14.

CHAPTER 5. A DRAMATIC ANALYSIS OF *DEAD MAN WALKING*

Introduction

Dead Man Walking (2000), composed by Jake Heggie (b. 1961), premiered at the San

Francisco Opera in October 2000. Its libretto, by playwright Terrence McNally (b. 1938), draws

from two sources: *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the

United States*, a 1993 non-fiction book by Sister Helen Prejean, C.J.S. (b. 1939) and *Dead Man

Walking*, a 1995 Academy Award winning film directed and adapted for the screen by Tim

Robbins (b.1958).[192] Sister Helen's book recounts her volunteer work in the 1980s as a spiritual

advisor to two convicted murderers at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola) in West

Feliciana Parish, Louisiana.[193] The main characters in both the film (Matthew Poncelet) and the

opera (Joseph De Rocher) are fictional composites of the real-life personalities described in

Sister Helen's book.[194]

As in *Silent Night* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Dead Man Walking* portrays characters in

conflict over opposing fundamental beliefs. In this story, the divisive issue is capital punishment.

Through the musical genre of opera, composer Jake Heggie hoped to contextualize both sides of

this debate: "The opera did what we had hoped: it moved and surprised people and brought them

into a dialogue about something they had perhaps only considered in the abstract."[195]

The disagreement over capital punishment in *Dead Man Walking* plays out nonviolently,

within the constraints of the American criminal justice system. This is a stark contrast to the

violent expressions of conflict in *Silent Night* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, where the settings are

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[192] Sean C. Teets, "A Stylistic Analysis of Jake Heggie's Opera: *Dead Man Walking*," PhD diss., University of Northern Colorado, 2007 (ProQuest AAT 3271027): 5-6.
[193] Sister Helen Prejean, "Official Website of Sister Helen Prejean," http://www.prejean.org, Accessed Feb. 18, 2019.
[194] Id.
[195] Jake Heggie, "Minnesota Opera's *Dead Man Walking*," Jan. 16, 2018, https://issuu.com/ minnesotaopera/docs/lowresforref_prg_mnop_dmw_0118 (Accessed Feb. 17, 2019): 11.

World War I and a fictional, post-coup theocracy, respectively. Nevertheless, the emotional stakes run just as deeply.

These emotional stakes come to a head in the courtroom scene in Act one, scene 7. Joseph's final appeal strategy from his Death Row sentence will be determined at this court hearing. Despite his conviction for the brutal murders of two Louisiana teenagers, Joseph continues to maintain he is innocent. Joseph's mother testifies on his behalf, acknowledging that "nothing excuses the terrible thing my Joe has been convicted of (m.1601-1604)," but pleading for Joseph's life because she believes "there is good there, too (m.1614-1618)." The parents of the murdered teenagers, in contrast, firmly believe that Joseph's death is warranted in the name of justice. Sister Helen Prejean, who only agreed to be Joseph's spiritual advisor in the preceding scene (Act one, scene six) is caught in the middle. She is struggling to discern the guidance that God would want her to offer to both sides.

When the court denies Joseph's final appeal, Sister Helen's predicament comes to a head as she is leaving the courthouse. The victims' parents angrily confront Sister Helen in the parking lot (Act one, scene 8), demanding an explanation for her efforts to save Joe's life: "You don't know what it's like to lose a child" (m.1835-1901). Sister Helen, asserting that "only human compassion can save Joe" (m.1811-1814), apologizes and asks them to pray with her (m.1910-1912). The parents, however, angrily refuse, with one parent shouting, "I don't think we want the same thing, Sister" (m.1913-1915).

The chorus plays a vital role in *Dead Man Walking*. As children, nuns, inmates or guards, the various chorus groupings collectively add realism to the given circumstances of time and place. For example, in Act one, scene 1, the children's chorus contextualizes the volunteer work done by Sister Helen's order at Hope House, a children's shelter, by singing an original folk-like

melody, "He Will Gather Us Around." In Act one, scene 5, an unruly chorus of inmates singing a repeated phrase, "Woman on the tier," heightens the intimidation felt by Sister Helen during her first visit to visit Joseph at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Various solo inmates also emerge from the texture in this scene, shouting epithets at Sister Helen as she is escorted to the prison's visiting room.

Yet the most important contributions of the chorus in *Dead Man Walking* are psychological and symbolic. The first time we see this psychological use of the chorus is in Aone, scene 9, where Sister Helen collapses in exhaustion at a vending machine. Her fatigue and hunger are understandable, and she has had a very stressful morning attending Joseph's final appeal hearing, only to be confronted immediately afterwards in the parking lot outside the courthouse by the victim's parents. Three groups of choristers– the children from Hope House, the other sisters from Sister Helen's order, and the male prison inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary – give voice to the internal conflict playing out in Sister Helen's thoughts regarding her role as Joseph's spiritual advisor. Capital punishment is an issue without any middle ground, as it places a life at stake. Some, like Sister Helen, believe that only God may pass ultimate judgment. Others, such as the victims' parents, cannot see past their own grief and need for retribution and a sense of justice. Heggie's psychological use of separate choral characterizations perfectly illustrates this debate. Three choral scenes are examined in greater detail below.

Choral Example 1: Act one, scene 1 (Hope House)

Heggie's choral writing utilizes musical themes and motives that return throughout the opera, sometimes only as fragments, sometimes in other vocal lines or in the orchestra. Solos and duets often interrupt or join the choristers. Heggie presents the first of these recurrent themes in Act one, scene 1, with the original hymn tune, "He will gather us around." The initial motive of

this melody, "He will gather us around," returns as a fragment many times throughout the opera, vocally and/or orchestrally, including the Act one finale.

In this opening scene, Heggie displays his characteristic approach to texture and form. He presents the hymn tune four times in various combinations: as an *a cappella* solo by Sister Helen, as a duet between Sister Helen and Sister Rose, as a chorus by the children of Hope House, and in other solo/duet/choral combinations. The solos and duets also add new musical material. As a result, the form is not strophic, but more closely resembles a rondo.

Significantly, the hymn melody is immediately recognizable in every appearance because of its musical structure. Its phrasing is balanced (via two-measure units that combine into larger units and a total length of eight measures); the rhythmic pacing of every two-measure unit begins with more activity but ends in longer rhythmic values (typically a sustained half note); and the melody is characteristic of the hymn genre in its diatonic and predominantly stepwise melodic contour. The melody also outlines the tonic triad (with an instance of blues color added by a lowered third in the seventh measure). Even the lyrics are repetitive, with a simple rhyme scheme: "He will gather us around, all around. He will gather us around. By and by. You and I. All around Him. Gather us around." These lyrical melodic characteristics and recognizable rhythmic patterns result in an arioso-style hymn melody that is easily referenced when it returns later in the opera.

Texturally, solos and duets interrupt and/or intensify the choral texture in this scene. Sister Helen introduces the short hymn melody in F Major, singing *a cappella* and with free rhythm (mm. 121-128), pursuant to Heggie's tempo indication of "Slowly and freely – inflected in an easy, gospel style." After Sister Helen's expressive, *a cappella* introduction of the hymn melody (mm. 121-128), the children of Hope House start clapping in rhythm (m. 129). After

some encouragement from Sister Helen, the children then sing the first recurrence on the same lyrics (mm. 139-148) but in the tonal center of E Major. With Sister Helen leading and the children responding, Heggie creates an antiphonal texture that references the "call and response" performance practice of gospel music.

For the second recurrence of the hymn melody, Sister Helen seamlessly modulates back to the opening tonality of F Major, adding the lyrics of the next verse (mm. 149-155). The children join in the second half of each four-measure phrase on this verse. Before Sister Helen and the children finish this verse, however, Sister Rose gently interrupts, noting that Sister Helen had accidentally altered the hymn tune (by omitting a measure). Sister Rose leads a repeat of this verse, duetting with Sister Helen and joined by the children's chorus, and extending the length of this third recurrence to eleven measures (m. 162-172). After a brief codetta duetted between Sister Rose and Sister Helen (mm. 172-178), the children sing the final recurrence of the hymn melody (mm. 179-195) in F# Major, with Sisters Rose and Helen providing virtuosic descants.

As chorus master, I would rehearse the children's chorus with more pedagogical terms than I use when working with an adult chorus. To encourage vowel connectivity and cohesive consonant rhythms, I would have the children speak the text slowly and arrhythmically, then in rhythm. I would model both elongated vowels and crisp, rhythmic consonants for them. The folk-like quality of this hymn melody is also enhanced by a buoyant articulation, accomplished via a slightly emphasized articulation of the consonants on every beat. A concise, vertical and rhythmic conducting gesture will also convey this folk-like rhythm to the children. For developing a bright tone color, I would discuss the "happy" message of the text. Finally, I would rehearse the musical cues and provide enough repetition in rehearsals to ensure the comfort with

the increasing complexity of this scene: the initial unison, strophe develops into two-part

counterpoint, and soloists interweave and interrupt the choral texture.

Example 5.1. *Dead Man Walking*, vocal score, Act one, mm. 151-62.

Example 5.1. *Dead Man Walking*, vocal score, Act one, mm. 151-62 (continued).

Choral Example 2: Act one, scene 9 (The Death Row Visiting Room)

In the Death Row Visiting Room scene, three groups of choristers – the children from Hope House, Sister Rose and other sisters from Sister Helen's order, and the male prison inmates – give voice to Sister Helen's internal dialogue.

As Sister Helen sits alone, she hears the voices of Sister Rose, the other sisters, and the children from Hope House singing "He Will Gather Us Around." Sister Helen joins the texture, adding the melodic descant we heard in the Act one, scene 1 performance of this hymn tune. This time, however, she adds new text to the hymn descant, repeating the advice she offered Joseph in the previous scene, "The truth will set you free" (mm. 2524-25).

Example 5.2. *Dead Man Walking*, vocal score, Act one, mm. 2259-61.

The children begin the next strophe of the hymn melody (m. 2259), but it turns out to be a codetta on "All around Him gather us a round." The inmates add a countermelody (m. 2261), singing a variation of the melodic motive they introduced in Act one, scene 5 ("Woman on the tier"). The motorcycle cop that stopped Sister Helen on her drive to the prison in Act one, scene 2 also appears (m. 2262), singing a fragmented motive from that earlier scene ("Say a prayer for her").

As the children finish their motivic tag, Joseph enters the texture, repeating the melodic motive he sang when he first requested Sister Helen to be his spiritual advisor, ("Help me! They're trying to kill me, Sister.") The inmates expand into four-part TTBB harmony and the chorus of Sisters from Helen's order being a new strophe of "He will gather us around." Joseph's mother enters, repeating a fragment of the plea she made at the final appeal hearing ("Don't kill my Joe" [m. 2274]).

In a dramatic shift from quadruple to triple meter, the Sisters chorus begins a new strophe of the hymn tune in 3/4 meter, while the parents repeat their accusation from the parking lot in 9/8 meter ("You don't know what it's like" [m. 2277]). They are joined by the inmates, whose motive has also been adapted to the new triple meter (m. 2278). The choral groups, parents' quartet, and soloists culminate in a sustained, half-note exclamation in m. 2287. Their voices drop out, and Father Greenville appears, speaking the advice he earlier gave to Sister Helen, ("You're way over your head, Sister." [m. 2287-2289]). Sister Helen again protests, "Dear Lord, don't let me fail this man," and she is again interrupted by the choristers exclaiming "Ah" or "No!". Father Greenville's sole advice to Sister Helen is to "Go home." After a final choral interjection, all voices and instruments drop out of the texture, save for an orchestral tremolo (m.

2296) and Sister Helen singing a stepwise, descending melodic "Ah" that trails away, as if in defeat.

Example 5.3. *Dead Man Walking*, vocal score, Act one, mm. 2275-77.

Thus, against Sister Helen's sung assertion that "The truth will set you free," each choral group in this scene sings the music they introduced in previous scenes. The children and sisters

sing "He Will Gather Us Around," while the inmates sing "Woman on the tier." This creates a complexity of musical texture symbolic of Sister Helen's internal conflict over accepting Joseph's invitation to be his spiritual advisor. In a larger sense, Heggie's use of three separate groups of choristers in this scene symbolizes the irreconcilable viewpoints in the policy debate regarding capital punishment.

As chorus master, I would affirm the contrasting tone colors and rhythmic qualities that each choral group had previously introduced: a darker, fuller tone and heavier, quasi-tenuto articulation from the inmates singing "Woman on the tier," and a brighter tone and more buoyant articulation from the sisters and children singing "He Will Gather Us Around." A single conducting gesture cannot fully encompass these contrasting colors and rhythmic qualities, nor the complex texture resulting from the overlay of these choruses of inmates and children against the parents' quartet and the solo lines of Sister Helen, Sister Rose, Joseph, and Joseph's mother. Consequently, speaking the text in rhythm would simplify the texture and allow choristers to hear the rhythmic overlay in rehearsal. Harmonically, both choruses receive support from the orchestra, so adding the pitches should not be difficult after the spoken rhythms are mastered. The conducting gesture can also cue entrances, providing further guidance.

Choral Example 3: Act two, scene 8 (The Execution)

The final scene of the opera, Act two, scene 8, is Joseph's execution. As in the Act one finale, the choruses are again utilized for their psychological impact, with layered entrances that combine into a complex texture and that build to an emotional climax. The form is through-composed.

At the beginning of this scene, the prison chaplain, Father Greenville, intones the text of the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father who are in heaven") on a repeated C4. In a reference to

responsorial psalmody, an ensemble comprising the chorus of Sisters and Mothers, the parents, and two guards repeats Father Greenville's intonations in chanted octaves on Cs. The four parents and two guards closely imitate Father Greenville's motivic rhythms. The Sisters and Mothers are offset from the parents and guards, often by a half measure, and their chanted octave rhythms are slightly less active.

Example 5.4. *Dead Man Walking*, vocal score, Act two, mm. 1573-75.

As chorus master, I would again invite the tone colors used by the inmates' chorus and the chorus of sisters and mothers in their previous scenes. The diatonic harmonies are supported by the orchestra, but the textural overlay of soloists and ensembles again results in rhythmic complexity. Speaking the text in rhythm will again simplify this texture in rehearsals. I would also speak the rhythm of the parents' quartet while the choristers are singing to demonstrate its function as a point of imitation against the ensemble of the parents and guards. The two-part chorus of inmates has different text and rhythms, but must also be spoken to reveal the textural overlay. My conducting gesture would attend to entrances when each group is separately speaking its text in rhythm. When combined, however, these choruses must independently execute these rhythms, because my conducting gesture would only convey dramatic highpoints in the phrasing, such as the shifts from triple to quadruple meter.

As in the Act one finale, Heggie gradually layers solos, duets and choral groups into the texture, each utilizing previous motivic fragments. Against the intoned text of the Lord's Prayer, Sister Helen and Joe sing a duet in declamatory, quasi-recitative rhythms and short phrases ("You O.K., Sister Helen?" "Christ is here, Joe. Remember. Remember to look at me."). The Warden enters in measure 1572, singing "Dead man walking!" to the motive he previously introduced at the beginning of Act two. A two-part chorus of inmates repeats this text but varies the musical motive a measure later (m. 1573). As the text of the Lord's Prayer progresses, the inmates sing Joseph de Rocher's full name and inmate number ("95281") in m. 1577. In a brief, two-measure reference (mm. 1583-84), the inmates sing the "He Will Gather Us Around" hymn melody, but in the parallel minor tonal center of F Minor.[196] Against this texture, the orchestra plays in hushed eighth notes on the beat, providing the rhythm for Joseph's final walk. The

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[196] The tune was introduced in Act one, scene one in the tonal center of F Major.

instrumentation includes trumpets, timpani, harp, piano, and string basses in this scene. Later, the harp and violins reference the "He Will Gather Us Around" motive.

The scene builds dramatic momentum when the entire ensemble adopts the text of the Lord's Prayer. The inmates sing "Deliver us" but to the melodic motive of "Woman on the tier." The entire ensemble builds to a forte on "Deliver us from evil," sustaining an altered F# chord (containing both the diatonic and lowered chordal 3rd) in mm. 1590-91. The meter then modulates to 6/8 for a dramatic codetta, sung in duples, on "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen." This codetta begins with antiphonal repetition in the tonal center of F minor but progresses to a homophonic D minor chord on "heaven" (m. 1600) that is sustained for four measures. For the concluding "Amen," the meter modulates to 10/8, the tonal center modulates to D minor, and the ensemble sings octave D's.

As chorus master, I would emphasize the cohesive diction and rhythm required when the texture simplifies and becomes homorhythmic in m.1590. Since the harmony in this climactic moment is an altered F# chord (both the lowered and raised third of the chord are present), I would rehearse the chorus of Sisters and Mothers in pairs, allowing them to initially tune only to one other vocal line. The same approach will benefit the F# altered chord sung by the chorus of inmates. I would also rehearse the pacing of the crescendo to ensure it is smoothly and evenly executed.

Example 5.5. *Dead Man Walking*, vocal score, Act two, mm. 1589-91.

      At this point in the drama, the entire ensemble has witnessed Joseph's confession and walk to the execution room. It is truly a climactic musical moment, as evidenced by the *forte* dynamic, quasi-homorhythmic and dense texture, sustained rhythms, and the text itself ("Deliver us from evil" is the end of the Lord's Prayer). Yet it is not the climax of the story. Every person

must meet death alone, and Heggie's score acknowledges this fact. As Joseph is strapped to the

execution table, the chorus quietly, wordlessly hums an A pedal (m. 1665), accompanied in the

orchestra via an F pedal point and a sustained chordal cluster played at a triple *pianissimo*

dynamic. They continue humming while Joseph asks for the parent's forgiveness, stopping only

when he is administered the lethal injection. In this moment, the opera offers not music, but

silence. The only interruption is mechanical: the beeping of the heart monitor that fades away as

Joseph passes. Sister Helen approaches and, after a moment, sings a final, moving refrain of "He

will gather us around" *a cappella*.

Example 5.6. *Dead Man Walking*, vocal score, Act two, mm. 1671-78.

Conclusion

Even in our democratic society, we struggle in our response to crimes of brutality. The surviving parents of the victims in this story, two Louisiana teenagers, believe only capital punishment will achieve justice, and the court system has sided with them. Yet the dialogue that unfolds between Sister Helen and Joseph De Rocher calls into question whether we, as a society, should allow the criminal justice system to serve as our *de facto* moral compass. The law protects our right of free speech, but not our feelings. How then, are we to conduct public debate over this, or other equally sensitive issues?

The dramatic genius of this opera is that it contextualizes the debate over capital punishment for the audience without passing judgment. Will the audience identify with the bright and hopeful children's chorus, who reside at the aptly named Hope House? Or will they dismiss this debate as irreconcilable and relate more to the hopelessness personized by the chorus of inmates? If the chorus master has realized the dramatic potential of each of these choruses, it will be up to each audience member to apply his own heart and mind. This opera reminds us that each of us has a responsibility to act in accordance with our conscience.

CHAPTER 6. A DRAMATIC ANALYSIS OF *SILENT NIGHT*

Introduction

Kevin Puts (b. 1972) composed *Silent Night* (2011), with a libretto by Mark Campbell, as a commission for The Minnesota Opera's New Works Initiative.[197] It musically dramatizes a historical event — the spontaneous Christmas Eve truce between regiments of Scottish (under British command),[198] French, and German soldiers in World War I (1914-1918).[199] And, while it frames a significant historical moment, it also contains an underlying message of social justice that ties this past event to the present. This message, in the words of the composer, is "[t]hat it is distance, and a lack of familiarity with one another, that leads us to the atrocities of war; [t]hat once you see your sworn enemy as not so different from yourself, the whole thing falls apart."[200] This message especially resonates today, when tensions between opposing factions disproportionately escalate simply because people refuse to communicate with each other.

According to Allan E. Naplan, a former President and General Director of the Minnesota Opera, the Initiative's guiding principle is to ensure the relevance of opera, as an art form, to contemporary audiences by "explor[ing] the ideas, emotions and stories that unite and confront us as humans."[201] By agreeing to a temporary cease-fire in war time, the soldiers in *Silent Night*

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[197] *Silent Night,* premiered by the Minnesota Opera in November 2011, is a full-length opera based on the 2005 French film *Joyeux Noël*. See Kevin Puts, "*Silent Night*," Accessed Oct. 28, 2017, http://silentnightopera.com/.

[198] Approximately 688,000 Scotsmen served with the British Army during World War I. "VisitScotland – Scotland's National Tourist Organization," Accessed March 27, 2019, https://www.visitscotland.com/about/history/ww1-centenary/scottish-regiments/.

[199] Id. See also "VisitScotland – Scotland's National Tourist Organization," Accessed March 27, 2019, https://www.visitscotland.com/about/history/ww1-centenary (around 688,000 Scotsmen served with the British Army during World War I).

[200] See "Kevin Puts on *Silent Night*," Unison Media, https://youtu.be/lHs7EfchO_4, Accessed Feb. 7, 2019 ("I would say it was an enormous privilege to write *Silent Night*, and to make a statement through it, which I've always believed: That it is distance, and a lack of familiarity with one another, that leads us to the atrocities of war; That once you see your sworn enemy as not so different from yourself, the whole thing falls apart.").

[201] David Sanders. "Minnesota Opera's *Silent Night* Program," *Issuu*, Nov. 20, 2012, https://issuu.com/minnesotaopera/docs/mnopsilentnight. Accessed Feb. 13, 2019.

demonstrate how our shared humanity can be the basis for resolving our differences. As summarized by theatrical director Eric Simonson, the characters in *Silent Night* act as we would wish them to act, revealing the best part of our human nature: "In the midst of one of the most brutal and horrific wars in history, opposing armies disobey their generals, drop their weapons, walk out of their trenches, and exchange Christmas greetings. […] It's a cry against the insanity of war and evidence of our common humanity."[202]

Silent Night uses three separate choruses of soldiers, representing German, French, and Scottish (under British command) regiments. The choruses are essential to establishing the setting of a battlefield in World War I on the day before Christmas Eve. Each battalion asserts its nationalism by singing originally composed marching tunes in their native languages and in different tonal centers. The soldiers also portray the horrors of war in an extended, percussive, atonal, and wordless four-minute battle. Later, when they sing together in a common tonality in their subsequent actions and music, the soldiers demonstrate how the human potential for peaceful resolution is always present.

In portraying our common humanity, the choruses in *Silent Night* assume a symbolic role. The chorus provides several key characterizations of this theme throughout the opera: (1) the "Sleep" chorus; (2) the soccer game; and (3) the disbanding of the troops to the front line. The first characterization occurs after the initial battle, when the soldiers have withdrawn to their respective bunkers and their voices unintentionally combine into a collective lullaby, singing in a

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[202] See Eric Simonson, "Director's Notes," Minnesota Opera, https://mnopera.org/season/2018-2019/silent-night/directors-notes/?utm_source=wordfly&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=silent_night_preview_tix&utm_content=version_A (Accessed Feb. 13, 2019) ("The story of *Silent Night*, which is a familiar one to anyone with a cursory knowledge of World War I, gets at our heartstrings, because the characters act as we would wish them to act. In the midst of one of the most brutal and horrific wars in history, opposing armies disobey their generals, drop their weapons, walk out of their trenches, and exchange Christmas greetings. Here, in sharp contrast, we see the best part of our human nature. It's a cry against the insanity of war and evidence of our common humanity.").

common tonality. Later in the opera, during the spontaneous Christmas Eve truce, the three

troops reinforce their common humanity by playing a soccer game in no-man's land. At the end

of the opera, the leaders of the separate battalions, the German Kronprinz, the French General,

and a British Major, arrive to redeploy the German, French, and Scottish soldiers under their

respective commands to the front line as punishment for the "treasonous" cease-fire. As in the

"Sleep" chorus, the soldiers in all three bunkers, who are writing letters to their loved ones,

unwittingly demonstrate their shared human responses, describing the cease-fire as "the most

amazing thing" and an event they will "never forget" (mm. 707-747).

　　　Silent Night places unique musical and dramatic demands upon the soldiers' choruses,

representing Scottish, French and German forces. As described in one review, the music flows

"from declamation to a kind of flexible arioso to big ensembles, the tone varying from extreme

violence in the battle scene of Act one . . . to a tender wistfulness in later scenes, along with

original carols, marching tunes, and evocations of Mozart and Schubert."[203] How should the

chorus master structure rehearsals to meet these demands? I answer this question in my analysis

of three choral examples from *Silent Night* below.

Choral Example 1: The War Choruses (Prologue)

　　　There is no overture. The curtain raises to reveal three separate geographic locations

portrayed on stage: an opera house in Berlin, a small village church in Scotland, and an

apartment in Paris. In succession, the audience is introduced to the soloists in each geographic

locality. After each introduction, the audience hears soldiers singing their respective German,

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[203] Michael Anthony, "Puts: *Silent Night* (World Premiere)," *American Record Guide* 75, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 2012): 27-28 (Accessed February 19, 2018), https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/docview/1012152847?accountid=6766.

British, or French war chorus from offstage. Notably, the entrance of each offstage war chorus lacks a sense of downbeat, seeming to begin in the middle of the drama unfolding onstage.

Near the end of the Prologue, the three war choruses combine, gradually displacing the onstage soloists. Yet this combination of German, British, and French war choruses is not consonant. Despite shared commonalities of a two-part texture, diatonic intervals and march-like rhythmic syncopations in a simple duple meter, each fanfare retains its distinct language and tonality. The result is a simultaneous articulation of French, German and English texts in a polyphonic texture.

Specifically, the German war chorus, "*Der sieg Wird Unser*" ("The Victory is Ours"), is a thirty-bar, two-part, strophic setting in Gb major. Its tessitura is Db3-Eb4, with diatonic intervals frequently at the 3rd or 6th. The British war chorus, "Never Turn Your Back on the Union Jack," is a twenty-three bar, two-part setting in E major, through composed but with a final phrase that is repeated three times. It also contains frequent intervals of a 3rd or 6th in a comfortable tessitura of E3-E4. The offstage French chorus, "*Nous Battons*" ("We are fighting"), is a twenty-four bar, two-part setting in C Major, through composed but utilizing a repetitive two-measure rhythmic pattern of a dotted-quarter and an eighth note followed by a half note. Its tessitura is slightly higher than the other two choruses (C3- B4), with the two voices most frequently combining at the interval of an octave.

Harmonically, the settings are in distantly related tonal centers, as the comparison between the major keys of Gb, E and C results in differences of more than one chromatic sharp or flat. Throughout, the orchestra plays an octave G ostinato, harmonized by various doublings from the war choruses, and complemented by a virtuosic, march-like piccolo obbligato line. The

symbolism of each fanfare remaining musically and textually distinct sends a strong message of nationalism.

Since the concurrent onstage music is in a different meter and tonality,[204] each war chorus must be rehearsed for utmost confidence and independence. Fortunately, the musical style in each chorus facilitates this mastery, with harmony, rhythm and timbre in the style of a march. Each is a two-part, diatonic setting in simple duple meter. The diatonic intervals are frequently at the 3rd or 6th. The comfortable mid-range tessitura, mostly within an octave, suggests a vocal chest timbre of chest. Upbeat entrances (the anacrusis of beat 2) combine with dotted eighth and quarter note rhythms to emphasize the syncopated nature of a march. Finally, repetition in the music and text enhances the fanfare-like quality of each chorus. The entrance of each war chorus is discussed below.

The German War Chorus

The German chorus their offstage chorus shortly after a German general has walked onstage in a Berlin opera house (m.60) and interrupted the neo-Classical duet[205] performed by the characters Anna Sorensen and Nikolaus Spink. The general stops the orchestra from the stage and reads aloud from a letter in which the German Kaiser announces the start of World War I. During the general's announcement, the low strings enter with a dissonant, disjunct melody in

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[204] Against the offstage German war chorus in Gb major, the onstage music plays two contrapuntal melodies, ostensibly in C Major but also highly chromatic and disjunct, and in a 4/2 meter. During the English-language chorus in E major, the orchestra plays in the contrasting meter and tonality of 3/2 and C major, with a repeated half-note ostinato on E harmonized by different, chromatic dotted whole note chords. As during the other two war choruses, the onstage orchestral music clashes with the French war chorus, with two independent, slow-moving lines moving forming chromatic intervals in a 4/2 meter.

[205] The diatonic harmonies, transparent texture and articulations, symmetrical phrase lengths, and eighth-note harmonic accompaniment patterns suggest the style of Mozart. The reference is underscored by the instruction in m.6 accompanying the Allegretto tempo marking: "(in a Classical style)."

m.62, and in the distance, we hear an offstage German soldier's unit singing an original chorus, "*Der Sieg Wird Unser*" (The Victory Will Be Ours), in the unrelated key of Gb major.

Example 6.1. *Silent Night*, vocal score, Prologue, German war chorus, mm. 1-30.

This chorus, scored for two-part men's voices, has the tell-tale characteristics of a march: a simple-duple meter, diatonic intervals of 3rds, 4ths, and 5ths, syncopated dotted quarter and dotted eighth note rhythms, and a comfortable tessitura that highlights the male chest register. In the opera's storyline, this chorus is used to portray German soldiers headed off to war. As the soldiers have not yet been in battle, they are robust with anticipation.

As chorus master, I would explain that rhythmic drive, vitality and cohesion are essential in this characterization of untested soldiers who are still excited to head off to war. This rhythmic quality, in turn, requires precision in articulating the consonants. For initial consonants, slightly anticipating their pronunciation will ensure that the vowels line up on every beat. Emphasizing initial consonants in a robust, forte dynamic will also convey the quality of war chorus. For final consonants, a crisp and cohesive execution is required of every chorister. A duple conducting gesture that is compact yet rhythmically buoyant, will convey this march-like quality. Finally, I would encourage choristers to listen to the other vocal line. The chorus is a duet throughout, and

on its own, the intervals of diatonic thirds and sixths are easy to tune. However, it receives no harmonic support from the orchestra. The orchestral strings are playing chromatic, disjunct intervals in a different key signature (C major) and meter (4/2), as if unaware that the audience is witnessing multiple staging perspectives and hearing harmonic dissonance. This discordance is manageable because the German war chorus is sung offstage, allowing the choristers to hear themselves over the orchestra.

The British War Chorus

When the German soldiers' fanfare fades away, the scene switches to a village church in Scotland in m.77. Father Palmer is watching while Jonathan paints a statute of St. Michael. They are interrupted by Jonathan's older brother, William, who has a flyer announcing the start of WWI. William sings about the glory of enlisting and fighting alongside British troops. The scene ends with an off-stage chorus singing, "Never Turn Your Back on the Union Jack."

Example 6.2. *Silent Night*, vocal score, Prologue, British war chorus, mm. 1-23.

This chorus is also march-like in character. The soldiers sing in two-part intervals, diatonic to the key of E major, with characteristic dotted-eighth note syncopations in a simple-duple meter. As during the German fanfare, the orchestral strings and chimes are oblivious to the offstage soldiers' singing, playing in their own unrelated key (C major) and meter (3/2). As chorus master, I would again prioritize the rhythmic qualities of this chorus, particularly the

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uniform execution of initial and final consonants. I would also coach the singers to tune the diatonic intervals of 3rds and 6ths.

The French War Chorus

In another seamless transition in m.128, the stage lights switch to the third locale of the opening prologue, the Parisian apartment. Madeleine is upset that her husband, Lt. Audebert, is leaving her during her pregnancy with their first child to lead a battalion of French troops. Their argument, unresolved, fades away as offstage chorus of French soldiers sings "*Nous battons*" (We are fighting). The orchestra strings play throughout. Although the soldiers' diatonic, two-part chorus shares the same key (C major) as the orchestra, its rhythms and duple meter are utterly discordant with the stings' chromatic, disjunct intervals moving in half-note rhythms in 4/2 meter. As chorus master, my approach to this chorus would be similar to the considerations noted in the German and British soldiers' choruses.

Example 6.3. *Silent Night*, vocal score, Prologue, French war chorus, mm. 1-24.

The Combined War Choruses

After these successive introductions, soloists from all three of the locations (Nikolaus Spink, Father Palmer, Jonathan, William, and Lt. Audebert) simultaneously sing distinct melodies, creating a non-imitative, contrapuntal texture. They are joined by the fanfares of the German soldiers in m.211, the Scottish soldiers in m.217, and the French in m.225. Since the characters' music retains their respective tonal centers, the initial orchestral accompaniment is an octave ostinato pattern, melodically outlined in sixteenth notes. When the three soldiers' choruses join the characters in m.211, also singing in their respective keys, the orchestra doubles some of their melodies, resulting in a pantonal texture. Significantly, the soldiers ultimately drown out the soloists in m.226, continuing to sing their fanfares with ever-growing intensity and volume until m.255, when the soldiers' voices and the orchestra join in a fortissimo tone cluster, accompanied by the sound of an exploding bomb, marking the end of the Prologue.

As chorus master, I would utilize speaking the text in rhythm for the first several rehearsals of this passage. Although the melodic contours of each soldiers' chorus is fairly uncomplicated, the textural overlay of the German, English and French languages is not. Rhythmic speaking, absent the pitches, will reveal how the consonants of three different languages may threaten to undermine the rhythmic, march-like drive of these choruses. When pitches are added back in, I would then attend to the balance between the three different war choruses. As before, the core sound of these choruses must be robust and resonant to convey each unit's nationalistic pride. In the premiere of *Silent Night*, a cast of forty choristers filled the ranks of three separate soldiers' choruses. The comfortable, mid-range tessitura of each war chorus and sufficient number of choristers enables the requisite *forte* dynamic. Given their staggered entrances, the chorus master's conducting gesture can cue each entrance. Each chorus

has individual characteristics, caused by different phrase lengths, diction, and rhythmic

syncopations. Once all three choruses have combined, however, the conducting gesture should

not emphasize these differences, but rather, what is common to all three: a march-like, buoyant

rhythm and robust vocal quality.

Example 6.4. *Silent Night*, vocal score, Prologue, mm. 226-29.

The seamless transition into Act one is accomplished by the three war choruses

sustaining a pandiatonic cluster of whole notes, sung at *fortissimo* volume. The orchestra then

takes over, with only the sound of bombs, blasts, machine guns and the screams of men

interrupting four minutes of dissonant instrumental writing.[206] This four-minute simulation of

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[206] The seamless transition in m.255 from the Prologue into Act one, scene 1 is accomplished with chromatic, tonal cluster chords that give way to a pointillistic texture. The full orchestra, and especially the trumpets and percussion, simulates a WW1 battlefield in Belgium, near the French border. The orchestra creates dissonant harmonies through tremolos, rhythmically aggressive syncopations, and pandiatonic and/or chromatic clusters. The

battle presents a unique staging demand. The choreography of soldiers' cries and shouts, punctuated by percussive and shrill orchestral hits, must be carefully rehearsed due to its extended length and rhythmically precise interplay with the orchestra.
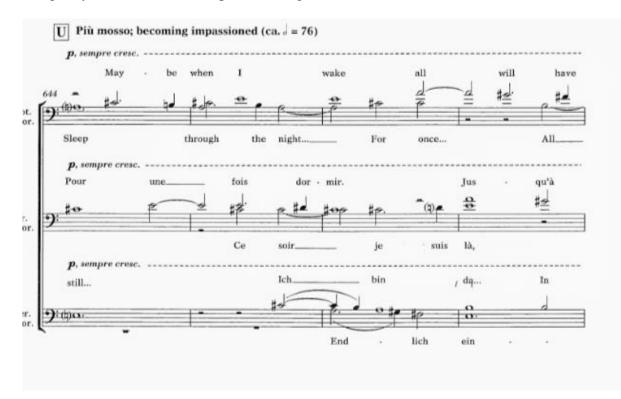
Choral Example 2: Act one, scene 2C (The "Sleep" Chorus)

In Act one, scenes 2A and 2B (mm. 412-556), the Scottish and French leaders assess their wounded after their unsuccessful, combined attempt to infiltrate the German bunker. Lt. Audebert sings an aria as he writes in his logbook (mm.556-616), recounting the day's casualties and addressing certain passages to his wife, Madeleine. His aria seamlessly transitions into the soldiers' "Sleep" chorus, marking the beginning of scene 2C in m.616.

After simulating the physical violence of battle, a very different demand is made upon the three soldiers' choruses. After a bloody day of fighting, then men prepare for sleep in their separate bunkers (three different sets simultaneously displayed on stage). From all three bunkers, the men sing of sleep. Snow starts to full, slowly at first, then increasing, lightly erasing the bodies of the corpses in no-man's land. As nightfall approaches, the opposing factions, separated by bunkers onstage, lift their voices in a lullaby. Unintentionally, their singing combines into a six-part lullaby. The Scottish, French and German troops have staggered entrances, separated by several measures (mm.616, 624, and 629, respectively). As in their opening march tunes, the soldiers from each bunker sing in two-part harmonies in their national languages (English, French and German).

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melodic, perfect fifth motive from the start of the opera also returns. The respective German, French, and Scottish bunkers are visible onstage, separated by an unoccupied no-man's land. Yet there is no singing. For the next four minutes, from m.257-388, the orchestra plays without interruption, joined only by the occasional battle cries and screams of the onstage soldiers. The scene ends when William gets shot running across no-man's land. Jonathan, unable to move William to safety, is forced to retreat back into the Scottish bunker, leaving William to die in no-man's land in m.411.

The music of the "Sleep" chorus reflects the commonality among the soldiers' thoughts. They sing about their wives or girlfriends, their fallen compatriots, their physical fatigue, and their fears about what may lie ahead. Although each solder sings in his own national language, the music is rhythmically and tonally cohesive. There is a single tonal center and the harmonies are diatonic. The symbolism is clear: differences observed on the battlefield have faded away, leaving only common human responses to nightfall.

Example 6.5. *Silent Night*, vocal score, mm. 644-47.

As chorus master, I would call for a different core sound for this "Sleep" chorus. Dramatically, the soldiers are preparing for sleep, so their vocal tone must be warm and supported by consistent breath support (constant air velocity). The rhythmic quality of this chorus must be precise but muted. Specifically, unlike the robust articulation of consonants in the war choruses, the consonants must be minimized to convey a smooth, lullaby quality sustained by legato vowels and the gentle, stepwise melodic contours in the voice leading. I would also

request staggered breathing, which creates the illusion of seamless, constant vocalism without the interruptions of inhalations. Given the textural overlay of three different languages, rhythmic speaking may also be beneficial to ensure that vowels and consonants are maximized and precisely timed. A conducting gesture must convey the legato quality of each phrase through smooth, horizontal motions. In addition, the left hand can cue the different vocal entrances of the French, German and Scottish soldiers.

At the beginning of this "Sleep" chorus, the troops share a common tonality of Db major, singing lush, diatonic harmonies in an Andante tempo in 3/2 meter, with gentle orchestral accompaniment. When the orchestra pauses to highlight the beautiful, lush vocal sonorities, the soldiers modulate together to the tonal center of A major. When the orchestra reenters in m. 662, the music returns to the tonal center of Db Major. Yet this orchestral reentrance feels more suspended than an arrival back in a home key. This is because the vocal sonorities outline a dominant suspended chord (Ab, Db and Eb, with an added 6th). This dramatically portrays the effect of sleep, where conscious time loses momentum and becomes suspended.

As chorus master, I would adjust the balance between the six-part vocal texture to mirror the changing harmonies, particularly when one voice part has a suspension or a tendency tone that resolves, such as a chordal seventh resolving down by a half-step, as in the Gb to F movement in the German chorus after the orchestra reenters in m. 662.

Example 6.6. *Silent Night*, vocal score, mm. 660-68.

The juxtaposition of this lullaby against the battlefield music that preceded it could not be

more pronounced. Warfare represents the epitome of disagreement, when differences have

become so antagonistic that leaders have opted for resolution determined by bloodshed and

physical victory over one's opponent. The dissonant, percussive, wordless music in the

battlefield reflected that antagonism. There could be no stronger commentary against that view

than a gentle, tonal lullaby with lush, diatonic harmonies. As a result, the "Sleep" chorus is one

of the most poignant moments in the opera, musically and dramatically. Its gentle pacing

prepares the audience for the spontaneous Christmas Eve truce that occurs in Act one, scene 5.[207]

Choral Example 3: Act two, scene 2 (Soldiers Writing Home)

Act two, scene 4 (m. 566) opens with duetting strings in chromatic, disjunct counterpoint.

Lt. Horstmayer confronts Nikolaus and Anna, ultimately ordering his men to arrest Nikolaus for

insubordination. Before they can follow out this order, Anna takes Nikolaus's hand and leads

him into no-man's land to seek asylum in the French bunker. The couple sings a duet, requesting

asylum from Lt. Audebert, who agrees.

After this duet, the focus in this scene then shifts to the soldiers in all three bunkers, who

are writing letters to their loved ones, describing the cease-fire as "the most amazing" thing, an

event they will "never forget" (mm.707-747). From the ranks of the chorus now emerge

individual solo lines, soldiers identified simply by their nationality and a number (e.g., "German

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[207] Scene 5, m. 1326, opens with a simultaneous portrayal of the Christmas Eve activities in all three bunkers. The audience sees the French soldiers sharing a meal, the Scottish soldiers drinking from a bottle of whiskey, and the German soldiers drinking schnapps and beer as they decorate the miniature Christmas trees. A Scottish soldier starts playing the bagpipe, and another solider begins singing a Scottish ballad. The sound of the bagpipe carries over no-man's land into the other bunkers, where the other soldiers stop to listen. At its conclusion, the Scottish soldiers cheer and insist on a repeat performance. This time, the performance elicits sung reactions inside the other bunkers. Inside the German bunker, Anna and Nikolaus have returned. Nikolaus sings a Christmas song loudly, and the Scottish bagpiper, hearing the melody, begins to accompany. Nikolaus moves to the top of the German, raising a Christmas tree in a friendly gesture, and the bagpiper rises in response. Soldiers from the other bunkers follow suit, lighting candles and standing atop their bunkers. Emboldened, Nikolaus moves into no-man's land, singing a Latin Christmas tune to the bagpiper's accompaniment. Lt. Horstmayer raises a white flag in truce and moves to return Nikolaus to the German bunker. Lt. Gordon and Lt. Audebert also cautiously move into no-man's land. The three leaders agree to a temporary truce only for the night of Christmas Eve, ending at dawn.

Later, the three lieutenants extend the truce until 3 p.m. on Christmas Day to permit burying of all their dead. Yet the audience wonders whether the troops would have resumed fighting had not the respective offices of the German Kronprinz, the French General, and a British Major intervened in Act two, scene 5, officially ending the cease-fire and disbanding their respective troops to the front line.

Soldier 3," Scottish Soldier 2"). Although they are singing in different languages, the individual melodies share a common tonal center, creating a texture of tonal counterpoint. As in the Prologue's "Sleep" chorus, the unified harmony is strongly symbolic. The cease-fire may have ended, but the soldiers still feel connected to each other, or perhaps to the feeling common humanity, even in their separate bunkers.

As chorus master, I would encourage each soldier to sing with vibrancy and individual color, despite the reflective act of letter writing. I would also rehearse each entrance for independence, as the soloist will not have the support of additional choristers. The rhythmic writing is considerably more complex in these lines, as well, which might benefit from speaking the text in rhythm. Finally, I would listen to balance between the three individual choristers, as the staging may result in considerable distance between them.

Example 6.7. *Silent Night*, vocal score, Act two, mm. 707-17.

Near the end of the opera, in Act two, scene 5, individual soldiers repeat their earlier

sentiments from Act two, scene 4, but this time from offstage. The German Kronprinz, the

French General, and a British Major have traveled to the bunkers from their headquarters to disband the case-fire. The French general informs Lt. Audebert that he will be transferred to Verdun and his unit disbanded as punishment for consorting with the enemy (m.839). A similar scene plays out in the German bunker (m.886), where the Kronprinz deploys the unit to Pomerania as punishment. The soldiers are taken away in boxcars, leaving the stage empty. As before, several individual soldiers sing of their amazement over the spontaneous Christmas Eve truce and how they will "never forget it" (m.952). Strings play a tremolo outlining an open octave of D, A and D (m.971) for nine measures, quietly ending the opera.

Example 6.8. *Silent Night*, vocal score, Act two, mm. 959-69.

Conclusion

The chorus master must thoroughly understand the dramatic aim in every choral scene. This understanding informs his every musical choice and rehearsal strategy. The task must also be undertaken with respect, as there is more at stake than mere entertainment. Through their music and actions, the soldiers' choruses deliver *Silent Night's* message of social justice. They trace the emotional arc of the opera, from the violence of the battlefield, to the joy and humanity that emerge during the spontaneous cease-fire, to the expressions of sadness and regret over the lifting of the cease-fire. They intensify the drama before resolving it. They demonstrate how much we have in common, at a fundamental, human level. Ultimately, the soldiers' actions symbolize that our potential for making human connections is always present, despite our differences. It is the chorus master who must ensure this message is communicated to the audience.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

Opera can be a vehicle for social change and learning, and these three contemporary operas, all of which were produced by The Minnesota Opera, have powerful lessons to teach. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we see that no government wielding absolute power will be immune from corruption. In *Dead Man Walking*, we realize that while authorities and courts enforce laws, including the right of free speech, it is up to us, as a society, to determine how we should conduct the debate over sensitive issues. As a *de facto* moral compass, the criminal justice system is a poor substitute for our own minds and consciences. In *Silent Night*, we see that even in warfare, the most divisive of situations, we are never beyond communication and redemption.

In each of these operas, then, the chorus master's role is of the utmost importance. To realize the dramatic demands required of the chorus, the chorus master must understand the story as it unfolds in every moment of the music. This understanding comes from individual score study well in advance of the first rehearsal, including a word-by-word translation and research into the stylistic period. From this study, the chorus master can strategize the type of choral sound and conducting gesture that will best serve the drama. As Palumbo advised, there is a choral sound appropriate to every scene. Like the different instruments that comprise an orchestra, the chorus master must invite each chorister to contribute to this collective, choral sound his unique tone color and "soloistic" resonance, which Miller describes as the result of efficient, classical vocalism based on the speech model. Sheston tangentially describes these tone colors as bright or dark, lean or full, focused or more colorful. Horst also reminds us that the choral sound is also shaped by the chorus master's choices about diction, particularly vowel colors and consonant rhythms.

When rehearsing the opera chorus, the chorus master must have an arsenal of strategies at his disposal and draw upon a broad skill set. He must understand the art of pacing, or what Hughes described as alternately painting in broad strokes or focusing on minute details. He must find a conducting gesture that utilizes independent functions of the right and left hand to accomplish Rilling's dual objectives of clarity of beat and embodiment of the musical emotion. He must ensure diction and rhythm are cohesive, a process aided by Shaw's technique of rhythmic speaking of the text. He must unite the chorus behind a common dramatic objective, which Stivender approached by grounding musical cues in dramatic imagery and the text. He must ensure that choristers have the confidence to enter on musical cues that are often embedded in a complex texture, and the independence to sing in staging configurations that may separate them from their own voice part. Draper's advice to vary sectional, mixed, and circular rehearsal seating arrangements will provide the range of aural experiences needed to equip choristers for this task.

The chorus master must also serve as the chorus's advocate throughout the entire production schedule. He must collaborate with the stage director and the conductor, ensuring that the chorus delivers their optimal sound as they incorporate new stage blocking directions or stylistic refinements. He continues to evaluate the choral sound after the chorus has been integrated with the soloists and the orchestra. He may focus the chorus and re-establish their optimal sound by leading warmups before performances. He may even add input during the run, giving feedback from each performance. In every choral scene, the chorus master evaluates whether the choral sound is serving the drama.

Thus, the chorus master's duties and responsibilities are substantial, with much at stake. If the choruses in these operas do not full their dramatic functions, the audience's connection to

the chorus, and by extension, the greater social lessons in these operas, may be severed. That would indeed be a loss, particularly in today's political climate. We have become more concerned about being "right" than in finding common ground, especially with those whose convictions may be different than our own. In arguments, we have become blinded from seeing the "other side's" common humanity. Now, more than ever, we need to be reminded of the importance of dialogue and in making connections with others. Opera can help us find ourselves again.

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