**Message from the Composer**

Like so many people, I was deeply moved and affected by the death of a young, gay Wyoming man in 1998, Matthew Wayne Shepard. The events surrounding his death created an enormous feeling-world in me which continued to reverberate for months and years after the event.  I felt such a strong inner desire to respond somehow, especially musically.  This feeling stayed with me many years. But it was not until somewhat recently that I felt ready to give voice to this inner response.  In some ways, I feel that Matthew as a subject for this composition chose me rather than the other way around, as it seems is so often the case when we feel a strong inner calling.  This story holds so many layers or meaning and raises many questions.  My own journey with Matt and his story has proven to be an inspiring, challenging and deeply meaningful exploration that continues.  Surprisingly and remarkably, although remembering the suffering of Matthew Shepard can be intense and very dark, I continue to also experience a call to the inner light which this story profoundly transmits.

As a choral musician, I am very connected to the Passion settings, especially those of J.S. Bach, the*St. Matthew Passion* and the *St. John Passion*. At first I felt called to compose a Passion setting of Matthew Shepard. I followed that instinct and created Passion music which now makes up some of the central section of this work.  It has evolved and expanded from that point to include additional music including a prologue and epilogue. I very much wanted Matt’s voice to be heard, even if in a small way, and to include a few musical snapshots of his strong life force.  Additionally, I also especially wanted to provide a space for reflection, consideration and unity within this musical framework.

For the formation of the libretto, rather than setting the words of a single writer, I chose to gather and shape a collection of texts from several writers whose words span several centuries and represent significant cultural and geographic differences. Their writings both contribute to the telling of the story and also help create the poetic and musical structure which holds this musical meditation and reflection.

I am enormously indebted to Lesléa Newman for the poems from her extraordinary collection, *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*, which created the inspiration and foundational structure for the Passion music. At just the right moment, the poem which became Matthew’s aria appeared— "In Need of Breath," a beautiful Daniel Ladinsky rendering of the Persian mystic Hafiz.  Other poetic voices that are woven into the texture include the German mystic Hildegard von Bingen, the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, W.S. Merwin and several others whose words were building blocks within certain texts including William Blake, Rumi, Dante and a passage from the Old Testament.

Because the American West is so important to the telling of this story and our consideration of it, I include two Wyoming poets, John Nesbitt and Sue Wallis. For me, the expression of contrasting intimacy and grandeur along with contrasting images of both the enduring and the ephemeral evoked in Sue Wallis’ "Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass" creates a space in which all of the other texts can dwell.    For some of the sections, I created texts myself.

A very huge and special shout of acclamation goes out to Michael Dennis Browne, the remarkably gifted writer from Minneapolis who brought all of his gifts to bear in one of the most memorable and life-giving collaborations imaginable. From the beginning, he understood my passion for creating a very special song in large form for Matthew and he met me wherever I felt there was a need in the content or the pacing of the work.  Several of the texts are his, and I had the pleasure of co-writing others with him as well. He was a true partner in this work; and my heart is full of gratitude for all that he brought to *Considering Matthew Shepard*.

The singers of Conspirare inspired me at every turn. They premiered and recorded the work to great acclaim in 2016. Their voices were in my imagination as I composed *Considering Matthew Shepard* and they brought it into being with tender devotion.

I am deeply grateful to Dennis and Judy Shepard for their incredible generosity in continuing to support all of our remembrances of their beloved son Matt, and for being such extraordinary warriors for Love in the world.

I send my very best to all the performers and listeners who will share the space for *Considering Matthew Shepard*. Matthew’s story resonates now more than ever and I hope that you are inspired to be a force for Love in our world. I invite you to stay in touch with this work at <https://conspirare.org/project/considering-matthew-shepard/>.

With gratitude,

