Composers' Corner

Considering Matthew Shepard: A Passion in Progress by Craig Hella Johnson
Cara Tasher
Composers have written homages large and small to honor the victims of tsunamis, hurricanes, holocausts, genocides, acts of terror and other large-scale events that tear the human fabric.

In this case, I wish to explore a “work-in-progress” about an act of hatred that only took one life directly, but whose existence suggests that our “civilization” is actually still in the process of being civilized. For those unfamiliar with the story of Matthew Shepard, in short version, a young gay man was beaten by two men and left to die on a fence in the open prairie of Laramie, Wyoming in October 1998.

Since then, works of art in many mediums have been created to commemorate Matthew’s death. In June 2014, Craig Hella Johnson was able to share his personal reflections on Shepard’s death in his new work entitled Considering Matthew Shepard. His 45-minute composition was performed as a “poetry and music workshop” programmed within a two-week festival together with A Gnostic Passion by Doug and Brad Balliett, Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, Muehleisen’s Pietà and Durufle’s Requiem with the world-renowned ensemble Conspirare. The program notes for the two-week festival of passions entitled ComPassion clarified the point: “Compassion is to ‘be with’ another’s suffering and this is the theme that surrounds our performances and dialogues.”

This summer while in Austin, I had the privilege to hear the early rehearsals for this work dubbed by the Austin Chronicle as a “Passion-in-Progress.” I will not address the form since it is still fluid, but even in its workshop state, there was great cohesion due to the permeating motivic relationships between and within each of the ten movements. In its current form, the perspective of the fence is used to anchor the work three times and selections from Lesléa Newman’s October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard— which includes references from the Bible and signs from the protestors – open and close the work. To introduce the piece to Conspirare, Craig spoke through the texts whose sources also include Lacey Roop’s Gospel of Matthew: An Elegy for Matthew Shepard, Hildegard von Bingen’s Most noble evergreen, Rabindranath Tagore’s Stray Birds, Craig Hella Johnson’s I am like you, Matthew’s father (spoken during the movement “Stars”), and Hafiz’s My Heart is an Unset Jewel as rendered by Daniel Ladinsky. In the workshop, the spoken text was accompanied by puntuillist motives first presented in chimes and then alegatorically sung by the choir scattered among the audience in small groupings physically representing star clusters.

To know Matthew’s story more completely, Johnson visited Wyoming in 2011, and this beautiful musician, known to our community both as a composer and conductor, was able to capture the essence of the story. During his visit to Laramie, Craig informally interviewed townsfolk – some who knew Matthew, and some who knew Aaron and Russell, the murderers, when they were younger. He also visited the site that was formerly the fence.

Hella Johnson gently guided the musicians through each movement and encouraged quiet space for reflection and feeling. Comforting words of acknowledgement such as, “It is a lot to hold emotionally,” were stated as he slowly unveiled the work. Within each rehearsal, Craig allowed space for the singers to process and feel after each movement, providing background information as to the “why” of the compositional style or the text choices. That this was encouraged in a communal setting with singers “on-the-clock” was human and appropriate. To mourn together, to feel together, to cry together, and finally, to sing together as a form of healing was very organic. One could liken each rehearsal to a peaceful informal religious gathering of many backgrounds at once.

The narrators include inanimate objects. The perspectives of the helpless nearby are quite effective: the deer that ran off when the first person arrived to the scene of the crime, the tree that became the fence, the fence that supported his barely living body, the stars light years away, those who visited the fence, and more. The murderers are not allowed a voice, however in the poem I am like you, they are referenced by name. The signs of the protesters offer the most difficult texts. Johnson told the singers, “I’m only going to ask you to sing this one line once, and if you cannot, I understand.” It is a phrase that could easily be misunderstood in print and is much more violent than an earlier line ‘A boy who brings a boy to bed: where I come from that’s not polite.”
What immediately strikes me about this 45-minute work is the perfectly put simplicity and therefore raw delivery of a physical reaction—the kind you feel in your skin—because it is not excessive and does not try to be anything but what it is. The multi-sourced text is aptly represented by multiple musical styles. The composer references country music and chant and sometimes one can hear hints of Pärt, Imogen Heap and Michael Nyman in certain movements. In the movement entitled “A Protestor”, he points to Bach’s “Kreuzige” from St. Matthew Passion and Britten’s “This little babe” from Ceremony of Carols using male voices in canon. The piano part in the movement called The Fence (after) quotes Manuel de Falla’s “Nana”. This piece is masterfully woven together in such a complete fashion that even with the spoken text it is cohesive and complete all the way to the final unresolved cadence of “Still, Still, Still”. The lack of harmonic resolution in the final hummed chord somehow suggests that we have a lot of work to do as a global community to create a world where love prevails. Cross-references abound; however, the most stunning musical reference to me is that of the de Falla which references the tree that became the fence indirectly. In his Siete Canciones Populares Españolas, the third movement is called “Asturiana” and the text is: Por ver si me consolaba, Arrime a un pino verde, Por ver si me consolaba. Por verme llorar, lloraba. Y el pino como era verde, Por verme llorar, lloraba. “To see whether it would console me, I drew near a green pine, To see whether it would console me. Seeing me weep, it wept; And the pine, being green, seeing me weep, wept.” Translation ©2003 Claudia Landivar Cody http://www.lieder.net/. In this same movement, Johnson incorporates the melodic motive used in I am like you, weaving it brilliantly into the piano line four times.

Despite his busy schedule, Johnson found time to share some of his thoughts about the work in its present form, as well as its future:

CHJ: With most of the rest of the world, I learned about Matthew Shepard in 1998 and was deeply moved. Since that time, there has always been in the back of my mind a desire to respond in some way musically to all that happened and to what it inspired in people. The thought never left me in the last fifteen years but I don’t think I was ready until now to come forward with any response. This piece is a personal expression which felt like something I’ve needed to do. As a work of art, it is simply that. I have not been creating it with a sense of what any outcomes would be from it, but if it can be aligned with purposes that open the heart and can address the hate and separation in our world, then that would be a most meaningful outcome. But for me, it is a way to express myself regarding both the tragic events of the last days of Matt’s life and the incredible light that his life and story shines on the world and the impact it has had for actual change.

Finally, this piece is an attempt to do what I can so that we don’t forget Matthew’s story. When we set something to music, it can be a powerful aid in helping us remember. This is my sincere hope. Conspirare will perform the completed version in early 2016 and will record it. We plan to bring this to other cities. After these initial tours, the piece will be published and made available for other choirs to perform. I am very excited about sharing this work and hearing it from others.

Audience members were encouraged to write their reflections anonymously following the workshop performance. Here are select quotes:

- “Heart-work is hard work. It takes courage and focus even to put a mental frame around Matthew Shepard’s death, to be able to speak of it. And it only makes sense as a sacred story…”
- “To Craig Hella Johnson — Words and music have conveyed the agony of an innocent boy enduring the irrational hatred of those who tortured and killed him... Thank you and I hope the whole world experiences this incredible work of art.”
- “The intense level of honesty, dialogue, and music making were matched in conductor, composer, and collaborative artists. It is rare that we become witness to majesty, but this passion and participants do that on the human level.”
- “This was so beautiful, moving, creative... Clearly a loving offering from the depths of a wondering and honest heart.”
- “Blessed be thine ears, that hear the song. Blessed be thine eyes, that see the beauty. Blessed be thy hands, that write the truth.”
For days, weeks and now months after hearing this, passages from this work-in-progress still haunt me. They insist on bringing to light the need for action in preventing future atrocities both large and small. As artists, we are called upon to illuminate those in our world. Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard* demonstrates how a choral masterwork can light the way for those that experience it.

Due to her own meaningful experiences as a singer, Cara Tasher strives to instill the passion for excellence in others together with an appreciation of different cultures. Proficient in several languages, Tasher's engagements have brought her to ten states and twenty countries for concerts, competitions, festivals, workshops, or as a featured soloist. Her training took place at the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music, University of Texas at Austin (with Craig Hella Johnson), La Sorbonne, and Northwestern University. Since 2006, students continue to thrive under her mentorship in the Music Flagship Program at the University of North Florida where she conducts the Chorale and Chamber Singers and oversees the new M.M. in Choral Conducting program. Email: ctasher@gmail.com

Conspirare's founding artistic director Craig Hella Johnson is a conductor, composer, educator, and performer who brings depth of knowledge, artistic sensitivity, and rich imagination to his programs. He also serves as artistic director of the Victoria Bach Festival, music director of Cincinnati Vocal Arts Ensemble, and artist-in-residence at Texas State University, and is in international demand as a choral and orchestral clinician and guest conductor. He was previously Director of Choral Activities at the University of Texas at Austin (1990-2001), artistic director of Chanticleer (1998), and music director of Houston Masterworks Chorus (2000-2005). Johnson's compositions, arrangements, and edited scores are published by Alliance Music and in the Craig Hella Johnson Choral Series with G. Schirmer and Hal Leonard. He performs as a pianist and singer in a variety of styles. Johnson has been recognized with numerous awards and honors; most recently, the Texas State Legislature named him the 2013 Texas State Musician. He was inducted into the Austin Arts Hall of Fame in 2008, won Chorus America's 2009 Louis Botto Award for Innovative Action and Entrepreneurial Zeal, and received the 2011 Citation of Merit from professional music fraternity Mu Phi Epsilon. Johnson studied at St. Olaf College, Juilliard School, University of Illinois, Yale University, and as a National Arts Fellowship recipient at the International Bach Academy with Helmuth Rilling.

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