Music, Meaning, and Message in John Muehleisen’s Pietà:
An Introduction and Overview

Welcome to the premiere of Pietà. I hope that this work will be as meaningful to you as it has been to me. That said, I’ve lived with this piece off and on for almost two years, so realize that I have a bit of an advantage in that I understand it deeply from the inside out, and here you are being asked to grasp its meaning and its message in a single evening. To that end I would like to even the playing field a bit, as it were, by providing some introductory notes and an overview of each section in Pietà.

I realize that there’s a lot of information below (most people who know me well and who read this will not be surprised by that phenomenon!); however, rest assured that I don’t intend for you to read all the program notes as a prerequisite to experiencing the work. That would be an impossible task! Rather, I would encourage you to read through at least the first section, titled “Meaning and Message,” which will give you an overview of what Pietà is all about. The balance of the notes, especially the longer second section titled “Text and Music,” is intended more as a guide to drawing additional meaning from the work after you have experienced it. But if reading it before or during the performance enhances your experiences of Pietà, all the better! My hope is that you will take the program home, mull it over, think about your experience of Pietà, and reflect on its message as you read these notes, which I sincerely hope will deepen your experience of the piece, its meaning, and its message.

The following notes are in two sections. The first is an introduction to the meaning and the message of Pietà. The second, longer section is an overview of the high-level form, followed by descriptions of each movement and its role in the narrative, meaning, and message of the work.

Meaning and Message
In Pietà, the focus is on the meaning and the message of the work, with the music serving as a means to an end—an important means, to be sure—but not the focus of the work. Let’s start by addressing the meaning of Pietà by considering the word itself. Aside from its association with the profoundly moving and beautiful statue by Michelangelo, this Italian word is frequently translated as “pity.” In our contemporary culture, the word “pity” has unfortunately taken on something of a condescending and pejorative meaning, but for the purposes of my Pietà, I have focused on the deeper, more profound connotations of “compassion” and “mercy.” (The word is also sometimes associated with the notion of “piety,” which adds another layer of meaning altogether.)
Before discussing the meaning and message of Pietà more broadly, I want to dig a bit deeper into the word “compassion” itself, which is frequently understood as being synonymous with “empathy.” But as with “pietà,” there is a deeper, more profound (and more literal) meaning: “to suffer with” (com = with; passion = suffering). Our modern day understanding of “passion” is largely associated with great enthusiasm, strong emotion, or romantic ardor, but the deeper and more spiritual connotation of the word is the notion of “suffering,” from the Latin “passio.” This is the meaning associated with Bach’s monumental Passion oratorios, and this same meaning has profound implications in the context of my Pietà; for to have compassion for someone means having empathy for that person, which at its root grows out of love, the true heart of Pietà.

Concerning the broader meaning and message, I wrote the following almost two years ago now, at the beginning of the conceptual stage of the project in an effort to focus and clarify my own thoughts about why I felt so strongly about creating this work.

For many years I have observed the continuing decline in the civility of the political rhetoric, social discourse, and interactions between people in our culture and throughout the world on many different levels ranging from the interpersonal to the international. So many decisions made today and so many of the interactions between people are done without compassion, without mercy, without justice, without kindness and humility, and, above all, without love. Over the past several years, I have experienced an increased desire to express my personal concerns about these issues through my compositions. I deeply believe that music has the power to provoke, to heal, and to transform people’s minds and hearts. Music enters the ears, is processed by the brain, but seems inexplicably, almost mystically, to pierce the heart and to stir the soul—in the best of outcomes—to action. Our nation, our culture, and our world are desperately in need of healing, and in need of following a higher standard of interaction and discourse, both interpersonally and internationally.

Pietà is a major commission that addresses the issues raised above in a way that will provoke listeners to think about how they treat one another: whom they treat well and whom they treat poorly; and ultimately it offers answers to tragedy and loss, as well as a path to healing. The commission is not only the most extensive and sophisticated choral work I have composed to date, but I also hope that it will be the most meaningful and profound work thus far in my career, bringing together choral, solo vocal, and instrumental forces to provide a musical experience of emotional and spiritual intensity and conviction. I’m honored and grateful that Robert Bode and Choral Arts have chosen to partner with me in bringing to life Pietà’s message of hope and love. It is testimony to their vision and commitment as an organization to commission a major new work with such a timely and universal message of healing so desperately needed in our world today.

Pietà provides listeners with the opportunity to confront and explore a set of values and principles that have become increasingly important for our nation and for the world globally: the need for compassion, mercy, justice, and love as a means to restore and heal human relationships, not just between individuals, but across our society and between nations and cultures as well. It also addresses the question of how we respond to the manifold tragedies and injustices we see every day on the news and in our lives. Do we respond with anger, despair, revenge, apathy, criticism, and judgment, or with compassion, forgiveness, mercy, and love? We see examples of all the responses above almost on a daily basis, especially if we watch the news. Pietà asserts that we have been shown a more virtuous path, a better way…which will we choose?

Pietà uses the central image of the compassion and love between mothers and sons as a metaphor and a vehicle for exploring the ways in which the virtues of compassion, mercy, and love can lead to healing many aspects of our relationships with one another. Rather than playing out a single thread, the work exists simultaneously on several different levels, cutting between the levels using musical transitions akin to cinematic techniques such as sudden cuts and gradual fades. First of all, Pietà unfolds on three different timelines:

• Today (Prologue and Epilogue)
• World War I (Scenes One and Two)
• The end of the life of Jesus; His Passion, Burial, and Resurrection (the Passion Interludes and Scenes Three and Four)

Secondly, in parallel with these three timelines, Pietà plays out the notion of mutual compassion and love in three concentric circles, radiating out from the center.

1. In the center circle is the relationship between Mary and Jesus with their mutual compassion and love for each other as played out in Scenes Three and Four, particularly in the reciprocal Passions of the Son (section 4.2) and of the Mother (section 4.4) and in the Pietà tableau (sections 5.2 and 5.3).

2. The next circle out is mothers and sons in general, focusing on the mutual compassion and love of mothers and sons, which naturally extends to all parents and their children (Scenes One and Two).

3. The outer circle is all of us, and the mutual compassion and love we should all have for one another (Prologue and Epilogue, particularly in the Epilogue).

Text and Music
Pietà is scored for soprano and tenor soloists, SATB choir, male choristers, and treble choir, accompanied by two oboes (doubling on English horns) and two percussionists. The oboes are closely associated with the grounding of the work in the Passion oratorios of Bach, and, in fact, an important musical theme is drawn from the oboe music from the opening chorus (“Herr unser Herrschen”) from Bach’s Passion According to Saint John. They also represent Pietà’s overriding theme of compassion, as well as lamentation.
The percussion instruments are associated initially with suffering and war, but ultimately become sonic symbols of the brightness and hope that emerges in Scene Four and in the Epilogue of Pietà. The initial dark, funereal sounds of timpani, bass drum, tam-tams, and single strokes on the chimes eventually give way to the brighter sounds of the vibraphone, glockenspiel, and celebratory peals of the tubular bells.

Pietà is based on a diverse set of texts, including a funeral homily; the final letter from a son to his parents during World War I; a poem about the loss of that son and the effect that it had on his family, particularly on his mother; Biblical passages; and hymnody from the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, particularly those used during Holy Week in both traditions. In addition, there is a good deal of “borrowed” music that plays key roles throughout the work. The borrowed music ranges from Bach chorale harmonizations, Orthodox liturgical music, and a popular Civil War song by George F. Root to instrumental quotations from Bach’s Passion According to Saint John and a five-note “Lamentation” motive that appears throughout Pietà based on a recurring motive found in the sublime Stabat Mater setting by Antonio Caldara, an Italian contemporary of Bach’s. Details about the borrowed music are included in the sections in which it occurs.

Formally, the work consists of six large sections, which are interspersed with five Passion Interludes based on traditional Eastern Orthodox hymnology sung by a group of male chanters. These interludes begin each of the four central scenes and ground those scenes in the framework of a Passion Oratorio, converging on Scene Three (Calvary), which depicts the Crucifixion, and on Scene Four (Pietà), which depicts Christ’s descent from the cross, the Pietà tableau, the Burial, and the Resurrection. Each of the four scenes ends with a chorale, three of which are literal Bach chorale harmonizations, but using texts by Wilfred Owen and William Blake. The texts used for the three Bach chorales serve the role of commenting on the preceding scenes and tying them into the overall message of Pietà. The fourth chorale is based on a poem by Violet Fane and is set to original music. It serves as a transition from the grand Resurrection scene to the more intimate and personal nature of the Epilogue by extending the concept of resurrection as a metaphor for personal change and healing.

The six main sections of the work are as follows, with various subsections between the Passion Interludes and the Chorales.

1. Prologue
2. Scene One (The Son)
   Passion Interlude I
   Chorale 1
3. Scene Two (The Mother)
   Passion Interlude II
   Chorale 2
4. Scene Three (Calvary)
   Passion Interlude III
   Chorale 3
5. Scene Four (Pietà)
   Passion Interlude IV
   Passion Interlude V
   Chorale 4
6. Epilogue

The Prologue begins with a Processional, which starts with (1) the Orthodox monastic call to prayer (a call to gather together as one people), joined by (2) the joyous bell ringing of the Orthodox tradition, finally joined by (3) the chanters wordlessly intoning the somber Byzantine chant for Antiphon XV, the quintessential Orthodox Holy Friday text about the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ, which in this Processional for the Prologue represents the Via Dolorosa, the “Way of Sorrow,” referring both to Christ’s carrying of the cross to Golgotha and to the sorrow that many people in the world are forced to endure unjustly because of the suffering caused by multiple factors, some environmental and ecological, and others man-made, often wrought by our own lack of love, mercy, and compassion for one another, resulting in physical and emotional abuse, anger, selfishness, and greed. This suffering extends to more national and worldwide issues such as dictatorships, corrupt politics, slavery, torture, plutocracies, oligarchies, economic and political inequalities, and wars. This blending of the call to prayer, the joyous bell ringing, and the somber music of Antiphon XV creates an atmosphere of “bright sorrow” (aka “bright sadness”), a tradition in the spiritual practice of the Orthodox Church, which mingles sorrow for the suffering of the world as well as one’s past and current failings with the hope of restoration and healing, an apt metaphor for our world situation and the dramatic thrust and overall arc of Pietà.

The second section of the Prologue—Exhortation and Questions—begins with a somber instrumental introduction based on the opening measures of the oboe music from Bach’s Passion According to Saint John. At the climax of the introduction, the choir enters with two great wordless cries, which become more important toward the end of this section on the word “No!” After this choral exclamation, the choir takes on a different role, a calming one characterized by the repeated choral exhortation, “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” which is countered multiple times with questions sung by the solo voices, the first of which is “How can our hearts not be troubled?” This dichotomy encapsulates the plight of modern life and of human existence in general, with its tragedy and injustice and the quest to understand. Throughout the course of this section, we gradually realize that the troubled questions countering the exhortation of hope are those of family, friends, and loved ones who have lost a son, a brother. These troubled hearts eventually erupt in unbearable grief over the loss of this child. The ensuing journey on which the listener is taken proceeds through four scenes, the ultimate quest of which is to seek the answers to the questions posed in the Prologue.

Scene One (The Son) begins with the first of several examples of Eastern Orthodox hymnody. Passion Interlude I (The Son) begins immediately after the climax at the end of the Prologue. This is the first of many cinematic-style cuts used in Pietà, and we realize that the universal “child” of the Prologue is now the adult Jesus, Son of the Virgin Mary, on trial before Pilate. We have now experienced the first jarring shift of timelines, this one from the contemporary world to the timeline of the Passion. Soon, we experience another jarring timeline shift into World War I and Jack Kipling’s Final Letter, written by the son of Rudyard and Carrie Kipling (whose given name was John) from the trenches in France just hours before he was killed. (This letter will be “answered” by the poem in Scene Two, My Boy Jack.) The irony not made so clear within the text of either the letter or the poem is that, after being rejected from service because of his nearsightedness, Jack asked his father, Rudyard, to work through his contacts in the military to persuade them to allow Jack to enter the service and fight in World War I. Rudyard was successful. What a burden this must have been on the writer and his wife, Carrie, who was particularly devastated by these events and by her husband’s role in getting Jack admitted into military service. This irony is expressed...
eloquently in the excerpt from Rudyard Kipling’s set of Epitaphs of the War (1914–1918), which follows the next section of Scene One, a setting of the traditional Civil War song Just Before the Battle, Mother, which could apply equally to any war in which soldiers, in the midst of almost certain death, turn their thoughts to home and family. This poignant song ties the son to his mother in a complex blend of tender ballad tinged with bravery and heroism crossed with a palpable sense of doom. Scene One closes with Chorale 1: “I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gear guns,” a setting of Wilfred Owen’s Soldier’s Dream, sung to Bach’s “Wie wunderbärlich,” #46 from his Saint Matthew Passion. The tension between the World War I text, the Protestant chorale used in Bach’s Passion setting, and the reference to Jesus dismantling the apparatus of war creates another conflict between timelines, as well as a complex interaction among the various frames of reference for each element in the chorale.

Scene Two (The Mother) begins with Passion Interlude II, in which we experience another jarring shift of timeline and perspective from the World War I-centric text of Chorale 1 back to the Passion timeline, this time focused on Mary at the foot of the cross watching her Son as He suffers the Crucifixion. Another cinematic cut, this time a cross-fade takes us from the foot of the cross into the life of Carrie Kipling as she struggles to find out what happened to her son, Jack, who after only two weeks at the front in France has been declared missing in action. My Boy Jack is Rudyard Kipling’s poem about the real-life quest to discover the fate of their son. Despite being written by Rudyard, I have chosen to set the poem in Carrie Kipling’s voice as sung by the solo soprano because this quest was as much hers as it was Rudyard’s, perhaps even more so because Carrie had objected to her son’s being sent to the front. Again we are confronted with a series of questions, as in the Prologue. Carrie asks, “Have you news of my boy Jack?” which is answered with the choir’s “Not this tide.” This theme is repeated in a variety of ways, representing the agonizing 18-month search required to determine Jack’s ultimate fate. The music graphically depicts the interminable duration and futility of the quest and the stinging lack of answers. After the long wait, the parents eventually find an answer to their questions, and there is some consolation expressed in Kipling’s poem, but not enough to bring back their son. Again, the listener is asked to enter into the conflicting feelings encapsulated in this poem, especially with its relationship to Jack’s letter from Scene One. Carrie’s questions are set to music that is the first appearance of the Stabat Mater. This brief Lament leads directly into The Passion of the Mother. In this section, the literal meaning of “compassion” is brought to the fore as Mary “suffers with” her Son as He suffers on the cross. The parallel between The Passion of the Son and The Passion of the Mother is a very important point in Pietà because it dramatically points to the intensity of compassion borne out of the love that Mary feels for her Son. And no text describes Mary’s suffering more graphically or more sympathetically than the Latin Stabat Mater text used in the Catholic Church. This text was not originally part of the liturgy, but when I shared with Robert Bode that I was having trouble obtaining permission for a copyrighted poem that was to be used at this particular point in the work, he suggested that I use the first few stanzas of the Stabat Mater text. This was a brilliant

acts as a transition into the next jarring timeline shift, to the Biblical Crucifixion itself in Scene Three.

Scene Three (Calvary) begins with Passion Interlude III (The Crucifixion), a traditional musical setting of one of the most powerful texts in all of Orthodox Holy Week hymnody: Antiphon XV, an uncompromising description of Christ’s Passion and Crucifixion, but with a twist. Ironic paradoxes such as “The King of the angels” being “arrayed in a crown of thorns” are played out over and over in verses that contain Jesus’ divinity with His human suffering. While the first two Passion Interludes were from the Russian Orthodox choral chanting tradition, the music for Antiphon XV is from the Byzantine tradition, with its ison (drone) in the lower voices over which a twisting, tortuous melody full of augmented intervals is sung. During a review of the evolving libretto with Robert Bode in early 2011, he suggested that the narrative arc of the work needed something more dramatic at this point than just the traditional Orthodox chant and asked if I could compose something that would heighten the dramatic tension and narrative at this point. As it happened, I had previously set this text in a dramatic setting for treble choir and adult choir as a commission from Loren Pontèn and Opus 7 back in 1998. Titled The King of Glory, the work included the Seattle Girls’ Choir Prime Voci ensemble singing the treble-choir part. I told Robert I was confident it would provide the dramatic tension he was suggesting. We agreed that, in the great Baroque tradition of borrowing from oneself and one’s earlier works (Handel comes to mind), I would use part of my 1998 setting of the text for this moment in Pietà. (I should mention that we are pleased to once again have the Prime Voci ensemble from the Seattle Girls’ Choir singing the treble choir parts in this performance of Pietà.)

Thus, the traditional Orthodox music of Passion Interlude III is followed by my own setting of the same text, here called The Passion of the Son. In its own way, the musical language of my setting pays tribute to the earlier Byzantine setting by means of references to the ison, to chant-like lines, and to the exotic-sounding augmented intervals from the Byzantine mode 6 used for the setting of Antiphon XV. My setting also amplifies the drama and intensity of the text just presented by the chanters. The paradoxical contrasts in the text are made even more explicit in my setting through the contrast between the treble choir and the adult choir, which represent the Divine and the Human sides of Jesus, respectively. At the dramatic apex of this section, the soprano, in the person of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, emerges explosively out of the climax in a wordless Lament, expressing in a vocalise (singing without text) the emotions that cannot be expressed in words.
suggestion on his part and was perfectly appropriate at this point in the unfolding narrative. As I had composed a Stabat Mater for a cappella voices in 2003 (also for Opus 7), I decided to draw once again on my own music. Whereas the music for The Passion of the Son was used unchanged from its original setting, the text at this point demanded some adaptation of the original work. First of all, I added parts for the instrumental ensemble for this setting, relying especially on the dark quality of two English horns to help convey the mournful character of the text. To this I added chimes, vibes, timpani, bass drum, and tam-tam. The more radical departure from the original Stabat Mater setting was the interpolation of English paraphrases of the original Latin text, which I translated and adapted myself into the first person, to be sung by the soprano solo in the role of Mary. Whereas the original Latin text is objective in its third-person narrative of Mary’s suffering, I wanted to create a parallel stream of music and text that would emerge after each stanza, in which Mary directly expresses her personal reaction to the suffering of her Son, standing in contrast to the objective narrative of the Latin text as sung by the choir.

Closing the scene at the cross on Calvary hill is Chorale 3: “Can I see another’s woe?” based on William Blake’s masterpiece of compassion, On Another’s Sorrow, this time sung to the familiar chorale tune “Jesu, meine Freude” from Bach’s motet of the same name, BWV 227. In its proximity to the preceding Stabat Mater text, we discover a clear connection between Blake’s poem and the Stabat Mater. The role of Blake’s poem in Pietà is to state in personal, intimate, and everyday terms what the Stabat Mater states in the context of a more grand, and for some people, historically and culturally removed Biblical setting. In hearing Blake’s poem immediately after the Stabat Mater text, it is difficult not to have more compassion for Mary and to even see her in more human terms than the traditional view of her as the objectified and revered mother of God sometimes allows. For to fully understand Mary means not only to see her as the mother of Jesus, but to see her as the quintessential suffering mother, grieving as any mother would as her son was tortured and left to die in a most public setting.

Scene Four (Pietà) is the turning point in the work, where we begin the move from the “troubled hearts” of the Prologue and the drama of the preceding three scenes to the hope of the Epilogue. This final scene begins with Passion Interlude IV (The Descent from the Cross), which is presented in two parts. The first, “Give me this Stranger,” is a traditional Russian choral chant from the Orthodox Vespers for Holy Friday sung by the choaters. The text describes the scene in which Joseph of Arimathea asks the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, for Jesus’ body so that he may provide Jesus with a proper burial. Joseph was a wealthy Judean man and disciple of Jesus who offered his own tomb as a place to lay Jesus to rest. As part of his pleading, Joseph refers to the suffering of Mary in an effort to soften Pilate’s heart so that he might allow Joseph to take Jesus down from the cross. Eventually Pilate agrees. The second part of Passion Interlude IV, “…in her waiting arms,” is sung by the main choir. It is an adaptation of a well-known Orthodox Holy Friday hymn, The Noble Joseph, which will be heard later in Scene Four. The text I adapted describes Joseph placing Jesus in Mary’s arms, thus leading into the classic Pietà scene at the foot of the cross with Mary holding Jesus in her arms, the universal Mother, symbol of love, filled with compassion for her slain Son, who had earlier forgiven the very people who were responsible for His death. While the Pietà scene is clearly a Biblical, Christian image, there is also a universal meaning to which anyone can relate: a mother holding her dead son in her arms after watching Him endure unspeakable torment. As the Stabat Mater text and Blake’s poem On Another’s Sorrow ask, how can we imagine this scene without sharing Mary’s sorrow?

At this point a brief story seems appropriate to help you understand the genesis of the concept of Pietà. As I was preparing the concept and the libretto for Pietà, I immersed myself in viewing innumerable images of Pietà sculptures, paintings, and icons from throughout the world and across cultures. One particular photograph of a Pietà painting stopped me in my tracks and pierced my heart. It made me weep with its simple power and complex layers of meaning, and it was in many ways a key inspiration for what became Pietà. It is called Our Lady of the Fallen Soldiers of Iraq and Afghanistan. An anonymous author describes this particular Pietà image captured in a photograph on the website of The Museum of the San Fernando Valley in Southern California.

Here, in Hollywood Memorial Cemetery, a shrine calls out to curious passers-by that Pietà seeks entry into the hearts and minds, and perhaps the souls of the living. The Mother of Jesus becomes the Mother of all humankind. Here Mary holds the corpse of Her Son and cries out to revelers and reverent alike, that our children and the children of Iraq and Afghanistan live or die as the consequence of commitment to secure the blessings of peace.

I found the image particularly moving because of the multiple layers of meaning and the questions raised by the image’s simultaneous ambiguity, specificity, and universality: “Is it Mary the Mother of Jesus holding Jesus’ body dressed in desert camouflage or the body of a dead soldier? Is it even Mary, or perhaps the very mother of that dead soldier?” The mix of historical periods, images, and implications was overwhelming: a Biblical image from 2,000 years ago superimposed on that of a modern-day battlefield in Iraq or Afghanistan, the image of Mary holding the body of the dead soldier extending naturally to an imagined tableau of the soldier’s own mother holding him as well. More than any other, it was this image that finally solidified the concept that I finally decided to use for Pietà.

Back to the overview of Scene Four: As we arrive at the Pietà tableau, we are presented with the most intimate and transparent music in the entire work, the Lullaby, scored for solo soprano, oboe, English horn, vibes, and timpani. The texture and the mood of the music are a deliberate mix of a Bach-style Passion aria and a much deeper influence within my musical memory, Mahler’s Kindertotenlieder (Songs on the Death of Children). When I originally conceived of this moment in the work—it’s narrative apex—I was planning to use a poem by a well-known contemporary writer of sacred poetry. Ironically, it seemed that the harder I tried to get permission to use the poem, the more difficult that effort became. After realizing that I would not be able to obtain permission in time to use the poem for the premiere of Pietà, I decided to approach conductor Robert Bode—who is a fine poet himself—to ask if he would try writing something befitting this crucial moment in the work. Knowing that Robert was already familiar with what I wanted to achieve at this point in the narrative thread, I was confident that he would come up with something quite effective…and he did. When Robert presented me with his elegant and eloquent poem Mary’s Song, I knew that I had a true gem of a text as inspiration. It is one of the simplest, yet most profound poetic statements of Mary’s relationship with her Son.
that I have read. Robert’s choice of writing the poem in the form of a lullaby is brilliantly poignant, as the first and third stanzas both feature Jesus in Mary’s lap, first as an infant, then as a lifeless corpse. The three stanzas encapsulate Mary’s entire relationship with her Son from His birth to His death in the short span of three stanzas, starting with Him as a baby on her lap, to the martyred Son on the cross, back to her lap, a lifeless, yet holy, body: her Savior. Stopping where it does in the narrative, the poem leaves room for the resurrection to follow later in Scene Four.

The next section is the Duet: “Do not lament me, O Mother,” which is based on a combination of texts from the Orthodox Lamentation services for Holy Friday. The tenor’s music is an adaptation of the text that the dead Jesus speaks to His mother “from the grave,” as it were, asking her not to lament Him and reassuring her that He will soon arise and be glorified. Interspersed with that text are several lines of lamentation sung by Mary. The effect of Jesus’ part in the duet is to eventually calm His mother’s lamentations, bringing the two singers together in their respective references to His Resurrection, resulting in the first statement of the Resurrection theme, which will be developed more fully later in the scene in section 5.5. After they join together singing of the hope of the Resurrection, the choir joins the two soloists singing an English translation of the well-known Nunc dimittis text: “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace,” which in its original Biblical context was stated by the prophet/priest, Simeon, in reference to himself when he received Jesus as an infant in the Temple. Here it is applied to both Mary and Jesus, as if the two were singing the text to each other, adding another level of poignant to an already poignant text. After the Nunc dimittis text, there is the primary turning point in the work—where darkness finally turns to light, despair to hope—the point at which Mary accepts her Son’s death, unclasps her hands, and opens her arms to literally and symbolically let Him go. For this moment, I chose to adapt the final two lines of the traditional Seven Last Words of Christ from the Cross. Traditionally these are “Father, into Thy hands I commend my Spirit” and “It is finished.” In my adaptation, Mary speaks these words about herself relative to her acceptance of Jesus’ death and His ultimate destiny. The music for this section is a quiet and poignant reprise of the music for the Nativity stanza of the Lullaby, sung over a simple pedal tone in the timpani.

At this point we move from the familiar Pietà tableau to the Burial and Resurrection. The first is depicted in Passion Interlude V (Burial)—the last of the five Passion Interludes—which is a straightforward arrangement for the male chanters of the Orthodox hymn “The Noble Joseph,” which is often sung by a full SATB choir. Here the text describes Joseph of Arimathea preparing Jesus’ body for burial and placing it in his own newly constructed tomb. In section 5.5, Resurrection, the mood turns markedly brighter, acting not only as the Biblical Resurrection of Jesus, but also functioning as a metaphor for healing and transformation in our own lives. It is also a beacon that shines its light forward into the Epilogue and its enumeration of the verses from Romans 12. This musical setting is also extracted from my 1998 work The King of Glory, from which The Passion of the Son, heard earlier in Scene Three of Pietà, was drawn. The final section of Scene Four, Chorale 4: “Let me arise and open the gate,” makes the metaphor of the resurrection even more explicit and applies it on a personal level, serving as a transition into the Epilogue. This brief excerpt from a longer poem by Violet Fane simultaneously looks back on all the preceding sections of Pietà, beginning to heal the pain and the troubled hearts from the previous sections and moving us forward into the Epilogue.

Before discussing the Epilogue, a word about the intended effect of the four central scenes of Pietà, which is to viscerally evoke within the listener the qualities of compassion and empathy, amplified by the deliberately jarring shifts in timeline and emotions. We are meant to “suffer with” Carrie Kipling over the loss of her son, Jack, and with Mary over the loss of her Son, Jesus. We are encouraged to enter into those scenarios as if they were happening to us. You might ask, “Why put an audience through this experience?” The answer is: to soften our hearts by developing a sense of empathy and compassion for others by “suffering with” them, thus opening our hearts to love. Those qualities are elicited in several ways in the central scenes of Pietà. For example, in My Boy Jack, the qualities of compassion and empathy are evoked not only by the musical depiction of the interminable waiting-without-answer endured by Carrie Kipling (and her husband, Rudyard, as well), but also by the fact that we were already informed in Scene One that Jack has been killed, something we know at this point in the narrative, but which Carrie does not. This note of irony elicits a second level of empathetic response to Carrie’s plight of 18 months’ worth of unknowing. Because of the natural tendency to empathy, we ask “What if that were my child? What if I were in the same situation? How would I feel?” As the text of the Stabat Mater says, “Who would not weep seeing the Mother of Christ in such distress?” Could this question not also be applied to our reaction to Carrie, the mother of Jack, as well as to Mary, the Mother of Jesus? A similar question is asked by Blake’s poem On Another’s Sorrow:

Can I see another’s woe,  
And not be in sorrow too?  
Can I see another’s grief,  
And not seek for kind relief?  
Can I see a falling tear,  
And not feel my sorrow’s share?  
Can a father see his child  
Weep, nor be with sorrow fill’d?

Empathy begets Love begets Compassion. Which comes first? Which begets the other? They are inextricably woven, with Love at the center. The other scenes of Pietà are intended to work in a similar manner to evoke these important human emotions, and the four scenes work together to explore the questions raised in the Prologue and to prepare the listener for the answers presented in the final section of Pietà.

In the Epilogue, we find the answers to the questions posed in the Prologue of how we are to deal with the tragedy and injustice of the world, and of how we can “not let our hearts be troubled,” questions that also have been explored in the intervening scenes. In the opening section of the Epilogue—Answers and Exhortations—we are presented with the answer, which is love (along with its attendant qualities of compassion and mercy), particularly as embodied in excerpts from Romans 12, which enumerate powerful principles for living together in harmony, including “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” and “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.” There are numerous other profound principles in this remarkable passage, all of which are imbued with universal qualities of love, mercy, and compassion. The next to last
section, *Alleluia*, is a reprise of the resurrection theme from section 5.5 (*Resurrection*), but with the text “Alleluia” substituted for the resurrection text. Its role is to remind us of the hope of resurrection, which some will find primarily in the spiritual realm, but which also can be extended metaphorically to the personal, social, and cultural resurrection of committing to love one another and to live together in harmony, as portrayed in Romans 12. The *Alleluia* also serves to amplify the brightness and hope that is the ultimate destination of *Pietà* with its message of compassion, mercy, and love. Taking a page from the playbook of the Bach Passions and cantatas, as well as Benjamin Britten’s cantata, *St. Nicolas*, *Pietà* ends with a congregational hymn: *O God of Love, O King of Peace*. Not only are the words appropriate to the theme of *Pietà*, but the communal act of everyone—performers and audience alike—joining together in song becomes a symbol for living together in harmony that is the ultimate message of *Pietà*.

One last thought: As I mentioned at the beginning of these notes, the meaning and message of *Pietà* are carried by the music, which is not an end in itself. More important, it is the performers themselves who are the primary carriers of the message of *Pietà*, for without them, *Pietà* is just digital bits and bytes within a music notation file or obscure markings on paper. Therefore, I offer my deepest gratitude to all the performers in tonight’s premiere performance, particularly to the singers of Choral Arts and to Robert Bode, who had the courage and the vision to commit to breathing life into this new work and its message of hope and love.

Composer John Muehleisen specializes in works for choir and solo voice. Since 1996, he has served as Composer-in-Residence and Artistic Advisor for Seattle-based Opus 7 Vocal Ensemble, directed by Loren Pontén. He was Composer-in-Residence for the Dale Warland Singers during their final season in 2003–2004 and has been on the Advisory Board for Choral Arts since 2009. John is honored to be Composer-in-Residence for Choral Arts for the 2011–2012 Season.

John’s works have been performed and recorded by numerous ensembles in the US, Canada, and Europe, including Choral Arts, Conspirare, the Dale Warland Singers, The Esoterics, the John Alexander Singers, the Louisville Orchestra, Musa Horti (Belgium), Northwest Girlchoir, Pacific Youth Choir, Schola Cantorum on Hudson, Seattle Girls Choir, Seattle Pro Musica, Vocal Arts Ensemble (Cincinnati), and numerous college and university choirs, including the Yale Schola Cantorum. His works have been performed at the Sixth World Choral Symposium; at the National Endowment for the Arts American Masterworks Choral Festival in Austin, TX in 2007; at ACDA National and regional conventions in 2007, 2008, and 2009; and on new music festivals including June in Buffalo, the Ernest Bloch Music Festival, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival in Seattle, the Minnesota Beethoven Festival, and the Indiana State University Festival of Contemporary Music. Many of his growing catalog of choral works have also been commercially recorded.

John received the 1988 Louisville Orchestra’s Orchestral Composition Competition Award, and commissions and performances of his works have been supported by grants from the American Music Center, Meet the Composer, the Jerome Foundation, the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, and the National Endowment for the Arts. After completing a Bachelor of Music degree in Saxophone Performance, John earned a Master of Music degree in Composition from the University of Washington, where he studied with William Bergsma, William O. Smith, and Diane Thome. During doctoral studies at Indiana University he studied composition with John Eaton, Eugene O’Brien, and Harvey Sollberger; as well as orchestration with Donald Erb. He has also participated in master classes and extended residency programs with Lukas Foss, Milton Babbitt, Earle Brown, and Bernard Rands.

John has received commissions from many esteemed choral ensembles, including Choral Arts, Conspirare, the Dale Warland Singers, The Esoterics, Northwest Girlchoir, Seattle Pro Musica, University of Wyoming, and Wake Forest University. Upcoming commissions for the 2011–2012 season include a Christmas work for South Bend Chamber Singers, a work based on Gertrude Stein poems for San Francisco’s cutting-edge vocal ensemble Volti, and a major concert-length oratorio entitled *Pietà*, jointly commissioned by Choral Arts and the University of Missouri, Kansas City, to be premiered by Choral Arts in March 2012.

*Photo Credit: Anna Hilling (Hilling Design)*