

Sixth World Symposium on Choral Music: Composers' Forums
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1. The Appeal of Choral Music

DALE WARLAND: I commend the panel for coming up with the idea to have internationally renowned composers, in this case representing the Americas, commissioned to write works for ten outstanding choirs. There are supposed to be five composers here this morning, and one of them is unable to be here. But we are fortunate to have four of those. I am happy to say that I have done music by all of the composers you see up here. [Ernani Aguiar](#) to my right... and our last minute interpreter, here and on the spot. As all of you know, each of the composers were asked to write a four-minute a cappella work to be matched up with one of the performing choirs for this [symposium](#). In addition to Ernani Aguiar on my right, a few blocks from this very spot lives [Dominick Argento](#), a Minnesota composer. From [Cuba](#), the gentleman not able to be here is Guido Lopez-Gavilan. From the United States by way of [China](#) is [Chen Yi](#), and from [Canada](#), [R. Murray Schaefer](#). The question that I would like to ask to get us going, for each of you, is: What about the choral medium is it that appeals to you? What challenges you? And along with that, are you currently working on other choral or vocal works (just to see where vocal choral music is at the present in your lives)? What about the choral medium would you say appeals to you or challenges you?

ERNANI AGUIAR: I like everything! Choral music ranges from medieval music to contemporary music. First, as a choral conductor, I am retired. I didn't want to conduct any more choirs. Between me and the choir, there was an orchestra in the middle. In this moment with choirs, I am only composing. I don't want to know any more about the [-isms of the twentieth century](#). I am tired of them. I simply want to write music that singers want to sing and the audience wants to hear. I want to find direct communication.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: I have always felt that music began in the throat. There is that beautiful story about [Orpheus](#) and the tortoise shell. He strummed on the dried tendons stretched across it and, voila! Lute music was born. It is a very pretty story but I am convinced that music originated differently. There was a need for early man to be able to express things for which there were no words. Some prehistoric mother discovered that producing gentle crooning, humming sounds comforted her ailing infant, allayed its fears, and best of all, hastened healing sleep; in another cave down the block, a prehistoric father discovered that indulging in uncontrolled wailing, keening, moaning noises provided some relief from the unendurable anguish and rage aroused by the death of his infant; and in still another cave around the corner, some prehistoric elder wished to placate and gratify those incomprehensible forces responsible for illness and wellness, for life and death, by chanting wordless, solemn tones. These earliest manifestations of our art—the lullaby, the lament, the hymn—arose out of basic human needs and began in the human throat, and I find it interesting that most instrument that I have ever heard are imitations of the voice: they can play higher or lower, or can go without breathing...whatever. But music proves its vocal origins even in such simple things as the four-measure phrase, a structure that has persisted in so much music because that's when the human runs out of breath and needs to breathe again. I find the essence of humanity in choral music, in groups of combined voices, in groups of humans expressing what they feel or coming together to express whatever the text asks

them to express. It beats anything else I know. I love orchestral music, instrumental music, chamber music. I've written for these too. Not too much, but I have written some. I never do it without thinking, "This would be better in chorus, with singers and words to it!" Choral music is a representative for the soul, if you agree there is such a thing. I think we feel that most clearly in group singing. You were asking if we are writing any choral music now. Yes, as a matter of fact the thing that I am currently working on is a piece for an ensemble called the [Young People's Chorus of New York City](#): they wanted a seven- or eight-minute piece. And they want the text to have significance for the youngsters, which I find extremely important and challenging. I have found a poem for the work, a poem about Orpheus, a poem by [Sir Osbert Sitwell](#), which I think, though not well known, will be perfect. It seems to me that one failing of a lot of choral music is that the words that have been set didn't need setting. I see no reason for the musical expression of a text that doesn't really benefit from being set.

CHEN YI: I started musical training as an instrumentalist; I am a violinist. But in my childhood I heard choruses singing in church and also when I heard [Tchaikovsky](#) and [Puccini](#) operas. I loved them because away from instrumental music, I heard the human voice for the first time, and it was so natural and emotional. I tried to write for voice, but not until my formal conservatory training as a composer: it was a requirement to write for chorus every year. Also, when I went to the countryside of [Guangxi province](#) in southwest China to collect folk music I saw farmers' performances, and that was so impressive for me, how I was feeling was tied with singing and dancing. And so I started writing my first major choral work for the China National Symphony Choir. After coming to the States, I worked as the resident composer with [Chanticleer](#) from 1993 to 1996. I have written some Chinese folksong arrangements and also choral settings of some [ancient Chinese poems](#) that were sung in Chinese. Because Chanticleer told me that they had sung in Italian, English, and German—everything but Chinese—and they wanted to try this! I had even translated two or three songs into English, and they also asked that I [translate it back into Chinese](#)! And so afterward, I wrote for the [San Francisco Girls Chorus](#), and [Ithaca College Choir](#) and [Miami University Choraliers](#), and the [Bradley University Chorale](#), and also the [KITKA Women's Choir](#). Although some works are Chinese folksongs and mountain song arrangements, more of these are original compositions. I find that there is not much difference in the process that I use to write for choral music or instrumental music. Because the first thing I do is to do some research on the group that I am writing for and then I get an experience of what is its strength and what is good and what can be done. I think that I am going to write another piece for [Chorus America](#), for [next year's convention](#) in [Kansas City](#), and another work for the [Singapore Youth Choir](#) in 2004.

R. MURRAY SCHAEFER: I guess the thing that I like most about choral music is that everybody has a voice and therefore everyone can participate in some kind of singing together. There was a friend of mine, a [Dakota Indian](#) from [Manitoba](#), who once said something to me very significant: "No one in our tribe sings a wrong note." That was a beautiful statement because it doesn't mean that some people don't sing better than others, but it means that you're not going to be disqualified if you can't sing as well as the top singers. So, the appeal of the choirs is that they are very democratic, that they allow ultimately, in the most rudimentary form, everyone to

participate, everyone to sing along. Everyone sings along in church, sings the hymns. That in a way is an impediment because it does mean that choral music is regarded sometimes as a poor person's art. It's cheap, very cheap to put together. Buy a bit of music and sing. It is a lot cheaper than building an orchestra, which has various expenses, overhead and instruments, and yet, in capitalistic countries such as this one, that seems to be the ideal in music education. I think that is very tragic. Parents like to come and see a pile of gold and silver on stage, just the same as people like to go to a big concert hall to see a similar pile of gold and silver on stage, and think that we are a wealthy country, and we deserve this. And so, I guess all of us who are involved in choral music in a sense are denying that it represents the ultimate achievement in music. The ultimate achievement in music is cultivating the use of the original instrument God gave you, which is your voice, and doing all the miraculous things with it that composers keep doing. All cultures, for thousands of years, are still doing new things. We are still discovering new vocal techniques, new vocal kinds of performance tricks, and composers are still writing new pieces of music. So, although it remains a poor person's art, it is one of incredible invention and creativity.

2. The Choral Symposium Commissions

DALE WARLAND: I think we would all like to hear an explanation of the process you went through in this commission that you completed for the [symposium](#). How did you settle on a text? Did you know which choir would be singing the work?

ERNANI AGUIAR: It was actually very interesting. My life is full of coincidences. I went home on the 10th of September 2001, and I found the envelope with the commission for the work. I was very happy. The next morning, the [11th of September](#), I went downstairs to have some coffee. And somebody came, and he said, "An airplane had crashed into the [Empire State Building](#) [the World Trade Center]. What a disaster!" So I started walking down the street. People were watching television. More and more people were watching television. I returned home and turned on the television. And I received a big shock when I saw what was happening in New York. I felt very bad. I was looking at [the towers](#) and little black things falling. It was people! They were dying. And I felt really very bad. And immediately I found a text for the music. I looked in the [Psalms of David](#). And suddenly I just hit upon [Psalm 74](#), because it was really the most appropriate for what had happened, praying for what happened. And I tried to simply apply that to music. And that was the way that the work was constructed.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: Exactly three years ago this month, August of 1999, I was having a physical check-up, getting ready for a stay in [Florence](#) in September and October with a stop in New York. This has gotten to be our habit in retirement. And the doctor said, "You're not going any place." In the three years since, I've gone through nine surgeries and it sort of killed my interest in writing music; I wrote no music at all during that time. As a matter of fact, I was really determined not to write any more music. I simply didn't have the energy. But last September, we finally did return to Italy in September and October, and the second week in Florence, the phone rang and a friend said, "Turn on the television." And of course, what I saw were the airplanes crashing into the Twin Towers. Two weeks later I had an e-mail from a friend, whom some of you may know, [Bruce Carlson](#) who manages the [Schubert Club](#). He was getting ready to print a booklet containing the program of an upcoming recital and wanted to include a poem by [Shakespeare—Sonnet # 64](#)—which speaks about loss, speaks about lofty towers being down-raised, it was almost as if it had been written for that tragedy. And he was sending it to me to ask if I found it too bleak to be printed in the program booklet as his office staff did. I agreed with his office staff but I also thought it was the world's greatest case of serendipity because I had not yet found a text and only toyed with the idea that I would even write a piece for this symposium. I wasn't sure I would do it so I hadn't been looking very hard for a text. But that text, Shakespeare's which seemed to be written especially for 9/11, I found inspiring enough to make me think, "Well, maybe there is a piece of music here someplace." And as a result, it is the only piece I've written in the past three years. It's only a three-and-a-half minute piece, but it felt good to get started again.

CHEN YI: My piece is entitled *Know You How Many Petals Falling?* When I received this commission, it was after 9/11, and I remembered that whole month I was in New York, and had

seen the city. I was so sad that I couldn't work for five days during that period of time, because it was my second homeland: New York, the States. I studied there for many years—I graduated from [Columbia University](#). When I came back to work, I took a Chinese poem that is from the [Tang dynasty](#). I translated that into English because it is a requirement that this time we have to write in English. Although I had written another choral work with this old poem as the text, sung in Chinese, I found that this piece is more dramatic and with more contrast, and it's more emotional. Also, I hope that it's powerful in spirit to remember and to honor the [New York firefighters](#), and to think more about the future and for peace on our earth. I have one other rehearsal on Saturday. I think the [Elmer Iseler Singers](#) are doing a great job.

R. MURRAY SCHAEFER: When I received the information about the commission, I hesitated at first because I don't particularly like writing something for people I have never met. I much prefer working with people that I do know and working cooperatively with them. So a choir was assigned on the other side of the world, and I wrote to the conductor, **Derek DuHei**, and suggested to him what I had in mind. And he wrote back and said, "Maybe you would like to write something on a Chinese poem." I immediately felt that we each had our own idea of what we would do, what would be expected or appropriate. *Rain Chant*, which some of you heard yesterday, consists exclusively of words in an invented language. I would call these magic words, tone magic if you want because back very far in all cultures, people invented words and gave them presence and power. By saying those words and believing them, people believed they could change the world. So, *Rain Chant*, in its fundamental form, is sung every year with a group of people who camp in the bush and remain there for eight days in the wilderness of [Northern Ontario](#). It has a very simple function; to make the rain go away. Sometimes we have to sing it for two or three hours, but eventually the rain does stop. So, I decided to make a very abbreviated version for the concert, since I didn't expect there to be much rain in the hall, anyway. That's what I did, I wrote a four-minute rain chant.

3. Experimentation and Choruses

DALE WARLAND: What do you all think is the role of a composer today in dealing with experimental music and new advances in what is tonally possible?

ERNANI AGUIAR: I have heard so many sounds and I have seen so many experiments. And some things I cannot say! Now I am old, and I have returned to the sounds of traditional music. I am happy with the traditional sounds of the orchestra and traditional sounds of the choir. This is enough for me.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: It seems to me that a great deal of my writing is experimental in its own way. I'm not talking about the use of innovative systems or techniques and so on. When I am writing, I try to use the purest and most direct mode of communicating with the particular person or group who is going to be listening or performing my music, and that differs in most cases. I think [Benjamin Britten](#) said that everything that he ever wrote was an experiment. I don't suppose historians and analysts would agree with that, but I do because I believe he is also referring to a purity of communication that changes from work to work. The other point that I would make is I think that certain people—artists, composers, whatever you wish—are pre-wired by nature to be either experimenters or traditionalists. In either case, one communicates a certain vision and tries to put one's own stamp in it. Some composers can achieve that within the common practice. Others, like [Schoenberg](#), are destined, possibly against their will, to be experimenters. I think you all know that famous story about Schoenberg when he was a soldier the [Austrian army](#). A fellow soldier, meeting him, said "Oh, so **you're** Arnold Schoenberg!" And Schoenberg replied, "Well, somebody had to be!"

CHEN YI: For me, choral music is closely related to language, to any kind of a voice—a human voice. Whatever we could do for the voices, if we combine them well and use them properly in a piece, then it should be appreciated as a work. I don't have a preference for "What kind of style or technique do you use?" I just think that if you combine them well in a piece—according to the text and meaning or the background—that it will become a good piece of choral music.

R. MURRAY SCHAEFER: I guess all through our lives we keep discovering new kinds of choral music and other kinds of music, as well, very often from unfamiliar schools and unfamiliar periods in history. I remember the shock when I first heard Guillaume de Machaut's *Messe de Notre Dame*. Perhaps some others have had the same experience with *ars nova* music. We are constantly being presented with new inventions, new creations, some of which come from very old traditions and others from traditional societies that we are unfamiliar with. I can think of a couple that we have all discovered in the past few years, one is the [Tibetan overtone chanting](#), the other one is [Inuit throat singing](#). These are new choral techniques that are now being used by composers everywhere. So there will always be experiments, as Dominick has said. There will be composers who reveal new kinds of sounds to us that we have never heard before. I think it is natural. I always think of the statement of [Nietzsche's](#): "The artist who knows his/her audience has nothing to say." Think about that in terms of choral music. So there is an awful lot that still

remains to be discovered and will be presented to us and will shock us and delight us by opening up new territories.

DALE WARLAND: An appropriate point that you just made about the composer who knows his audience has nothing to say. I'm curious about how that factors into your desire to know the performers for whom you are writing. And if you cannot answer that question, then comment on your interest in working with a conductor in the approval of text, and maybe even receiving suggestions for texts?

DOMINICK ARGENTO: I don't approve of consulting a conductor about a text. If a composition is going to be a part of my life—take several weeks or months or years—I want it to be the best possible work it can be. And I don't want to do it just because the conductor says, "Would you mind setting this nursery rhyme, because my daughter sings in the choir." That's just not very interesting to me. If it posed some sort of challenge, I might consider it. But if you asked me to set the [Gettysburg Address](#), I would say no. I don't think it is very musical, nor would it benefit from being set, even [Copland](#) avoided setting it to music. I think if I'm going to write the music, I get to choose the words. I do not feel comfortable setting text that somebody else has selected unless it is also something I would have selected on my own.

CHEN YI: Most of the time I choose my own texts, even for my [Chinese Myths Cantata](#). I wrote out the program notes first before I wrote the cantata, then I wrote the text with lots of syllables and it was not in any language. It was written for orchestra and the choir [Chanticleer](#). And they memorized the whole score and even danced on stage. It is impossible for me to write a text without any input, but I did have the idea of the whole project from the beginning because we had to make our proposals to seek production grants first. So everybody agrees to that kind of a story for the project. Mostly, I found my texts from old poems, but sometimes people ask for something else. For example, in one of the two works I wrote for the [Ithaca College Choir](#), I was told that the commission piece should be related a kind of spiritual thoughts, because they wanted the whole concert with that theme. So I chose a section from the text of an old Chinese Thought. That is possible, according to the difference in circumstances.

R. MURRAY SCHAEFER: I think the simple answer is that if any composer is going to set something to music, they do have the right to veto a text that has been presented to them or choose an alternative. Otherwise, it would be very difficult for the composer to get inspired at all, and that is absolutely necessary. The difficulty that I tried to emphasize in the beginning of writing something for a group of people whom I had never met and never heard perhaps is not felt so strongly by other people. It would just be more interesting, I think, to work with a choral group or work with people you do know, and to perhaps create something communally. I have certainly done that in some cases of writing choral pieces. One piece that some of you might be familiar with, *Epitaph for Moonlight*, a quite early choral piece of mine, was conceived that way. The words were supplied by twelve-year-old kids in a class that I was teaching, when I asked them to create words in their own language that would express the qualities of moonlight. I would

prefer to work like that—closely and harmoniously with a group that I knew, and create perhaps even more collectively.

ERNANI AGUIAR: I have many friends who are poets. I want to select their best poems. Sometimes I am commissioned to do a work and I am given a text, and I have to do that. I don't want to lose a friendship. But in honor of the government, I won't do it. I am an anarchist. [Giuseppe Verdi](#) has given us a lesson in this sense. I read the text many times until a melody eventually comes out of this text. Sometimes I look at the text and immediately I have a melody. This is part of my process.

4. Composers Singing

DALE WARLAND: You all are writing for singers. Do any of you sing? I know you are not professional singers, but do you sing? Do you sing in your homes, in the car? How does writing for singers come out? In other words, do you actually make noise?

R. MURRAY SCHAEFER: Yes, I sing. I think I have already mentioned that. I have been singing since I was a choirboy at age 6, and I definitely sing through any piece of choral music that I've ever written—I sing through every part just for breathing, for general contour and singability. So, yes, definitely, I do sing the music as I am composing it.

CHEN YI: Me too! I have sung since I was a child in elementary school, and in middle school I was the head of the choir and conducted the choir, about 50 kids. Also, I sing all the time when I teach composition, singing with my students' works. We only come up to the piano to play the parts vertically, otherwise I sing all day and it never bothers my voice. Also, whatever I write, I sing it with my voice or in my mind. I don't touch the piano; usually it is not necessary.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: I don't sing. I did the next best thing; I married a singer! To this day, you can get a big rise out of my wife, and she gets a bigger rise than anybody out of it, by asking me to match a pitch someone plays. I'll usually be around a [tritone](#) away. It just breaks her up! She doesn't understand. I have practically no coordination of these things [vocal cords] inside here! But I do in my head. When I write a choral piece, I have to be able to sing, or rather hear, every part of it, at least mentally. I have to know how it is going to feel to the singers. But I am basically a fraud as a singer. My wife and I both went to the [Eastman School](#) together for our PhD. She is a very fine singer and got appointed as soloist at the best church in town. And in order to be together, I volunteered to sing in the bass section. Thank God all the other basses were colleagues from Eastman, too! I buried myself in the middle of them, and I would just hum along anything I heard someone else sing and no one ever found me out!

ERNANI AGUIAR: I am always singing. I sing the music that I write. I sing my friends' music. So I write many things for baritone and piano, for baritone and orchestra. I have been married three times to singers. I don't believe that Argento doesn't sing. I am sure that he does. There cannot be any musician who cannot sing. A man who does not sing I am scared of!

5. A New Romanticism?

DALE WARLAND: Do you think we are facing a new kind of romantic period in music, and if that is the case, do you have any thoughts or explanation about why this is so?

DOMINICK ARGENTO: I don't think there was ever a period when music was not romantic, but I am not speaking about a style. What we hear today doesn't seem that much different to me as a mode of expression than what I hear in Beethoven, Schumann, going back to [Mozart](#), to [the Bach family](#), and on back to [Monteverdi](#) and [Gesualdo](#). Every piece of music I have ever heard—and I include [Schoenberg](#), [Babbitt](#), [Stockhausen](#), and everything else—to me, is romantic. Because composing itself is a romantic activity. Just putting notes together to make music is a romantic idea. The whole concept of making something and hoping to make that something beautiful or meaningful, hoping to make something that communicates with a fellow being, that is a romantic notion. You may not like certain kinds of music; they may have qualities about them that you wouldn't consider very romantic, but I would argue that the fact that they exist, were made, and made for a purpose, makes them, *ipso facto*, romantic. I think that the labeling of periods of music is pointless anyway. To call one period [Romantic](#), another one [Baroque](#), another one [Rococo](#), and so forth is just obscuring the fact that this is all beauty of a kind and all on a single continuum.

R. MURRAY SCHAEFER: I think there are two theories, two myths, about the origin of music. One of them says that music came into existence when it was discovered that a turtle shell with some strings across it creates sound. That sound is from an exterior source. The other is one which suggests that music comes from inside the human being. That is, in fact, the romantic concept of the origin of music that music comes from inside us. But both of these theories had certain periods in which they became more accepted. For instance, in the [Middle Ages](#), music was not thought of as something that was romantic. Music was then considered to be part of an array of subjects which included [mathematics](#) and [astronomy](#) and so forth. And as we know, in the Middle Ages they talked about the [music of the spheres](#) being the ultimate form of music, totally outside of human invention. So these ideas did come back at times, and I think in parts of the Twentieth Century when we got into music that was created mathematically, music that was created out of [a twelve-tone method](#), and other kinds, perhaps we were moving closer to that older concept of music being more remote from the emotional drive of individuals. Perhaps we are moving back and are closer to the romantic concept of music coming from within us. But I have no doubt that at some point again we will probably shift the other direction and consider that form of music which is totally beyond us, almost beyond our comprehension.

CHEN YI: I think more than these, there was more variety in terms of styles. So, I don't think that would go for the whole direction at a time. I think that since the [Cold War](#), many countries and many styles have been explored. So I don't think that it will go in one direction.

ERNANI AGUIAR: I also feel the same way as Maestro Argento, and I want to say a few words, not as a composer, but as an interpreter. I have lots of problems when I have to conduct

the music of my friends, who write over mathematical equations or something similar, because this music does not say anything to me. And it does not say too much to the musicians who are playing this music. And then, the audience comes and asks, "Well, why did you do this?" To answer your question, we are returning to Romanticism. Man has always been a romantic creature because he has always felt love.

DALE WARLAND: I know from my own experience, you hear the word twelve-tone, and you think anything but romantic. And yet I have done a lot of Argento's twelve-tone music, and it is the most romantic music you can do. First of all, I would like to say don't be afraid of Mr. Argento. I have sung with him many times and have heard him sing, he just doesn't want to admit to us that he can sing! Would you talk about the process of beginning a composition, particularly as it relates to the text? How do you begin?

ERNANI AGUIAR: It is a hard question. You start to write.... May I say something to you? I am not a composer for orchestra, but an orchestra conductor. I think the compositions base themselves on two points: technique and inspiration. If we don't have the technique, we cannot write. And if we have only the inspiration, we cannot do anything because we don't have the technique to write. So inspiration comes from the Holy Spirit, comes together with the technique, and that is how we start.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: I start every new piece the same way, that is, by rummaging through all the unhappy pieces I have never finished to see if I can find anything of value to salvage! I don't think most composers throw anything away! You start something and get fourteen pages into it, and decide it's junk. But you don't throw it out! It's good junk. I tell myself that if an idea doesn't work for the specific piece I'm writing at the time, it might work just fine in a different piece. But I have never found that to be true; it's an illusion that I'm stuck with. I do begin by browsing through older things that might be useable, and it takes about a week for me to realize that it's hopeless and I'd better do it the hard way: just put a blank piece of paper in front of myself and start anew. That is when the action really starts. We are talking about choral music, and I think it starts from the text. I mean, I like to read a poem, a text—frequently prose—whatever the text happens to be, read it long enough, often enough, to where I discover what the weights of the words are, the significance of them, the durations to stress, the quality of the syllables, whether it is high, low, what I can do to those words that will enhance their meaning as I understand it. To give you a very simple example, somewhere in [the Sonnet that I set for the Symposium](#), [Shakespeare](#) speaks about the lofty towers down-razed. Lofty is one of those words that has got to be up here, it cannot be down there, at least not without getting a laugh. Enough of those considerations come together and begin to form a profile, and that profile is simply another word for melody. And I think that is how the piece finally starts. What happens after that is hard to discuss. Again, I refer to a composer whose choral music I admire, [Britten](#), who when asked how he composes said: "I pick a note and everything else just sort of follows." I understand exactly what that means but can't articulate it. This is the way it feels: once a note is set down, there is a kind of obligation for that note to go to this note, and not to go

to that note. And so you stand there like a censor or border guard, saying, "Okay you can pass.... no, you can't pass.... okay.... next!"

CHEN YI: For me, usually the process goes both ways: from choosing the text and getting the image. There are many times in my life I have read a text hundreds of times, and gotten into the mood. And the most important thing is to get an image and the idea. The idea means the unique sounding, the structure, the design of the timing, and a good beginning and an impressive ending. And then the texture comes to mind. And my job is to arrange that, to write that out.

R. MURRAY SCHAEFER: Well, sometimes if there is a text, the text creates the substance of the music. If there is a given text, I would take it and just sit down and maybe just scribble some features that would suggest what is going to be a lengthy vocal curve, or what is going to be very quick, rhythmic. These would be nothing more than scribbles on paper. And I'd do this maybe two or three times as I dream my way through the text, sing it to myself, and then perhaps the next day I would get a pen and start doodling some lines. I always draw my own lines. I write all scores by hand, and I find that the best way to work because it slows me down. I rule all the pentagrams myself too, so I would rule 5 lines, and then start ruling 6 and then 7, then 8, then 9, then 10 lines if I feel like it, and then I say, "Well, I guess the piece is going to have a soprano and bass part, it sort of goes from there."

DALE WARLAND: How do you decide on your harmonic language? Is it developed at the same time as the melody or is it something that happens?

ERNANI AGUIAR: I do not have a special choice; no choice is made. Just a melody, the harmony, and the counterpoint that unite the work, kind of flow together.

DOMINICK ARGENTO: I don't think I have ever really thought about it. It just seems to be there of its own accord, no pun intended. There are some words where a certain harmonic combination will be the best that I can think of to express what that word means to me or to give that word the emphasis that I want it to have. I think all of us probably have a working vocabulary of sounds that we are fond of, and sounds that we don't particularly like, dissonances or consonants of all sorts. And we try to find the ones most appropriate for whatever the text happens to be. I really cannot describe it with any more clarity than that. It is something that I have never really thought about. It's as if you were to ask a [centipede](#) how it knows which foot follows the previous foot: if they had to think about it, they would become paralyzed.

CHEN YI: If you consider all vertical sounding harmony, then you have many kinds of harmonic progressions. And sometimes I take clusters, but they are brought in one after another in order to make it easier for the singers to join in. Sometimes if there is a row form, you have to follow the [twelve-tone rule](#). And if it is counterpoint writing, the vertical sounding is also a harmonic progression. So I always have a combination. I don't separate them as harmonic progressions strictly. My [cluster](#) may be [chromatic](#), or it may be [pentatonic](#).

R. MURRAY SCHAEFER: Well, in a sense the question is inappropriate, because all vocal music is linear. All periods of choral music have been conceived as moving in linear fashion, and it was only after Rameau wrote [his book on harmony](#) that we began to think in terms of harmonic structure. And that gave rise to another form of music, which was the single voice accompanied by harmonies. But most choral music in the Western world and most choral music worldwide is something that is thought of in terms of linear progression rather than harmonic invention.

6. Working With Composers You Commission

LINDA HOESCHLER: It is delightful to be with all of you here today. I come at this moderation from both a personal and professional passion—probably one stems from the other. For the last 25 years, my husband and I have been privately commissioning music. We have commissioned three to five pieces of music a year. Many times we get the privilege of working with choral composers. For about the last 11 years, I have been Executive Director of [American Composers Forum](#), which [Libby Larsen](#) and [Stephen Paulus](#) founded about 35 years ago. So, this is an opportunity for us to get to know composers whom I dearly love working with and find great joy experiencing and participating in their creative process. Hopefully today we will learn a little bit about how they approach their music, and then how best to perhaps work with composers when you are commissioning them, or if you are performing a new work of theirs and want some guidance from them about the pieces. So, we just heard [Moses Hogan's](#) piece a couple of hours ago, which is wonderful, done by the [Michigan State Children's Choir](#). A very impressive piece, Moses! Why don't you talk to us about the text, the group, how you write differently for children...

MOSES HOGAN: This is a unique tribute, challenge, I would say. [Philip](#) asked me, "Moses, we would like you to do something a little different in terms of your normal musical offering." And I said, "Well, you know, Philip, I have made a vow to at some level preserve the spiritual." And he said, "Well, that's very nice. We would like you to write something with a sort of a gospel flavor." Well, certainly I am not at all opposed to gospel music, as it was part of my early upbringing. I grew up playing in a [Baptist](#) church. I started playing at a very early age. And as matter of fact, my father relates that I was talented when I was very young, so I thought I was playing by ear, because they said, "Oh, he's so talented, he plays by ear!" It's a Southern thing! But, that was my initial exposure to music. And so, I have never had the opportunity to document a written-out gospel arrangement and I thought that this was quite unique, having this be my first composition with a gospel flavor to it. But I have a great passion for the spiritual, as you know, if some of you have done some of my spiritual arrangements. So I thought this was a wonderful opportunity to educate, because many times as I travel around and I listen to people use the term "[spiritual](#)" and "[gospel](#)" interchangeably, and obviously, you know, there is a historical difference. We make every effort in classical music which I love, to let people know what [the Renaissance period](#) embraces in years, and then [the Baroque period](#), and then [the Classical period](#), and so forth as we talk about music history. But we tend now to group all of the African American music in one category—we want to call it all gospel music. And so what I decided to do with this, I introduced this gospel composition with a spiritual, a very famous spiritual entitled, "Over My Head I Hear Music in the Air." And it would give music educators the opportunity, hopefully, not to just sing the song because there is a nice groove to it, but to use it also as a historical lesson, to talk about the spirituals, and how the spirituals influenced jazz and how the spirituals influenced [the blues](#) and [ragtime](#) and gospel music. And to give our young people, who are basically only familiar with gospel music, a real history lesson. And so, I took the text of the old, "Over my head, I hear music in the air. There must be a God somewhere," and I used a couple of verses from that text, and then I reflected on what those

words mean. And Philip used a key word in the invitation—to use gospel music. Gospel is the good news. And so, the text commands us to understand this wonderful feeling of music, there must be a God somewhere. So, I was motivated to just play with the theme, to say, well hey, the people that created this moving art form that we call the spirituals had to have music deep down in their souls. And I wrote that thought, and I began to develop the text based on "Over My Head I Hear Music." And as music dominated my soul, and there was deep love, "There is music down in my soul, and it fills my heart with the joy of the Lord"—which is the basis of that entire text. Music is down in all of our souls, so this is something that I think can be sung by all races. And so, this composition simply developed in that way, and it was an opportunity for me to combine something that was traditional with something that is contemporary, keeping in mind the message of the text, something that I hope that you felt that it was exciting. I talked to the kids about it, and I said, "You know, you've got music and I can feel it. It is that expression that makes the song come alive." And so, I think they did a wonderful job.

LINDA HOESCHLER: When you heard it, were there things you wanted to change about it? And did the chorus, the choir you worked with, give you any feedback about things that might make it easier for them, that they thought you would want to do differently next time?

MOSES HOGAN: Well you know, I have had the pleasure of not composing for an imaginary group of people, as most composers sometimes act with most choral music. I have been very fortunate and blessed to be inspired by the singers that I have to write for. In this case, I had a wonderful experience about 3-4 years ago; I had a first experience of working with children's choirs, New Orleans Children's Festival. And so, as a composer that has only worked basically with older voices, it was important for me, first of all, to know the limitations and be familiar with the colors of the voices. So I asked Mary to send me recordings, because I don't like writing for imaginary choruses. And her recordings were so wonderfully crafted and I could hear clearly the timbre of their voices, and that served initially as the main motivation for me and my work, since I don't write for imaginary choirs. That was a great motivation, just hearing their recordings and to help me set the text based on their voices.

LIBBY LARSEN: I was delighted to hear you use the word "education" as part of your inspiration for your piece because I too think of choral music as a chance to resettle audiences... In my mind I think of the third audience as the performers. And I often think of choral music, because it needs words, as a chance to offer to the performers, and then again the performance audience, the opportunity to look into something, whether it be the spirit or whatever. And when Philip offered me the opportunity to compose a work for the symposium, he also offered me the opportunity to work with the Okubo Mixed Choir of [Tokyo](#). Clever man, this Brunelle! One of my great passions is [American English](#), and I work very deeply to try to understand the etymology of the language of American English, and then how our finest poets work very deeply with that language in order to express whatever is the lyric poetry and the culture we are evolving at this moment in time. And so, Philip asking me to work with a choir whose first language is [Japanese](#) posed an interesting problem for me, right at the base of where I create. I began to think about what this opportunity for third audience communication could be. And I began to research

texts. And I came across an extraordinary volume of texts (I have to put on my glasses to read this—I'm getting old), which I found in a book entitled, *May Sky: There is Always Tomorrow -- An Anthology of Japanese-American Concentration Camp Haiku*. I love it; I am humbled by it. I try to write it and have no success. Mine are all very surface, and when I read [haiku](#) I didn't know that there was poetic movement in the [World War II internment camps](#). And so, I settled into reading the whole volume, and by the end of the reading I was a changed person for having understood how poetry sustains us, as music sustains us—through times in which our regular street vernacular, our choice of words just to express to each other on a daily basis really cannot carry the spirit of the day or the depth of the emotion of the experience. And so, I set myself the task of making a selection of haiku from this volume and I selected a number of the haiku, thinking to make a compilation under the title, *May Sky*, which is the title of my piece. But then, I began to think about the fact that these haiku had been translated into English—very beautiful translations—and it struck me that I ought to also set them in Japanese at the same time and create a motet of the English translations and the Japanese, and that stopped me dead in my tracks immediately because I do not speak Japanese and I needed to begin to understand how the language works and also the musicality that can be found within the language. I stalled out for a while, and had several conferences with [Kathy Romey](#) about my stalling out. Many times a commissioner will ask a composer how things are coming, and we will answer, "Fine." You know the feeling? And often that means, I haven't got a note on the page, but don't worry. But if you answer "fine" three times in a row, then the commissioning person often knows that "fine" means, I'm stuck and a delicate conversation is being placed at that moment in time. And they are always the most fruitful conversations, if everyone remains open. For me, it was that I just couldn't reconcile the rhythm of Japanese with the rhythm of American English. American English is a very percussive and rhythmic language. Our lyricism really is not in our pitch, it is in how we construct our sentences rhythmically; we are a very lyrically rhythmic speaking people. And so, I struggled with it, and I finally found a solution for the piece so that it is set in both English and Japanese. The process of working with the choir is a wonderful process. I had asked for CDs because I too don't write for imaginary choirs. I can't imagine an imaginary choir, actually. And so I got CDs and found this extraordinarily rich sound, very unlike the American choral sound, and a kind of elegance that I haven't heard in Western-based choirs. And I used the CDs mostly as inspiration for working with the choir, until yesterday, when we began to work in person. It was an extraordinary, delicate blossoming of the piece. I cannot think of a better way to describe the process that we went through yesterday. The piece is absolutely perfect, perfectly prepared and the tempo was lovely. I, like so many composers, listen and say, "Could we take it just a little faster?" And so we took it a bit faster. But what was a humbling and ecstatic experience for me was listening to the English in the setting. The English was there, beautifully spoken; yet it wasn't yet being sung. We worked very carefully. I asked a friend of mine, Charles Buckley of the [Kansas City Chorale](#) for help. Because we had about 15 minutes in order to teach shadow vowels and shadow consonants connecting a D to a T, "sound of," and we found the lyricism in singing in English, which really is hard in English. And the piece began to flow in a way that haiku flows. The image of the haiku—I didn't really talk about what I found in the words, so I will just be very brief about it—but I expected to find a heaviness in the subject matter when I started reading the book, just because of the situation, which is an extraordinarily

shameful situation. And I expected to find a heaviness. I expected to find anger. All the things that I would have felt in that circumstance. But instead, I found barbed wire tuned to the filaments of spiders. I found light and wind and air lifting the spirit well out of whatever retaining fence had been put about a bit of land. And I think I finally began to understand haiku, by being able to relate culturally a little bit more through the haiku written by Japanese American poets in World War II.

7. Spiritual Connections

LINDA HOESCHLER: Libby, I am curious, did you tend to incorporate Eastern elements in your music or did you stick more to the Western idiom?

LIBBY LARSEN: I stuck to Western notation, and I used only a little [glissando](#) here and there, because I love [koto](#) and so I thought I would try to honor the koto by putting tiny glissandos here and there in the piece. Believe it or not, I used 6/8 as my meter and spent the entire piece trying to negate the bar line, which is what I often do. If the world were mine as a composer, I would have no bar lines, ever. If I could write my own, a workable score, it would be a bar lineless score with a suggestion of a meter, and then I would hand out acetates to the choir to overlay bar lines as needed, just to learn the piece, but then take them away. But of course, I grew up singing [Gregorian chant](#).

LINDA HOESCHLER: Moses, any comments when you hear about Libby? You both have very spiritual roots in your music.

MOSES HOGAN: Very interesting what she has said, and I am glad to know that you might get a little writer's block every now and then. People often ask, "Mr. Hogan, what is your motivation?" And I acknowledge a God-given talent, and then I say, "But a deadline is right up there!" It is interesting. One of the things that you said about the text... We had a little session yesterday as I of course did have a chance to work with the kids. And so it is important—and I said to them—to have really a group discussion about the text that you're singing. You know, my singers sing because we have a commitment to preserve something that is uniquely important. I feel a sense, a responsibility, to carry on the wonderful mission of the unknown bards who created the spiritual, whom we are not privy to know their names. And I enjoy a success and having my name published on various arrangements, but we are not privy to know the names of the individuals who created the text for "[Swing Low, Sweet Chariot](#)." And so, the singers whom I surround myself with also feel the sense of responsibility and a sense of pride to keep their message of hope alive. With young people it is important, I have found, that in singing a song in a foreign language, or if you are doing one of these spirituals, to talk about what this text means to you. We had a little session yesterday, and I said, "I want to hear from you what you feel, what you have received from the text of this song. What do you feel is the message? There is no wrong answer or right answer." Many times, kids look to us to tell them the answer, and then they respond, "Yes, that's what I feel," but that's not always the case. You have to have an open session I believe, to find out what the song means to you. And so once that took place I was able to find out what they actually felt about the text that I had written, and then on many, many, many views. But once you do that, you open the door to have them deliver this song, and that's the most important thing because I reminded them, that the singer sings the message. The public speaker speaks the message. So we have a responsibility—if it is in a foreign language, you've got to know what it is that you're singing about. I heard a choir sing a composition in a foreign language and only learned it from the phonetic side. Not a clue about what they were singing about. So there was no passion; there was no facial expression. Sadly, that's not music. And so,

once we did that, I believe that enabled this song to go to the next level. That was very important. And then I was able to talk about spirituals. I asked them if they knew the origin of spirituals, and we talked about gospel music. Gospel music. I would like to make this point. Many times, when we sing gospel music as choir directors and want to expose our kids to those elements that belong to the African American choral tradition, we only focus on one aspect of gospel music, and that is the opportunity to do something with a beat, or something the choir has an opportunity to rock to. And while those elements are present, that is not the sole purpose of that. If you want to just rock and move, you can get a [Jane Fonda tape](#)! It is important to say the kids, "Why are we clapping? Why are we moving?" You need to make them aware that this music is borne out of worship experience. It is not entertainment. And I was very careful to make sure that the text would be clear to the listener and for them to understand totally the message of the song. We don't just move or clap here to keep time. Generally, it is my experience that when the audience claps, the singers put their hands this way, or pat on the side. This is not our time to just move and rock. We have to understand why we're clapping, because we are so full of that joy and love that we just have got to...it makes you want to do that. So this discussion was very important.

8. The Meaning of the Text

LINDA HOESCHLER: Libby, with the Okubo Mixed Chorus, did you find in the text that there are things that they have difficulty with, that you had to teach them about? And how does a composer work with a choir when they get the music, but they are not going to have the opportunity to work with you? Are there any tips for people here?

LIBBY LARSEN: In truth, the meaning of the text, I absolutely agree with you: the singer delivers the spirit of the text. I actually am quite less concerned with accuracy of tone and pitch and beat and cut-off. I have sung in an awful lot of choirs in my life. I am so much more concerned with the delivery of the music and of the text—not even the text, the message of the text. So, working with the Okubo Mixed Chorus, everybody knew what the spirit of the text was about.

LINDA HOESCHLER: Had they known about the internment camps?

LIBBY LARSEN: Yes and we had done some certain work to try to talk a little bit about what that meant and why I chose those texts. There was already a deep understanding that set [the haiku tradition](#), which is a tradition of the distillation of the spirit into very few syllables, seventeen syllables. That this tradition would find a voice here and at the [World Choral Symposium](#), I was very humbled when the chorus wrote back to me that they were really delighted to be given a platform for haiku. This is fascinating. That is not about the music, as we were talking about. It is about the text, which is the music in the haiku tradition. Don't separate them. So the work that we did was really in the singing English, in singing the sounds of the words, so that the spirit that was there in the words would come through to English ears. It came through to them absolutely beautifully, but our ears—we are accustomed and, I daresay, perhaps we will become rarified in what we expect to hear in the delivery of words when sung lyrically. And so, we really did our work in that area, and it was very, very rewarding.

MOSES HOGAN: Of course, it is different dealing with older voices. But I gave Mary Alice a choice, because I wasn't sure. So in my final execution of the scores, I gave her the composition, where she did perform in a high key, and then one step down, because youth voices can change in a matter of a month. By the time I am done with that arrangement, she may be a bass. So that was one thing to make the text clearer. And that was the only thing. I don't think you really had to change the keys. But that was one thing that I thought of in terms of the delivery of the text, the placement of the text vocally, that the kids are able to sing successfully so that it is comfortable. So, she experimented with both keys.

LIBBY LARSEN: That is different working with younger voices...

MOSES HOGAN: I don't know what key we are going to publish it in! We should publish it in the higher key.

9. Setting Different Languages

LINDA HOESCHLER: How many of you perform contemporary music? How many of you have actually commissioned pieces? Good! I like to see that! What kinds of questions do you have of these composers?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I am concerned about the number of languages that we are losing every year, and what we are doing, what your thoughts are—both Moses and Libby especially—about preserving even shreds and shards of languages that are dying, especially in this country.

MOSES HOGAN: Well, I have not devoted my work to a specific area. I am not sure of the languages in terms of which ones specifically you feel that we are losing?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: For example, some of the smaller islands in the southeastern part of the United States, or some of the [native indigenous languages of the first peoples](#).

MOSES HOGAN: Well, it would seem to me as we run across the same considerations as relates to dialect, for example, the use of dialect in spirituals and now that we are educated, we should not abandon dialect, but it is necessary, I guess, in preserving any culture, to certainly document and have recorded examples. I think that is one sure way to do it. You know, when I first became interested in the spiritual, I would listen to the older recordings of [William Dawson](#), "Over Jordan," to find out just exactly how these compilations were actually sung during that day, and I think if we made an effort all around with, when it comes to those things that we see as disappearing in our culture; that is one way to help preserve it.

LINDA HOESCHLER: I think there are two issues. One is documenting the songs in the language. The other thing is, have you thought about commissioning works in some of these languages?

LIBBY LARSEN: Good question. I agree that the more that we can capture the dialect on tape, the better off we will be. I mentioned this before, and I am going to say it again, because I think it will illustrate what I am trying to say, and that is, I learned to sing [Gregorian chant](#) in [Latin](#) when I was five years old, and sang it every day for 8 years. Now, the first time that I heard the [Dies Irae](#) set by a western composer, this may sound harsh, but the word that changed my mind was "hideous."

LINDA HOESCHLER: Who was this, by the way?

LIBBY LARSEN: It is a very famous setting of the *Dies Irae*, and we sing it a lot. But to my ears, I didn't grow up in a classical household, so I wasn't exposed to the repertoire that we studied in the academy at an early age. And it struck me, and I still have fights with conductors about how to sing Latin. The inflection of it and where you hold, and how you rest, and it is

really best sung without a conductor and with your eyes closed. I'm sorry. I know that hurts, but to me one of the challenges to composition—because I think you also asked how you preserve it as a composer—is very difficult. Because if the language is to be sung as it is meant to be sung, we have very little training in how to do that in our field. We train our voices in a very specific way, to sing in a very specific way and one of the wonderful things about this symposium is that I am hearing so many other ways of singing, and I keep thinking, "How can I use those ways? What can I do? How could I put that on the page so that it won't come out, "Dies. Irae." With that rounded bass tone.... Now you know.... I keep wondering. We composers are trained to be able to capture what we hear and put it on the page as best we can, and in the way that we hear it. However, if we are going to set "[Gullah](#)" for instance, it just wouldn't be in 6/8 or 4/4 or 3/4 or duple. It wouldn't look like exact pitches on systems of spaces and lines. And there is the challenge for us.

MOSES HOGAN: There must be a guide. Again I go back to the documentation. If there is no effort to document in an effort to preserve, you may hear something different and phonetically when you come down, it may sound different to you than it sounds to me. Even my singers who come from all over the country—guys from [Mississippi](#) sound different from guys from New York. And so you are going to always run into that. So, if there were a master recording, or something to aim for...so that what you hear and how it comes out are two different things, sometimes.

LINDA HOESCHLER: Well, I think one of the questions is should we be writing in that idiom, or should we be leaving it to the [Smithsonian records](#)? Seriously, because there is a big debate in this country. Should western composers be writing with eastern sounds? Whereas, we do accept that many Asian immigrants here are adapting western music to create their sounds? I think that is an issue too.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: My question follows right along with that. As choristers with this whole text issue—as choristers we sing in a lot of different languages. We learn to sing in different languages, and we should learn to sing in different languages. As composers, should you be writing in anything except your native tongue?

LINDA HOESCHLER: Well, you can hear Libby's piece tomorrow, and answer that question! Libby, why don't you start?

LIBBY LARSEN: It frightens me to death to write in a language other than my tongue—which is [American English](#), not [British English](#)—because I cannot feel the word. I can't feel them. I don't know how much we have talked about feeling words, but I need to feel the words.

MOSES HOGAN: I will write what is comfortable for me, because I don't write in foreign language doesn't mean that I'm dumb or I cannot grasp it, but I think in order to best show what I am able to do, I would like for my compositions to be in the language that I am most comfortable with. And I have not had the opportunity, or I am not sure if I would accept a commission, to do

something that is totally foreign to me. I think we have to know our limitations. We cannot be everything to everybody. You must do those things with which you are most comfortable. So that is a choice that I have made personally.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: So how did you approach the Japanese language?

LIBBY LARSEN: Actually, I asked for several people to speak it, native speakers, and I recorded them. So, I used my ears.

10. Barriers Between Composers and Performers

AUDIENCE QUESTION: My question is directed to the personal growth of a choral director. Every time I hear composers talk on the radio, I am always intimidated because they seem to know so much about things other than music. Musicians usually go to summer school and go to music school and their whole education they study music theory and history, and they sort of pull all that out. And when we go back to school and start going to literature courses...

MOSES HOGAN: That's is an interesting perception. I will take just three minutes to even share my experiences. You will reflect with each composer you will simply ask the question, "What makes you a composer? What gives you the opportunity to make you feel that you have something to say about what it is that you are writing?" I don't come to it from the perspective that I know everything. I don't think there should really be a difference between where we are as composers and who we need to actually make what we write happen for us. I look at my efforts to compose and document music. I started off writing for a group of persons without ever having an attempt to publish any of my arrangements. I had choirs since 1980 and we had the same values about preparing the music that I use with my choir now, and it really wasn't until I met Jean Brooks at a music conference in 1994—because I was a pianist—that I felt that I had something to say about the music that was certainly important in my life. And so, I look at it as my own personal conviction. I am careful to offer my opinion. I had an opportunity to perform during the [1996 World Choral Symposium](#) in [Sydney](#) with my choir. A gentleman interviewed me about spirituals and gospel, and I was just running around here, talking about everything, and an article came out the next day in the paper and said, "The Gospel according to Moses!" So I know what you mean. But indeed it is not the gospel; it is a reflection basically of my experiences and my personal growth. And I am delighted to work with singers who also share the same love that I have for the music that I have written, whereas it appears that some composers will know everything, I know that really is their motivation, and that is the way that such a person comes off—that is a problem with that individual.

LIBBY LARSEN: It seems that sometimes there is a perceived barrier between the composer and the performer. Sometimes there is a barrier set up by the page. The conversation generally seems to be around controlling the page, interpreting the page. Am I making any sense? I always feel a little sad about that. I have already told you I hate bar lines and meters and the like. It seems that many of us, composers, have grown up with the mythology that we are "other." That we are somehow other than performers or conductors or musicians. And I think that this mythology is an invented mythology. It is also very convenient if indeed you are shy. Many composers are introverts and really are shy and learn to be extroverted in order to facilitate performances. But this barrier that somehow there is an otherness that is mediated by the page does not need to be there. Simply, don't do that now! The page is meager from the composer's point of view; our notation system is meager at best. And we try to put on the page some representation of what this is that we feel about the music, and, for me, I cannot speak for every composer, but for me, I look at the score as just the beginning step of the dialogue.

LINDA HOESCHLER: Moses has a comment, and I would like to then maybe get into a conversation that will less answer your question, but to talk about how to be a commissioner. I would like you all to leave here wanting to commission your next five pieces. It has been one of the great joys in my life, and I would like to talk about ways that we can make it easier for each other.

MOSES HOGAN: I just have something that I would like to add a little bit in talking about this very interesting experience several years ago. At the end of his career, I met [William Dawson](#). I met him in New York, and he invited me to his hotel room. I didn't understand it then, but sometimes composers feel wounded on some level, and I will share this with you. He knew I had a choir. He proceeded to go over 11-12 of his arrangements with me in detail. He gave me a headache, I gotta tell you. I didn't understand what exactly that meant then. But he said, "Well, young man, I know you have got a choir, and so when you perform these arrangements, make sure that you do the following..." And so I thought he was really quite bitter, but there was an element of frustration there. And as it relates to his arrangements, whenever he heard them, evidently somebody wasn't doing exactly what he had written for them to do, and I know the interpretation of many spiritual arrangements we take great liberties, as conductors. We will leave out a measure, repeat a measure, leave out a note. How many of us have ever thought about changing [Handel's *Messiah*](#) or any one of the chords, or something like that? My hands would shake if I thought about it. I mean there is a beautiful chord that Handel didn't use, but sometimes, maybe there is a frustration. There is this barrier. "We are not going to do what the composer wanted, but we are going to do what I feel like doing, so we'll just take this out." That's somewhat of an issue. And I will always say to those people, especially of the spiritual, "If you feel less strongly about the spiritual and change or leave out a measure, you write your own arrangement!" And that's simply the way to approach it. But sometimes, I do know of several composers who feel that even if you buy his choral music, you will say, "Oh, I'll just change this rhythm, or I should just change this note. I am happy to leave off..." I did see one person like this who commissioned me ten years ago.

11. Sage Advice for Emerging Composers

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I would like to ask a question from perhaps another place on the wheel and that is, from this stage in your development as a composer, what do you suggest as ideal components for developing? And maybe that will be a bridge to the question about the future. What would you suggest a composer get in their ears? If you notice a singer in your choir who seems to have that gift, how would you suggest developing that gift?

LIBBY LARSEN: That is a great place to be on this wheel. I have begun to make it possible for young people to take their first steps. I think confidence in yourself as a mentor, as a guide, but not as an instructor in how to do it, is very important. To provide an opportunity for someone whom you think has a spark that is appropriate for that level, number 1. I see many young composers crash and burn because they were given too many opportunities too soon, and then that was followed up by another big opportunity that was too big, too soon. I have seen some bright lights be snuffed out because of that. Too much, too soon and the craze takes over and the rush to commission that composer. I think that appropriate opportunities for the composer's talent is a good way to start, but then also a mentorship relationship, which is always hardest I think with the newest composers; meaning, that so many young composers will put everything but the kitchen sink into a piece, and a way of working with that composer to guide them into choosing the best idea in the piece. Developing a process of checking in on the piece, and dealing with the uncertainty of a developing talent. Most of us are very uncertain when we begin to compose; you can feel your brain growing. You really can. And to have a person giving you an appropriate opportunity, mine was an anthem, just an anthem was my first opportunity, and was very carefully mentored all the way along the line, without that person telling you what to write. I chose my own texts. We had conversations about how I might set that text, but no prescription about how to do it. We had conversations about range, but that person didn't say, "My sopranos wobble on the G." So no practical limitations set on the piece. You have to let the imagination soar, within the appropriate opportunity.

LINDA HOESCHLER: How old were you when that happened?

LIBBY LARSEN: That first anthem? I think I was 20.

MOSES HOGAN: I agree with everything that you say and I guess maybe I should just add—I will put in proper perspective what a commission does for me. It serves as encouragement first of all. That is the bottom line. It serves as encouragement. It is important recognition. I don't care who you are. If you had the resources of [Beethoven](#) to write, it probably would have meant something to you. When we have this opportunity, it's because you have recognized something that we have chosen to do in our creative life. And I have found that when these compositions are presented or we have the opportunity to perform them, that they touch somebody, some person on a different level. And so, when these compositions are feeding naturally the inspiration of others, once you give us the opportunity, we're inspired. We are inspired by the music we heard of the person who has been documented—[Beethoven](#), [Brahms](#), [Rachmaninoff](#), all the composers.

We didn't receive the commission, but we all know about their various commissions that actually document those works. But they did something—lit something within us. So for those of you who are thinking about encouraging or commissioning composers, know first of all that they serve as encouragement. Then it is a normal pattern. If their work is good, and if you think that the person that you asked to do the commission is a worthy person because of the time spent in his/her genre, then that is important. And then it is inevitable that he or she will serve as great motivation for some other young person.

LIBBY LARSEN: I would also like to add that it puts food on the table. Food on the table is very important. It is really important. Worry is a problem to the creative process. I can see when you ask this question that you believe in the creative process, and I think this encouragement and inspiration is so encouraging for composers to get a commission, and equally encouraging to a composer at whatever level to know that the person who commissions them believes in the creative process. There are some times when a commission will come along with doubt from the commissioner. Doubt as to whether the piece will succeed. Doubt as to whether their friends will like it. When doubt comes along in the creative process as part of the commission, fear that the piece will fail, and you feel that right up front, then it puts worry into the creative process, and that is something to be avoided at all costs, at whatever level the composer is. You just have to believe that whatever comes out is going to be the best thing in the world and everybody will accept it.

MOSES HOGAN: And in addition, having the opportunity to receive a commission is very important. What also serves as encouragement is the publisher. You have to publish your work to make it accessible to people. I am very fortunate to work with [Hal Leonard](#), and I think when I first started, I had Alliance. But now for those compositions that inspire me, my publishers are people that you serve, and that further help the commissioning process.

12. Sage Advice for Emerging Commissioners

LINDA HOESCHLER: I would just like to tell a little story about my own commissioning to get you thinking about how to become a commissioner. My husband and I did not start out thinking we were going to commission a lot of music. We wanted to celebrate an anniversary and there were a number of musicians around town, and we had been singing with the [Bach Society](#), and we thought it would be fun to have a piece written for the four instruments that our children played. We had 2 children. It was amazing how many of our friends thought that our kids would play all four instruments in the piece. They are talented, but not that talented! And we asked [Steve Paulus](#) to write the piece. So I called Steve and I said, "Gee, I would like something for a 15th anniversary." And he said, he got married this summer, so he talked about some texts that would suggest summer love songs, and then he said, "How long?" And I said, "Well, how much to you charge?" And he told me, and I said, "Well, it's for fifteen years, so how about fifteen minutes?" But during the process of the commissioning, Steve involved us. He talked about the text. "How would you like this ordered? Piece on the piano? Do you like this?" And he made us feel like such a part of the process, that we became so enthusiastic about commissioning, that we wanted to continue this. What we found, though, was after a number of years, a lot of our friends would say, "Gee it's great that you commission works." We would commission chamber works mostly because that was what we could afford. Some choral works, a few small orchestral pieces. And we would tell people what fun it was, but nobody would ever do it. And so we started a commissioning club, which all of you, of course, might think about. We have four other couples. It has been going for about a dozen years now. We each throw in a sum of money every year, and then we listen to tapes, and we talk about what music we think needs to be written. And we select composers—and those of you with a chorus mentioned it is much easier because you have the performers, and you might think about getting some individuals around you to commission. But don't ask them just to write the check, because that makes a one-time commissioner. Involve them in the process. Ask them to rehearsals. Have them meet the composers. We now, as a result of the commissioning club, have people go on their own commissioning pieces, and we have new members come in. And I think that's what we all want to accomplish. But if we try to keep control of it, totally—like, I want this composer, I want this music, and not cue in the commissioner—I don't think you'll necessarily get a repeat customer. And I think having a commissioning club, has actually made us better commissioners too because we have more ideas floating around. So I just urge that for all of you. Any of you commissioners like to share your heart-felt stories?

AUDIENCE COMMENT: I have been fortunate enough to sing a piece for the first time with Moses—[Choral Arts Ensemble](#), [Portland](#), Oregon. My question is, and I think we may have some commissioners in the room here. Both of you speak to the issue that you have a text that you are dying to set, or a tune that you're dying to arrange—you have just been waiting for your own lifestyle or whatever is just right at the moment and if that is the case, let us know. I think we have got some commissioners for you!

LINDA HOESCHLER: Great! Sign here with this contract I have in my purse, you'll get a discounted rate!

MOSES HOGAN: Actually I have over seventy published arrangements now, and that is not near enough as some of my colleagues at [Hal Leonard](#). Generally, I have done research and have a collected text of spirituals, and when someone will ask me about a text, what I choose, or will say something that they have in mind. You have got five hundred other spirituals to choose from. So you are not really out of material. And, you know, it is not a set pattern for me. I don't know. I am just encouraging or motivating maybe by the intention for the person who tells me the story about what they are trying to do. And I am going to speak to Mr. Rivers about a special project that he has a couple of years ago from now. I will begin to get my motivation about the text. It may not be something that I already have to do, but when he tells me in more detail, I will become excited just by listening to what he has to say. And then we will work through what his program is and I will give him a couple of ideas. But I must meet the needs of the commissioner, not "I'm going to do what I want to do, and I hope you like it!" It must be a collaborative effort. So there is nothing pressing. But I get the motivation from the person who is offering me the invitation.

LIBBY LARSEN: Like you, I have a whole wall of poetry and I have many texts that I would like to set. But of course, you are talking about collaboration and with each person whom I work with a similar kind of dialogue takes place. I will suggest texts that I have, my top ten texts that I hope some day to be able to set. But will always try to suggest a couple of texts and then hear the texts that might be already on the table to look at, and we talk about it to try to understand what words that the choir would feel good about singing. This is very important.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: You pretty well answered what I was going to ask. I was wanting to know, how does that dialogue get started? Often, as a conductor, I too love poetry. I read a lot of poetry. So often for a particular situation or whatever, I am inspired by certain things, and I would like to consider having those things be set, but I am just wondering how the dialogue goes back and forth. And I will give one instance. I love [Rilke's poetry](#). And I conducted a choir for a while called the [Orpheus Choir of Toronto](#). And I said to [Imant Raminsh](#), "I would really like this particular translation of Rilke's poetry, and can you do something for me?" He said yes, and then he got into it, and as he got into it we started talking, and he goes, "Man, this thing is so wordy. Where do I go with this?" And so that became an interesting dialogue. And in the end, I got a fifteen-minute piece out of it, but I just wonder...

MOSES HOGAN: It is a collaborative process. Even something as simple as a verse, "[This little light of mine](#)," which was a commission by the [St. Olaf Choir](#) and [Anton Armstrong](#). I wrote that for their Christmas Special last year. And in that process I called Anton about three different times because there are 3 or 4 different versions of it. And I said, "Well Anton. What would you like me to do here? Is it appropriate to use this text here?" And he said, "Well, no. Let's use this text." So it was all based on collaborative effort, and that makes a very successful relationship. They are going to perform that on Saturday, and I am looking forward to hearing it.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: My question is composing without commissions versus composing for commissions. Do you ever just have the opportunity to just write because of what you want to write, whether it is vocal or instrumental, and maybe write more from the soul, not because somebody is asking you or telling you?

LIBBY LARSEN: I always write what I want to write. It is just that the commissioner thinks that they are asking me to. I really love this process that we are talking about. I love to work with people who love the creative process. And I chafe at prescription—I have found over the years—that my commissioner says, "I want this, this, this, this, and this." I go Norwegian on him. What that means is that you just go like this... And you don't talk for months. But you are asking a very delicate question, and that is that music that is for the person writing the music, making the arrangement, you really need to be passionate about what it is that you are writing, and the delicate balance is to be able to bring your passion to the project, and at the same time, meet the needs of the project. Hence, my flip answer that I always write what I want to write. It is a question of finding that point of passion in order to produce the piece that you need to produce as an artist, but the piece that you also need to produce as a professional. Does that make sense to you? And then some commissioners think that you can say, "I need a piece 3 minutes long, and this is going to be the title, and this is going to be the text, and I want the range to be x-y-z." And while those can be great guidelines, it is the manner in which it is presented that can either light the passion or put the fire out.

MOSES HOGAN: More than half of the seventy arrangements that I have done were written before I ever heard of a publisher or a person to commission. I wrote the arrangements for my choir because we needed something to sing, and I was too afraid to ask them for money! It was a delight. I'll tell you a funny story. He's here and we joke a lot. I had all of these arrangements for choir since I had had my choir since 1980. Gene Brooks heard my choir, and he says, "Moses, how about coming and singing for American Choral Directors Association?" He says, "Where have you been? I've never heard of you?" And I said, "Well I never heard of you neither!" So he explained it to me. I took him up on his offer. And he said, "Well, we have a regional, you've got to come to regional. And if it goes well there, you may be able to go to nationals." And I said, "Well, Okay." So I decided to perform several of my arrangements at this regional, and we were very well received. And a gentleman by the name of [André Thomas](#) came up and said, "Oh, [that arrangement](#) of the 'Elijah, Rock' is outstanding. I am going to do something in Texas. I need 6,000 copies." I said, "That's the unpublished version. I can't do that." And so they said, "Well, we'll find you a publisher." And a lady by the name of Virginia Collier, made a connection, and [Hal Leonard](#) published my first 'Elijah, Rock' and it sold about 8,000 copies. And she said, "Well, do you have anything else?" By that time, we had been invited to perform in Washington in 1995. She said, "Well, do you have anything else?" And I said, "I have plenty of stuff!" I had been writing for my choir because I was convicted by the text. I had wonderful inspiration of singers, and then that was my entrée into publishing. You know, and then I found that people pay for commissioned work! And I say, "That's cool!" So that was my motivation. And then there are things that I write just because I love what I do. So you're right. There's a motivation, and it is

not so much just about dollar signs associated with a commission. I do believe that a commission serves simply as recognition, and I know that I am thankful for those people who have assisted in my writing.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: This may be a little crass. But, the organization that you might be working for decides to do some commissioning. How do you subsequently determine what it is going to cost? Common sense tells you a longer piece will cost more than a shorter piece. And if you are doing something for orchestra, that is going to cost more than an SA piece. How do you get into the specifics—do you charge by the hour? By the project?

LINDA HOESCHLER: Every composer is different, and there are guidelines that composers will publish that generally hold true for establishing this. My husband and I tend to work personally with some very established composers, but we have tried some emerging composers, people who have not yet been discovered who really need an opportunity, and we often do ask them to come up with an idea and venue, but we have an idea. We ask them what they would like. Sometimes it is too little, and we say, "We're not comfortable with that." And the Forum will be happy to guide you. The [American Composers Forum](#), the organization is separate from the commissions, which is a private thing. But we do a lot of commissioning at the Forum. We run commissioning programs, and we are happy to work with any of you, help you find a composer, particularly composers in your area. If you are a first-time commissioner, it might be an easier way to start, where you can be face-to-face with a composer. They will help you find a person and talk to you about what they might charge. But most composers have an idea. A beginning composer will sometimes charge \$250 or \$500 a minute. A more advanced composer will be \$1500 to \$2500. Depending whether it requires orchestra. If you are doing choir with an orchestra, that is a much more expensive piece. But it just depends. For some composers, there is no negotiation; with some composers there is. We try at the Forum to protect the composer to make sure they are not giving away their work for free or for too little, because it is the way that they make a living. And to give you an idea, there are probably only about twenty composers in the United States writing classical music who are able to live off their commissions. Most composers have to teach, or do something else. So it is not even a living wage for many composers here.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I hope you don't mind a nuts and bolts, simplistic question about the creative process? Because some of us in this room are emerging composers, or looking forward to the next commission or the first commission perhaps... I wonder how you order your lives? Is there a daily discipline?

LIBBY LARSEN: I can't wait to hear how Moses answers this.... We all have a totally different way of approaching it. I try to have a very tiny domestic life. I know that sounds fun, but I have a child, and I have a household and a husband. So, and you're smiling... That means a certain kind of order that I like to maintain if I can. What I try to do is I try to write every single day. If I am lucky that happens. But I do set aside time every day to write. There are weeks and weeks when that time is interrupted, but I keep in my mind that this time is my time to think, write, do

something concerning composition. And then I try to order things around that, if I can. That's what I do.

MOSES HOGAN: That's a beautiful story. In my heart I am organized! You know life is ever-changing. You ask yourself a couple of questions about the creative process. You say to yourself, "Well, why do I compose?" That's the first question. Many times I will live or think about a piece for months. It depends on how quickly the commission is, or how quickly the response to it. But there is nothing about music that there is ever absent from anything that I do—as I am listening to people on the street, or I am in the supermarket listening to the Muzak™ in the background; I'm analyzing it. And so it is always present with me. What makes you a composer? What it is that makes you want to document what it is that you're documenting. You know, a person is a result of his/her own musical experiences. And so you have various influences that will make us who we are. And so once you get in touch with that initially, there is never a problem—When it is time to compose, the music will come to you. I believe that this is the process, and whether I do it every day for 15 minutes, or if I don't actually sit down for another 2 weeks or until late at night. Sometimes I walk along the street and I just feel the rhythms, or I just hear this idea—not necessarily dashing it down, but sometimes I just need it to stay with me, and I know that when I get to the piano or when that time is appropriate for me to finish that composition it will come out. So there is no regular schedule. Music is always present with every thought, and even if I haven't had a minute on a composition, and we are talking about something two years down the road, I'll start on it really the minute we start talking about it. When it comes out a year from then, but I believe it has taken all of that time to come to fruition.

LINDA HOESCHLER: I will ask Libby and Moses to make some final comments, and then I am sure they will be able to stay a few minutes afterwards to answer personal questions. I would like to say that we have two extraordinary composers here who are articulate. They are both very successful. But having worked with hundreds of composers in my work and in my private life of commissioning, the composers are generally very easy to work with. In fact, I don't think I have ever worked with a difficult composer. They are articulate. They are, I think, easy to work with because they can explain what they are doing. They are used to having some parameters, and I encourage you all to try to work with a composer. It is one of the great joys I think you will have in your life to experience something new. This is not about getting married. This is about a new piece of work. I was thinking of one commissioner whom I sent to work with Libby who I think was difficult to work with, and Libby handled it quite well. But because there was a fear... Not all parties succeed. But the joy in creation and, I think, understanding what the artist is thinking about, and then the artist doesn't exist without you who literally give voice to the artist's work, this is also a great joy, working with each other. We heard in the beginning about what Moses did to work with the choir from Michigan, and Libby with the Japanese choir. How they worked on the piece together, and how you get others to understand what is going on, and that is the great joy of a commission. Not just doing standard repertoire. And I think if you can involve private commissioners in this and get them to experience that joy, so that you are truly creating a historic occasion, not just a program of pieces that everybody has heard on recordings over and over again. We have gotten so much into music wallpaper here. I really urge you to take that chance.

As I said, you don't have to hear this piece every day for the rest of your life, but I think the process is often as enjoyable as the final product, because it is so much fun for those of us who are not that creative have that experience. I urge you to do it. Now, I would like to ask Libby and Moses the one or two things you would like us to know as we wrap up.

MOSES HOGAN: This is a marriage. On behalf of your partner, I thank you. This means a lot. For those of you who have studied music history, I want to thank you for embracing some of things that I have tried to put forward as it relates to the preservation of the spiritual. For those of you who studied music history, you will know that in the old days, most composers had to be dead for at least 150 years before there was any interest in their music. So as a living composer, I am excited for the opportunity to have my works performed, and I thank you for accepting me, for encouraging me in my work. Thank you Linda and Libby for sharing this wonderful time.

LIBBY LARSEN: I feel the same way. The opportunity to speak through our voices in a fresh way, because we are all alive, and in the same room with each other—the opportunity for me to work with you and you to work with me, for you to work with composers, any composer, any opportunity to speak afresh some of the deep, intergenerational messages that music carries with itself. Music is generous, and it will let us do whatever we want to it. When we give the opportunity to put fresh breath into the depth of what music always carries with it, that is really a fine way to live. And so I also thank you for the opportunity, and also to tell you that all composers are very good looking, and we are a lot of fun to be around!

13. From The Bible to Blake

[Alberto Grau and Jorge Cordoba are often speaking through interpreter, Christian Grases]

TOM HALL: I am the music director of the [Baltimore Choral Society](#) here in the United States. To my immediate right is [Stephen Paulus](#) who is a resident of the Twin Cities, right here in [St. Paul](#), Minnesota. To his right is [Jorge Córdoba](#), from [Mexico](#), whose wonderful piece on a poem of [William Blake](#) we just heard a few minutes ago. We have a saying for that choir that sang your piece—Those guys have got game! And to his right is [Alberto Grau](#) from [Venezuela](#). We are delighted to have him. And to his right is our good friend, Christian who I understand is going to translate. We are grateful to have you here to help us out with that. Tonight we are going to hear Steve and Alberto's work sung by the [VocalEssence](#), as well as the [Dale Warland Singers](#), and we just heard Jorge's piece just a few minutes ago. So, why don't we start at your end, Alberto? Could you tell us a little bit about the piece that you wrote for the Dale Warland Singers, and give us a little background as to what we might expect tonight?

ALBERTO GRAU: I chose the text in [Latin](#), because I thought this was better for a world symposium and that this text praises God. The piece is divided into several parts, and in some of the parts, the main thing is to experiment with the consonants, and how those consonants should be sung, like the percussion.

TOM HALL: We should note that his text is [Psalm 32](#) from the [Vulgate](#). "Give praise to God upon the harp, play upon the ten-stringed psalter, sing to him a new song, sing skillfully with a strong voice." It is a text that many of us are familiar with. And indeed, you assigned separate notes, for example in the word "con-fi-te-mine." It is a really wonderful effect. Jorge, how about your piece? You set a beautiful poem by William Blake, which I just thought was particularly poignant and special text for this kind of gathering. Beautiful text. Tell us a little bit about that.

JORGE CÓRDOBA: I will try to speak English—I would confess that for me it was very difficult to find this text. When I received the invitation for this symposium, it was a little late for the deadline. I looked in many books of my friends, and I could find nothing. I was very worried. I searched in [the Bible](#); nothing stood out. I prayed and I prayed, and nothing came to me. And then [September 11](#) happened, and I was very depressed after this notice, and I was very afraid, because I thought—if this happened in the US, what would happen next? This was very frightening. Then I continued to try and find a good text, and I went to a bookstore that was starting to close, and I found the book of William Blake. I began to read it, and I found this poem, "[The Divine Image](#)," and I felt a real contact and my heart cried and my feelings began to flow and I thought that this is the poem that I wish to give to the people that come to the symposium. And the curious thing about this is that I wrote the piece very quickly. Sometimes it is the idea in the air, and it could arrive at any moment; it can be written walking, and like thunder it comes. And I was at a concert of 20th century music, and the idea just came, and I said, "That's it! That's my composition!" It was very complicated to hear the music at the same time I was receiving,

from who knows where, all the ideas for my composition. Heavenly e-mail. (laughter) "You've got notes!"

TOM HALL: For those of you who were not able to hear the concert this afternoon, the poem is called "The Divine Image." The first verse is, "To mercy, pity, peace and love, all pray in their distress, and to these virtues of delight return their thankfulness." And the last verse is particularly poignant and applicable to our wonderful gathering her: "And all must love the human form, heaven, in heathen, Turk, or Jew. Where mercy, love, and pity dwell, there God is dwelling too." Steven, how about you? You wrote a piece called, "Love Opened a Mortal Wound." Tell us a little about that.

STEPHEN PAULUS: Well, actually, some of what Jorge said I resonate with because I always look at a commission as permission to go into a bookstore and buy books on poetry. My wife insists that she would like to start giving some of the books away, but I never know when I am going to need a book. Oftentimes, I have a backlog of things that I would like to set, waiting for the right commission to come along. And in this case, for some time, actually I proposed to a few choirs settings of some of these poems by [Sor Juana de la Cruz](#). And 2 other people had said, "I don't think so." One person said he thought they're erotic; they're downright sensual. And I said, "Well that's what I like about them." And he said, "But it's not for my choir." I don't know why. They are for a choir. I don't know why. They didn't ask the choir. I had had some of these poems sitting around, and I had really wanted to set some of them. And then this commission came along and I dug out my file of texts. Actually I wanted to do others, I wanted to do a something longer than just one poem, but the commission specified a shorter piece. So I chose this one called, "Love Opened a Mortal Wound." Because of some of things I just said. [Philip Brunelle](#) is a great intuitive mentor, and he has done many of my things, and he knows much of my work that I had done prior to this time, several slower, nice melodic things. One in particular called, "[Pilgrim's Hymn](#)" which has sort of been done all over the map. I really didn't want to do that. As a creator, you are constantly looking for new areas to go into, because otherwise what's the point of writing. So I wanted to do for this symposium something that moves along more quickly, as I wanted to expand my craft. When I called Philip, he said, I think it would be smart to do something a little quick. Those are the very words that he took out of my mouth. This has nothing to do with 9/11, and maybe I'm the only one. I don't know; I'm beginning to feel left out! But it is a wonderful text, which is where I start, and to sort of add to some tension to this poem, this woman was a 17th century nun in the Mexican court, and she wrote some sacred poetry, and she wrote some rather erotic, sensual poetry, so she was perhaps a bifurcated personality. I haven't read her bio, there is [a very thick bio on her](#) that I haven't read yet, because there was a deadline, and I wanted to get the piece done first. One of the things I did after a short, 4-bar opening that is sort of a pyramid in sound, one of the things that I did with the text is to sprinkle it liberally with rests. So it starts with a quarter-note chord, then a rest, then two quarter notes and then a rest, and then three quarter notes and then there is a whole bar of rest. It is not a lot but just enough to put the listener on edge and to make the listener listen to the text. And that's what I want, to emphasize the text, and also to the choral sound.

TOM HALL: Can we share with them the text?

Love opened a mortal wound, in agony I worked the blade to make it deeper.

Please, I begged, let death come quickly.

Wild, distracted, sick I counted, counted all the ways love hurt me.

One life, I thought, a thousand deaths. Blow after blow my heart couldn't survive this beating.

Then, how can I explain. I said, Why do I suffer? Love ever had so much pleasure?

14. Capturing the Rhythm of the Text

TOM HALL: Now, Alberto, your text is familiar to all of us, "Cantante Dominum, canticum novum " is the second half of this piece. It seems to me - you mentioned playing with the consonants - it seems to me that it was not only the literary meaning of the text that inspired you or led you to your musical decisions, but also the actual physical sound of the words themselves. When you take a text, any text, what is your relationship with the words?

ALBERTO GRAU: The first thing is that I should like the poem—the text. And when the text is chosen, then I start to try to imagine the rhythmic patterns of the text, and how I will construct the whole idea. But this should always be from the point of view of the character of the text. Once the text has been settled, then I start to read the text, the natural rhythms emerge and I continue.

TOM HALL: And Jorge, your texts are also very rhythmically vibrant, very powerful. They make a great impact on the listener. Do you approach your text in the same way as Alberto does? Does the sound of the words themselves, apart from their actual meaning, bear some importance to you? How do you approach it?

JORGE CÓRDOBA: Sometimes I try to find the poetic significance of the words. I try to read it constantly, in this case, multiple roads to approach how I am going to set the text. I was talking to Alberto and we were talking about this upper or second level of consciousness that is activated when you are reading the text. You are not sure knowing that this is going to work when you are reading it, and then it comes to be the right text to set for your music. I was very surprised because Maria [Venezuelan conductor, Maria Guinand] analyzed my work, and I was very surprised to know that I had done the things that Maria had seen in a very precise way. And then Maria came and showed me some things that I did not know.

TOM HALL: Steve, your piece—it always fascinates me when composers of choral music choose pieces that are in the singular personal pronoun. There are many great examples of that: I think of [Dominick Argento's "I Hate and I Love,"](#) [Kirke Mechem](#) did a wonderful setting of "[Come live with me and be my love.](#)" And yours is in the first person—"I beg, let death come quickly." Yet it is sung, of course, by more than one person. So many of the texts that appeal to composers of choral music are things that are very general, and use plural pronouns—"Dona Nobis Pacem." Grant us peace. Do you ever think of it in those terms? Does it ever affect your setting of the piece, of the poem when it is in a personal pronoun as opposed to when it is in a plural pronoun that a chorus is going to sing?

STEPHEN PAULUS: This is an example of what my colleague Jorge was talking about that the less you analyze the work sometimes reveals things we didn't even know we were doing. I have never thought about that. The thought of 40 people begging all at once rather than a collective thing adds some power—40 people begging all at once adds some intensity to it. I'm sure I have set some third person things; I'm just trying to think of them now. I'll go home now and find out

what I was doing. It is quite true that someone doing a lecture on your piece may know a lot more... One more thing I want to say about the text: I really wanted to set the text in Spanish. But Philip said, "Well, you know, we are an English-speaking choir. There will be other people who could do that very well who will be at the conference. I have two sons, and both of them have studied Spanish in school for 6-8 years, and they won't tell me what they know, but I know they have learned something because we have been in places where they have had to use it, and they seem to have been understood at the time. One thing about my piece, the road continues. The piece did not seem ready to end yet at the last line. It is quite a quick turn about in the text, when she says, "What lover ever had so much pleasure?" It's like she said. It just needs a certain amount of revolutions per minute for the car to feel like it's gotten up to the right speed and it is ready to stop. So I finally got her part of my way. And so I decided to repeat this line, "What lover ever had so much pleasure? And I modulated up to a little higher key level. And then I felt it was the perfect time to introduce the Spanish phrase that says the same for several reasons. This accomplished several things. It allowed me musically to further the piece to build more excitement. Plus the musical phrase the way that I set it is really similar to the English that comes about. So that people won't be saying, "What are they saying, what are they saying?" The line is the same; the architecture is the same. They must be saying the same line that they have repeated a couple of times in English, in Spanish. And the thing about the Spanish is, if you think about it, the Spanish seems much more loaded with excitement, and I don't think it's just that it is foreign. It is just the number of consonants and vowels that are coming in quick succession. So it accomplished finally a musical end, which made it as exciting as I thought it should be.

15. Favorite Composers

TOM HALL: Alberto, let me ask you what might be an unfair question, one which I will ask everybody. Who are your favorite composers working today? Who do you like to listen to today, and whose music moves you in a particular way, besides your own?

ALBERTO GRAU: I feel very lucky to be very versatile, and enjoy everything from [Gregorian chant](#) to a good [salsa](#). And I can also sit at the piano and play [Johann Sebastian Bach](#). I am fond of many types of music. And [during] the times that I have to write, many of my talents and all these elements come to me, and I give all these elements a very personal touch.

TOM HALL: Jorge, how about you? You are a conductor as well as a composer. You do a lot of music. Are there people writing music today in particular that you are drawn to?

JORGE CÓRDOBA: You asked me about the composers. I think there are too many. [Béla Bartók](#), [Francis Poulenc](#), [Gorecki](#), [Arvo Pärt](#). I like very much the composers that set a choral reality. I am a singer and choral director, and sometimes when I approach a certain kind of music, I see that the choir is suffering. The singers are suffering. And I really like all these composers who think about the choir, about the singer.

TOM HALL: You, as a co-founder with [Libby Larsen](#) of the [ACF](#), have done just phenomenal work for many years in supporting many, many American composers in particular. This may be a particularly unfair question, but who are the composers that you are interested in?

STEPHEN PAULUS: I obviously have been greatly exposed to the works of my colleagues here in the States as I have worked and lived here. Also through the Composer's Forum, I have become familiar with literally hundreds of composers' music. Also through two residencies, one with the [Atlanta Symphony Orchestra](#) and one here with the [Minnesota Orchestra](#). When Libby and I were here with the Minnesota Orchestra, we were sent works by probably 700 composers, and we functioned as a little screening committee of two, before the sacred, smaller number made it to [Neville Marriner](#)'s desk. So we became familiar with all kinds of people. I have been fascinated by the work of several of my colleagues; people outside the Minnesota area would include music of [Joe Schwantner](#), [Bob Beaser](#), [Aaron Kernis](#). I told Aaron this story—Four or five years ago I didn't really know much of his music; I don't know why. We have a little boombox in the kitchen. I think it is fair to say it is not a very sophisticated piece of equipment. But it is a kitchen. [Minnesota Public Radio](#) was playing something, and my wife had just asked me to take out the garbage, which I was doing. I put down the garbage, because you know how it is when you really want to hear the end of the piece, who the composer was. I was that fascinated with who the composer was, and it turned out that it was Aaron Kernis. And I thought that is the ultimate compliment when you stop doing something else. You often hear people say, "I was traveling along in the car and I heard this fascinating piece and I was five minutes late for the party. And this being America, I think I am like most Americans, I have very eclectic tastes and you can go down the radio dial and listen to seventeen different styles of music. I was in New York

supervising the production of a new opera that I had written, and I ended up eating in the same restaurant on several nights in the row. At the late hour we were finishing, sometimes there were not so many options open to us. And they were always playing the same CD at around 11:30 or 12 at night. And I finally said, "Who is that?" because I had no idea, and it turned out to be [Norah Jones](#), who is sort of a jazz singer. And after a while, I noticed that [Barnes & Noble](#), everybody in that [Lincoln Center](#) area was playing the same CD. Finally, I'll go to the point, I didn't want to be embarrassed by it, but after a while, there was a twinge of country-western thrown in with jazz and something else that I couldn't figure out because that is not my area of expertise. There is something fascinating about the way the text is set, sparsely accompanied, and I have since learned that she is quite a hot ticket, she is [Ravi Shankar](#)'s daughter and is writing all of these great interesting little things. So I think a lot of American composers are influenced by some of the popular music around. It is not as if we would incorporate it, but it all feeds into the same tube and somehow comes out as a piece of music.

16. Nationalism

TOM HALL: Jorge, is there a national style in Mexico, and does your music reflect a national proclivity, tendency? Do you think of your music and the music of your colleagues back home as being very unique and individual? What role does your nationality play in your music?

JORGE CÓRDOBA: Nowadays, multiplicity. I was hearing this very Latin American song not long ago, and it was done by Japanese singers.

TOM HALL: Alberto, is there a Venezuelan style that is known throughout the world?

ALBERTO GRAU (via interpreter): When he approaches popular music, musical arrangements, he does not want to be attached to this type of thing. He can be shocked by music, [aleatoric music](#). And the rubber road can be hit musically as well! He's really thinking as he is sitting here talking to you about how he can hit the audience in the next composition.

TOM HALL: You are in for a good "hit" tonight! I was at the rehearsal last night. Stephen, this was asked me by the editors at [ACDA](#). A bunch of conductors were asked to define the American style of contemporary music. I found it a very threatening question, and so I would like you to answer it for me.

STEPHEN PAULUS: I don't think there is an American style, but I am going to contradict myself. In America there are people who write [very strict twelve-tone music](#), very strict serial music, and can't fathom what happened to the rest of us to desert that style, as if that's what music should be. You will find people writing very popular-influenced things; [Michael Torke](#) shows a definite influence of popular rhythms and very harmonic chords. Things by [John Adams](#)—a composer whom I forgot to mention in my list of composers whom I like a lot... There is [Neo-Romanticism](#), all these things even veering towards almost [new-agey](#) stuff. So there isn't an American style, and conversely, that probably is the style, a grab bag of all of those things. A piece may start out with 11 notes of a twelve-tone row, and go through that, and suddenly go into some rhythmic thing with a 9th chord that repeats for 20 bars. And in some composers that seems to work. I have been told that there is an American style, that my music sounds so American. I wish I could figure out specifically what they mean by that. But I think some of it—sometimes I think they are referring to a [Copland](#)-esque like influence, a chordal vocal thing with open intervals. But that is not their main *modus operandi*. So I think there is a difference—that there is a certain openness, freshness in a certain way that seems to characterize the American spirit. And we Americans seem to be much more informal than some of our European colleagues. "Hi, I'm Bob." But wait a minute, I don't know you that well. Back off. There is a sort of an open, genuine friendliness that can be a little disarming that perhaps comes across in our pieces. There are pieces that could only be written in this country. I will think about it a little more while you are asking someone else a question.

17. Establishing a Compositional Voice

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Do you think it is important as a significant composer to establish your own voice, that is, your own particular style that departs from one piece to another?

ALBERTO GRAU: Everything in life changes. Your work as a composer should evolve in the same line as you evolve as a human being.

JORGE CÓRDOBA: Some things are composed at the moment, at the mental moment, not the physical moment. But I try not to repeat any technical procedure from one piece to another. And try to approach to the real sound that I am conceiving through the choir. This has allowed me to take apart what I call musical trash.

STEPHEN PAULUS: I think it is very important for you to find your musical style. That is what sets you apart; it is your signature. You cannot force it. Your musical style develops as the person evolves, as the artist evolves. Eventually you find sounds that you like better than other ones. Those are incorporated into your work and the other ones get separated out. But if you connect with whatever is in here, and feel confident about it, then that becomes your signature. My principle composition teacher was [Paul Fetler](#). I'll never forget the first piece, after all the little exercises that I had written, the first piece in which he implied that I was developing a musical style. It was a group of three [Elizabethan](#) songs, and we had to go to the piano and play them as best we could and sing them. Actually [Libby Larsen](#) sang them; they were actually for soprano. When I finished, he said, "You know, these aren't bad." That is the ultimate compliment from another composer, actually.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: [Stephen Paulus](#) was wondering about pieces that he had written in third-person plural. And I happen to have "[Pilgrim's Hymn](#)," which even before we call on your name... "We give thee but thine own..." I was wondering if composers think of this as a more appropriate mode for things that will be used in conjunction with communal worship, church pieces.

STEPHEN PAULUS: Sure. I really haven't thought about it much. Basically what I said earlier is that I know that when I want a more intense thing, separating out the "I" and "we"; "we" would be a more collective thing. I would be more intent on focusing on if the "I" or "we" says something that ends up relating only to male or female gender. If you're having a mixed chorus sing that, then you either have to throw it out, or somehow cross that bridge. And in "[Pilgrim's Hymn](#)," it is a spiritual text, not that this isn't in a certain way, but I was just handed a poem with a "we" in it, and I think I just set it. I don't know what else to say about that.

18. Mentoring Younger Composers

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I wonder if you were mentoring a young composer, what would be essential for them to focus on, to really tune the ears?

ALBERTO GRAU: The first thing would be that he has to focus on the choir that he is going to write for. This is very important because a composer should write for the interpreter, whoever the interpreter is. In [Venezuela](#), we have many children's choirs, and one can write for pre-school choirs to the [Dale Warland Singers](#). So it is very important for the composer to focus on the choir for which he is composing. The second thing is that the pupil should work a lot.

CHRISTIAN GRASES [INTERPRETER]: I can tell you that he gives us a lot of work.

ALBERTO GRAU: The composer should pick a good poem and stick to it, but it is very important for the people to feel compassion for what the music can give back after he is done working on it. And the last thing would be to be very critical with one's self.

CHRISTIAN GRASES [INTERPRETER]: I can tell you that he is very tough on himself and on us. I am a pupil of his. He shows us how to be really critical with ourselves and our work.

JORGE CÓRDOBA: It is very important to analyze the great composers. I agree with Alberto about all the preparation. I emphasize that analysis is very important, and I was so amazed at how much fun it was to analyze works. After all of these things are in yourself, then approach the music from your heart, so your feelings can come through. After you have analyzed and after you have worked a lot, then you have to take all these studies of counterpoint apart and you have write from your heart.

STEPHEN PAULUS: I would say that young composers should listen like crazy to music, and find out what is working and what isn't, and why. Write every day. It is no different from being a gymnast; develop that facility if possible, something related to composing. Older composers should listen like crazy, and write every day. It is the same. The other tricky thing I heard in a quote heard down the table here is to become self-critical, and wean from the teacher or mentor. My teacher, Paul Fetler, never said, "this is good...this is bad." He always said, "Well, let's see...Let's look at the alto line. Are you pleased with what you have written?" And I would, being young, say, "Oh, very pleased." Instead of pointing out that I had written 28 bars without a rest, and all altos have to breathe, just like woodwind instruments. And he would say, "Well, is there anything you would change?" And I would say, "Not a thing!" "Well if there was one thing possibly that you might want to consider changing," and by this time behind me all the graduate students were laughing, because they could see as plain as day that I hadn't allowed them time to breathe. But if he had said, "Give the singers a chance to breathe," no—he used the [Socratic method](#) and finally got it out of me, "That's right! I need to give them a chance to breathe." That is a great skill that needs to be developed as soon as possible. Come back to a piece; I still do this to this day. The more time after I have written a piece, to put it on the shelf—even if it is for one

night, hopefully it is a week, sometimes a month—suddenly some of the world's greatest ideas suddenly become very mediocre after you have had a chance to let the work sizzle a bit; That chord isn't zippy enough, or that chord doesn't have the right punch." You can improve a piece so much, even before you get to the premiere. Much better than at the second rehearsal.

19. After The Premiere

AUDIENCE QUESTION: My question relates to the last thing you said about after the premiere. If you have written a piece for a certain occasion or a specific ensemble, what do you do afterward? If it is going to be published or if it is going to be performed widely, do you look at it fresh? Or is it just done?

JORGE CÓRDOBA: This piece required that for the premiere, I would have two rehearsals with the choir prior to the concert. Fortunately I didn't have to change anything. They [the choir] did all that was requested on paper. I feel fortunate because it is a very good choir, and you got to hear a very good approach to my music, as it is written. Sometimes I have to change things, but that is not a common thing for my works. In the rehearsal, perhaps.

ALBERTO GRAU: In my case, I work to the contrary. I change things a lot, and after the premiere as well. I change things constantly. This is a real headache for my editor, but I think that sometimes I have better ideas, and just [need to make] changes. I feel very fortunate about Dale Warland's patience because at these two rehearsals, he has been changing a lot! I feel very grateful that they [the choir] are coping with me. And after the premiere I am sure I will change things, and will have to fight with the editor again.

STEPHEN PAULUS: I am a sort of "It's done" kind of guy, except for the operas, which will not be done until I am dead. Opera is such a large-scale form, and there always seems to be such a lot of people involved who have an opinion about what works. And you are dealing with drama and music and orchestra and singers and staging and lighting and wigs, and all of that. Everything else—after the premiere, if you're going to hear a subsequent performance and you hear something and you think, "Did I write that?" and it doesn't seem right... I've gone to a thing where I have had to say, "I know it's printed, but that note ought to be an F natural, instead of a G." If you're a composer, you can get away with that.

TOM HALL: One of the issues that my composer friends lament is that we do the premiere, and then it never seems to be done again. [Chorus America](#), which is an organization with which I have been working for a number of years (I serve on its board), used to have a program funded by the [Pew Charitable Trust](#), in which we would do second and third performances of pieces that had been premiered. So the idea was to get the pieces in circulation so that the group who did the premiere did not do the second and third performances. Unfortunately, the funding for that dried up, and we are working to invigorate that program.

TOM HALL: Let me just take an omnibus poll here. How many of you have heard some of these premieres this week commissioned by [IFCM](#) and are planning to do them with your group?

TOM HALL: That's great! That is one of the great legacies that this organization will leave.

20. The Compositional Process

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I have a question about process. When you are composing, are you working at a keyboard, or are you at a writing desk, or a table? Or do you use software and write with a keyboard?

ALBERTO GRAU: The first approach is without a piano. I will take the text and organize whether to separate [it] into 2-3 parts. What are going to be the climatic points, the deep points? All the scheme is done at a desk. Then I use a piano for the melodic and harmonic points to come out.

JORGE CÓRDOBA: In my case, I am contrary to Alberto. I think that a piece has a life of its own. Sometimes I need a piano to write it; sometimes I do not. I do not use software to write music. No two compositions of my own for choral performance have been written with the same process. Sometimes I just write it. Sometimes I use a piano. Sometimes I write bits and pieces and then compile the whole work. The basic idea is the intuition. That is the main process, intuition.

STEPHEN PAULUS: I write at the piano. I use a [Pentel rolling writer](#), which is basically a felt-tip pen, to do a complete draft. It doesn't matter if I make a mistake; I just cross it out. Then I hand it over to my copier who puts it on [Finale](#), and sends me a final copy, and that's it.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I have a question related to the process. When you're thinking about what you're going to write... As a performer, I have had the experience of being given pieces that were fantastic, but also extremely difficult, and so, if you think about performability, that a piece may be at a level, what do you think about settings that take high-level forces, or large forces, knowing that it may not be performed as much as you might like?

ALBERTO GRAU: I would like my music to be performed more—and of course to be bought more, but I insist on the fact that when you compose, you should think to whom you are composing for. Sometimes if something is extremely difficult, you as a composer should make it easier, if you see that the performer is not able to do it. But sometimes for respect of the institution, you have to do things harder, because the choir that is going to sing this deserves such an amount of difficulty.

JORGE CÓRDOBA: In this case, I think that it is risky to think about the performer. That does not mean that I am opposed to Alberto's idea. I was commissioned in Mexico from very high-level musicians. They talked to me and they actually got into my ideas of the compositions. They were in the process with me. No one can sing those pieces besides them because they are too difficult, and that is why I think it is too risky to think about the performer for whom one writes. In the case of the Norwegian choir that just sang my piece, I did not know the level of this choir, because I never talked to them before. That is why I wrote a piece that I think was not as complicated as it could be. It would be very risky to compose something very complicated,

that they may not be able to perform. That is why I think that it is good to think about the interpreter, but your piece could be isolated if you think in this line.

TOM HALL: Your piece is written for a 26-voice choir, sometimes divided into 20 parts. There is a lot of *divisi*... Steve, you were writing for a group that you know very well...

STEPHEN PAULUS: I always try to work with the conductor, get to know the organization, whatever, ask for recordings, though it is best to hear them live. Then to write a piece that stylistically is consistent, although you may be writing difficult or a more accessible piece, I think you can keep your own style as a composer, but you can tailor the piece so that the group is challenged somewhat but they can do the piece. So if they cannot perform the piece, they are going to be frustrated, they won't be happy with me as a composer, and I'll think, "What's wrong with this group? They can't sing my music?" Well, the group is a community chorus, can't be as challenging in terms of *divisi* and certain intervals and certain other things. Whereas a professional chorus of 20-40 singers—when you have those opportunities, you just have to set your sights in the right direction. A pro-chorus that can do these kinds of things, you say, "Oh, boy! Anything goes!" The [San Francisco Girls Choir](#), the group I heard this morning, they did Alberto's piece. They can do anything! If you were fortunate enough to receive a commission from them, you would say, "Oh, boy!" That is a wonderful feeling for a composer to be able to do anything, and as a matter of fact they may want you to try things a little bit hair-brained, or crazy, or unusual or they haven't been asked to do that before. They rise to the occasion. And other groups will need help with notes, etc, and that's okay too.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: In listening to some of the composers that had long careers, and hearing where they were 20-30 years ago, and things that they have written now, I get a sense that for some the end of their career they try to sum up or make a statement about what has happened with music in their life. Of course, all of you are very young and healthy and have many years in front of you, but do you think about your own voice, and how you are trying to comment on or incorporate what has happened in the last century or in the last 10-20 years, or whatever?

ALBERTO GRAU: I am so young still, and am not yet thinking about that.

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