The Starry Night: Jake Heggie, Vincent van Gogh, and the Consolation of the Stars

Shannon Melody Unger

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____________________________________
Janet Page, PhD
Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

____________________________________
Susan Owen-Leinert, MMu

____________________________________
Mark Ensley, MFA

____________________________________
John Baur, DMA

____________________________________
Kenneth Kreitner, PhD

Accepted for the Graduate Council:

____________________________________
Karen D. Weddle-West, PhD
Vice Provost for Graduate Programs
THE STARRY NIGHT:
JAKE HEGGIE, VINCENT VAN GOGH, AND THE CONSOLATION OF
THE STARS

by

Shannon Melody Unger

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts

Major: Music

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ABSTRACT


This document begins with an Introduction detailing the reception history of Jake Heggie’s 2002 song cycle *The Starry Night.* Chapter one offers biographical information on the composer, chapter two details thematic connections between “La Peinture Consolante” (the painting of consolation) and Heggie’s conception of narrative journey, chapters three through nine offer detailed musical analysis for each of the seven songs, and the conclusion discusses the contemporary American art song recital, with specific reference to Ned Rorem’s 1996 *Opera News* article: “The American Art Song: Dead or Alive.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Janet Page, not only for extensive editorial assistance, but for inspiring my new-found passion for musicology; this document represents a step in the direction of what I hope will be a lifelong pursuit of musical scholarship.

The completion of my course of studies would not have been possible without the support of my family and friends; I am profoundly grateful to Nettie, Paul, and Joanne Unger, and dedicate this document to the memory of my father Melvin, who would have been so proud to see its completion.

I would like to thank the members of my committee Dr. John Baur, Dr. Kenneth Kreitner, Susan Owen-Leinert, and especially Mark Ensley, my mentor and friend.

Finally, thank you to Jake Heggie for music that inspires, and “speaks to the heart.”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract  
ii  
Acknowledgements  
iii  
Table of Contents  
iv  
List of Figures  
vi  

Chapter  
Introduction  
1  

1 JAKE HEGGIE: A BIOGRAPHY  
4  

2 JAKE HEGGIE, VINCENT VAN GOGH, AND *THE STARRY NIGHT*  
8  
Premiere and Reception History  
8  
Vincent van Gogh and *The Starry Night*  
9  
The Search for Consolation  
12  
Jake Heggie and Vincent van Gogh  
13  

3 THE STARRY NIGHT (SONG 1)  
16  
Anne Sexton and *The Starry Night*  
16  
Musical Content  
19  

4 CELESTIAL LOCOMOTION (SONG 2)  
28  
The Letters of Vincent van Gogh  
28  
Musical Content  
30  

5 GO THY GREAT WAY! (SONG 3)  
41  
Emily Dickinson, Christianity, and Circumference  
41  
Jake Heggie and Emily Dickinson  
44  
Musical Content  
46  

6 REFLECTION (SONG 4)  
55  
Vincent van Gogh: A Refugee from Paris  
55  
Musical Content  
58  

7 THE SUN KEPT SETTING (SONG 5)  
68  
Emily Dickinson and Victorian Notions of Death  
68  
A Sketch of the Sky  
70  
Musical Content  
71
8 TOUCH (SONG 6) 76
A Kiss of Reverence 76
Musical Content 78

9 EPILOGUE (SONG 7) 90
Wheat Field with Crows 90
Musical Content 92

10 CONCLUSIONS 100
The American Art Song: From Academia to the Concert Hall 100

BIBLIOGRAPHY 106

APPENDICES

A. Opera and Stage Works 109
B. Works with Chorus 110
C. Song Cycles and Individual Songs with Piano 111
D. Songs with Orchestra, Chamber Orchestra, and Chamber Ensemble 117
E. IRB Clearance
F. Copyright Permission
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>The Sidewalk Café at Night</em> (1888, Kröller-Müller)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>The Starry Night over the Rhône</em> (1888, Musée d’Orsay)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>The Starry Night</em> (1889, MOMA)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “The Starry Night,” mm. 1-3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “The Starry Night,” mm. 4-6</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “The Starry Night,” mm. 43-44</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “The Starry Night,” mm. 66-68</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “The Starry Night,” mm. 69-77</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 1-9</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 10-13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 16-18</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 26-29</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 70-74</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 79-82</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 99-109</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 110-113</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. “Go Thy Great Way!” mm. 1-5</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. “Go Thy Great Way!” mm. 26-31</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
23. “Go Thy Great Way!” mm. 1-12  
24. “Go Thy Great Way!” mm. 41-43  
25. “Go Thy Great Way!” mm. 6-19  
26. “Go Thy Great Way!” mm. 20-31  
27. “Go Thy Great Way!” mm. 32-36  
28. “Go Thy Great Way!” mm. 37-43  
30. “The Starry Night,” mm. 1-3  
31. “The Starry Night,” mm. 43-44  
32. “Reflection,” mm. 1-4  
33. “Reflection,” mm. 23-26  
34. “Reflection,” mm. 13-17  
35. “Reflection,” mm. 42-45  
36. “The Starry Night,” mm. 51-54  
37. “Reflection,” mm. 49-59  
38. “Reflection,” mm. 60-69  
39. “The Sun Kept Setting,” mm. 1-4  
40. “The Sun Kept Setting,” mm. 15-18  
41. “The Sun Kept Setting,” mm. 23-24  
42. “The Sun Kept Setting,” mm. 44-49  
43. “The Sun Kept Setting,” mm. 56-63  
44. *Entrance Hall of Saint Paul Hospital* (1889, Van Gogh Museum)  
45. *Pièta (After Delacroix)* (1889, Van Gogh Museum)
<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 1-2</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td><em>The Deepest Desire</em>, Mvt. 1A, “Love,” mm. 1-5</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 6-10</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 11-13</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 14-17</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 18-22</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 28-32</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 33-36</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 43-47</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 53-57</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 78-83</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 84-86</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58.</td>
<td>“Touch,” mm. 95-98</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.</td>
<td><em>Wheat Field with Crows</em> (1890, Van Gogh Museum)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60.</td>
<td>“Epilogue,” mm. 1-4</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61.</td>
<td>“Epilogue,” mm. 5-7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62.</td>
<td>“Epilogue,” mm. 12-15</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63.</td>
<td>“Epilogue,” mm. 16-17</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64.</td>
<td>“Epilogue,” mm. 22-23</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65.</td>
<td>“Epilogue,” mm. 24-26</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66.</td>
<td>“Epilogue,” mm. 31-36</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The topic for this dissertation is Jake Heggie’s song cycle entitled *The Starry Night*, for mezzo-soprano and piano. Commissioned as part of the concert series Evolutions in Song, the work was premiered in 2001 at the Merkin Concert Hall in New York by mezzo-soprano Kristine Jepson and pianist John Churchwell. The song cycle has subsequently been recorded by the composer with mezzo-soprano Mary Phillips under the Americus Records label as a benefit in favor of Classical Action, an affiliated branch of Broadway Cares which offers AIDS services, awareness, and education.

Jake Heggie is best known as an operatic composer, and his operatic and stage works include: *Moby-Dick* (2010), *Three Decembers* (2008), *For a Look or a Touch* (2007), *To Hell and Back* (2006), *At the Statue of Venus* (2005), *The End of the Affair* (2003), *Dead Man Walking* (2000), and a chamber opera entitled *Again* (2000). The debut of Heggie’s opera *Moby-Dick* (with a libretto adapted by lyricist Gene Scheer) in May of 2010 was hailed as an “undeniable success” in the *New York Times*, and *Opera Now Magazine* christened it “A Great American Opera.”¹ *Moby-Dick* is scheduled for upcoming seasons in San Diego and San Francisco, and international co-productions are scheduled in Canada and Australia. Heggie frequently collaborates with librettist Gene Scheer, and their musical partnership has included not only the operas *Moby-Dick*, *To Hell and Back* and *Three Decembers*, but also the song cycles *Rise and Fall*, *Statuesque*, and *Friendly Persuasions: Songs in Homage to Poulenc*, and a music theater work for baritone entitled *For a Look or a Touch*.

Heggie is a prolific and successful composer of song. Early in his compositional career he caught the attention of mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade, who recorded his award-winning setting of Emily Dickinson’s poem “If you were coming in the Fall” for the G. Schirmer American Art Song Competition of 1995. This stimulated interest in his songs and fostered commissions by various artists and a recording under the BMG Classics Red Seal label. His first recording, entitled The Faces of Love, featured established, world-class artists: Frederica von Stade, Renée Fleming, Jennifer Larmore, Sylvia McNair, Carol Vaness, and Brian Asawa. In 2008, the Avie Record label released a recording entitled Passing by: Songs by Jake Heggie, which features Susan Graham, Joyce DiDonato, Zheng Cao, Frederica von Stade, Paul Groves, and Keith Phares. Jake Heggie’s song compositions to date include six song cycles for soprano, eight for mezzo-soprano, one for counter-tenor, one for tenor, and four for baritone, in addition to numerous individual songs.

This document includes ten chapters. Chapter One provides biographical information derived from a literature review as well as information related to the reception history of The Starry Night. Chapter Two provides biographical information on the painter Vincent van Gogh, as well historical and archival material extracted from the letters of van Gogh which pertain to the painting The Starry Night. Chapters Three through Nine contain detailed musical analysis and context for each movement of the

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3 Carolyn E. Redman, “Songs to the Moon: A Song Cycle by Jake Heggie from poems by Vachel Lindsay” (DMA diss., Ohio State University, 2004).

song cycle. Chapter Ten is a conclusion that incorporates reviews of Heggie’s songs, and a brief discussion of the contemporary art-song recital in America.
I love songs. I’m a song-writer by heart and by nature so that’s why I keep going back to it … that sense of journey and transformation and development that I think is fascinating.¹

Because Jake Heggie has been such a successful composer of opera, it is easy to overlook the fact that his musical roots are firmly entrenched in song. Heggie has long had a fascination with the human voice and with the dramatic possibilities inherent in texted music. His earliest musical memories are linked to the human voice:

I’ve always just responded more to the voice than to any other instrument. My first vivid memory of this was hearing and seeing Julie Andrews in “The Sound of Music.” It was stunning how beautiful she was, and how connected, natural and real … That kind of story-telling through music has always fascinated me. I love great stories – and the element of music (singing) just naturally heightens the emotional arc and journey of that experience.²

Jake Heggie was born on March 31, 1961. He began composition studies with noted American art-song composer Ernst Bacon at the age of sixteen.³ Heggie studied piano in Paris with Pierre Sancan for two years before entering the University of California at Los Angeles, where he studied with pianist Johana Harris.⁴ The widow of composer Roy Harris, Johana Harris was a distinguished teacher and performer in her own right, with a formidable career as a pianist, pedagogue, and recording artist under the


² Jake Heggie, e-mail message to author, September 25, 2010.


MCA Classics label. Although Harris was his piano and not his composition instructor, Heggie attributes his musical development primarily to her influence. Heggie describes her as, “the most incredible musician I have ever known. She had an amazing facility with the keyboard, and loved singing and vocal music.”⁵ Heggie and Harris married in 1982, and began performing nationally as a piano duo shortly thereafter:

We didn’t know we were a two-piano team until after we were married, Heggie recalled. But we found out, fast. It’s not only that we have the same approach to sound and color—we just naturally seem to think and feel together. We never have to talk about things, or make adjustments. And, of course, we have a tremendous amount of fun.⁶

Their duo performing career ended in the late 80’s, when Heggie sustained a hand injury (focal dystonia), and shortly thereafter Harris was diagnosed with cancer. In 1993, Heggie moved to San Francisco to work in the publicity department of the San Francisco Opera:

The move was important for so many reasons. First, I needed to start living my own life as a gay man, and Johana recognized and supported that. We always remained very close and the best of friends, and she was more than understanding. I was feeling stifled professionally and personally in Los Angeles and knew I had to start over in a new place—but not so far away that I couldn't be near her or see her … The cultural climate and the support for the arts are tremendous here. It turned out to be the right choice on all levels.⁷

Heggie and Harris maintained a close friendship until cancer claimed her life in 1995.⁸

In San Francisco Heggie discovered a place for himself as a composer of opera and song. Pivotal to his work as a composer of song is Heggie’s on-going collaborative

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relationship with mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade. In an interview conducted by Carolyn Redman in 2003, Heggie credits von Stade for his early success: “She began to ask me to play for her and commissioned pieces and also arranged commissions for me. She has been my biggest champion. She also came into my life right around the time that Johana died.”

In an interview with Tom Savage of the Los Angeles Times, Heggie describes a decisive day in his life as a composer: “February 20, 1995, was the turning point in my professional life. I entered the G. Schirmer Art Song Competition, and Flicka agreed to make a demo tape for me. And I won! Because of her belief in me, other people paid attention.”

As a result of this competition, Heggie was awarded his first recording contract. The recording entitled The Faces of Love and the subsequent Schirmer publication of a three-part series of songs brought his work a certain amount of attention. It was also during this time that Heggie was commissioned by Lofri Mansouri, general director of the San Francisco Opera, to create a new opera. In 1998 he was appointed as the Chase Bank composer-in-residence to that company. The opera Dead Man Walking premiered at the San Francisco Opera in October, 2001.

Frequent collaborations with von Stade have inspired a vast body of song literature that is ideally suited to the mezzo-soprano voice. Joyce DiDonato, Susan Graham, Frederica von Stade, Jennifer Larmore, and Joyce Castle are among noted American mezzo-sopranos who have premiered Heggie’s compositions. While Heggie

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9 Carolyn E. Redman, “Songs to the Moon: A Song Cycle by Jake Heggie from Poems by Vachel Lindsay” (DMA diss., The Ohio State University, 2004), 4.


11 Ibid.

has composed over two hundred songs, the majority of his collections and opera roles tend to favor this voice type. Compositions for mezzo-soprano with either piano or chamber accompaniment include *Songs to the Moon, The Deepest Desire, Statuesque, The Starry Night, Times of Day, Facing Forward - Looking Back, Before the Storm, Winter Roses* and *Paper Wings.*
Chapter Two

JAKE HEGGIE, VINCENT VAN GOGH, AND THE STARRY NIGHT

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.
—Oscar Wilde, Lady Windemere’s Fan

Premiere and Reception History

The Starry Night was commissioned by Evolutions in Song for mezzo-soprano Kristine Jepson, who premiered the work with the pianist John Churchwell at the Merkin Concert Hall in New York City in May, 2001. This early song cycle did not receive much in the way of press at the time of its premiere. Wayne Lee Gay of the Fort Worth Star Telegram had this review of The Starry Night:

Anyone who fears that the art song for voice and piano is dead, should listen to Heggie’s work for evidence that the form is very much alive. Heggie’s “The Starry Night” (2001) presents a neatly devised anthology of texts by Anne Sexton, Emily Dickinson, and Vincent Van Gogh, setting each emotionally packed phrase with straightforward, accessible effects. The sources may be diverse, but Heggie pulls his broad interests and inspirations into a convincingly unified whole.¹

The recording made for Classical Action, a branch of Broadway Cares in support of AIDS services, awareness, and education, garnered this review in the Journal of Singing:

We are treated here to four of the seven songs in the cycle, featuring poems by Anne Sexton and Emily Dickinson and excerpts from two of van Gogh’s letters. This is some of Heggie’s most imaginative writing … it is Jake Heggie at the piano lending loving and helpful support to his singers. His understanding of and affection for the human voice is fully evident in everything he writes.²


Vincent van Gogh and The Starry Night

This song cycle was inspired by Vincent van Gogh’s painting of the same name. At least three paintings reflect Van Gogh’s fascination with the stars: The Sidewalk Café at Night (fig. 1) and The Starry Night over the Rhone (fig. 2) were precursors to what is arguably the artist’s most famous work, The Starry Night (fig. 3).


In a letter written to his sister Willemien in 1888, Van Gogh describes his fascination with the colors of the night: “I definitely want to paint a starry sky now. It often seems to me that the night is even more richly colored than the day, colored in the most intense violets, blues and greens … I enormously enjoy painting on the spot at night.”

These paintings were born of religious necessity. Van Gogh’s letters to his brother Theo express his sincere desire to capture the essence of the stars: “the starry sky at last, actually painted at night, under a gas-lamp … That doesn’t stop me having a tremendous need for, shall I say the word—for religion—so I go outside at night to paint the stars.”

The paintings completed in Arles are quite different in tone from the masterpiece entitled The Starry Night that depicts the night sky as seen from the Saint-Rémy asylum in 1889. Van Gogh moved to Arles dreaming of a thriving and vibrant communal studio with colleagues who shared his vision; however, Paul Gauguin was the only artist who chose to accept his invitation to the “House of the Friends.” His tempestuous friendship with Gauguin exhausted his idealism, and reality proved a stark disappointment to a man contending with oppressive bouts of mental illness. After the infamous incident in which van Gogh hacked off his earlobe, he abandoned his beloved “Yellow House” in Arles and voluntarily sought refuge at the Saint-Rémy asylum.

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5 William Uhde, Van Gogh, (New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 1951). Note: all biographical information is derived from Uhde unless otherwise noted.
The Search for “Consolation”

“Consolation” as a religious theme inspired much of van Gogh’s work in Arles and he felt that “La peinture consolante”\(^6\) or the painting of consoling images differentiated his work (and that of Gauguin and Bernard) from the Impressionists. Having deserted an earlier career as a missionary, van Gogh was a deeply religious man bereft of the comfort of his faith. His letter to Emile Bernard describes the religious turmoil he frequently struggled with:

But the consolation of this so saddening Bible, which stirs up our despair and our indignation—thoroughly upsets us, completely outraged by its pettiness and its contagious folly—the consolation it contains, like a kernel inside a hard husk, a bitter pulp— is Christ. The figure of Christ has been painted—as I feel—only by Delacroix and by Rembran(d)t.\(^7\)

Working in a sacred vein, van Gogh felt that his attempts to capture the image of Christ were unsatisfactory. He attempted at least two portraits of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, and both canvases were scraped clean and discarded by the artist. Unable to paint his own Christian image of consolation, the artist then turned to painting impressions of religious scenes by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863). He copied Delacroix’s Pietà (1850, National Museum, Oslo), and The Good Samaritan (1850, private collection). Van Gogh appeared to find the act of imitation something akin to a spiritual discipline: “Heaps of others copy – I started it by chance and I find that it teaches me things and above all it gives me consolation. And then my brush goes between my fingers as a bow would on the violin and absolutely for my pleasure.”\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Ibid.


\(^8\) Ibid.
Ultimately, van Gogh abandoned overtly religious imagery altogether in favor of the cypress trees, olive groves, and stars over Saint-Rémy. According to art historian Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński, the painting entitled *Olive Trees with Alpilles in the Background* is “van Gogh’s equivalent of a painting of Christ on the Mount of Olives … the olive trees speak of endurance and duty as well, and the sky contains an element of hoped-for consolation.”9 In essence, Jirat-Wasiutyński is suggesting that natural elements in van Gogh’s painting become the symbolic equivalent of Christian iconography. The cypress seen in the foreground of *The Starry Night* represents immortality, and the crescent moon becomes an emblem of faith. Lauren Soth suggests that “to give consolation was van Gogh’s lifelong aim, first as a missionary, then as an artist … It sprang from the same deep-seated psychological root: van Gogh’s virtually compulsive urge to console his fellow men for the miseries of life.”10 Perhaps seen through the bars of his cell, the vibrant, swirling stars appeared to offer the solace which he was unable to find in Christianity.

**Jake Heggie and Vincent van Gogh**

Jake Heggie’s song cycle, *The Starry Night* was inspired by van Gogh’s painting of the same title. Heggie’s lyrics for *The Starry Night* are primarily derived from the letters of Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, but he also includes settings of poems by Emily Dickinson, and a poem of Anne Sexton that refers directly to this painting. The January 2011 edition of *Classical Singer* magazine features a photograph of Heggie with

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a copy of Vincent van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* tucked under his arm. The copy he carries was painted by his father, who committed suicide when Heggie was ten years old. He credits his desire to compose with this pivotal event in his life:

My father committed suicide when I was 10 and everything changed. It was a week before my 11th birthday. I found solace in my music. That’s when I started to write. I wrote piano pieces, but I also started writing songs.\(^{11}\)

As a composer, Heggie is concerned first and foremost with the sincere representation of theatrical characters and their narrative. This impulse, to turn a personal journey into a theatrical, artistic, event is at the heart of Heggie’s music:

More than anything I hope my musical style is “HONEST.” That is always my intention – to write honestly, beautifully, and with deep feeling and connection with not only the text, but also the story behind the text. I always write with a character in mind – I guess that is why I’m a theater composer: songs, arias, operas, whatever it may be – all of it is character driven; a character who wants something, is missing or needing something, in his or her life.\(^{12}\)

It is very clear that this early song cycle by Heggie represents a spiritual journey; ostensibly it is the journey of Vincent van Gogh, but it may also reflect the composer grappling with his own history and the decision he made at a very young age to find his voice in composition:

I’m drawn to stories of emotional transformation – where action and spirit collide. I find these stories fascinating because they are ultimately about spiritual crisis. I think everybody goes through that – a crisis of conscience and spirit where a physical challenge and choice is given to us and we have to take a stand, find strength somewhere, even if it might go against everything we thought was safe and sure.\(^{13}\)


\(^{12}\) Jake Heggie, e-mail message to author, September 25, 2010.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
When referring to the recent Classical Action benefit recording of *The Starry Night*, Heggie describes it as a cycle, “about the fragile and fleeting nature of our lives: we are flesh and bone one day, ash and stone the next.” The ephemeral and precarious nature of existence is a central theme in this song cycle. The introduction of *The Starry Night* introduces a five-note motive derived from the “blues” scale. Heggie’s use of the lowered fifth (“blue-note”) sets the tone for the narrative journey to follow. This American tradition of musical lamenting correlates to the dramatic progression of the song cycle. When van Gogh looked to the stars, it was with a profound sense of loss, and a sincere desire for consolation.

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Chapter Three

THE STARRY NIGHT (SONG 1)

Giving up my car keys and my cash,
Keeping only a pack of Salem cigarettes the way a child holds on to a toy
I signed myself in where a stranger puts the inked-in X’s –
For this is a mental hospital, not a child’s game.¹

Anne Sexton and The Starry Night

The thematic associations linking the prose of Vincent van Gogh (in the form of letters to his brother Theo), the poetry of Emily Dickinson, and the poetry of Anne Sexton form a fascinating element of this song cycle. There are three excerpts from the letters of Vincent van Gogh, three settings of Dickinson, and the Sexton poem that draws its title from The Starry Night. There is the obvious link between van Gogh and Sexton, in that both artists left a lengthy trail documenting their anguished battles with mental illness. Sexton discovered her talent for poetry, in fact, through therapy. Most of the poems in her early collections (To Bedlam and Part Way Back and All my Pretty Ones) were written while under the care of psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne. Anne Sexton’s mental illness is well documented; at the heart of any discussion of Anne Sexton’s personal life is the ethical controversy concerning Orne’s release of therapy tapes to Sexton biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook.² Like van Gogh, Sexton succumbed to mental illness and committed suicide after numerous and lengthy institutional stays.

To explore Sexton’s “confessional” poetry is a voyeur’s paradise; raw and uncensored emotions are unapologetically explored. Sexton’s journal was begun under


the premise of confession: “Dostoevsky says, ‘what filthy things the heart is capable of.’ I started this journal full of my own sense of filth. Why else keep a journal, if not to examine your own filth?” Sexton’s mentor John Holmes discouraged Sexton from publishing the confessional poetry, which he was certain, would prove a humiliation to her and to those whom she loved. Sexton was certainly not the first to write in this style, but “confessional” poetry appears to be a label that she was comfortable with, and which she defended vigorously. Sexton’s defense took the form of a poem addressed to John Holmes:

I tapped my own head; It was glass, an inverted bowl … And if you turn away because there is no lesson here I will hold my awkward bowl, with all its cracked stars shining … This is something I would never find in a lovelier place.

Throughout her creative life, Anne Sexton returned to the palindrome: “rats live on no evil star.” It appears that Sexton was fascinated by the thought that there was meaning to be found in the exploration of her suffering, and that by poetic alchemy; even “rats” could reveal their “star” nature. Sexton’s poetic legacy is profoundly spiritual in nature. Where van Gogh’s iconography is found in cypress trees, olive groves, and stars, Sexton dropped words as palpable mementos of her pilgrimage. Sexton found faith to be elusive and an enviable commodity, “Whoever God is I keep making telephone calls to him. I’m not sure that’s religion. More desperation than faith in such things.”

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4 Ibid., 100.
5 Ibid., 221.
6 Ibid., 124.
7 Middlebrook Anne Sexton, 355.
presented with a crucifix (by Ruth Soder), Sexton’s response was a poem which reads in part:

I detest my sins and I try to believe in The Cross.
I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face, its solid neck, its brown sleep.
True. There is a beautiful Jesus.
He is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef.
How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes!
But I can’t. Need is not quite belief.  

_The Starry Night_ is taken from Sexton’s collection _All my Pretty Ones_, published in 1962. _Poetry_ awarded Sexton the prestigious Levinson prize for seven excerpted poems published by the magazine in 1962, and in the year following, this collection was shortlisted for the National Book Award. Religious themes continued to be a part of Sexton’s work and she frequently returned to the imagery of rats and stars. Biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook concludes that Sexton found liberation in the assumption that, “if God exists, the despised must have their place in the order of things … owning a star without the stain of evil.”

Sexton’s poem is a three stanza structure, which does not conform to symmetrical poetic structures. There is however, exact repetition in the closing phrases of the first two stanzas: “Oh starry, starry night! This is how [nine syllables] I want to die [four syllables].” Sexton achieves a dramatic effect by splitting the phrase and drawing attention to the words, “I want to die.” It is perhaps significant that Sexton’s third stanza is only five lines long, and the phrase structure has fewer syllables with each line [nine, nine, six, three, and two]. Word repetition, alliteration and diminutive phrases lull the listener into the poet’s soothing elegy: “to split from my life with no flag, no belly, no

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8 Middlebrook, _Anne Sexton_, 62.

9 Ibid., 352.
cry.” The preface to the poem is taken directly from the Van Gogh letters addressed to Theo van Gogh: “that does not keep me from having a terrible need of -- shall I say the word—religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars.”¹⁰ Bereft of traditional religious practice, both van Gogh and Sexton appear to have found that contemplating the stars offered solace and sanctuary.

Musical Content

Musical content derived from the introduction of this first song in the cycle forms the underpinning of the entire work. In an email to the author, Heggie described his compositional process:

Musical, rhythmic, and harmonic motifs are terribly important to me. I believe in an economy of means- also in finding a sonic universe that is particular to a piece. That is true whether it’s a set of songs, a large cycle, or an opera. What is the sound world of this piece? Usually the characters (or a single character) tell me what that sound world is, and generally it is through a musical motif. Then it will find its way into other parts of the composition- slowed down, speeded up, upside-down, fragmented, etc.¹¹

Elements derived from the first five bars of music form the structural core of the entire work and include:

1. Harmonies generated by intervallic patterns, interspersed with pentatonicism, and recurrent motivic construction exploring the following series of pitches: B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, F-sharp, G, and A.

2. Modal ambiguity between F-sharp major and F-sharp minor.


¹¹ Jake Heggie, e-mail message to author, September 25, 2010.
3. The circle of fifths, and its derivative, the pentatonic scale (that is, the first and fifth pitches of a circle of fifths.) The Grove Online definition of the term emphasizes the importance of the minor third: “One may further refine the notion of the pentatonic by recognizing the distinctiveness of the scale's minor third ‘steps’; hence the motif G–A–C is more characteristically pentatonic than C–D–E, even though both belong to the same pentatonic scale.” In the five note motive which Heggie utilizes, the recurring minor third is from F-sharp to A.

4. The traditional “blues” scale: a major scale with the pitches lowered-third, and lowered-seventh. The lowered-fifth (C-natural/B-sharp) constitutes the “blue-note,” and is the distinctive marker of the “blues.”

5. A melodic motive consisting of an ascending interval, generally a seventh, followed by a descending scale pattern which is frequently the descending melodic minor and generally associated with the text, “Oh starry, starry, night!”

6. The use of repetitive rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic patterns (ostinati).

   The first three bars of music (fig. 4) reveal a pull between the modes of F-sharp major and F-sharp minor. Considering the enharmonic implications of the B-flat, it is apparent in measure two that the F-sharp major triad is present (F-sharp, A-sharp, C-sharp) as well as the F-sharp minor triad (F-sharp, A-natural, C-sharp). In addition to this, the pentatonic scale is also suggested by the pitches B-flat/A-sharp, C-sharp, E-flat/D-sharp, and F-sharp; however the fifth note of the pentatonic scale (G-sharp) is not present.

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The other compositional features are particularly apparent in mm. 3-5. There are two principal melodic motives: a “blues” motive, and a “starry night” motive. In the right hand of the piano accompaniment, the ascending seventh, followed by a three-note descending pattern, will become the kernel of the “starry night” motive. The five pitches of the “blues” motive are apparent in the right hand of the accompaniment in measure 5. The blues scale in F-sharp major consists of: F-sharp, A (flat third), B, B-sharp (flat fifth, “blue”-note), C-sharp, E-natural (flat seventh), and F-sharp. For a composer familiar with this genre, the choice to incorporate the “blues” scale, with its flatted third, fifth, and seventh, into the central motive of the entire work links the listener instantaneously to this American elegiac tradition. In much the way that the descending tetrachord pattern underscores the laments of Monteverdi and Purcell, the flatted third, fifth, and seventh of the “blues” scale are associated with the musical depiction of sorrow.\(^\text{13}\)

The “starry night” motive appears in measure 4 (fig. 5), and the five-note “blues” motive appears in measure 5. Additionally, Heggie is working with the incomplete pentatonic scale as expressed by B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, F-sharp, as well as

the modal ambiguity of F-sharp major versus F-sharp minor. These harmonic concepts are presented in the form of an ascending scale. This scale represents a musical palindrome, in other words, the intervals are identical when read from the outside to the inside of the scale. These intervals are as follows: P4, A2, m2, (M2), m2, A2, P4. This figure will appear throughout the cycle in various guises.

Figure 5. “The Starry Night,” mm. 4-6

In its original form, the musical palindrome resembles a scale but at times it will appear as an arpeggio in the lower register of the piano, as it does in fig. 6. It will also appear in the upper register of the instrument and will be expanded to include the pitch G-sharp (fig. 7). The tonality consistently hovers between F-sharp major and F-sharp minor (fig. 7). The addition of the G-sharp is an interesting choice in that it strengthens the pentatonic relationship between the pitches B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, and F-sharp. The idea of relationship by fifths is implied by the pentatonic idea, namely that D-flat/C-sharp ascends by fifth to A-flat/G-sharp, which in turn ascends by fifth to E-flat/D-sharp, and then to B-flat/A-sharp. Fifth relationships figure prominently in the harmonic content of
chords in several of the songs in the cycle. By adding the G-sharp to the arpeggiated figure, Heggie creates a chord cluster of G-sharp, A-natural, and B-flat. While pentatonic sonorities are present, the over-riding effect of the arpeggiated chords is a clash between F-sharp major (spelled enharmonically as F-sharp, B-flat, C-sharp) and F-sharp minor.

Figure 6. “The Starry Night,” mm. 17-19.

Figure 7. “The Starry Night,” mm. 43-44.

The “starry night” motive is initially presented as an ascending 7th, followed by a three note descending scale consisting of the pitches F-sharp, E-natural, D-sharp, and C-sharp. This pattern is expanded, transposed, and incorporates the descending B-flat minor melodic scale when it appears in fig. 8. Each statement of this motive in the melodic line
is presented with homophonic motion in the accompaniment. The homophonic movement of the six-note chordal accompaniment accentuates the sacred nature of the text and is aurally suggestive of hymnody.

Sexton’s text suggests that the celestial vision renders the earthly landscape insignificant. “The town does not exist except where one black-haired tree slips up like a drowned woman into a hot sky … the town is silent.” The vitality of existence is found in the skies, and the image associated with humanity is the simile which links the “black-haired tree” to the image of a “drowned woman.” It is the night sky that comes to life, boiling with stars, serpents, and dragons. The contrast between the music which “boils” and that which “stagnates” underscores the delineation of divergent worlds. Sexton’s imagery is disturbing; the journey from earth to heaven is a violent process, rending body from soul. The ominous presence of the dragon-beast emerging from the depths is underscored by Heggie’s growling bass-clef septuplets (fig. 9). The pitches utilized (B-
flat, C-sharp, E-flat, F-sharp, G-natural, A-natural) are all derived from the third measure of the song (fig. 4).

Figure 9. “The Starry Night,” mm. 62-63.

Sexton’s journey from suburban housewife to Pulitzer prize-winning poet was not an easy one; her illness accompanied her every step of the way:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn’t know that she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn’t know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married to have children … but one can’t build little white fences to keep nightmares out.\(^\text{14}\)

Sexton’s poems, like those of her colleague and friend Sylvia Plath, are replete with uncontained rage and suicidal longing. Linda Mizajewski likens Sexton to the mythological Dido, a “woman uncontained … woman broken off, flying into the night, swept into the air, running over earth like a thunderstorm.”\(^\text{15}\) In a discussion comparing Sexton’s poem *The Starry Night* with Plath’s *Ariel*, Mizajewski highlights the verb “splitting”:


Plath uses the same verb that is at the center of Sexton’s “The Starry Night,” the metaphor of splitting. We can almost hear her going farther and farther away, losing touch with the earth in those last lines … Sexton’s death wish is envisioned as a slow diffusion of the self into air, elements, (and) separation.16

At the heart of Sexton’s poem is her identification with the artist van Gogh; for Sexton it seems, the painting suggests a death wish. Anne Sexton is defined, at least in part, by her ultimate choice: to lock herself into her garage as carbon monoxide poisoning claimed her life.17 Heggie captures this act of departure in the final bars of music (fig.10). The active bass-clef septuplets melt away; the harmony is reduced to a two-note interval; the vocal line completes the chord by offering both A-natural and A-sharp, thereby reinforcing the F-sharp major/minor duality (fig. 10). The sparse texture perfectly accentuates the text: “to split from my life with no flag, no belly, no cry.”

Figure 10. “The Starry Night,” mm. 66-68.

The concluding measures reprise the introductory material (fig. 11). The final note of the vocal line resolves to F-sharp but the piano accompaniment does not, one might infer that while the poet welcomes death, the composer does not share her resolve.


17 Middlebrook, Anne Sexton.
This first song of the cycle initiates the steps of a narrative journey; the journey begins and ends with a response to a specific painting. Some may view *The Starry Night* as the iconography of a deeply religious man; others may see the wild imaginings of mental illness. While van Gogh may have found consolation in the stars, Sexton’s images are violent and menacing. Her night sky is fraught with serpents and dragons; monsters waiting to devour their young. Perhaps the power of the painting lies in its timeless capacity to invoke the questions which encompass our deepest fears and greatest hopes.
Chapter Four

CELESTIAL LOCOMOTION (SONG 2)

Now at present, despite that, we’re still in the position of believing that life is flat and goes from birth to death. But life too is probably round and far superior in extent and potentialities to the single hemisphere that’s known to us at present.

—Vincent van Gogh, June 26, 1888.

The Letters of Vincent van Gogh

The 651 letters from Vincent Van Gogh to his brother Theo provide a rich source of texts for Heggie, as much of the painter’s work deals with themes of spiritual pilgrimage. Van Gogh contemplated the mysteries of death, and was particularly obsessed by the thought that the stars held the assurance of a benevolent God, and a promising after-life. He also found consolation in the idea that God cherished his creation despite its flaws:

I’m thinking more and more that we shouldn’t judge the Good Lord by this world, because it’s one of his studies that turned out badly … we shouldn’t take it for anything other than it is, and we’ll be left with the hope of seeing better than that in another life.¹

The text for Heggie’s second song is taken from a letter dated July 9 or 10, 1888, after Van Gogh left Paris for Arles, France. The artist had become disillusioned with his life among the Impressionist painters in Paris, and this move to the south prompted a tremendous surge in creativity:

The Impressionists? Certainly he used their mode of expression, saw with their eyes, employed their techniques; both he and they were inspired by the Japanese school. But beyond that? They loved the appearance of things and loved them with their well-tempered bourgeois hearts. He loved passionately the things themselves. They like brightness. He was a fanatical worshipper of the sun … He now set out to devote himself entirely to this service of the sun.\(^2\)

Van Gogh had hopes of establishing an artist colony in the south of France.

Plagued by money problems, Van Gogh believed that the solution was in communal living and collaborative studio arrangements; only Gauguin accepted his invitation:

He rented a house, painted it yellow and adorned it with six pictures of sunflowers. It was to be the ‘House of Friends’. The idea of the communal life of the early Christians kept returning to his mind; he dreamed of artists living together, producing the most beautiful pictures as the fruit of their existence in common.\(^3\)

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3 Ibid., 13.
Van Gogh took possession of the Yellow House in May of 1888, and Gauguin joined him the following October. While some of Van Gogh’s most famous works were created during this time, (The Night Café, Bedroom in Arles, Vase with Twelve Sunflowers, The Café Terrace) the endeavor ended badly. After a particularly disturbing altercation with Gauguin and the infamous incident in which Van Gogh lopped off his earlobe, van Gogh was petitioned out of his home by villagers distressed by his bizarre behavior. It is not difficult to imagine that disappointment fueled his search for solace during his residency at Saint-Rémy. It is astonishing to consider that his miraculous view of “The Starry Night” was seen through the bars of a Saint-Rémy asylum cell.

Musical Content

The most significant musical idea in this piece is that of halt and motion; one envisions a train which slowly begins to move forward. It is motion which depicts the dramatic narrative of the journey from an earthly world to the celestial destination; motion is represented as a scale-like passage in the right hand of the accompaniment, and as a repetitive intervallic pattern in the left. The music is propelled by an ever-lengthening rhythmic motive (interrupted by an eighth note rest) which launches into the E-flat minor scale before settling into steady rhythmic momentum. The cadence in measure 8 is unusual; while it is suggestive of E-flat minor, descending motion by half-step in the bass from E-flat to D discloses a Phrygian cadence (fig. 13).

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4 Ibid., 14
5 Uhde, Van Gogh, 21.
Figure 13. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 1-9.
With its rhythmic momentum, polytonality, and dissonant chords, this second song is suggestive of Charles Ives’s *Phantasy for Piano* entitled *The Celestial Railroad* as well as associated works: the second movement of the Fourth Symphony, and the Hawthorne movement of the Second Piano Sonata (Concord).\(^6\) The extra-musical associations with the Hawthorne narrative find parallels in the van Gogh text; both texts depict a spiritual journey on the “glory-train.” Vincent van Gogh, however, is not only describing a dream-journey to the Celestial City, but also the attraction of hastening the journey. He may be talking about death by natural causes (i.e., cholera and cancer), but the text could also be interpreted as the logic that would ultimately impel him towards suicide. As Broadhead suggests in his analysis of Ives’s “Celestial Railroad,” the journey to the Celestial City is a rough ride:

The conclusions of both CRR [Celestial Rail Road] and IV2 [The Fourth Symphony, mvt. 2] are difficult to reconcile with Hawthorne’s short story. Whereas Hawthorne’s short story stops at the point where his narrator awakes from the dream, Ives’s music closes with an extended tutti passage full of extended circus music. Could this be the ferry ride to the Celestial City with brass bands playing on the deck? Could this be a quick descent into hell?\(^7\)

Van Gogh likens the celestial journey to a trip he often took, to Tarascon-sur-Rhône, located 20 kilometers north of Arles, France. The momentum of the train is represented by a rhythmic and melodic ostinato pattern encompassed by steady eighth notes in the left hand, and the rising and falling motion of the following intervals: ascending P5, M2, P4, and descending P4, M2, P5 (fig. 14). The intervals represent the C Pentatonic scale and are generated by their fifth relationships: C ascends by fifth to G,

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\(^7\) Ibid, 390.
which in turn ascends by fifth to D, and then to A. It is interesting to note that as in the first song, Heggie is using ostinato in the arrangement of interval patterns in the left hand of the accompaniment. The staccati in the left hand are at odds with the legato ascent in the right; polytonal sonorities underscore the tension. Using musical means, Heggie emphasizes the uncomfortable aspects of the journey to the Celestial City.

Figure 14. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 10-13.

While the E-flat minor scale suggests a tonal center, this song is primarily based upon the third measure of the first song, coupled with pentatonicism, and polytonal concepts. Heggie uses four pitches derived from the F-sharp pentatonic scale (F-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp, C-sharp, D-sharp) throughout the cycle; these four pitches are spelled enharmonically as B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, and F-sharp. This set of pitches, introduced in the third measure of the first song, is found again in Celestial Locomotion. If one compares the notes of the vocal and right-hand accompaniment with the third bar of the first song (fig. 4), it is apparent that Heggie is using all of the same pitches (B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, F-sharp, G-natural, and A-natural); he also introduces the pitches B-natural,
D-natural, and E-natural, but these appear to function as neighbor or passing tones (fig. 15).

Heggie also moves freely from one pentatonic scale to another in the left-hand of the piano accompaniment. For example, the C pentatonic accompaniment pattern gives way to the F-sharp pentatonic pattern but with identical intervallic relationships: ascending P5, M2, P4, and descending P4, M2, P5. Again, this pattern is a musical palindrome (fig. 16). The C-natural and E-natural (m. 27) add sharp dissonances to the sonority, as the C-sharp minor and C-augmented chords contend with the F-sharp pentatonic. Additionally, the D-natural and E-natural of m. 29 create sharp dissonances (C-sharp, D-natural, D-sharp, E-natural).
There is one significant moment in which the complete pentatonic scale is represented, and motion of the left hand is entirely stilled, only to reappear in transposition in the right hand of the accompaniment. In figure 17, the right-hand piano part features a D-flat pentatonic scale (D-flat, E-flat, F, A-flat, B-flat) against the pitches B and F-sharp, another instance of polytonality. Heggie expands this idea by removing the D-flat of the pentatonic scale and introducing four pitches of the B pentatonic scale (B, C-sharp, D-sharp, F-sharp). In figure 18, the intervallic palindrome: P4, P4, M2, P5 based upon the D-flat pentatonic of figure 17, is coupled with a quasi-canonic passage between the vocal and bass accompaniment, based upon a B pentatonic scale (B, C-sharp, D-sharp, F-sharp, G-sharp).
By the change of tempo, accompaniment texture, and the harmonic and melodic completion of the pentatonic scale, Heggie draws attention to a dramatic moment in the narrative; it is a moment of decision. The point which van Gogh was making in his letter to Emile Bernard was that our understanding may be clouded by a “flat” rather than “round” conception of existence; in other words, there might be more to death than there is to life. Van Gogh chose to hasten the passage, rather than complete the slow and arduous journey which living into old age entails. Heggie uses stasis and momentum to
tell this story; there is a moment in which crawling into old age does not seem logical.

The postlude offers an alternative; we can get on the train. Eighth-note motion in the right-hand accompaniment propels the motion forward, and the quintuplet figure creates additional momentum (m. 109, fig. 19). Both the “starry night” and “blues” motives are suggested by the melodic line in mm. 100-102 (fig. 19). The ascending leap by minor sixth with step-wise descent is derived from the “starry night” motive; while the choice of pitches (F-sharp, A, B, C-sharp) is clearly a fragmented and re-ordered version of the original five-note “blues” motive (F-sharp, A, B-sharp, C-sharp); the lowered fifth (B-sharp) is missing from the figure.
Figure 19. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 99-109.
There is a significant emphasis on the relationship between F-sharp minor and F-sharp major within the cycle as a whole. The final four measures of “Celestial Locomotion” emphasize F-sharp major (spelled enharmonically as G-flat and B-flat), while giving the impression of a beckoning train whistle by the repetitive major third in the right-hand of the accompaniment (fig. 20), in a manner similar to that of Ives’s *Celestial Railroad*. The competing tonalities (G-flat major in the right-hand accompaniment and C pentatonic in the left) underline the narrative tension of the final statement, “to die of old age would be to go there on foot.”

![Figure 20. “Celestial Locomotion,” mm. 110-13.](image)

From this setting of van Gogh’s letter dated July 9, 1888, it seems clear that he is harking back to ideas and images that were beginning to coalesce as early as June 26, 1888 (see chapter epigram). This earlier letter describes an after-life in which hardship and mental illness play no part. This world, which can only be reached after death, offers consolation to the lost. For van Gogh, the thought of an undiscovered, “new world” offered a transformative broadening of his vision and belief:
That existence of painter as butterfly would have for its field of action one of the innumerable stars, which, after death, would perhaps be no more unapproachable, inaccessible to us than the black dots that symbolize towns and villages on the map in our earthly life.⁸

It is not pleasant to delve into van Gogh’s world, and to consider life and death in terms of suicide. Artists like Vincent van Gogh and Anne Sexton force us to contemplate life in terms of its ferocity as well as its beauty. Unsparingly frank, these artists draw us into the reflection of existential realities, when perhaps we would rather avert our gaze. In the novel *A Long Way Down*, British author Nick Hornby uses dark humor to address the question of what would compel a sane man to stand on the roof of the tallest building in London, contemplating suicide on New Year’s Eve:

Can I explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower block? Of course I can, I’m not a bloody idiot … Say you were, I don’t know, an assistant bank manager in Guildford. And you’d been thinking of emigrating, and then you were offered the job of managing a bank in Sydney. Well, even though it’s a pretty straightforward decision, you’d still have to think for a bit wouldn’t you? You’d at least have to work out whether you could bear to move, whether you could leave your friends and colleagues behind … You might sit down with a bit of paper and draw up a list of pros and cons. You know: CONS: aged parents, friends, golf club PROS: more money, better quality of life … I haven’t got aged parents, and I don’t play golf. Suicide was my Sydney. And I say that with no offense to the good people of Sydney intended.⁹

Van Gogh’s letter is suggestive of a similar logic; suicide represents a viable and reasonable option to the artist. It is not an act of despair, but rather a gateway to an alternate reality. Weighing the known against the unknown, van Gogh opts for the stars.

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Chapter Five

GO THY GREAT WAY! (SONG 3)

The Bible dealt with the Centre, Not with the Circumference.
—Emily Dickinson to Mrs. Josiah Holland, 1862.

Emily Dickinson, Christianity, and Circumference

Poems by Emily Dickinson are frequently chosen as song texts for their profound subject matter: “on occasions of both public and private grief ranging from John F. Kennedy’s assassination and the AIDS epidemic to the death of a child or parent, composers have searched the Dickinson canon for the words to create songs of mourning or consolation.”¹ One might wonder why it is that composers reach for the poems of Dickinson rather than the sacred texts of the world’s great religions. Perhaps it is because grief involves not only loss, but also anger, and confusion; it is a time to embrace the unanswerable and unknowable, within the presence of community. Wrestling with the unknown is a common theme in Dickinson’s poetry.

Emily Dickinson was writing at a time when “consolation” literature was flourishing in New England communities and churches. Eighteen-fifty was a year of “Revival” in Amherst, Massachusetts, and many of those in Emily Dickinson’s immediate circle, her family and closest friends were succumbing to evangelical zeal.²

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Christ is calling everyone here, all my companions have answered … and I am standing alone in my rebellion, and growing very careless … I can’t tell you what they have found, but they think it is something very precious. I wonder if it is?3

While resisting a conversion experience herself, Dickinson found the prospect of heavenly reunion comforting:

Conversion, throughout Dickinson’s letters, involved less individual salvation than group continuity before and after death. The imagery of conversion constantly evoked metaphors of binding and being bound to friends and family. Dickinson feared the possibility of these ties being broken.4

Emily Dickinson, having lost several family members and friends in close succession, found heavenly “solace” comforting, but insufficient:

God is indeed a jealous God—
    He cannot bear to see
    That we had rather not with Him
    But with each other play5

Artistic expressions which draw into question the benevolent nature of God and the possible existence of Heaven comprise a lexis which transcends time and culture. The answers we find, or perhaps do not find, define our belief systems. The enigma of an after-life is well-traversed ground in the poetry and letters of Emily Dickinson.

Love, Death, and Immortality are persistent themes in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Her use of the word “Circumference” encompasses these aspects of transient existence. If we accept as our premise that a circle encompasses perfection, Emily


5 Ibid., 75.
Dickinson’s “Circumference,” is about spiritual quest and the exploration of the periphery:

Dickinson strays further and further from center, from Reason and so from the stylistic unity that preserves our sense of center. Her sojourns on the limit traced by Circumference yield poems which chronicle in “feet” increasingly “hobbled” and “blind” the wanderings of the poet as disoriented theologian who affirms God’s knowledge through her own lack thereof.6

It must have taken tremendous moral courage for Dickinson to defy the prevailing practices and beliefs of her time, but her refusal to accept a traditional religious practice indicates that she did exactly that. Emily Dickinson chose not to attend church, resisted a conversion experience, and is by turns devout and irreverent, perhaps even radical, in her approach to faith. Her poetry reminds us of the complexity of life; she directs us towards the mystery that is at the heart of all the great religions. Dickinson was willing to live in a world without answers, rather than accept the easy comfort of the “consolation” literature and evangelicalism that was so prevalent during her time:

This scrutiny will call her to question and then systematically cancel her own premises, premise by premise, verity by verity, center by center, and finally circumference by circumference, until she has reached what we might call the negative way of Possibility, a possibility refigured as doubt, attained not by hope or belief but by hard wandering.7

The themes of Heggie’s song cycle The Starry Night are loss, mystery, and consolation. The loss that accompanies suicide is unanswerable; seven years after the premiere of this song cycle, Heggie returned to the theme of suicide with his 2008 chamber opera Three Decembers (an adaptation by Gene Scheer of Terrence McNally’s

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7 Ibid., 10.
Some Christmas Letters). Emily Dickinson’s “Circumference” represents an artist’s attempt to grapple with the uncertainty that accompanies bereavement:

In her lifelong attempt to trace the boundaries of the certainties and possibilities, she [Dickinson] found that love and death become only more acutely felt … she finally accepted the human incapacity to close the circle of love and death and immortality.8

**Jake Heggie and Emily Dickinson**

Heggie has long claimed an affinity for the texts of Emily Dickinson. His settings of Dickinson include: *I shall not live in Vain* (in two versions, one for solo, and a second revision for mezzo-soprano with SA chorus, handbells, and percussion), *Faith Disquiet* (SATB a cappella setting of three Dickinson poems), *Ample make this bed*, *The Sun kept Setting, A Great Hope Fell* (for baritone and chamber orchestra), *The road to Bethlehem* (from *The Road to Christmas* for mezzo-soprano and string orchestra), *The Robin, Here where the Daisies fit my Head, In lands I never saw, To make a Prairie, It makes no difference abroad, It sounded as if the streets were running, As well as Jesus, At last, to be Identified!, Why do I love you Sir?, She sweeps with many-colored Brooms, and All that I do.*9

Heggie describes his fascination with Dickinson: “Dickinson is still one of the most astonishing of contemporary poets. With just a few words she can describe feelings and journeys that take others thousands of words to investigate. She never stops inspiring

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and surprising me.\textsuperscript{10} Heggie’s setting of \textit{If You Were Coming in the Fall} reprises common Dickinson themes: Love, Death, and Immortality:

Stanza four represents her most outrageous claim. Were this mortal existence her only hindrance, she would, “toss it hither like a Rind,” if it meant an encounter with her lover in Eternity. For her existence is worth no more than a rind without the lover. She would casually discard it … If reunion in Eternity were assured, she would give her very being for it.\textsuperscript{11}

This subject matter is not new territory for Heggie. In a recent interview with Elizabeth Connell Neilson, Jake Heggie spoke about common themes in two of his operas, \textit{Dead Man Walking} and \textit{The End of the Affair}:

I began a personal journey that has become the focus of much of my work: spiritual crisis; Questions of faith, our place within the universe, and the power of love in our lives, and the struggle to believe in some kind of benevolent higher power in a world so fraught with violence … this is a journey all of us are going to face at some time in our lives, often when we least expect it … Where do I go with this desire to believe?\textsuperscript{12}

Dickinson’s stanza \textit{Go thy great way!} is an interesting choice for this third song in the cycle, because it deviates from the view put forward by Vincent van Gogh; while van Gogh may find the stars a comforting presence, Dickinson responds with skepticism, “For what are stars, but Asterisks, to point a Human Life?” For Dickinson, the corporeal world is more significant than the shrouded, celestial one; in her second letter to T. W.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Jake Heggie, e-mail message to author, September 25, 2010.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Lee J. Richmond, “Emily Dickinson’s, ‘If You Were Coming in the Fall’: An Explication,” \textit{The English Journal} 59, no. 6 (September 1970): 772.
\end{itemize}
Higginson of April 15, 1862, she [Dickinson] wrote “they are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse every morning whom they call their ‘Father.’”

Musical Content

The harmonic structure of “Go thy great way” is based upon the construction of intervals, as well as motivic ideas drawn from the first song. The “blues” motive as used here could be seen as a transposition of the original presentation. If one transposes the introductory motive (1, flat 3, 4, flat 5, 5) from F-sharp major to G major, the motive would appear as G, B-flat, C, C-sharp/D-flat, D-natural. The lowered fifth blue-note (D-flat) appears in the vocal line in the fourth measure. The original “blues” motive is clearly recognizable in its new form in the vocal line, although the ordering of the intervals has been slightly altered (fig. 21). The motive appears again, now a semi-tone higher in mm. 29-32 as B-natural, G-sharp, D-natural, and C-sharp (fig. 22).

Figure 21. “Go thy great way!” mm. 1-5.

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The left-hand accompaniment consists entirely of three-note chords that tend to move in parallel motion, in the fashion of chordal planing. As in the second song, “Celestial Locomotion,” these intervals appear to be generated by ascending intervals. This pattern becomes apparent in the three note chords of the left-hand accompaniment in mm. 1-12, when the intervals are re-arranged to represent ascending P4 relationships. There are cadences in the music, but they are not tonal; rather, they are resting points in the music, followed by brief interludes before the vocal line resumes (m. 6, fig. 23). The pitches in the vocal line appear to be harmonically generated; they tend to either double a pitch already found in the chord, or to represent ornamentation such as suspensions. In measure 9 for example, the suspended E-flat in the vocal line resolves to the D-flat, however the dissonance is strengthened by the fact that Heggie pits C-natural, D-flat, D-natural, and E-flat against each other on the downbeat of this bar (fig. 23). This sharp dissonance underscores the word “stars,” and seems to suggest discord in the heavenly sphere.
Figure 23. “Go thy great way!” mm. 1-12.
The final cadence of the song merits special attention. Motion in the bass presents a V-I concept on the level of C, but the harmonic content of the chord is generated by ascending P4 intervals; if the pitches are re-ordered, the set includes: D, G, C, F, and B-flat (fig. 24).

Figure 24. “Go thy great way!” mm. 41-43.

Heggie uses a rhythmic motive throughout this song; generally speaking, it is a combination of a dotted half-notes, half-notes, and quarter-notes. The pitches appear to be generated by the intervallic pattern of major and minor seconds and thirds. These intervals are clearly derived from the third measure of *The Starry Night* (Fig. 4), as the third measure utilizes A2, m3, m2, and M2 intervals. The central motive in *Go Thy Great Way!* is comprised of either a descending major second, followed by a descending minor third (mm. 8-9) or a descending minor second, followed by a descending major third (mm. 11-12,12-13, 15-16). This descending line in the right hand of the accompaniment is countered by descending parallel chords in the left (fig. 25).
Figure 25. “Go thy great way!” mm. 6-19.
The motive dramatically shifts from descending to ascending motion in mm. 22-32 (fig. 29). The musical motive in the right hand of the accompaniment initially ascends from B-flat to D (B-flat, C, A, C-sharp, D) but ultimately to G-sharp (fig. 26). This change of direction is crucial to the dramatic narrative because it signifies a moment in which the Dickinson text challenges the domination of the celestial world. By designating the stars as “asterisks,” the poet has challenged their significance. Heggie has selected texts from three different authors to form a cohesive narrative about a spiritual journey; the narrative becomes more conflicted when the object of speculation, namely heaven, is considered from differing points of view.
Figure 26. “Go thy great way!” mm. 20-31.
In. mm. 32-36, Heggie retains P4 intervals in the chordal planing, but also adds a series of tritones. This musical gesture underscores another dramatic moment in the narrative. The tritones represent a significant musical event; the musical tension generated reflects the narrative battle for superiority. The celestial and terrestrial worlds diverge, only to arrive at a stasis point an octave apart in measure 36 (fig. 27).

![Figure 27. “Go thy great way!” mm. 32-36.](image)

An extended descent in the left hand of the piano accompaniment follows: G, F, D-flat, C, B, and a V-I cadence from G to C (fig. 28). The final measures of this song represent the resolution of narrative dénouement. If conflict is represented in terms of ascent and descent, the lengthy descent in the postlude suggests resolution on earthly terms. Formulating conclusions from the letters and poems of Dickinson, biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff posits that “repeatedly, both in the letters and in the poetry, she (Dickinson) affirmed that life – with its admixture of pain, which accentuates pleasure – offers everything we need of heaven.”

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Figure 28. “Go thy great way!” mm. 37-43.
Chapter Six

REFLECTION (SONG 4)

All the same, it’s a funny city, Paris, where you have to live by wearing yourself out, and as long as you’re not half dead you can’t do a damned thing.†

– Vincent van Gogh, June 26, 1888.

Vincent van Gogh: a Refugee from Paris

In his mid-thirties, van Gogh made a decision that radically changed the direction of his life; he left Paris for Arles to create a studio in the south of France. The letters that Heggie chose to set are not only the subjective expressions of a man’s life, but historical documents that exist within the context of concrete fact. While van Gogh’s thoughts are frequently lyrical and even poetic in nature, placed within a specific context they become autobiographical documents. The text of this song was derived from two different sources: two letters written while the artist was residing in Arles. The main body of the text is taken from a letter dated June 4, 1888, when the artist was engaged on a sketching trip to the village of Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. The final lines are taken from a letter dated September 3, 1888. There were indications as early as February 1888 that van Gogh’s dreams were beginning to disintegrate:

My dear Theo, Thanks for your kind letter and the 50-franc note. So far I’m not finding living here as profitable as I might have hoped … At times it seems to me that my blood is more or less ready to start circulating again, which wasn’t the case lately in Paris, I really couldn’t stand it anymore.²


Van Gogh’s residency in Arles was a time during which the artist vacillated between despondency and momentous creativity. Eager for refuge from his life in Paris, van Gogh was drawn to the quiet countryside of Arles and appeared to find tremendous satisfaction in painting the natural landscape in Arles and also in the nearby seaside town of Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. The letter dated June 5 describes van Gogh’s emotional response to the rural night sky: “In the evening there’s also a beautiful view of the yard, where everything is deathly still and the street-lamps are burning and the sky above full of stars. When all sounds cease–God’s voice is heard–Under the stars.” The line “God’s voice is heard–Under the stars,” was a favorite quote of van Gogh’s, taken from *Under the Stars* (1875), a poem by Dinah Maria Mulock Craik. During the summer and autumn of 1888, this poem must have held tremendous personal significance to the artist, as it is quoted in letters dated June 5, June 12, July 15, August 18, and September 18, 1888.

Some of van Gogh’s greatest works were created during this residency at Arles, but after a particularly violent altercation with Gauguin, the residents of Arles signed a petition to have him committed. Gauguin was a principal figure in the drama that unfolded in Arles, as van Gogh’s plan could not come to fruition without another artist to share his studio work and exhibition space. After repeated petitions by the artist and his brother Theo, Gauguin moved to Arles. Once Gauguin arrived, the relationship grew turbulent:

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They spoke a great deal about art, Gauguin assuming a didactic tone which accentuated the morbid irritability of the other until it reached a crisis. It appears that van Gogh threw a glass at his friend’s head and on another occasion threatened him with a razor. What is certain is that in a moment of mental derangement he cut off his own ear, (earlobe) wrapped it in paper and left it, at about three o’clock in the morning in a brothel. While Gauguin left Arles as quickly as he could, van Gogh was taken to the hospital where his disease took the form of hallucination.6

The collaboration that began as a friendship between the artists led to the infamous incident for which van Gogh was institutionalized, and his dream for the “House of Friends” was shattered.7


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6 Uhde, 24.

7 Ibid., 14.
**Musical Content**

This fourth song consists of material entirely derived from the first five measures of the first song in the cycle. The “blues” scale motive and the “starry night” motive both recur in various guises, and the harmonic and melodic material derived from the third measure of the first song forms the musical foundation. In measure 3 of “The Starry Night,” (fig. 29) the pitches B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, F-sharp, G, and A are presented, and, in measure 43, the harmonic and melodic content is expanded to include the pitch G-sharp (fig. 30). All of these pitches, with the exception C-sharp, are found in the introduction of *Reflection*.

![Figure 30. “The Starry Night,” mm. 1-3.](image)

![Figure 31. “The Starry Night,” mm. 43-44.](image)
The harmonic content of the fourth song ("Reflection") is built upon a series of repeated chords derived from measure 3 of the first song, and consists of the pitches B-flat, E-flat, G-natural, A, D, and G-sharp, against a persistent F-sharp pedal point. This harmonic content represents an expansion of the original grouping of pitches. Heggie has added the pitches G-sharp and D-natural to members of the original set, while leaving out C-sharp, and minimizing the G-natural as a grace note. This appears to represent an expansion by a minor second, as G-natural is scarcely present but G-sharp is significant, and C-sharp is not present, but D-natural is. This primary material is always presented as a sustained, rolled chord with a rhythmic value of either a half-note preceded by a quarter note rest, or as a sustained dotted half-note (fig. 31).

Figure 32. “Reflection,” mm. 1-4.

The “blues” motive is presented in diminution as an eighth-note pattern. As in the first song, it is presented in the accompaniment of the left hand but is transposed up by two octaves (fig. 33).
This song is relatively transparent in its structure and is essentially a ternary (ABA¹) form. The A section is comprised of mm. 1-37, followed by four bars of transitional material. The B section is comprised of mm. 42-64, and is primarily pentatonic. It is followed by a slightly altered reprise of A material (mm. 66-81) with a four bar postlude incorporating the primary unifying motive (F-sharp, A, B, B-sharp, C-sharp) derived from the first measure of “The Starry Night.”

The F-sharp pedal point (ostinato rhythm) is an important device underlying the overall structure (fig. 34). It draws attention to motion and stasis, and reinforces the tonal center of the entire song cycle, which is clearly F-sharp.
The B section (mm. 42-64) features a descending bass line, which begins as an F-natural pedal point against a series of G-flat pentatonic chords derived from P5 intervals (fig. 35).

The bass line then descends through: E-natural (m. 46), E-flat (m. 48), and D-natural (m. 51), then a rapid three-octave pentatonic scale (mm. 52-53). Pitches from the original cell (B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, and F-sharp) reappear at measure 54 (fig. 37). The bass line continues its descent, passing through the pitches B-natural, G-sharp (measure 55), F-sharp (measure 56) E-natural (measure 57), E-flat (measure 59), D (measure 61), arriving at C-natural in measure 63. The persistent A-natural in the bass line in mm. 55-60 (fig. 37) is not a pentatonic pitch, but rather serves as the lowered third in transitional passages leading to the five-note “blues” motive F-sharp, A, B, B-sharp, C-sharp. This A-natural represents a striking dissonance and is used frequently in this song cycle, sometimes appearing as a dissonant upper neighbor of G-sharp, and sometimes reinforcing the modal ambiguity between F-sharp major and F-sharp minor (fig. 37).
Soaring above the harmonic material derived from earlier movements is the refrain (fig. 36) taken from the first song of the cycle, “Oh Starry, Starry Night.”

Figure 36. “The Starry Night,” mm. 51-54.

In the reiteration of the melodic refrain, the text now includes a reference to the brilliance of the starlit sky: “brighter, flashing more like jewels than they do in Paris.” The refrain is presented within the vocal line as a climactic event; van Gogh describes the brilliant night sky, and in a masterful allusion, Heggie reincorporates the “starry night” motive: B-flat, A-flat, G-flat, F, E-flat derived from the refrain in the first song (fig. 37).
Figure 37. “Reflection,” mm. 49-59.
The transition from the B section back into the A\textsuperscript{1} not only involves a return to the slower *Tempo Primo*, but incorporates the five-note “blues” motive in its original form in the right hand of the piano accompaniment in mm. 62-64 and in a transposed and retrograde form in the left-hand in mm. 60-61, spelled as E-flat, F-sharp, G-sharp, A. The return to A\textsuperscript{1} also incorporates the “starry night” motive into the right hand of the piano accompaniment (fig. 38). The melodic line uses the pitches B-flat, E-flat, and F-sharp, all of which are derived from the opening measures of the first song, and specifically, from the pentatonic cell B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, and C-sharp of the third measure.

![Figure 38. “Reflection,” mm. 60-69.](image)
The compositional elements that form the foundation of this song include:

1. Ostinati repetition as a unifying device either rhythmic or melodic.

2. Motives taken from earlier movements appearing either in their original versions, or in diminution, augmentation, retrograde, or transposed forms.

3. Stasis versus motion: static, repetitive pedal points juxtaposed with the momentum of rapid scale passages.

4. Sonorities with a strongly pentatonic bias, expressly evident in the use of parallel fourths and fifths and pitches derived from the pentatonic scale.

The story of van Gogh is one of privation, mental illness, and disappointed hopes. The move from Paris to Arles was meant to relieve the artist of his money problems, and to foster community, creativity, and well-being. Van Gogh rented the house in Arles on May 1, 1888, had sent at least twenty-six paintings to Theo by May 8, and yet by late August he was still plagued by money problems and living alone. Many of the letters written to Theo van Gogh read like the following:

On 1 September I’ll have my rent to pay, and if you could send me the money for the week the same day as you receive yours for the month, first of all I would pay the rent the same day, then the outlay would cover both weeks for me. Lastly, if there was some way that you could send me the money on Sunday in your letter or by money order, it wouldn’t leave me indifferent to gain a day in that way.

To van Gogh’s intense dismay, Paul Gauguin did not follow through with plans to join him until several months after he was expected; Emile Bernard never arrived at all:


Neither Gauguin nor Bernard has written to me again. I believe that Gauguin doesn’t give a damn, seeing that it isn’t happening right away, and for my part, seeing that Gauguin has been managing anyway for 6 months, I’m ceasing to believe in the urgent need to come to his assistance. Now let’s be careful about it. If it doesn’t suit him, he could reproach me: ‘why have you made me come to this filthy part of the country?’ And I don’t want any of that. Of course, we can remain friends with Gauguin all the same, but I see all too clearly that his attention is elsewhere. I say to myself, let’s behave as if he wasn’t there, then if he comes, so much the better, if he doesn’t come, too bad.¹⁰

Van Gogh moved into the Yellow House on September 17, 1888, and on October 23, Paul Gauguin joined him. After two months together, the altercation broke out that sent Gauguin back to Paris, and van Gogh into a serious psychotic state and subsequent hospitalization. Van Gogh’s letter to Theo dated January 2, 1888, is heart-breaking; he truly did not understand the break with Gauguin:

In order to reassure you completely on my account I’m writing you these few words in the office of Mr. Rey, the house physician, whom you saw yourself. I’ll stay here at the hospital for another few days — then I dare plan to return home very calmly. Now I ask just one thing of you, not to worry, for that would cause me one worry TOO MANY. Now let’s talk about our friend Gauguin, did I terrify him? In short, why doesn’t he give me a sign of life? He must have left with you. Besides, he needed to see Paris again, and perhaps he’ll feel more at home in Paris than here. Tell Gauguin to write to me, and that I’m still thinking of him.¹¹

The obvious question then becomes: in what ways do the musical devices service the drama of the cycle as a whole, and this song in particular? This song is the central movement of the work, with three preceding movements and three following. Heggie’s title “Reflection” aptly describes the questions which enveloped van Gogh throughout the


fall and summer of 1888. Faced with serious questions as to the significance of his life’s work, van Gogh was, to quote Oscar Wilde, “in the gutter looking at the stars.” The static pedal point and rhythmic ostinato in the A section of the song (mm. 1-37) depict the mundane aspects of the artist’s existence, plodding along plagued by financial difficulties and disappointments (fig. 34).

The vitality emerges with the soaring vocal line in the B section of the piece at measures 48-55 (fig. 37). It is the vibrant colors of the flashing stars bringing the musical landscape to life. The Arles period represents some of the artist’s finest work. He was awakened there by the colors of the night sky, “sparkling greenish, yellow, white and rose, brighter, flashing more like jewels than they do in Paris. Opals, Emeralds, Rubies, Sapphires.” The second text (mm. 69-80) extends this vision to encompass a spiritual dimension, namely, the radiance of the illumined, hopeful soul:

In a painting I’d like to say something consoling, like a piece of music. I’d paint men or women with that je ne sais quoi, of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colorations.12

If van Gogh did not find a viable life in Arles, it did not prevent him from finding inspiration there. The Sunflower series was born out of van Gogh’s hopes in Arles and his friendship with Gauguin; The Starry Night, arguably the artist’s finest work, was fashioned in Saint-Rémy out of the wreckage that followed.

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Chapter Seven

THE SUN KEPT SETTING (SONG 5)

Going to Heaven!
I’m glad I don’t believe it,
For it would stop my breath,
And I’d like to look a little more
At such a curious earth!¹

Emily Dickinson and Victorian Notions of Death

Sentimentality, verging on maudlin preoccupation, frequently accompanied Victorian notions of death and immortality.² Death had taken a profound toll on the life of Emily Dickinson; as someone who had suffered so many losses, it is not surprising that she met sentimental portrayals of heaven with skepticism:

We gather together in thought some of the fairest and grandest things we have known on earth—“trees of life”, and” rivers of pleasure” and “thrones of power” and “crowns of glory” and fashion them to our childish taste a little, pitiful, tinsel, mimic Paradise and call the place Heaven. Alas! Alas for our folly.³

Emily Dickinson was not untouched by the soothing sentimentality of Victorian culture; it seems a natural response to the harsh Calvinistic doctrines that accompanied the New England evangelical fervor of the 1850’s.⁴ Buell suggests that Dickinson may have “regarded herself as something of a specialist in the genre of sentimental consolation, and in her search for explanations, she often willingly fell into the


³ Ibid., 370.

mainstream of contemporary thought and writing.”⁵ By way of example, Buell offers this note that the poet sent to a bereaved friend: “I know we shall certainly see what we loved the most. It is sweet to think they are safe by Death and that that is all we have to pass to obtain their face. There are no Dead, dear Katie, the grave is but our moan for them.”⁶ On another occasion however, she wrote: “Now we have given our Mister Bowles—to the deep Stranger—Heaven is so presuming that we must hide our gems.”⁷ Her resentment towards the heavenly thief is marked.

In much the way that contemporary funeral rites, performed by strangers, serve to insulate us from the shock of death, Victorian consolation literature was meant to offer reassurance in the face of the unknowable. The introduction of familiar elements into the realm of “heaven” was meant to dispel the uncertainty of immortality. Farland contends that Dickinson’s poetry removes this element of “domestication”:

Where sentimental fictions restore the familiar comforts of home to the less-familiar prospect of heaven, Dickinson’s poems remove hometown places and persons from heaven’s scene. And where sentimental fictions domesticate death, Dickinson’s poems detach and strip it bare. In this regard we might say that death becomes alien and barren in Dickinson’s poetry not only because of certain formal choices … but also as the outcome of certain rhetorical strategies that resist and contest dominant cultural conceptions of death and immortality. Those strategies function to undo sentimentality’s domestication of death by rendering death distant and unrecognizable.⁸

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⁶ Ibid., 330.

⁷ Ibid., 329.

A Sketch of the Sky

Dickinson, like van Gogh, looked up to the skies with her paintbrush in hand, but she found neither comfort nor satisfaction there, preferring the view of her garden:

My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in June, and in it are my friends—all of them—every one of them … if roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below—and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen—I guess that He would think his Paradise superfluous.9

Throughout her life, Dickinson returned to themes that were inspired by her observance of the natural world. Her affinity for the summer sun can best be described as reverence. In the natural world, Dickinson found regeneration as well as decay. In The Sun Kept Setting, the approach of dusk is a metaphor for the gradual ebbing away of vitality.

In the first stanza the progression is imperceptible; there are no shadows to indicate that transformations are taking place. The time of day is noon, when the sun is most powerful. The second stanza ushers in the fall of dusk; Dickinson’s use of the word “dropping” implies a precarious and potentially hazardous action, and the imagery of perspiration implies effort or illness. The third stanza suggests a gradual loss of mobility and sensation. It is evident that an unspoken conflict between “self” (soul) and the “seeming” (body) is quietly being waged.

The fourth stanza indicates a dramatic shift in form and content. Action (“the sun kept setting, the dusk kept dropping, my feet kept drowsing”) is replaced by reaction: “How well I knew the light before— / I could see it now.” The meaning of the poem hinges on the final words: “Tis dying—I am doing—but / I’m not afraid to know—.” The

9 Armand, “Paradise Deferred,” 58.
final line conforms to the expectation generated by preceding stanzas, but it is more 
compelling because of its unexpected placement at the end of the stanza rather than at the 
beginning. The lines imply not only the acceptance of death, but also the conviction that 
mysterious will someday be “known.”

**Musical Content**

Three musical ideas permeate this song: first Heggie uses ostinato patterns in 
repetitive two-bar phrases, second, he reintroduces the descending melodic minor 
associated with the refrain of the first song, “Oh starry, starry night,” and third, he 
introduces a static intervalllic motive in the vocal line, based upon leading tone structures 
(A-sharp to B and C-sharp to D).

After its initial statement in measures 1 and 2, (fig. 39) the ostinato pattern is 
repeated an additional four times. The pitches outline a second-inversion G major triad, a 
minor/major seventh chord, and a major second. This pattern maintains its intervalllic 
integrity when transposed (fig. 40).

![Musical notation](image_url)

Figure 39. “The Sun Kept Setting,” mm. 1-4.
The repetitive intervallic structure of the melodic line in the vocal part is based upon the leading tone motion of A-sharp to B, and C-sharp to D (fig. 41). The effect is one of stasis, as the note of departure is also that of arrival. The vocal line moves between simple and compound meter, while the accompaniment remains in 6/8; the effect is slightly jarring (fig. 41).

In *The Sun Kept Setting* the “starry night” theme is presented as an ascending seventh followed by a descending natural or melodic minor scale; the only alteration from the original (F-sharp, E, D-sharp, C-sharp, in the right-hand accompaniment) is the
substitution of D-natural for D-sharp (fig. 5, *The Starry Night*, m. 4). The descending scale includes the pitches E, D, C-sharp, B, and A; this incorporates the flat sixth and seventh of the melodic minor. The lowered second (G-natural) is less striking in the fifth song, as the tonal center is suggestive of G major rather than F-sharp minor. The recurrence of the “starry night” theme is important at this point in the narrative; it recalls the moment of illumination; the mystic transcendence that van Gogh found, when he looked up at the stars. The tempo change (*Very calm, with resignation*) at m. 47 lends gravity to the statement “how well I knew the light before” (fig. 42). Measures 44-46 which precede this statement underscore the modal ambiguity of F-sharp major and F-sharp minor; the chord is stated several times as an open fifth (fig. 42). Reverence is often found in the contemplation of mystery, and in his omission of the third, Heggie leaves room for this interpretation.

The song concludes with a statement of the “starry night” motive in F-minor, but the motive leads to a root position F-major triad in measure 61 (fig. 43). The vocal line in measure 56-58 is again based upon leading tone motion from E-sharp to F-sharp, and G-sharp to A (fig. 43). While the song appears to be constructed largely in terms of
intervallic and rhythmic repetition, there is also a significant pull towards the tonal centers of F-major versus F-minor, and D-flat major. Measure 61 is a point of arrival; the root position F-major chord underscores the finality of the statement “I’m not afraid to know.” The F-major tonality is significant; F-major is the tonal center of the seventh and concluding song of the cycle, Epilogue: I Would Not Paint a Picture. In narrative terms, this tonal center suggests resolution or acceptance; but after introducing the F-major tonality in the final song, Heggie concludes the Epilogue with a return to the F-sharp major/F-sharp minor duality. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 9.

Figure 43. “The Sun Kept Setting,” mm. 56-63.
The placement of the Dickinson texts within the cycle is significant. The cycle opens with Sexton’s fervent wish for death: “to split from my life with no flag, no belly, no cry.” The van Gogh letters propel the narrative forward towards its inevitable conclusion. Van Gogh, as we perceive him through the letters to Theo, is eager to accept the “invitation” of the beckoning stars and follows in animated pursuit. *The Sun Kept Setting* is immediately preceded by: “to express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance … Is it not something that actually exists?” As if in response to the question posed by van Gogh, the Dickinson poem offers the consolation of acceptance: “Tis dying—I am doing—but / I’m not afraid to know—.” The inevitable progression towards death is underscored by the motion of the melody in the vocal line; the ascending and descending step-wise motion always returns the inescapable point of origin, and returns to the unwelcome conclusion: “Tis dying I am doing” (fig. 43). In this poem, the inevitability of Death is acknowledged, but solace is found in the “radiance” of courageous acceptance.
Chapter Eight

TOUCH (SONG 6)

There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathize with the color, the beauty, the joy of life. The less said about life’s sores the better.

—Oscar Wilde

A Kiss of Reverence

One definition of the verb to kiss is: “to touch in an expression of reverence.”¹ By this definition, van Gogh’s touch on his canvas is an act of veneration. Since he ultimately committed suicide, it may sound contradictory to say that van Gogh held a deep reverence for life, but that would be to mistake the symptoms of his illness for the spiritual essence of the man. Van Gogh may have found himself on the losing end of the battle with mental illness, but his profound reverence for beauty enabled the artist to live a creative existence, despite overwhelming odds. This excerpt dated September 10, 1889, shows how the artist fought relentlessly against the symptoms of his disease:

Life goes on like that, time doesn’t come back, but I’m working furiously, because of the very fact that I know that the opportunities to work don’t come back … Above all, in my case, where a more violent crisis may destroy my ability to paint forever. In the crises I feel cowardly in the face of anguish and suffering – more cowardly than is justified, and it’s perhaps this very moral cowardice which, while before I had no desire whatsoever to get better, now makes me eat enough for two, work hard, take care of myself in my relations with the other patients for fear of relapsing – anyway I’m trying to get better now like someone who, having wanted to commit suicide, finding the water too cold, tries to catch hold of the bank again.²


At the time this letter was written, van Gogh was a voluntary inmate of the Saint-Rémy asylum, six weeks after the precipitating psychotic episode in mid-July.


During the autumn, the artist was making copies of the religious paintings of Delacroix, notably *The Piéta*. At a time when his own spiritual resources were depleted, van Gogh turned to the iconography of other artists. He found consolation in the life of Delacroix: “I always think of the words of Delacroix … that he found painting when he had neither breath nor teeth left.”

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Musical Content

The ABA structure of this song presents two clearly defined, contrasting worlds of sound. The A section consists primarily of two-note chords moving homophonically, suggestive of hymnody. The melodic palindrome taken from “The Starry Night” (fig. 4) is placed into the right hand of the piano accompaniment (fig. 46). Both the vocal melody and the harmonic chordal accompaniment are dominated by four pitches of the original pentatonic cell: B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat/D-sharp, and F-sharp (fig. 46). Heggie uses a similar homophonic, hymn-like texture to express reverence in his setting of “Love,” the first song in *The Deepest Desire: Four Meditations on Love* (fig. 47). The meditations were extracted from the writings of Sister Helen Prejean, after their work together on Heggie’s opera *Dead Man Walking.*
References to hymnody are particularly appropriate to the van Gogh text, which speaks of resignation to the forces of suffering and death. Life is not an infinite commodity, and as the writer Anne Lamott has said, “We’re all terminally ill on this bus.” The religious sentiment which pervades the text is underscored by the presence of the “starry night” motive in measure 8 (fig. 48). Pitches derived from the third measure of

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“The Starry Night” (B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, F-sharp, G-natural, and A-natural) are prominent in both the melodic line and the piano accompaniment (fig. 48).

Figure 48. “Touch,” mm. 6-10.

The static repetition in the A section mirrors the restraint of the text: “I know well that healing comes from within, through profound resignation to suffering and death—through the surrender of your own will, and of your self-love.” The second statement of the “starry night” motive is transposed; the higher tessitura suggests countering momentum (fig. 49).
The transitional measures leading into the B section feature static repetition of the F-sharp major chord and its dominant C-sharp. Repetition is appropriate to the text; there is a moment of suspension, a wavering of thought, leading to a moment of decisiveness. The text suggests a decisive rejection of the pious life: “But that is no use to me.”
The continually shifting dance meters of the B section (fig. 51) suggest a vitality, which contrasts with the overriding stasis of the A section. This mirrors the exuberance of the text: “I love to paint. To see people and things and everything—Everything—Everything—Ah!” The introduction of rhythmic momentum mirrors the dramatic conflict between the pious (A) and the secular (B) in the life of van Gogh. As in previous songs, the ostinato pattern defines the structure of the musical material. The initial two-bar pattern is derived from a G-sharp pentatonic scale and utilizes the pitches G-sharp, A-sharp, B-sharp, D-sharp, and E-sharp (fig. 51). The pattern is repeated four times, and then transposed. In measure 28, four pitches of the D pentatonic scale are present (D, E, F-sharp, and A) while in measures 29-30 all five of the pitches of the C pentatonic scale are present (C, D, E, G, A) and measure 32 completes the B-flat pentatonic (B-flat, C, D, F, and G) (fig. 55). The ostinato pattern in measures 29-30 (fig. 52) are very clearly a transposition of the original two-measure pattern of measures 18-19 (fig. 51).

Figure 51. “Touch,” mm. 18-22.
The harmony of the B section of the song is derived from the first five measures of “The Starry Night,” making use of the following structural elements:

1. Prolonged attention to four pitches of a pentatonic scale, with some form of embellishment incorporating non-pentatonic pitches. Generally speaking the embellishments are either lower neighbor or chromatic passing tones.

2. Significant musical emphasis on the F-sharp minor tonal center, with particular focus on the ascending melodic minor scale utilizing the sharp sixth (D-sharp) and sharp seventh (E-sharp) as well as enharmonic spellings of the dominant chord.

Heggie frequently uses four pitches taken from a pentatonic scale, but additionally this technique is combined with the idea of motivic repetition in a very clever manner. For example, the pitches D-sharp, F-sharp, G-sharp, and A-sharp could be seen either as four members of the F-sharp pentatonic scale (F-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp, C-sharp, D-sharp) or as a transposition of four pitches derived from the introductory five-note “blues” motive: (F-sharp, A, B, B-sharp, C-sharp). The intervallic content is identical:
m3, M2, M2 (fig. 53). Note however, that the transposition of the motive in “Touch” omits the lowered fifth or “blue” note; four out of the five pitches of the original motive are presented in this transposition, but an exact transposition would include the pitch A-natural as well (D-sharp, F-sharp, G-sharp, A-natural, A-sharp). The transposition of the original motive to D-sharp is a transposition down of a minor third.

Figure 53. “Touch,” mm. 33-36.

When a composer chooses to utilize four pitches of a pentatonic scale, modulation to another pentatonic scale becomes a very simple matter. For example the F-sharp pentatonic scale is comprised of the pitches F-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp, C-sharp, and D-sharp. By selecting four of the commonly held pitches, it becomes a simple matter to shift the tonal center to the B pentatonic scale (B, C-sharp, D-sharp, F-sharp, G-sharp) or to the C-sharp pentatonic scale (C-sharp, D-sharp, E-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp). In mm. 43-47, Heggie presents the dominant of F-sharp, but then transitions into the C-sharp pentatonic scale. The pitches C-sharp, D-sharp, E-sharp, G-sharp, and A-sharp are all present, but additionally the composer has lower neighbor tones as embellishments which obscure this pattern (fig. 54).
The F-sharp melodic minor scale and the five-note F-sharp “blues” motive are reintroduced as a means of transition to the A prime section of the song. The F-sharp ascending melodic minor scale with sharp sixth (D-sharp) and seventh (E-sharp) leads into the “blues” motive: F-sharp, A, B, B-sharp (lowered fifth, “blue”-note) arriving at C-sharp in m. 68 (fig. 55).

The A\textsuperscript{1} section returns in measure 68 with four bars that recap the homophonic two-note chords offset by the palindromic scale. The chordal accompaniment grows measure by measure to encompass thicker sonorities; three-note chords become six-note
chords, and the bass line, which is doubled at the octave, reaches to the very extremes of
the instrument as it descends from E through E-flat, and D, and ultimately arrives at the
C-sharp/D-flat dominant in m. 78 (fig. 56).

The vocal line now carries the climactic “starry night” motive. This soaring theme
is underscored by lush six-note chords moving homophonically. Heggie frequently uses
the G-sharp/A-natural as a dissonance in the arpeggio figures (fig. 4, “The Starry Night”),
but in the palindrome passages (fig. 7, “The Starry Night”) he uses G-sharp, A-natural,
and B-flat. This functions to obscure the tonality; A-sharp/B-flat asserts F-sharp major,
while A-natural strengthens the F-sharp minor tonality. In mm. 81-83 (fig. 56), Heggie is
firmly establishing the F-sharp major tonal center; this fact will become more significant
in the Epilogue, which transposes the F-sharp minor third “Blues” motive to an F-sharp
major motive.
Figure 56. “Touch,” mm. 78-83.
The final measures of the song incorporate a return to the accompaniment that was associated in the first song with Sexton’s turbulent imagery of “boiling stars” and the demonic dragon/serpent, “that rushing beast of the night” (fig. 9). The pitches include four members of the F-sharp pentatonic scale: the original grouping of B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, and F-sharp (fig. 57)

![Figure 57. “Touch,” mm. 84-86.](image)

The song concludes with the five-note blues motive (F-sharp, A, B, B-sharp, C-sharp) but the ordering of the pitches has changed. The arpeggiated chord in measure 95 is pentatonic, but with the addition of A-natural. This dissonant minor second underscores the tension between F-sharp major (A-sharp/B-flat) and F-sharp minor (A-natural). Characteristically, Heggie ends the song with a compound P5 interval, leaving the F-sharp major/F-sharp minor duality unanswered (fig. 58).
Returning to the premise that a touch can be an act of reverence, one wonders why Heggie has coupled the lines “what a queer thing touch is … the stroke of the brush” with the music associated with the Sexton text. Sexton’s poem begs for a reprieve from the arduous task of living; van Gogh’s letter describes an artist battling the forces of resignation with a “carpe diem” call to life. This is a significant moment in the dramatic narrative because it highlights the common ground between poet and painter. Perhaps it serves as a reminder that despite the forces of generation and creativity, van Gogh and Sexton both ultimately succumbed to mental illness and chose to abruptly end their lives. I find myself compelled to consider the words which Denise Levertov offered in Sexton’s obituary:

We who are alive must make clear, as she could not, the distinction between creativity and self-destruction. The tendency to confuse the two has claimed too many victims … To recognize that for a few years of her life Anne Sexton was an artist even though she had so hard a struggle against her desire for death is to fittingly honor her memory.  

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EPILOGUE: I WOULD NOT PAINT A PICTURE

A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.

—Oscar Wilde

Wheat Field with Crows


Emily Dickinson used her vast lexicon to explore and to define the shifting landscape of her psyche. Drawing inspiration from the natural world, she found meaning in the relentless motion of birth and decay:

Her challenge was always to capture nature at its dramatic moments of transition, sunrise or sunset, late autumn or early spring, the sensuous painful beauty of late summer. The one who could repeat or mirror this process of nature would earn poetic immortality. Despairing of ever reaching this ideal, of pinning down
something so evanescent and so forever in process, she still discovers a human nobility of aspiration amidst all the flux.¹

Van Gogh was likewise interested in defining the world encapsulated within his field of vision, but in the year 1890, the view was grim. Theo van Gogh was beset by financial difficulties, and Vincent felt responsible. A late painting entitled *Wheat Field with Crows* (Vincent van Gogh, *Wheat Fields with Crows*, 1890, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam) was created during the final weeks of van Gogh’s life, at Auvers-sur-Oise. On July 10, 1890, van Gogh discussed the *Wheat Field* canvases:

I too felt very saddened, and had continued to feel the storm that threatens you also weighing upon me … my life too is attacked at my very root, my step also, is faltering. I feared—not completely—but a little nonetheless—that I was a danger to you; living at your expense … I’ve painted another three large canvases since then. They’re immense stretches of wheat fields under turbulent skies, and I made point of trying to express sadness, extreme loneliness.²

The meaning of *Wheat Field with Crows*, and speculation as to van Gogh’s state of mind at the time remain controversial subject matter to this day. The dates which would clearly define this painting as his last are speculative, and therefore one cannot ascertain his state of mind at the time with certainty. It is possible to make inferences, however, based upon the letter of July 10, 1890. The painting depicts three roads, none of which appear to lead anywhere. The celestial vision of the night has given way to a dawning reality: travel without a destination, accompanied by black crows, and encircled by “turbulent” skies. On July 27, 1890, Vincent van Gogh shot himself in the chest; he


died two days later, with his brother Theo at his side. Viewers still clamor for a glimpse of *The Starry Night* but *Wheat Field with Crows* offers a glimpse of a world from which we might avert our eyes.

**Musical Content**

This final selection is startlingly simplistic harmonically in comparison with the songs which have preceded it. The piece clearly defines F major as an important tonal center within the opening bars of music, and there are clearly defined relationships between tonic and dominant. Tonic is prolonged in the bass line of the first eight measure of music. Heggie obscures the matter slightly with G-flat pentatonic sonorities (fig. 60).

![Figure 60. “Epilogue: I would not paint a picture,” mm. 1-4.](image)

He then transfers the pedal point to the right hand accompaniment, but features the sixth scale degree rather than tonic, thereby reinforcing the deceptive motion of the cadence (vii° to vi) to D minor, rather than the tonic, F major (fig. 61). As we have seen in the preceding songs, the deliberate obscuring of mode is a technique that Heggie appears to favor in this song cycle.
As in preceding movements, F-sharp major and F-sharp minor return to primacy frequently and pentatonic relationships continue to contribute significantly to the harmonic language of the piece. In the first song of the cycle, Heggie made use of the “blues” scale that utilizes the lowered third and seventh of the major scale. African spirituals, blues, and jazz also frequently make use of the lowered fifth as a “blue note,” as Heggie does (B-sharp/C-natural) in the first song. Traditional African spirituals tend to be pentatonic in nature, possibly to avoid the semitone. This is significant because it becomes evident how easily Heggie could move from the F major “blues” scale (F, G, A-flat, B-flat, C,D, E-flat, F) to the A-flat pentatonic (A-flat, B-flat, C, E-flat, F), since there are five pitches in common. In the Epilogue, Heggie is using the pentatonic scale, but the potential for movement between the two scales exists.

In measures 12-15, Heggie utilizes tonal centers as well as pentatonic scales to move between the two important pitch centers: F-sharp/G-flat major and C-sharp/D-flat major. Movement between the pentatonic scales is a simple matter, as they share four common pitches.

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pitches in common. The F-sharp/G-flat pentatonic scale comprises the pitches G-flat, A-flat, B-flat, D-flat, E-flat and the C-sharp/D-flat pentatonic scale comprise the pitches D-flat, E-flat, F, A-flat, B-flat. The common pitches are: D-flat, E-flat, A-flat, and B-flat. The tonal concept of motion between tonic and dominant is also reinforced by the relationships of C-sharp/D-flat dominant motion to F-sharp/G-flat Tonic (fig. 62). In measure fifteen, Heggie returns to the F-sharp minor key signature.

Figure 62. “Epilogue: I would not paint a picture,” mm. 12-15.

Another significant musical feature of this song is the shift of texture in the climactic phrases of mm. 15-17. The octave triplets introduced in the first eight bars of
music (fig. 60) give rise to the triplet pattern chords in measures 15-17 (fig. 63). The crashing sonority of nine-note chords is associated with the trumpet fanfare of the “talking” cornets. The striking sonority of this texture, coupled as it is with the text, “Such sumptuous Despair, I would not talk, like cornets,” may offer an insight into the composer’s point of view, which will be discussed in greater detail in the conclusions. The thick texture of the accompaniment, coupled with the agitated rhythmic motion of the sixteenth-notes in the vocal line, reinforces the insistent nature of the artist’s calling.

Figure 63. “Epilogue: I would not paint a picture,” mm. 16-17.

In m. 23, the original pentatonic cell derived from the opening measures of the first song is presented as A-sharp/B-flat, C-sharp, D-sharp/E-flat, and F-sharp (fig. 64). While the spellings may be enharmonic, the relationships are clearly derived from the third bar of the first song and directly reference the pitches noted above.
Heggie’s setting of the third stanza of the poetry is significant to the narrative; the poet disparages her calling: “I would not be a poet / Tis finer own the ear / Enamored—impotent—content— / The license to revere.” The unexamined “contented” life is simpler, and, Dickinson suggests that it may be preferable. Heggie captures this simplicity with the tuneful F-major melody of the vocal line. This melody features simple triadic sonorities, step-wise motion, and predictable phrasing; it is not unlike a folk-song (fig. 65).
The pauses in the vocal line (fig. 69, m. 32) are significant to the narrative because they suggest a moment of decision. Faced with the choice between simplicity, and the “awful privilege” of an artist’s life, the poet asks herself which she would choose, if she had a choice (fig. 66). “Bolts of melody” usher in a triumphant return to the original five-note motive, transposed to F-sharp major. The lowered third and the “blue-note” fifth are gone; the climactic phrase “Bolts of melody” is transformed from F-sharp minor to F-sharp major, and the modal duality appears resolved.

Figure 66. “Epilogue: I would not paint a picture,” mm. 31-36.
One might wonder why such a simple, predominantly tonal song follows songs of such complex melodic and harmonic construction. As in any well-crafted song, this is a clear case of simplicity by design. Dickinson poses the question whether it is better to be the recipient or the creator. The text suggests several possibilities, depending upon one’s reading of the poem. Perhaps the poet is arguing in favor of a simple and unexamined life; a life not encumbered with the arduous task of exploration or creativity. It is also possible that Dickinson was playing with ideas, and posing the question ironically. Heggie’s sudden shift from a complex compositional style to something much simpler and predictable underscores the nature of the argument.

The moment of triumphant resolution does not last; the final bars of music reintroduce the dissonant semitone relationship (A-natural/G-sharp) that is emphasized in measure 38. The original pentatonic cell (B-flat, C-sharp, E-flat, F-sharp) is presented in measure 39. In the final measure of the piece, Heggie’s cadence contains both A-sharp/B-flat, and A-natural; there is no resolution to the F-sharp major/minor duality as both keys are represented (fig. 67).

Figure 67. “Epilogue: I would not paint a picture,” mm. 37-40.
The composer leaves us with the impression that simplistic resolutions are not possible. This is, first and foremost, a song cycle about Vincent van Gogh; whether it was in spite of, or because of, his mental illness that the artist was able to leave such a remarkable legacy, there is no escaping the fact that his life was anguished. For Vincent van Gogh, the journey to the stars was excruciating, and ended in suicide.

The concept of the epilogue originates in Greek drama. Traditionally, the epilogue serves as a narrative device that offers a summary or definitive comment upon the action which has preceded it. As an interviewer, I was curious to know how Heggie arrived at the selection of this poem as an epilogue to the entire cycle and his response was as follows:

Dickinson is still one of the most astonishing and contemporary poets. With just a few words she can describe feelings and journeys that take others thousands of words to investigate. She never stops inspiring and surprising me. The last poem of The Starry Night is so fascinating because she is talking about how it’s better to be the casual listener and observer—how it’s better NOT to be the poet, the artist, the musician – because that creativity, that privilege, that gift, can come at such a painful, awful cost. For van Gogh it came with madness and a tragic life … terrible suffering that led to powerful, transformative beauty. For Dickinson it came with isolation and terrible loneliness. How lucky we are that THEY suffered so deeply, so we can appreciate their work with distance now. That’s what she’s saying – I think it is quite profound. I certainly understand it.  

4 Jake Heggie, e-mail message to the author, September 25, 2010.
Chapter 10

CONCLUSIONS:

THE AMERICAN ART SONG: FROM ACADEMIA TO THE CONCERT HALL

Young American singers, meanwhile, learn to sing, albeit unsteadily, in every language except their own. Americans know they’re better than the rest of the world in terms of bombs and budgets, but they retain a vague inferiority complex when it comes to the musical arts, still feeling that European repertories … are superior to our own.

—Ned Rorem, Opera News, 1996

In the same year that Rorem’s article, “American Art Song: Dead or Alive,” appeared in Opera News, a feature article on Jake Heggie appeared in the Los Angeles Times. In 1996, one year after winning the G. Schirmer Art-Song Competition, Heggie was just beginning to find success as a composer of song, but retained his PR position at the San Francisco Opera:

These days, Heggie counts himself a lucky man. “I’m really grateful that there are people out there who are willing to take a chance and champion new music,” he says. Still, he’s not quite ready to quit his day job. “How many composers do you know,” he asks, “who make a living writing art songs?”

Four years after Rorem’s article, “American Art Song: Dead or Alive,” appeared in Opera News, Tom Savage interviewed Jake Heggie for the magazine. At the time of this interview Heggie was the Chase Bank Composer-in-Residence for the San Francisco Opera, Dead Man Walking was being prepared for a full-scale production, and The Faces of Love had been released under the RCA recording label. When asked why, as an accomplished pianist, Heggie had chosen to compose primarily for the voice, his response was indicative of a life-long passion:

The voice still takes my breath away. It is the most expressive, most magical instrument ever. The inspiration comes from the voice. It brings tears to my eyes when I hear a great voice. And I love American English, too. It’s a very expressive language. The nine singers on the recording (Renée Fleming, Sylvia McNair, Jennifer Larmore, Frederica von Stade, Nicolle Foland, Zheng Cao, Kristin Clayton, Carol Vaness, and Brian Asawa) are all very special people and artists. None of them needed this [as a] career [move]. The whole project was a labor of love.\(^2\)

The *New York Times* review of *The Faces of Love* by Anthony Tommasini criticized Heggie for a tendency towards “cross-over” in his repertoire:

A sensitive and facile pianist, he gives the impression of someone to whom music comes easily. Perhaps too easily. His harmonic language, rooted in tonality, is spiked with astringent bits of dissonance and enriched with murky Impressionistic colors. But the wistful, dreamy and accessible language that results is not particularly fresh. Mr. Heggie draws heavily on jazz, pop, Broadway and folk styles. But employing vernacular sources begins to seem like an easy way to give his songs an American jolt.\(^3\)

On the surface of it, Tommasini may be expressing disappointed expectations, but the injustice of the criticism should be apparent; why should an understanding of the music of one’s own time and place, coupled with the ability to assimilate diverse musical influences be grounds for censure? Surely it is advantageous to the composer if the results are authentic and expressive. Heggie, being especially fluent in the styles of American music, draws upon this advantage in service of the text:

> My music is character driven. I write how I write. It’s honest and from my heart. I do want the audience to be part of the journey being taken—and that is very important to me. But I never deliberately compromise my writing or style because I think it will make it easier on the audience. If a piece needs to be thorny, angular and difficult because that’s what the character demands—then that’s what I’ll write. If it needs to be lyrical and aching, then that’s what I’ll write.\(^4\)

\(^2\) Tom Savage, “High Scorers: Jake Heggie,” *Opera News* 64, no. 7 (January 2000): 12.


\(^4\) Jake Heggie, e-mail message to author, September 25, 2010.
I cannot help but wonder whether or not Tommasini spent an extended period of time reviewing the works of the composers in question, before making his 2002 pronouncement: A “Sudden, Facile Flowering of the American Art Song.”\(^5\) In the case of Heggie, his success has been anything but “sudden.” By the time *The Faces of Love* was recorded and published, Heggie had been developing his craft for nearly twenty years. *The Starry Night* is a beautifully crafted song cycle, and certainly not “facile” in its construction. Thematic unity is not only a feature of the music, but of the carefully selected texts, the ordering of their presentation, and the dramatic narrative as a whole. Detailed study reveals the tremendous craft behind the composition: the effective use of musical motives, manipulation of thematic concepts, and masterful text-setting. Perhaps now that Heggie has achieved such popularity in the realm of opera, his songs will receive the attention they deserve through detailed study and analysis.

In 2002, Tommasini followed up with Ned Rorem, to ascertain his opinion of a perceived resurgence of American song:

For twenty years or so, the composer Ned Rorem went around grimly asserting that the art song was languishing, especially the American art song. As he saw it, American singers of recent decades, lured by the potential for fame and fortune in opera, were giving only token attention to song. But last month at the 92nd Street Y on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, Mr. Rorem admitted that he had been quite wrong. While he was predicting the demise of the American art song, he said, a whole generation of song composers emerged right under his nose.\(^6\)

The Tommasini article is important, because the author has noted a significant shift in the trend of art-song composition. Singers and audiences alike are responding to


\(^6\) Ibid.
a shifting aesthetic, and this is fostering a demand for new repertoire. The art-song recital is still primarily an academic endeavor, but performances in public venues by notable artists are taking place, and audiences are responding to the repertoire:

Perhaps the pendulum swing that has long been noted in other areas of classical music is finally affecting the art song. A backlash has set in after a long period during which composers who wrote in atonal, hard-edged contemporary styles alienated many singers and song fanciers … Because of the nature of the singing voice, and because the whole point of a song is to support and transmit words through music, a certain degree of directness and accessibility has always been valued in the genre.\(^7\)

Heggie’s recording *The Faces of Love*, and the subsequent publication of the three-part series of songs, garnered a favorable review in *The Journal of Singing*. Author Judith Carman noted the unique position that Heggie maintains as a composer with strong ties to the professional operatic world:

It has been greatly to the composer’s advantage not only to be working in a public rather than academic milieu, but also to have so many contemporary American classical singers sing his songs and eventually record them. This effectively puts him in the kind of composing situation that composers used to have before musical composition moved into the academic environment; that is, composing songs that will immediately be sung by singers who are well known to the paying public—a very different audience from the university audience. This happy circumstance encourages the composition of music that speaks to the heart, as well as engages the musical mind.\(^8\)

There can be no question that Heggie’s operatic success has drawn greater attention to his formidable talent as a composer of song. The songs came first, but his professional affiliation with opera, coupled with his success as an operatic composer, has

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brought his song repertoire greater exposure. When I questioned him about a perceived resurgence of American art song recitals, Heggie’s response was:

I do not feel there is a resurgence of interest in song recitals. In fact, the only place they continue to thrive is at colleges and conservatories. In the real world, they are disappearing year by year. The general public has no connection to what a song recital is – or why it matters. So, they are disappearing. I think young American composers are doing their darnedest to keep contributing to the literature – and there are STUNNING artists out there eager to do recitals, but as a great impresario once said, “If people don’t want to buy tickets, you can’t stop ‘em.”

If there is to be a resurgence of the art-song recital in America, two things are required of its practitioners: firstly, a willingness to explore and expand the parameters of the traditional art-song recital, and secondly, an unwavering commitment to the communication of the text. Perhaps one of the things that we can do to “further the cause” is to explore contemporary repertoire in our own language. This was certainly Ned Rorem’s point in his 1996 Opera News article:

As a teacher at Juilliard, I sense a strong and growing interest in contemporary American song. Both students and professionals want to be able to sing to an audience in their common language. One aspect I enjoy about American song is that artists gravitate to a piece for both its poetry and its music. When we sing in English, we’re choosing to speak to the world through music about what we feel and who we are, and more and more composers and poets are giving us the music and words to do just that.

On this point, it would seem that Heggie and composers of his generation are following in the footsteps of Ned Rorem, arguably one of the most accomplished composers of art-song in America. When asked about recital repertoire and performance, Heggie addressed two specific, critical aspects, namely, performance energy and communication:

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9 Jake Heggie, e-mail message to author, September 25, 2010.

Recitals need to be about a very intimate and engaging musical experience between a singer and the audience... something exciting needs to happen: joy in singing, joy in music-making, joy in emotional journeys. It takes an energetic and motivated singer to capture an audience—and they need the material to make that happen. A singer ALWAYS performs best in (her) native language, because then it’s really about the musical journey. American singers will always sing American art songs the best... and they should be proud of that.\textsuperscript{11}

In 2010, \textit{Passing By – Songs by Jake Heggie} (Avie label) garnered a favorable review as the Editor’s Choice in \textit{Gramophone}. Edward Seckerson captures the essence of Heggie as a composer who is driven by the communication of text, in service of the dramatic narrative. Heggie is concerned first and foremost with emotional truth:

Jake Heggie is the kind of composer that musical theatre—and I make no distinction between musicals and opera or indeed any other innately theatrical form—needs to embrace... Heggie instinctively ‘gets’ the music of words and through melody (that still much maligned enchantress) and carries the emotional memory of a moment, a connection, a feeling, forward.\textsuperscript{12}

Despite limited marketability and diminishing audiences, it comes down to the unshakeable belief that art-song is still relevant. Recitals matter, because when they are done well, they speak to our hearts. Writes Heggie: It is in all respects “a labor of love”:

More than anything I hope my musical style is “HONEST.” That is always my intention—to write honestly, beautifully, and with deep feeling and connection not only with the text, but also the story behind the text. I always write with a character in mind—I guess that’s why I’m a theater composer: songs, arias, operas, whatever it may be—all of it is character driven; a character who wants something, is missing or needing something, in his or her life... I only know one way to write: from the heart.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Meredith Ziegler, “Jake Heggie’s ‘Paper Wings’: Feeding the Genre of American Art Song.” \textit{Journal of Singing} 64, no. 3 (January-February 2008): 293.


\textsuperscript{13} Jake Heggie, e-mail message to the author, November 2010.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Appendix A

Opera and Stage Works

*Moby-Dick*
Opera in two acts
Libretto: Gene Scheer (based on Melville’s novel)
Premiere: Winspear Opera House, Dallas, TX, 2010

*Three Decembers*
Chamber opera in one act
Libretto: Gene Scheer (based on Terrence McNally’s play *Some Christmas Letters*).
Premiere: Cullen Theatre, Houston, TX, 2008

*For a Look or a Touch*
Music Drama for one actor and baritone
Libretto: Gene Scheer (based on interviews from the documentary film *Paragraph 175*)
Premiere: Nordstrom Recital Hall, Seattle, WA, 2007

*To Hell and Back*
Opera in one act
Libretto: Gene Scheer (based upon *The Rape of Persephone*)

*At the Statue of Venus*
Musical scene for soprano and piano
Libretto: Terrence McNally

*The End of the Affair*
Opera in two acts
Libretto: Heather McDonald (based upon the novel by Graham Greene)

*Dead Man Walking*
Opera in two acts
Libretto: Terrence McNally (based upon the book by Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ)

*Again*
Operatic scene in 10 minutes
Libretto: Kevin Gregory
Appendix B – Works with Chorus

Seeking Higher Ground: Bruce Springsteen Rocks New Orleans, April 30, 2006
Double SATB chorus with Orchestra
Text: Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ

John Adams’ Prayer
Chamber Chorus a cappella
Text: President John Adams

He will Gather Us Around
SATB a cappella (arr. of original hymn tune from Dead Man Walking)

My Grandmother’s Love Letters
SATB and orchestra
Text: Poetry by Hart Crane

Anna Madrigal Remembers
Mezzo-soprano solo and 12 male voices
Text: Armistead Maupin

I Shall Not Live in Vain
Mezzo-soprano solo and SA chorus, hand bells, pno.
Text: Emily Dickinson

Patterns
Mezzo-soprano solo, SSAA chorus
Text: Amy Lowell

Faith Disquiet
SATB
Text: Emily Dickinson
Appendix C – Song Cycles and Individual Songs with Piano Accompaniment

Soprano

Facing Forward, Looking Back
Duets for soprano and mezzo-soprano
Texts: Charlene Baldridge, Eugenia Zuckerman, Raymond Carver, Amistead Maupin, and Jake Heggie

1. Motherwit (Baldridge)
2. Grounded (Zukerman)
3. Hummingbird (Carver)
4. Mother in the Mirror (Maupin)
5. Facing Forward (Heggie)

Rise and Fall
Text: Gene Scheer

1. Water Stone (Noguchi)
2. Incantation Bowl
3. Angels Wings
4. The Shaman

How Well I Knew the Light
Text: Emily Dickinson

1. Ample Make This Bed
2. The Sun Kept Setting

Songs and Sonnets to Ophelia
Text: Heggie, Edna St. Vincent Millay

1. The Spring is Arisen; Ophelia's Song (Heggie)
2. Women have loved before as I love now (Millay)
3. Not in a silver casket cool with pearls (Millay)
4. Spring (Millay)

Natural Selection
Text: Gini Savage

1. Creation
2. Animal Passion
3. Alas! Alack!
4. Indian Summer - Blue
5. Connection
Eve-Song
Text: Philip Littell

1. My name
2. Even
3. Good
4. Listen
5. Snake
6. Woe to Man
7. The Wound
8. The Farm

Mezzo-Soprano

Facing Forward, Looking Back
Duets for soprano and mezzo-soprano
Texts: Charlene Baldridge, Eugenia Zuckerman, Raymond Carver, Amistead Maupin, and Jake Heggie

1. Motherwit (Baldridge)
2. Grounded (Zukerman)
3. Hummingbird (Carver)
4. Mother in the Mirror (Maupin)
5. Facing Forward (Heggie)

Statuesque
Text: Gene Scheer

1. Henry Moore: Reclining Figure of Elmwood
2. Pablo Picasso: Head of a Woman, 1932
3. Hapshetsut: The Divine Potter
4. Alberto Giacometti: Standing Woman #2
5. Winged Victory: We’re Through

The Deepest Desire
Text: Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ

1. The Call; More is required; Love
2. I catch on fire
3. The deepest desire
4. Primary colors
The Starry Night
Texts: Anne Sexton, Vincent van Gogh, Emily Dickinson

1. The Starry Night (Sexton)
2. Celestial Locomotion (Van Gogh)
3. Go Thy Great Way (Dickinson)
4. Reflection (Van Gogh)
5. The sun kept setting (Dickinson)
6. Touch (Van Gogh)
7. I would not paint a picture (Dickinson)

Of Gods and Cats
Text: Gavin Geoffrey Dillard

1. In the beginning ...
2. Once upon a universe

Songs to the Moon
Text: Vachal Lindsay

1. Prologue: Once More - To Gloriana
2. Euclid
3. The Haughty Snail-King
4. What the Rattlesnake Said
5. The Moon’s the North Wind’s Cooky (What the little girl said)
6. What the Scarecrow Said
7. What the Gray-Winged Fairy Said
8. Yet Gentle Will the Griffin Be (What Grandpa told the children)

Paper Wings
Text: Frederica von Stade

1. Bedtime Story
2. Paper Wings
3. Mitten Smitten
4. A Route to the Sky

Counter-Tenor

Encounter-tenor
Text: John Hall

1. Countertenor’s Conundrum
2. The trouble with trebles in trousers ... (Pitch can be a bitch!)
3. A Gift to Share
**Tenor**

*Friendly Persuasions: Songs in Homage to Poulenc*
Text: Gene Scheer (based upon four transformative friendships and meetings in Poulenc’s life)

1. Wanda Landowska
2. Pierre Bernac
3. Raymonde Linossier
4. Paul Eluard

**Medium Voice**

*Three Folk Songs* (1994)

1. Barb’ry Allen
2. He’s Gone Away
3. The Leather-Winged Bat

**Baritone**

*The Moon is a Mirror* (2001)
Text: Vachel Lindsay

1. The Strength of the Lonely (What the Mendicant Said)
2. What the Miner in the Desert Said
3. The Old Horse in the City
4. What the Forester Said
5. What the Snowman Said

*Thoughts Unspoken* (1996)
Text: John Hall

1. A learning experience over coffee ...
2. You enter my thoughts
3. To speak of love
4. Unspoken thoughts at bedtime

*Trois Poèmes Intérieurs de Ranier Maria Rilke* (1988)
Texts: Rainer Maria Rilke

1. Portrait intérieure
2. La porteuse de fleurs
3. Epilogue: C’est pour t’avoir vue...
Individual Songs with Piano Accompaniment

Soprano and/or Mezzo-Soprano

*In Our House* (2009)
Duet for soprano, baritone, and piano
Text: Mark Campbell

*Final Monologue from Master Class* (2007)
Text: Terrence McNally

*Vanity (Blah Blah Me)* (2004)
Text: Jake Heggie

*The Faces of Love*
Poems of Emily Dickinson
Ample make this bed (1999); The sun kept setting (1999); It makes no difference abroad (1998); I shall not live in vain (1995); As well as Jesus?; (1995) At last, to be identified! (1995); If you were coming in the Fall (1987); “Why do I love” You, Sir?; (1987) Here, where the Daisies fit my Head (1987); In lands I never saw (1987); She sweeps with many-colored Brooms (1987); All that I do (1987)

Mezzo-soprano
Text: Sir Philip Sidney

*Sophie’s Song* (1998)
Text: Frederica von Stade

*Dixie* (1997)
(arr. of traditional song)

*White in the Moon* (1990)
Text: A. E. Housman

*To Say Before Going to Sleep*
Text: Rainer Maria Rilke

*Away in a Manger* (1986)
(arr. of traditional song)
**Baritone**

*In Our House* (2009)
Soprano, baritone, and piano
Text: Mark Campbell

Text: Robert Browning

*Everyone Sang* (1998)
Text: Siegfried Sassoon
Appendix D – Songs with Orchestra, Chamber Orchestra, and Chamber Ensemble

* A Great Hope Fell: Songs from Civil War  
  Songs for Baritone and Chamber Orchestra  
  Texts: Maya Angelou, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Emily Dickinson, and Stephen Foster

Prologue: Ships that Pass in the Night (Dunbar)  
  1. Africa (Angelou)  
  2a. When Johnny Comes Marching Home (Gilmore)  
  2b. Letter to President Lincoln from Annie Davis, 1864  
  2c. Was My Brother in the Battle? (Foster)  
  3. A great Hope fell (Dickinson)  
  4a. Glory (Howe)  
  4b. America (Angelou)

* The Deepest Desire: Four Meditations on Love  
  Mezzo-soprano with Chamber Orchestra (orch. 2005)  
  Text: Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ

Prelude: The Call  
  1. More is Required; Love  
  2. I catch on fire  
  3. The deepest desire  
  4. Primary colors

* Paper Wings (orch. 1999)  
  Text: Frederica von Stade

  1. Bedtime Story  
  2. Paper Wings  
  3. Mitten Smitten  
  4. A Route to the Sky

* Three Folk Songs (orch. 1997)

  1. Barb’ry Allen  
  2. He’s Gone Away  
  3. The Leather-Winged Bat

* So Many Notes! (1997)  
  11 soloist and orchestra  
  Text: Jake Heggie
On the Road to Christmas (1996)
mezzo-soprano and string orchestra
Texts: A.E. Housman, Frederica von Stade, Jake Heggie, Emily Dickinson, J. J. Niles

1. The Night is Freezing Fast (A.E. Housman)
2. The Car Ride to Christmas (von Stade)
3. Good King Merrily on High (traditional)
4. I wonder as I wander (Niles)
5. The Road to Bethlehem (Dickinson)
6. And then the Setting Sun (von Stade)
7. Christmas Time of Year (Heggie)

Songs with Chamber Ensemble

In Our House (2009)
Soprano, baritone, flute, piano, percussion, and string quartet
Text: Mark Campbell

Here and Gone (2005)
Tenor, baritone, violin, viola, cello, and piano

1. The Farms of Home (Housman)
2. In Praise of Songs That Die (Lindsay)
3. Stars (Housman)
4. The Factory Window Song (Lindsay)
5. In the Morning (Housman)
6. Because I Liked You Better (Housman)
7. The Half-Moon Westers Low (Housman)

Statuesque (2005)
Mezzo-soprano with flute, alto sax, clarinet, violin, cello, bass, and piano

1. Henry Moore: Reclining Figure of Elmwood
2. Pablo Picasso: Head of a Woman, 1932
3. Hapshetsut: The Divine Potter
4. Alberto Giacometti: Standing Woman #2
5. Winged Victory: We’re Through

Mezzo-soprano, violin, cello, piano

1. The Minuet (Carver)
2. Simple (Carver)
3. The Best Time of the Day (Carver)
Vanity (Blah Blah Me) (2004)
Soprano, clarinet, cello, bass, piano and percussion (also a version for piano solo).
Text: Jake Heggie

Mezzo-soprano, string quintet, wind quintet and piano.
Texts: Charlene Baldridge, Emily Dickinson, Frederica von Stade, Raymond Carver

Prologue: Winter Roses (Charlene Baldridge)
I. Two Birds
   1. The Wren (Baldridge)
   2. The Robin (Dickinson)
II. Three Shades (in memoriam C.v.S.)
   3. A Hero (Frederica von Stade)
   4. Sleeping (Raymond Carver)
   5. To My Dad (von Stade)
III. Looking West
   6. Sweet Light (Carver)
Epilogue: Late Fragment (Carver)

From Emily's Garden (1999)
Soprano with flute, violin, cello and piano

1. Here, where the Daisies fit my Head
2. In lands I never saw
3. To make a prairie
4. It makes no difference abroad

Before the Storm (1998)
Mezzo-soprano, cello and piano
Texts: Edna St. Vincent Millay, Emily Dickinson, Dorothy Parker, Judyth Walker

1. Before the Storm (Walker)
2. It sounded as if the streets were running (Dickinson)
3. What lips my lips have kissed (Millay)
4. The Thin Edge (Parker)

My True Love Hath My Heart (1996)
Soprano with cello and piano (also arranged as a duet for soprano, mezzo-soprano, cello, and piano)
Texts: Sir Philip Sidney
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Institutional Review Board

To: Shannon Melody Unger
Music

From: Chair, Institutional Review Board
for the Protection of Human Subjects
Administration 315

Subject: "The Starry Night" - an American song cycle by composer Jake Heggie (E10-305)

Approval Date: June 30, 2010

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Tahlequah, OK 74464  

February 6, 2011  

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Bent Pen Music, Inc.  
3865 21st St.,  
San Francisco, CA 94114.  

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