

THEMES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE CHORAL MUSIC OF JAKE RUNESTAD

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With his thought-provoking and socially relevant music, American composer Jake Runestad has quickly become one of the most performed choral composers of the 21st century. Although music and social justice have been tied together for centuries, there is a new movement bringing social justice to American choral music in a noticeably increased manor, and Jake Runestad is a leading composer in this movement. In this paper, I provide a detailed analysis into the social justice themes employed by Runestad, interviews with him and several well-respected American choral directors programming and commissioning his music, as well as compositional devices employed within his compositions. The purpose of this study is to show Jake Runestad's place as an American choral composer by offering a historical overview of the social justice themes in American music and Western choral music separately. I will then narrow the scope to Jake Runestad, who since 2013 has been using his choral music to bring awareness to human inequalities within the United States today.

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By

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CHAPTER 1

THEMES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN AMERICAN MUSIC

In this chapter, I endeavor to trace to roots of social justice in American music from the 19th century to the present. In Chapter two, I will discuss social justice elements that are particular to Western choral music, and I will conclude with details on Jake Runestad and how he is incorporating social justice in his current American choral compositions. The chapters on Runestad will include a brief biographical chapter (Chapter 3), Runestad's inclusion of social justice within his choral compositions (Chapter 4), and Runestad's compositional process (Chapter 5).

In an interview with Ryan Guth, Runestad says, "I believe it is my duty as a composer to give a voice to the voiceless or to tell a story of someone whose story isn't known well in society. It is my opportunity to raise the question or to address a topic that isn't talked about or needs art in order to come into our social consciousness."¹ As Runestad further said in an interview with Twin Cities Pioneer Press, "I think my art is a way of discovering, trying to understand or question something. I don't know that I'm blatant with what I believe, but I hope my music supplies some path into that experience. Ultimately, what I want to do is to foster compassion."² As social justice can be viewed by many through a differing lens, Runestad's humanist views of treating others with respect and encouraging people to live a life of

¹ Ryan Guth, "A much-needed composer's perspective, with Jake Runestad," Ryan Guth: Step up to the Podium with Purpose, October 05, 2016, accessed November 05, 2016, <http://ryanguth.com/much-needed-composers-perspective-jake-runestad/>.

² Chris Hewitt, "Young composer seeks harmony in social justice themes," Twin Cities, October 20, 2016, accessed November 07, 2016, <http://www.twincities.com/2016/10/20/young-composer-seeks-harmony-in-social-justice-themes/>.

compassion towards others will serve as the definition of social justice for purposes of this document.

Throughout American music history, social justice and music are seen almost exclusively through popular, mainstream musical outlets. This socially conscious music includes songs of the temperance period³, slave songs in the 19th century,⁴ movements of the 20th century such as the Freedom Fighters of the 1970's,⁵ Rhythm Activism,⁶ Riot Grrrl,⁷ the reggae music of Bob Marley, and the folk singing of Woodie Guthrie.⁸ American jazz music also has strong ties to social justice as it developed as an art form among predominately African-American artists/musicians seeking freedom from oppression as an outlet for their feelings of persecution.⁹

Social justice in American music was popularized with the Swedish immigrant Joe Hill in the first decade of the 20th century.¹⁰ Joe Hill, born Joel Emmanuel Hägglund, immigrated to the United States in 1902.¹¹ After becoming disillusioned with American job inequality pitting

³ Paul Sanders, "Temperance Songs in American School Songbooks, 1840–1860," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 37, no. 1 (2015): ,accessed April 7, 2018, doi:10.1177/1536600615608464.

⁴ Ronald Radano, "Black Music Labor and the Animated Properties of Slave Sound," *Boundary 2* 43, no. 1 (2016), accessed August 20, 2017, doi:10.1215/01903659-3340685.

⁵ Ellen Carol Dubois, "Freedom Fighters," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 71 (February 25, 2011), accessed April 17, 2017.

⁶ Jean-Phillippe Marcoux, "Riots, Rituals, and Ceremonials: The Multi-functionality of Rhythm and Blues and Soul as Generational Music in David Henderson's Early Poetry," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 40, no. 1 (Spring, 2015), accessed April 17, 2017, doi:10.1093/melus/mlu061.

⁷ Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 22, no. 2-3 (July 2012), accessed August 14, 2017, doi:10.1080/0740770x.2012.721082.

⁸ Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, *Rebel Musics: human rights, resistant sounds, and the politics of music making* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 2003), 19.

⁹ Court Carney, "New Orleans and the Creation of Early Jazz," *Popular Music and Society* 29, no. 3 (August 21, 2006):, accessed September 14, 2017, doi:10.1080/03007760600670331.

¹⁰ Courtney Brown, *Politics in music: Music and Political Transformation from Beethoven to Hip-hop* (Atlanta: Farsight Press, 2008), 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

owners/capitalists against workers, he organized a labor activist group which he called the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.)¹² Among his talents was the ability to write labor songs with lyrics which spoke directly to the labor workers. Hill wrote a number of such songs which were eventually published as the “Little Red Songbook” in 1908.¹³ Songs included “The Preacher and the Slave,” “The Rebel Girl,” and “Workers of the World, Awaken!” all about the unification of workers against selfish owners.¹⁴

The most significant composer of these popular songs on social justice after Joe Hill was the well-known American artist, Woody Guthrie (1912-1967). Guthrie, who many believe established the precedent of activism among American musicians¹⁵, composed numerous songs about social injustice and equality. His songs include “1913 Massacre,” “Boomtown Bill,” “Outlaw Life,” “World War II,” and his most well-known piece, “This Land is Your Land.” Woodie Guthrie wrote over a thousand songs¹⁶ and had substantial influence on the next generation of composers interested in social justice. Beginning in the 1960’s, rock artists began writing protest songs about police brutality, government authority, corporate power, and women’s rights.¹⁷ Musicians writing on these social issues include Bruce Springsteen, Rage Against the Machine, KRS One, John Mellencamp, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Pink Floyd.¹⁸

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 114.

¹⁴ Ibid., 118-125.

¹⁵ Ian Peddie, *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 33.

¹⁶ Brown, 132.

¹⁷ Peddie, ed., 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3-6.

Simultaneously with the rock song protest movement were folk style protests. Also claiming Woodie Guthrie as the inspiration, folk artists composing works on social injustice include Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Paul Ochs, Judy Collins, Joan Baez, The Kingston Trio, The Byrd's, and Simon and Garfunkel.¹⁹ Initially in the 1960's these pieces were performed as anti-war protests in response to the multitude of conflicts throughout the 20th century, but starting in the 1970's women's liberation became the more prominent subject.²⁰ Popular songs over women's rights include "The Modern Union Maid," "Stand and Be Counted," "The Freedom Ladies," and "Papa."²¹ In 1976, many of these pieces were collected in a book titled, "All Our Lives: A Woman's Songbook."²²

These two separate styles of music began to meld together in the late 1970's through the 1990's into what became known as the "Singer-Songwriter" generation.²³ These singers, whose style became associated with country music, included artists such as John Prine in the 1970s, Mary Chapin Carpenter in the 1980's, and Iris Dement in the 1990's.²⁴ In 1988 artists Bruce Springsteen, Sting, Tracy Chapman, and Peter Gabriel toured as part of the still active, annual movement "Amnesty International Human Rights Now!" to raise awareness for human rights. Other notable artists include Billy Joel, who wrote "Goodnight Saigon" for Vietnam victims, Neal Diamond and his song "America," Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On?" and The Capital Steps who became famous for their political satire in the early 21st century.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17-18.

²⁰ Ibid., 19.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 20.

²³ Ibid., 23.

²⁴ Ibid.

The progression of social justice in American popular music over the past century has been a relatively steady stream. Within the last ten years, the heightened number of protest movements in the 21st century, along with the increased media outlets through technology for disseminating different social ideals, such as YouTube, iTunes, and Spotify, have further aided in the growth of nationwide awareness. Movements including #blacklivesmatter, protests of the Star-Spangled Banner in response to police brutality, #metoo, #nodapl, amongst several others, have encouraged artists to write music on issues aligned with these growing movements. Contemporary American artists including Lady Gaga, Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé are just a few examples of musicians from the past five years addressing social inequalities

Americans have been afforded an opportunity to freely speak their beliefs through a variety of means, which includes musical outlets. Musical outlets are a part of this history of free speech, first being utilized in the 19th century and since expanding through popular musicians through the decades. Musicians have employed this platform for labor disputes, peace during a time of war, and now to exploit several oppressed communities of the 21st century. As there is no deficiency of acts of oppression within the American society, it has been a natural progression for popular singers and songwriters to use their spotlight to bring these issues into focus.

CHAPTER 2

THEMES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN WESTERN CHORAL MUSIC

Social justice themes have been utilized throughout the history of classical music. Yet, up until the last thirty years, outside the rich heritage of African-American spirituals, there are few examples of themes of social justice in the classical music produced in the United States. There are examples of composers creating music based on their disagreements with authority in Europe as far back as William Byrd in the Renaissance.²⁵ An example includes Byrd's *Why Do I Use My Paper, Ink, and Pen*, written in 1588, which has a hidden message regarding his disagreements with authority.²⁶ At first glance the piece appears to pay homage to Christian martyrs; instead, it was composed as a lament on the execution of the Jesuit missionary Edmund Campion.²⁷ The difference in works such as Byrd's compared with social justice works of later periods is that Byrd wasn't necessarily writing for social change, but to state a dispute (and in disguise).

Beginning in the early 19th century, there's a notable tie between music for social justice and war. Following the Napoleon Wars, classical composers began to create music with less reservation about their intent for unity, and thus the genre expands. Many European composers used poems of joy and brotherhood in response to their feelings of betrayal after the illusion of a true republic disappeared.²⁸ There are over 40 surviving pieces written on Shiller's setting of *An die Freude* alone between 1790 and 1825.²⁹ Perhaps the most notable pre-twentieth century musical example of a plea for social change was set to this poem through Ludwig van

²⁵ Kerry Robin McCarthy, *Byrd* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 99.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Jan Swafford, *Beethoven: anguish and triumph: a biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Beethoven's ground-breaking Ninth Symphony. Within one of the final works of the famed composer's life, Beethoven uses the Shiller text with a clear intention to unify all people through the power of music.

The message in Beethoven's work is similar to those pleading for peace and understanding in today's society. The process of Beethoven combining an important message with a melody or motif is an idea with which Jake Runestad is clearly adapting in his 21st century works. The connection is made by Director of Choral Studies at University of California State Long Beach, Dr. Jonathan Talberg in an interview with the author:

When you think about a piece that does to an audience what "Let My Love be Heard" does, I think for me it starts with: (singing) *O Freunde nicht diese Töne!* Let us sing of brotherhood and love, right? So, Beethoven! It's a Romantic idea. It's a post-God over the millions the stars shine, there must be someone who loves us. It's not about Jesus. For me, there is a real big Beethoven tie in to this whole thing.³⁰

Although Runestad doesn't credit Beethoven for his inspiration, the parallels within his marriage of text and melody are riddled with similarities as will become apparent in a Chapter 5 of this document.

With the dawn of the Romantic era, composers expressed their passions for social change through musical mediums other than choral music. However, in the 20th century, with the resurgence of war and power struggles, the theme of social justice would resurface. From 1914-1918, the world went through a great time of loss and conflict with World War I followed by World War II (1939-1945) only twenty years later. The tragedies and time of conflict that came with the early 20th century clearly had an effect on classical composers reverting their musical focus back to searching for social change; initially beginning with music of peace and acceptance in response to the war. Below (Table 1) is a chronological account of classical choral

³⁰ Jonathan Talberg, interview by author, October 2017.

compositions on social justice that indicates the evolution of the genre. The table shows a notable exponential increase throughout the century up to the movement of the most recent choral composers of the early 21st century.

Table 1: 20th-21st Century Choral Works on Social Justice

Year of Composition	Composer	Title	Topic
1920	Gerald Finzi	Requiem da Camera	Futility of war
1922	Ralph Vaughan Williams	Symphony No. 3: A Pastoral Symphony	Peace
1936	Ralph Vaughan Williams	Dona Nobis Pacem	Peace/anti-destruction
1937	Darius Milhaud	Cantata de la Paix	Peace/acceptance
1941	Herbert Howells	O Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem	Peace
1941	Dmitri Shostakovich	Symphony No. 7	Anti-war
1943	Francis Poulenc	Figure Humaine	Freedom, acceptance, and victory over tyranny
1946	Marc Blitzstein	Symphony: The Airborne	Anti-war
1946	Arthur Honegger	Symphony No. 3: Symphonie Liturgique	Anti-war/desire for peace
1960	Krzysztof Penderecki	Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima	Anti-war/lamentation of the lost
1962	Benjamin Britten	War Requiem	Anti-war/peace amongst enemies
1966	Murray Schafer	Threnody	Anti-war
1968	Karel Husa	Music for Prague	Anti-war/loss
1976	Henryk Gorecki	Symphony No. 3: The Symphony of Sorrowful Songs	Anti war/loss
1983	Andrzej Panufnik	A Procession for Peace	Peace and cultural and political understanding
1989	John Adams	The Wound Dresser	Anti-war/peace
1989	John Burge	Mass for Prisoners of Conscience	Anti-War and Brutality
1998	Sean McLaughlin	Across the Bridge of Hope	Anti-war/peace
2000	Karl Jenkins	The Armed Man	Anti-war/hope for peace

(table continues)

Year of Composition	Composer	Title	Topic
2001	Jill Ann Siemans	Sempre Vicino: A Childs Prayer for Peace	Peace
2001	Allan Bevan	Peace	Peace
2002	William Jordan	City of Peace	Peace
2005	John Burge	Flanders Fields Reflections	Peace/understanding
2008	Martha Hill Duncan	War Memorial	Peace/anti-war
2008	David Lang	The Little Match Girl Passion	Child abuse
2009	Ted Herne	Privilege	Equality
2010	Michael Eglin	Barter	Peace
2011	Karl Jenkins	The Peacemakers	Cultural acceptance
2011	Kevin Puts	Silent Night	Anti-war/peace

The primary source of these compositions continued to be predominately through European composers; however, in 1989 an example of the anti-war and peace movement reached North America with American composer John Adams and Canadian composer John Burge. From this point forward the interest in choral music for social justice within the United States continued its expansion into the movement it has become today.

The New American Choral Generation

With the exponential increase in American choral compositions based upon social justice texts and issues, the topic has become worthy of serious research. As indicated by the number of pieces currently being written with this focus, the growing interest in addressing social justice concerns and humanism through choral music has reached an all-time level in America, and American composers have written works centering around these important social justice themes.

Examples of such works include Abbie Betinis' *Love is Love is Love is Love*,³¹ Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepherd*,³² Andrea Ramsey's *We Choose Love*,³³ and David Lang's *Make Peace*³⁴ who have made their social views known through their compositions. Other works include Joel Thompson's *Seven Last Words of the Unharmed*,³⁵ *When All is Done* by Seattle composer John Muehleisen,³⁶ and several compositions by Ted Herne including *Consent* and *From the Bench*.³⁷

In April 2017, choral musicians Abbie Betinis, Andrea Ramsey, Ahmed Fernando Anzaldúa, and Tesfa Wondemagegnehu launched the website, justicechoir.org, in an attempt to codify and add to the collection of choral pieces on social justice sprouting throughout the country. Their first publication on September, 24 2017, consisted of over forty entries and continues to expand.³⁸ The Justice Choir mission, "to further social and environmental movements by engaging communities to sing together," has aided the development of Justice Choir chapters throughout the country.³⁹ Outside of the flagship organization in Minneapolis, Minnesota, there are current community chapters in San Diego, California; Cedar Valley, Iowa;

³¹ Abbie Betinis., Abbie Betinis, composer, Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://www.abbiebetinis.com/>.

³² Craig Hella-Johnson, D.M.A., Craig Hella Johnson, accessed September 14, 2017, <http://www.craighellajohnson.com/>.

³³ Andrea Ramsey, "Andrea Ramsey," accessed September 14, 2017, <http://www.andream Ramsey.com/#portfolio>.

³⁴ David Lang, Red Poppy Music, January 08, 2014, accessed September 14, 2017, <http://davidlangmusic.com/>.

³⁵ Joel Thompson, "The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed| Joel Thompson," MusicSpoke, accessed September 14, 2017, <https://musicspoke.com/downloads/seven-last-words-unarmed/>.

³⁶ John Muehleisen, "When All is Done," John Muehleisen, October 22, 2016, accessed September 14, 2017, <http://johnmuehleisen.com/done/#more-571>.

³⁷ Ted Herne, Complete Works, accessed February 14, 2018, <http://www.tedhearne.com/complete-works/>.

³⁸ "Start Local, Stay Vocal," JUSTICE CHOIR, accessed September 30, 2017, <http://www.justicechoir.org/>.

³⁹ Ibid.

Indianapolis, Indiana; Detroit, Michigan; Raleigh, North Carolina; Ithaca New York; Townsend Washington; and in the Tri-Cities of Washington.⁴⁰

Not only has the supply of compositions greatly increased, but also the demand, as evidenced by the number of choral conductors programing music and entire concert programs with this theme. Within the past five years, outside of the Justice Choir circuit, choirs have been organized in Tucson, Arizona,⁴¹ Syracuse, New York,⁴² and Minneapolis, Minnesota⁴³ with the specific purpose of performing choral music for social justice. There are conductors of university choirs, community choruses, and of professional choirs who are now programing concerts specifically to promote social equality. In the summer of 2017, Dr. Joshua Habermann programmed a concert with the Santa Fe Desert Chorale titled *Liberté*, which Habermann believes was a moving and successful experience:

In Santa Fe, we do basically all themed concerts and I want the theme to be something that will reach a lot of different people of different political backgrounds. (To reach people) of different personal persuasions and social persuasions because I think we are too walled off now into camps. Preaching to the converted is not something that I'm particularly interested in doing. Setting up an echo chamber of your own social views, albeit satisfying, I don't find that interesting. But if you can draw a diverse crowd of people in by demonstrating through a concert the interconnectedness we share across social and political boundaries; I think that is more interesting.

Something like we did this summer in a program called *Liberté*, meaning liberty. It took its meaning from the final movement of Poulenc's *Figure Humaine*. That piece along with the William Byrd piece (*Why Do I Use My Paper Ink and Pen*), music from World War II written in resistance times, to music from the Baltic countries around the singing revolution when Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania broke off. We sang some music that was

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kate Selby, "Social Justice Choir Festival," St. Mark's Presbyterian Church | Tucson, AZ, February 09, 2017, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://stmarksaz.org/social-justice-choir-festival/>.

⁴² Karen Mihalyi et al., Syracuse Community Choir, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://syracusecommunitychoir.org/about/>.

⁴³ Amy Gort and Mark Bilyeu, "Calliope Women's Chorus," Calliope Women's Chorus, accessed April 17, 2017, <https://calliopewomenschorus.org/>.

sung in concentration camps and people who used music to survive that. Then we tied that to the African-American spirituals. We are going through a certain political movement right now that won't be forever, but I will say that (this music) resonated with people.⁴⁴

In the fall of 2017, choral conductors Dr. James Bass, Dr. Jerry McCoy, and Dr. Jonathan Talberg separately produced concerts themed on social justice to be performed within a month of one another without a tie or correlation. When asked about the importance of including social justice in his choral concerts, Talberg concluded with these thoughts:

We need this music. We just need it, we really do. It definitely affects the singer the most because they know it, but I also think it affects audiences because they can relate to “let my love be heard” more than they can to “Credo in unum Deum.” We are living in the craziest time in my life. I have been alive for almost fifty years and we have a man that will not openly denounce white supremacism in the white house, we have a guy who throws paper towels to a country where half of the country are without drinking water in the white house. We have a Republican party which refuses to stand up against things we have traditionally believed in, with Republican principles, like treating people with respect and dignity. We have people saying “if you don't want to bake a cake for a gay person you don't have to bake a cake for a gay person.” We just live in crazy times and I just think it is important to bring that to people's attention.⁴⁵

Talberg's fall concert titled, “We Can Mend the Sky: Choral Music for Social Justice” included works by composers such as Mari Esabel Valverde (b.1987), Joshua Rist (b. 1988), Peter Louis Van Dijk (b.1953), Sydney Guillaume (b.1982), Craig Hella Johnson (b. 1962), and Jake Runestad (b.1986). Dr. Jerry McCoy, Past President of the American Choral Directors Association and conductor of the Fort Worth Chorale, has taken this movement to a grander level by dedicating the entire season of the Texas ensemble to social justice and equality. It is McCoy's hope in his season entitled, “Celebrating All of US,” that Americans will reflect on the need for unity and cross-cultural hopes and expectations.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Joshua Habermann, interview by author, November 2017.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Talberg, interview by author, October 2017.

⁴⁶ Jerry McCoy, Personal Email, December 2017.

In addition to exclusively programming compositions, conductors of professional, collegiate, and community choirs are commissioning pieces that deliberately bring social issues into social consciousness. Examples include a consortium of Ohio collegiate choirs commissioning a work titled *Please Stay* (Runestad 2016)⁴⁷ about depression and suicide awareness, Patrick Quigley and Miami based professional choir, Seraphic Fire, commissioning a piece regarding the inclusivity of love for all human beings called *The Hope of Loving* (Runestad 2015)⁴⁸, Dr. Kym Scott commissioning a piece of community inclusivity, *Tchaka* (Guillaume 2016)⁴⁹ for the West Virginia All-State Choir, and Dr. James Bass commissioning a piece with The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay about the immigrant experience and overcoming oppression, *We Can Mend the Sky* (Runestad 2014)⁵⁰. Bass shares his views on the movement and his thoughts behind why he is proud of his choice to program his choral concerts with a social justice theme in a conversation with the author:

As an art form, especially with choral music, we have the added benefit of text. Not just text sung in a solo way, like you have for opera, but we have it as corporate unity. There are 40 people, or 20 people, singing these texts. So, you see and hear people in a corporate environment conveying that message. When the choir sings these words, it becomes so much more powerful than just one person doing it. It's like marching together except in this case we are actually doing it through an art form. This makes it very elevated to me in the choral world that we have the opportunity to give voice to some of these causes. Every person, every conductor, every programmer, might feel differently about certain causes, but at least the base ideas of love and compassion are something that we all share, and choral music allows us to share it publicly through an art idiom to the public. It's a really beautiful mirror.⁵¹

The inherent visceral response drawn from music and its ability to have a direct effect on

⁴⁷ Jake Runestad, "Jake Runestad - Composer & Conductor." Accessed November 7, 2016. <http://jakerunestad.com>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Sydney Guillaume, "Sydney Guillaume – Composer." Accessed December 30, 2017

⁵⁰ Jake Runestad, "Jake Runestad - Composer & Conductor." Accessed November 7, 2016. <http://jakerunestad.com>.

⁵¹ James Bass, personal conversation, March 2018.

the human spirit has in large part been what has made its partnership successful and natural. Choral music has always had the ability to inspire, but with the growth in the number of these compositions, and the interest of conductors programming them, it has reached an overwhelming level. As a leader and advocate of this surge, composer Jake Runestad reflects on the evolution stating, “The musical response to these compositions, alongside the built-in community and all-encompassed inclusivity of those who are a part of an ensemble, has made choral music an ideal musical outlet for these compositions today.”⁵² This inclusive environment, alongside Runestad’s melodic compositional style has been a strong reason for his increased popularity and the reason for his importance as a composer.

⁵² Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

CHAPTER 3

JAKE RUNESTAD BIOGRAPHY

Jake Runestad (b.1986) was born in Rockford, Illinois to two selfless, loving parents and was raised in a richly musical environment.⁵³ According to Runestad, his mother was active in musical theatre, his father a singer and guitar player, his grandfather a singer in a big band, a pianist grandmother, and a great uncle who is a retired band director. Singing in the car and harmonizing with one another was not uncommon in the Runestad family. While at home, music ranging from Wilson Phillips, James Taylor, Billy Joel, and the Beatles was always playing. Runestad's parents were very active in their local church choir where Runestad would accompany them on Sundays and for weekly rehearsals. Runestad's childhood was totally immersed in music.⁵⁴

Being constantly surrounded by music, it comes as no surprise that Runestad became interested in composition at a very young age. In a recent interview, Runestad looks back on his childhood:

When I was younger, probably around four or five, I was really interested in sound. We had a piano at home and I would go to the piano and plunk out melodies that I heard. So, that became almost like a science for me. It was fascinating to do that. That then turned into figuring out little melodies, then adding harmony and accompaniment, and then I started creating my own little melodies and improvising and I guess that is when the composer was born.⁵⁵

Although his parents encouraged his musical instruction and professional guidance, Runestad admittedly hated the individual practice that went along with the private lessons.⁵⁶ He

⁵³ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

began taking piano lessons at age five, but didn't find agreement with the teaching methods, refused to follow instruction, and eventually stopped attending. It was a few years later, when in third grade, that Runestad found an instructor who was able to connect with him through a different musical approach. This teacher encouraged him to improvise and explore music alongside his regimented practice, and it was the improvisation that truly excited Runestad about the possibilities of music. After elementary school, Runestad began to play saxophone as a part of his middle school band, and his passion for instrumental music began to flourish into high school through the inspiration of his band director, Rick Durango.⁵⁷

Runestad shared that Durango encouraged him to explore his musical interests outside of his primary instrument promoting Runestad to arrange pre-written musical compositions. As a senior in high school, Runestad was allowed to come into the band room before school and arrange music on the school's notation program. Runestad came in almost every morning and began to develop an elementary sense of composition through trial and error. Through the guidance of Mr. Durango, Runestad reached the culmination of his high school experimentation with his arrangement of the theme from "Remember the Titans" for his concert band. The thrill of the arrangement instantly excited Runestad to take the next step and compose something of his own.⁵⁸ Runestad's first original composition, also for his high school band, was called "A Viking Symphony. He details his perspectives on the piece below:

I think what was most exciting for me was when I had the premier of this piece. I was in high school, Guilford High School in Rockford, and our mascot was The Vikings. So, my piece of course, was called "A Viking Symphony." And it was at that moment that the piece was premiered and I heard it. It was the first time that other people had performed

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

something I had written. So, that was a major force in inspiring me to notate these kinds of things for ensembles.⁵⁹

Upon high school graduation, Runestad went on to Eastern Illinois University with the intent of studying music.⁶⁰ According to Runestad, despite feeling impressed with the talent level and instruction of the program, he knew it was not the environment for him and left after a year. Runestad transferred to Winona State University in Winona, Minnesota where he began his new journey with a focus on instrumental music education. He hoped to inspire the world through concert band music. He was “going to be a high school band director.” and he was “going to be like Mr. Holland’s Opus!”⁶¹

In his first year at WSU, Runestad joining choir for the first time.⁶² He recalls the experience singing with his family when he accompanied his parents to church choir rehearsals as a child, as well as in the children’s choir at his church, but this was his first experience in a more advanced choir with a community of his peers. Runestad was “conned into joining the group”⁶³ at the university because of his ability to read music as a bass, but he was instantly thankful for the lure. “I fell in love! I loved it,⁶⁴” Runestad exclaimed in a recent interview.⁶⁵ This experience would lead to Runestad joining a pop a cappella group, immersing himself in a lot of vocal music, and starting and conducting his own vocal ensemble. It was through this vocal

⁵⁹ Jakerunestad.com, accessed September 1, 2017, <http://jakerunestad.com/living-with-a-genius-podcast/>.

⁶⁰ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ryan Guth, "A much-needed composer's perspective, with Jake Runestad," Ryan Guth: Step up to the Podium with Purpose, October 05, 2016, accessed November 05, 2016, <http://ryanguth.com/much-needed-composers-perspective-jake-runestad/>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

ensemble where two of his first notable choral compositions, *I Will Lift Mine Eyes* and *Nyon*, *Nyon* were written and first performed.⁶⁶

In the spring of 2008, the residency of acclaimed composer Libby Larsen at Winona State University would aid in changing the path of Runestad's life. Noticing Runestad's compositional talent, he recollects being introduced to Larsen through the university orchestral conductor, and Larsen taking the time to listen to some of what Runestad had composed. Larsen asked Runestad questions about his method of composition and shared compositional techniques Runestad had never before considered. Realizing his ability and need for compositional direction, Larsen implored Runestad to drive up to Minneapolis periodically for private instruction with her at her home. Runestad believes it was Larsen who encouraged him to truly find his compositional voice as he references below:

I think it was Libby who really got me to think about the “why” of my music. Asking questions like, “why is this here?” or “why do we develop this and how do we develop this?” “How does the music correspond to the text?” So even though it didn't seem like we spent that long together, they were profound experiences for me. I lingered on every word she said. She is one of the most brilliant people I have every met in my life. The way that she processes the world, the way that she thinks about art and thinks about culture and the way she thinks about creation and creativity is just unbelievable. I come away from every conversation having been changed in some way.

Larsen used her platform as a full-time composer and belief in Runestad to encourage him to pursue a graduate degree in music composition after the completion of his undergraduate work.⁶⁷ According to Runestad, composing was something he did primarily for enjoyment up to this point, so he felt hesitant about where to apply and how to focus his research. Thankfully, Runestad was able to lean on Larsen who guided the young composer through the process. After

⁶⁶ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

completing his undergraduate degree in instrumental music education at Winona State, Runestad started graduate school at the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University, where he studied composition with Pulitzer Prize winning composer, Kevin Puts.⁶⁸

Runestad shares that graduate school gave him the opportunity to put all of his focus on composition for the first time. He was in weekly composition lessons, taking counterpoint classes, orchestration classes, and allowing himself to discover the music and the arrangement of music in a new way. With an instrumental music education background, he felt comfortable composing for instruments, and always had a creative mind for composition, but his focused work in compositional technique during graduate school solidified the composer he has become today.⁶⁹ Runestad graduated with his Masters of Music in Composition in 2011 and has since found his way into prominence in the choral community.

Runestad has since been regarded as “stirring and uplifting” by the Miami Herald⁷⁰ and “highly imaginative” by the Baltimore Sun.⁷¹ He was awarded the 2016 Morton Gould Young Composer award by the ASCAP Foundation, and received the McKnight Fellowship in 2017.⁷² He has received commissions by several leading ensembles and organizations including the Washington National Opera, the Netherlands Radio Choir, the Louisiana Philharmonic

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ David Fleshler, "Seraphic Fire Winning Mixes Past and Present with Christmas Program", last modified 2017, accessed April 15, 2017, <http://southfloridaclassicalreview.com/2012/12/seraphic-fire-winningly-mixes-past-and-present-with-christmas-program/>.

⁷¹ Tim Smith, Weekend Review: Pro Musica Rara, conductor Lee Mills, composer Jake Runestad. http://www.baltimoresun.com/bs-mtblog-2011-11-weekend_review_pro_musicia_rar-story.html, Accessed March 1, 2017

⁷² Jake Runestad, "Jake Runestad - Composer & Conductor." Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://jakerunestad.com>.

Orchestra, the Virginia Arts Festival, the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, Seraphic Fire, Conspirare, The Dallas Symphony Chorus, The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay, and several well-respected collegiate and community ensembles.⁷³

Runestad is now in high demand for clinics and commissions, and he is able to make a living as a full-time composer without academic affiliation.⁷⁴ In 2017-2018, Runestad is traveling to work with various choirs throughout many areas including Minnesota, Montana, Colorado, Wisconsin, Indiana, Texas, Oregon, Washington, Michigan, Illinois, California, and a tour through several cities in Germany. Runestad will also be spending a portion of his 2018 summer premiering a commission for a collaboration with Craig Hella Johnson, in Sydney, Australia. He currently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota and has commissions, clinics, and residencies lined up through the next three years.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

CHAPTER 4

THEMES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN RUNESTAD'S MUSIC

With the continuing increase in ideological division in America, Runestad seeks to be a champion of social justice with his compositional output.⁷⁵ The importance of social justice and equality was instilled in Runestad during his childhood.⁷⁶ The manner with which his parents live, showing their generosity towards others, continues to keep him mindful of equality in all his decisions and practices. Runestad continues with more insight below:

My parents wanted us to have diverse experiences in life and to engage with diverse people. A strong part of their background is a sense of service to others. So, they were always volunteering in several different ways. My father was also very involved in the outdoors and he studied environmental education, so certainly a part of my love for nature comes from him.⁷⁷

After Runestad's graduation from the Peabody Conservatory, he began to use his platform as a composer to write on important and relevant issues in American society today. With the nationwide recognition in 2013 of his choral/orchestral work, *Dreams of the Fallen*, which emphasizes the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Runestad shifted his overall compositional focus to shed light on the larger social issues plaguing society. From this composition forward, over 85% of his compositions incorporate social justice or a call for all people to help improve the lives of one another in the multi-layered society of the United States (Table 2). Runestad's compositions create a setting which causes the performer and audience to consider what may go overlooked, often bringing a story of an oppressed individual or culture to

⁷⁵ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the foreground. Runestad believes it is his duty as a composer to share these often-disregarded social concerns.⁷⁸

Table 2: Jake Runestad Pieces with a Social Justice or Humanism theme

Year	Pieces with Social Justice or Humanist Ideals	Percentage of Output
2011	<i>N/A</i>	0%
2012	<i>N/A</i>	0%
2013	<i>Dreams of the Fallen; Fear Not Dear Friend; Peace Flows Into Me</i>	60%
2014	<i>Let My Love Be Heard; The Peace of Wild Things; Spirited Light; Why the Caged Bird Sings; Sing, Wearing the Sky; We Can Mend the Sky</i>	75%
2015	<i>And So, I Go On; Come to the Woods; The Hope of Loving; Good Night, My Love</i>	80%
2016	<i>Climb; Live the Questions; One Flock; Please Stay; Reflections; Under this Tree; Waves</i>	88%
2017	<i>Into the Light; Proud Music of the Storm; Rise Up; Winter Stars</i>	100%

*All information taken from Jakerunestad.com

Runestad has used his compositions to create music that brings light to these important issues. He has composed choral works for the LBGQT community, works regarding suicide prevention, the empowerment of women and women’s rights, African-American equality, the acceptance of immigrants and foreign cultures in the United States, and environmental awareness.⁷⁹ Runestad also has choral works encouraging human beings to face the challenges and fears of life, and several works on the universality of acceptance and love amongst all people.⁸⁰ Runestad believes his compositions of love can aid to his view that love is respecting someone or something while showing compassion towards another human being or space. He

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Jake Runestad, “Jake Runestad – composer & conductor,” accessed October 14, 2016

⁸⁰ Ibid.

believes it is allowing someone to feel appreciated and a part of something. This is a concept with which Runestad strongly feels is needed in the current American climate.⁸¹

Runestad is one of the first American choral composers to compose almost exclusively on issues of equality and social awareness. Runestad attributes his evolution in style from his previous compositions largely to no longer having the regulation of academia:

(Dreams of the Fallen) was my first major commission. I think there was a confidence that was built with that. As a student one is searching, one is exploring, one is experimenting, one is trying to figure out what this all means in the context of an academic situation because you're graded on it, instead of trying to figure out where the humanity is in it. Then out of school there is no one there to tell you that this is right or wrong. So, I think that piece built a lot of confidence in me and I think it felt like a really good direction. Especially after seeing the impact it had on people. I think that helped me to really become more interested in works that can do that; that can speak to these social things and that can touch people in a way like that. To bring a topic into the forefront of people's minds so that they think about it, so that they struggle with it.⁸²

The focus of Runestad's choral pieces' range from those which directly relate to a specific social justice issue, like suicide prevention or cultural awareness, to others which are more indirect thematically with an all-encompassed humanistic meaning or significance. Although Runestad is always meticulous with where he places his musical choices in relation to the text, at times he feels it is important to leave room for the performer/listener to further explore the text, and its meaning, on an individual level.⁸³ Runestad spoke of his compositional approach and reasons for some of his textual choices in an interview with the author:

Some of my compositions are very intentional to a specific social justice issue, and then others that can certainly be taken that way, but maybe less dramatically. For example, *Come to the Woods* isn't necessarily about social justice exactly, although it can certainly be taken that way. It is the story of a guy who climbed a tree in a storm and what a beautiful metaphor that can be for how we should live our lives. When difficulties come that we don't hide and shy away from them, but we approach them full on, and live into them. How much better our lives can be if we do that.

⁸¹ Jake Runestad, interview by the author, October 2017.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

However, in comparing that to a piece like “Please Stay,” “We Can Mend the Sky,” or “Dreams of the Fallen,” which are very much about social justice issues more directly, (They are) trying to get people to think about things in a different way, or to take action, or to show compassion. So, I think humanistic is a good word. My music isn’t necessarily about mathematical ideas, it’s not necessarily about equations, for me it’s truly about human experiences. How humans interact with each other, how humans interact the natural world, how humans interact with the divine[sic]. I think for me that is my focus, authentic human experiences and emotions.⁸⁴

One of Runestad’s most recent choral commissions, *Into the Light* (2017), gives an example of how he uses his stance on social justice to shape his compositions. For this piece, Runestad was commissioned to write a work for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Instead of being drawn towards Protestantism and/or the religious affiliation tied to the Reformation, Runestad thought of what needs to be changed, or reformed, in our society today.⁸⁵ In preparing for this composition, Runestad asked himself questions including: What are the major issues plaguing our world and what is their cause? Who has addressed these issues through their work and their words? How can these issues be addressed through a musical work for chorus and orchestra in a meaningful way?⁸⁶ As opposed to re-living the story of Martin Luther or discussing the history and actions of the 16th century within their own context, Runestad instead chose to use the texts of influential historical figures to challenge how people of the 21st century should consider reforming their thoughts to become better humans in today’s climate.⁸⁷

Thematic Material in Runestad’s Music

In the section that follows, I have endeavored to group into categories the various textual

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Jake Runestad, “Jake Runestad – composer & conductor,” accessed January, 2017.

⁸⁷ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

themes that Runestad has used in his works, in order to bring clarity and synthesis to the themes. Runestad has eight different categories where he uses a secular humanist or social justice theme. The categories are listed below with detail regarding the classifications and works included in each group.

Theme 1: Bringing Awareness to a Specific Issue

Runestad's *Dreams of the Fallen*, *Please Stay*, and *We Can Mend the Sky* fit into the category of those pieces where Runestad has a very specific social issue he is highlighting. Runestad's first commission, *Dreams of the Fallen*, speaks of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, *Please Stay* features issues of depression and suicide, and *We Can Mend the Sky* uses text of a Somali child to convey the story of the immigrant experience where one has been forced out of their country because of war, but is still hoping for peace and love. There are some pieces in Runestad's catalog that require some depth and continued research into the text to fully understand the motive, but the choral works using this theme are very easy to understand the oppressed group with which Runestad is trying to help.

Theme 2: Racial and Social Equality

Racial and social divides within the United States are difficult to ignore. With these divides it should come as no surprise that Runestad has addressed these issues in his compositions. Runestad has two pieces using the powerful text of Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and *Good Night, My Love*, which bring awareness to oppression in the African-American community. He also wrote a cantata entitled *One Flock* using the words of Todd Boss regarding a hope for one equal humanity. *One Flock* tells the story of a community

besieged by a wildfire and the choir is to enact much of the story by using the entire performance space. The piece begins with an explosion of birds rushing from the fire and ends leaving the audience with the text, “maybe we are like the birds all over the war-torn world, one flock of humanity, one flock. One.”

Theme 3: Being an Advocate for Others

In a world of inequality, sometimes the most important attribute one can possess is that of being an advocate for another disenfranchised group. In Runestad’s pieces *Fear Not, Dear Friend*, and *Spirited Light*, he addresses two different situations where someone is spiritually broken. *Spirited Light* uses a translation of Hildegard von Bingen’s poem, *O gloriosissimi lux vivens*, which uses vivid imagery focusing on an angel with crooked wings. Runestad uses this careworn angel to represent a struggle in humanity. *Fear Not, Dear Friend* uses the poetry of 19th century Scottish poet, Robert Louis Stevenson to portray a selfless love for another that is so strong they would rather die than see them in pain. Although many may not think they possess the needed riches to support an oppressed society, through these works Runestad seeks to address the understanding that neither fame nor money is a requirement of being a good human being to another.

Theme 4: Self-Introspection and Self-Improvement

It is clear when looking at the choral works of Jake Runestad that he feels it is important to look inward when considering the inequalities in the world. Works including *Climb, Come to the Woods, Reflections, Live the Questions*, and *Into the Light* all discuss the different ways humans should look to themselves before pointing fingers at others. *Come to the Woods* uses the

image of a man climbing a tree in a storm despite the struggle that may lay before him. Runestad uses this image as a metaphor of how one may consider to go about his/her life. *Reflections* uses text of Henry David Thoreau from Thoreau's time of introspection at Walden Pond, and Runestad's piece *Into the Light* delves into unnecessary fears of xenophobia, homophobia, and racism that plague the United States. All of these works consider how self-introspection and improvement can aid to one moving beyond these troubling issues.

Theme 5: The Importance of Love and Compassion for All

The idea of love and compassion for all is something that encapsulates Runestad's overarching hope for society. In an interview with the author, Runestad said: "I really think that I feel that love is at the core of who we are and what we do as humans. It is our purpose in the world."⁸⁸ Runestad's works *The Hope of Loving* and *Let My Love be Heard* speak to this vision of the desire of a world filled with love amongst much of the existing darkness. *The Hope of Loving* uses poetry from several mystic poets including Rabia, Hafiz, and St. John of the Cross with morsels of different aspects of love, and *Let My Love be Heard* uses the text of Alfred Noyes to incorporate this vision. Runestad's *And So, I Go On*, although more specifically about loss, shares the story of a homosexual man overcoming the loss of his partner instilling an idea of the acceptance of all loving relationships. Above all else, Runestad believes and advocates for a world filled with love and compassion, and these goals are referenced in these works.

Theme 6: Women's Rights and Self-Worth

Although the women's chorus is the choral ensemble with which Runestad has the least

⁸⁸ Jake Runestad, interview by the author, October 2017.

amount of output, Runestad has used two of his works as a platform for women's equality. *Sing, Wearing the Sky* uses a poem from a 14th century Sufi-mystic writer to speak of self-worth and beauty. The poet, Lalla, uses the metaphor of feeling free or naked to exemplify the beauty of empowerment with her text, "My teacher told me, live in the soul. When that was so, I began to go naked and dance." *Rise Up* uses text of a powerful voice against women's suffrage of the 19th century, Susan B. Anthony, in an effort to provide a source of empowerment for women. Runestad incorporates words of Anthony including the thought-provoking line, "pray every second of your life, not on your knees but with your work." While these are the only two pieces in Runestad's current catalog written specifically for soprano and alto voices, he chose to use these two commissions for ensembles of predominantly women to sing words of influential women throughout history.

Theme 7: Experiencing Internal Peace

As a lover of nature and an advocate for environmental awareness, Runestad personally finds peace being in nature.⁸⁹ With this solace, relating peace with the outdoors in his choral works is an obvious parallel. He makes use of the words of well-known poets Sara Teasdale and Wendell Berry in *The Peace of the Wild Things* and *Peace Flows into Me* respectively, who both use nature as imagery for finding peace. Berry's eloquently written text associates finding peace amongst the simplicity of nature despite the despair in the world. He then ends the poem with the text, "For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free." Teasdale, in a similar manner, begins her poem with, "Peace flows into me as a tide to the pool by the shore" linking peace with nature.

⁸⁹ Jake Runestad, interview by the author, October 2017.

In Runestad's work *Under this Tree*, he chose the text of a poet from St. Paul, Minnesota who writes of a specific tree standing outside of a Unitarian church in the city. The lyricist, Brian Newhouse, believes the tree symbolizes an expression of gratitude for the members who have found their way to this liberal congregation and experienced a refuge amongst the challenges of life.⁹⁰ Newhouse ends his poem with the text, "Under this tree...you are loved as you are. Under this tree...There is no veil. Under this tree...You are your own. Under this tree...Here is your home." Newhouse speaks of his collaboration with Runestad by saying, "What a joy to create this piece with Jake Runestad who implicitly understands the wordless power of nature to heal."⁹¹

Theme 8: Unity through Music

One could make the argument that all choral pieces can represent the unification of human beings through music due to the communal nature of choral singing. In *Proud Music of the Storm*, however, Runestad makes the joy of communal singing his purposed intention by use of the poetry of Walt Whitman. For this work, Runestad was commissioned to write a piece honoring the 40th anniversary of the Dallas Symphony Chorus.⁹² In an ensemble consisting of predominantly volunteers, musicians come together exclusively because of their love of music despite their potential differing social backgrounds or political beliefs. Within this work, Runestad clearly kept these parameters in mind. The Whitman text explores the different sounds that make up our world, including the roar of a river, waves of the ocean hitting the shore, and a lullaby from a mother's voice. These sounds, with which most can associate, make the text an

⁹⁰ Jake Runestad, "Jake Runestad – composer & conductor," accessed January, 2017.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

ideal match for this celebration of communal singing and displaying how music can unify humanity.

Runestad's choral music is unique with his intentional hope to make a difference in how human beings, with differing beliefs and backgrounds, can view each other in a peaceful, loving, and respectful manner. He combines what is socially important to him with his talent in composition to create music for the change he wishes to see in the world. "It is my belief that I need to illuminate something through music or to create meaning," Runestad says, "and to somehow, through that, make the world a better place."⁹³ Runestad may never have experienced all that he writes about directly, but through his compassion and connection he truly believes in opening eyes to situations of others that may otherwise go overlooked. This sympathy is apparent in the way in which he shapes his choral compositions.

⁹³ Ryan Guth, "A much-needed composer's perspective, with Jake Runestad," Ryan Guth: Step up to the Podium with Purpose, October 05, 2016, accessed November 05, 2016, <http://ryanguth.com/much-needed-composers-perspective-jake-runestad/>.

CHAPTER 5

RUNESTAD'S PROCESS OF COMPOSITION

Jake Runestad's self-identification as an extroverted introvert greatly influences his compositional process. He is someone who needs time alone to think, write, and be introspective, but at the same time thrives on interaction with humanity, culture, and life experiences. Runestad feels he needs both elements in order to fully grasp an understanding of the human experience to provide a successful and effective choral composition.⁹⁴

According to Runestad, his compositional process always begins with the text before considering any musical thought or idea.⁹⁵ Runestad collects writings from a variety of sources including journal entries or poems which he believes will most adequately tell the story of someone, a group of people, or a space which he deems can use his art as a method of fostering compassion towards these oppressed groups. He goes through several different texts on his journey to find exactly what he is looking for, and will create his own libretto out of the text that speaks most to the issue he is wanting to bring forward.⁹⁶

Historically there have been several composers who have chosen to prioritize text over music, but Runestad's selection of stories and situations with which he isn't always able to directly empathize make his compositions unique. Runestad chooses to not limit himself to those subjects or situations to which he can fully relate on an experiential level, but instead seeks to address various issues of justice regardless of his own personal journey. In addition, Runestad is more interested in utilizing texts from a variety of sources that express universal themes versus

⁹⁴ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

overtly religious texts. Though many composers in the choral canon utilize liturgical or biblical texts, Runestad gravitates toward words encompassing the entire human experience.⁹⁷

In order to deliver his desired message for social change, Runestad cautiously avoids comfortable clichés or inaccuracies which could trivialize his composition and the movement. Writing on these issues then begs the initial question as to how Runestad feels comfortable composing a story of someone else’s struggle. He speaks to this in detail, while discussing “We Can Mend the Sky,” in an interview with the author below:

I think that the important words here are compassion and connection. I don’t want anyone to think that I have experienced these things, but I do work really, really hard in researching and trying to understand what people have experienced. Then I also will draw from experiences of my own life that maybe would be my version of it. If we think about displacement for example; How does it feel to arrive somewhere new and not know anyone? To not know the culture and try to make sense of it?

I did my student teaching in Peru. When I got there, there was pretty much nothing in place. I was dropped into this new culture, I didn’t really know anybody, I didn’t have a place to stay yet, and I’d walk into a room and was the tallest and whitest person and I’d have everyone look at me. So, it’s not fleeing a war-torn nation, and I don’t want anyone to think that I’m trying to say it is, but I have experienced displacement and jarring culture shock and things like that. So, I try to draw from those experiences to inform my interpretation.

My goal is not to try to make people say “this is what the experience is like,” but instead to say, Hey! Let’s look at this person’s story and think about it. I’m not trying to say this is exactly what it’s like to be an immigrant from an East African nation, but what I am trying to say is, Hey! This is a fellow human and this is an issue. This is something that is happening in our world so let’s think about it. Let’s try to imagine what this experience is like so that maybe we can show compassion to someone else that we meet along the way.⁹⁸

To most accurately share the stories of others from a distressed background foreign to him, Runestad forms relationships with poets who are well read on specific subjects, as well as those suffering through the trials within the oppressed cultures and social groups. Runestad’s

⁹⁷ Jake Runestad, Personal Email, March 2018.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

process of identifying with oppressed groups is exemplified by his assiduousness for his largest work to date, *Dreams of the Fallen*.⁹⁹ After careful study and research on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Runestad was referred by well-known poet Todd Boss to the poetry of Iraqi war veteran Brian Turner. Turner, who has been open about his trauma in coming back from war, is a distinguished author who has published several collections, and is an active speaker throughout the country.¹⁰⁰

Further examples include the text Runestad chose for *We Can Mend the Sky*. In this choral piece, regarding cultural acceptance and understanding, Runestad used the poetry of a child refugee from Somalia. The selected poem (Table 4) was one of several obtained by Runestad as a part of an middle school poetry contest of immigrants now living in Minneapolis.¹⁰¹ For the composition *Please Stay* (Table 3), facing issues of depression and suicide, Runestad utilizes tweets from #Ikeptliving, citing reasons people considering suicide chose to keep living.¹⁰² In a further example, Runestad directly speaks of his process in selecting the text for his cantata *The Hope of Loving*, and how he believes love and understand is lacking throughout society.

The Hope of Loving takes texts from several different mystic poets. The appeal of this comes from the immediacy of the text, which is perfect to be set to music. It is simple, but has colorful language that is complex. When you hear it, it makes sense immediately because it has self-contained morsels that are perfect for musical settings. The whole piece is about love and the importance of love in all cases of life. Something as simple as, when you walk down the street why don't you smile at the person you pass, to two people in a relationship showing love to each other. One of the opening lines is, "I know about

⁹⁹ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Brian Turner, [Brianturner.org](http://www.brianturner.org/), accessed September 16, 2017, <http://www.brianturner.org/>.

¹⁰¹ Jake Runestad, "Jake Runestad - composer & conductor," accessed October 14, 2016.

¹⁰² Ibid.

love the way the fields know about light.” To me this is kind of a direct response to everything going on in the world.¹⁰³

After the lengthy process of selecting an effective text, Runestad will wrestle with the words for several weeks, and sometimes months, singing around his home trying to find a melody that he believes is the best representation of text and the story.¹⁰⁴ Dr. Jonathan Talberg believes Runestad’s ability to write a memorable melody that pairs well with the text is one of his greatest talents as a composer as he explained in an interview with the author:

[Runestad] writes beautiful melodies. He’s a melodist in an age where melody has been lost. Composers sit at pianos and write nice chords that they like the way they sound, but they don’t take the time to walk around their house to sing a line like Hugo Wolf did, and Brahms did, and Mozart did, or Rossini did who was famous for whistling around the village. Jake Runestad sings all the time and usually he is singing his music. If you compare that to any other composer you like right now, can you sing a melody from their piece? Not that it isn’t there, but it isn’t something that you walk out of a place going, “oh, I get it.” For me it is a bit of the culmination of post-tonal, second coming of Romanticism in American choral music.¹⁰⁵

Runestad believes that creating this melody is a crucial step for his compositional creation.¹⁰⁶ The melody is what becomes the focus of the entire composition and what he believes is the basis for understanding the text. The melody is where Runestad believes his music must begin before anything else is possible. He takes great care to ensure he is giving the poet the best musical representation as he alludes to below:

I really try to let any ego disappear when I’m writing. So, my context for that is removing my own ego from the text and allowing the text to dictate what the music is. Because really, as a composer who is writing vocal music my job is to illuminate that text with the addition of music. It’s not to have the music and maybe use the text as a vehicle for it or to force my music upon the text. It’s to make a statement using the text and illuminating

¹⁰³ Jakerunestad.com, accessed September 1, 2017, <http://jakerunestad.com/living-with-a-genius-podcast/>.

¹⁰⁴ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Talberg, interview by author, October 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

it through the addition of music.¹⁰⁷

Once he has established a marriage between the melody and the text, the next step for Runestad is realizing how that relationship fits into what he calls the “sound world.”¹⁰⁸ With this idea of the sound world, Runestad considers what types of sounds and overall aural image fit well with the story he is sharing. Runestad’s musical background as a performer in both classical and jazz play a part in how he compositionally chooses to expand the melody into this sound world. Using a typical jazz construction as his template, Runestad believes there must be an important theme, but then variations of the theme, and a memorable chorus in every work he creates. Runestad also finds his method similar to the structure of the compositional approach used by J.S. Bach. Runestad describes his outlook on composition and how this methodology may be different than other choral compositions being written today:

I think [my compositional process] is an important process that not a lot of choral composers are doing. Right now, we have many people writing, which is awesome and I love that, but people will usually sit down and write what they can play at the piano and usually do it in real time from beginning to end. When musical structure, I think, should be created by foundational content. Like Bach did with the inventions. We have a theme. Then he figured out how to harmonize the theme, and how to introduce the theme, how to develop the theme. So, I stick to these basic building blocks. Like if you’re building a house you don’t just go, “Okay! Let’s start building!” First, you have to imagine, and then you have to create the blueprint, and with the blueprint there are practical elements, but there are also creative elements. Then you begin to put everything together.

For example, let’s talk about *Let My Love be Heard*. I found that melody [Example 1] and then I harmonized it. Just a very basic version of the harmony. Then I figured out how I want it to progress. So, some sort of introduction and then a drone and basic skeletal harmony with “ooh” with the tenors on the melody[sic]. Then we state it full with everyone on the chorus [Example 2]. Then we move on to the angels and the soaring with the triplets. I figured out the introduction later because it’s just outlining of the very, very, basic structure of the harmony, which is the minor 6 to the 4 major 7 chord. I discovered this while I was harmonizing the melody and then once I figured that out, I put that at the beginning to introduce the material.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Example 1: Let My Love be Heard Original Melody

9

S. *p*
Co.

A.

T. *p*
An-gels... where you soar... up to God's own light... take my own lost bird... on your hearts to-night, and as

B.

Pno.

9

Example 2: Let My Love be Heard Expansion of the melody

13

S. *poco rit.* *a tempo* *pp*
and sings, love.

A. *pp*
and sings, love.

T. *p* *mp*
grief once more... mounts to heav-en and sings, let my love be heard.

B. *p* *mp*
Co. and sings, let my love be heard.

Pno. *poco rit.* *a tempo*

13

18

S. *mp* *mp*
An-gels... where you soar... up to God's own light... take my own lost bird... on your hearts to-night, and as

A. *mp* *mp*
An-gels soar to God's own light... take my own lost bird... hearts to - night,

T. *mp* *mp*
An-gels soar to God's own light... take my own lost bird... hearts to - night,

B. *mp* *mp*
An-gels soar to God's own light... take my own lost bird hearts to - night,

Pno.

18

As Runestad continues through his melodic expansion, he creates a programmatic narrative of the story with which the listeners and performers are able to trace throughout the composition. In an interview with the author, Runestad explains this importance of character and compositional development.

When I'm composing, I don't always know how (the listener or performer) may be affected, but I do always think about them. I always really think about what kind of journey do I want to take someone on when their listening to this? A part of that will influence the theme, part of that will influence style, but a part of that also influences my construction. I believe that we create a vocabulary with every new piece we write as composers. So, when I create a piece I need to introduce something to the listener, something that becomes familiar that the listener can track throughout the piece, in order to show progression. They need something to grab onto that they can follow. It's just like in a movie. You're introduced to a character, then you watch that character as they progress throughout the story. My job is to do the same thing with my music. So, I'm thinking about that. What is this person going to be able to grab right away and follow?¹¹⁰

With the creation of this story, Runestad's basic compositional structure can be dissected in his music with basic analysis. For the purpose of this document, Runestad's *Please Stay* and *We Can Mend the Sky* are used as examples in addition to the example of *Let My Love be Heard* above. The tables and musical examples below illustrate how Runestad thematically structures these social justice related compositions. With each example below the text will first be indicated, followed by the original melody, memorable chorus, and an example of the expansion of that melody.

After the immediate attention-grabbing plea in *Please Stay*, the melodic theme is introduced through the soprano soloist with a basic skeleton of the harmony (*Example 3*). The composition then leads to the simple harmonic progression on the text "Please Stay, Just Stay," which is the motif, or chorus, that continues to reappear throughout. After the melodic theme is established with the soloist, it is expanded with harmony by the tenors and basses with a return to

¹¹⁰ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

the “Please stay, just stay” chorus (*Example 4*). The development of the story is progressed through a passionate climax on a new text, but then comes back to the same “Please stay, just stay” progression. The motive is repeated several times, as quotes from #Ikeptliving are read by members of the chorus with the direct intention of bringing focus to depression and suicide within society.

Table 3: Description and Text of *Please Stay*

Work	<i>Please Stay</i>
Social Issue	Depression and Suicide
Source of Text	#Ikeptliving
Text	<p>No! Don't go! Don't let your worst day be your last. The storm is strong, but it will pass. You think you can't go on another day, but please stay. Just stay. Hope is real. Help is real. You are breath, you are life, you are beauty, you are light. Your story is not over. You are not a burden to anyone. Please stay. Just stay.</p>

Example 3a: Opening Melodic Line of *Please Stay*

6

It is illegal to photocopy this score beyond the amount purchased.
 Please purchase scores from jakerunestad.com

A portion of the proceeds from this work will be donated to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.
 More info at afsp.org

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Example 3b: *Please Stay* Theme Continued Ending with Memorable Chorus on “Please Stay, Just Stay.”

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 10-13) features a Solo part with lyrics: "think you can't go on_ an-oth-er day, but please stay. Just stay." The Solo part is marked "a tempo". The Choir part consists of sustained notes. The Piano part is marked "rit." and then "a tempo". The second system (measures 14-17) features a Solo part with lyrics: "stay." The Solo part is marked "Flowing" with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 60 - 63$. The Solo part is marked "p" and "mp". The Choir part consists of sustained notes with lyrics: "Stay." and "Just". The Piano part is marked "Flowing" with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 60 - 63$ and "p".

Example 4: *Please Stay* Expansion of Melody in the Tenors and Bases

3

The musical score is divided into three systems, each with a measure number on the left (20, 22, 24) and a page number '3' in the top right corner.

System 1 (Measures 20-21):
 - **Choir:** Tenors and Basses. Tenors start with a long note 'oo' (piano, *p*). Basses enter with a melody. Lyrics: "oo... Your last. The" (Tenors) and "Don't let your worst day be your last." (Basses).
 - **Piano:** Accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and chords in the left hand. Dynamic marking: *mp*.

System 2 (Measures 22-23):
 - **Choir:** Tenors and Basses. Tenors: "storm is strong, it will pass. You" (*mf*). Basses: "The storm is strong, but it will pass. You" (*mf*).
 - **Piano:** Accompaniment continues. Dynamic marking: *cresc.*

System 3 (Measures 24-25):
 - **Choir:** Tenors and Basses. Tenors: "think you can't go on another day, but please" (*mp*). Basses: "think you can't go on another day, but please".
 - **Piano:** Accompaniment. Dynamic marking: *dim.*. Includes a *rit.* (ritardando) section and a *a tempo* section.

Table 4: Description and Text of *We Can Mend the Sky*

Work	<i>We Can Mend the Sky</i>
Social Issue	Cultural Acceptance and Peace
Source of Text	Warda and two Somali proverbs
Text	<p>In my dream, I saw a world free of violence hunger suffering a world filled with love Now awake in this world I beg, let my dream come true. Naftu orod bay kugu aamintaa. <i>(To save your life, run with all your might.)</i> If we come together, we can mend a crack in the sky.</p>

In his composition for chorus and percussion, *We Can Mend the Sky*, Runestad splits the melody with interjections of Somali text depicting the fleeing of the war-torn nation in East Africa. Similar to *Please Stay*, Runestad begins with his initial delivery of a more forceful musical opening to set the scene. In this piece, the harsh sections return throughout and Runestad uses them to depict the struggle of war in Somalia by use of the contrasting Somalian text. The melody begins through the soprano soloist, who serves as the story-teller for the piece using Mohamed’s text. The soloist begins with the poem singing, “In my dream I saw a world free of violence, hunger, suffering. A world filled with love” (Example 5).

Example 5: *We Can Mend the Sky* Opening Melodic Line

After the initial introduction of the melody there is another interjection of the Somali language with abrasive spoken texts, glissandi, and dissonance, which leads to a fugue depicting the fleeing of the Somali people during the time of war. The fugue then gives way to the return of Mohamed’s poem with the soprano soloists which begins the powerful expansion through the rest of the choir sharing the vision of a hope for unity, acceptance, peace, and love. (*Example 6* and *Example 7*). At the end of the melody on the text, “If we come together, we can mend a crack in the sky,” there is use of overlapping the end of the melody with the repeated chorus (*Example 8*). This additive method is a compositional approach used in several of Runestad’s compositions.

Example 6: *We Can Mend the Sky* Re-Entrance of the Melodic Line before Expansion

The musical score for Example 6 is presented on page 84. It features a vocal soloist and a four-part choir (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass). The soloist's part begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and includes the lyrics "Now a - wake in this world, I beg, I beg." The choir parts enter with a piano (*p*) dynamic, with the lyrics "world, I beg." The percussion part consists of a single rhythmic pattern. The piano accompaniment provides harmonic support for the vocal lines. The score is marked with a rehearsal cue '84' at the beginning and end.

Example 7: *We Can Mend the Sky* End of the Melodic Line with Harmony

The musical score is for the song "We Can Mend the Sky" and focuses on the end of the melodic line with harmony. It features five vocal parts (Solo, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The score is written in 2/4 time and includes dynamic markings such as *mf*, *f*, and *p*, as well as tempo markings *molto rit.* and *a tempo*. The lyrics for all parts are "let my dream come true, let my dream come true." The piano part provides harmonic support with chords and a steady bass line.

88

molto rit. *mf* *f* *mf* *p*

Solo
— let my dream come true, — let my dream come true.

mf *f* *mf* *p*

S.
— let my dream come true, — let my dream come true.

mf *f* *mf* *p*

A.
— let my dream come true, — let my dream come true.

mf *f* *mf* *p*

T.
— let my dream come true, — let my dream come true.

mf *f* *mf* *p*

B.
— let my dream come true, — let my dream come true.

molto rit. *a tempo*

Pno.

88

Example 8: *We Can Mend the Sky* Memorable Chorus

93 *p* freely, rubato 19

Solo
If we come to-gether, — we can mend a crack in the sky If we

S.
A.
Pno.

With hope $\text{♩} = 60$

93

97 *mp*

Solo
come to-gether, — we can mend a crack in the sky If we

S.
A.
Pno.

stagger breathing

97

After this initial iteration of the memorable chorus at measure 94 by the soloist, the section is expanded first with the sopranos and altos, and finally the entire choir (*Example 9 and Example 10*).

Example 9: *We Can Mend the Sky*: Initial Expansion of Memorable Chorus

21

107

S. *p* If we come to-gether, we can mend a crack in the sky.

A. *p* If we come to-gether, we can mend a crack in the sky.

T. *p* Oo

B. *p* Oo

Pno.

107

110

S. *mp* If we come to-gether, come to-gether, we can mend a crack in the sky.

A. *mp* If we come to-gether, come to-gether, we can mend a crack in the sky.

T. *mp* Oo We can mend a crack in the sky.

B. *mp* Oo We can mend a crack in the sky.

Pno.

110

Example 10: *We Can Mend the Sky*: Full Expansion of Chorus with Choir and Percussion

22

113

poco accel. *Steady groove* ♩=66

S. mend, we can mend. If we

A. mend, we can mend. If we

T. mend, we can mend. If we

B. mend, we can mend. If we

Perc. Djembe *mf*

Pno. *poco accel.* *Steady groove* ♩=66

113

Encourage audience to sing melody after first time.
Soloist: Freely improvise on melody after first time. A few more soloists from other voice parts may improvise as well - added gradually throughout repeats.

***Repeat many times, ad lib.**

115

S. come to - geth - er, we can mend a crack in the sky. If we

A. come to - geth - er, we can mend a crack in the sky. If we

T. come to - geth - er, we can mend a crack in the sky. If we

B. come to - geth - er, we can mend a crack in the sky. If we

c. Freely improvise a steady groove (East-African backbeat-esq) with fills.

***Repeat many times, ad lib.**

115 *** Change dynamics to match intensity of pacing. Get louder/more intense in the first several repeats and then fade and lessen nearing the final repeat.**

With Runestad allowing the text to dictate his compositions it enables the text to effectively come to life through these stories. After creating a melody which best depicts the text, Runestad uses the programmatic approach to share the life of another human being through melodic expansion. Runestad's sense of compositional control, alongside his melodic based music, creates a positive and inspiring environment through the text with each composition. The additive expansion on the repeated chorus, beginning with one voice (either in monody or as a soloist), spreading through the entire choir, is a powerful approach Runestad effectively employs to reach the climax of his pieces. This musical device gives a strong sense of togetherness and effectively unifies the choir in the same way he hopes to do his part in unifying humanity through these choral works.

Process of Commission for Runestad

Runestad's socially and musically effective compositions has aided to his growth in popularity and has several conductors and ensembles commissioning his works. Since his first commission, "Dreams of the Fallen" in 2013, Runestad has now been commissioned 52 times by 120 ensembles to date.¹¹¹ The conductors who have commissioned Runestad range from conductors of professional choirs, collegiate ensembles, symphony choruses, community choirs, opera companies, and professional orchestras throughout the United States. Patrick Quigley, Founder and Artistic Director of Seraphic Fire, explains why he has commissioned the composer four times in an interview with the author:

There are some composers who don't have any sense of pacing and Jake has an insane idea about pacing. He really gets the idea of something that builds to a place and then has a short ending. He has great musical timing and that has to do with where the parts of the text that are the most striking, usually at the end of the piece, which is what you want.

¹¹¹ Jake Runestad, Personal Email, February 2018.

Jake provides a holistic musical experience for the listener. The theoretical foundation is very, very, very solid. It's beautiful, it's challenging, it's at times dissonant, but it all has a point. When you get to the end you know what his piece was about.¹¹²

Although Runestad's growth in popularity with his works on social and environmental issues gives many conductors an indication of the focus of a Jake Runestad composition, it is interesting to note that Runestad is still the one choosing the content of each commission.¹¹³

Runestad goes into detail about his process of being commissioned below:

Typically, people don't ask me to write about issues. People ask me to write about themes or they ask me to commemorate a celebration of something, but I am always drawn to things that are at an extra-musical level. So, for example I just finished a piece in commemoration of 500 years since the reformation. That was the theme. It was for choir and orchestra for Valparaiso University and they were going to be performing it here and also in Germany. That's the information they gave me. In my initial conversations with the conductor, I was thinking about how have we come together or how we can show the diversity of beliefs and traditions, while looking at our oneness of humanity. So, those are kind of the general guidelines. Then I have to go do my thing. Get into my world, process it, figure out what's meaningful to me and that usually takes a very long time for me to arrive at what it is that I really want to talk about and that I feel passionate about[sic]. So, for this piece what I arrived at was the "power of fear" in our culture and how it controls so many things and causes us to fear others. To have xenophobia, racism, and sexism[sic]. They are all stemming from fear in some way. So, I was addressing what needs reforming in our culture, which to me was these ideas of fear.

With *Please Stay* there was nothing. It was just a consortium of twenty college choirs and they said, "write us a piece" and I said, "okay!" For *Dreams of the Fallen*, it was wide open, just the ensemble of piano, choir, and orchestra. So, I just took that in the direction of wanting to write about what I did. *We Can Mend the Sky* with James (Bass) was about the theme of immigration. *Come to the Woods* was a theme of "human relationships," so I chose the human relationship with nature. Typically, it is much more broad and then I tend to really dig in or narrow or specify.¹¹⁴

Throughout the process of the commission and compositional process Runestad has exclusively chosen to write his compositions on social issues without influence from the

¹¹² Patrick Dupré Quigley, interview by author, October 2017.

¹¹³ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

conductors commissioning him.¹¹⁵ Patrick Quigley explains below that despite his working relationship with Runestad, he never knows exactly what the composition's thematic intentions are going to be when he agrees on the commission:

The first time I commission people I'm usually a little more sort of micromanaging of what they set and approval of texts and that sorts of things, and I think for (The Hope of Loving) I just said, "We have a string quartet. Write a piece for us. Please keep it in four parts." At this point (Runestad) has been a part of what we've been doing for a long time so at this point it was more like, "you write great stuff, write us a Jake piece!"¹¹⁶

After Runestad's process of writing the composition is complete, Runestad shares that he is content putting his music into the hands of the conductor to bring the composition to life.¹¹⁷

Although he has a clear picture for each moment in each composition he creates, Runestad doesn't want his view to influence what the conductor believes needs to be illuminated as he details in a previous interview in 2016:

There is no way I can say that the way someone is interpreting my music is wrong, because that person is basing it on his or her life experiences. So, in that moment what is meaningful to that person is that interpretation. There are many conductors who have performed my music and helped me to understand my music in a new way that I didn't before and that excites me, that interests me. My hope is that when someone is performing my music, when they are studying the score, that they are thinking about why I wrote the piece and even before that, what is this text? Who wrote this text? Where did that person live? What was going on in the world at that time? What was going on in the poet's or writer's mind and in the poet's life? Then why did I choose to do these things with the text? Then taking that interpretation and creating something with it. Then if there is a word that needs to be slightly elongated, then by all means do it, because then you'd have a reason to do it. So, you have my approval, you have my okay to do that with my music if you're performing it. To find those moments that are meaningful to you and to somehow illuminate them.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Jakerunestad.com, accessed September 1, 2017, <http://jakerunestad.com/living-with-a-genius-podcast/>.

¹¹⁷ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

¹¹⁸ Ryan Guth, "A much-needed composer's perspective, with Jake Runestad," Ryan Guth: Step up to the Podium with Purpose, October 05, 2016, accessed November 05, 2016, <http://ryanguth.com/much-needed-composers-perspective-jake-runestad/>.

Runestad's use of text on inclusivity and social justice, paired with his effective melodic musical style, has made his compositions regularly sought after for commission. The progression of commissioning Runestad has become a simple process with which Runestad has almost complete control of the focus of the composition and the issues he is bringing forth within that piece. Runestad is contacted, given a theme, and then determines if that theme fits his compositional vision.¹¹⁹ As a full-time composer, Runestad is careful to not put himself in a place where he is conflicted with an ensemble or conductor who doesn't share his ideals.¹²⁰ Once the theme is established, Runestad then begins his process to invigorate his hope for social change and social awareness through his choral music.

¹¹⁹ Jake Runestad, interview by author, October 2017.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Social justice themes within American choral music is at an all-time high and Jake Runestad has put his mark on the choral community through this vein. Runestad's powerful music on relevant 21st century social issues are having a lasting, positive effect on people in a different musical medium than ever before. Using an effective and memorable melodic based compositional style, paired with text based on his beliefs of a hope for awareness and change, Runestad has become a leader in this new choral movement. In addition to his personal contact through workshops and commissions, Runestad receives emails and messages daily regarding how his pieces have changed the lives of those who come into contact with him and his music.¹²¹ Runestad went into detail of a specific story below in an interview with the author:

Especially for *Please Stay* I've gotten so many messages, comments on YouTube, personal messages, and Twitter messages. I think that piece has elicited the most response from anyone. It has been really, really meaningful to just find out how they have connected to that piece and how it has helped them. I had an instance where I was doing an honor choir and during a Q&A I was telling them that I was writing that piece and that I was addressing those things. A couple days after that honor choir I got an email from a student who was a part of that honor choir and she wanted to say how much it meant to her to be a part of that experience, to feel a part of that community, and to feel accepted. Then when I mentioned that I was writing that piece it really touched her and she said before that experience she and her friend were planning to kill themselves and after that experience they decided not to. So, that was a really powerful thing and, of course, I had to then find out the student's teacher and let them know that this student was talking about this, but to even imagine that this piece could even save someone's life is incredible and that's my hope for what this piece might be able to do.¹²²

As Runestad's music continues to have a positive effect on conductors, performers, and audiences, he envisions himself continuing to write music with social justice themes. Future compositional aspirations for Runestad include an idea regarding those going through the trials

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

of cancer and the life they are unexpectedly forced to live. He also has a story he wishes to share of two homosexual men, who were married to women to disguise their sexual orientation, and found one another through a unique circumstance.

Whether it is one of these future ideas, a composition already created, or something yet to be discovered, Jake Runestad has already accomplished what he set out to do; to raise topics that aren't regularly discussed and to foster compassion to those in an oppressed community through his choral works. As Runestad continues to evolve, and social issues continue to be faced, it will be fascinating to watch how the genre develops now that the conversation regarding these 21st century social issues has been greatly expanded through these innovative choral works.

APPENDIX A

A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF JAKE RUNESTAD'S CHORAL COMPOSTIONAL
OUTPUT THROUGH 2017

Composition	Year Composed
All the World's a Stage	2016
Alleluia	2014
And So I Go On	2015
Ave Verum	2017
Climb	2016
Come to the Woods	2015
Dereva Ni Mungu	2013
Dreams of the Fallen	2013
Fear Not, Dear Friend	2013
Gaelic Prayer	2016
Good Night, My Love	2015
I Will Lift Mine Eyes	2010
Into the Light	2017
Let My Love be Heard	2014
Live the Questions	2016
Nada Te Turbe	2013
Ner Ner	2014
Nyon Nyon	2006
One Flock	2016
Peace Flows into Me	2013
Please Stay	2016
Proud Music of the Storm	2017
Reflections	2016
Rise Up	2016
Sing, Wearing the Sky	2014
Sleep, Little Baby, Sleep	2012
Spirited Light	2014
The Hope of Loving	2015
The King of Love	2013
The Peace of Wild Things	2014
Under this Tree	2016
We Can Mend the Sky	2014
Why the Caged Bird Sings	2014
Winter Stars	2017

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Christopher: Hi Jake.

Jake: Hey, hey, hey.

Christopher: How are you?

Jake: I'm doing alright, how about yourself? How's the teaching life?

Christopher: Great! The grad school process is always daunting, but once you get back in front of the students and are making music you realize it is all 100% worth it.

Jake: Aw. Yeah! That's great! I'm so glad. La Crosse is a beautiful place!

Christopher: Definitely. Okay. Let's get started!

Jake: Yeah, let's do it!

Christopher: So, just a little bit biographically. I heard in both of the interviews on your website that interest in composition started when you were 4 or 5 when you started being interested in sounds. So, I'm curious to know, what sounds?

Jake: Yeah, I think you're right. A lot of the sounds I heard were music. My parents are very musical people. There was always singing around the house, and when I was a kid my parents were in the choir at our church and they would bring my sister and I to choir rehearsals instead of getting babysitters. My dad was also in a quartet and he would bring me to rehearsals and all of these sounds became a part of my world. Then we had a piano, and I began to explore and improvise at the piano starting very, very basically. I took piano lessons for a very, very short time. Oh gosh, first grade maybe, but it was just not a very good fit. I was pretty obstinate. Then I took for a year in third grade with my third-grade teacher who was an amazing teacher. She was my regular classroom teacher, but she had a piano in there and every day we sang in the regular classroom and it was awesome! So, I took from her, and she was much better with letting me play by ear, but I still did not want to practice anything in books. I just wanted to do my own thing. I think the main theme of my musical experience as a child was just free exploration. Without having to worry about noting everything. Without having to worry about reading anything, but just being a part of that creation and production of sound.

Christopher: So, was it in high school when you were in a band that you truly began to read music?

Jake: I mean, not really. I didn't really, what I would consider to truly read music until like maybe senior year of high school.

Christopher: Wow. So, when you had your *Viking Symphony* that you wrote for your high school band, you don't feel like you could really read music?

Jake: Well, I read it for saxophone, because I play the saxophone. I could read treble clef and I knew the names of pitches. I was okay reading rhythm, but I became much better with that later. For that first piece though, I didn't know any theory. I really created it using the playback feature on Sibelius. I was just doing it by ear. I'd just be figuring it out, testing different things, and playing it back. It was very exploratory. I didn't have to worry about certain things though, so that was kind of fun for me.

Christopher: I bet! So, going back to your third-grade teacher, did you just take lessons with her in third grade? How did those lessons go and what was it about those one-on-one lessons that you enjoyed?

Jake: I don't remember too much about it. I do remember that I was teaching myself how to play *The Entertainer*, the Scott Joplin tune, and I came into a lesson and was like, "Hey check this out", and it was very, very basic and she was like, "Oh that's so cool, now try doing this." Then she showed me a new technique with my left hand and a little bit more interesting harmony. Then I was just able to adopt that. That was one thing I remember very clearly. The other story that my parents like to tell especially, is that she would play the piece the week before and I would go home and have to practice it, but I play by ear pretty well. So, I'd listen to what she did, figure it out. Then I came back the next week, I'd put my book up on the piano, play my piece and she was like, "That was very good Jake but you're on the wrong page". Because I wasn't reading it.

Christopher: That's really impressive to remember it that well. That's amazing.

Jake: Well, I don't know. It was probably a mixture of hearing her play it and then just kind of trying to figure it out slowly with the music.

Christopher: I see. So, just quickly going through. I got that you were writing terrible love songs because you didn't know anything about love, you had a multitrack recorder, then you really got involved through your high school band director, Mr. Durango. Then as a senior in high school you arranged the "Remember the Titans" theme. Was that ever performed or was that just something that was fun for you?

Jake: Yeah, we performed it.

Christopher: Okay, was it like a marching band show or a pep-band show or a concert band?

Jake: It was at a concert. It was our spring concert. The same concert we premiered *The Viking Symphony*, I'm pretty sure.

Christopher: Wow, so it was like the Jake Runestad concert. Were you ever involved in marching band or was it just all concert band for you?

Jake: No, we didn't really have a marching band in high school. I had to do it my freshman year of college. I was at Eastern Illinois University before I transferred and I had to do it there. I just did not like it.

Christopher: [laughter] Is that part of the reason you transferred? You said that it wasn't a good fit for you in a previous interview. Was the marching band a part of that reason?

Jake: No, it was really a cultural thing. I didn't feel a central purpose with the students there. It felt like a huge Greek system. It was a big party school and so I didn't connect with it culturally. The saxophone professor I was studying with there was very fine. The jazz program was very good there. It just wasn't the best fit.

Christopher: Right, okay. So, what was the name of your high school?

Jake: Guilford High School.

Christopher: Guilford High School and that was in Rockford?

Jake: Yeah.

Christopher: Okay. So, a little about your upbringing. Can you just tell me a little about the background of your parents? I feel like in everything you continue to attribute your parents to how they brought you up and that you were very fortunate in that they were very loving and giving. I would just love to hear a little bit about your parents.

Jake: Sure. In my family, we're very close. I'm very fortunate to have supportive, loving, engaged parents who really gave everything to us kids. I don't mean gave everything as in they gave us whatever we wanted, but gave of themselves in as many ways as possible to us. Very generous, very loving, very supportive, wanted us to have diverse experiences in life and to engage with diverse people. A strong part of their background is a sense of service to others. We did a lot of volunteering and a lot of family vacations. Both of them did music throughout their childhood. My mom's father, Howie Lindstrom, he was a tenor and he sang with big bands. He was actually asked to be a regular on The Lawrence Welk Show, but his mom didn't want him to leave home. He was a Shriner and the name of his big band was the "Shrinanigans." He had a beautiful tenor voice. He was a Swede and very proud of his Swedish heritage. He was a very funny guy. He worked for a screw and fastener company and he would take songs and re-write them to sing to his clients like "Because of screws" instead of "because of you." So, I think that was passed down. My mom then is very, very creative. She's brilliant! She makes me laugh like nobody else. She has a very musical, beautiful voice. She played the violin throughout high school and she did musical theatre post high school. I believe it was in college or after. She was Sandy in Grease, and she was Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz. She was very engaged in theatre and music that way. My dad was in choirs throughout high school and his mom played the piano and lead choirs at churches. She was a pastor's wife and his dad was a pastor. Her brother, my dad's mom's brother, my great-uncle Ernie, was a middle school band director throughout his entire career. My great grandma on that side, my grandma's mom, was a choir director, pianist, and teacher. She started a little choir called the "Steven Foster Singers," way back in the day. My dad was very much involved in music. He was in choir, did some theatre, and was in some folk groups. He played the guitar and sang and would often play with people in public gatherings, not necessarily as a big performer, but just bringing people together to sing through music. He was also involved in the outdoors. He studied environmental education so part of my love for nature

comes from him too. As kids, they took us hiking and camping all the time. Our family vacations usually revolved around National Parks or the mountains or things like that. Then as parents they brought that music into our household. We were always listening to music. We would sing all of the time and I remember, we'd be singing in the car and harmonizing with each other and just feeling that out. Those are really important parts.

Christopher: What kind of music were they listening to, or what kind of music do your parents love?

Jake: Oh man! One thing me and my sister always remind each other of is, on Saturday morning we had to do our chores. We called them our job. It was like vacuuming or dusting and then cleaning of one of two bathrooms and then we would trade off. But a very clear Saturday morning memory would be waking up and hearing Wilson Phillips blasted on the stereo. James Taylor, The Beatles, a lot of The Beatles when I was a kid. Elton John, Billy Joel, so more folk kind of singer-songwriter. Not much in the way of rock but that great 60s, and then some 50s, but probably more 60s, 70s of more "folk-y" type of music. Melodically driven and sing-able. That type of stuff.

Christopher: That's so great. Okay. Back to you. After high school, you went to Eastern Illinois, then you went up to Winona and your still an instrumental music education major at this point? Your Bachelor of Music in instrumental music education, correct?

Jake: It is. There was a point where I was considering changing or double majoring in choral because I started to really fall in love with it in college, but I would have had to be in school for much longer and that just wouldn't work.

Christopher: I know that feeling. So, what year were you in college when you met Libby Larsen? What year was it that you came and did her residency in Winona?

Jake: It must have been 2008? I think. Somewhere around there. I think it was Spring of '08. Because then I went and had about two lessons with her at her house. I drove up that spring and also I had one in the summer. It was during those that she said, "Hey, you should think about this whole grad school thing."

Christopher: I heard you say once that Libby Larson, kind of helped you to find your voice as a composer. Do you still believe that and what did she do for you as a composer?

Jake: I think Libby really got me to think about the 'why' of my music. Why this here? How do we develop this? Why do we develop this? How does the music correspond to the text? Even though it didn't seem like we spent that long together, they were profound experiences for me. I lingered on every word she said to me. I just held onto them. The first piece we looked at was "I Will Live Mine Eyes" in my first lesson. There were two changes that she made as far as text stress? In the original piece "From Whence Comes my Help" was on beat 3. Instead of [singing] "From Whence Comes my" (as it is today). Also, it is "He is the Maker," but the original version was [singing] "The Maker of" with "of" on the downbeat, but "of" is not an important word to

stress. She just said well what if it is "He is the Maker"(as it is today). Those two little morsels, just illuminated a whole word of text stress.

Christopher: Can you tell me a little bit about who she is? I was just talking with Dr. Jonathan Talberg and he said that he thinks there is a lot of her in you and I don't know her. So, it would be wonderful if you could just tell me a little bit about her.

Jake: Well, I'm reading her biography right now that just came out by someone at Florida State. She is one of the most brilliant people I've ever met in my life. The way that she processes the world, the way that she thinks about art and she thinks about culture. The way she thinks about creation and creativity is just unbelievable! I come away from every conversation I have with her having been changed in some way. She says some things that completely change the way I conceived of something, or allows me to process something new about the way I work or the way I live. It's things like that. She is unbelievably intelligent and wise. It is not just intelligence though, but it's wisdom. Not everyone has that. She is a bundle of energy. You always see the wheel spinning and turning. She is a marathon runner and that is one of the ways she helps to get that energy out of her system, she does a lot of running. She chose to stay here in Minnesota as opposed to moving somewhere else like to New York or L.A or wherever. She is also an important supporter of composers and artist. She founded the American Composers Forum along with Steven Paulus, which started as the Minnesota Composers Forum. She has participated in a lot of the business side of things. She has never held a full-time teaching position or a university position. She has always been independent, which is kind of another model that I have followed along with Steven Paulus. She has her own publishing company. She is just a very wonderful person.

Christopher: Wow. Sounds wonderful. So, then after your time in undergrad, you went to Peabody and you studied with Kevin Puts or primarily with Kevin Puts? What did you take from your time with Kevin?

Jake: Yeah it was just with Kevin. Kevin is a brilliant orchestrator. He knows the orchestra so well. That was a huge thing that I learned from him. Just some of the details of making things work in an orchestra. He also writes music that is very beautiful, and I think that was really important for me to see a successful composer that is writing beautiful music. Sometimes in academia that can get stifled. So, that was really important. I went into grad school having absolutely no clue who he was, no clue about Peabody other than it had a reputation. Really not knowing anything about who would be a good person to study with. I just kind of trusted Libby and she had suggested Peabody, so I went and had a really great experience. It was fun. Kevin was writing his opera "Silent Night" at the time. I was able to sing through a couple arias in a lesson.

Christopher: I was going to ask you about "Silent Night" actually because that is kind of an anti-war type of work. I was just curious, and we haven't really gotten to any of the social justice type things yet, but do you think that you got any of these peace ideas from that specific work at all?

Jake: You know, I don't think so. He didn't talk too much about it. I just knew the premise and we sang through one or two arias. Lessons weren't really him talking about his own work so I

didn't really get too much about it until the premiere. I mean everything that I hear influences what I write so it's hard to say Oh, this was influential and this wasn't. I don't know that there was any direct influence, but I'm sure that there were things that I heard that became a part of the sound world that I wanted to create.

Christopher: Yes. Definitely. Before we leave the biographical section, I would love to know, aside from music what else do you really, really love?

Jake: Nature is a big one. I love to read so that kind of goes along with being understood and setting texts because I'm always looking for text.

Christopher: Do you read specifically to look for text or are you able to find time to read for fun?

Jake: I would say I read poetry for fun. I'm always kind of reading with the lens of hoping that I could find something for musical text, but that doesn't mean that I'm only looking for that. I'm reading Libby's biography right now. I just read "Siddhartha" and "Life of Pi" recently. I'm just starting the "War of Art," which I have heard is a really great book talking about resistance that causes us to not create or not create as well as we could. It kind of varies. I really love to cook for and with other people. I'm actually packing. I just bought a condo and I'm moving on Tuesday to a new place that is so much more conducive to hosting people, so I'm really, really excited about that.

Christopher: Still in Minneapolis though?

Jake: Yeah.

Christopher: It's interesting because everything that you've said is all in that creative vein of poetry, and outdoors with nature, and cooking. They are all still very creative things.

Jake: Right? It's the artist's life, man.

Christopher: Yeah, of course. I love to cook too, I'm just not so good at it.

Jake: Yeah, yeah, yeah absolutely. I think I'm an extroverted introvert. I can be extroverted as needed, but I really need my recharge time and I would much rather have meaningful interactions with a smaller group than try to make any sense of a large party or something like that. I think I tend to participate in things that allow me to do that. So, hikes with people or cooking with people. Those kinds of intimate relationships are really valuable to me.

Christopher: I am exactly the same with that. Okay, so a little bit about your music. I heard you say in another interview that you felt as if it was your job to create art that you hope will be a vehicle for positivity or to foster meaningful relationships. Can you explain and expound upon that and what exactly you mean? How do you believe your music is doing that?

Jake: So, I think that some of this comes back to my parents instilling a sense of wanting to serve others in some capacity and being a part of music. I think those two things have come together. So, when I write I think of it as a way of self-expression and creativity but also, what is its purpose? I think that is a really important question that I have to ask myself. It comes back to Libby asking why again. So, every piece, before I start it I ask, why? What am I trying to say and why am I trying to say it? What is the purpose of this? I would much rather create something that can serve a really important purpose. I want to be a positive influence on the world and I want to create something that can help do that. I think that is really my focus. Starting out I was a songwriter so I was trying to say something. I remember the first song I ever wrote was after my grandfather died. I think it was in 8th grade. It was just a very simple song; I can still play it. I'm trying to remember what the chorus was like "And I know that you're shining down on me, guiding and protecting willingly." I mean it was just terrible lyrics but I was trying to write something heartfelt and that served purpose. I think everything that I've ever written, I hope had intention in that way, so I guess that's my guiding principle.

Christopher: You definitely do that now, but when I think of something like *Nyon Nyon*, sure it's cool, and *I Will Live Mine Eyes* is beautiful, but it's a psalm. When do you think you really made this shift to compositions that are really on these issues? I'm not saying *I Will Live Mine Eyes* doesn't reach people, because it clearly does, but at least to me it doesn't speak to an issue the same as *Dreams of the Fallen*. So, what shifted in you?

Jake: That's interesting, and I do think about that. I have some pieces that are very, very specific as to the intention with a social justice issue, and then I have other pieces that can be taken that way but maybe are less dramatically so. For example, a piece like *Come to the Woods* isn't necessarily about social justice or even really about environmental issues. It's about a guy who loved the earth and appreciated and valued what it does. But I think a lot of it too is, he climbed a tree in a storm and what a beautiful metaphor that is for how we can live in life. When difficulties come that we don't hide and shy away from them, or try to ignore them, but we approach them full on. We live into them and how much better our lives can be if we do that. It can definitely be taken as appreciating the importance of the natural world, absolutely, but for me it feels more biographical in a way. Then also something like *Please Stay*, *Dreams of the Fallen* or *We Can Mend the Sky*, that are very much about social justice issues. [They are] trying to get people to think about things in a different way that maybe cause them to take action or to change their mind or to show compassion.

Christopher: Social justice can be a broad concept and hard to define. How do you think that you would describe your music and what's important to you in maybe a word or sentence? Is it maybe humanist to you?

Jake: I think humanistic is a good word. My music isn't necessarily about mathematical ideas or equations. For me, it's truly about human experiences. How humans interact with each other, how humans interact with the natural world, how humans interact with the divine. I think for me that's really my focus, authentic human experiences and emotions. I think every piece that I've written is about that and very much in a narrative form.

Christopher: What does narrative form mean to you?

Jake: Meaning that there is a point A and a point B and we're on a journey from point A to point B. We, as humans, process time in a narrative form most often. We start here and end here. It is not necessarily cyclical, but usually in linear format. So, in music, I'm not a minimalist where time is cyclical, but I'm more working on a narrative or linear model where there is a character or the is a motive and it's developed throughout. Then we watch as something can shift or change throughout the experience.

Christopher: So, for example, *Let my Love be Heard*, you kind of start with a unison line and build. Then you do the same thing with *We Can Mend the Sky*. Is that what you mean by narrative form?

Jake: I guess so. I think it's... well, technically speaking, it's a building of tension. It's a developing of musical material; taking something and shifting it, reshaping it, using counterpoint, variations, or whatever comes in order to show progression. I'm a very physical composer and a very visual composer. So, I'm envisioning a story as I'm writing too. So, that's another part of that narrative. In *We Can Mend the Sky*, I have a very visual story in my mind of what's happening and also *Dreams of the Fallen* is a very visual piece for me. I can describe that scene by scene and I think for most of my pieces that's the case. I think that comes into play in the sound world. I'm trying to paint a picture of it and I'm also trying to utilize rhythm in order to help us know what it feels like physically to be in that place.

Christopher: Is *The Hope of Loving*, an entire connected narrative or since it's more of a cantata, do you see each movement as a narrative all connected by love?

Jake: I think each movement is a narrative. I mean, in the whole piece there's a progression, but maybe each one has a little vignette in a way. It's like a movie that has different storylines going on that all can tie together and then maybe it's something more like that.

Christopher: Like “Love, Actually”?

Jake: Maybe, yeah, yeah, *The Hope of Loving* is actually “Love Actually.” [Laughter]

Christopher: So, are you familiar with those like Woody Guthrie, U2, or the music in the mid 20th century where there was a lot of social justice within music?

Jake: Probably. I can't even think of anything in particular right now. Yeah, I guess some of those protest songs I know. I don't know if I really thought too much about their purpose, but maybe it was just so ingrained in what we did as musicians when I was younger that it just felt natural.

Christopher: Yeah.

Jake: Yeah, it's interesting. And what's also fascinating about the classical world is a lot of music that maybe we associate with this could be instrumental, which is much less specific.

Christopher: Yeah.

Jake: You know the *Threnody* and the Penderecki.

Christopher: Yeah.

Jake: I don't know the history of it. I think I learned it's for the victims of Hiroshima.

Christopher: Right.

Jake: Right. So, yeah, that's one kind of statement. What's unique about vocal music is we have the text to make it much more specific, and I think that's been done less frequently in the classical music world. It has been but much more veiled or more used in metaphor, not necessarily so overt. What I have done is I allow the text to dictate what the painting is going to be.

Christopher: Right.

Jake: So, that instrumentally it is influenced by creating that story or that world and then the text provides us the vehicle to produce some of the rhythms and phrases. I think for me I really love working with text because it gives me so many answers.

Christopher: Right.

Jake: You know, a strictly instrumental piece is completely from scratch. I'm given nothing. I just have to create. So, the text kind of gives me a blueprint of sorts which is really helpful.

Christopher: Yeah. So, you talked about poetry, but where is there a specific place or, maybe aisle in the library where you go to try to find your inspiration for your text?

Jake: I have a file on my computer that holds all kinds of subtexts that I just find and save that I like. So, that's my first place that I go to. If I'm writing on a specific topic, then I'll just use the web to try and find something. Then that will lead me somewhere else, and then that will lead me to this writer who will lead me to this person. Then I'll find their journal writings. So, I just kind of go on these wild goose chases. I don't know that there's really one place. The internet is huge and helpful tool so it's great to have that. But, you know, I have books and I have my frequent collaborator Todd Boss that I use for stuff. So, yeah. Different sources.

Christopher: A part of my document is that you're writing on some issues that don't necessarily directly affect you. Can you speak a little bit about your process of how you go about finding that information and how you feel comfortable writing on something that you aren't directly affected by?

Jake: Yeah. I think that the important words here are compassion and connection. So, yes, and I don't want anyone to think that I have experienced these things but I do work really, really hard in researching and trying to understand. I try to somehow understand with what people experience and also draw from the experiences of my own life that maybe would be my version of it. So, if we think about displacement. How does it feel to come somewhere new and not know

anyone, not know the culture and try to make sense of it? I did my student teaching in Peru. When I got there, there was pretty much nothing in place. I was dropped into this new culture. I didn't really know anybody. I was connected with a school, but I didn't have a place to stay and I would walk into a room and be the tallest and whitest person in a room and have everyone look at me. So, it's not fleeing a war-torn nation, and I don't want anyone to think that I'm trying to say it is, but I have experienced displacement and jarring culture shock. So, I try to draw from those experiences to inform my interpretation. And my goal is not to try and have people say this is what the experience is like, but to say, "Hey! Let's look at this person's story and think about it."

Christopher: Right.

Jake: So, I'm not trying to say, "This is exactly what it's like to be an immigrant from an East African nation," but what I am trying to say is, "Hey, this is a fellow human and this is an issue." This is something that's happening in our world. Let's think about it. Let's try to imagine what this experience is like so that maybe we can show compassion to someone else that we meet along the way.

Christopher: I think that's great. You said Libby Larsen says things that make you really think about life and I really think that you do that too.

Jake: Thanks.

Christopher: So, can I get just for the record, what is the Jake Runestad definition of love? It's clear to me that you have this belief of a universality of love. You have *The Hope of Loving*, you have *Let my Love be Heard* but what is love to you?

Jake: Well, I would go with the Greeks on that. That there are different ways of thinking about love or showing love. There's romantic love, there's brotherly love, there's familial love. I think I subscribed to that belief system. I think that I feel that love is at the core of who we are and what we do as humans and our purpose in the world. We think about that ridiculous question of the meaning of life and for me it comes back to where do I feel most purposeful, or how do I feel most connected, and it's usually involved in some artistic pursuit or a meaningful connection with another human or a space. For me I think love is a part of that. Love is respecting someone or something. It's showing compassion to someone. It's allowing them to feel that they are appreciated and a part of something. So, yeah. I guess. I don't know. I haven't really thought about specifically what it means to me. I guess I then try to show that through my music and a way I live, I hope.

Christopher: Yeah, I think that is perfect. I'm sure you weren't expecting me to ask you about love.

Jake: [laughter]Hey, that's an important thing!

Christopher: Definitely. So just talking a little bit about your process of commissioning. Specifically, to your most recent things about different issues. How does that process work? Has

there been someone that says, “I want you to write a piece on this issue,” or have they come to you and said, “Jake, I want you to write a piece” and you say, “Well, how about this issue?”

Jake: Typically people don't ask me to write about issues. People will usually ask me to write about themes or they ask me to commemorate a celebration, but I'm drawn to things that are at a more extra musical level. So, for example, I just finished this piece commemorating five hundred years since the Reformation. That was the theme. It was for a choir and orchestra for Valparaiso University and they were going to be performing here and also in Germany. Okay, so that's the information they give me. In my initial conversations with the conductor, I was thinking about how have we come together or how do we show the diversity of beliefs and traditions and yet look at our oneness of humanity. So, those are the general guidelines. Then I have to go off and do my thing and get into my world. I have to process it, figure out what's meaningful to me, and that usually takes a very long time for me to arrive at what it is that I really want to talk about and that I feel passionate about. So, for this piece what I arrived at was the ‘power of fear in our culture,’ and how it controls so many things and causes us to fear others; to have xenophobia and racism and sexism. They're all stemming from fear in some way. So, I was addressing what needs reforming in our culture. For me that was these ideas of fear. With *Please Stay* there was nothing. It was just a consortium of twenty some college choirs and they said write us a piece, and I said okay [laughter], and so I wrote *Please Stay*. For *Dreams of the Fallen* it was wide open. It was just the ensemble of piano, choir, and orchestra. So, I just took that in the direction of wanting to write about what I did. *We Can Mend the Sky*, with James, was the theme of immigration. *Come to the Woods* was human relationships, that was the theme of the concert, so I chose the human relationship with nature and trying to illuminate John Muir. So typically, it's much more broad and then I tend to really dig in or narrow or specify.

Christopher: It really sounds like the ideas are really just coming from you then. They give you a theme and you write about what's important to you. Have you turned down commissions because they have said, “This is what we want” and you said, “That's just not me?”

Jake: Yeah, I have. Especially if the texts are blatantly Biblical or Christian or, you know, something that's not as universal. I think that I believe in much more in universality of belief systems. Like I have no interest in writing a *Te Deum* or a *Requiem*, or really anything with a traditional, Christian or Latin text because so many people have done it so beautifully and so many people have just done it. I think we need new, which to me new is not another *ubi carita*. Which is a beautiful text, and there are some beautiful settings, but I'm not interested in that. I'm more interested in finding new stories and new writers or different poems that people aren't familiar with, or with universality in theme but more specific in the text itself. If that makes sense?

Christopher: Yeah, it does. Have you had any backlash from like things like this? Have you commissioned a piece and then they're like, “This is not what we asked?”

Jake: It hasn't happened. For this new piece *Into the Light* we had a lot of back and forth about the text, which typically is not how I work [laughter]. Usually, if they request approval then I'll oblige, but typically I just do my thing. I'll let them know what I'm doing in some ways, but typically I just kind of work and then present them with the finished product. In this case, it was

hard for me because I was still working through what the piece was. Then he would give feedback on some things and/or want something different and I'm like, "Well, you know, I'm still working through it" [laughter].

Christopher: Yeah. Right.

Jake: And so, at one point I just had to say, "Look, I really respect the feedback you've given. I appreciate the value placed on my process, but I really need to go away and do my thing right now. I think I have a really clear understanding what you need, but I need you to respect my artistry. So, that I can really just be in my own process and not have this back and forth," and he totally respected that.

Christopher: That's great.

Jake: Yes. So, I think I've been very fortunate in that sense. What's interesting is for *Please Stay*, there's one of those spoken lines that I included that I've had two groups write to me with some push back. [The line] "suicide doesn't get rid of your pain, it passes it on to everyone else." Within their conversations they found it to possibly be on the edge of victim blaming where, you know, "Don't kill yourself because you're going to put pain on everyone else." And I can understand that, but I can also see the other side where it's saying, Hey, if you do this, this is the reality, like, it doesn't really get rid of your pain. I mean, you're dead but everyone else is suffering this loss. I thought that was really fascinating. I ultimately I decided to remove that line because I don't want there to be any sort of question or discomfort with anything even remotely close to the victim shaming.

Christopher: Have you replaced the line with anything else or you just took it out?

Jake: Just took it out.

Christopher: But that was from Twitter, right? These weren't your words. Someone actually wrote that, right?

Jake: Correct. Correct. Yeah.

Christopher: So, you said you haven't really got too much push back. Do you think that's because people are starting to realize your style?

Jake: I think so. I think people know that if they commission me, they're not going to get a *lux aeterna*. I think they know that they're not going to get, X Latin piece or X Christian text. So, I think I would hope that there's that understanding and I think that's why certain people reach out to me. I think they would choose a different composer if that's what they wanted.

Christopher: Yeah. I'm sure that you hear stories all the time about how you're impacting people and how your music is helping somebody. Do you keep those or do you do you have a document on your desktop for something like that too? Do you have a specific story that was incredibly meaningful that you can go back to kind of keep you inspired?

Jake: Yeah, especially for “Please Stay.” I’ve gotten so many messages, comments on YouTube, personal messages, and Twitter messages. I think that piece has elicited the most response from anyone. It’s been really, really meaningful to just find out how they’ve connected with that piece and how it’s helped them. I had an instance where I was doing an honor choir and during a Q and A and I was telling them that I was writing that piece. Then, a couple of days after the honor choir, I got an email through my website from a student who was part of that honor choir and she wanted to say how much it meant to her to be a part of that experience. It helped her to feel part of the community and feel accepted. Then when I had mentioned I was writing that piece it really touched her and she said that before that experience she and her friend were planning to kill themselves, and she said after that experience they decided not to. That was a really powerful thing. Then, of course, I had to find out the student’s teacher and let them know that this student was talking about that, but to even imagine that this piece could possibly save someone’s life is incredible. That’s my hope for what that piece might be able to do. So yeah. I do keep all these things.

Christopher: When you’re writing in these types of pieces, do you write them ever thinking about who you may affect?

Jake: Yeah. I don’t know how they’ll be affected, but I always think about the audience. I always really, really think about what kind of journey I want to take someone on when they’re listening to this. A part of that influences the theme, part of that influences style, but a part of that also influences my construction. I believe that we create a vocabulary with every new piece that we write as composers. So, when I create a piece, I need to introduce something to the listener, something that becomes familiar that the listener can track throughout the piece to show progression. They need something to grab onto that they can follow. Just like in a movie. You’re introduced to a character and then you watch that character as they progress throughout the film, throughout the story. I believe that my job is to do the same thing with my music. So, I’m thinking about that. Okay, what is this person going to be able to grab right away and then follow?

Christopher: Now, it’s interesting that you say the audience because I feel like most of the people affected, I’ve got to imagine the performers. It’s interesting that you are specifically trying to not only just reach who’s performing it, but give a way for the audience to really trace your composition.

Jake: Yeah, I guess I would lump the performance into that category as well, but I also think a lot about that. Part of that is just the whole technical things of what feels good to sing or to play. what’s idiomatic, but what’s interesting. If I give people a drone for thirty-eight measures, that’s no fun for anybody.

Christopher: Right.

Jake: So, I have to think about those practical things as well, but also, what’s going to feel good to play or to sing. Are you going to enjoy this from a technical standpoint but also from an emotional standpoint?

Christopher: Right. So, I'm sure you are familiar with the different composers in the last five years or so, writing on the social justice topics. Examples include Craig Hella Johnson's, Considering Matthew Shepard and the Justice Choir. I do notice that when I look on justicechoir.org, I don't see a single Jake Runestad piece. Do you feel that you don't belong in that specific movement or are you just staying separate for a particular reason?

Jake: No, I'm not separating myself. I really appreciate them in the work that they're doing. I think some of my music doesn't necessarily fit into what they're looking for. And then there's a whole copyright thing that they deal with where you have to give up pretty much all the rights for the music.

Christopher: Ah, I see.

Jake: So, it's not that I don't want my music to serve a purpose in that way, but also, this is how I make my living.

Christopher: Of course.

Jake: And I'm not able to just freely put my music out anywhere that people would want it. So, that's something I also have to think about. I think artists want to do good in the world, and they need vehicles in order to do that. They can go somewhere and they can sing, you know, Brahms that is stunningly beautiful, but it's a tradition that's not as well-known. It's not as understood. When they present a piece like *Please Stay* and it's in English. It's a text that is clear to understand and hopefully I feel in a musical way that people can engage with it on an immediate level. Hopefully also with layers they can peel back if they want to, and so I think that performers have a choice. I think what I'm seeing is that conductors are really wanting that kind of repertoire and it's something that I'm really passionate about, so I want to provide it. I think people are just eating it up because that's what they're craving, and what they want to bring into the world are these kinds of messages.

Christopher: Right.

Jake: So, yeah, it's kind of this beautiful confluence of desires on both of our sides that are resulting in this, and I feel very, very fortunate that people are connecting with the music.

Christopher: So, about your evolution as a composer. You start with *I Will Life Mine Eyes* and *Nyon, Nyon*. These are smaller works whereas now you are writing *Come to the Woods* which is like fourteen minutes long and *The Hope of Loving* is around 17 minutes. Do you think that this has to do with you just becoming a more intelligent human being, or because you are writing on more important issues that you think takes longer to tell the story?

Jake: Yeah. I think it's hard to tell a story in a short amount of time.

Christopher: Yeah.

Jake: Some of it is based on the length of the commission too. If they wanted a ten-minute piece, or they wanted a fifteen-minute piece I have to think, “Okay what’s a story that would take that long? Or what’s something that is going to be close to that length. That’s part of what I have to think about. When you’re younger, when things are new, it takes you longer to write. So, shorter things feel better because it’s easier. Then something like *Dreams of the Fallen*, which I wrote right out of grad school, was longer-ish.

Christopher: And *Dreams of the Fallen* is still your longest piece, correct?

Jake: Yeah.

Christopher: Yeah, I was kind of more drawing the line at *Dreams of the Fallen*. To me I just see a shift in your compositions right at *Dreams of the Fallen*. All of a sudden it’s the new voice of this new choral generation has arrived at *Dreams of the Fallen*. That’s where I think your music changes. After that we have *Fear not, Dear Friend* and *Let my Love be Heard*. *Sing Wearing the Sky* happens right after that. All of a sudden we’re just talking about so many different issues and a shift has happened.

Jake: Yeah, I’m just thinking back to grad school. I think you’re right. Yeah, you’re right. That was the turning point. I think part of it was I was no longer a student and it was my first major commission. I had never written anything close to that before. Let alone being paid for it. I think there was a confidence that was built with that. As a student one is searching, one is exploring, one is experimenting, one is trying to figure out what this all means in the context of an academic situation where you’re graded on it, but also, trying to figure out where’s the humanity in that? And out of school, there’s no one there to tell you this is right or wrong.

Christopher: Right.

Jake: And so, I think that piece built a lot of confidence in me. And I think it felt like a really good direction. Especially after seeing the impact that it had on people. I think that helped me to really become more interested in works that can do that. Works that can speak to these social things and can touch people in a way like that. That can bring a topic into the forefront of people’s mind so they think about it, so they talk about it, they struggled with it, they wrestle with it. So yeah, I think you’re right. I think that was a major turning point.

Christopher: Nice! Jake said I’m right. This is definitely going into the dissertation. [laughter]. So, turning to your commissioning process. Is there a conductor that you really think helped put you specifically on the map?

Jake: There have been several that have been really influential. One is Robert Bode. He was one of the first to do *I Will Live Mine Eyes*. Actually, one of my friends in grad school was his previous student and so, he said to me one time “Oh man, I want to send this to my teacher”. So, he sent them another piece and then Robert wanted to do it. Now Robert has commissioned two other pieces. *Let my Love be Heard* is one of them, and so I really, really value the relationship I’ve built with him. He’s a wonderful guy and very supportive. Another one is Philip Brunelle. He’s been a huge, huge, major influence. When I moved to Minneapolis, one of the professors at

Peabody, an organ professor who I met there said, he emailed Philip saying "Hey! There's a Peabody student who is moving in there. I think you should get to know each other." So, Philip invited me to audition for Vocal Essence and I sang with that choir for like three years. So when I started, I gave Philip a sack of music, you know? And then at the very bottom of the stock was *Nyon Nyon*, just kind of thrown in there. Then when they were preparing for the Chorus America conference, here in Minneapolis he said "I wanna do this piece!" Like what!? That one? [laughter] Are you sure?" And so, he did it and who was in the audience? Well, lots of choral connections including Andre Thomas. He grabbed it and was like, "I want it." So, he started doing it with this group at Florida State. Then he did it with some honor choirs and All-States and then it just spread like wildfire from there. Andre was really important. Then Patrick Quigley with Seraphic Fire. They did the first recording of *I Will Life Mine Eyes*, which was amazing and incredible and beautiful. That was my first connection to a professional choir. Then I wrote those three pieces for Seraphic and the later wrote *The Hope of Loving*. I have a really beautiful relationship with them. There are so many more I could talk about. I guess I'm just thinking chronologically those are some of the earlier ones.

Christopher: That's great that you had so many positive exchanges. So, with your compositional process. I've heard you say you let the text kind of dictate where the piece goes in a previous interview. So, I can just envision Jake Runestad, walking around his house, singing random melodies to this text until something pops out. Is that kind of what happens with you or how does that --

Jake: That's exactly right.

Christopher: Okay. [laughter].

Jake: I was just thinking about this. In my hometown growing up we had amazing jingles on the radio, they were really, really well written. I'm actually trying to research to find who wrote some of them because the way that they set text is absolutely brilliant. It was spot on. It feels natural, it's sing-able, and so a part of my toolbox is my background. Then I would just sing things making up melodies for words, and I've always done that. I still do that. I'll just sing something and find out how it feels natural in the voice and so that's part of my process. I sing it until I find how it feels natural within the context of the sound world or the image, you know the film that I'm trying to create.

Christopher: And you're talking about just like the regional jingles in Rockford?

Jake: Yeah. Yeah. Like, Anderson Automotive Group. [singing] "Anderson Automotive Group, to keep you out in front, be a part of it and Anderson, be a part of the tradition, everywhere you go, [recalling the lyrics] makes us the ones to know, experience and service, putting you out in front." [laughter] Yeah, it's so good! And there was a blues one, FNF Tire World. "FNF Tire World is [recalling the lyrics] on me, it's more than this tires, it's what your car needs, FNF has the best service and it starts with the price that's right. It's good for what you drive, you gotta head on over that FNF Tire." Like brilliant!

Christopher: That's amazing that you remember though.

Jake: Isn't it?

Christopher: It's amazing.

Jake: It's so good.

Jake: What I've discovered, is you can take just about every melody from my music and sing it as a jazz tune, up tempo. [singing and snapping] "Angels where you soar up to God's over light and take my own last bird on you." Melody is such an important part for me and I have a jazz background so you have the head, you have theme, and then you have variation that or the chorus. And so, for me melody is so crucial.

Christopher: Then once you have this melody with this text then what's your next step?

Jake: I figure out how it fits into the sound world. So, for example, let's talk about *Let my Love be Heard*. I found that melody and I figured, "Okay well, I have to introduce it somehow, but I harmonized it, just a very basic version of the harmony. Then figured out, well how I do I want it to progress? Some of the introduction and then, like a drone and basic skeletal harmony with "ooh's" with the tenors on the melody and then we state it full with everyone on the chorus. And then we move on to like the angels the soaring of the triplets. Then I figured out the introduction later because it's just outlying of the very, very basic structure of the harmony, which is to this minor 6 to the 4 major 7 chord. Which I discovered while I was harmonizing the melody. Then once I figured that out then I've threw that harmony at the beginning to introduce the material as this is like a basic structure all element of the piece. So, I want you to hear this and then we have a melody. Then finally state it in full when everyone else comes in.

Christopher: That's fascinating to me. I would have guessed that you started with the beginning, but you start with the melody. Do you find yourself doing that a lot?

Jake: Oh yeah.

Christopher: Cool.

Jake: Yeah. I think that's an important process that not a lot of choral composes especially do. Right now, we have many people writing, which is awesome and I love that. But people sit down and they write what they can play at the piano and usually do it in real time from beginning to end. When musical structure should be created, I think, by foundational content. Like Bach did with the inventions, you have a theme, then you figure out how to harmonize the theme, then how you introduce the theme, and how do you develop the theme. So, starting with these basic building blocks, like if you're building a house you don't just say "Okay, let's start building!"

Christopher: Right.

Jake: First you have to imagine and then you have to create the blueprint. Then with the blueprint there are practical elements, but this also creative design. When you enter a certain entry way how does it feel with an arc or whatever it might be? Then you begin putting these various things

together. You have your materials and you have your concepts. So, I think it's important for people to realize that. Music isn't just written from start to finish. There's that generative, creative side where you're creating information or you're creating content, and then there's a technical side where you're putting it together. Where you're harmonizing it, you're orchestrating or reconstructing, you're figuring out how to introduce it.

Christopher: So, for you it's always, let me find the text first, then put the melody to the text, and then build around that.

Jake: All filtered within or filtered through the sound world. So, when I conceive of a piece, I can see what the painting looks like or what the film looks like, because I have a clear sense of that. And then when I create, it's filtered through that sound world.

Christopher: Okay. Cool. So, this is probably an impossible question, but do you have a piece that you are the proudest of composing?

Jake: I think that there are pieces that I'm proud of for different reasons. I'm really proud of *Dreams of the Fallen* for the sheer size and scope of it. It took a lot work and lot of time, and I'm really proud of that. I'm also really proud of the message that I hope that it tells. I'm really proud of *Come to the Woods* because I love it. Something about that piece just feels so natural. It feels like an absolutely pure extension of me. I think that when I'm writing, it's very physical sensation. Like when I was writing that part about bending and swirling, I was standing up and I was just like, [singing enthusiastically] "Bending and swirling and round and round, bending in this wild sea...", and then it's a little scary and then it's just like, "Wow! This is amazing."

Christopher: Yeah! I definitely feel that. Sometimes I'll even move to your music, especially that piece. And not necessarily in a conducting gesture, but in a physical manor. That piece especially invokes so much motion because that's just how I feel it. I love it.

Jake: Awesome! I love that. And I think with every piece there's some physicality to it. Like *Let my Love be Heard*. It begins to very low, deep place "ooh and ooh's, which is a vowel that's deep, that's low, and that's inside. And then gradually we move in to that triplet section which becomes "ah's" which is outward, right? So, this is physical movement. The sensation of moving from inward to outward, but then returning inward on the "oohs" again. And then especially with rhythm. The way that we speak the text has a different physical sensation if it's all quarter notes versus if it changes between quarters and eights and triplets. And there's so much that you can communicate through rhythm that you can't do with melody, or that you can't do with harmony. That you feel physically, so in that moment "Bending and swirl", I could done [singing in a straight duple rhythm] "Bending and swirling" and...

Christopher: But it doesn't feel right.

Jake: Doesn't work!

Christopher: Yeah, definitely. Do you have a piece that you are surprised to find under-performed?

Jake: [laughter] *Nada Te Turbe*, I think is one of them. Maybe people just don't connect with that one, or maybe the people just don't know it or it hasn't had a very public performance.

Christopher: So, without going into more detail than you'd feel comfortable, can you tell me which pieces are the most popular and being performed the most?

Jake: Yeah. Okay. Well my most popular pieces are *Nyon Nyon*, *Alleluia*, *Let My Love be Heard*, and *Please Stay* is getting up there. I think those are probably the most popular as far as sales numbers anyway.

Christopher: So, what's next for you? What do you envision writing next?

Jake: Yeah. Well, a big thing is I got the Brock Commission from ACDA. So I'm writing the big piece for the National Convention in 2019, Kansas City. So, I'll be doing that.

Christopher: Do you know what the topic is going to be yet?

Jake: I don't know yet. I'm working through it right now.

Christopher: What are the parameters of that?

Jake: It's completely wide open.

Christopher: Wow.

Jake: Which is just really hard.

Christopher: Yeah. And you have the piece for Craig, what's that about?

Jake: Yeah, I'm working on that right now. I'm trying to find a text. It's kind of about the importance of community and diversity, I think. And I think it will be with brass?

Christopher: So, like brass quartet or brass choir or?

Jake: So, like it could be paired with the Rutter Gloria kind of idea. Right now, I'm working on consortium for like five college choirs also, so I think maybe doing a new text by Todd Boss. I'm orchestrating this piece that I just had premiered by the Dallas Symphony Chorus. So, they're going to tour Europe with that. And then I think *Into the Light*, the reformation one was is on there too. What else is coming up? Let me check my schedule. Okay, let's see. Oh, a wind band thing, I get back in the wind band world. I've have gotten an orchestral piece and I've got another choir and orchestra thing.

Christopher: And these are all like deadlines within the next year or two or?

Jake: The next three years. The next due date is this college consortium and then Craig. Then I'm doing a piece for, well it's supposed to premier in Barcelona, for one of these tour companies too. But, I might go to Hawaii instead, I don't know...

Christopher: The life of Jake Runestad, "Where do I go to Barcelona or like go to Hawaii?"

Jake: Yeah. Well, you know.

Christopher: So, have you had the turn down things yet because you're busy?

Jake: Yeah. Yeah. It's a very fortunate place to be in.

Christopher: Do you have a specific issue that you haven't written on that's really important that you're like trying to find a way to do that soon.

Jake: Yeah. I want to write about the experience of being diagnosed with cancer and losing someone; being a part of that community and going through that. That's something I really want to write about. There's another story that I've wanted to tell about a friend of mine who was in the military, in the Singing Sergeants, and he is gay and he married a woman before he went in to the military so that no one would question him about that part of his life. His, now husband, did the same thing.

Christopher: Holy cow.

Jake: Wasn't a musician, but married the woman to prevent any sort of issue. Then they met and had to both get divorces, you know, after they're out of the service so that they could be together. Then when they wanted to get married, but they couldn't get married in the state they lived in. So, they went Canada and got married. And then finally, when it was legal in their state and they could get married they did. So yeah, I want to tell that story. I think it's an amazing story.

Christopher: That's unbelievable.

Jake: So, those are two that I'm really interested in doing.

Christopher: Well, Jake, I'm officially out of questions now. Is there anything else that you feel is important to say or something I didn't ask you'd like to mention?

Jake: Well I think there's all this outward stuff but also keeping in mind that everything I write about is also deeply based on personal experiences. We all fall in love, we all have loss, we all have breakups, we all have people that are important to us and... You know, not that I'll go in to specifics on all of that, but I think that's an important part of what it means to be an artist and how we express. So, I don't know how that plays in to what you're doing, maybe it's just more of something that you think about as you're looking at *Let my Love be Heard* and thinking, "Why on earth did you write this or what kind of breakup was he going through?" [laughter] So just kind of put that in your head that these are about exterior things, but also drawn on very personal things as well.

Christopher: Definitely. Makes sense.

Jake: Yeah, I think there's a lot of good stuff there. I don't know how the rhythm thing plays into what you're talking about, but I do think that's an important part of what I do. So, that it feels very natural. It's funny I get people that tell me that, "You know, I listen to a lot of music but yours just feels so natural in the voice" and I feel like, shouldn't it always?

Christopher: Well, I think that might just be you walking around the house, singing through the melodies until something feels natural. And then if it feels natural to you, then it's likely to feel natural to an English speaker. So, that makes sense. And I think maybe the rhythm is just you dictating what feels natural as supposed to trying to fit a rhythm into a specific measure. This is what felt natural coming out, so how do I make that fit in to the music?

Jake: Exactly. And I think maybe that also speaks to what I'm interested in. The human element, right? As opposed to the systemic element. It should feel natural as opposed to fitting in some sort of mold.

Christopher: Yeah. Definitely. I like it. Alright, well thank you so much Jake, I really appreciate your time. If I have any more questions I'll send you a quick email just as we go if something comes up if that's alright. I know you're busy, but I really appreciate your time.

Jake: Yeah. Reach out anytime.

Christopher: I will. Have a good rest of your day and we'll be in touch very soon.

Jake: Alright see you!

Christopher: Bye, Jake.

Josh: Hello!

Chris: Hey Josh! How are you?

Josh: I'm great!

Chris: Okay. So, I know you're under a time constraint let's get started! First, when you're going to commission a composer, what do you look for?

Josh: Well, quality music number 1. Number 2, I would say-- There are just practical things you have to have, like people who deliver music on time.

Chris: Yeah.

Josh: We're really interested in people who have the history of being able to meet deadlines. And then, also I would say people who are artistically interesting. We've got the summer festival in

Santa Fe, that's usually what we're commissioning for. Sometimes for tours and recordings and things like that, but we want people who can speak and who can engage audiences. People who can be a part of the mission that we have to make more people love choral music.

Chris: Makes sense. So, then specifically about Jake. What about him specifically has drawn you to him?

Josh: Yeah, I'd say all of those things. We commissioned him because he is good at writing for different kinds of ensembles. He can write music that is interesting and engaging to a professional chamber chorus, and he can write music that is engaging, interesting and performable by a community chorus of 350 singers. I'd say on top of that, he's interested in good words. Choral music is distinguished from orchestral music by the fact that we're working with text. So many of our performers and audience members come to that music from the point of view of the words. So, we're looking for people who are interested in good words, who can set them well, and I think Jake does that.

Chris: And do you think that his matching with the text to the music is really what draws audiences to him or do you think it's more than just that?

Josh: Oh, yeah! I think that's a piece of it. But you and I both know a lot of pretty and positive pieces that are empty musically. So, I don't think that's the whole story. I think the story is that positive message combined with something of musical substance.

Chris: Yeah, absolutely. So, if you were to say that Jake has some kind of specialty as a composer, what would you say?

Josh: You know, I wouldn't pretend to be an expert on his music to be honest with you, I've done three or four of his pieces but, really that's it. I know he has a lot more some of which I've looked at, some of which we're planning for future seasons but, I wouldn't pretend to say I'm an expert in his music. It's hard for me to tell you what his specialties are because there's so much of his music I don't know. With that said, though, he is very good at matching the music to the text.

Chris: Okay, so since *Dreams of the Fallen* in 2013 he began to shape his compositions into inclusiveness, acceptance, understanding, and just the overall betterment of the human condition. Where do you think that fits in the overall grand scheme of things in choral music?

Josh: I think it's something that people are more interested in now. In having sort of social commentary inside of music, but it's certainly not new. We know that it goes back centuries and people were commenting in political social aspects of society for music long before Jake Runestad came along.

Chris: Of course.

Josh: So, it's not something that he's created, but I think it's something that is more explicit in what he does. I think that's going to be appealing to some people and not to others frankly, and I

think that that's okay. I love quoting the figure from Chorus America that it is 43 million of us participating in choral music in United States and that's, my gosh, think of the variety. Think of the variety of circumstances in which choral music is being done. In academic institutions, professional ensembles, community based ensembles, children's groups, religious institutions. Each one of those situations is going to have its own circumstances in which socially infused commentary is more or less appropriate.

Chris: Yeah.

Josh: Right? So, I think it fits into a certain part of our American experience, but it's not everywhere. I think it's a big tent. There's enough room for people who are interested in writing this kind of music and there's plenty of room in the American choral experience for people who aren't interested in that. So, I don't think it's sort of the trend now. I don't think it's the way that all music is going. I think that it's one direction that it's going and I think some people find it interesting and appealing.

Chris: Right. So, speak a little about your recent commission with the Dallas Symphony Chorus. Did you dictate the theme or did you dictate the text?

Josh: I left the words of it to him, but I told him that I wanted the theme to be around the joy of singing and I think that's a pretty uncontroversial. So, I didn't sense any push back or anything like that. I think some of his other pieces are more, I don't want to say socially edgy cause they're not particularly edgy, but they're at least more socially conscious. Socially conscious in a way that there might be people on another side, in a way that this piece really isn't.

Chris: Yeah. So, you've commissioned two pieces for Jake, one with Santa Fe and one with Dallas, is that correct?

Josh: Yeah.

Chris: And was your process basically the same where you give him a theme and say run wild?

Josh: We let him select the text because I love doing that with composers. I feel like composers who are sensitive to words, and most of the people that we work with are, are going to work better if they themselves feel like they're attracted to an ownership over the music they're setting. If somebody comes along and they say "God, I love this poetry" and we say "we've been wanting somebody to set that poetry forever, so let's do it," well great. We're happy to dictate that. But I love giving composers free reigns so they feel like they've got a real personal connection.

Chris: Is that your experience with everyone that you've commissioned in that process or has there ever been any back and forth with anyone you've commissioned?

Josh: Yeah, but I think it just depends on the person. There's always some composers that when you commission them you say, we're looking for something that's 9 minutes of music, and they come back with something that's 16 minutes and you say "Oh, gosh." That can always happen. There can be back and forth. All that stuff does happen. I haven't done a million of these to be

honest, but in the experiences that I've had, the majority had been with people that I knew had a pretty good sense based on their history of what they were likely to do.

Chris: That makes sense. So, of course in the moment of time it's hard to pin point, but if you had to say there's one thing that gives Jake Runestad's music a chance to last in the test of time what would that one thing be?

Josh: Well, it's good music and good words. I'm looking for a different way to say it. I think that's the point. Whether something will last, nobody knows. You know, in Bach's time people thought that Telemann was the guy for the job and now we hear a little bit about Telemann. I do think that things will last through a system now, because of our connectivity. Individual people are more able to market themselves and become known on their own terms rather than working for publishers. It's now possible for composers to advocate for themselves in a way that makes the market place a lot louder and more heterogeneous.

Chris: Right.

Josh: So, I don't know what's going to happen down the road, whether his music will continue to be known. We are obviously voting with our pocket books right now though, and we're saying we want to do his music because we like it. It has something to say to us and our audiences. We've definitely found a connection there. Whether it'll be present a hundred years from now, 20 years from now, I don't know.

Chris: Yeah. It's impossible to know. So, this is probably more towards Santa Fe, but have you done a themed concert on this idea of social justice, inclusiveness, acceptance, understanding or anything along those lines? And do you find that to be an important concept as a choral conductor in this time or not?

Josh: It depends on how big of a tent you stretch over that concept. We have not done something that is very overtly social justice or inclusiveness, mostly because I think that can come up as very preachy. Particularly in a community environment. I look at our role and my role in general is to make more people love choral music. Really that's it. Because I love it and I want more people to love it so that it continues to survive. I'm not one of those "doom-sayers" who looks at classical music and says it's dying. It's not. There are 43 million of us. It's not dying it's thriving!

Chris: Exactly.

Josh: It's changing, and that's worth talking about. I think that that's true. But bottom-line, I want to be part of the team that continues to advocate for it and makes more people love it. When we do concerts in Santa Fe, they're basically all themed concerts. I want the theme to be something that will reach a lot of different people, of different political backgrounds, different personal persuasions and social persuasions. I think that we're too walled off now into camps and preaching to the converted is not something that I'm particularly interested in doing. Setting up an echo-chamber to your own social views, albeit satisfying, I don't think is that interesting. If you can draw a diverse crowd of people in, by demonstrating through a concert the

interconnectedness that we share across social and political boundaries, I think that's more interesting.

Chris: Yeah, I think so too.

Josh: But I don't think a concert entitled, you know, “inclusiveness” or “let’s get behind transgender people” or some horrible main idea—

Chris: [Laughter] Yeah.

Josh: But you know, you get the idea.

Chris: Yeah, of course.

Josh: I don't think that's going to do it. I think something like we did this last summer is a good example of something that very much fits that criteria. We did a program called *Liberté*, obviously “liberty.” I took its name from the final movement of the *Figure Humane*. So, we opened with a William Byrd piece, you know why, and then we did music from *Liberté*, which is music World War II written in resistance times. We did music for the Baltic countries around the singing revolutions in the late 80's early 90's when Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania broke off. We sang some of the music from the singing revolution and then we sang some of the music from World War II that was sung in the concentration camps. Then we tied that to African-American spirituals. So yes. We've certainly done a program like that. We gave an overarching theme to the entire summer called “Liberty and Justice,” and we did a whole justice program with André Thomas doing spirituals and gospel music. So yes, we do that.

Chris: I've heard from so many people how great that experience was with Andre Thomas.

Josh: It was cool. It was absolutely cool. We see the value in all those things, but we do it in a certain way. We're going through a certain political moment right now which won't be forever. I will say lots of people gave me credit for doing what they perceived as a social justice, resistance, program during a time that some parts of our society are feeling desire to do that. The truth is though, that I had programmed that concept two years before. So, that happened to be a coincidence, but I will say that it resonated with people. And it's not surprising that humans continue to play out the same dramas century after century. That what was happening in Williams Byrd's time, and what was happening in World War II, and what happened in the 1980's and 90's is happening again. We're just people playing out these dramas again and again.

Chris: Do you think with this concert it was reaching people in a different way that maybe different media outlets aren't?

Josh: Yes. We had a lot of really positive feedback from the audience members. Of course, people usually don't take the time to come up to you and tell you after a concert that they just really hated it. So, maybe that happened, I don't know. That has happened, for the record but it's just not very common. The feedback that we got was consistently really positive. We've also been involved in community engagements after it with different kinds of social justice themes

with our community in Santa Fe, and we think the music amplifies that and makes more people interested in it. So, that is good.

Chris: Yeah, definitely! So, although it may not be new, to me there is a difference in the number of pieces being written on these themes. With Jake, of course, but Abbie Betinis, Andrea Ramsey, Considering Matthew Shepherd with Craig Hella Johnson for example. There's now justicechoir.org. Do you think we've reached the peak or do you think it's going to keep growing?

Josh: I think that people are being positively impacted by it. The idea of justice within social value explicitly being expressed within choral music. Again, it's not new, but when we have composers who can do compelling things musically, and I think certainly *Considering Matthew Shepherd* is a compelling piece. I loved it when I saw it. I loved it and of course I'm already converted because it's Craig.

Chris: Of course.

Josh: So, you know, I'm pretty bought in.

Chris: Right.

Josh: But I really love it and I think that it's going to continue to inspire people. I also think that, like in any movement, there are better and worse versions of it. There's some music that is being written on these themes that I think it's not that interesting. So, it's not the theme that's going to carry to that. In my view, it's the quality of the music combined with the social background.

Chris: I completely agree. Okay Josh, I know you are super busy, but thank you so much for your time!

Josh: Totally. If anything comes up as you write, if you need clarifications or whatever, feel free to reach out.

Chris: I will do that. Thank you again so much. I appreciate your time.

Josh: Yeah, you're welcome and good luck in all you're doing up there.

Chris: Alright, thanks so much.

Christopher: Hello there!

Jonathan: How are you?

Christopher: I'm good. How are you?

Jonathan: I'm doing well. Thank you!

Christopher: Alright. Great. I'm so thankful that we're able to finally find this time and it's great to actually be speaking with you. Thanks so much for taking the time on to your day.

Jonathan: Absolutely, I'm really sorry to that I [laughs] had to re-schedule twice.

Christopher: No, it's completely fine. No worries at all. Okay. Let's get started! First, just overall in a commissioning. What exactly do you look for if you're looking to commission a composer?

Jonathan: I have to like their music. That's the most important thing. So, those pieces that I commissioned in the past I have to like the composer. I have to believe that they're going to be a part of the process in terms of bringing the pieces to life. I want them to come visit. I want them to have great taste in text. I'm not going to dictate that. I won't dictate it but I will give them some ideas if they ask. Yeah, I guess that's probably it.

Christopher: So, along those lines is that what drew you to Jake?

Jonathan: What drew me to Jake was that my partner had died suddenly of a heart attack. And in his wallet was one business card. That business card was Jake Runestad. I knew Jake's music and I have to be honest with you, I didn't like the *Alleluia*, I didn't like the *Nyon, Nyon* and I still don't [laughs]. Jake and I know this. And that's kind of what he was known for at that point. Everybody was singing *Nyon, Nyon*. And so, I hadn't really heard much of his other music. Well, once I found his card, I went on his website. I looked at the other things that he had written and thought, oh wow, this guy writes a lot of really beautiful music. And so, I spoke to Edith Copley, who is the Director of Choral Activities that in Northern Arizona University. And I said, would you like to co-commission a piece with me in his memory? She said yes. Then I said, well, there was one business card in his wallet and it is Jake's. Seems like a no-brainer to me, let's ask Jake to do it. That's how.

Christopher: Wow. So, what do you think draws audiences to his music? Why do you think audiences love his music?

Jonathan: It's accessible. He has great influence from popular music in terms of his progressions. He was a Jazz player growing up. He plays really good saxophone and really good jazz piano. He won't say that in front of most people, but I can tell you as one of his dearest friend that he plays well. And so, there's a lot of that sensibility in his music. Most of his text are in English or sometimes use a hybrid, for example, *We Can Mend the Sky*. It has Somali and English. But generally, the pieces that he writes for the most part are in English. That's accessible to people. I think the fact that he is such a fine text setter; really one of the finest living text setters. In my opinion, what has also attracted people to his music is his absolute fearless alteration between duple and triplets. It is reminiscent of Benjamin Britten and Dominick Argento more than anybody else. But his language, his musical language, is much more accessible than either Britten or Argento.

Christopher: Yeah, I think so, too. So, I know that you have a really great relationship with Jake, but can you talk about what is so enjoyable to you working with Jake?

Jonathan: Because we're such good friends I can catch him in the middle of a rehearsal and say "What do you need here? Which I do all the time. So, I think that one of the things, especially people with DMA programs, is we begin to believe in the absolute nature of score, right? The score is to be respected above all. But sometimes the composer is wrong. [laughter]

Christopher: I think so, too.

Jonathan: You know. [laughter] Sometimes the tempo is too fast, sometimes the tempo is too slow. And when you're talking about Aaron Copland, Benjamin Britten, or you know someone who's like an icon, who has put terrible markings in their scores, you think okay well I can't mess with this because Leonard Bernstein said sixty, so it must be sixty. And then you listen to five recordings of Chichester Psalms and you realized he does it at seventy-two and not sixty. And you suddenly go okay, well maybe it wasn't so holy after all. I think that the combination of recognizing that there's lots of things that play into great music making and having someone that you're really close to that you can just say, "Hey! man, I'm wondering if it be possible if we did this instead?" Thus far he's almost never said no. Also, being in Los Angeles, I don't even know how many times he has come out and worked with my students. It's so clear to me that what they want is a musical affect or musical idea to be brought forth in the best possible way. If that means you sing it for an extra beat, then great go for it. And I think that having that kind of personal relationship with the real composers is a blessing, in that, most people don't conduct the choir like mine, or they can't get the time a day from the good composers. What he says is "well do what I wrote" and you say "well, I'm not sure what you meant here." Oh! really, okay. Well let's talk about that. As soon as you can say I studied the score and I'm not sure I understand, they're really interested in what you have to say.

Christopher: You know, when I was talking with Jake and when I ask him about what he meant in a specific spot, and he said, "well, what do you think it means?" I was so intrigued by that because it was very obvious that he wanted me to have an opinion, and I really love that.

Jonathan: I think that's his Libby Larsen training. She says the same thing. What does it mean to you?

Christopher: Definitely. So, in 2013 I feel that Jake shifted his compositional emphasis to primarily writing on inclusiveness, acceptance, and understanding. He is writing on different ideas of Social-Justice. So, first to you agree with me and second where do you think these ideas fits into the choral genre?

Jonathan: I agree with you on principle but your missing environmentalist. If you added environmentalism into Social-Justice, then I would agree with you. I think number one, he's not a traditionally religious human being and so I don't believe he has any desire to set a mass setting and he doesn't want to write a traditional requiem. He doesn't want to do matins or lauds. None of that interest him because it doesn't speak to his soul. What speaks to his soul is people being better to each other. People eradicating racism. People feeding the hungry. I think that he's

looking at two-thousand years of Christian text and saying "well that hasn't work in our choirs." And certainly, what he is doing is working. I mean you look the way people react to *Let My Love Be Heard*. Just my recording of *Let My Love Be Heard*, which is a religious text, but it is really about a soul loving as much as we can, the reaction to that piece is astonishing. It was like a hundred thousand views on YouTube and another Hundred and Fifty Thousand on Sound Cloud. And who knows how many people listened to that. And that's just one recording of it.

Christopher: You're right. It's really unbelievable. So, the second half of the question, where do you think this fits into that?

Jonathan: Well, I think secular music by skilled and trained composers is relatively new outside of drinking songs. [laughs] Or songs about nature that you might get in Mendelssohn or Schumann or something like that. That kind of music pales in comparison in terms of output to the requiems, mass settings, and the song settings of all that sort of stuff. The reality is people are singing as much in public, non-religious institutions, now as they are in church in the US. And people who are singing in church are not necessarily singing 4-part anthems anymore. So, I think we have to find the music that speaks to our better angels without saying you've got to be a Christian to have a better angel.

Christopher: Yeah, I think so.

Jonathan: And I think Jake's music does that beautifully. So yes, I do think this is a change.

Christopher: You spoke on this a little bit with *And So I Go On* and you said you don't necessarily give Jake text, so did he come up with the text alone?

Jonathan: We are both friends with the guy named Todd Boss, who is a really well-respected poet from Minneapolis. He has just release his forth book with Norton and Sons which is one of the truly great publishing houses in the world, and you don't get to publish with them unless your good. I mean they did the Anthology of English Literature. It's like publishing with Oxford from a musical perspective. And Jake and Todd had become friends, and Jake said I'm having a really hard time with this commission and I have an idea of maybe two lovers talking to each other across the great divide, and I'm just wondering if we can put something together? And Todd came up with this poem. I never saw the poem when it was being worked on. And I did not see the piece until it was finished.

Christopher: Wow. It really is beautiful. If you were to commission another work of Jake's would you try to steer him in a direction or would you do the same type of thing again?

Jonathan: Well, do you have Twenty Thousand to give me? [laughs] So I can play with this for reals. [laughs].

Christopher: Yeah that will be great, wouldn't it? [laughs]

Jonathan: I can't afford him anymore and he's my best friend. I think I would accept the premise that he is going to look to distill text from sources that basically say one way or another for

humans to be better to each other. To be better to your earth and to yourself. Like even with *The Peace of Wild Things*. It is about environmentalism but it's also about recreation. It's about getting outside, which is very important to Jake. The first time he and I really hung out, we took a four-day camping trip. That was like our first real hang out that wasn't on the phone or when he came out to do a commission. So, I think that I would accept it if I was choosing to commission Jake. It would probably be in that Social-Justice realm. I think his musical style is evolving, but I don't see him writing any meaningless texts. Jake is one of the most creative people. Honest to God, if you said Jon, who are the most creative people you know in your life? Two of the Three, Jake Runestad and Eric Whitacre, and I'm not just talking about musically. I'm talking about creative, open minded thinking people. They're both brilliant, obviously, but they have this way of looking at the world. I think to box him in and say this is what I want-- I wouldn't do that with him. I would probably ask, what you want to write about? Do I need to give you some perimeters? For *And So I go On* I said, I want two choirs. I want it to be hard. And so, what did he do? He started in unison. [laughs] It is a beautiful melody, though.

Christopher: Yeah his melodies are, he's found some amazing melodies. Before we go on from that, you said you think his compositional style is changing. What did you mean by that?

Jonathan: I think compositional styles are always evolving. There are some composers who write the same. And you know, I'm not going to name any names, but there are plenty of living composers that keep writing the same piece over and over again.

Christopher: I agree.

Jonathan: Jake is not going to do that. So even the piece that he premiered last weekend. [Into the Light] you haven't seen it yet, right?

Christopher: I haven't seen it. I saw that it was happening but I haven't heard it or seen the music yet.

Jonathan: So, there's very much a Social-Justice theme to it. And the one that is premiering this week in Dallas is a John Muir text like *Come to the Woods*. So, he's still very much a Social-Justice minded composer.

Christopher: Absolutely. Do you think there is a better term for Jake's music than social justice? It does seem like I'm having the say well it's Social-Justice, but it's also about acceptance and loving yourself, which is kind of Social-Justice but not a hundred percent. Then environmentalist is there too. Do you think there's a better way to put his music into a category than Social-Justice?

Jonathan: Well, I hate to say it but most of it is secular humanist. It's not overtly religious music. Even *Into the Light* that he just did for Valpo. He said to me, I'm going to send them my text and say this is where I am and I really can't make any alterations. He doesn't want to write a piece with part of the gospel in it. It's not where he is. He wants it to be open and affirming to all people.

Christopher: And do you think that he would have done that same thing ten years ago?

Jonathan: Well, he couldn't afford it. [laughs] He's a thirty-year-old composer making a living as a composer, and that gives you a certain amount of freedom. There are thousands of princes but only one Beethoven.

Christopher: You leave me with all sorts of your quotes. [laughs]

Jonathan: Oh, sorry.

Christopher: No, I love it. I love it. So, go ahead you were saying something else.

Jonathan: No, so I really think that allows a certain amount of freedom. Being overly religious is just not him. My soul is the candle that can burn away the darkness, that's who he is.

Christopher: Yeah, what beautiful text. So, what gives him the chance to stand that test of time that you're always trying to look for in a composer?

Jonathan: He writes beautiful melodies. He's a melodist in an age where melody has been lost. Composers sit at pianos and write nice chords because they like the way they sound. They don't take the time to walk around their house to sing a line like Hugo Wolf did, and Brahms did, and Mozart did, or Rossini did who was famous for whistling around the village. Jake Runestad sings all the time and usually he is singing his music. Jake Runestad sings, oh believe me. He sings all the time. He never shuts up. And usually he is singing his music. It's a joke. I'll ask him, why are you singing that and he'll say, "I think I like it, I wrote it." I know! [laughter] He sings his own tunes all the time but they're good tunes. They really are. But, if you compare that to any other composer you like right now, can you sing a melody from their piece? Not that it isn't there, but it isn't something that you walk out of a place going, "oh, I get it."

Christopher: Right.

Jonathan: You know? And sometimes some of Jake's pieces have a little bit Broadway in them. They got a little bit of jazz and jazz standards, American song book Broadway. Like I said he was a sax player.

Christopher: Right.

Jonathan: You know, he played those melody lines and those melody lines are a part of who he is and what he writes. For me it is a bit of the culmination of post-tonal, second coming of Romanticism in American choral music?

Christopher: Yeah.

Jonathan: Yeah, in America this is a comeback, you know? We went through the fifties and the sixties and the seventies with serialism and all that sort of stuff.

Christopher: People wanted something that's pretty again

Jonathan: Conductors want to do some music that's really pretty.

Christopher: Yeah, so do you think that Jake's melodies are what separates him from someone like Eric Whitacre then?

Jonathan: I think that Eric is more interested in the effect of the music from the audience and Jake is more interested in the effect of the melody on the singer.

Christopher: Okay, I like it. I totally see that.

Jonathan: So, Eric is painting with big, broad brush strokes. He's an extraordinary writer of harmony. He writes big, beautiful lush chords. It's not that he can't write a melody, because Eric can write a good melody too, but it's not his principle thing. Where I think that Jake's music starts with the words and thinking about this text and what song comes to mind.

Christopher: So, I have found that a lot of times Jake uses a leit motif and text painting, which comes from starting with the text. Do you see any other compositional styles used in most of his music?

Jonathan: Well, I think there's a combination of those things. I think he has a thing that he does. The "Ah section" in *Let My Love Be Heard* is not unlike the *And So I Go On* section in terms of building to a giant climax.

Christopher: Right.

Jonathan: --or if you look at *Spirited Light*. Do you know *Spirited Light*?

Christopher: I know it minimally since it is so new.

Jonathan: Okay, so *Spirited Light* does the same thing where it builds and builds and builds to a giant explosion of sound. Then takes a deep breath and comes back and makes you think.

Christopher: Yeah, that's the same thing with *We Can Mend the Sky*. The second half starts with that solo and then builds up to this big thing then it kind of comes back.

Jonathan: Yeah, "if we come together, we can mend the crack in the sky." Right. That sort of thing. But where does that come from? That comes from gospel, right? That comes from the gospel church. That comes from a jazz jam session where you're building and building and building and it finally goes away.

Christopher: Right.

Jonathan: More sounds, more harmony, repetition.

Christopher: Right.

Jonathan: But it's not repetition by itself. It changes.

Christopher: Totally.

Jonathan: You know, if you look at *Let My Love Be Heard*. The guys sing, "Let My Love Be Heard", and then there is a chord inversion, and then it goes up again and again and the fifth time it goes up and all of the sudden the tenor sing a high A full voice. It's so effective. Now is it going to get old? If he keeps doing it, yeah. He's going to have to find a different thing to do. It can't just be that.

Christopher: Yeah, but I do think it works. I think that it's powerful when you're trying to get across this message of like you said, *Let My Love Be Heard*. It is like, no really. Listen to me. Let my love be heard!

Jonathan: It's extraordinarily powerful.

Christopher: Right. Okay, so just for the record, what is your view on social justice and equality and these things that Jake writes on?

Jonathan: Well, for the record I think we're living in a really messed up time.

Christopher: Yeah.

Jonathan: I think that the composers that have the intestinal fortitude to fight against that are the ones that history will look kindly on. The ones who are writing *credo, credo, credo*, and outside of the educational music, which I understand there's a need for music that speaks to high school kids and teaches them about text stress and counting and all that sort of stuff, but if someone wants to be taken seriously in this world, they have to talk about serious topics.

Christopher: Right.

Jonathan: Jake is taken seriously because he is talking about serious topics. But he also has a sense of humor. The same guy he wrote *Nyon, Nyon*, wrote *Come to The Woods*. These are very different pieces.

Christopher: Right.

Jonathan: Right? And I think that we need composers to be artist. To hold a mirror up to society and say, "This is important. Look at yourself. Look at what you're doing." And Jake is doing that. Jake is a thoughtful, intelligent, and a social justice minded human being. He cares deeply about humanity and he doesn't understand the kind of injustice that we perpetuating against each other. He gets it because he is smart. He understands the historical background, but he doesn't understand why in 2017, we're still making the kind of mistakes that we've made in the past.

Christopher: I think a lot of us can agree with that too.

Jonathan: Right! I mean, you can call him a left, liberal, blue, democrat Minnesota, hippie and he is all of those things. Except for the hippie part. He works too hard to be a hippie.

Christopher: [laughter] yeah.

Jonathan: Not to pick on hippies, but generally—

Christopher: I understand.

Jonathan: He is a worker. We were in Europe for two weeks and he was working six or seven hours a day, every single day of our vacation.

Christopher: Wow, it's not quite a vacation, but good for him.

Jonathan: But there were two deadlines.

Christopher: Right.

Jonathan: It was fine because Todd and I would go out and do our thing, come back, and pick up Jake. Then he'd be up before us the next morning and back at the computer. Jake shows up every day and I think that that's a really important thing for young composers to know. This is the guy here who writes hundreds of notes a day. Every single day of his life. And if he is not writing down on paper, he is still walking around the house singing them. He is making music constantly. I don't know that I answered your question about social justice. We need this music.

Christopher: Yeah.

Jonathan: Desperately. We need it. We really do and you know, I'm glad that there are other composers writing social justice based music, you know? We have Sydney Guillaume writing *Tchaka*, which is very much a social justice sort of piece. We can all come together that sort of thing. You have Craig Hella Johnson's--

Christopher: *Considering Matthew Shepherd*.

Jonathan: You know, "All of Us." and that's gospel without Jesus quite frankly.

Christopher: Right.

Jonathan: That's a straight up gospel piece. There's still talks of God and love and that sort of thing, but it's very much the same sort of aesthetic as Jake is going for. And we can do that because we understand the innocent are murdered in horrible ways all the time in the same way as I teach the crucifixion as an act of violence against the innocent man. It doesn't require belief in sanctity of the cross for people to understand that, though. That really helps me to teach Christian music to non-Christian singers from a Jewish perspective. I'm Jewish.

Christopher: [laughter] Okay, so you say, we need this music, and I completely agree, but who do you think it's affecting the most and how? It's clearly probably affecting the singers that you can share the story with and experience with, but how is it affecting audiences that it may not have otherwise?

Jonathan: I mean, I guess the first thing is yes. It affects the singers most because they know it best. They are the ones who have been living with the notes and the words. I think it affects audiences because people can relate to *Let My Love Be Heard*, in a way that they can relate to, *Credo in unum Deum*. So, let's talk about the original social justice music. Where does this start? Who is the first composer to really lay it out there and say, "Brothers, let's live together." When you think about a piece that does to an audience what *Let My Love be Heard* does, I think for me it starts with: (singing) *O Freunde nicht diese Töne!* Let us sing of brotherhood and love, right? So, Beethoven! It's a Romantic idea. It's a post-God over the millions the star's shine, there must be someone who loves us. It's not about Jesus. For me, there is a real big Beethoven tie to this whole thing.

Christopher: Wow! You're right! And have you ever program that entire concert around social justice or--

Jonathan: Right now! The first concert of the year is about social justice.

Christopher: Great! What you're doing on the program?

Jonathan: The theme is called, "We Can Mend the Sky."

Christopher: Okay. [laughter] Good theme.

Jonathan: It opens with just that. Let me actually pull that up so I can tell you—I have to move you over because I have to pull it up on my computer.

Christopher: Okay.

Jonathan: Okay. It is *We Can Mend the Sky* and then, *This We Know* by Ron Jeffers, which is an American Indian text, and then *When Thunder Comes* by Vivaldi which is about the destruction of our natural space by industry then *True Colors*, the Cyndi Lauper song arrange by Chris York. Power from *Three Mesa Songs* by Judith Cloud, about the power of nature and then we sing with the audience, *We Shall Overcome*. We then have a break and when we come back and we sing *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, the new arrangement by Zanaida Robles which is the Black National Anthem. Then we're doing Joshua Rist's *Invictus*, about overcoming personal obstacles and then were doing *Indodana*. The arrangement by Michael Barrett, which is about the crucifixion and crying out to God. From that we go on the *Fürchte dich nicht* of Bach which is be not afraid. Then *Horizons* of Van Dyk which is a really cool of piece about the destruction people in South Africa and then we end with *Tchaka* of Sydney Guillaume. Then combined, our choirs are doing "All of Us" from *Considering Matthew Shepherd*. We'll then end with an Irish blessing that we do at the end of every fall concert. So yeah, absolutely I believe in social justice.

Christopher: That's incredible! What is your reason for picking this concert theme?

Jonathan: We are living in the craziest time in my life. I have been alive for almost fifty years and we have a man that will not openly denounce white supremacy in the white house. We have a guy who throws paper towels to a country where half of the country is without drinking water in the white house. We have a Republican party which refuses to stand up against things we have traditionally believed in, with Republican principals, like treating people with respect and dignity. We have people saying "if you don't want to bake a cake for a gay person, you don't have to bake a cake for a gay person." We just live in crazy times and I just think it is important to bring that to people's attention.

Christopher: I completely agree. Congratulations. So, we covered everything I'd planned to ask. Is there anything else that you think is important that I should know about Jake or social justice in American choral music? Or the evolution of the partnership of social justice and music?

Jonathan: Well, I think that there's one connection that I would suggest maybe that you consider. That is the death of the traditional mainstream Protestantism in American. For music that's moving and touching and asks people to live to their better angels, you know? So, you had Randall Thompson writing religious music of the power of *The Last Words of David*, or the *Alleluia*. Something has to fill that void in education because the goal of art is to entertain and to educate, right? And so, if we're going to educate people towards their better angels I think we have no choice but to choose text that requires that we be more excellent to each other.

Christopher: Yeah, I'm 100% with you.

Jonathan: That's legit, and you talk about people like Craig Hella Johnson or Randall Thompson. These are people who grew up in church. These people with really religious backgrounds who are no longer religious.

Christopher: That's good point. I really I never put that all together but I mean it's a really, really good point.

Jonathan: I look forward reading your paper, Chris.

Christopher: Well, thank you.

Jonathan: You're welcome. If you have any other questions, feel free to reach out.

Christopher: Great. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate your time and everything you have shared. If anything else comes up, I'll just shoot you a quick e-mail.

Jonathan: Okay, it's great to meet you.

Christopher: Yeah, you too.

Jonathan: Good luck!

Christopher: Thanks! Talk with you later.

Jonathan: Buh-bye.

Patrick: Hello.

Christopher: Hi Patrick, this is Chris Hathaway. How are you?

Patrick: I'm Fine. How are you?

Christopher: I'm good. So, I just want to thank you so much for taking some time to talk. I know your schedule's ridiculous. So, thank you for the time.

Patrick: No problem.

Christopher: Okay. First, what do you look for when you specifically are commissioning composers and then what specifically out of that drew you to Jake?

Patrick: Well I mean. When I commission composers, usually I want to see; one, can they write? When I'm choosing composers for Seraphic Fire in particular. When I'm commissioning I tend to look for someone who has a distinct artistic voice, who is able to write idiomatically for the voice and still able to come across with something new. Does that make any sense?

Christopher: Yes. Definitely.

Patrick: Because when I look at the composers I'm not looking for Luciano Berio. I'm looking for someone who can write for 13 professional singers and write within the confines of what the voice can actually do in ensemble rather than as a soloist. I also like to commission people whose works I've heard. Those who have at least a couple published works already. Unless it's specifically a commissioning young composers project, I am looking for experience. Not necessarily in the genre, but that really helps. But experience putting together commissions on deadlines. I almost always have a conversation before I commission someone. And it has to be someone I honestly like. Someone that I feel I can go back and forth with 8 months and then I want to have around for the whole year. It's certainly important that they'd be able to communicate their vision to an audience. That's important for me. And that they can communicate also to musicians. That when they come to a rehearsal they don't say, "Oh that's great." Instead they say, "Okay, so this is the reason that I wrote this and this is the way it would be." I want someone who has a professional level of understanding of what musicians need in order to create the music that they do.

Christopher: Understood. So, is that what it was about Jake Runested that drew you to him?

Patrick: Jake, how did I find Jake? We came in contact with Jake by performing, *I Will Lift Mine Eyes*, which I found from his website. He's a very digitally available musician. Both through social media, but also he's easily contactable, which is very important for composer. Then we

recorded it, which was published by Boosey, and after we perform we're like, "This is someone who has a point of view." At which point, we commissioned our first set of pieces for him. Then we got *The Hope of Loving* through another commission. It was the first year of that Choral Commission that comes out of Pennsylvania. Jake came up to us and said "Hey do you guys have interest in going in together on this." And I was like, "Absolutely." And we were doing a program that had a string quartet. So I said, I need a piece to go on this romantic program. You can be a romantic as you want because you're going to be between Schubert and Brahms. So, that's how *Hope of Loving* got started.

Christopher: Since we're talking about *Hope of Loving*, did you give him any parameters? You just said be as romantic as you'd like? Did you mention anything regarding text?

Patrick: The first time I commission people, I'm usually a little bit more sort of micromanaging of what they do and approval of text and those sorts of things. I think we had one discussion about the mystics, and I just said, we have string quartet. Please keep it in four parts. And it was the second time we commissioned him and so at that point it was like, you write great stuff. Write us a Jake piece! And that's how that text came.

Christopher: Okay great. So, we've been talking about what draws you to Jake, but what do you think draws audiences to him?

Patrick: Well I think again it goes back to that thing about him having a distinctive artistic voice that he is able to accomplish within the idiomatic limits of the instrument. And I think people hear that. The reason this music sounds good is because the parts that have been written well for the members for which he is writing. There are some composers who don't have any concept of like pacing and Jake has an insane idea about pacing. He really gets the idea of something that builds to a place then has a short ending.

Christopher: Yeah. I know exactly what you mean. He's perfect to that.

Patrick: He has great musical timing that has to do with where the parts of the text that are the most striking. I think Jake provides a holistic musical experience and listener. The theoretical foundation is very, very solid. He usually sets things that people have not set already so there's originality there. There is originality in harmonic progression, originality in how he makes divisions in the vocal parts and it makes sense in the end. I commission people for music and for musical reasons and I think that people respond to music for musical reasons and anything else is just a gimmick. Jake is not a gimmick. Jake has the musicality needs a backup everything that he does. It's theoretically sounded, beautiful, and it's challenging. It's sometimes dissonant, but it all has a point. And when you end, you know what his piece was about. No one is left at the end going, "I don't know what just happened." When you hear a piece by Jake it is clearly by him. It's by no one else but him. You've understood what the harmonic, emotional, and textual content was about. There are very few things that are left unresolved at the end of his pieces in terms of the question why.

Christopher: Right.

Patrick: And both the performer and the audience member can always answer the question, “why.” At least in my experience, with the pieces of Jake’s that we’ve performed.

Christopher: That’s great! So, is there anything textually or thematically in Jake’s compositions that aligns with what you are choosing to commission or program? Or do you make your decisions purely from a musical standpoint?

Patrick: I think that the job of a conductor is not to interpret text. It's to perform text. And so, the composer has made a choice of the text that they are going to set. My job upon getting that piece is how do I communicate the text that he has set, and that is almost always a musical question and not a dramatic question. And so, I think for me, text is important in terms of what the entire piece is about, but if I say that a piece is about the sunrise, well, does that mean *piano* or does that mean *forte*? The text doesn't change. The only thing that the text changes in terms of musical interpretation is what vowel is on what syllable for how long. And in what language. Our job is to communicate both the composer’s music and the author's text to the audience. How will they receive that text? Every person interprets those textual things in a different way. I try not to get into text unless it's to indicate a specific translation. It's not my job to tell them how to feel about that text. Neither is it any musician's job to tell someone who perceives it what they should feel about it.

Christopher: Right.

Patrick: So, it's sort of like if you look at a painting. Do you perceive it as the colors, do you perceive it as lines, or do you simply perceive it as a painting? My personal conducting philosophy is that I would like people to take a piece as a piece and a sum of the parts, and the text is one of those parts.

Christopher: Right.

Patrick: If it was just text, it would be a poetry recitation.

Christopher: Yeah, definitely.

Patrick: So, from the way I approach music the text matters because I'm not going to program Holy Thursday text for Christmas concert. But beyond the programmatic elements of it, I think that once I put something on a program, my job is then to give that piece the best possible performance and communicate everything the composer has put on the page. And I can have personal interactions with these texts, but as a musician, I don't think that it matters what my personal opinion of this text is. I think what matters is the composer's opinion of these texts.

Christopher: Right.

Patrick: And it's not like I want to say it's not my job, but really it is not my place to do that. Neither is it any conductor's place to do that. I think when people take it on, it sometimes alienates the audience as the result. Opposed to saying, "Here's a piece that the composer

composed, drive your own conclusions." And I didn't choose Jake's piece based on text. I chose it based on the musical aggregate and he is amazing at that.

Christopher: Yeah, definitely. So when working with Jake, does he ever say, "Patrick, I wrote this text for this musical reason, or this music goes with this text for this reason? Or in your experience, does Jake allow you to make your own interpretation?"

Patrick: With commissions, usually I don't talk to that person about their piece until they arrive for the performance. At that point we know all the notes and we sing it for them. Then they say, "Okay, here's what I want" and they talk to me or to the ensemble about that. That's when we get into what they want or the why or the how of it. But, with limited rehearsal time, our job is to do what's on the page. If a composer requires me, or the ensemble, to define some sort of greater meaning to this piece beyond that in order to make it a good piece then it's probably not a good piece.

Christopher: Yeah.

Patrick: So, we don't perform pieces because of their text or musical organization, we perform pieces because of their music. And yes, we have usually an hour of how they may want something performed differently with the composer, but in terms of Jake, he'll certainly say that from time to time, but it's usually a day or two before the performance. Because, again, if it sounds differently than what's on the page, well that's not what you wrote.

Christopher: Yeah. Definitely.

Patrick: It's like well you didn't write that, do you want a piano instead? And that's one of the nice things about Jake, he writes what he needs. He's a very honest composer. You get an honest piece of music that says what he wants to say. And sometimes, he'll be like, "Oh actually if you could", or "I know I wrote this tempo but you need to just have a little slower movement on the functionality." I have never worked with Jake where he has had to re-write a piece. There are certain composers that you work with who every day they come to rehearsal and they come with a different portrait. Whereas Jake provides finished products and I am very appreciative of that.

Christopher: Great! I can imagine. So, I've really seen a movement toward more and more composers writing on this idea of social justice for choirs. Whether it's social justice of understanding cultures, inclusiveness, acceptance, or just any kind of understanding, and Jake is certainly doing that. *The Hope of the Loving* that you did is definitely about an idea of finding love and acceptance and peace with everyone. Do you think that has a place in the choral genre or where do you think it fits??

Patrick: I mean, I think that question assumes a premise with Jake. Which is that this is a new phenomenon. All the text that composers choose to set, whether regarding universal brotherhood or a return to compassion, which is what Beethoven was going, I don't think that there's much difference. I don't see it as a new phenomenon. I think that we have a new word for it now, but there are pieces that were inclusive of indigenous music into the mass form which in itself could have been considered sort of catholic social justice at the time. So, I don't want to be entirely

speaking in opposition, but these are all social justice texts. I mean, look at some of the madrigals. These are incredibly politically or socially driven pieces of music. So, does it continue in that traditions or did Jake start that tradition? I think that these are themes that have been a part of music since day one. And I don't think that it's new.

Christopher: Do you think with Beethoven's 9th, he was truly writing it to purposefully reach people to agree based on his beliefs?

Patrick: I don't think it matters. I get it's in a way our job as musicians, with a composer who has passed away, to impart some sort of thing that's in the peace that isn't already on the page, but I guess in the end, I don't care. It doesn't matter to me because, it is a statement of universal humanity. No matter if Beethoven intended it to be or not. I believe it's not my place to answer that question. It's the place of the composer and audience to answer. Whereas as the performer, it is our job is to read the language that is on the page. Basically, to read the computer code and to do what it says to do and to do it as musically as we possibly can make it. It is to communicate what is on the page to the people in the audience. How they feel about that emotionally is going to be entirely dependent on their life's experience.

Christopher: Definitely.

Patrick: And, you know, it's a hard thing when you talk about that stuff. We start to begin to what question things like the conductor and performers place. There are raging debates about this. Like, what is the performers place? I think the performers place is whatever they decide it to be, but I feel my place is to interpret music that is written by someone else with fidelity towards the notes, rhythms, tempi, and articulations that they have written down.

Christopher: Yeah, I agree. So, one last two-part question. When you're programming concerts, what is it exactly that you're thinking? Is this just purely musical? Would you ever consider, or have you done, an entire concert with this social justice theme?

Patrick: Let me see how I put this. It's a hard question to answer. I have programmed for performances that someone could read as social justice, which is a broad and undefined term. Will I do it again? Yes. Is that the ultimate intent of the program? No. The ultimate intent of the program is emotional connection and dissolution of the outside world while people are in a performance. I feel the duty to the audience member is not to force them in a direction. Our audience comes for musical reasons, so in the end I program things because they are good music, and sometimes all those good things which are good music have a theme. You can group them together into a program but do I do that specifically for a social justice reason? No. Is it one of the reasons? Sometimes, maybe, sure. As an example, my parents were trapped in New Orleans during Katrina for seven days and I grew up in New Orleans. So, the year after Katrina we do a Gospel, Scripture, and Bluegrass concert. And we decided that we would theme it around music from New Orleans with narration of family stories and of people who went through Katrina. But did I do for social justice reason? No. I did it to communicate a human story which most music communicates somehow. I think that we are always trying to communicate some human story. So, I try not to program around issues, I try to program around people, music, stories, and locations and things like that. The moment that I start to get into that, I am putting my personal

feelings, not only onto the audience, but also unto a set of performers. Whereas, I think there is always more reason to program for musical reasons. Now, there are times when you are like, I need something that will say this for a specific program and you are looking for a specific setting of a text. But even in those instances I think that music always wins, because if I am looking for a specific setting of a text, I am going to pick the best version of that.

Christopher: Yeah, of course. That makes sense.

Patrick: So, the answer is yes and no. When you cross your eyes and the picture becomes 3-D, can it look like a social justice? Sure.

Christopher: That's a good quote. I'm changing my title to my dissertation to that.

Patrick: [laughter] Well you know, it's one of the things like, yes, certainly we want to be topical and we want to be relevant, but when you're taking music as an aggregate that starts in terms of the repertoire that we're performing, it starts at eight hundred in the Common Era. Topicality and relevance is less important than creating an individualized human experience for the people who come to concerts. That's my bigger concern. Which is that there are a lot of things in this world that pull us apart. If you live in California, New York, or Massachusetts, the likelihood that you are performing to people who all are of the same political mindset is probably a lot more likely than if you were in Florida, which is the ultimate swing state. I have people sitting next to each other who hold an incredibly diverse number of beliefs and I know I am not going to change their mind about that in a choral concert. However, what I can do is give them a musical experience and the idea of social justice has even changed. Social justice today is a political statement. Whereas social justice 20 years ago would have been more of a moral statement. So, some people will quibble with that. If you define it as a political statement, do I do that in my concerts? No. Definitely not. I feel like my job is to bring people in my audience together, and to give them something different to discuss other than what they usually talk about. I feel like for my particular audience, and for my particular mission, I'm not doing my job. Because my job is to give people who are sitting next to each other and may in another place debate the presidential race, that they can at the end of the concert be like, "Oh my gosh, that was so great. Do you want to go to dinner or talk about the concert?" You know, people who would have nothing in common can have the something in common.

Christopher: And I really believe that's the same exact thing that Jake's trying to do in his music. He's just trying to bring people together through the idea that we have a lot more similarities than a lot of us choose to believe.

Patrick: Well, and that's why it is hard to define. He may call it social justice, I don't know. The text that he has set for us, just deal with universality, but you don't feel it as a political statement. I mean sure it's a part of political justice, but it's also a part justice. It is a part of humankind.

Christopher: Exactly. Just being good to one another. That's what's important. Well, I think that's great unless you have anything else. I am officially out of questions. You've said so many wonderful things, so I really appreciate it.

Patrick: I hope that I helped at least a little bit.

Christopher: Definitely. It was really, really great. I appreciate your time and knowledge.

Patrick: Cool. Happy to have helped, and let me know if you need anything.

Christopher: Alright, thanks so much.

Patrick: Great talking to you, alright bye.

Christopher: Bye.

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