JOHN HARBISON’S THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT:

AN ANALYSIS FOR PERFORMANCE

Brian Edward Galante, B.M.E., M.M.

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2008

APPROVED:

Jerry McCoy, Major Professor
Stephen F. Austin, Minor Professor
Henry Gibbons, Committee Member
and Division Chair
Graham Phipps, Director of Graduate Programs
James C. Scott, Dean, College of Music
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

John Harbison’s status as a significant contemporary American composer is confirmed by his numerous appointments, honorary degrees, and awards. He is the recipient of nearly every major composition award, with works performed by major orchestras and in important opera houses spanning the world.

This paper examines in detail Harbison’s most acclaimed choral work, the 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Flight into Egypt*. This study of the score is a “conductor’s analysis,” offering a musical guide for the conductor who seeks to perform this work. To provide a context for the discussion, Chapter 1 offers a brief biographical sketch of Harbison’s life and career. Chapter 2 provides the analysis of the work and includes a history from commission to premier, a discussion of Harbison’s selection of text, and an examination of the pitch organization which informs the piece. In Chapter 3, I present important rehearsal and performance implications to consider when undertaking a performance of the work. Interviews with two well-regarded conductors who have performed *The Flight into Egypt*, David Hoose and Patrick Gardner, and the composer himself, provide valuable insight into this discourse.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Personal interviews were an integral source of information in this document, and I wish to thank John Harbison, David Hoose and Patrick Gardner for their wonderful commentaries which provided invaluable insight into this remarkable composition.

To my doctoral committee—Jerry McCoy, Henry Gibbons and Stephen Austin—I extend deep gratitude for their support, the education and experience I enjoyed during my residency at UNT, and for continued guidance during the writing of this paper.

I also want to thank my family—Kristi, Riley and Brayden—for their enduring patience throughout this process. Their love and energy continue to challenge and inspire me.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my parents, Edward and Catherine Galante, without whose support, encouragement, and love this degree would not have been possible.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

iii

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

vi

## LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

vii

## Chapters

1. **JOHN HARBISON**

   - Introduction .................................................. 1
   - Early Childhood ............................................... 2
   - Early Experiences in Choral Music .......................... 3
   - University Education ........................................... 4
   - Post-Graduate Work ............................................. 5
   - Faculty Appointments ......................................... 6
   - Harbison’s Choral Sounding Boards:
     - The Cantata Singers and Emmanuel Music .............. 6
   - Harbison’s Vocal Music ....................................... 8
   - Composer-in-Residence Positions ........................... 9
   - Awards and Honors ............................................. 9
   - Compositional Style and Influences ........................ 10

2. **THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT**

   - Commission from the Cantata Singers .................... 13
   - Performing Forces ........................................... 14
   - Selection of Text ............................................ 14
   - Analysis for Performance .................................... 16
   - Treatment of Text ............................................ 17
   - The Opening Section—Measures 1-30 ....................... 17
   - Narration 1—Measures 26-30 ................................ 22
   - “The Angel”—Measures 31-55 ................................. 23
   - Narration 2—Measures 56-82 ................................ 24
   - “Out of Egypt”—Measures 83-110 ............................ 27
   - Narration 3—Measures 111-145 .............................. 30
   - “In Rama”—Measures 146-190 ............................... 30
   - Narration 4—Measures 209-216 .............................. 33
   - “The Angel”—Measures 216-233 ............................ 33
   - Narration 5—Measures 234-278 .............................. 34
   - “He shall be called a Nazarene”—Measures 278-317 ... 35
   - The 1987 Pulitzer Prize ....................................... 38
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Illustration Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Rehearsal sequence for difficult melodic leaps</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, Oboe 1, m. 1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, Oboe 1, mm. 1-2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, Oboe, 1, mm. 3-5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, Oboe 1, mm. 11-14</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, mm. 1-17</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, Soprano solo, mm. 31-42</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, mm. 56-63</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, mm. 77-82</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, Alto part, mm. 100-104</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Harbison, <em>The Flight into Egypt</em>, Choral parts, mm. 189-190</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

JOHN HARBISON

As Harbison's career has evolved, the manner of his musical expression has been heard in many guises. He can write triadic music one week, such as the variation movement of *The Most Often Used Chords*, and the next week compose music that abandons virtually all tonal moorings, such as many of the songs in *Simple Daylight*. What remains constant is the underlying voice of the composer. The music which seems simple is deceptively so—there is always something else going on besides the obvious; and conversely, even his most complex creations are articulated by precise formal craftsmanship, so that one never loses one's bearings. Most of all, Harbison's music, early and recent, instrumental and vocal, is about something; it speaks in compelling tones, no less urgent for the overlay of ambiguity and paradox, about the specific issues that confront man in this time and about the universal issues with which he has been confronted throughout all time.¹

Introduction

John Harbison's status as a premier contemporary American composer is confirmed by his numerous appointments, honorary degrees, and awards. He is the recipient of nearly every major composition award, with works performed by major orchestras and in important opera houses spanning the world; there is no doubt that Harbison's name must be listed among the most significant composers of the last century.

Harbison's compositions transcend all genres and reflect the influences of jazz, Stravinsky neoclassicism, Schoenberg serialism, and a variety of popular idioms. Though his choral output represents a relatively small portion of his total oeuvre, Harbison's long association with two important choruses—the Cantata Singers and

Emmanuel Music—in Boston, Massachusetts, and his admitted admiration for the choral works of Bach and Schütz, inform his choral writing.

This paper examines in detail Harbison’s most acclaimed choral work, the 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Flight into Egypt*. This study of the score will be a “conductor’s analysis,” offering a musical guide for the conductor who seeks to perform this work. To provide a context for the discussion, this initial chapter will offer a brief biographical sketch of Harbison’s life and career. In addition to the analysis of the work that follows, I will present important rehearsal and performance implications to consider when undertaking a performance of the work. Interviews with two well-regarded conductors who have performed *The Flight into Egypt*—as well as the composer himself—provide valuable insight into this discourse.

**Early Childhood**

John Harbison was born on December 20, 1938 in Orange, New Jersey. His father was a history professor at Princeton University; his mother worked as a freelance writer for a variety of magazines. Naturally, Harbison’s close proximity and exposure to the academic environment of Princeton provided many opportunities for intellectual stimulation and study, but Harbison’s earliest experiences in music began in the home: his father studied composition at an early age and readily encouraged Harbison’s early piano “improvisations” at the age of three and four.² Harbison’s mother also had a background in music: she played popular show tunes on the piano and improvised harmonies during family sing-a-long sessions. Harbison’s sister, Helen, became an accomplished cellist; his uncles enjoyed successful careers as popular songwriters.

---

Harbison’s family continued to nurture his musical development during his primary
school years, enrolling him early in viola and piano lessons, but even so, Harbison’s
natural instincts betrayed a stronger facility for writing music over piano performance.

**Early Experiences in Choral Music**

Harbison’s experiences in choral music began in his early childhood years as a
treble soloist in a New Jersey children’s chorus. Later, while a student at Princeton High
School, Harbison participated in what he called “the strongest musical organization” at
the school, a thriving choral program that offered annual performances of major works
and significant tours:

> When I was in high school . . . the strongest musical organization that we had
> happened to be the choir. [The conductor] was a very enterprising conductor,
> Tom Hilbish, who soon thereafter went on to the University of Michigan. Though I
> played instruments—tuba and piano and so forth—my main high school activity
> as a performer was singing. We did very enterprising repertoire, spent a lot of
time in rehearsal, and gave a lot of concerts, so I knew not only some recent
choral repertoire, but also standard works from singing in that choir.

> We did the Honegger *King David*; we did a couple of Schubert masses; we did
> the Schubert *Song of the Spirit Over the Waters* with the male choir; and a good
deal of Bach. It was very challenging repertoire for young singers, but it was also
a pretty impressive program. We had vocal technique instruction; we had some
sort of chamber-singing smaller groups. It was really very thoroughly conceived
—and the choir did a lot of traveling to perform as well—so I’d say that was the
start of my interest.3

Not surprisingly, Harbison’s participation in the successful choral program stirred
his compositional mind, and his time in high school also marked his initial foray into
conducting and composing for choirs: he wrote several pieces for male chorus and
enjoyed numerous chances to conduct the ensemble in performance. Harbison recalls:

> I also began conducting there and wrote a little music too . . . . [T]hat was the real
focus of my high school life. Princeton High School Choir actually continued to

---

3 John Harbison, telephone interview by author, transcript of audio recording, October 2007.
have quite a strong tradition, a very active sort of enterprising group of singers, always.4

During his time in high school, Harbison continued to receive private instruction on several instruments. He studied violin, viola, piano, tuba, voice, and composition, and took courses in music theory offered by the high school. All the while Harbison fostered his creative instincts—to the point where he was asked to leave the high school band because his improvised tuba bass lines had become too distracting to the other band members.5

Harbison received the first significant endorsement of his composition skills when he was named 1954 winner of the Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) award for composition (for his Capriccio for Trumpet and Piano); he was just fifteen years old.6

University Education

Harbison earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Harvard University in 1960, where he studied composition with Walter Piston. After graduating, he spent a summer in Berlin studying with Boris Blacher, then completed graduate studies at Princeton (MFA, 1963). His principal teachers at Princeton were Roger Sessions, Milton Babbitt and Earl Kim. Though he did win a Chorus Musical Composition Prize while a student at Harvard, Harbison turned most of his attention in his college years to composing and conducting works for instrumental forces:

When I got to college, I actually moved more into instrumental music and conducting—Bach Society Orchestra and so forth—and a little bit away from

4 Ibid.
choir. I didn’t really come back to it in terms of central preoccupation until I went to graduate school and organized some concerts of Bach cantatas.\(^7\)

During his time at Princeton, Harbison also served as assistant conductor of the Princeton University Orchestra, where met his future wife, Rose Mary Pederson.

Summer 1963 was an important one in Harbison’s life: he graduated from Princeton in May and made arrangements to spend the summer with the Santa Fe Opera Company. During the performance season, the Santa Fe company rehearsed and presented the complete operas of Stravinsky, with the composer in residence, and to this day Harbison acknowledges the influence of Stravinsky’s music on his own writing as “obvious. [Stravinsky] is always in my ear.”\(^8\)

Also in summer 1963, John and Rose Mary were married. Harbison often refers to Rose as his musical associate, “his most relentless and loving critic.”\(^9\) He has written numerous compositions to be performed by his wife, a violinist, and the two have frequently collaborated in performances since their marriage.

**Post-Graduate Work**

From 1963-1968, Harbison held a junior fellowship from the Society of Fellows at Harvard University. This non-teaching fellowship afforded Harbison the opportunity to become increasingly productive as a composer.\(^10\) During this time, Harbison supplemented his income by performing—often with his wife—and conducting the Brandeis University Contemporary Concerts. These concerts provided yet another chance to experiment and develop his compositional craft.

\(^7\) Harbison, interview.
\(^8\) Ibid.
Faculty Appointments

After five years in his post-graduate fellowship appointment, Harbison joined the composition faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, a position he continues to hold today. He was promoted to associate professor in 1972, full professor in 1979 and, in 1996 he was named Institute Professor, MIT’s highest academic distinction for resident faculty members.

Shortly after his arrival at MIT, Harbison started the Cantata Singers, a group that remains influential in the development of his choral compositions:

[W]hen I arrived here to teach at MIT, I began the Cantata Singers, which I did on a couple of stretches—first for about four years, and then I came back as music director a number of years later. That was mainly a Bach and twentieth-century music choir: we didn’t do too much of the choral repertoire in between...I wrote a piece during that period, Five Songs of Experience, which I performed with the Cantata Singers.11

Harbison’s Choral Sounding Boards:

The Cantata Singers and Emmanuel Music

Harbison’s choral output is relatively small, but his lasting connections with the Cantata Singers and the music program at Emmanuel Church have provided important opportunities to write for chorus. Not surprisingly, Harbison’s approach varies depending upon the choir for which he writes. He describes the two ensembles as such:

[For Emmanuel], the rehearsals of the new piece are one day: a Saturday rehearsal and performance on Sunday. That’s really the way those pieces have always been put together. Now, Cantata Singers is a different experience, and it’s a mix of highly professional singers and what we would call community chorus singers. It holds weekly rehearsals over a seven or so week period, and there I would say my mode of communication with the singers is a little different. It works both ways of course, because while the absorption time is longer, the quick immediate sort of sight reading level is less.

11 Harbison, interview.
With Cantata Singers, I’ve always thought of it less as a chamber choir, more in between, with larger sections and a somewhat different sonority, which is really what it’s always been: it’s always had a very strong character and very slow turnover, a very consistent personality. Pieces I’ve written for Cantata Singers have had, I would have to say, another character, more “outward-directed” too, in terms of the text, whereas at Emmanuel, I tend to be communicating more with a congregation that hears a great deal of sacred music and has dealt more with what you might think of as canonical texts, some of them set very often. With the Cantata Singers, with The Flight and with the But Mary Stood, I’ve tried to take on what I would call more community themes, social themes.\textsuperscript{12}

Harbison began the Cantata Singers in the early 1970’s, and served as the ensemble’s musical director on two occasions. David Hoose, Artistic Director of the Cantata Singers since 1982, describes the group as

a community chorus. That is, it rehearses once a week and its members are volunteer. In that respect it’s like any of thousands of community choruses around the country…. There are hundreds of choruses just in Boston: many large choruses and auditorium-sized choruses, some chamber-sized choruses, and a couple of professional choruses—Handel and Haydn is one for instance—but [Cantata Singers] is fairly unique in that it manages to attract a lot of very high level singers, some right out of the four music schools in the city, some still in the music schools, but mostly recent graduates and then a cadre of long standing members, all of whom have really serious music training. Many of them are professional singers, but those that aren’t may teach music, may have a church choir, or may conduct a chorus themselves. There are others, of course, who work in libraries, and doctors and lawyers and mathematicians; those people have an extremely strong background in music from whenever they went to school.

It’s blessed with really strong personnel. Although the chorus is volunteer, we’re able to take a lot of the soloists for a good bit of the repertoire that we do out of the chorus, and that of course attracts people to the group, so it’s circularly beneficial.\textsuperscript{13}

Craig Smith founded the music program at Emmanuel Church in Boston in 1970 to perform the complete cycle of over 200 Bach cantatas in accordance with the liturgical calendar. Since then, the music program has grown to include lasting

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Harbison, interview
\item \textsuperscript{13} David Hoose, telephone interview by author, transcript of audio recording, December 2007.
\end{itemize}
associations with prominent modern composers, notably Harbison, and is known for innovative programming and creative performances, including collaborations with the acclaimed choreographer Mark Morris and director Peter Sellars. Members of the board and artistic advisory panel at Emmanuel include acclaimed musicians and scholars such as Seiji Ozawa, Christopher Hogwood, David Hoose, Christoph Wolff, Robert Levin and Rose Mary Harbison.¹⁴

Emmanuel employs a resident professional chorus, one which has allowed Harbison to hone his conducting and compositional craft and gain significant exposure to the music that would most influence his choral writing, particularly the music of Bach and Stravinsky. Harbison describes the ensemble as a “perfect sounding board” for experimenting with his choral writing:

Suddenly it occurred to me that it would be a great chance, working with Emmanuel Choir (which was after I stopped with the Cantata Singers), to do a series of choral pieces and . . . use it as a sounding board for choral writing. Since I knew the singers very well, I knew I could get a good sense of what I was doing. And so since then, really since around—this was 1990 or so—I’ve written mainly for Emmanuel Choir and gotten a good sense of how the pieces evolved in performance, because we’re able to bring back the repertoire really over a long period. Some of the pieces I wrote then we still perform quite regularly over there.¹⁵

Harbison’s Vocal Music

Harbison has also made substantial contributions to contemporary opera and vocal music repertoire. Harbison’s “distinct preference for tough-minded writers who produce strong, clean lines”¹⁶ attract him to the writings of Blake, Goethe, and Dickinson

¹⁴ Sadly, Craig Smith passed away in November 2007, following a lengthy illness. John Harbison assumed the position of Acting Artistic Director at Emmanuel Music in December 2007.

¹⁵ Harbison, interview.

for his solo works, and his settings of these texts provide a relevant parallel to the setting of the Kings James Bible in *The Flight into Egypt*.

In 1999, the Metropolitan Opera premiered Harbison’s most well-known opera, *The Great Gatsby*, commissioned to commemorate the 25th anniversary of James Levine’s debut at the opera house. This opera, coupled with Harbison’s vocal solo writing, has made him extremely popular among professional soloists—his long and successful association with Dawn Upshaw is well-documented—and has afforded him numerous opportunities to develop his melodic construction and important musical-textual relationships.

### Composer-in-Residence Positions

Harbison’s first composer-in-residence position was with Reed College in Portland, Oregon (1968-1969), funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. He served as Director of New Music and composer-in-residence with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1975-1977, and in 1981, served in a similar capacity in the American Academy of Rome and the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival in New Mexico. Subsequent positions include the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (1981-1983), the Berkshire Music Festival at Tanglewood (1984-1985) and a second appointment with the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1985-1988).

### Awards and Honors

Though the Pulitzer Prize for *The Flight into Egypt* is perhaps the most distinguished award Harbison has received for composition, the honor is but one in a series of significant endorsements and awards throughout his career. Beginning with his first major award in high school—the BMI Award for Composition—Harbison has also
won the George Arthur Knight Prize for composition from Harvard, the award for
distinguished composition from Brandeis University in 1971 (his first professional
award), an award from the Academy of Arts and Letters (1973), a Guggenheim
Fellowship (1977-1978), and the Kennedy Center-Freibheim Award (1980). The Pulitzer
came in 1987, and subsequently Harbison received a coveted MacArthur “Genius
Grant” (1989), several awards from MIT for excellence in teaching, the 1994 Killian
Award Lecturer prize for “extraordinary musical accomplishments,” the 1997 Heinz
Award, the Harvard Arts Medal (2000), the American Music Center’s Letter of Distinction
(2000), and the Distinguished Composer Award from the American Composer’s
Orchestra (2002).

Compositional Style and Influences

Harbison clearly has distinct views on the process of composition: in a series of
lectures presented at Tanglewood, he divides composers into two categories
—“personality” composers and “philosophic” composers—and expresses a desire to
label himself the latter:

I want to be a composer of the philosophic mode, which I think requires a
sophisticated harmonic language, an ability to re-imagine melody as a guiding
force, an inventive formal sense, a willingness to be misunderstood, and much
patience.17

Harbison’s compositional style is heavily influenced by the music of Stravinsky
and Schoenberg. He cites Stravinsky’s rhythmic character, inventiveness and
eclecticism as his primary attractions to the music,18 and admits becoming enamored
with the ordered, logical nature of Schoenberg’s serialism: he states, “it’s such an

17 John Harbison, “Six Tanglewood Talks (1, 2, 3).” Perspectives of New Music, 23/2 (Spring-Summer
18 Harbison, as cited by Terry, 21.
elemental way of thinking . . . It doesn’t go away, just as Schoenberg doesn’t go away as a powerful personality and influence.”

In addition, Harbison’s work with choirs has led him to the music of Bach and Schütz, and while Harbison’s choral works certainly reflect the musical influence of these composers, his choice and treatment of texts reveal a deep connection with the theological implications of their sacred works and a serious engagement with thoughtful—even demanding—texts which impact the listener on a spiritual, emotional, and intellectual level. While he was preparing to conduct the Cantata Singers, Harbison recalls “[reading] through all the Bach Cantatas . . . . They are like my returning reference point.”

As mentioned previously, Harbison’s music also bears the influence of popular music idioms—recall that his mother used to play Broadway show tunes on the piano—and jazz. This is not a characterization that Harbison shies from, noting that the skills required to create a meaningful work are the same, regardless of the musical language.

Harbison’s artistic credo remains “to make each piece different from the others, to find clear, fresh, large designs, to reinvent traditions.” Hence, his music is constantly evolving; he continues to reinvent both his process and musical language, challenging performer and listener alike to discover the multiple layers of detail.

---

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 23.
22 John Harbison, program notes to The Flight into Egypt; The Natural World; Concerto for Double Brass Choir and Orchestra (New World Records, 1990).
Like the composer himself, John Harbison's music is many faceted, deep, and constantly questing. It arrests the ear, challenges the mind, and ultimately resides deep in the heart. It is a music free from cliché, complacency, or adherence to any school. The need for communicativeness and clearness is fundamental to Harbison's nature, but these are never sought at the expense of simplifying his message. Among American composers today Harbison is the great master of ambiguity, the great reader of poetry who never loses sight of the tensions between word and tone, the great seeker after hard truths—not homilies and not dubious truisms, but those things which are learned only through the difficult experiences of life.\textsuperscript{23}

Commission from the Cantata Singers

The commission to compose \textit{The Flight into Egypt} came from a familiar source: David Hoose, Artistic Director of the Cantata Singers, approached Harbison about writing a piece for his ensemble, the group Harbison once directed and one, he concedes, that allowed him to experiment with his choral writing.\textsuperscript{24} Harbison obviously knew the talent and capabilities of the ensemble intimately: he states that his work represents an aspect of Boston’s musical life I have been involved with for a long time, that part of the community that rehearses and performs sacred music of every era with tremendous understanding and devotion. That has been a central part of my musical life.... I'm happy because this is a work composed for people I have worked with for a long time, and David Hoose and Craig Smith were very involved in this piece on a primary level.\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{The Flight into Egypt} was the first in what evolved into a series of commissioned works—ten in all—by the Cantata Singers (the group tries to commission a new work for chorus and orchestra at least every two years). Hoose credits the success of this

\textsuperscript{23} St. George, online essay.  
\textsuperscript{24} Harbison, interview.  
endeavor to the significance of the first three commissions, *The Flight into Egypt*, Peter Child’s *Estrella* (1988), and Donald Sur’s *Slavery Documents* (1990):

Those three pieces seemed to form an inadvertent trilogy that, while very different in scope—Donald’s was for a huge orchestra, an hour and fifteen minutes long; Peter’s piece was for larger orchestra than *The Flight into Egypt* and was 30-35 minutes long—had at their core a center, a heart that was examining and attempting to address painful things about the human condition.

...Those were three very important pieces for us, because they seemed to belong together in some emotional way. They also seemed to spin out of our work with Bach cantatas and the theological challenges therein.26

The Cantata Singers paid Harbison $5,000 to commission *The Flight into Egypt*. Quietly, Harbison donated his fee to charity, appropriately a homeless shelter in the Boston area. The group premiered the work on November 21, 1986, with Hoose conducting.

**Performing Forces**

*The Flight into Egypt* is a fifteen-minute work scored for soprano and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, two oboes, English horn, bassoon, three trombones, chamber organ and strings. Harbison does not specifically call for a certain voice type in the soloists, but the character of the soprano solo suggests a lighter, lyric voice, while the baritone is more dramatic.

**Selection of Text**

Harbison’s choice of text for *The Flight into Egypt* comes from Matthew 2:13-23 in the King James version of the Bible. Wishing to evoke the “darker side of Christmas,”27 he chose a text not commonly treated by composers writing a seasonal work. He acknowledges that the narrative is “a very violent story, and that’s probably

---

26 Hoose, interview.
27 John Harbison, program notes to *The Flight into Egypt*, provided by the composer.
one of the reasons that it’s not been a big hit around Christmas, that it doesn’t come up
a lot in the liturgical tradition of the so-called holidays.”

More importantly though, Harbison sought to underscore the plight of the homeless, oppressed, and victims of violence in our current society. He states:

One of the things that has always struck me about that story—of course, it’s in the iconography, the paintings and so forth—is people who are driven out and have to find their way into new terrain. They’re driven out essentially by violence and the paranoia of a leader who adopts an absolutely brutal solution to what is really just a competitive paranoid problem. That struck me as being very resonant, very interesting as a theme.

It was something I’d been thinking about for a while because that period was—of course, it’s not so different now—[one] in which the number of lost citizens, people begging on the streets...was very strikingly opposite a society unresponsive, unwilling, or unable to help the less fortunate.

Matthew’s text illuminates the journey into Egypt of Mary, Joseph and Jesus to escape the atrocities of Herod’s reign. According to Matthew, when wise men arrived in Jerusalem and requested an audience with the “King of the Jews,” Herod became fearful that the newborn child would present a challenge to his throne and furiously ordered the murder of all male children under the age of two. The Angel, a messenger of the Lord, appeared to Joseph in a dream, warned him of the impending danger, and directed the family into Egypt, a country outside Herod’s jurisdiction. Here Matthew inserts the first of three references to Old Testament prophecies, an indirect quote from Hosea: “Out of Egypt have I called my son.”

While the actual quote from Hosea reads “When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt,” Matthew

28 Harbison, interview.
29 Ibid.
30 Matthew 2:15, referencing Hosea 11:1.
apparently calls upon a secondary meaning from an Old Testament passage foretelling the Exodus, an event that had already happened.

Matthew draws a second Old Testament parallel to the massacre of the children ordered by Herod. Here, he quotes a prophecy from Jeremiah: “In Rama, there was a voice heard, lamentation and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.” The reference to Rachel is that of the once-barren wife of Jacob, who later gave birth to Joseph and Benjamin and died during a difficult childbirth. Jacob buried her on the way to Eprath, in Bethlehem. The significance of Rachel weeping for the slaughter of the children in the same town of her burial location would presumably not be lost on Matthew’s early audiences.

After Herod’s death, the angel appeared again and instructed Joseph to take the family into Israel. The family traveled to Judea, but when Joseph heard that Archelaus (Herod’s son) was in power, they changed direction and settled in Galilee, in the town of Nazareth.

Here, Matthew’s draws reference to another Old Testament prophecy—“He shall be called a Nazarene”—but this is a puzzling one: the quote appears nowhere in the Old Testament. In fact, the singular form of the word “Nazarene” appears only once in the King James Bible, here in Matthew’s text (the plural form of the word does appear once in Acts). Modern commentators have proposed that Matthew’s allusion is a play on words with the Hebrew “nasir” (translated, “branch”), thereby alluding to a branch

31 Matthew 2:18, quoting Jeremiah 31:15.
stemming from the roots of Jesse’s lineage in Isaiah’s prophecy. For Harbison though, the reference also has another significance:

one of the chorus members explained to me that “Nazarene” (at the end of that text), which I understood really just to be a designation of place, of heritage, also means “healer” or “redeemer.” It’s one of the theological-school people in the Cantata Singers.

Analysis for Performance

Harbison subtitles his work a “sacred ricercar,” and from the opening notes clearly seeks to evoke a sense of loss and a “wandering” affect. His own program note for *The Flight into Egypt* provides an excellent overview of the structure of the work:

The subtitle “Sacred Ricercar” is important, ricercar signifying a thread to be constantly sought, looked for by the ear of the listener. The solo oboe begins with two phrases, the second slightly longer, from whose motives all the subsequent music evolves. The reed colors of the introduction are my rendering of the visual surroundings of the drama (a landscape I had in 1986 only seen in painting and photos). The upper strings then join as the angel issues her warning. The halting journey begins as the original melody grows branches and leaves, bringing us to the first of the three chorus passages, each prophetic texts. Trombones, long associated with the villains in early sacred music, introduce Herod, who orders the slaughter of the innocents, the chorus then sings the prophecy of Jeremiah, the lamentation in the desert. At this abject point the blank steady-state of the positiv organ makes its impassive statement.

The original sequence recurs–angel, holy family, Herod–this time circling back in a wide arc to the city of Nazareth. The final prophecy, “He shall be called a Nazarene,” has meaning beyond geography, Nazarene also signifying healer and teacher.

The impulse behind the piece came from many conversations with Rose Mary Harbison and Craig Smith about the need to express the darker side of Christmas. Anxiety and isolation often increase at that time of year, and their presence in this post-Christmas narrative is inescapable.

---

32 Goulder, M.D., “Midrash and Lection in Matthew,” (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004). This connection is included customarily in cross-referenced biblical concordances and online searches, and is provided in Appendix B, Figure 6.

33 Harbison, interview.

34 John Harbison, Program Notes for *The Flight into Egypt*, provided by the composer.
Treatment of Text

Acknowledging the influence of Stravinsky in *Abraham and Isaac* and *A Sermon, Narrative, and a Prayer*, Harbison sets the biblical text in a straightforward, continuous manner and delegates contrasting vocal forces to outline the narrative. As such, the work is sectionalized, the formal structure defined by the text.

The baritone soloist takes on a principal role as narrator in five appearances (bars 26-30, 58-81, 119-144, 209-215, 234-275): Harbison allows his character to eschew objectivity and detachment, describing the narrator as “a storyteller with a dramatic flair.”\(^{35}\) The soprano soloist makes two relatively short appearances (bars 32-51 and 216-233) to deliver the Angel’s message in Joseph’s dreams, and the chorus enters with the three prophetic references from the Old Testament text. Harbison recalls that he was drawn to this particular text due to the consistent perspective from the Old Testament prophecies, and he saw these references as “a natural role for the chorus.”\(^{36}\) A chart of Harbison’s textual design is found in Appendix A. Specific musical characteristics of each section will be discussed below.

The Opening Section—Measures 1-30

Harbison describes the opening section of *The Flight into Egypt* as his musical representation of the iconography, his choice of instrumentation “a rendering of the visual surroundings of the drama.”\(^{37}\) As such, a plaintive, solo oboe begins the work with two phrases, the second a measure longer than the first, that impart the motivic material for the remainder of the work. The first motive, labeled motive A in the figure below,

---

35 Harbison, interview.
36 Harbison, interview.
37 Harbison, program note.
presents the first four notes in Harbison’s tone row and is the subject of the ricercar, a four-note cell—C, B, A-flat, B-flat (0124)—that systematically recurs throughout the work, particularly in the choral sections.

Example 1: Motive A, Harbison’s four-note cell (0124). Opening measure.

The rhythm of this presentation of the motive is particularly significant: following this introduction, Harbison makes only veiled references to the dotted-eighth/sixteenth note character of the motive. In measures 101-105, the gesture is obscured by a descending melodic sequence in the alto line and subverted by the ties across the barline. Triplet gestures evoke the character of the opening rhythm in the second choral section (mm. 167-173), but not until the third choral section—appropriately on the word “Nazarene”—does the dotted rhythmic motive of this cell reoccur. Clearly, the word holds significance for Harbison, and he returns the ricercar subject to the foreground.

Harbison’s thoughts on the ricercar principle governing the work provide further insight into his design:

I think of the ricercar very literally in terms of the way the Italian word translates, as a kind of hidden presence, an all-over presence that is foregrounded only occasionally. That is to say, a thematic substance which has to be searched for, but it’s not always presented up front. I think that’s the way it is in Frescobaldi and some of the composers who use that title quite frequently. Bach, oddly enough, uses it only once, to my knowledge, in *The Musical Offering*, where it certainly functions exactly as I just described: after the entrances of the subject in
the six-part piece, the subsequent thematic appearances are about as hidden and stealthy as any Bach contrapuntal piece. In fact, sometimes he tries deliberately to confuse the ear by seeming to bring the entrance before it really comes. There’s quite an elaborate subterfuge that goes on in that piece, which I think is illustrative of the title.38

The next motive, labeled “B” in Example 2, introduces pitches five through eleven of the tone row in a rhythm evocative of a sense of “wandering.” The rhythm of this motive makes more frequent appearances than the first, perhaps a reminder of the struggles and bitter sense of loss faced by the homeless.

Example 2: Motive B, the “wandering” motive. Opening oboe solo, mm. 1-2.


The twelfth note of Harbison’s row—pitch class A—finally appears at the end of the second phrase, and it bears an important tritone relationship to the E-flat that represents pitch 11. Through this second phrase, Harbison not only provides more rhythm- and pitch-related material for subsequent development, but also delays the arrival on A, thus obscuring the tritone connection.

38 Harbison, interview.
Example 3: Opening oboe solo, second phrase, mm. 3-5. The arrival on pitch class A in measure 5 provides the twelfth note of Harbison’s row.

Figure 1 provides the tone-row matrix guiding the compositional basis for the remainder of the work.

Figure 1: Tone-row matrix\(^{39}\) of *The Flight into Egypt*.

---

Sustained arrival points in bars 2, 5 and 8—E-flat, A, and E-flat respectively—reinforce the tritone connection before Harbison introduces another melodic “conflict” between the tritone and the two perfect intervals that surround it in measures 11-13.

Example 4: Linear conflict between the augmented fourth, perfect fourth, and perfect fifth. Oboe 1, mm. 11-14.

In the opening, Harbison introduces each instrument in canonic imitation, a device he continues throughout each of the choral sections. Entrances of the second oboe (end of bar 5), English horn (end of bar 11), and bassoon (end of bar 18) occur at the fifth and follow closely the original oboe material. Low strings enter in measure 24 with motive A, and the baritone soloist makes his initial entrance in measure 26. Example 5 illustrates measures 1-17 of the introduction.
Example 5: Motivic presentation and canonic imitation in the introduction, mm. 1-17.

Measure 26 brings the first entrance of the narrator, in which Harbison's melody again toys with the conflict between perfect intervals and the augmented fourth first
heard in the opening section (cf. mm. 11-12). The melody begins with a heraldic perfect fifth (“Behold”, m. 26), a series of augmented fourths and minor/major sixths—the upper and lower neighbor tones of a perfect fifth—and finally concludes with an augmented fourth (“saying”, m. 30) and a sense of impending mystery. In addition, Harbison presents the first instance of the quintuplet rhythm, a device he uses for declamatory effect in the narration, and a gesture which delineates larger sections.

Example 6: Opening baritone solo, mm. 26-30.

The soprano solo makes two appearances in the work (bars 31-51 and 216-233), delivering the warning message in Joseph’s dreams. In the first occurrence, upper strings accompany the soprano in imitation at the tritone. In a gesture reminiscent of the opening oboe solo (bars 3-4), first violins enter in measure 31; second violins enter an eighth-note later, though the actual imitation is separated by a full beat. The soprano soloist enters in measure 32, with an ascending major seventh. This interval—while also serving as a text-painting device for the word “Arise”—marks the first two notes of motive A, in P₅ form. As he did with the baritone solo, Harbison allows his melodic line to move more freely around the notes of the motive, but the four-note cell clearly informs the construction of the melody. Example 7 illustrates the presence of the motive in the soprano solo.
Example 7: Soprano solo, mm. 31-42.

In the second baritone solo section, the narrator speaks of the journey into Egypt. In the first part, Harbison sets the melodic line, another transformation of the four-note cell in $l_{11}$ and $P_0$ forms, against sharp string attacks and the B motive in the oboe 2 and English horn. Rhythmic intensity is achieved through an increasing number of articulations in the lower strings and bassoon: the first entry includes two eighth-notes in bar 56; following a quarter rest, the second entry has four (56-57); six attacks follow another rest (57-58), then eight (58-59). In addition, though vertical pitches change, most of the chords in this section are intervallically-equivalent, each containing a major
second, a major third, and an augmented fourth. The text here tells of journey, but the irony of the musical effect is not lost on the listener. The meandering quality of the B motive, coupled with little harmonic movement, yields a sense of stasis, a hopeless wandering filled with fear and despair. Example 8 illustrates this “wandering stasis” in the first part of the second solo section.

Example 8: “Wandering stasis,” mm. 56-63. Intervallically-equivalent sonorities are bracketed with dotted lines. Note also the wandering B motive in mm. 61-63.
In the latter part of this section, Harbison’s use of the quintuplet as a demarcation device becomes clear: he considers the quintuplets “setups for a new scene in the narration.” Here, the repeated use of the quintuplet signals the end of the narration and the first entrance of the chorus. Harbison also continues his use of intervallically-equivalent harmonies to yield an effect of no movement.

Example 9: Use of quintuplets as a delineating device, mm. 77-82.

---

40 Harbison, interview.
“Out of Egypt”—Measures 83-110

In the first choral section, Harbison sets the text canonically in a 2/4 meter. The bass part begins the imitation with an inverted form of the four-note cell beginning on pitch class D (I₂). The melody continues with the first five notes from row P₁₀, where the fifth—pitch class D in this circumstance—maps to the first of row P₂, the next four notes in the bass line.


Successive entrances of the canon—the tenor in bar 87, alto in 91, soprano in 95—occur at the fourth in I₇, I₀ and I₅ forms, respectively. The imitation continues until the dynamic climax of the section in bar 100. There, Harbison begins a sequential descent led by a weaving melody in the alto line: structurally important notes, made significant by ties over the barline, represent a sequence of descending fourths (D in m. 100, A in 101, E in 102, B in 104).

Example 11: Notes outlining the sequence of descending fourths. Alto part, mm. 100-104.
This alto line also includes two instances of a melodic tritone—B-flat to E in bar 102, and F to B in bars 103-104. These tritones not only mirror the similar intervals in the soprano, tenor and bass vocal lines, but also serve a musical-symbolic purpose. When the second tritone (bars 103-104) interrupts the melodic sequence of descending fourths, the “conflict” between the tritone and nearby perfect intervals returns. Clearly, there is no sense of comfort in Harbison’s dark imagining of this story: the desperation and threatening feelings of wandering and loss return to the fore.

Contrasting this alto line, Harbison scores the soprano, tenor and bass in similar rhythms, slyly evocative of the rhythmic character of motive A, the “Nazarene motive.” Further, a movendo tempo instruction in bar 100 increases the intensity of the contrasting gestures, and the section ends with trombones and bassoon in a vertical representation of the first five notes of the cell, in $P_1$ form and a quintuplet gesture. Beginning with the tenor entrance in measure 87, the choral sections are doubled by the strings. Example 12 shows the pervasive use of the four-note cell in this section.
Example 12: Motivic unity and canonic imitation in the first choral section, mm. 83-109.

THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT. By John Harbison.
International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.
Narration 3—Measures 111-145

In the third solo section, Harbison allows his narrator to become dramatically more involved in the forceful and foreboding description of Herod’s wrath and murderous decree. He sets up the ominous character of the text with a mocking “chase” gesture in the brass as he draws upon a traditional model—taken directly from Schütz—of brass instruments representing the villain. Not surprisingly, notes in the trombone articulations are taken directly from the opening motive, in an alternating and repeating pattern of inverted and prime forms: I₃, P₁, I₁₁, P₉, I₁₂, and P₅.

Example 13: “Chasing” trombone motive, mm. 111-116.


“In Rama”—Measures 146-190

The second choral section represents the climax of the work, at which the points of imitation draw increasingly closer and culminate in bars 188-190 (“because they are not”). Harbison recalls crafting a measured contraction of imitative events to elicit the greatest intensity in this section. He states:

---

41 Harbison, interview.
I had a scheme in my mind where, as you get to the center of the piece, the points of imitation come closer. That was to be a reinforcement of the direction to the central chorus, which is also an Old Testament reference to tragedy. In that choral section, the imitation points are closest. I wanted to try to find a way of paralleling a goal point in terms of intensity, with the swiftness with which the sections are imitating. It spreads back out towards the end of the piece.\textsuperscript{42}

Though the melodic structure of this section is also based on the initial motive, Harbison uses octave displacement to create angular, very difficult vocal lines: this incarnation of the motive contains an ascending minor ninth, descending major sixth, ascending minor seventh and a descending tritone. The soprano part presents the entire melody in bars 146-150, then begins the imitative section (m. 162) on pitch class E with a presentation of the first five notes of row I\textsubscript{4}. As in the previous choral section, the last of these notes maps to the next row, in this case P\textsubscript{0}.

Example 14: Octave displacement in the second choral section. Soprano part, mm. 162-165.

Here, however, imitative entries are separated by only one beat and the canon is at the tritone. Because the imitation is at the tritone, voicing is essentially in two parts: the soprano and tenor parts have identical melodic material; likewise the alto and bass.

Beginning in bar 174 (“Rachel weeping for her children”), Harbison uses the retrograde of both prime and inverted forms of the four-note cell. The soprano in

\textsuperscript{42} Harbison, interview.
measures 174-176 represents a retrograde form of P_{10}; similarly, measures 178-180 are a retrograde form of I_{11}.

Woodwind parts double the chorus in measures 162-165, then provide short, punctuating gestures in 170-175. Strings enter in bar 166 and double the chorus for the remainder of the section. Four bars (184-188) of low strings and bassoon offer a dark, descending sequential passage connecting the end of the imitation and the final line of text.

Measures 188-190 provide the only homophonic choral statement in the work, the climax of intensity and dissonance as the text alludes to children finding no comfort or safety from Herod’s wrath. Here the organ enters for the first time, offering Harbison’s “impassive statement”\(^\text{43}\) — perhaps a representation of Herod’s unrelenting decree itself — as the section concludes.

Example 15: Choral parts, mm. 189-190.

\(^{43}\) Harbison, program note.
Narration 4—Measures 209-216

The brief fourth baritone solo section recalls the opening, as the narration once again introduces the message from the Angel. In this section, Harbison’s orchestration is sparse, as if still reeling from the suffering inflicted by Herod and the exclamations in the previous section. The narrator delivers a declamatory statement, informing the listener of Herod’s death and announcing the arrival of the angel. Quintuplets once more provide a delineation of sections.

“The Angel”—Measures 216-233

The second appearance of the angel occurs in a manner similar to the first, though the upper strings are now an octave lower and the second violins are the first to enter. Imitation in the string parts is again at the tritone, separated by a beat. The soloist enters with the same ascending major seventh and continues through motivic forms $P_7$ and $P_4$. This time, however, the section is truncated: Harbison undercuts a sense of closure and interrupts the conclusion of the soprano section with a new section of narration. While this might seem contrary to the action in the text—the death of Herod, after all, allays any imminent threat to the child—Harbison’s effect is twofold.

In the first appearance of the Angel, the section comes to a quiet, yet uncomfortable close, with an ominous sustained chord (G, B and C#) in the lower strings: the text painting suggests both confusion and fear for Joseph and his family. In this second occurrence though, the threat of death is ended, and any doubt remaining in Joseph’s mind must have been assuaged by the timeliness and accuracy of the original message from the Angel. On a musical level, this section occurs rather quickly after the second choral section—the climax of the work—where Harbison deliberately draws
points of imitation and sectional closure closer together. This compacting principle peaks at the end of the second choral section; Harbison then begins spreading out these points. The expansion clearly is not complete by the end of this soprano section, for the violins have not completed their imitative accompaniment when the baritone “interrupts.”

Narration 5—Measures 234-278

The final section of narration ranges from perfunctory declamation to entangled drama. The return of the trombones and the “chase” motive provide a signal that the danger has in fact not passed, and Joseph makes the decision to turn toward Galilee rather than traveling through Judea. Absent from this section are the quintuplets that punctuate the rest of the work. Instead, Harbison’s rhythmic expansion, away from the compressed intensity of the “In Rama” section, is evident. The quintuplet eighth notes are expanded into groups of triplets, and Harbison scores longer rests between narrative statements. Short, pointillistic melodic gestures in the instruments harken to earlier thematic elements, but the effect is one of an uncomfortable conclusion: any hope for a satisfying resolution feels uncertain. Harbison’s intent is clear, and the effect is terrifying. He explains:

[O]ne of the things that’s interesting about this story is that Mary and Joseph are an underclass: they come from a very marginalized segment of society, particularly because they’re in an occupied country. It seemed to me that story, in addition to being obviously a well-known story, with a certain amount of scene setting and working at it—not from the graphic angle which is where it’s usually been treated—from the sonic angle, could be reheard, or at least reconsidered.44

44 Harbison, interview.
“He shall be called a Nazarene”—Measures 278-317

In the final choral section, Harbison recalls the descending-fourth sequence presented in the alto line in bars 100-104: successive imitative entrances in this section begin on pitch classes D, A, E, and B, respectively. The soprano part begins the imitation with a presentation of $P_2$, followed by $I_6$. More significantly, the dotted rhythmic motive returns, completing “the search” for the “Nazarene” motive initiated at the beginning of the composition.

Example 16: Return of the “Nazarene” motive. Soprano, mm. 278-282.

As in the first choral section, canonic entries occur every four bars, the dynamics follow the contour of the melodic line, and the section ends with a *movendo* instruction. The effect is an uncomfortable feeling of losing control, of “slipping away”\(^{45}\): the scoring becomes increasingly sparse and the piece ends quietly, without any sense of conclusion or hope for resolution.

\(^{45}\) Hoose, interview.
Example 17: Motivic unity and canonic imitation in the third choral section, mm. 278-307.

THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT. By John Harbison.
International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

36
Example 18: Quietly slipping away, the conclusion of *The Flight into Egypt*, mm. 313-317.
The 1987 Pulitzer Prize

*The Flight into Egypt* received the Pulitzer Prize Award for Distinguished Musical Composition in 1987. When Harbison first received notification of his selection, he was surprised:

I’d had a conversation with the head of the Classical division at Schirmer, who always made a courtesy call to some of her composers around the Pulitzer time and said “Is there anything you want us to enter?” And I said “Well, no. I don’t have anything this year. I don’t have any large pieces. Thanks for calling. Just let it go.” That’s where I thought it stood, and then she made the executive decision to nevertheless send in this piece…. [I]t was certainly a year that I didn’t consider that I was going to be involved.46

46 Harbison, interview.
CHAPTER 3

REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS

Introduction

The word “accessible” seems to be the musical buzzword of our day, but I would not call the work “accessible.” I find it “approachable.” There’s a depth in it, and I don’t think there is anything easy about the piece. It’s a difficult text, a challenging text, a serious text which requires a lot of maturity and thoughtfulness on the part of the performers, singers, conductor and audience alike.  

After completing a thorough study of *The Flight into Egypt*, the conductor faces the challenge of guiding the choir through a series of efficient and informative rehearsals, teaching the music in a manner that provides relevant information concerning Harbison’s compositional process without overwhelming the ensemble with excessive analytical detail. While Harbison’s choral conducting experience and long association with the Cantata Singers and the music program at Emmanuel Church inform his compositions for the singer’s idiom, he readily acknowledges an inner struggle to reconcile his vertical harmonic vocabulary with a linear melodic construction more accessible for a singer. He admits to a long process of development and experimentation before coming to the understanding that “much of the experience of the singer [is] ‘line’.”  

Certainly, Harbison’s expectations of the choral ensemble vary widely depending upon the size, skill, level of education, and experience with music of a nontonal nature. Harbison states:

I’ve actually understood, gradually, that there are a great many different mentalities depending on what kind of choir it is. And I’ve written now in recent years a few pieces for a very large chorus where I think the approach is fundamentally different, both in the kind of sonority that you expect and also the

---

47 Hoose, interview
48 Harbison, interview.
ways that you lead the singers through the piece in terms of the structure of the piece and the—well, just the way that you direct them through the harmonies.

Emmanuel, initially when I started this later set of choral pieces, I treated them really as what they are: that is, very quick learners, and much like a string quartet, with quite extravagant ideas about what they could put together and what was chorally appropriate.

And I think I gradually got more inside the way the singer’s ear worked. It’s something that occurred to me a few times when I was conducting Cantata Singers, but I didn’t really transfer it over from my performance experience to my composing experience. That is, I occasionally conducted a piece where the linear content really guides the singer through the piece, but it took me quite a while as a composer to apply that sort of perception to what I was writing so that I could get the harmonic language that I wanted, with a little surer approach from the singers. That was an interesting evolution.

I’d say the later motets, the ones I’ve written more recently for Emmanuel Choir, show that—from the singer’s perspective—incorporation of the experience of singing choral music.49

In an effort to gain further insight into effective rehearsal and performance strategies for *The Flight into Egypt*, I interviewed two well-regarded conductors who have performed the work: David Hoose, Artistic Director and Conductor of the Cantata Singers (the ensemble responsible for the commission and premiere), and Dr. Patrick Gardner, Director of Choral Activities at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey.50

**The Choral Rehearsals**

Hoose’s rehearsal process begins with a read-through of the three choral sections: he does not offer an explanation of Harbison’s systematic treatment of the four-note cell; rather he feels that Harbison’s method is “not missable, and it becomes very apparent as a motivic idea when you’re trying to tune it.”51 He explains further that

49 Harbison, Interview
50 Complete transcripts of these interview are provided in the appendices.
51 Hoose, Interview.
the rehearsal period is one of discovery for the singers and admonishes a conductor to allow the choir the freedom to explore the construction of a work before being told specifically “how it works.” He states:

For me, there is no such thing as a “rehearsal process.” There is a piece of music, and it suggests a way of rehearsing it. The rehearsal process is one of analysis. That means, without saying “now notice the half step and the whole step, or the minor third here, and that is a motive that permeates the piece,” it’s more valuable to work out a rehearsal process whose consequence is that people have to look at the issue, and they can’t help but discover it.

Rehearsing is a process—for an orchestra, new music ensemble or a chorus—of helping people hear what it is they need to hear. By doing that, the rehearsal process ends up being an analysis, not one where you draw symbols on the board or give out charts (which is not to say that would not ever be appropriate), but one which best flows as a natural part of the rehearsal experience.52

When Gardner performed The Flight into Egypt, he did so with the University of Texas Chamber Singers, and his rehearsal aims were necessarily informed by his role as an educator of a university ensemble. Gardner’s singers were capable, certainly—half of the group were graduate students in voice; a number of the singers subsequently participated in the Robert Shaw Festival Singers in France53—but the length of his rehearsal period also allowed for a greater focus on the compositional detail. Gardner’s choir rehearsed the work during normal rehearsals (a two-hour rehearsal, three times per week) from September through November of 1987. In the initial rehearsals with the Chamber Singers, Gardner recalls making the singers aware of Harbison’s four-note cell, but did not provide the choir with a complete analysis.

I do find that, for a piece like this, it is helpful for the choir to have some of the analysis; not all of it, they don’t need to need to know every little bit of it, but they should see what’s happening, interbalancing with the chorus, so they start to recognize where the intervals are and what they can sing. It’s just not going to be

52 Hoose, interview.
an easy solfege session, to say the least. At some point, you have to sit down and spend a lot of your personnel time getting the pitch manipulation vocally to line up so you get a great sound.

I never hand out an analysis; I don't give a lecture on the piece to the singers. Some of them would rather shoot themselves in the head than study that, but others are very interested and they'll come to you and talk to you about it. I would say that I always introduce that at a certain level. I run a pretty fast-paced rehearsal, and you can't sit around and lecture on four-note cells when the time you have needs to be spent on getting it into their ear. There is a point at which they do need to sit down and be aware of that if they're going to sing it accurately. And unless they've got perfect pitch, or they're phenomenal sight readers and they do that intuitively, they need to find those relationships as they go along.54

The First Choral Section—"Out of Egypt"

After the first read through, Hoose suggests an effective procedure to clarify pitches and work intonation, one particularly helpful in the first and third choral sections. He instructs the choir sections to sing parts simultaneously, rather than in canonic imitation. This allows the choir to discover the relationship of a perfect fourth between parts and experience the point at which the imitation breaks down:

When you look at the very first choral entrance, the imitative choral entrance, you don't have to say, “now notice that the parts are imitating at the perfect 4th.” You can simply have the vocal sections all sing at exactly the same time. It becomes quite apparent what's going on, and it also begins to help them sing it in tune. There's a point at which the imitation stops, and that also helps them understand when it does—it becomes chaotic at a certain point. That helps them understand the way in which the imitation works. They begin to feel it; you don't have to point to the place where that happens.55

By contrast, Gardner instructs his choir to sing one part unison. This provides an opportunity to highlight the principal motive, isolate the accuracy of the pitch intervals, and call to the choir's attention the manipulation of the four-note cell throughout each of

---

54 Gardner, interview.
55 Hoose, interview.
the choral sections. Gardner then expects his students to transfer the information to
their respective parts.

The Second Choral Section—”In Rama”

In *The Flight into Egypt*, Harbison’s choral writing offers a myriad of possibilities
for rehearsal and teaching methods; the pervasive use of imitation makes the pitch-
learning process in the first and third choral sections a relatively easy one. In the
second section, however—“In Rama” (bars 146-206)—Harbison’s angular melodic lines,
leaps into dissonant intervals, imitation at the tritone, and compact points of imitation
present great challenges for the singer and require considerable planning on the part of
the conductor.

One rehearsal approach involves a compression of the angular melody, removing
the octave displacements to draw an association to the original motivic material. After
the singers can sing accurately the sequence of pitches, the conductor may gradually
return singers to the notated melody, allowing both the notated melody and the
“compressed” melody to sound simultaneously. Once the singers all return to the
notated melody, the connection to the “compressed” motive remains in the singer’s ear
and aids the accuracy of the difficult ascending minor ninth, ascending minor seventh
and descending tritone. Figure 2 illustrates this procedure:
Hoose again advocates instructing the choir to sing the otherwise imitative parts simultaneously, in “a kind of weird organum” at the tritone, to hone accuracy of pitch and overall intonation. He adds that measures 188-190 (“because they are not”) provide a unique challenge in that they mark the only homophonic choral statement in the work: “you have to figure out a way to rehearse it, because that’s certainly something that people will not get immediately.” To do so, Hoose continues with his vertical approach: he instructs the altos and basses to sing together and calls attention to the parallel perfect fifths between the parts; he does the same for the soprano and tenor, this time noting the parallel minor thirds.

Gardner likewise experienced the difficulty with bars 188-190 and, in addition to compressing the ninth and working the tuning of related parts, he gave the choir a general benchmark of E-major:

---

56 Hoose, interview
57 Hoose, interview
I remember having them think E-major and coming in and just working so hard on that. You know, to get that far, you could hear it pretty much as straightforward E-Major. The “lamentation” and weaving material isn’t so hard because the intervals are closer, but they still have to work on it. I don’t remember ever thinking that was going to be easy, so it didn’t surprise me that it was hard for the singers.\(^{58}\)

The Third Choral Section—“He shall be called a Nazarene”

When describing his compositional design, Harbison speaks of drawing the points of imitation closer together in the second choral section, then spreading apart again in the third. It is not surprising then that Hoose and Gardner draw parallels between the third choral section and the first: when teaching this section to the choir, they both employ a rehearsal process similar to their approach at the opening. However, Hoose does cite one additional vocal issue inherent in the third section:

The closing section, when the music comes back, is a little more difficult than the opening section, and it’s partly because it’s vocally more difficult. It sits more statically in certain regions of the voice, and people have to really spin those notes and spin those phrases and get them to travel. Conversely, the opening phrase has built into it a *parlando* that’s very apparent and doesn’t require too much manipulation—too much work to get it to speak—other than getting it not to sound like it’s two bar units (which is an easy thing to let happen when the music has a rest!). Also in the last section, the tuning of the “he shall be called” is more difficult.\(^{59}\)

Instrumentation

When asked about rehearsal and performance issues concerning Harbison’s instrumentation, Gardner and Hoose immediately offered the same response: “hire great players.” And while the comment may be considered aloof, it underscores another fundamental difficulty in the work—performing Harbison’s carefully considered

\(^{58}\) Gardner, interview.  
\(^{59}\) Hoose, interview.
orchestration not only with technical merit, but also in an expressive and evocative manner.

While preparing The Flight into Egypt, Hoose had the opportunity to work with the orchestra alone for a full rehearsal. This is consistent with his normal rehearsal process, as it allocates a time for the instrumentalists to work things out. He feels strongly that “[the players] just need time to hear it, and need not have the chorus sitting there or chaffing at the bits.” He explains further:

The oboe parts are challenging. They’re not technically really hard, but they do require a level of elegance, eloquence and technical security on the part of the players. They’re hard to tune, and there is this lamenting quality, a plaintive quality, but the oboes can’t sound strained or taxed. Now, that’s not to say that students can’t play the piece. I know students have, and it obviously will just take a bit more time. Nothing is unreadable in the piece.

The trombone parts are unusual in that they are independent of each other, especially in that note-chasing motive, the first allegro of the “Herod” section. That’s not something that trombonists typically do, and the players have to have a certain elegance in their own playing. They need to be a bit suave, because it really can’t be rough and edgy. It needs to be quite slippery sounding while in tune.

The organ part looks easy, but it’s not. The organist needs to see the part well in advance. The big crunchy chords that happen toward the end are not hard to play, but they just require some deciphering because the parts are in manuscript. The choral parts have obviously been engraved, but the instrumental parts have not.

Regarding issues of balance, the trombones can’t play up except very rarely, such as the outburst with the quick glissando, the chord right at the climax, right before the organ starts to play. They can’t play a real orchestral fortissimo because they need to balance. The three oboes and the bassoon have to be able to simulate the color of a fortissimo, a real fortissimo. They can’t play gently. The trombones, while they have to be incredibly even and aggressive, can’t be terribly loud because they have to balance with the double reeds.

---

60 Ibid.
61 Hoose, interview.
In addition, Gardner recalls particular difficulty with the high string tuning in the soprano solo sections:

I remember the string crossings being a real bear, that it just sounded terrible. And there's nothing underneath it; there's nothing supporting it. It's really naked right there, so each of the players really have to be able to play.\textsuperscript{62}

Gardner also remembers spending a great deal of rehearsal time on the synchronicity of the quintuplets that delineate sections throughout the work. He cites these quintuplets as perhaps the most difficult aspect in the orchestration:

Getting people to play true quintuplets together—it's something singers don't do as often as players—is really hard. It makes it sound out of tune even if they're all playing it in tune slightly apart from each other. You need good players who want to do it.

I do remember rehearsing the quintuplets, but mainly just getting them to listen to each other and trying to get everything steady. I wish there were some trick, you know. Working out the fact that it is important is nice, but it doesn't make it easier to play.... I sat down with my metronome and figured out mathematically where that third note sits in relationship to the others, to the main beat, which is not fun. That's hard stuff.\textsuperscript{63}

Gardner also advises preparing “practice parts” to provide the instrumentalists an opportunity for off-site practice. Since he currently works primarily with union orchestras, Gardner understands that the players are used to relying upon their sight-reading abilities:

They want to sound good, and they're just used to being able to sight read everything. But if they got this, they wouldn't be able to do it perfectly. Then they would giggle and laugh, but they'd buckle down and work.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{62} Gardner, interview.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
Conducting Challenges

Neither Hoose nor Gardner mentioned any specific gestural challenges for the conductor, though Harbison does score several tempo transitions that demand planning and special attention. In one particular circumstance, Harbison calls for a *movendo* at the end of the third choral section (bars 300-307). Here the challenge is to gradually increase the tempo back to Tempo I (quarter note=88) without a sense of urgency or hurry. Hoose describes this transition as

fantastic—you have the feeling that everything’s just slipping away—and yet it must not feel like it’s accelerating. It can give the singers the feeling that they don’t have a good grip on what’s going on because it’s just going faster and faster.65

Overall Effect

Despite the challenges inherent in a composition such as *The Flight into Egypt*, Harbison’s work is a viable performance option for many university, community, church and professional ensembles. The systematic approach to motivic unity and pitch development provides not only an approachable work, but also a relatively modest introduction to quasi-serial music for a group with little experience in non-tonal musical constructs. Hoose states:

I would say one does not need to sell this piece to anybody. I guess it’s possible that a group that never performs any new music—has never done anything quasi-atonal—would be baffled and not terribly sympathetic, but by and large it is extremely approachable music, emotionally and technically. And its approachability doesn’t mean that there isn’t layer after layer of things to dig into and to unveil.66

But why then is this piece performed so infrequently? Hoose offers one explanation:

65 Hoose, Interview
66 Ibid.
Maybe its size—that is, its relative modesty—makes people shy away from it, I don’t know. I guess you can look at the first page of the orchestral writing and say, “Ooh, it’s very high,” or see the first violin entrance and that can creep you out, but it is worth every minute of study and rehearsal time. It’s quite a compelling piece on a concert, as long as it’s given a sympathetic reading—and a loving reading for that matter—and as long as it’s framed in some way that is thoughtful, because it’s not a piece that can stand alone. It’s not large enough to stand alone; it belongs with other music. Now there are lots and lots of things it can work with, but it can’t just sit there as the new piece on the concert; it really won’t work. There has to be something that connects to it textually, texturally, spiritually, emotionally or sonically, and we’ve done it with a variety of things. On the first concert, I think it was Bach and Schütz, and they were Advent pieces.67

Perhaps another reason is the very subject that initially attracted Harbison to the text, the journey into Egypt which, despite its chronological proximity to the birth of Jesus, is often overlooked among the stories and traditions of the Christmas holidays. To perform the work when seasonally-appropriate—that is, immediately after the feast of the Epiphany—is difficult in universities on semester break or in professional choirs between Fall and Spring performance seasons. Moreover, the subject matter is one that normally does not “sell” during the typical “festive” celebrations of Christmas.

Nevertheless, the piece is remarkable, a carefully crafted and terrifyingly expressive musical illustration of a harrowing tale of fear, desperation and sorrow. Over twenty years after the original commission and premier of the work, Hoose remains an ardent champion of Harbison’s music and, in particular, the work that inaugurated his long association with new music and the commissions of profound choral-orchestral works:

[D]o it with enthusiasm, because it’s a very rewarding piece. It’s rewarding to sing, rewarding to play—John’s music is always.

One of the great things about John’s music is that it’s always satisfying to perform. It’s satisfying for the soloists, the orchestra, and for the chorus, each in

67 Ibid.
its own way. You cannot say that about all music. That’s not a comment on the quality of the music, but there are composers whose way of writing reflects profound sympathy with an understanding of the performer; John’s music consistently does that.

I think that John’s music—from the very first rehearsal—is so clear in its intention that the performers get it right away, even if they’re not able to play it or sing it. They are very likely to come away from that first rehearsal saying “Wow, this is a very cool piece. I hope we can perform it.”68

68 Ibid.
APPENDIX A

HARBISON’S TREATMENT OF THE TEXT IN *THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT*
BARITONE SOLOIST (as Narrator)
Behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying:

SOPRANO (as Angel)
"Arise, [arise,] and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be there until I bring thee word, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him."

BARITONE
When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: and was there until the death of Herod, that it may be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying:

CHORUS
"Out of Egypt have I called my son."

BARITONE
Then Herod when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem and in all the coasts thereof; from two years old and under according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying:

CHORUS
"In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation and weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted, because they are not."

BARITONE
But when Herod was dead, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying:

SOPRANO
"Arise, [arise,] and take the young child and his mother and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child’s life."

BARITONE
And he arose and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding being warned of God in a dream he turned aside into the parts of Galilee; and he came and dwelt in the city of Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets:

CHORUS
"He shall be called a Nazarene."
APPENDIX B

BIBLICAL TEXT AND QUOTATIONS
Matthew 2:13-23 (King James Version)

13 And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a
dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and
be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into
Egypt:

15 and was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of
the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

Hosea 11:1—
1 When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding
wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the
coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had
diligently inquired of the wise men.

17 Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying,

18 In Rama was there a voice heard,
lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
and would not be comforted, because they are not.

Jeremiah 31:15—
15 Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Rama, lamentation, and bitter
weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her
children, because they were not.

Genesis 35:16-21 (The Death of Rachel)—

16 And they journeyed from Beth-el; and there was but a little way to come
to Ephrath: and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labor. 17 And it came to
pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said unto her, Fear not;
thou shalt have this son also. 18 And it came to pass, as her soul was in
departing, (for she died,) that she called his name Beno'ni (trans. "the son
of my sorrow"): but his father called him Benjamin (trans. "the son of the
right hand"). 19 And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath,
which is Bethlehem.
But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life.

And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel.

But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee:

and he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth:

---

_Luke 2:39 (The Return to Nazareth)——_

39 And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth.

that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

---

_Isaiah 11:1-3——_

1 And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: 2 and the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; 3 and shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD.
APPENDIX C

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HARBISON
Brian Galante:
I know that you have been involved in choral ensembles dating back to your high school years. Will you discuss your childhood education in music and your early experiences in the choir?

John Harbison:
Sure. When I was in high school at Princeton High School, the strongest musical organization that we had happened to be the choir. There was a very enterprising conductor, Tom Hilbish, who soon thereafter went on to the University of Michigan. Though I played instruments—tuba and piano and so forth—my main high school activity as a performer was singing. We performed very enterprising repertoire, spent a lot of time in rehearsal, and gave a lot of concerts, so I knew not only some recent choral repertoire but also standard works from singing in that choir.

I also began conducting there and wrote a little music too: I wrote some male choir pieces which we did with that chorus (and which actually Harold Rosenbaum is doing with the New York Virtuoso Singers this winter). So that was the real focus of my high school life. Princeton High School Choir actually continued to have quite a strong tradition, a very active sort of enterprising group of singers, always.

Galante:
I understand there were some pretty major works that you performed while you were a student there.

Harbison:
We did some big works. We did the Honegger King David; we did a couple of Schubert masses; we did the Schubert Song of the Spirit Over the Waters with the male choir; and a good deal of Bach. It was very challenging repertoire for young singers, but it was also a pretty impressive program. We had vocal technique instruction; we had some sort of chamber-singing smaller groups. It was really very thoroughly conceived—and the choir did a lot of traveling to perform as well—so I’d say that was the start of my interest, or at least participation, though I had sung in children’s choirs too, even before that, before my voice changed. And I actually sang as a treble soloist for a while . . . strange memory, but I did quite a bit of that.

When I got to college, I actually moved more into instrumental music and conducting—Bach Society Orchestra and so forth—and a little bit away from choir. I didn’t really come back to it in terms of central preoccupation until I went to graduate school and organized some concerts of Bach cantatas.

Then when I arrived here to teach at MIT, I began the Cantata Singers, which I did on a couple of stretches—first for about four years, and then I came back as music director a number of years later. That was mainly a Bach and twentieth-century music choir: we didn’t do too much of the choral repertoire in between. Mainly, it was those two poles and then some earlier music. I remember doing Josquin with that chorus, and then I wrote a piece during that period, Five Songs of Experience, which I performed with the Cantata Singers.
Then there was a long break of not composing for choir. I’m not quite sure why because I was still working a lot with choruses as a conductor, but I didn’t compose for a choir for a long time. Suddenly, it occurred to me that it would be a great chance, working with Emmanuel Choir (which was after I stopped with the Cantata Singers), just to do a series of choral pieces and use it as a sounding board for choral writing. Since I knew the singers very well, I knew I could get a good sense of what I was doing. And so since then, really since around—this was 1990 or so—I’ve written mainly for Emmanuel Choir and gotten a good sense of how the pieces evolved in performance, because we’re able to bring back the repertoire really over a long period. Some of the pieces I wrote then we still perform quite regularly over there.

Galante:

Since you write so much for a specific group, how does that inform your approach to your compositions of the choir? You know the singers very well, obviously; you know their capabilities. What is your process as you approach the writing?

Harbison:

I’ve actually understood, gradually, that there are a great many different mentalities depending on what kind of choir it is. And I’ve written now in recent years a few pieces for a very large chorus where I think the approach is fundamentally different, both in the kind of sonority that you expect and also the ways that you lead the singers through the piece in terms of the structure of the piece and the—well, just the way that you direct them through the harmonies.

Emmanuel, initially when I started this later set of choral pieces, I treated them really as what they are: that is, very quick learners, and much like a string quartet with quite extravagant ideas about what they could put together and what was chorally appropriate.

And I think I gradually got more inside the way the singer’s ear worked. It’s something that occurred to me a few times when I was conducting Cantata Singers, but I didn’t really transfer it over from my performance experience into my composing experience. I occasionally conducted a piece where the linear content really guides the singer through the piece, but it took me quite a while as a composer to apply that sort of perception to what I was writing so that I could get the harmonic language that I wanted, with a little surer approach from the singers. That was an interesting evolution.

I’d say the later motets, the ones I’ve written more recently for Emmanuel Choir, show that—from the singer’s perspective—incorporation of the experience of singing choral music.

Galante:

Do you find that particularly difficult, to incorporate the linear aspect of the singer’s approach into your harmonic vocabulary?
Harbison:
Yes, I did for a while, but it’s becoming less so. I would say initially it was hard for me to understand since I don’t think the music that way. It was hard for me to understand how much of the experience of the singer was line.

Galante:
Is the Emmanuel Choir made up of professional singers?

Harbison:
Yes, it is. Generally the rehearsals of the new piece are one day: a Saturday rehearsal and performance on Sunday. That’s really the way those pieces have always been put together. Now, Cantata Singers is a different experience, and it’s a mix of highly professional singers and what we would call community chorus singers. It holds weekly rehearsals over a seven or so week period, and there I would say my mode of communication with the singers is a little bit different. It works both ways, of course, because while the absorption time is longer, the quick immediate sort of sight reading level is less.

With Cantata Singers, I’ve always thought of it less as a chamber choir, more in between, with larger sections and a somewhat different sonority, which is really what it’s always been: it’s always had a very strong character and very slow turnover, a very consistent personality. Pieces I’ve written for Cantata Singers have had, I would have to say, another character, more “outward-directed” too, in terms of the text, whereas at Emmanuel, I tend to be communicating more with a congregation that hears a great deal of sacred music and has dealt more with what you might think of as canonical texts, some of them set very often. With the Cantata Singers, with The Flight and with the But Mary Stood, I’ve tried to take on what I would call more community themes, social themes.

Galante:
Will you discuss the evolution of The Flight, its genesis from commission to what you ultimately ended up with?

Harbison:
It’s always been interesting to me, the particular stories of the “Slaughter of the Innocents” and “The Flight into Egypt” have not been treated very much in the choral world. In fact, for the first performance of the piece, when David Hoose looked for certain kinds of pieces that might be in parallel, he found, I think, less than he expected. Typically, where you always expect to find almost complete coverage of almost every Biblical theme, he did find a Schütz piece: Schütz is comprehensive in a way that Bach is not. There’s really no Lutheran church day that deals directly with the Flight story, which is probably one reason that Bach didn’t treat it in a sort of head-on way.

One of the things that has always struck me about that story—of course, it’s in the iconography, the paintings and so forth—is people who are driven out and have to find their way into new terrain. They’re driven out essentially by violence and the
paranoia of a leader who adopts an absolutely brutal solution to what is really just a competitive paranoid problem. That struck me as being very resonant, very interesting as a theme. Also, I like the idea of the straightforward, continuous Biblical narrative which I knew from a few other instances. Stravinsky, at certain points in his career, is interested in that sort of piece, particularly in *Abraham and Isaac*, and then in one section of *A Sermon, Narrative and a Prayer*, where the entire narrative is just taken on straightforwardly. By assigning certain parts to soloists or whatever, you can delineate the actors in the drama.

This is quite a different approach than the cantata, where you are essentially editorializing or doing what you would in, say, the madrigal responses in the Passions. *The Flight into Egypt* doesn’t have those sort of madrigal responses. It’s all directly from the Biblical narrative.

Galante:  
Were you aware of the Schütz piece when you undertook—

Harbison:  
No, actually, not. I know a lot of Schütz, but that one I didn’t know. I was, of course, not at all surprised that he had treated that subject matter.

Galante:  
So the choice of text was yours, or was David Hoose involved?

Harbison:  
No, it was my choice, and one of the things that appealed to me was the idea that all the way through that narrative there’s recourse to the prophetic Old Testament text. That seemed to be a natural role for the chorus.

Then, one of the chorus members explained to me that “Nazarene” (at the end of that text), which I understood really just to be a designation of place, of heritage, also means “healer” or “redeemer.” It’s one of the theological-school people in the Cantata Singers.

At any rate, there is a consistent perspective all the way through that narrative each time there’s a reference to Old Testament verse.

Galante:  
When you do go back to those Old Testament references in the successive entrances of the choir, these are clearly aligned with the motivic development initiated at the beginning of the piece. What was your process in the narrative portion with the soloists? What guided your composition in that area?

Harbison:  
I kept the angel fairly distinct. The angel is based on the motives, though the melodic line is fairly free, or refers only in a very angled way to the motives.
I worked on all the choruses together because I conceived of them as developments of each other, and they were, as you say, quite consciously adhering to the initial—really just a proposal of a couple of motives—in that oboe introduction.

My idea was that I would make most of the piece from just those few motives, and the narrator would refer back to the motives. To me, it’s necessary to recall a certain thematic of the narrative. Often, then, he will work freely against a texture which is derived from the initial thematic shapes, that is, a kind of obbligato.

Galante: Did you have in mind a certain character between the instruments and the narrator, one functioning freely against the other?

Harbison: The narrator is to me much like the Abraham and Isaac narrator, in that he assumes a dramatic involvement in the text at times. He’s not always neutral, but gets involved in the text; he is not detached in its telling. He is a storyteller with a dramatic flair—that was the way I thought of it. Then, of course, even passages which would seem fairly textural—like the trombones—are displays of the motive as well.

Galante: Yes. You mentioned in your program notes the timbral aspect of the opening oboe section as your musical representation of the iconography. Did you have that in mind for the other sections as well?

Harbison: I think so. Of course, I knew from Schütz and various other early composers that the association of brass with the villain comes up in the Schütz Christmas Oratorio.

Galante: Your subtitle, a “sacred ricercar,” evokes a connection to the music of the 16th and 17th centuries, and I know you’ve been active as an early music conductor. How did you come up with the allusion to earlier music through the wandering affect of the ricercar?

Harbison: I think of the ricercar very literally in terms of the way the Italian word translates, as a kind of hidden presence, an all-over presence that is foregrounded only occasionally. That is to say, a thematic substance which has to be searched for, but it’s not always presented up front. I think that’s the way it is in Frescobaldi and some of the composers who use that title quite frequently. Bach, oddly enough, uses it only once, to my knowledge, in The Musical Offering, where it certainly functions exactly as I just described: after the entrances of the subject in the six-part piece, the subsequent thematic appearances are about as hidden and stealthy as any Bach contrapuntal piece. In fact, sometimes he tries deliberately to confuse the ear by
seeming to bring the entrance before it really comes. There’s quite an elaborate subterfuge that goes on in that piece, which I think is illustrative of the title.

Galante:
Looking at the opening section—and certainly when one considers the four-note motive that permeates the piece—I see striking illusions to Stravinsky in the Symphony of Psalms. Was this a piece that you had in the back of your mind as you were composing The Flight? Again, the four-note cell comes immediately to mind.

Harbison:
These were in the back of my mind: that’s certainly a piece that I heard done as a teenager and I would have had in my ear, particularly the fugue.

In fact, now that you mention it, it seems quite obvious that I must have been retracing the idea of that initial flutes-and-oboes fugue that begins the second section in the way I began this piece. But I hadn’t thought about it until now. Again, it’s a wind fugue with very staged entrances and a very limited motivic vocabulary. I’ve known that piece since I was in high school.

Galante:
You performed it in high school?

Harbison:
I don’t think we performed that one. We did a couple movements of the mass. I know my sister’s generation of the choir did perform it a few years later, but I certainly knew the piece: I was very aware of it.

Galante:
I read somewhere that you were actually surprised about your designation as a Pulitzer Prize winner for this piece?

Harbison:
Well, yes. I’d had a conversation with the head of the Classical division at Schirmer, who always made a courtesy call to some of her composers around the Pulitzer time and said “Is there anything you want us to enter?” And I said “Well, no. I don’t have anything this year. I don’t have any large pieces. Thanks for calling. Just let it go.” That’s where I thought it stood, and then she made the executive decision to nevertheless send in this piece. That would be the source of the surprise; it was certainly a year that I didn’t consider that I was going to be involved.

Galante:
Did you conceive of a type of rhythmic development throughout the piece, such as the use of the quintuplets? Was there an affect that you wanted associated with a certain rhythmic motive?
Harbison:

Well, the fives are generally setups for some new scene in the narration. As I remember, I had a scheme in my mind where, as you get to the center of the piece, the points of imitation come closer. That was to be a reinforcement of the direction to the central chorus, which is also an Old Testament reference to tragedy. In that choral section, the imitation points are closest. I wanted to try to find a way of paralleling a goal point in terms of intensity, with the swiftness with which the sections are imitating. It spreads back out towards the end of the piece.

Galante:

It’s obvious to the listener, the tension involved with the movement toward the closer imitation and then spreading back out: the kind of release there is quite striking.

Harbison:

That was—yes. I recall that was something that I had to calculate to a certain degree—I had to make a decision to heighten that sufficiently so that it was really audible.

Galante:

Going back to the text and your notion of experimenting with the darker side of Christmas, was this spirited specifically by this commission or was it something that you were looking at over a period of time and this gave you the vehicle to do it?

Harbison:

It was something I’d been thinking about for a while because that period was—of course, it’s not so different now—a period in which the number of lost citizens, people begging on the streets and so forth, was very strikingly opposite a society unresponsive, unwilling, or unable to help the less fortunate.

Of course, one of the things that’s interesting about this story is that Mary and Joseph are an underclass: they come from a very marginalized segment of society, particularly because they’re in an occupied country. It seemed to me that story, in addition to being obviously a well-known story, with a certain amount of scene setting and working at it—not from the graphic angle which is where it’s usually been treated—from the sonic angle, could be reheard, or at least reconsidered.

It’s a very violent story, and that’s probably one of the reasons that it’s not been a big hit around Christmas, that it doesn’t come up a lot in the liturgical tradition of the so-called holidays.

Galante:

Were you involved in the rehearsal process?

Harbison:

I remember I was. We had a very young and extremely talented soprano, Lorraine Hunt, who then eventually became quite successful. That was one of her first solo appearances, and it’s always exciting to be hearing a new singer.
It was also a group that—there were players and singers that I know very well. I knew what I could ask for in terms of their learning skills and so forth. And David Hoose—David has done so many of my pieces, already had by then.

**Galante:**
Were there any revisions that came about as a result of the rehearsals or the first performance?

**Harbison:**
All I remember is the usual: a few dynamic adjustments and the like, nothing much. And I also remember that the things—it’s often true—you expect difficulty with are not difficult. And the reverse.

But that’s a typical experience with a new piece.
Galante:
Will you describe the circumstances of your presentations of the piece?

Gardner:
I've only done it once, and it's one of those things where you want to have the right resources before you do it. I've lectured on the piece; I love the piece, too, but I performed it at the University of Texas. It must have been either 1987 or 1988—I can't remember the exact date. There is a list of previous performances up to that time in my score—it hadn't been that many at that point.

Galante:
And I don't think there have been that many subsequently.

Gardner:
No, I don't think so. Let's see, November of 1987 was my performance; December '87 was at Emmanuel, which is the group of people that David has recorded it with, I think; and Riverside Symphony with George Rothman in October '87.

Galante:
Rothman's was the New York premier.

Gardner:
Right. I have a whole list of performances—'89, '90, '91, '93, '95, '96...up to 2001—from a lecture I gave at ACDA. It has not been performed all that much, and a lot of the sort of people you might expect did it: Indiana, Oberlin, University of Colorado. 1990 was again the Cantata Singers with David: it was probably a lot of the same people in the Emmanuel performance. Oberlin did it a couple of times (that was John Bixby doing it after he found out about it from me). Oregon Bach Festival did it in '96. So anyway, there—at the point when I performed it in November of '87—had been the West Coast Premier and the New York Premier, and then my performance. I guess mine was pretty early in the performance history. It was very well received, by the way. The audience really seemed to like it.

Galante:
How did you hear about the work?

Gardner:
I'm always looking for new music by—one of my main goals in music is to perform and look for composers who are writing significant music without concern for medium. In other words, I'm looking for people who are well known in the orchestra field and the chamber music field and not just "choir composers." I'm less interested in someone who only writes for chorus (not that there isn't great music in that area as well), but I think that there's something to be said for finding the people whose compositional minds transcend any particular medium.

I've done works by Bill Bolcom, John Harbison, Lukas Foss and Lou Harrison, people who don't come to mind immediately as choral composers. I find that, by
focusing on the more popular choral composers, perhaps we're missing the boat on significant repertoire that will impact and last. When did this win the Pulitzer?

Galante:
In 1987.

Gardner:
Right. That was probably a big impetus for performing it. I probably knew it had won a Pulitzer and called immediately to get the score. I know that in my notes here I have a list of every piece that won the Pulitzer from the 1940s for a lecture I gave at ACDA. There are not many prize winners who won the Pulitzer for a choral piece, so it seemed to me it would probably be worth looking into.

Anyway, I had arrived at the University of Texas, and I was young and fearless, so I jumped in and did this on my first concert with the UT Chamber Singers. It wasn't like I was unfamiliar with the group (both Jerry [McCoy] and I had studied there as students, and I'd been teaching at the University of Michigan from 1981 until 1987). I had not been away from the ensemble all that long, and I was thoroughly aware of its capabilities; indeed, I was probably as concerned about the orchestra that I would need as anything else.

Galante:
Can you describe briefly the abilities and the make-up of the Chamber Singers?

Gardner:
I would say, as college choirs go, it was a very advanced group. For its time, it probably was one of the better set of singers around. It had probably half graduate students in voice. In fact, out of that choir, at least three or four people ended up singing with Robert Shaw the next year in the Festival Singers, over in France. They had a long tradition of attracting great singers and singing at a high level, although they hadn't done this kind of repertoire very much.

Galante:
Will you describe, rather generally, your approach to a new work? You talked about seeking works that are in a medium perhaps nontraditional for choral conductors. How do you—once you decide to do a piece—introduce it to the choir and take them through those first rehearsal stages?

Gardner:
Of course with a piece like this, you have to really know it very well yourself, and since there wasn't anything available—it's not like you could go to Eric Walter White's book on Stravinsky, or someone's book on Britten—I spent a lot of time on analysis, probably that entire summer at the keyboard. I'm not a pianist, but that's where I work things out, sitting down and doing analysis of the piece. I assume you've had a chance to do that.
Galante:  
Yes.

Gardner:  
So you know the relationship of the three choral parts, right?

Galante:  
Right, absolutely.

Gardner:  
I'm quite sure I started there because I had to make a decision as to whether the choir could sing it. My approach is to get the piece of music and start at the macrocosmic level: there is some pretty obvious, large sectional organization going on, from the opening ricercar to the big structural placements of the three major choral sections. The baritone obviously has material that comes back at the end, as does the Angel's response, so you can take the big overall picture of it.

With this piece, one of the things that attracted me was the pitch organization, and its clear connection to the traditional—back to Stravinsky—with the opening sonority, the very clear map of the piece, and that incredible...do you know about the thing with the trombone?

Galante:  
Yes.

Gardner:  
You've been able to trace the four-note cell there?

Galante:  
Yes.

Gardner:  
Good, then. I remember, when you first heard the trombone, the thing went <singing> and you just go “Wow, what a cool sonority”: it is something that draws you in. Then, if you spend the time at it, you find how those pitches are organized and shift around each other with the same opening motive. To me, that's very attractive—the puzzle aspect of the piece that's separate from how beautiful the melodies are. I'm quite sure that before I went to the first rehearsal, I was pretty clear on the way that...you know how the melody doubles on itself?

Galante:  
Yes.

Gardner:  
You know you have the four pitches, and then they turn around backwards?
Galante:
Right.

Gardner:
That, plus the way it works as a little fugato, turning on itself. If you've never heard of a level within a level, it's pretty cool. And the octave dislocations in the "In Rama".

Galante:
And that section is extremely difficult to sing correctly.

Gardner:
Yes, right. I often use that when someone is really good at pitch matching when auditioning for me. I quite often play that and see if they can sing it back to me and sing the minor ninth accurately.

I do find that, for a piece like this, it is helpful for the choir to have some of the analysis; not all of it, they don't need to need to know every little bit of it, but they should see what's happening, interbalancing with the chorus, so they start to recognize where the intervals are and what they can sing. It's just not going to be an easy solfege session, to say the least. At some point, you have to sit down and spend a lot of your personnel time getting the pitch manipulation vocally to line up so you get a great sound. It is difficult, no question about it. Although I don't find the two outside parts difficult at all, the "In Rama" section is very difficult.

So that's how I start. I analyze the piece and come up with a good sense of where it's going. Honestly, I don't do that with every piece. I don't do it with a [Eric] Whitacre, which is based on the very clever manipulation of sonority with relatively simple melodic and harmonic material. Something like that opens itself up to you harmonically and melodically very quickly, whereas something like this, you have to keep going to back to it, and keep going back to it the way you do a piece by Beethoven or Stravinsky. I'm quite sure that's one of the real attractions of the piece.

One wouldn't immediately say John Harbison is a choral composer, although he has conducted choirs, and sung in choirs and he knows choirs really well. He's a really nice guy too: I spent some time with him up at Tanglewood one year when I was up there; I have nice letters from him regarding his performance, but I never had the chance to ask him specifically about his compositional process. I'm glad you're doing that.

Galante:
After the analysis is done, how do you take that into the introduction to the choir? Do you have them initially sing the four-note cell and move beyond that? Do you actually take them through the road map and show them where their cells arrive?
Gardner:
As we sing through it, I would. I never hand out an analysis; I don't give a lecture on the piece to the singers. Some of them would rather shoot themselves in the head than study that, but others are very interested and they'll come to you and talk to you about it. I would say that I always introduce that at a certain level. I run a pretty fast-paced rehearsal, and you can't sit around and lecture on four-note cells when the time you have needs to be spent on getting it into their ear. There is a point at which they do need to sit down and be aware of that if they're going to sing it accurately. And unless they've got perfect pitch, or they're phenomenal sight readers and they do that intuitively, they need to find those relationships as they go along.

There is no question about it: if I go to my choir right now, hand out a piece of music, stop them and say, "What key are we in?", half of them say "Huh?". They're music majors, so I get really mad at them, but sweetly and nicely say, "We're spending all this money to train you in music theory and you're spending your money on tuition. We don't do that to irritate you. Here's your reason: how can you sight read carefully if you don't know what key you're in?" I try to train my singers early on to use their intellectual skills and their musical skills to help them sight read. I know you work with Ken Fulton—there's another conductor who makes people solfege.

This one is trickier, though, and yet kind of fun. If you have a group of people who are doing this sort of thing to begin with—they are trained to do it—and then you say, "I have something different for you. You're going to enjoy this. You really will find it frustrating to solfege it right unless you're moving do, so for once the intervallic approach that most of you want to take off at times is actually going to work very well here. And oh, by the way, look, instead of <singing>, if you now go <singing>, you're going to find...”

I do remember making them read through the piece. Then I went back and compressed all the octave displacements and had everybody sing one section's part. And then they all went, "Oh, I get it." That doesn't necessarily mean that the manipulation of the voice along with the ear is going to immediately happen, but it's certainly going to come a lot faster if you make them aware of it.

That's the level of analysis that I would give them. Then, as I go through things—I'm a teacher working at a university while preparing for this performance—I certainly would point things out.

Galante:
You mentioned solfege a few times. Is that your normal mode of operation?

Gardner:
It wasn't when I was doing this piece, by any means, but normally it is. We have a very good—four days a week, our kids are in what we call “Fundies.” These are Music Fundamentals classes (the kids all call it “Fundies”). They do learn moveable do and we use it in the chorus.
But back to your question, I did not use solfege at all in this piece, and I doubt seriously I would right now. It's a piece that is atonal or chromatically organized in such a way that you would have to keep shifting your do all the time, and I don't find that using C-syllable (which is the only other choice) is all that helpful.

Galante:
How long was your rehearsal period before the piece?

Gardner:
The last week of August or first week of September until November. I had two-hour rehearsals, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, or perhaps Monday, Wednesday, Thursday. I had a significant amount of rehearsal time compared to anywhere else like that with really good singers.

Galante:
Do you recollect any difficulties or challenges that you had with the piece, the obvious difficulties notwithstanding?

Gardner:
You mean in the chorus?

Galante:
In the chorus, yes.

Gardner:
Yes, the middle section took a lot of time. The two outside sections went pretty quickly.

Galante:
And what about with the instrumental ensemble?

Gardner:
I remember the string crossings being a real bear, that it just sounded terrible. I can't remember where it was in the score.

Galante:
It's probably around the soprano entrance, 31, 32.

Gardner:
Okay, <singing>, something from the ricercar vignette, <singing>. There's nothing underneath it; there's nothing supporting it. It's really naked right there, so each of the players really have to be able to play. I had a small section; it was a pick-up band.

The opening we took a lot of time on. Page 5 and 6 of the score is not so difficult, but those quintuplets are tricky. There's some stuff that's exposed, and it's all low. In the first choral part, there's almost nothing for the players. In the trombone section, to
get it really in tune, you need players with real ears, but then I did have good
players. I'd love to do this now, because the trombone section I work with in New
York City is the world's best; they would love this piece.

Getting people to play true quintuplets together—it's something singers don't do as
often as players—is really hard. It makes it sound out of tune even if they're all
playing it in tune slightly apart from each other. You need good players who want to
do it. There's some tricky stuff in the woodwinds, too. I'm just flipping through the
whole thing now. I can remember, even the doublings on 16 and 17...

Galante:
In the strings and the chorus?

Gardner:
Yes. It's hard for the orchestra as well as the chorus.

Then, of course, you have the same issue with the return of the soprano solo, when
she comes back with the string accompaniment. I remember spending a lot of time
on that—you need to make sure that you've got the time to do that. Of course,
situations will be different. At a university, you can call a sectional for just the
violinists and get them working. Here in New York City, it is incredibly expensive, but
the players are good. This might be one of the few pieces where they would actually
get excited and challenged and take it home.

I would definitely prepare practice parts if I were doing it here. With a union
orchestra, I would prepare practice parts and make them available. They want to
sound good, and they're just used to being able to sight read everything, but if they
got this, they wouldn't be able to do it perfectly. Then they would giggle and laugh,
but they'd buckle down and work. I'm sure if I did this—and this would be very
unusual for me—I would have a one-hour string call before I called the rest of the
orchestra and I would tear into those string crossings, then bring in the rest of the
orchestra and work carefully through everything else. It would be an interesting thing
to see how that would work with the orchestra. If I did this piece, I would work the
date around the time when I would know all the players would be available and I
could get the top people.

That is my memory of the orchestra. I do not remember how many rehearsals I had,
but it was a university and a busy time, so I likely had one long working session with
the orchestra and then maybe two with the chorus (if I was lucky!). I'm certain that I
had the soloists come to those orchestra rehearsals. While I often write down my
rehearsals in my score, I didn't for that one, so I can't really tell you what I had there.

Galante:
Harbison talks about the quintuplets demarking sections, which adds another level of
pressure to make sure that those are accurate. Did you do anything different
gesturally to affect a more tight, rhythmic unity, or did the repetition help the players
agree?
Gardner:
I do remember rehearsing the quintuplets, but mainly just to get them to listen to each other and try to get everything steady. I wish there were some trick, you know. Working out the fact that it is important is nice, but it doesn't make it easier to play. I don't suppose I just said, "This is hard. Make sure you get it right." Again, it's a very different thing whether you're working with a professional orchestra that can immediately play it and a student orchestra where you're teaching it. If I did it here, I'd want a significant amount of rehearsal; this wouldn't be a pick-up work. When I think about it, I'm amazed that I did it there, at Texas. Like I said, I was pretty fearless.

I'm sure I sat down with my metronome and figured out mathematically where that third note sits in relationship to the others, to the main beat, which is not fun. That's hard stuff.

Galante:
If you had to name the most difficult aspect of performing the piece in your recollection, what would that be?

Gardner:
In the chorus, the orchestra, or for the conductor?

Galante:
All of the above.

Gardner:
For the singers, the midsection by far. For the orchestra, the string crossings and the quintuplets. For the conductor, I don't remember; I just remember having a lot of fun with it.

Getting the quintuplets to work in your own mind, so you can make sure that it's steady and that you're hearing them when they're not, I suppose: I find things like that really hard. But the rest of the piece is logical and works. I think the quintuplet over the two beats in the 3/4 would be something any conductor should take a look at, set his metronome on, pound into his skull, and do the math so he can do it himself. Some people find that easy; other people who look like they find it easy are spending 10 hours a day on it.

We were talking earlier about the "In Rama" section, and separating it from the way we learned the rest of it. I remember having them think E-major and coming in and just working so hard on that. You know, to get that far you could hear it pretty much as straightforward E-major. The "lamentation" and weaving material isn't so hard because the intervals are closer, but they still have to work on it. I don't remember ever thinking that was going to be easy, so it didn't surprise me that it was hard for the singers. It's hard. I'm sure I gave choir exams on that one.
Galante: On the "In Rama"?

Gardner: On the whole piece. I'm sure I had everyone come in, and I would give them an E-natural and say "Sing your part." And then I would listen and tell them what they needed to work on until they got it.

Galante: From an interpretive standpoint, Harbison talks about trying to depict the "dark side of Christmas," and obviously the texts do so. He's spoken a lot about illustrating the plight of the homeless and oppressed in our own society in a very—well, it's certainly current—but he's using an old text and old compositional devices to do that. Did that play a role in your interpretation and your approach to the work? Or is that just something that you feel comes out of it automatically?

Gardner: I didn't program around it, but that would be because of the situation I was in, not because of any lack of interest. Were I to do it in Manhattan with Riverside Choral Society and the orchestra there, I would almost assuredly program around that theme.

As you can imagine—it's a silly thing, but a reality for all of us—January is a terrible time to give a concert at a university. So programming the work in the time where it would fit—what with the story of Herod, the post-Christmas sense of ennui that one might have—is very difficult. When I think of the piece I think of that time of year, and it certainly affects me, but I can't say that I did anything particular, other than talking to the performance personnel about it.

I'm also sure my program notes mentioned it, but I didn't make a specific effort to sell the concert built around that theme, nor did I sell the piece to any of the people singing it along those lines. The fact that this is a threatening, scary thing, and that somehow working past this and getting a sense of resolution that would move people to fix this problem—the oppressiveness—in our world would be something to touch on as you go along and hope people become aware of it. I would say it's my job as a conductor to reflect what's in the score and hopefully that happens.

Galante: What advice would you give to the conductor taking up this work for the first time?

Gardner: Oh, just what you would expect: study hard, look at it carefully, make sure you have the right performing forces. But don't be afraid of it; it's easier than it looks. You have to get the different components of it together—having the right players and having the right singers—but people shouldn't be so afraid of the vocal parts because the two outside parts are relatively easy (of course, the middle part is really difficult). Then, just make sure that you have orchestra that can really play.
APPENDIX E

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH DAVID HOOSE
Galante:  
Will you give an overview of the Cantata Singers—the makeup of the group, your normal rehearsal process?

Hoose:  
Cantata Singers functions as a community chorus. That is, it rehearses once a week and its members are volunteer. In that respect it’s like any of thousands of community choruses around the country, but it’s blessed with a very high level of singers; that has been built over the years.

There are hundreds of choruses just in Boston: many large choruses and auditorium-sized choruses, some chamber-sized choruses, and a couple of professional choruses—Handel and Haydn is one for instance—but Cantata Singers is fairly unique in that it manages to attract a lot of very high level singers, some right out of the four music schools in the city, some still in the music schools, but mostly recent graduates, and then a cadre of long standing members, all of whom have really serious music training. Many of them are professional singers, but those that aren’t may teach music, may have a church choir or conduct a chorus themselves. There are others, of course, who work in libraries, and doctors and lawyers and mathematicians; those people have an extremely strong background in music from whenever they went to school.

It’s blessed with really strong personnel. Although the chorus is volunteer, we’re able to take a lot of the soloists for a good bit of the repertoire that we do out of the chorus, and that of course attracts people to the group, so it’s circularly beneficial.

Galante:  
Do the personnel numbers vary per concert?

Hoose:  
When the group began—long before I became music director and before John Harbison was involved—it was probably in the high 20’s or maybe low 30’s, when they were doing only Bach. In the years that I’ve been with the group (which is over 20 years) the group has expanded in two different ways. The core group that we use for almost every concert is at least 44 singers. This has inevitably had an effect on the repertoire that we do, because it does make some Bach pieces harder. Because the group’s a little larger, it takes us out of some of the repertoire that I wish we were able to do—such as Renaissance music (though we still do Schütz; we still do a fair amount of that). When the group was constituted at a smaller level, that repertoire was easier, and that was the bulk of what the group was doing: Bach, then Schütz, and then some other earlier composers, Schein and others like him. When John Harbison was music director of the group for two different periods—two short but important periods—he expanded the repertoire to include a lot of new music (including some of his own music, but not at all in a self serving way), and I think perhaps the group grew a little bit then.
I suspect when I took it over it was probably around 33, and gradually we’ve enlarged it. There are a couple of reasons for that. One is that I was really interested in a wider range of repertoire, including Classical repertoire and some Romantic repertoire, and obviously a lot of new music. While we continued to do Bach—and have in every season but two in the history of group—I would say that gradually the emphasis on Bach has statistically decreased. I think it will always be the music that forms the spiritual root of the group, a serious engagement with heady and thoughtful texts that, even if we’re not doing Bach, is in the background all the time.

In the last 20 years, many other organizations have taken up the mantle of Bach and the other repertoire, whereas when the group was founded, really no one was looking at this repertoire, at least not in this part of the country. Since then, other groups have done that and so there’s not as much crying need for it. Externally, that is: there is still a need for us to fulfill our musical desires.

Last season, we did only Bach and pieces that had been commissioned by the Cantata Singers, including a new piece by Stephen Hartke, a large work by Andrew Imbrie, and two pieces by John Harbison, including *The Flight into Egypt*, which was the first work that Cantata Singers commissioned. Since, we’ve commissioned about nine or maybe ten pieces, all with orchestra of some sort, quite varying in range, in scope, and in terms of instrumental and choral requirements. In a sense, John’s piece, while one of the most important of all the pieces that we’ve commissioned, is one of the smallest.

While we are usually constituted around 44, we have sometimes expanded to as large as 90, and we’ve done that by bringing in. We have a pretty big roster to accommodate life changes—for people in this day and age it’s harder to commit to a full season. The season itself has grown, so we have a larger roster that we draw upon, and we rotate people in and out from concert to concert. There are times when we performed with 90, that is, without bringing in another extant chorus (which we’re actually doing on the concert that’s coming up).

**Galante:**

It seems that you try to make it a consistent mission of the group to commission new works.

**Hoose:**

Once we commissioned *The Flight into Egypt*, it seems that at least every two years there was a work commissioned by us, for us. The first three works were: John’s *The Flight into Egypt*; the piece by Peter Child called *Estrella* (1988) is a piece on a text about Nicaragua, a real political text about the CIA involvement with Nicaragua—a pretty left-wing point of view; and the third piece that we commissioned was a piece

---

69 *Indicia Virtutis*, co-commissioned with Winsor Music, premiered in May 2007

70 *Adam*, 1994.

71 *The Flight into Egypt* was commissioned and premiered in 1986. *But Mary Stood: Sacred Symphonies for Chorus and Instruments* was commissioned in 2005.
by Donald Sur called *Slavery Documents* (1990). All three of those composers lived in Boston: Peter teaches at MIT, as does John, and Donald is not living anymore, but he lived in Cambridge.

Donald’s piece is based on antebellum texts about slavery, mostly apologists for slavery talking about how wonderful life is on the plantation—very ironic texts—and biblical texts that were used to justify slavery. This was probably one of the first times the group enlarged significantly for a performance, because it was a piece that Donald insisted have a fairly equal number of African-American singers in the group. While there are African Americans in Cantata Singers, they don’t constitute the majority of the group by any means. We brought in about 35-40 African American singers for this piece, and spent weeks upon weeks grappling with what were incredibly difficult texts about American slavery, a period that Donald always thought was the great unaddressed period in the United States history. A very powerful work.

Those three pieces, *The Flight into Egypt*, *Estrella*, and *Slavery Documents* seemed to form an inadvertent trilogy that, while very different in scope—Donald’s was for a huge orchestra, an hour and fifteen minutes long; Peter’s piece was for larger orchestra than *The Flight into Egypt* and was 30-35 minutes long—they had at their core a center, a heart that was examining and attempting to address painful things about the human condition. Donald’s, obviously slavery, American slavery; Peter’s piece about South American or Nicaraguan politics and United States involvement with difficult things there; and John’s piece, which really was, as you probably know John would say, a way of looking at some of the really darker side of Christmas having to do with homelessness. As a result, those were three very important pieces for us, because they seemed to belong together in some emotional way. They also seemed to spin out of our work with Bach cantatas and the theological challenges therein. They grew out of those three composers’ knowledge of the Cantata Singers and its history: John, for obvious reasons, but Donald and Peter also knew the Cantata singers very well and were frequent concert attendees. So there was a way in which those commissions seemed very consonant with the heart of the Cantata Singers.

The subsequent commissions—there’s one by Andy Vores\(^72\); the one I mentioned by Stephen Hartke; James Primosch\(^73\); and T.J. Anderson, with a second work on American slavery called *Slavery Documents II*; and a piece that we’re about to do in January by a young Israeli composer, Lior Navok, called *Slavery Documents III: And the Trains Kept Coming*.... This uses texts from World War II in which the Allies were begged to bomb the tracks to the concentration camps. Again, really challenging, not pleasant texts. They haven’t all been that way, but there’s a way in which that does seem to be something that grows out of very difficult, challenging Bach cantatas.

---

\(^{72}\) *World Wheel*, 2000.

\(^{73}\) *Matins*, 2003.
Galante: When you do commission these pieces, do you have discussions with the composers about the textual implications in the piece, or do you leave it to their own devices and their own knowledge of your group, your programming missions and what you’ve done in the past?

Hoose: Good question. Certainly in the case of John, we didn’t have any such conversation. In the case of Estrella with Peter Child, we again did not. With Donald’s Slavery Documents he assembled a text that was masterful, but there turned out to be a lot of controversy in it, and we certainly talked about it. I veered away from trying to impose any kind of restrictions on his, or anyone else’s, choice of text.

In the case of Andy Vores, who wrote a piece for the turn of the millennium called World Wheel, he picked texts that were from each thousand years of world history, a couple of texts from each one. He showed me the texts, and they were fabulous and fascinating texts. I said “I know you’re not religious, and there is no requirement that this piece be religious in any way, or assume any kind of point of view, but you might want to consider the fact—the possibility—of some biblical texts, considering the role that the Bible has played in human history.” He had not, at that point, included any biblical texts, and that was as much as I said. He went back to the drawing board and included an incredible, heated text from Revelations and I think he was very glad that he did: it became kind of a touchstone for the piece.

In the case of Stephen Hartke, it was a joint commission between Cantata Singers and a wonderful oboist in Boston, Peggy Pearson. We had conversations with Steven in which I simply said, “This is not a religious group, but there is no question that—having done many Bach cantatas over the years, the Passion and a ton of sacred music—something that has spiritual roots is what we are hunting for, as opposed to a setting of e.e. cummings poems, or Emily Dickinson poems—all fabulous stuff, but not where a lot of our focus lies.” Steven proceeded to assemble some biblical texts that had a very strong political tone; it’s a very wonderful and powerful piece.

That is as far as the conversations have ever gone, and in some cases they haven’t at all. When we commissioned Andrew Imbrie, who just passed away in the last month...wonderful composer...I gave him free rein. He said “I just want to hunt for texts that will work,” and he picked about eight poems, American texts that had a focus on the Civil War. Some of them were Whitman texts from that era and they were by no means religious. But they did have a seriousness or thoughtfulness of tone.

Galante: You have commissioned a number of works and dealt with multiple premieres. I wonder what is your approach once the score is delivered to you and you sit down for the first time with it: you realize that you have to bring this work to its fruition, to
realize the composer’s vision. What is your process of score study? How much of that do you share with the choir and bring into your rehearsals with them?

Hoose:
That's hard. I have students who say, “How do you study a score?”, and one of my former students, who is really my best friend now, used to say, “You just drove us crazy, because you would just say, ‘Well, just study the score.’” I can’t say that there is a method to the madness, except to say that it’s really not different than studying any other piece; it’s not different than studying a Brahms symphony or a piece of Stravinsky’s. Open the score, figure out what the large gestures are, figure out what the small gestures are, figure out what’s motivating this piece, figure out, as best you can, how it breathes and what makes it breathe. The methodology is not any different and not any scarier than doing a piece that you may have heard, or that you could theoretically pick up a recording of.

Then again, I think it’s not any different, because when I study standard repertoire I tend not to listen to recordings. I think it’s dangerous to listen to recordings when you’re just learning a piece, because you end up not being able to separate the piece that you’re trying to learn from the recording of the piece that you’re hearing. Until you have spent a lot of time with the piece, enough so that you have a pretty vivid image of how you believe it goes and what the piece needs, I think it’s treacherous to listen to a recording. I don’t want to suggest a purist attitude on this is, that “I never listen to recordings,” but I really try not to listen to them until I’m pretty late in the process. In that sense it’s not really any different than looking at a new piece. The only difference is that when you’re about to take on a Schoenberg piece or a Brahms piece, you can glean from some source or another—whether it’s looking at the score, or listening to a recording, or speaking to a colleague about how hard the piece is—whether you should be programming it with something else that’s really easy. You just don’t know with a new piece how hard, or in a way, how long it is.

I remember very well Andy Vores’ World Wheel. We asked for a piece about 40-45 minutes long. It very well may be that Andy told me that the piece was a lot longer than 40 minutes, but somehow I didn’t hear it, he didn’t tell me, or I forgot, and I got into the dress rehearsal without the realization that this piece was 70 minutes long. I knew then that we were in trouble, because I didn’t allot the right amount of time to rehearse. Fortunately, that kind of extreme situation doesn’t happen very often. That never happened in my experience before (or since!), but certainly you don’t know just how hard the piece is, or how hard it’s going to be when you haven’t seen it.

You also don’t know what some of the instrumental requirements are going to be. For instance, this piece that we are working on—and will give the first performance of in January—is a piece called Slavery Documents III: And the Trains Kept Coming.... I said to the composer, “This is your orchestra. This is what the orchestra can be. It needs to fit into this size ensemble, because this is what’s on the other half of the concert,” and he did that. But I also said, “You can have three percussion
players and no more.” What he asks of the percussion, however, is so large in its scope that it’s going to be a challenge to fit it on stage!

I have gradually learned what it is you have to make sure of, ahead of time, and there are many things that you want to check out when you are commissioning pieces. The challenge is to give the composer free rein, artistic rein and artistic freedom, while at the same time protecting both the ensemble and the concert on which the piece is going to appear. If you end up with a piece that’s much larger, much harder, or more expensive than you had anticipated, everybody could be in trouble, including the composer. He may have had a wonderful time writing it, but he’s not going to be so happy in the concert when it doesn’t go so well.

Galante:
Do you have a resident orchestral ensemble?

Hoose:
It’s Boston freelancers. We see the same people over and over again, but they’re not contracted for the season. We have only four main stage performances a year, and you need to have more than that to be able to expect the players to commit themselves to an entire season.

We are fortunate the group has a good enough reputation that people enjoy playing with the group and they will reserve the dates in order to play with us. Consequently, we see the same core players over and over again; new people come and go. There’s also a high degree of variability in the ensembles required: if on one concert you’re doing Bach and and Schütz, and another one you’re doing a big new piece, you may see the cellist and a few violinists consistently through the year, but the trombone players only once.

Galante:
Specifically regarding *The Flight into Egypt*, you mentioned that you did not have any conversations with Mr. Harbison about the text of the piece. Did you talk at all about the conception of the work or any other aspects of the piece?

Hoose:
No. I knew John’s music well. I had done, by that point, a fair amount of his music (I’ve done a lot since then). I knew his music; he knew the group obviously very well, having worked with it as much as he did. Probably the first extended conversation we had about the piece was once it was done. I don’t necessarily recommend that unless the commissioner knows the composer well, and there is a lot of mutual trust because, as I said, you can end up with a piece that’s completely off the mark of what you want. At the same time, you don’t want to control, or try to control what the composer is doing.

Galante:
This first extended conversation—I realize this is some 20 years ago—was it early in the rehearsal process?
Hoose:
It was well before that. He probably had the piece done. Unlike some commissions that come in right at the last second, John’s piece I had in hand during the season preceding our first performance. Certainly during the course of rehearsals, there are conversations that go on. I think I really, with good reason, trust John; for whatever reason, I think he trusts me.

I have done pieces of John’s in which, because of his schedule, he never attended a rehearsal and then came to the performance. It was a little nerve-wracking, not unduly so, because he knows what my musical interests are, and I know his music pretty well. I hope that there is a high degree of mutual trust, and that is one of the things that really makes some—not necessarily all—of these commissions that Cantata Singers has done very special for us.

It could be helpful for other groups that are commissioning works to think about this. The group can say, “Let’s commission a piece,” and then sit around and say, “Well, whom do we want to commission?” One can then say, “Well, I know of music from this composer who lives in Iowa,” but your chorus is in New Jersey; that composer has never heard the group. You know the composer’s music, but you don’t know the composer personally. Going that route can lead to interesting results, but you can end up missing something very valuable, and that is a mutual knowledge of each other’s work that informs the whole compositional process, the rehearsing process, and a synergy between the composer and the organization that is not possible if you are making a cold call. Even though some of the composers whom we’ve commissioned have not lived in Boston, all of them have heard Cantata Singers live in performance before they set out to write a piece.

Galante:
Did Mr. Harbison attend rehearsals of The Flight into Egypt?

Hoose:
Yes. I don’t remember them specifically but yes, he did. In general John has come to an early rehearsal, a chorus rehearsal toward the end, and then the orchestra rehearsals.

Galante:
How did you introduce this work to the chorus?

Hoose:
I would not say it is simply readable, but we would certainly read through it. It’s not so tough—and the group is good enough—that that is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. There are pieces that you have to think hard about how you’re going to teach them to the group. An example would be the Webern First Cantata or Schoenberg. Some of that is readable, but some isn’t. When we’ve done those pieces, they’ve required a good bit of planning on my part as to how we’re going to tackle the piece, so that we’re going forward from the very beginning. But in a piece like John’s, it’s
Galante: And did you as conductor make them aware of the four-note cell that permeates all of the choral entrances, or leave them to discover this on their own?

Hoose: I think it’s not missable, and it becomes very apparent as a motivic idea when you’re trying to tune it. Getting it really well in tune makes everybody concentrate on exactly what that half step sounds like—not approximately, but exactly—and they become more aware of how the piece is put together, and where is the climax of the piece.

Galante: The “In Rama”?

Hoose: Yes, the “In Rama.” That final “because they are not,” the homophonic thing: you have to figure out a way to rehearse it, because that’s certainly something that people will not get immediately. If you take the alto and the base line and isolate those, get them to hear that they are parallel fifths, and the alto and soprano lines, that they’re parallel minor tenths or minor thirds. Then it becomes clear. Also you can get rid of the ninth and compress the whole thing. Lots of ways of doing that and verifying it.

The rehearsal process is one of analysis. That means, without saying “now notice the half step and the whole step, or the minor third here, and that is a motive that permeates the piece,” it’s more valuable to work out a rehearsal process whose consequence is that people have to look at the issue and they can’t help but discover it. Rehearsing is a process—for an orchestra, new music ensemble or a chorus—of helping people hear what it is they need to hear. By doing that, the rehearsal process ends up being an analysis, not one where you draw symbols on the board or give out charts (which is not to say that would not ever be appropriate), but one which best flows as a natural part of the rehearsal experience.

When you look at the very first choral entrance, the imitative choral entrance, you don’t have to say, “now notice that the parts are imitating at the perfect 4th.” You can simply have the vocal sections all sing at exactly the same time. It becomes quite apparent what’s going on, and it also begins to help them sing it in tune. There’s a point at which the imitation stops, and that also helps them understand when it does—it becomes chaotic at a certain point. That helps them understand the way in which the imitation works. They begin to feel it; you don’t have to point to the place where that happens.

For me, there is no such thing as a “rehearsal process.” There is a piece of music, and it suggests a way of rehearsing it. There are people who could perhaps describe their rehearsal process—it’s something they do for every piece—and while there are
certainly things I might do in every piece, I would never be able to describe the
rehearsal process extracted from this piece that you’re preparing. I suspect that
there is commonality—the piece doesn’t just suggest to me how it could be
rehearsed—in that more than one person will see how the piece can be rehearsed
and they will agree.

Galante:
In rehearsing the piece either for the premiere or the subsequent performances,
were there any difficulties or challenges that you did not foresee?

Hoose:
The last time we did it, this last year, we were also doing another piece of John’s—
a new piece that we had done in the previous year. There were many people who had
done that piece before; probably slightly fewer people who had done The Flight into
Egypt. I expected The Flight into Egypt to be a little quicker to learn than it was. That
may have been because I’d known the piece for a long time and it didn’t strike me as
terribly difficult anymore, but there were numbers of people in the group who had
never sung it, never heard it, and so there were those little challenges, exactly the
things that we were talking about: singing that opening gesture beautifully in tune
and singing things like the climax with complete conviction and full force. Again,
even though we found it a little more difficult than expected, it’s short, and the
difficulties do not eat up a lot of rehearsal time.

Galante:
When I spoke with Mr. Harbison, he seemed to recall that some of the things he
thought would be difficult for choir were pretty easy; other things he thought would
be easy would take up a lot of rehearsal time. He couldn’t recall specifically what
those things were, but is that your recollection as well?

Hoose:
It’s almost always the case. We did a piece of James Primosch, a commissioned
piece, and I thought, “Oh this piece is so easy.” The language was neo-tonal, but we
just had a dickens of a time doing this thing; I never quite figured out why. It is
always unexpected.

When I think about The Flight into Egypt and the choral writing, it's just so organized,
and it’s organization is so much right in your face. It’s one of John’s first fairly
systematic pieces where he really allows the system or organization to show. Once
you get into singing the “lamentation” contrapuntally in parallel tritones, not in
imitation, and the build up to the climax, people get it pretty quickly.

The closing section, when the music comes back, is a little more difficult than the
opening section, and it’s partly because it’s vocally more difficult. It sits more
statically in certain regions of the voice, and people have to really spin those notes
and spin those phrases and get them to travel. Conversely, the opening phrase has
built into it a **parlando** that’s very apparent and doesn’t require too much
manipulation—too much work to get it to speak—other than getting it not to sound
like it’s two bar units (which is an easy thing to let happen when the music has a rest!). Also in the last section, the tuning of the “he shall be called” is more difficult.

The *accelerando* and the *movendo* at the end is fantastic—you have the feeling that everything’s just slipping away—and yet it must not feel like it’s accelerating. It can give the singers the feeling that they don’t have a good grip on what’s going on because it’s just going faster and faster.

**Galante:**

How many rehearsals did you have with the chorus and orchestra?

**Hoose:**

We tend to have three rehearsals with the chorus. In certain circumstances there will be a fourth rehearsal just for the orchestra. I don’t recall what we did this time.

**Galante:**

What did you do last year?

**Hoose:**

We were doing Bach and another Harbison work. We did a rehearsal of arias in the Bach cantata with the soloists. At that rehearsal we also rehearsed the two Harbison pieces without the chorus, just to take advantage of having the players there. That certainly was helpful.

For the tuning, such as in the high violin tuning, they just need time to hear it, and need not have the chorus sitting there or chaffing at the bits. There were then three other rehearsals which were taken up with the two Harbison pieces and a couple of Bach cantatas.

**Galante:**

Are there any potential roadblocks or major challenges that you would encourage a conductor approaching this piece in the future to watch out for in a choral or orchestral rehearsal context?

**Hoose:**

No, except that I think there is—I’m sure you’ve experienced this yourself: you go through all these choral rehearsals with the piano, and there is one rehearsal of adjustment with the orchestra that the chorus must go through. They are just figuring out what it is they need to hear, what it is they need to pay attention to. All of it used to be sitting right in front of them with the piano. Now it may be over there, somewhere else on the stage, and it may be loud or it may not be loud—any number of possibilities. There is a sound that you really want to hear for your own security’s sake, and there’s that period of adjustment. I don’t recall, however, the singers saying after such a rehearsal, “Oh, it’s much more difficult with the orchestra.” They almost always say it’s much easier with the orchestra because they have figured out that it’s the oboe that they’re listening for, and they have a timbre to locate as opposed to just some pitch from the piano.
The oboe parts are challenging. They’re not technically really hard, but they do require a level of elegance, eloquence and technical security on the part of the players. They’re hard to tune, and there is this lamenting quality, a plaintive quality, but the oboes can’t sound strained or taxed. Now, that’s not to say that students can’t play the piece. I know students have, and it obviously will just take a bit more time. Nothing is unreadable in the piece.

The trombone parts are unusual in that they are independent of each other, especially in that note-chasing motive, the first allegro of the “Herod” section. That’s not something that trombonists typically do, and the players have to have a certain elegance in their own playing. They need to be a bit suave, because it really can’t be rough and edgy. It needs to be quite slippery sounding while in tune.

The organ part looks easy, but it’s not. The organist needs to see the part well in advance. The big crunchy chords that happen toward the end are not hard to play, but they just require some deciphering because the parts are in manuscript. The choral parts have obviously been engraved, but the instrumental parts have not.

Regarding issues of balance, the trombones can’t play up except very rarely, such as the outburst with the quick glissando, the chord right at the climax, right before the organ starts to play. They can’t play a real orchestral fortissimo because they need to balance. The three oboes and the bassoon have to be able to simulate the color of a fortissimo, a real fortissimo. They can’t play gently. The trombones, while they have to be incredibly even and aggressive, can’t be terribly loud because they have to balance with the double reeds.

Galante:
In your recording of the piece, did you do a set up a couple of mics and do essentially a live performance, or did you have the instruments tracked where they could play an orchestral fortissimo and pull it back in the mix?

Hoose:
I recall it was done with a very simple mic set up. Most of the recordings we have done have fairly straightforward mic setups with only a few mics. It’s a more natural sound. The place where it was recorded was not ideal—it was live but a little small and, as a result, sounds a little trapped in the acoustical space. But it’s a recording, and recordings are just snapshots.

Galante:
And it’s the only one in print. Any advice to give to a conductor taking up this piece for the first time? What to look for, what to be careful of, anything to add to what you’ve said already?

Hoose:
No, I would say do it with enthusiasm, because it’s a very rewarding piece. It’s rewarding to sing, rewarding to play—John’s music is always.
One of the great things about John’s music is that it’s always satisfying to perform. It’s satisfying for the soloists, the orchestra, and for the chorus, each in its own way. You cannot say that about all music. That’s not a comment on the quality of the music, but there are composers whose way of writing reflects profound sympathy with an understanding of the performer; John’s music consistently does that. There is music that I absolutely adore (and I know John does too) like Schumann and Schoenberg. Without taking one thing away from those composers, their music is not always satisfying for the performer. Schumann more so than Schoenberg is not performance- and performer-friendly.

I think that John’s music—from the very first rehearsal—is so clear in its intention that the performers get it right away, even if they’re not able to play it or sing it. They are very likely to come away from that first rehearsal saying “Wow, this is a very cool piece. I hope we can perform it.”

And this is different than what many people do with new music, which is to wait for the piece to prove itself to them. It’s something that’s very frustrating to me: performers are quite quick to judge pieces. They’ll go through the first rehearsals; they might have the good sense not to say anything, but they come to you after the fourth rehearsal (this happens to me a lot especially with younger players and singers) and say, “Gee I’m beginning to like this piece. I didn’t like it at first.” I smile and say, “I’m so glad you like it.” What I really want to say is, “Why did you ask yourself whether you liked it at the first rehearsal? Why don’t you wait until we can perform it as well as the composer expects before considering whether you like the piece?” I think what the performers are doing is not really saying, “I don’t like this piece, or I do like this piece.” What they’re really saying is, “This piece doesn’t feel so good, doesn’t feel good under the fingers, it doesn’t feel good in the voice.”

Well, John’s music feels good: I’ve played his music, I’ve conducted music of his and, in every instance, there is always a feeling that he’s deeply connected to the instrument—whether the voice or the viola—and he’s deeply connected to the performers as people. He never sees the instrumentalist or the choral singer as a sound generator, but rather gives the performer compelling material to grapple with, and that’s rewarding. When you play a Brahms symphony, you may be playing the second violin part, but that second violin part is just as interesting as the first violin part, partly because embedded in it is all of the genetic material of the piece. That’s not always true of every composer, and again it’s important to stress that’s not a criticism of the piece. It may not have that quality lying in wait for the performer. It is a hurdle that has to be overcome when it’s absent. I would say one does not need to sell this piece to anybody. I guess it’s possible that a group that never performs any new music—has never done anything quasi-atonal—would be baffled and not terribly sympathetic, but by and large it is extremely approachable music, emotionally and technically. And its approachability doesn’t mean that there isn’t layer after layer of things to dig into and to unveil.
Galante:
I'm very aware of that. That's what's so fascinating for me.

Hoose:
The piece just continues to reward.

Maybe its size—that is, its relative modesty—makes people shy away from it, I don't know. I guess you can look at the first page of the orchestral writing and say, “Ooh, it's very high,” or see the first violin entrance and that can creep you out, but it is worth every minute of study and rehearsal time. It's quite a compelling piece on a concert, as long as it's given a sympathetic reading—and a loving reading for that matter—and as long as it's framed in some way that is thoughtful, because it's not a piece that can stand alone. It's not large enough to stand alone; it belongs with other music. Now there are lots and lots of things it can work with, but it can't just sit there as the new piece on the concert; it really won't work. There has to be something that connects to it textually, texturally, spiritually, emotionally or sonically, and we've done it with a variety of things. On the first concert, I think it was Bach and Schütz, and they were Advent pieces.

Galante:
The Schütz was the same text, correct?

Hoose:
Yes, the Schütz was the same text. But the second time we did it, we did it with the Schumann Requiem, a piece that people don't know and really should, because it's fantastic. We also started with a Bach cantata, then performed the Requiem. The last time we performed it, we did another piece of John’s and a couple of Bach cantatas.

These have to be chosen fairly carefully. The piece begins so modestly and it ends without any glamour. It could easily become overshadowed, and you don't want it to disappear on a concert because it's too important.

Programming is a really important aspect of what we do. It's really important to figure out ways to set up a piece we're going to do and follow it with things that are coherent. Primarily, we should approach programming so new pieces are made more understandable by their context and, as importantly, older pieces—pieces or a musical language that people may know—are somehow revealed in a new light because of the association with that new piece. In this way, the older music is not there as a relief from the new. In fact, it's a part of the entire experience and grows naturally out of that newer piece.

Galante:
I think there's a perception that The Flight is very difficult and it's going to take a lot of rehearsal time for an ultimately short perf—
Hoose:
Sure, it’s only about 14 minutes long.

Galante:
What would be your response to a conductor who gives you that argument?

Hoose:
Well, the Webern First Cantata is worth every minute of work, but you get seven minutes of performance from that. You just have to plan it. Sure, the Berlioz Requiem is easier, in a way, but what do you get?

The word “accessible” seems to be the musical buzz word of our day, but I would not call the work “accessible.” I find it “approachable.” There’s a depth in it, and I don’t think there is anything easy about the piece. It’s a difficult text, a challenging text, a serious text which requires a lot of maturity and thoughtfulness on the part of the performers, singers, conductor and audience alike.

Another reason I would not call the piece accessible is that even when the audience listens to it, they need to really think about what this piece is, what it’s trying to say, what it’s trying to do. These require some degree of effort on the audience part—desirable effort, worthy effort. That, to a certain degree, flies in the face of the concept of “accessibility,” commonly touted as the thing that should keep people from being scared when they go to a Classical music concert: “Oh, don’t worry. It’s not so scary, it’s accessible.” Well, War and Peace is not terribly accessible; Faulkner is not terribly accessible. But we don’t need to dumb down the music and try to pretend that it’s something that it isn’t. It’s entirely approachable, it’s quite “hear-able” by an audience, but it does take some concentration on their part.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


_______. “Six Tanglewood Talks (1, 2, 3).” Perspectives of New Music 23, no. 2 (1985): 12-22.

_______. “Six Tanglewood Talks (4, 5, 6).” Perspectives of New Music 24, no. 1 (1985): 46-60.


_______. Program notes for The Flight into Egypt. Provided by the composer.


