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Joshua James Shank

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**The Dissertation Committee for Joshua James Shank Certifies
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**Two Boys Kissing: An Oratorio
for Men's Voices and Instruments**

Committee:

Russell Pinkston, Supervisor

Donald Grantham

Yevgeniy Sharlat

Eric Drott

Chad Bennett

Two Boys Kissing: An Oratorio for Men's Voices and Instruments

by

Joshua James Shank B.A.; M.Music

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2016

Acknowledgments

A quick word of thanks to all my composition teachers during my time here at the University of Texas at Austin: Russell Pinkston, Yevgeniy Sharlat, Donald Grantham, Bruce Pennycook, Dan Welcher, and the late Daniel Catán. I feel I needed every bit of knowledge I've learned during my studies with all of you in order to write this piece. My colleagues and friends in the composition department and beyond have also helped me become both a better composer but also a better human being so to all of them—Andy, Max, Eli, Jon, Joey, Steve, Kramer, Ben, Chris, Ian, Corey, Tim, and Jocelyn—you have the gratitude of one who toils in the same vineyard as you do.

Also deserving thanks are the people who helped make *Two Boys Kissing* a reality before it was ever a dissertation. Reuben Reynolds III, Bill Casey, and the men of the Boston Gay Men's Chorus introduced me to the world of the GALA Choruses and Ben Riggs, Jeffrey Heine, and the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus graciously asked me to collaborate on this work. However, this would not have been possible without the incredible generosity of a few donors. *Two Boys Kissing* was underwritten through the generosity of husbands Dean A. Genth & Dr. Gary W. Swenson with additional support by Alan & Ken Braun and John Sullivan. I also owe Eric Grant for bringing all his literary acumen to bear on crafting the libretto with me and Ben Stonaker proved invaluable in communicating instrumental parts to the commissioning party; you guys are amazing. Matthew Culloton and David Trembley subsequently recorded, mixed, edited, and mastered a gorgeous studio recording of the work. Lastly, David Levithan gave us all permission to adapt his incredible novel into something we thought could communicate something hopeful to a group of people that sometimes need it more than anyone else and, for that, I'll never be able to say 'thank you' enough.

Finally, my husband, Robert Ressler, has been nothing but supportive over the two years it has taken me from the initial phone call from the TCGMC to the final period on this document. Every grad student should be so lucky to have someone like you in their lives.

Two Boys Kissing: An Oratorio for Men's Voices and Instruments

by

Joshua James Shank, D.M.A.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

SUPERVISOR: Russell Pinkston

Choirs made up primarily of individuals from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community have been around for nearly 40 years. Because there is very little repertoire which tells their particular story, they have supported the creation of many new, LGBT-centric works to present in concert over the course of their history. This dissertation will concern itself with the creation of *Two Boys Kissing: An Oratorio for Men's Voices and Instruments* which stems from a commission the author received in the spring of 2015 from the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus (TCGMC¹) to adapt David Levithan's 2013 award-winning young adult novel, *Two Boys Kissing*, into an evening-length musical work to be presented by the TCGMC during their 35th anniversary season.

Composing such a work presents many challenges on many levels both musical, literary, and historical. Over the course of this document the source material will be examined, and the history of the gay men's chorus in the United States examples of previous commissions from these ensembles will be examined. Finally, the method of adaptation of the source material and the compositional process which resulted in the final work will be explained.

¹ Note: due to the fact that their names can sometimes be a mouthful, it's become common for LGBT choruses around the world to abbreviate their names in this fashion. For instance, the Boston Gay Men's Chorus refers to itself as "BGMC" and the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles goes by "GMCLA."

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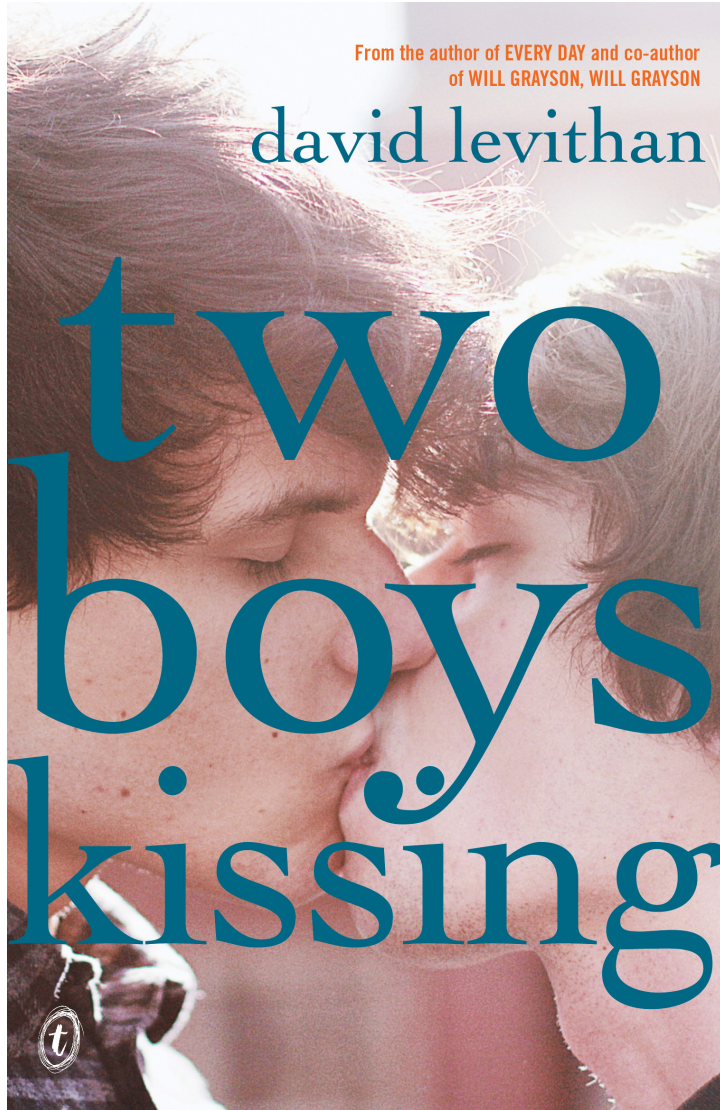
CHAPTER 1

The Commission

1.1 Introduction

In early 2015, I received an email from the Artistic Director of the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus (TCGMC), Dr. Ben Riggs, inquiring as to whether or not I would be amenable and available to write a piece for their 2015-2016 season celebrating their 35th anniversary. Specifically, he asked if I would adapt David Levithan's novel, *Two Boys Kissing* (Figure 1), for the choir. I had known about the incredible work the TCGMC does in the LGBT community in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul area and was honored that they asked. Dr. Riggs informed me that they were also planning on recording the subsequent work in its entirety and having it for sale as the audience exited the performance hall. They would then take it to the international conference of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA) and perform it for the 6,500+ attendees. As an added bonus, the TCGMC had been one of only nine ensembles from around the world who were asked to perform in a special “Coffee Concert” that would be attended by the majority of the conference. As a composer, it was a proverbial “no brainer” to agree to the opportunity. Not only would I be collaborating with an organization that is actively trying to affect positive change in the LGBT community and beyond—a community of which I am part of—but they would then go on to record it and present it to an even wider audience.

Figure 1. Cover of David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing*.



The one problem I had to figure out, however, was how much to charge for such a large work. There weren't many opportunities to talk about this aspect of being a composer in any of the graduate courses I've taken and, though there are some resources out there (and old "Commissioning Guide" from the now-defunct Meet the Composer

organization has been available various places online for years¹), I decided it might be best to check with some colleagues in similar career stages in order to see what they might charge for such a thing. After some time spent talking with other composers and doing some math, the appropriate fee for the length and breadth of the type of work the TCGMC wanted seemed as if it should be \$25,000. This turned out to be directly in the budget of the various donors they had lined up, so we drafted a contract and I started the process of adapting *Two Boys Kissing* into something musical.

1 Website of composer Matt Small, "Commissioning Music: A Basic Guide," <http://www.matsmall.org/CommBasicGuide04.pdf> (accessed March 28, 2015).

CHAPTER 2

Historical Context of the Gay Male Chorus Repertoire

Over the past 40 years there have been many new works written for choral ensembles which explicitly identify themselves as members of the LGBT community. In order to understand why this is it is important to understand a few things about how those ensembles and their largest parent organization, GALA, came about.

Although the GALA chorus movement can trace itself back to 1975 with the formation of the Philadelphia Anna Crusis Women's Choir,² the event which served as the catalyst for its formation occurred on November 27, 1978 when San Franciscans grieving the assassinations of Mayor George Moscone and City Supervisor Harvey Milk—the first openly gay elected official in United States history—gathered in an impromptu musical memorial. A month later, many of the gay men who sang on the steps of City Hall that night would perform in the first concert of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus (the first choir to include the word “gay” in their title).³ A 12-city tour of the United States by the SFGMC in 1981 lead to many more of these choruses popping up as communities for gay men who wanted to sing⁴ and, the following year GALA Performing Arts was formed and achieved 501(c) (3) status.⁵ In July of 2016 GALA celebrated its 35th anniversary with

2 Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, “History,” <http://galachoruses.org/about/history> (accessed July 14, 2016).

3 Coyle, Patrick, “Significant Male Voice Repertory Commissioned by American Gay Men's Choruses” (D.M.A. diss., University of Cincinnati, 2006), 10.

4 Mensel, Robert, “A Music of Their Own: The Impact of Affinity Compositions on the Singers, Composers, and Conductors of Selected Gay, Lesbian, and Feminist Choruses” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 2007), 44.

5 Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, “History,” <http://galachoruses.org/about/history> (accessed

their quadrennial conference in Denver, Colorado with over 6,600 singers in attendance.⁶

Because LGBTs have historically been outliers in mainstream society, there is a lack of choral repertoire that speaks to what Robert Mensel, the current conductor of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus, calls “the social and political underpinnings” of that community.⁷ The vast majority of choral repertoire is what sociologists would call “heteronormative” and, in order to create a body of work that actively addresses the LGBT experience, these choruses around the world have been some of the most frequent supporters of the commissioning of new music. In fact, the GALA website has one of the most comprehensive resources for choruses on how to commission new pieces.⁸ Mensel goes on further to describe the expanding repertoire these ensembles have commissioned over the past 40 years:

Taken in total, these new compositions run the gamut of gay and lesbian choral expression. These works may be serious, militant, political, or campy. They may reflect the highest artistic sophistication or be simplistic and amateurish. What unifies them is their intended performers and listeners: lesbian, feminist, and gay choruses—which were generally formed outside of the choral mainstream—and their supporters. Certainly, the music often touches upon themes—mostly social, seldom musical—that have rarely, if ever, been the subject of choral compositions in the past.⁹

Two Boys Kissing was commissioned in the same spirit as many of these pieces and it

July 14, 2016).

6 Robin L. Godfrey (Executive Director of GALA Choruses), in correspondence with the author, July 18, 2016.

7 Mensel, Robert, “A Music of Their Own: The Impact of Affinity Compositions on the Singers, Composers, and Conductors of Selected Gay, Lesbian, and Feminist Choruses” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 2007), iv.

8 Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, “History,” <http://galachoruses.org/resource-center/artistic-directors/commissions> (accessed July 15, 2016).

9 Coyle, Patrick, “Significant Male Voice Repertory Commissioned by American Gay Men's Choruses” (D.M.A. diss., University of Cincinnati, 2006), v.

might be useful to reference a few of them here. Persecution is something that the LGBT community has had to deal with for centuries so, as you'll see, the subject matter for many of these works is quite “heavy” and often overlaps. Below is a short list of many of these pieces and, whenever possible, I've attempted to reference the composer's own descriptions of their respective works.

- *Alexander's House* by Michael Shaieb (commissioned by the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington D.C.)
 - “A one-act choral musical about a man who dies and leaves his summer home to his estranged son instead of his partner. It is a story about bringing people together from separate worlds and about the family of friends that we create.”¹⁰
- *Eos* by David Conte (commissioned by the Boston Gay Men's Chorus)
 - “[This piece]—named after the Greek goddess of the Dawn—was about the turning of the century; everything [LGBTs] had gone through in the past and the advancements we had made. It touched on all the major things—the AIDS crisis, everyone coming out, etc.—and it talked about all those experiences; a litany of what was possible for us in the future.”¹¹
- *For a Look or a Touch* by Jake Heggie (co-commission between the Boston Gay

10 Website of composer Michael Shaieb, “Alexander's House,” <https://fatlab.com/projects/alexanders-house/> (accessed July 15, 2016).

11 Reuben Reynolds III (conductor of the Boston Gay Men's Chorus), phone interview by the author, July 15, 2016.

- Men's Chorus and the Seattle Men's Chorus)
- “...a story about the persecution of gay men during the Holocaust...[based on] true stories told in the documentary film *Paragraph 175* and the journal of Manfred Lewin, from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.”¹²
 - *I Am Harvey Milk* by Andrew Lippa (commissioned by the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus, along with Atlanta Gay Men’s Chorus, Dayton Gay Men’s Chorus, Denver Gay Men’s Chorus, Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles, Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus, and Heartland Men's Chorus)
 - The composer describes this piece as “an emotional celebration of an American icon” which “weaves the story of Harvey Milk’s life...from boyhood to his rise as the first openly gay man to hold public office in California to his assassination.”¹³
 - *Metamorphosis* by Robert Seeley (commissioned by the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus)
 - This work is about “change within a family” and “a gay man moving out of his house because of his father.”
 - *Night Passage* by Robert Moran (commissioned by the Seattle Men's Chorus)

12 Website of composer Jake Heggie, “For a Look or a Touch,” <http://jakeheggie.com/for-a-look-or-a-touch-2013/> (accessed July 15 2016).

13 Website of composer Andrew Lippa, “I Am Harvey Milk,” <http://andrewlippa.com/i-am-harvey-milk/> (accessed July 15, 2016).

- “The opera’s original source comes from the day that Oscar Wilde was arrested. According to historians, on the evening of this arrest, over 600 men of all walks of life boarded the train at London’s Victoria Station [and made their way] to Calais, France. Usually this late-evening boat ride had a total of approximately 25 passengers. These men, fearing a ‘witch hunt’ for by the authorities and press alike, left homes, careers, families, lovers, property and titles to live in France and away from such repression.”¹⁴
- *Through a Glass Darkly* by Michael Shaieb (commissioned by the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus)
 - “...a 45-minute choral oratorio looking at the effects of crystal meth addiction in the GLBT community.¹⁵ The story loosely follows a 36-hour period in the life of Sebastian, a young and successful businessman, as he ‘hits bottom’ due to his chronic use of methamphetamine. Sebastian is about to lose everything and everyone close to him, while both his long-time partner, Zack, and one-night-stand, Billy, face the cold truth that they have been lied to and left behind.” [The work] is about shattered dreams, dreams unrealized, and dreams deferred. It is about the fear of being alone, the fear of not fitting in, and the struggle to find one’s place in the world. It explores the truth that, with

14 Website of composer Robert Moran, “Night Passage,” <http://robertmorancomposer.com/night-passage/> (accessed July 15, 2016).

15 Crystal meth addiction has recently become a rising problem in certain parts of the gay community. For more information you can check out an article by The Association for Addiction Professionals (http://www.naadac.org/assets/1959/craig_sloane_-_naadac_handouts.pdf).

support from our friends, we can gain the insight to see life more clearly.”¹⁶

- *When We No Longer Touch* by Kristopher Jon Anthony (premiered by the Turtle Creek Chorale)
 - [The work] “...addresses the stages of grief recovery (Denial, Isolation, Anger Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance and Hope).¹⁷ The composer, a member of the chorus, died of AIDS the week of its premiere.¹⁸

There are dozens more examples of pieces commissioned by LGBT choirs and, on the GALA website, there is a fairly stunning resource which contains an archive of over 100 new works written since the organization's inception by well-known composers such as Ricky Ian Gordon (*Only Heaven*), Libby Larsen (*Everyone Sang*), Stephen Paulus (*Too Many Waltzes*), and Samuel Adler (*Rededication*).¹⁹ Pulitzer-winning composers such as Gian Carlo Menotti (*My Christmas*), William Bolcom (*The More Loving One*), Ned Rorem (*Love Alone*), and John Corigliano (*Of Rage and Remembrance*) have also been asked to contribute to the growth of repertoire. GALA has even gone so far as to set up a fund for commissioning female composers to work with the women's choruses in the

16 Website of composer Michael Shaieb, “Through a Glass Darkly,” <https://fatlab.com/projects/through-a-glass-darkly/> (accessed July 15, 2016).

17 Allmusic.com, “When We No Longer Touch,” <http://www.allmusic.com/album/when-we-no-longer-touch-a-cycle-of-songs-for-survival-mw0000536100> (accessed July 15, 2016).

18 Reuben Reynolds III (conductor of the Boston Gay Men's Chorus), phone interview by the author, July 15, 2016.

19 Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, “Commissioning New Music,” <http://galachoruses.org/resource-center/artistic-directors/commissions> (accessed July 15, 2016).

organization.²⁰

All of this is to say that LGBT choruses are hungry for their stories to be told through the commissioning of new works which, as Mensel puts it, “...all explain some aspect of the gay, lesbian, or feminist experience and not only reinforce those experiences for individuals who are inside these communities, but educate those outside as well.”²¹ I’m honored to have my composition sit firmly alongside the LGBT-specific works that have come before it.

20 Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, “Roma Commissioning Consortium,” <http://galachoruses.org/resource-center/artistic-directors/commissions/dr-catherine-roma-project#overlay-context=files/roma-commission-chorus-application> (accessed July 15, 2016).

21 Mensel, Robert, “A Music of Their Own: The Impact of Affinity Compositions on the Singers, Composers, and Conductors of Selected Gay, Lesbian, and Feminist Choruses” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 2007), 230.

CHAPTER 3

Adapting the Sourcing Material

3.1 The Source Material

David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* was published in 2013 and went on to win a Lambda Literary Award²² as well as become one of the novels that was named to the National Book Award Longlist by the National Book Foundation.²³ A year later it was named a Stonewall Honor Book in Children's and Young Adult Literature by the GLBT Round Table of the American Library Association²⁴ and gained notoriety in the LGBT press when a parent in Warrenton, Virginia asked that the book be banned from the library at Fauquier High School (an action which was unanimously voted down).²⁵ In 2016 the author was awarded the Margaret A. Edwards Award by the American Library Association.²⁶ This honor is viewed by writers of young adult fiction as something of a lifetime achievement award but, over brunch in Minneapolis, Levithan humbly insisted that it was nothing of the sort.²⁷

22 Lambda Literary, "Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan," <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/09/08/two-boys-kissing-by-david-levithan/> (accessed July 17, 2016).

23 National Book Foundation, "2013 National Book Award Longlist, Young People's Literature," http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2013_ypl_levithan.html#.V4wRQbgrLIU (accessed July 17, 2017).

24 American Library Association, "Stonewall Book Awards List," <http://www.ala.org/glbtrt/award/honored#2014> (accessed July 17, 2016).

25 Hannah Dellinger, "Committee decides to keep 'Two Boys Kissing' on school library shelves," Fauquier.com (website of the *Fauquier Times*), April 23, 2014 http://www.fauquier.com/news/article/committee_decides_to_keep_two_boys_kissing_on_school_library_shelves (accessed July 17, 2016).

26 American Library Association, "Edwards Award," <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/edwards-award> (accessed July 18, 2016).

27 A list of previous winners includes people like Susan Cooper (*The Dark is Rising* sequence), Madeleine L'Engle (*A Wrinkle in Time*), and Judy Blume (*Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*).

Levithan's novel consists of four separate storylines all told to the reader in the third person by a phantom Greek chorus of gay men who lost their lives in the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. None of the various Chorus²⁸ members “stick out” as a primary voice but, rather, are sort of this massive corporate character. If I had to describe their narrative voice I might reference something like the Borg from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; they're sort of just a massive hive mind. This unique voice was the primary reason that the TCGMC commissioned me to write this work—a gay choral ensemble singing the words of a gay Chorus—and served as the main concern for the style in which we adapted the narrative.

3.2 Character Listing

The story which Levithan's Chorus tells the reader is made up of four primary-yet-disparate storylines of seven teenage boys: Craig and Harry, Neil and Peter, Avery and Ryan, and Cooper. The Chorus dips in and out of the events happening in the boys' lives over the course of 48 hours and, though their stories are interwoven because of the shifting gaze of the Chorus, they never actually meet. In fact, but for a fleeting moment at the end of the book where Neil and Peter drive to see Craig and Harry in their record-breaking embrace (more on that in a minute), they are never in the same location at the same time. The four storylines are as follows:

Craig and Harry

28 Here I'd just like to quickly mention that I'll be making a distinction between the actual character of the Chorus (capitalized) and the ensemble that performs the musical work: the chorus (lower-case). Hopefully it won't be too confusing from here on out.

Craig and Harry—the titular characters of the book—are two high school-aged boys who used to date but have since broken up and decided to remain friends. Their classmate, Tariq, was violently assaulted for being gay after leaving a movie theater and this event deeply affects Craig and Harry to the point that they feel they need to make a symbolic statement about LGBT rights. In order to do this, they decide to undertake the Herculean task of breaking the world record for the longest kiss: over 33 hours total. They must stand the entire time, never take bathroom breaks, and record the event in its entirety as proof.

What's interesting to note is that this is actually based on a real-life event which Levithan references in an author's note at the end of the book:

On September 18, 2010, college students Matty Daley and Bobby Canciello kissed for thirty-two hours, thirty minutes, and forty-seven seconds (longer than the characters in the book) to break the Guinness World Record for longest continuous kiss. I am just one of many people who were inspired by what they did. While the characters in this book are not in any way based on Matty and Bobby, the story is certainly inspired by what they did. I am grateful to Matty for telling me what it was like, and for continuing to inspire.²⁹

In 2011 there was a documentary made about Matty and Bobby's remarkable kiss called *Our Lips Are Sealed*.³⁰ However, their record has since been broken on more than one occasion (in one case by another gay couple in Thailand who kissed for over 50 hours!).³¹

29 David Levithan, *Two Boys Kissing*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 197.

30 Internet Movie Database, “*Our Lips Are Sealed*,” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1924340/> (accessed July 11, 2016).

31 *The Telegraph*, “Male couple win kissing competition with world record 50-hour embrace,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/sex/valentines-day/9082156/Valentines-Day-Male-couple-win-kissing-competition-with-world-record-50-hour-embrace.html> (accessed July 11, 2016).

Neil and Peter

Of the four story lines in *Two Boys Kissing*, Neil and Peter are arguably the least important. They are two high-school-aged boys who are in a stable relationship with one another. They've been together for some time and have a comfortable ease about them. Their major scene occurs when Peter's dad takes them to a book store—they're not yet old enough to drive themselves—and they resolve a relationship issue by using the titles of books as dialogue. It's cute. It's meant to be cute.

There is some other ancillary drama with Neil's family who inexplicably refuse to acknowledge that he is gay and that Peter is his boyfriend, but from what I can understand from the structure and focus of Levithan's book, they are simply there to be the *in situ* witness for Craig and Harry's Kiss. The story is told to the reader by the Chorus, but Neil and Peter witness it in the world in which it is actually happening via live streaming on the Internet. They eventually travel to see the record being broken in person at the end of the novel.

Avery and Ryan

In the opening scenes of Levithan's book the reader is invited into a “prom” for teenage LGBTs in “a town with the improbable name of Kindling.”³² We are introduced to a pink-haired boy named Avery, and a blue-haired boy named Ryan. These colors are obvious references to the colors traditionally associated with the gender stereotypes of

³² David Levithan, *Two Boys Kissing*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 7.

girls and boys, respectively, but here Levithan decides to subvert those heteronormative concepts and, instead, inject another issue: transgender people. Ryan is a cisgendered gay boy and, over the course of the book, we find out that Avery is not only gay as well, but he is also a transgendered boy.

This is not, however, simply lip service to the trans community. Levithan uses the “meetcute” Avery and Ryan have at the prom to talk about falling in love for the first time, and Avery's eventual coming out as a trans person is used as a metaphor for the proverbial bearing of our souls that we all do when we enter into a romantic relationship. There is some consternation along the way which the boys eventually get through (they're assaulted by some local toughs in an abandoned miniature golf course) but, as I've said before: it's cute. It's meant to be cute.

Cooper

The story of Levithan's book is, overall, hopeful and optimistic. However, one of the boys, Cooper, reflects a sadder and sometimes all-too-familiar experience that LGBT youth have when they are discovered by less-than-supportive parents and subsequently run out of their homes. While there have been improvements for LGBTs in the United States—serving openly in the military, the passage of anti-discrimination laws, marriage equality—there is still much proverbial work to be done. According to The Williams Institute at the University of California – Los Angeles's School of Law, 40% of all

homeless youth in the United States are LGBT³³—that's approaching *half* of all homeless youth—and Cooper's story is a fictionalization of this scenario. He is seventeen years old and, due to the isolation he experiences in high school, he has retreated to the Internet for his friendships and sexual encounters. In most cases, he engages with anonymous (and presumably) older men to discuss and flirt with (in some cases explicitly). In the opening passages of the book, he falls asleep with his head on the keyboard while still talking with these individuals and this keeps the computer monitor active until the morning. His father enters the room and reads the still-open chat windows from the previous night and, enraged by homophobia, physically assaults his son. The boy flees and spends the rest of the book meandering from place to place in a numb despair because of how his life has fallen apart. Over the course of the story, he visits a coffee shop where he deletes all the contacts from his phone, has a less-than-stellar, in-person romantic encounter with an older man he meets on a hookup app, and has an anxious run-in with a peer at Wal-Mart. Eventually he makes his way to a large bridge high above a river leading to a large city where he attempts suicide.

According to Levithan, Cooper's story is somewhat inspired by that of Tyler Clementi, a first-year student at Rutgers University who was surreptitiously videotaped kissing another man by his roommate. This violation of privacy combined with family issues Clementi was facing eventually drove the young man to take his own life by

33 The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, "America's Shame: 40% of Homeless Youth Are LGBT Kids," <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/americas-shame-40-of-homeless-youth-are-lgbt-kids/> (accessed July 5, 2016).

jumping off the George Washington Bridge.³⁴ In contrast to Clementi's suicide, Cooper is ultimately pulled off the bridge railing by a traffic cop and, in a discussion I had with Levithan, he made sure to note that there are police officers who are directly tasked with doing just that.³⁵

3.3 Creation of the libretto

Adapting a nearly 200-page book into an evening-length musical work seemed a difficult task. Aside from a few diegetic songs the book references as being on the radio or playing in a dance club, there isn't any music explicitly mentioned. This meant that I would have to create a libretto which distilled the literary work into something I could use when I began to compose. In order to do this I undertook an exhaustive deconstruction of the various storylines; a process I began to call “exploding it out and putting the pieces back together.” The four storylines don't happen in a linear fashion because the Chorus's gaze constantly shifts from one narrative to another so, in order to keep things organized, I constructed a master document in which I kept the stories separate. This file—which eventually topped 20,000 words—was made up of verbatim quotes from the book or thoughts that occurred to me during the process of constructing the libretto and it allowed me to see the important events in each of the four stories as well as the events that I thought I could excise in order to make the narrative something

³⁴ *The New York Times*, “After Gay Son's Suicide, Mother Finds Blame in Herself and in Her Church,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/25/nyregion/after-tyler-clementis-suicide-his-parents-make-painful-changes-in-the-search-for-why.html>, August 24, 2012 (accessed July 13, 2015).

³⁵ David Levithan, interview by author, Minneapolis, June 18, 2016.

that would yield the 50-minute piece the TCGMC was commissioning.

The original terms of the commission were that I was to place an emphasis on the character that the chorus portrayed. The TCGMC wanted to make sure that the adaptation made the choral ensemble the proverbial star of the show and, since the novel is primarily written in the third person as narrated by the Chorus, there was plenty of material to give them. However, this became a huge problem because there was simply *too much* for the 50-minute work the ensemble wanted. Solving this problem became about two things: subtracting characters and/or conflating their stories with others'.

The first characters to go were the ancillary ones; characters which didn't necessarily drive the plot. Harry and Craig's female friend, Smita, has a few interactions with them as she helps film *The Kiss* but has no real influence on the events. She was the first to go and her videotaping of the event—a requirement to prove they have broken the record—was livecasted on the Internet and archived on a website such as YouTube instead.

The more important of their two friends who help with *The Kiss* is a gay boy named Tariq. His violent assault outside a movie theater serves as the catalyst for Harry and Craig coming up with the idea for *The Kiss* and he has a fateful run to Craig's house at the end of the book but, other than these two dramatic events, Tariq doesn't have much bearing on the plot. However, the motivation for *The Kiss* still needed to be in the story so, in order to preserve this, I had the assault happen to Harry instead.

Another minor character which had to go was Tom Bellamy, a history teacher at Harry and Craig's high school. He is one of the adults in the story who have signed on to “chaperone” *The Kiss* and is also an out gay man. In a particularly touching moment, the Chorus recognizes him walking up to take his shift watching over the boys and recalls how he was there for them as they lay dying of AIDS so many years ago. He serves as a sort of “mortal protector” of the next generation of gay kids; “minding the herd,” so to speak. As he is the real world embodiment of the Chorus his story was not easy to let go, but it wasn't important enough to warrant the minutes it would take to tell it.

If you were to ask a fan of the book what they thought the biggest difference between the plot of the book and the plot of my musical work was they would likely say that my piece is missing the entire story of Neil and Peter. I did just as much exhaustive cataloging of their story as I did the other three but, in the end, they don't serve to advance any plot forward. Cooper's story was important because it gave voice to some of the struggles that LGBT youth face in the world, Avery and Ryan's was an opportunity to talk about the experience of a transgender person (something that the conductor of the TCGMC felt was very important), and Harry and Craig's kiss was the origin of the title of the book. However, Neil and Peter's experience was about being in a stable relationship and, aside from some *very* teenage drama involving Neil's mother's seeming denial of his sexuality, the overall plot didn't seem to suffer from Neil and Peter's absence.

Once I had made those changes I decided to focus on the narrative voice of the

Chorus. Since it doesn't consist of individual voices—the various members don't even have proper names—it was important to find a way to have the prose narration which advances the story occur. For this I fell back on my love of Handel oratorios and decided to make the libretto about *recitative* versus *aria*. The *recitatives* would be in prose in order to move the storyline forward (I didn't know yet if I wanted them sung or spoken) and the *arias* would have more poetic text that the chorus could ruminate on.

In order to see how some of the earlier works in the oratorio genre used a chorus like this, I looked at examples from a few different composers: Felix Mendelssohn's *Elijah*³⁶ and George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*.³⁷ Once I eventually decided that the Narrators would be spoken roles, I consulted more recent works that used this element: *El Niño* by John Adams³⁸ and Leonard Bernstein's *MASS*.³⁹

Based on my research and the speed at which I felt the plot would need to unfold, I decided to create four narrators and task each with a single storyline. Narrator 1 told Cooper's story, Narrator 2 had Avery and Ryan, Narrator 3 told the story of the Kiss, and Narrator 4 was the mouthpiece for the Chorus. This seemed like an effective way of keeping Levithan's third-person style of storytelling intact (it's one of the primary charms

36 *Mendelssohn: Elijah*, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Barbara Bonney, Florence Quivar, Jerry Hadley and Thomas Hampson dir. Robert Shaw, Telarc 2CD-80389, 1995.

37 *Messiah: George Frideric Handel*, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Jennifer Vyvyan, Monica Sinclair, Jon Vickers, and Giorgio Tozzi dir. Sir Thomas Beecham, RCA Victor 09026-68159-2, 1959.

38 *John Adams: El Niño*, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Dawn Upshaw, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Willard White, Theatre of Voices, London Voices, and Maîtrise de Paris dir. Kent Nagano, Nonesuch 79634-2, 2000.

39 *Leonard Bernstein: MASS*, Norman Scribner Choir, Berkshire Boy Choir, Alan Titus, other vocal soloists, and instrumentalists dir. Leonard Bernstein, Sony Classical SM2K 63089, 1971.

of the novel). This also addressed one of my biggest concerns about adapting the source material: how the events in the story would be conveyed to the listener. It didn't seem effective to have the events of the novel explicitly played out on stage by members of the chorus—not to mention that it might look absurd for adult men to be portraying teenage boys for nearly an hour—so having the Chorus tell the story to the audience in the same fashion as the source material seemed an ideal solution.

Once I made what I thought were the necessary adjustments to the characters and plot I put all the pieces back in an order as close as I could get to the book's, assigned lines to the various Narrators, and found places where I thought the chorus might comment musically. What I came up with was a 36-page libretto with nearly 16,000 words which seemed as if it was going to clock in at nearly 90 minutes.

The initial commission was for a 50-minute work, so I set out to do some even more judicious editing and began taking out more individual events from the three remaining storylines. Cooper's story lost his flustered meeting with a classmate at a local Wal-Mart, the verbal assault that Avery and Ryan experience on their second date was removed, and a moment during the night when someone harasses Harry and Craig by lobbing a raw egg at them also hit the proverbial cutting room floor. The resulting new draft was only 3,000 words shorter so I decided to ask a friend with a master's degree in Creative Writing, Eric Grant, if he might take a look at what I had and offer some advice about getting the narration cut down. He describes his role in the collaboration as such:

The challenge with any adaptation is staying as true to the source material as possible while adding something that makes it personal to the person adapting it. This was especially true with *Two Boys Kissing* as the soul of the book means so much to the LGBTQ community, and to stay loyal to that soul in the music was vital. So after numerous drafts, a few arguments, and some silent apologies to Mr. Levithan for cutting out parts of the book, we captured a message in the libretto that [Josh] felt his music could really amplify—and the results are better than I could've hoped for. There is still the distinct feel of Mr. Levithan's book, but it's been framed in a way that makes it distinctly [Josh's] vision as well.⁴⁰

After Eric got through with a draft of his own he had trimmed the Narrators down to two named Robert and Matthew⁴¹ instead of my four anonymous ones in order to allow them to have a conversation with one another rather than just parroting the events of the story at the audience⁴², a leaner conflation of a few events, and an even more primary role for the Chorus (which the commissioning party liked). The final draft of the libretto that he and I produced was 28 pages and half as many words as the previous one. The piece would likely be clocking in a bit over the 50-minute mark, but both the Artistic Director of the TCGMC and I were satisfied with where it was at.

Since the narrative of the book consisted of contrasting episodes in which the Chorus “checks in” with the different boys' stories, our final structure mirrored this by yielding 33 “movements” separated into four larger sections (Table 1). Those sections corresponded with the three days over which the story happens (with Friday labeled “Prologues”) followed by a section of epilogues in which the Chorus talks about their

40 Eric Grant, correspondence with the composer, July 18, 2016.

41 This was a nod to the real-life, college-aged men who broke the world record for the longest kiss and served as inspiration to the author, Bobby Cenciello and Matty Daley.

42 In the first production of *Two Boys Kissing* the TCGMC chose to use six actors, each pair of which were responsible for one of the three storylines.

wishes and advice for future generations of LGBT kids.

Table 1. List of movements for *Two Boys Kissing*.⁴³

<u>Prologues</u>	<u>Sunday</u>
1. Openings	18. <i>Narration 4</i>
2. Chorus for Sleeping Boys	19. Song for Some of Us
	20. Twenty-four hours
<u>Saturday</u>	21. <i>Narration 5</i>
3. Wake up!	22. Hymn from the closet
4. Cooper's discovery	23. Chorus for Strength
5. Chorus for Boys Driving Cars	24. <i>Narration 6</i>
6. The reason	25. Cooper leaves town
7. <i>Narration 1</i>	26. Over and over again
8. Chorus for the Sky	27. <i>Narration 7</i>
9. <i>Narration 2</i>	28. Song for That Kid Out There
10. Cooper hits delete	29. Countdown
11. <i>Narration 3</i>	
12. Craig's mother shows up	<u>Epilogues</u>
13. Song for Some of Our Parents	30. Chorus for when the time comes
14. Chorus of the Body	31. Chorus for Two Boys Kissing
15. Fourteen minutes	32. In between
16. Harry and Craig kiss into the night	33. Make more than dust
17. Chorus for a sleeping boy	

43 Movements listed in italics are made up of solely narration. Everything else is either a movement with only choral music or choral music accompanied by narration.

CHAPTER 4

The Compositional Process

Due to the time constraints of the commission—I had less than 18 months from signing the contract to the premiere—I would have to figure out how to write an hour's worth of music in a very short time.⁴⁴ However, I also had to take into account the fact that the TCGMC was going to record it a month before the premiere so they could have the album available for purchase so those 18 months were actually more like 16. Since I would be dealing with rehearsal time constraints, my primary focus in beginning to write music would have to be the parts that the Chorus would be singing. I would finish those and send them off in a piano/vocal score as the parts of the libretto that were primarily spoken narration took shape.

One of the challenges of working with a choir made up of amateur singers from all ages and proverbial walks of life is that the music has to be accessible but still compelling and, as the singers aren't paid (and in some cases actually pay to be in the ensemble), the rehearsal process couldn't feel laborious. My experience with the men's chorus repertoire is that it can sometimes rely too heavily on what I call the TTBB “Wall of Sound.”⁴⁵ By this I mean that there are entire pieces that are made up of solely

44 At the time I also had commissions from the Boston Gay Men's Chorus to write a 25-minute work for chorus and chamber orchestra as well as an *a cappella* piece for the Minneapolis-based ensemble, The Summer Singers.

45 Obviously not the recording technique pioneered by Phil Spector. “Wall of Sound” is just what pops in my head every time I've been bored with too much constant homophonic TTBB music.

homophonic, 4-part sound with no variation. For a lengthier piece like the one the TCGMC envisioned in their commission I felt that I would need to find that variation in order to not bore the audience (or myself) so I made the following mental list (Table 2):

Table 2. List of possible choral textures for *Two Boys Kissing*.

4-part TTBB “Wall of Sound”
Two, three, or four parts homophonic/contrapuntal
Unison (chant)
Accompanied v. <i>a capella</i>
Falsetto

Since I was basing the structure of the piece on the oratorio genre and the role of the Chorus was to comment on the events of the story, it seemed natural that their material be more lyrical in contrast to what the Narrators were going to be given and, in some cases, firmly rooted in the songwriting tradition that amateur choruses can sound very good at performing. However, since I was concerned with textural variation I didn't want to have the piece to *only* be rooted in that tradition.

I entertained a few different ways of generating material but the method which I felt would be the most expedient was to base the entire oratorio on a sequence of chords. These chords and the order in which they occurred would govern the work in a fairly strict way that would eliminate a lot of choices for me when I eventually sat down to write. This was a practical decision for me as it would allow me to write faster and meet my approaching deadline. This Primary Chord Sequence—17 in all—occurs in every transposition throughout the course of *Two Boys Kissing* but, for the sake of brevity, only

the transposition which begins with the lowest note as a B-natural is listed here (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Primary Chord Sequence

The Primary Chord Sequence had elements of diatonicism—chords 11 and 12 form a dominant progression ($V^7 \rightarrow I^9$) in the key of C and chords 8 and 9 imply a progression of $IV^6 \rightarrow I$ in the key of A (albeit with some added “color” notes)—and, thus, would be easier for amateur musicians to “hear” since the consonant harmonies would be somewhat familiar. However, over an hour of purely diatonic music seemed as if it might get boring so there are elements in the sequence which are dissonant as well (chords 13-

16 in particular). In case there were long sequences of narration in which the harmonies moved quickly, it was also important that the Primary Chord Sequence could start over somewhat seamlessly. This is why the first and last members (chords 1 and 17), although voiced differently, are exactly the same except for a single pitch.

Another primary element of the book which I felt had to somehow be portrayed in the music was that of the two different worlds in which the action takes place: the world of the living which the boys inhabit and the world of the dead which the Chorus inhabits. I had been analyzing a lot of Philip Glass's music at the time and ran across the first movement of his 1982 composition, *Glassworks*, which he titled "Opening" (Figure 3). The constant 3-against-2 which happens throughout the movement's six minutes of music form a beautiful, interlocking, and kaleidoscopic pattern when heard together but the right hand and left hand never play simple or compound time together. This seemed like the perfect metaphor for the world of the boys and the world of the Chorus; always seemingly working in congress with one another but never quite meeting up. Consequently, the first movement of *Two Boys Kissing* deploys this same rhythmic pattern and, in tribute to Glass's work, is called "Openings"⁴⁶ (Figure 4). This 3-against-2 rhythm occurs throughout *Two Boys Kissing* in various tempi and registers.

46 The plural form of this word is due to the fact that there are multiple storylines which begin here.

Figure 3. “Opening” from *Glassworks*, mm. 1-8.⁴⁷

The musical score for Figure 3 is for the piano part of the 'Opening' from *Glassworks*. It consists of two systems of music, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The tempo is marked as quarter = 92. The first system (measures 1-4) is marked *mf sempre legato* and *con Cres.* . The second system (measures 5-8) continues the piece. The music features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the bass clef and a melody in the treble clef with frequent triplets.

Figure 4. “Openings” from *Two Boys Kissing*, mm. 1-8.

The musical score for Figure 4 is for the piano part of the 'Openings' from *Two Boys Kissing*. It consists of two systems of music, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The tempo is marked as quarter = 85. The first system (measures 1-4) is marked *p*. The second system (measures 5-8) continues the piece. The music features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the bass clef and a melody in the treble clef with frequent triplets. The score includes dynamic markings and hairpins.

Once the piano/vocal score had been composed and as the narrative portions of the libretto became locked by myself and my co-librettist, I needed to begin the orchestration process. The terms of the commission were that the chorus be accompanied

⁴⁷ Philip Glass, “Opening” from *Glassworks*, (Dunvagen Music: Bryn Mawr, PA: Presser, 1982, c1984).

by a chamber ensemble whose instrumentation was to be chosen in consultation with the Artistic Director of the TCGMC.

In the summer of 2015 I was taken on a 10-day tour of Israel and Turkey with the Boston Gay Men's Chorus so, by the time it came to choose an instrumentation for *Two Boys Kissing*, I knew the challenges I was going to be facing with such a large group of only tenors and basses. I had also heard a wonderful album of music called *So There*⁴⁸ which piano-based singer/songwriter Ben Folds made with the chamber ensemble, yMusic. Their instrumentation of flute, clarinet, trumpet, violin, viola, and cello seemed as if it might be the right combination of treble-heavy ranges and bright instrumental colors to combat over 100 men's voices. The TCGMC already had a staff accompanist to play piano and the Artistic Director suggested we add a contrabass to fill out the low end and, after we agreed on adding a percussionist, that set our final instrumentation (Table 3). We would have the lush sound and full range of strings, the dexterity of woodwinds, the power of a brass instrument, and the colors of a percussion section. There was some discussion about adding an oboe and a horn, but budgetary issues were a concern.

Table 3. Instrumentation for *Two Boys Kissing*.

Flute
Clarinet in B-flat
Trumpet in B-Flat
Percussion
Piano
Violin
Viola
Cello
Bass

48 *So There*, Ben Folds, yMusic, Giancarlo Guerrero, and the Nashville Symphony. New West Records NW6337, 2015.

Figure 5. Percussion setup for TCGMC's recording session of *Two Boys Kissing*.



Photo credit: Paul Nixdorf

During the pre-composition period I felt it was a good idea to come up with a defined role for the orchestra because I didn't want it to sound to the audience as if it were just obligatory accompaniment. I had entertained ideas about how the various sections of the instrumental ensemble—strings, winds, and percussion—might correspond with the three boys' storylines but I felt that might feel somewhat boring as each instrument would then be locked into a role. Instead, I settled on the notion that the instruments might exist in the same world as the Chorus and only come in during a movement in which the chorus sang. This idea came from a masterclass I attended a few years ago in which the lecturer relayed an anecdote about how the composer Dominick Argento had once told him that if a composer has a libretto in which parts are spoken, then there is no reason for other parts to be sung. What I thought that bit of advice might be getting at is that the

different “sound worlds” that spoken text and sung text inhabit are aurally disconnected from one another and that the transition between the two can be jarring. It reminded me of the instances in which I've heard pieces that have narration—typically amplified using a microphone and speakers—and the narrator either comes in or drops out. The transition from amplified sound to acoustic sound nearly always took me out of the experience the composer was trying to craft and I've felt somewhat averse to ever using spoken narration ever since. In order to familiarize myself with pieces outside the oratorio genre that had large sections with spoken narration I listened to pieces like Aaron Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*⁴⁹ and Leonard Bernstein's *Symphony No. 3: Kaddish*⁵⁰ and, although the transition between amplified sound and acoustic sound wasn't as jarring as I remembered because of the ways in which sound engineers can mix recordings, I was still reminded that I would need to attempt to solve this problem for the work's four scheduled *live* performances.

The solution I came up with in order to “blur the lines” between the acoustic singing of the Chorus and the amplified speech of the Narrators was the orchestra. They would only be used in the movements of the oratorio in which the chorus was singing. This would have them inhabiting a sound world distinct from that of the Narrators instead of sharing it and calling attention to the difference between amplified and acoustic vocal

49 *Appalachian Spring*, Melvyn Douglas, Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Serge Koussevitzky. Dutton CDEA 5021, 1940-1946.

50 *Bernstein Conducts Bernstein: Kaddish & Chichester Psalms*, Felicia Bernstein, Jennie Tourel, Columbus Boychoir, Camerata Singers, New York Philharmonic, and Leonard Bernstein. Sony Classical SMK 60595, 1964-1965.

sound. It would also further serve to divorce the Chorus from the world of the living and seemingly elevate their singing into a different musical space from the accompanied narration.

With that I had the full measure of constraints for writing the piece: narration would only be accompanied by piano and the orchestra would only be used if the chorus was singing. There were instances in which I departed from these commandments for dramatic license, but having these two measures in place moved options off the proverbial table and helped me work faster.

CHAPTER 5

Analysis

Quick note for the reader here: Because of the amount of score involved in this piece—277 pages in all—I've elected to submit to the readers the written dissertation accompanied by the full score. In this section, I will reference the musical examples analyzed by their bolded page number in the full score rather than in the appendix of the accumulated dissertation. If/when I pass the defense I'll go in and incorporate the score into this document after I've made all the changes the committee suggests.

5.1 Use of Different Choral Textures

As I mentioned before, I made a mental list of the different textures I could get out of a choral ensemble made up of only men's voices (Table 2). When I began composing *Two Boys Kissing* I didn't make a checklist to make sure that I used every one of these textures and in some cases—as in the use of the falsetto range—I didn't end up using them at all. The 4-part, homophonic, “Wall of Sound” I had been so concerned about overusing ended up in only two prominent passages (both of which turned out to be *a cappella*): mm. 35-45 in No. 32 (**pp. 249-250**) and No. 22, “Hymn from the Closet” (**p. 163**).

Examples of homophonic and contrapuntal singing in a two-part texture can be seen in No. 1, mm. 139-192 (**pp. 21-30**) and No. 23b (**page 165**), respectively. I found that this equal tenor/bass division allowed for greater clarity of the words as they were sung by the ensemble. This was a concern because I knew beforehand that the TCGMC would not be using supertitles in their performances.

A three-part division of the ensemble has always been problematic for me as a composer because a men's ensemble isn't usually divided in that way. There are four sections: tenors (1 and 2), baritones, and basses. A three-part division always requires special dispensation in rehearsal and, thus, takes time away from learning repertoire. However, there were instances in *Two Boys Kissing* where I decided to employ it a few times. The most prominent example is found in No. 33, mm. 62-78 (**pp. 263-267**). Here I used it because of the natural, building expansion from unison, to two-part, to three-part voicings that the harmonies undergo throughout the ensuing stanzas of the text. In this three-part passage, I dropped the orchestration down to just the winds—flute, clarinet, and trumpet—to allow for more text clarity.

The four-part contrapuntal texture is one that I almost never employed due to the fact that, in a TTBB ensemble, all of the ranges are tightly packed together. Conservatively, there are only about two octaves and a third—D2 to G4—that are generally usable and dividing that among four voices means that clarity of line and text is a concern; the lyrics can be completely obscured and the vertical harmonies are all the listener can hear. I decided to use this to my advantage during No. 26, “Over and Over” (**pp. 185-190, mm. 24-50**). This movement occurs after the Chorus watches Cooper attempt suicide and one of the narrators comments that every time they are made to watch an LGBT child end their life that the men of the Chorus “die over and over again” (a line taken directly from the book. The text for this movement consists of the repetition of the

final four words of that quote so the four-part, contrapuntal harmonies wouldn't need aural clarity for the listener to know what the chorus was singing; the music could then concern itself primarily with the harmonic content. This was also a particularly emotional moment for a lot of audience members I spoke with after the performances.

One of the first times I can remember encountering a chorus of men singing was in 1990 as a 10-year-old riding the school bus and hearing the German pop group Enigma's song, "Sadness (Part I),"⁵¹ come over the radio. In it a group of monks is heard chanting in unison over an electronic beat. This song forms some of my earliest memories of the male voice so, whenever I'm asked to compose something for a group of tenors and basses, I nearly always use this texture. Due to the sheer number of singers performing a given line it (a) can cut more effectively through a larger instrumental ensemble—or a smaller group playing loudly—and (b) the clarity of the lyrics is heavily amplified for the listener. This is why you find plenty of unison or, in some cases two-part writing in works for chorus and orchestra. A prominent example of this in *Two Boys Kissing* occurs in mm. 79-86 of No. 1, "Openings," when the chorus sings the words "It was an exquisite irony: Just when we stopped wanting to kill ourselves, we started to die." (pp. 10-12). The chorus begins in unison so the listener can clearly hear the heartbreaking text.

The *a cappella* texture has been, in my experience, underutilized in the repertoire written for gay men's choruses. This is likely because, as a chorus consisting primarily of

51 *MCMXC a.D.*, Enigma, Charisma Records, 1990.

amateur singers, tuning can sometimes be an issue. However, because it is seldom used meant to me that, when it is, it can be striking. I rarely used this texture because of the pragmatic aspects of having accompaniment for an amateur chorus but, I felt it warranted having only the chorus singing for No. 22, “Hymn from the Closet,” (page 163) as the lyrics, taken verbatim from the book, are especially poignant:

If you put enough closets together, you have enough space for a room.
If you put enough rooms together, you have space for a house.
If you put enough houses together, you have space for a town,
Then a city,
Then a nation,
Then a world.

This entirely *a cappella*, homophonic hymn is also of note because it contains some particularly challenging harmonies for an amateur choir. Over the course of its 33 measures they rigorously traverse the first nine chords of the Primary Chord Sequence in its E-natural transposition (page 163).

5.2 Spoken Narration and Underscoring

One of the primary challenges of composing *Two Boys Kissing* was figuring out how to notate the spoken narration. Since the Narrators were mainly going to be accompanied only by the piano vamping through the Primary Chord Sequence, it seemed a practical idea for the pianist to be able to see when they should move on to the next chord instead of just receiving a cue from the conductor. For this reason I notated the dialogue the narrators were speaking in boxes over each vamp in the piano part. If the

line was short enough I included all of it but, if it were longer, I might only give the first portion followed by an ellipsis followed by the final portion of the line (Figure 6). I spoke with a colleague who had a lot of experience playing keyboards in pit orchestras and, when I showed him how I had attempted to solve the problem of showing when to transition to the next vamp he said, “Yeah, this is great. We usually get way less than this!”

Figure 6. “Narration 5,” mm. 1-7, from *Two Boys Kissing*

quarter = 120

Avery pulls into Ryan's driveway... .. You wanted to talk?

It sounded so good... .. You country boys and your canoes.

They drift in the water... ..if he can tell *a* story without telling *the* story.

Alright, tell you what... ..Not too rough compared to some.

Alright, tell you what... ..Not too rough compared to some.

Yeah, I wish it'd gone... ..but, you know, I'm not a girl.

Okay, I didn't really expect... ..it's not like you were born a fish or anything, right?

5.3 Influence of the Broadway Musical Style

Table 4. List of Songs in *Two Boys Kissing*

No. 13, “Song for Some of Our Parents” (pp. 99-111)
• D-flat major throughout.
No. 19, “Song for Some of Us” (pp. 130-148)
• E minor throughout.
No. 28, “Song for That Kid Out There” (pp. 195-208)
• D major throughout.
No. 33, “Make more than dust” (pp. 251-277)
• C-major with a whole step modulation up.

Repertoire of the Broadway tradition can sometimes make up a large (but not necessarily primary) part of a performance by a gay men's chorus. This could be due to any number of historical, sociological, or psychological reasons which are far too complicated to write about here but the fact remains: these ensembles are steeped in this tradition and it's something they are good at performing. Because of this I wanted to make sure to put a few “songs” in the oratorio. By referencing the idiosyncrasies of this repertoire—strophic structures, rhyme schemes, etc.—they would both be using skills the ensemble was already adept at as well as serve as an expressly diatonic contrast to elements of the Primary Chord Sequence which didn't necessarily have stable diatonicism. Although some of the chorus's music throughout has diatonic and song-like elements, there are only four movements which have the clearly-defined, strophic structures and rhyme schemes that are the hallmark of many musical theater productions.

Most contain only the I, IV, V, and vi chords and, with the exception of the ascending whole-step modulation in No. 33, “Make more than dust,” they all adhere to one key throughout. In three of the four, I have gone so far as to explicitly refer them as “songs” in their titles (Table 4).

Conclusions

Two Boys Kissing is a significant moment in my career as a composer for many reasons. It is the first time I've been commissioned to write an evening-length work, the first time I've adapted a literary work into a libretto, and the first time I've seen a work of mine staged in a dramatic fashion (Figure 7). It required bringing to bear all of the knowledge I've gained as a composer writing for the voice over the last 15 years, but also required me to write for instruments in a facile way. The work is musically successful because the major thematic elements—the Primary Chord Sequence, song structures, and the spoken narration—stay consistent but not boring throughout the work's 70-minute length. Not only was the TCGMC able to rehearse and record it successfully, but it was met with standing ovations all four times it was publicly performed so it seems to have connected with its intended audience and the risk the ensemble took on commissioning a composer—one who doesn't have a literary degree—to adapt a novel into something musical for them was hopefully worth it. Jeffrey Heine, the Executive Director of the TCGMC, summed up his thoughts on how the collaboration ended up:

Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus has a history of working with composers to create new choral works that tell the stories of our community through music. This process of collaboration is always fun and rewarding, to go through the act of discovery and sharing as a composer presents their vision that will be expressed by the voices of over 150 men. But *Two Boys Kissing*, and working with Josh, was extra special for all of us. Many of our singers had a very deep, personal response to the music the first time they sang it. Josh got to the heart of the source material. Where the book takes awhile to find its themes, Josh takes you there from the start. It's an emotional experience for the men of the chorus and the audience. It has been a pleasure to collaborate with Josh and we are so proud to have been able to present it to our audiences.⁵²

52 Jeffrey Heine (Executive Director of TCGMC) correspondence with the composer, July 18, 2016.

Figure 7. TCGMC performs *Two Boys Kissing* in Minneapolis, June 17, 2016.



Photo credit: Paul Nixdorf

In July of 2016 I attended the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses Festival in Denver, Colorado with my husband, Robert. There were over 6,600 singers there—the vast majority of which were LGBT individuals—and Boettcher Concert Hall in the Denver Performing Arts Center was packed for the performance of *Two Boys Kissing*. Due to the history of discrimination and hatred that LGBTs can face they can bring a lot of traumatic experiences to the ways in which they interact with each other and works of art aimed at giving voice to their life experiences so, for me, it was important that the work be *emotionally* successful as well. I took the fact that I was writing something for this audience *very* seriously—even more so than many of my other commissions—and it seems to have paid off in the four live performances I witnessed. In every case I caught more than one chorus member openly moved to tears while they performed. I walked out of the performance in Denver to find a woman sobbing in the lobby. I said, “You look like you might need a hug,” and we embraced for a solid 30 seconds while she cried into

my suit jacket. Gerald Gurss, the Artistic Director of Charlotte, North Carolina's LGBTQA choir, One Voice Chorus, sent me a note that said:

Having had close friends who were taken by HIV/AIDS, I was extremely moved by the concept of [the Chorus.] I remember being given advice from them on topics from dating to always remembering those who'd gone before to advance LGBT rights. [*Two Boys Kissing*] brought those friends back to me. I sat in the Denver audience sobbing most of the hour.⁵³

At the third performance in Minneapolis a rail-thin man came up to me afterward and gave me a hug. He told me he had been HIV-positive for decades and survived three bouts with cancer and said, "I'm one of the ones who stayed behind." He was referencing a line I wrote in the final verse of No. 19, "Song for Some of Us," that the Chorus sings:

Some of us, they stayed behind.
They think of us most every day.
They watch over you with us in mind.
They survived to show you the way.

For him, it provided a safe space to grieve his friends and look toward the future. As an LGBT individual myself but, more importantly, as a human being who places an emphasis on having empathy for others, I can't think of anything better to put my time and talents toward than what that gentleman experienced during the 70 minutes of *Two Boys Kissing*.

53 Gerald Gurss (Artistic Director of One Voice Chorus) in correspondence with the composer, July 10, 2016.

APPENDIX A – Libretto

Two Boys Kissing

An Oratorio for Men's Voices and Instruments

By Joshua Shank

Libretto adapted by the composer & Eric Grant

Based on the novel, *Two Boys Kissing*, by David Levithan

Characters

CHORUS

- Two soloists are used for No. 28, “Song for That Kid Out There”

ROBERT – narrator played by an actor

MATTHEW – narrator played by an actor

GLORIA – played by an actor. She is Craig's mother who shows up for a brief (but important) scene.

Notes

- Whenever a line appears in bold for the CHORUS, it is sung. Everything else should be spoken.
- If possible, NARRATORS should be performed by professional actors. They should be mic'd.
- Sometimes the actors speak to each other, sometimes to the audience.
- The world the cast is observing is directly in front of them. Whether or not they actually make direct eye contact with the audience is up to the director.
- The CHORUS should not perform in a choral “formation;” just scattered around the stage, if possible. Obviously this depends on the performance space.

PROLOGUES

1. Openings

(It is night time. The light is low.

CHORUS enters during the introductory music. They greet one another as friends greet each other at a mutual friend's funeral; sadness wrapped in the joy of an appreciated life stolen too soon.

One by one they take their spots on stage. They face the audience.

The NARRATORS gradually step out of the CHORUS as the music draws to a close.)

CHORUS

You can't know what it was like for us now—you will always be one step behind. Be thankful for that. You can't know what it was like for us then—you will always be one step ahead. Be thankful for that, too.

ROBERT: We're just shadows.

MATTHEW: If you're a teenager now, I doubt you knew us.

ROBERT: We are your uncles, your angel grandfathers, characters in a play.

MATTHEW: We are the ghosts of the remaining older generation.

ROBERT: If you're a teenager now you might not know the way we died.

MATTHEW: It's the living part that mattered more, anyhow.

ROBERT: It wasn't that long ago was it, when so many of us got sick?

MATTHEW: But these are stories from your life.

ROBERT: And ours.

MATTHEW: All we ask is that you remember the way we lived and died.

ROBERT: It's 8:43 on a Friday night and Cooper Riggs is in his room, alone, feeling nothing.

MATTHEW: I know those eyes.

ROBERT: Yeah, the eyes that reflect the flat, dull world he's been living in for so long. So what does he do?

MATTHEW: He gets online, of course.

ROBERT: And why not? He's only 17 now, but online he can be anything, anything anyone needs him to be. He has fake profiles, photos and imaginary histories, and he fill his conversations flirting with men, making promises he'll never deliver on.

MATTHEW: Small sparks in a lifeless world, I guess.

ROBERT: Just playing at life.

MATTHEW: We remember that, don't we?

ROBERT: Feeling our body wasting away, drifting away lying in rooms alone, feeling like nothing? Yes, we do.

CHORUS

It was an exquisite irony: Just when we stopped wanting to kill ourselves, we started to die. Just when we were feeling our strength, it was taken from us.

We know that some of you are still scared. We know that some of you are still silent. Just because it's better now doesn't mean that it's always good.

MATTHEW: It's 9:03 on Friday night in a town called Kindling - an unlikely place for a blue-haired boy named Ryan and the pink-haired boy called Avery to meet.

ROBERT: Prom night.

MATTHEW: Look at them file in.

ROBERT: There's a little bit of everything here. Boys in tuxedos with flowers, torn hoodies, boys in ties as skinny as their jeans, V-neck T-shirts, boys who feel awkward wearing dress shoes. And girls...girls wearing the colors of the rainbow.

MATTHEW: There he is. The pink hair gives him away. And look at that. Sure enough, the blue-haired boy walking towards him. They came with other people but that didn't matter much anymore. They dance, and don't care about anything else besides each other.

ROBERT: Magical.

MATTHEW: I know how they feel, like the supernatural is natural, and wonderment comes from the most mundane moment, like a heartbeat or a glance.

CHORUS

Some of us applaud. Others look away, because it hurts so much.

ROBERT: Do you remember what it was like to meet someone new? The possibility? The hope? The naïve belief that love can show up in surprising little moments?

CHORUS

Love is painful, how could you ever wish it on anybody? And love is so essential, how could you ever stand in its way?

MATTHEW: It's 10:45 and Craig Cole and Harry Ramirez are at Harry's house making final plans for their record breaking day.

ROBERT: What record?

MATTHEW: They are going to break the record for the longest kiss. 33 straight hours.

CHORUS

We are excited for The Kiss tomorrow. We don't see how they can do it, but we are hoping they will.

ROBERT: Couldn't do anything like that in our day could we?

(Pause.)

MATTHEW: Who knows, no one ever tried.

CHORUS

We think of the boys we kissed. We think of the boys we loved, and the boys who didn't love us back. The boys who were with us at the end, the boys who were with us beyond the end.

2. Chorus for Sleeping Boys

MATTHEW: It's getting late, and eventually we all have to sleep.

ROBERT: Pink-haired Avery falls asleep with a phone number written on his hand. When his eyes open he will peek through the window to see a dewy sparkle covering the grass.

MATTHEW: Blue-haired Ryan falls asleep in a sleeping bag under the stars, thinking of a boy with pink-hair and marveling at how much tomorrow looks so different from yesterday. He doesn't notice the halo of dew that gathers around him as the night warms to morning.

ROBERT: Cooper is still awake though, isn't he?

MATTHEW: He's typing himself into other time zones, talking with men who are just waking up, men who are sneaking a moment from work. The things he says are sometimes flirty, sometimes graphic, whatever the man on the other end wants to hear. Sometimes, though, he just stares, hating them and hating himself. He falls asleep with his head on the keyboard, keeping the computer awake through the night.

ROBERT: This is an incomplete picture. You know that.

MATTHEW: I know. There are boys all over the world lying awake right now, hating themselves.

ROBERT: Just like some of us did when we were boys.

MATTHEW: Right now there are unlucky boys sleeping on benches and under bridges, lucky boys sleeping in shelters, which feel safe but certainly not like home. There are boys so damaged by love that they can't stop picking at their pain. There are boys who clutch secrets at night in the same way they clutch denial in the day. There are boys who don't think of themselves at all when they dream.

CHORUS

And men. There are men who do all of these things. And there some of them, fewer and fewer, who fall to bed and think of us.

MATTHEW: We fell into bed, one after another, but most of us would never get out.

CHORUS

We wish we could show you the world as it sleeps. Then you'd never have any doubt about how similar, how trusting, how astounding and vulnerable we all are.

CHORUS (full)

We no longer sleep, and because we no longer sleep, we no longer dream. Instead we watch. You have become our dreaming.

(The music will eventually fade out with the lights. The cast is left to watch. Wherever they are at, they are not allowed to sleep.)

SATURDAY

3. Wake up!

ROBERT: Harry wakes up excited. Today is the day of The Kiss. It's not future tense anymore. It's a day, like any other day, but not feeling like any day.

MATTHEW: Pink-haired Avery wakes up to find a phone number still written on his hand, and wonders what to do next. He doesn't have to worry, though. Blue-haired Ryan is already on it.

CHORUS

We smile at this...

4. Cooper's discovery

MATTHEW: I need Cooper to wake up though. Wake up!

(Sad music. We feel sorrow for the situation because we have seen it before. The actor playing the father must own this part)

ROBERT: The chair flies from under Cooper and he hits his head on the desk. His father is here, footsteps like thunder, words like lightning.

MATTHEW: “Is this what you do? When we're asleep. Is this what you're up to?”

CHORUS

Disgust. Revulsion. Anger. Rage

ROBERT: Cooper scrambles but it's too late. The monitor is still on and his father must've been reading over him while he was asleep.

MATTHEW: “Is this what you do in my house?”

ROBERT: His father grabs him by the shirt and pulls him up, hate in his eyes, his face a burning red glow.

MATTHEW: “Do you just go off and fuck men? Is that it? While we're asleep, you go out and fuck them? Is that what kind of whore you are?”

ROBERT: *Fuck. Whore.* Rage has its own language, doesn't it? Cooper's father pushes him against the wall and punches him full in the stomach. There's a horror in Cooper's silence as he struggles for breath. His mother comes running into the room and for a moment it's quiet. For a moment it seems like it might stop. There's a breath before the storm.

MATTHEW: *(screaming)*: “Faggot! Disgrace! Whore! Pervert!”

ROBERT: Cooper tries to swing back, but it isn't enough. Blow after blow rain on Cooper's face and all he can see are tears and blood. His mother tries to break it up but the hate is too strong.

MATTHEW: "Get the fuck out of my house you fucking faggot!"

ROBERT: He's out the door driving in his car before he even realizes what he's doing.

MATTHEW: It only takes him ten seconds to leave his parents.

CHORUS

You spend so much time, so much effort, trying to hold yourself together. And then everything falls apart anyway.

5. Chorus for Boys Driving Cars

ROBERT: Remember that first date, practicing all the lines we might say?

MATTHEW: Ha! In the car, shower, wherever. Oh yeah. I remember.

ROBERT: Avery is in his car crossing the bridge on his way to Kindling, trying not to do exactly that, but making it sound like a performance anyway.

MATTHEW: I think Ryan is waiting for Avery, "not" practicing his lines too.

CHORUS

You will never forget what that feels like, that hope.

6. The reason

ROBERT: A lot of thought went into the location of The Kiss, and it was Craig who suggested the lawn in front of their high school. For so many reasons, this needed to happen in public.

MATTHEW: Craig's parents couldn't know. If they did, there's a chance he wouldn't go through with it. They've always had ways of breaking him—with silence, with disappointment, with disapproval. Their religious beliefs are stronger than any belief they have in him.

ROBERT: Harry's parents were cool, but he also had ways of getting broken, didn't he?

MATTHEW: A blow right to the chest, and one to his jaw. He never even saw it coming. Suddenly he was curled up on the ground to protect himself but kick after kick landed on his stomach, legs, and after a while, he couldn't even tell what hurt anymore. They laughed as they broke his ribs and fractured his jaw. The men were never caught.

ROBERT: They're never caught. Weren't in our day either.

MATTHEW: Just another fag getting what he deserved.

CHORUS

As Harry bled on the pavement, we felt ourselves bleeding too.

ROBERT: Harry would later say, "They beat the shit out of me. But you know what? I didn't need that shit inside of me. I'm glad it's gone."

CHORUS

People like to say that being gay isn't like skin color, isn't anything physical. But then it's a different chase. They say we always have the option of hiding. But if that's true, why did they always find us?

7. Narration 1

ROBERT: Cooper's driving fast, hating everyone and hating himself with a renewed rigor. Nothing adds depth to despair like the feeling you deserve it.

MATTHEW: It wasn't always like this. Let's be honest, nobody starts life hating themselves. There was a time he was happy, a time when the world meant something to Cooper. But high school confused things.

ROBERT: He came out, at first to someone he thought he could trust, but the rumors started quickly and his life began to fall apart. People he thought were friends pulled away. The dullness started to pervade the outside of his life and he spent more and more time on the computer. This wasn't really a choice; it was simply the one thing that was always there.

ROBERT: It all starts with an idea doesn't it?

MATTHEW: We watch protests on TV, read about bills passing in other States.

ROBERT: After Harry was attacked Craig thought about protests. About gestures. About making the world watch. Then he came up with the idea of The Kiss.

MATTHEW: It was icing on the cake that nothing in the rules prevented it. A kiss is a kiss, no matter who's kissing.

8. Chorus for the Sky

MATTHEW: The blue-haired boy smiles as he gets in the pink-haired boy's car. They say their hellos.

ROBERT: Huh, this isn't nearly as awkward as we expected.

MATTHEW: They hop in Avery's car and drive to the town's old relic of a miniature golf course. They talk and laugh as they make believe they're playing the game.

ROBERT: It comes more easily than either could've expected. By hole seven they're walking hand in hand.

MATTHEW: The sun isn't shining, but they don't notice. If anyone were to ask them later, they'd probably say it was.

ROBERT: One of the many horrible things about dying the way we died was the way it robbed us of the outdoor world and trapped us indoors.

MATTHEW: There were no decrepit golf courses to hold hands on. For every one of us who was able to die peacefully on a deck chair, blanket pulled high, as the wind stirred his hair and the sun warmed his face, there were hundreds of us whose last glimpse of the world was white walls and metal machinery, the tease of a window, the inadequate flowers in a vase, elected representatives from the wilds we had lost.

CHORUS

Our last breaths were of climate-controlled air. We died under ceilings. It makes us more grateful now for rivers, more grateful for the sky.

9. Narration 2

ROBERT: Today is the day! Are we all ready?

MATTHEW: Harry and Craig have taken their last proper bathroom breaks for the next thirty-two hours, twelve minutes, and ten seconds. In order to set the record, they have to record it, so the cameras are ready, and will be run in shifts by friends, never stopping, filed away to a hard drive. A stopwatch is produced. Friends have gathered. Harry's parents give the two boys two thumbs up. The clock hits noon.

ROBERT: Harry leans over and whispers into Craig's ear.

MATTHEW: I love you.

ROBERT: I love you too.

10. Cooper hits delete

MATTHEW: Cooper decides to leave. He knows he has some decisions to make.

ROBERT: He finally checks his messages...at least the first one.

MATTHEW: “You better get your ass back here right now if you know what's good for you! I will drag you back here myself if I have to...”

ROBERT: Cooper hits delete. Then he hits delete thirteen more times.

CHORUS

We want to shake him. We want to tell him what we learned from blunt experience:

Tempers can calm. Rage can wear itself out. Sense can return.

11. Narration 3

ROBERT: A few more hours pass, and Harry and Craig remain in their kiss. More people gather. Phones are out taking video. Videos are being uploaded online.

MATTHEW: It's going viral, as the kids say now.

ROBERT: Harry's feet start to hurt. He leans on Craig and shakes them out. Being upright for a long time isn't how the body is supposed to work.

MATTHEW: If only that was the most dramatic thing that could happen today.

ROBERT: Craig's eyes are closed but Harry's are wide open.

MATTHEW: This is how Harry sees her first.

12. Craig's mother shows up

ROBERT: Then Craig hears it. His name. His mother's voice. His name.

MATTHEW: She's a small woman, who until ten minutes ago thought Craig was on a camping trip for the weekend. She looks more confused than angry.

ROBERT: Craig wants to turn around. He wants to try to explain. But The Kiss is already too far along. He can't reset it.

MATTHEW: This isn't how it's supposed to be. He'd imagined coming out to his family after all this. Somehow, he believed it could be kept a secret until it was over. He'd have this big accomplishment, and whatever happened they wouldn't be able to take anything away from him, they wouldn't be able to erase anything he'd done.

ROBERT: I'm not sure, in the end, that he ever would've found the perfect moment.

MATTHEW: Their friends hand Craig a piece of paper and a marker to communicate. All the things he has to say boiled down to the essential.

ROBERT: Each of us had a first sentence

CHORUS

Each of us had a first sentence.

*(The phrase "Each of us had a first sentence..."
fans out through the CHORUS.
Conductor cues MATTHEW when to begin the next phrase.)*

MATTHEW: Each of us had a first sentence, and most of us found the strength to say it out loud to someone who deserved to hear it.

ROBERT: The second sentence of the truth is always easier than the first, and the third sentence is even easier than that.

MATTHEW: Suddenly you're speaking the truths in paragraphs, in pages.

(CHORUS slowly dies out. Conductor cues ROBERT to move on.)

ROBERT: Still, the only sentence that matters to Craig in this moment, he is unable to say.

MATTHEW: *I'M GAY, MOM. I'M GAY.* Did he say it out loud or just in his head?

ROBERT: Craig and Harry shift a little and Craig sees her eyes as she sees what's written on the paper, begins to understand what's happening in front of her.

MATTHEW: He's not sorry for being gay, but he is endlessly sorry that this is how she's found out. In hindsight he could've done things a bit differently.

ROBERT: Not being able to explain things makes Craig feels like a bystander to one of the most important moments of his life.

MATTHEW: The paper falls to the ground. His tears run down his cheeks, into their mouths.

ROBERT: We understand what it's like to be bystanders at the moments that matter most. To watch helplessly.

MATTHEW: Of all the people though, we needed our mothers to love us, our fathers to sit with us in white hospital rooms telling us "It's a lot to process".

ROBERT: We needed them on our side. Sometimes they were. More often than not, they weren't.

13. Song for Some of Our Parents

CHORUS

**Some of our parents,
Were always on our side.
They were there to help
Every time we cried.**

**Some of our parents,
When they say loved us they lied.**

**They banished us
Instead of helping us survive.**

**Some of our parents
Shouted Scripture to our face.
We had to leave
Because home didn't feel safe.**

**Some of our parents,
When they found out we were ill,
They came rushing backseat
And endless tears were spilled.**

**Some of our parents
Only found us in that final fight.
It should've taken much less than that
To help them see the light.**

**Some of our parents,
The ones who didn't leave us for dead,
They started as dragons
But became dragon slayers instead.**

14. Chorus of the Body

ROBERT: Avery should be floating from his day with Ryan, but a look in the mirror drags him down. He's worked so hard to change his body, to make it the right body, but he can't come close to loving it. No matter how strong Avery gets, there will always be this subterranean fear, this nagging shame. I want to whisper to him that the only way to free yourself from shame is to realize how completely arbitrary it is. There is power in saying, *I am not wrong. Society is wrong.* Because there is no reason that we should ever be ashamed of our bodies or ashamed of our love. He thinks it's because he was born in the wrong body, but I want to whisper in his ears that many of us were born in the right bodies and *still* felt foreign inside them, felt betrayed.

CHORUS

We completely misunderstood our bodies.

MATTHEW: It wasn't all hopeless was it?

ROBERT: Of course not, and yet we punish our bodies, berate them, hold them to an ideal that's deeply unfair. We needed to be beautiful by all the standards. When we were healthy, we were ignorant. We could never be content in our own skin.

MATTHEW: Avery feels all that and more.

CHORUS

We want to tell Avery, *breathe. Feel yourself breathe.* That is as much a part of your body as anything else.

Avery, you are a marvel.

(Italicized text in previous passages is whispered by half of the CHORUS. The other half simultaneously sings it.)

MATTHEW: And he is. He may never believe it, but he is.

15. Fourteen minutes

ROBERT: For fourteen minutes, Craig's mother watches her son kiss a boy. Their eyes meet and they both start crying again, but it doesn't seem as desperate as before, as devastating. He needs her to say something.

GLORIA: "I need to get back home, your father and your brothers will be home soon, and I should be there."

ROBERT: It's clear from his eyes that Craig is listening, even though he's kissing Harry at the same time.

GLORIA: "I hope you realize that I am going to have to tell them what you are doing. If they find out from anyone else, it will be...worse."

ROBERT: He wants to say something. Anything. But Harry holds on tighter. He can hear everything.

GLORIA: "I love you, Craig. I am also very angry with you. To find out this way...it's not what I would have wanted."

ROBERT: It's only after she is gone, only after he pictures her alone, walking, that his

vision draws back closer. For the first time since she arrived, he realizes how thick the crowd has become.

CHORUS

There are all these moments you don't think you'll survive. And then you survive.

ROBERT: The sun goes down and the crowd diminishes, the night air cooling the sweat, bringing a small measure of relief.

16. Harry and Craig Kiss into the Night

CHORUS

The world is quieter now.

MATTHEW: There are very few lights on at four in the morning. There are one or two night readers, one or two night wanderers, one or two night workers to be found. But most everyone else is asleep.

CHORUS

We are the ones who are awake.

ROBERT: Except on the front lawn of the local high school. There, two boys remain kissing. Muscles sore, mouths tired, eyelids weighty, Harry and Craig hold on to each other.

CHORUS

We know what it's like to need to hold on. We hold on to you. We hold on to life.

(The music stops. The lights go down.)

ROBERT: While the world sleeps, Avery sends a text.

MATTHEW: "Can we talk tomorrow?"

ROBERT: Ryan isn't sleeping either.

MATTHEW: "Any time."

17. Chorus for a sleeping boy

MATTHEW: At two in the morning, Cooper wakes up to the hum of gas station lights. His body is sore from trying to fit in. The seat belt has been digging in to his back, and for the first time in what feels like a lifetime, Cooper feels angry.

ROBERT: I don't think Cooper believes tomorrow will be better. Or any tomorrow. Not really.

MATTHEW: He is angry at his father, angry at his mother, but mostly he's come to feel that all this was inevitable, that he was born a boy who must sleep in his car.

ROBERT: We know what he feels.

MATTHEW: He despises himself. Despises what life has turned him into.

ROBERT: We know that anger. But he's too tired to do anything about it. Too tired to figure out a better place to be. Too tired to run away somewhere. So he stays in that back seat, contorting himself but never finding comfort.

MATTHEW: We felt tired too. Unable to sleep. Unable to live. Unable to leave.

ROBERT: Not in any way that really mattered. We would wake in the middle of the night. Sometimes there were tubes down our throats. Sometimes we were attached to machines that seemed more alive than we were. And there we were, trapped in those endless, unforgiving hours.

CHORUS

Unable to sleep. Unable to live. Unable to leave.

(The music stops briefly.)

SUNDAY

(Lights up.)

18. Narration 4

ROBERT: It's Sunday morning now, 18 hours in, and Craig and Harry are exhausted; to a degree we understand well.

MATTHEW: Hey, check it out. The camera crews are getting here.

ROBERT: I told you. It's gone viral.

MATTHEWS: They want to ask questions, want to get close. Harry and Craig had been thinking of themselves as a cause, but now they feel reduced to a curiosity. And they can't speak for themselves.

MATTHEW: A hard pounding on his windshield wakes Cooper up—someone telling him he needed to clear out of the gas station. His mind is slowly working up to something. He should be thinking about clothes, about a shower. He should be realizing that his parents are probably going to church this morning, giving him an opportunity to sneak in and get more things. He should be figuring out a next step. He should care.

ROBERT: He doesn't. His parents aren't going to change. The world isn't going to change. He isn't going to change. There's no real fight in him. So why try changing what's inevitable?

MATTHEW: There's always a choice though, isn't there?

ROBERT: Sometimes it's easier to just give in.

19. Song for Some of Us

CHORUS

**Some of us, we didn't stop the fight.
Some of us thought to give up was to give in.
Some of us, we wore it like a birthright.
Sainthood, from suffering, with endless strength from within.**

**Live went on, in pain.
Inhumane, this way to leave.
Small reprieves; your hand in mine.
Intertwined, a life and a death.**

**Some of us, we couldn't help but yield.
Pain was reality, and struggle wasn't reason to stay.
Some of us had no strength left to wield.
Encased in a body, vitality draining away.**

**Death is hard, and painfully slow.
We let go, with nothing left to give.
The will to live, it lost us along the way.
Then the day when our bodies finally let us depart.**

**Some of us, they stayed behind.
They think of us most every day.
They watch over you with us in mind.
They survived to show you the way.**

20. Twenty-four hours

MATTHEW: The crowd has started to count down the minutes until Craig and Harry hit the twenty-four-hour mark.

ROBERT: I wish we could tell you that everyone is part of the countdown. But there are jeers now—people who have come to protest, who've come to yell. Some hold hastily scrawled posters.

MATTHEW: Some have brought their children.

ROBERT: The ring around the boys holds on.

MATTHEW: I'm glad they have that. Not all of us did.

ROBERT: Harry is struggling, though. No matter how he shifts and kicks, he can't get them to feel normal. The ache is becoming unbearable, like someone is twisting each and every vein and each and every muscle. He tries to think of other things, but the pain is the loudest broadcast.

CHORUS

Twenty...nineteen...eighteen...

ROBERT: He's brought back by the countdown. He feels Craig smile under his lips.

Seventeen...sixteen...fifteen...

ROBERT: The noon day sun is bearing down. People are pressing in to see. It's getting hotter and hotter.

Fourteen-thirteen-twelve...eleven...

ROBERT: It's getting hotter and hotter. Harry tries to focus.

Ten...nine...eight...seven...six...

MATTHEW: One of the news stations blinds them with their lights, wants to capture the moment.

Five...four...three...two...

ROBERT: It's so hot. The lights are so bright.

One...

MATTHEW: An enormous wave of cheering.

ROBERT: They have made it to twenty-four hours. They have made it for a day.

MATTHEW: And amid the wild press of celebration, Harry starts to pass out.

(The music crescendos then abruptly ceases. Lights out.)

21. Narration 5

(Music restarts after a brief pause. Lights slowly back up.)

ROBERT: Avery pulls into Ryan's driveway.

MATTHEW: "Hi," Ryan says.

ROBERT: "Hi."

MATTHEW: You wanted to talk?

ROBERT: It sounded so good in Avery's head on the way over.

MATTHEW: I don't know. You wanna go for a walk or something?

ROBERT: How about a canoe ride?

MATTHEW: (*SMILES*) You country boys and your canoes.

ROBERT: They drift in the water—not much, just a gradual pull.

MATTHEW: “So what’s up?” asks Ryan.

ROBERT: Avery doesn't know if he can tell *a* story without telling *the* story.

(*Pause.*)

MATTHEW: “Alright, tell you what I’ll go first. When I came out, my Mom cried. A lot. Most of my friends were fine, though. I mean, some were weird, mostly the guys, but the girls were cool. And that’s it, I guess. Not too rough compared to some.”

ROBERT: “Yeah, I wish it’d gone that easy for me.”

MATTHEW: “Hey just let the current take us. So, what happened?”

ROBERT: “You see, I was born a girl, but, you know, I’m not a girl.”

MATTHEW: “OK, I didn’t really expect that one.”

(*Pause.*)

MATTHEW: “But hey, it’s not like you were born a fish or anything, right?”

ROBERT: Avery’s tension breaks as suddenly as it came. Talking to Ryan is like talking to a friend he’s known for years.

ROBERT: “I, uh, yeah, my parents were pretty cool about it. They put me on hormones early, to sort of stop me from going through the wrong kind of puberty. Is this too much information? I’m sure you don’t want all the details. I don’t even know... I just...”

MATTHEW: “Hey, it’s cool. You can tell me anything.”

ROBERT: “Does that bother you?”

MATTHEW: “Hey, I like whatever it is that makes you the person you are.”

ROBERT: The conversation continues and we leave them to have it.

(beat)

MATTHEW: Harry crumples and Craig instinctively catches him.

ROBERT: The day’s heat is catching up to him, Craig hadn’t realized how much until Harry started to fall.

MATTHEW: Harry is momentarily confused by the loss of balance and his eyes flutter open. Craig holds him tighter until Harry gets his legs back. A fan, when it comes, brings some relief.

ROBERT: Someone suggests that Harry’s shirt be cut off. He nods and his mother does the honor.

MATTHEW: This really is getting to be a group affair.

ROBERT: No doubt.

(Small musical interlude.)

ROBERT: We’re watching and cheering the boys.

MATTHEW: But in all that sound we’re screaming at Cooper, who can’t hear us.

ROBERT: We’re watching him let go.

MATTHEW: He’s erased the contacts from his phone even after we begged him not too. There are no longer that many anyway.

ROBERT: We’re screaming at him to pay attention to the world around him but he can’t hear us. The walls of the closet he’s built around him are just too thick.

MATTHEW: We want him to take a census of the future. We want him to consider that love does make the world bearable.

ROBERT: We wish he could hear us from these hospital beds. Our wisdom came at a price, though.

22. Hymn from the closet

CHORUS

**If you put enough closets together, you have enough space for a room.
If you put enough rooms together, you have space for a house.
If you put enough houses together, you have space for a town,
Then a city,
Then a nation,
Then a world.**

23. Chorus for Strength

MATTHEW: We want to be strong for Cooper.

ROBERT: Just like Craig is for Harry.

MATTHEW: The afternoon is getting hot and tears are starting to mingle with sweat.

ROBERT: Harry's in so much pain that he's started to cry.

MATTHEW: His legs are seizing up.

ROBERT: Bladder feels like it's full of rocks,

MATTHEW: He's lost control of his eyes.

ROBERT: He's lost control of everything, except for his lips.

MATTHEW: All of the control he has left, he has to put there, in that moment.

ROBERT: His body is shouting *surrender*.

MATTHEW: Who are we talking about, exactly?

ROBERT: All of us... at some point or another. But some of us tried so hard to stay strong for one another.

MATTHEW: Because we know how far that strength can go. (*Back to the Kiss.*) Craig would never grasp at it for himself, not in this way. But for Harry, he will.

CHORUS

It's one of the secrets of strength: We're so much more likely to find it in the service of others than we are to find it in service to ourselves. We have no idea why this is.

The spirit of that strength—it carries through. It is there for the taking.

(Music restarts.)

24. Narration 6

ROBERT: (*Hands MATTHEW a penny*) Here, for Ryan and Avery, a penny in the river for good luck.

MATTHEW: No. Don't.

ROBERT: Why not?

MATTHEW: Ryan has thrown pennies in that river his whole life. Not a single wish has ever come true.

ROBERT: What does he wish for?

MATTHEW: He never says it out loud, he doesn't need to, but nothing ever seems to change for him.

ROBERT: Maybe he's not doing it right. Let me show him.

MATTHEW: See, nothing happened.

ROBERT: Really? It seems like the pink-haired boy and the blue-haired boy in a canoe are falling in love. Seems like someone's wish came true.

MATTHEW: You really are sentimental aren't you?

ROBERT: Not enough wishes come true. I want them to have this one.

25. Cooper leaves town

ROBERT: There he goes. Cooper approaches a big bridge that spans a big river with a big city on the other side.

MATTHEW: I can't help but feel a little excitement. This journey into the city always felt like the opening credits of our life. Those of us born in the city anyway.

ROBERT: Maybe this gets to be the opening credits to Cooper's life, an escape from the doldrums. Even as we were dying, we'd remember that first arrival, or we would remember how we'd pictured how the arrival would be.

MATTHEW: There's a parade of headlights. All those cars. But Cooper's car breaks free. He pulls out of the toll lane, narrows onto the local roads. He parks under the bridge and he steps out of the car. The sign says NO PARKING AT ANY TIME.

ROBERT: Wait. Something's different.

CHORUS

Up until this moment, there was room to believe he was heading in another direction.

(Ecstatic repetitions of "Stop!" explodes from the CHORUS. It's chaos. Panic.)

ROBERT: What can we do?

MATTHEW: We yell at him, yell after him.

ROBERT: No, he can't hear us. Walks right through us.

MATTHEW: Pound on his car, raise an alarm, but we can't do anything.

ROBERT: He's walking to the center of the bridge. He's not in a rush, is he? He watches the dark water undulating far below. His tears will fall into the river too.

(The CHORUS's music moves up in tessitura.)

MATTHEW: Just howl at him. Beg with him. Plead with him. Yell at him. Explain to him. Our lives were short, and we never would have wanted them to be shorter. Sometimes perspective comes far too late. You are not worthless. Your life is not disposable.

ROBERT: There's no point.

MATTHEW: No, Cooper. You think nothing else will ever come close to being as strong as that pain.

ROBERT: The edge is right there. Our ends are never this precise.

MATTHEW: Listen to us, please. We shit blood and had our skin lacerated and broken by lesions. We had fungus grow in our throats, under our fingernails. We lost the ability to see, to speak, to feel ourselves. We coughed up pieces of ourselves and felt our blood turn to magma. We lost the use of our muscles and our bodies were reduced to collections of skin-encased bones. We were unrecognizable. Our lovers had to watch us die. Our friends had to watch as the nurse changed our catheters, had to try to put aside that image as they laid us in caskets, into the ground. Everything that was taken from us is right there in front of you. Don't steal it from yourself.

ROBERT: Why do we have to watch this? The 12-year-old who puts a gun to his head and pulls the trigger, the 14-year-old who hangs herself in the garage and is found by her grandmother two hours later. The 19-year-old who swallowed a handful of pills and choked to death on his own vomit. Even the 8-year old and the plastic bag.

MATTHEW: Why must we die over and over again?

ROBERT: Why hasn't the world solved this by now? Here we are, thousands of us, shouting at him to stop, but we know that no matter how tight a net we make, he will still find a way to fall through.

MATTHEW: Why do we have to watch Cooper lift himself up onto the railing?

ROBERT: I guess a bridge is just another way.

(Music in the CHORUS halts.)

MATTHEW: We die over and over again.

26. Over and over again

CHORUS

Over and over again.

27. Narration 7

ROBERT: Before he can know what's happening, before we can know what's happening, he's being brought to the ground, he's being tackled to the ground. A body is holding him down and he can't breathe.

MATTHEW: Do you think he feels a little relieved at least?

ROBERT: No, he doesn't. He feels anger, humiliation at being stopped, self-loathing. And his tears turn to screams as the emotions come flooding out, throwing all that sadness into the void. He feels for the first time and it's too much. The dull ache now replaced by a sharp pain.

MATTHEW: More and more voices surround Cooper and a man in a uniform walks over.

ROBERT: This is turning into a group affair too.

MATTHEW: "You may not believe it, kid, but today is your lucky day."

28. Song for That Kid Out There

CHORUS

**I'm calling out
To those of us
Who've been spat upon
For all of our lives**

**I'm calling out
To those of you
Who maybe didn't mean to
But you messed it up for me and for them**

**I'm handing out
An olive branch
To take on the stench
Of the hurt and the wreckage you left**

**I'm calling out
To those of us
Who've been left behind
Oh, but never mind, it'll all just pass**

**To that kid out there
On the walk home where
It's the best part of his day**

**But it's okay
It'll all go away**

**I'm calling out
To those of your
Who always felt obliged to
Fuck it up for them and for me**

**This is my confession
A solemn procession
On a journey that will hopefully end**

**So I can mend
And you can pretend
That you've no idea what this is all about
On the hems of society
Impropriety
It happens just about every minute of the day**

(Lights down.)

29. Countdown

*(Lights up. The air has been
cleared.)*

ROBERT: We're reaching the end.

MATTHEW: Craig and Harry reach their final hour.

ROBERT: They're too close to fail now even though their bodies are sore, minds overwhelmed, and the air smells like the sweat of a crowd.

MATTHEW: Doesn't look like Harry's doing too well.

ROBERT: He's tried shaking his legs, moving his legs. But this is it. He can't anymore. He can't imagine disappointing all these people, can't imagine disappointing his parents and, most of all, Craig. But he can't imagine fifty-six more minutes of this. He's trying to think of a way to communicate this to Craig. He's trying to think of a way to ask forgiveness before he lets go.

MATTHEW: God, listen to that crowd.

ROBERT: Harry wraps his arms around Craig, pulls him closer, pulls him tight. Craig does the same thing. First and embrace. Then squeezing. Harder and harder. With all the energy they have left.

MATTHEW: The crowd in the background cheers louder.

ROBERT: This is it. This is now the way things are. The story is going to spread, and they hope that maybe it'll make people a little less scared of two boys kissing than they were before.

MATTHEW: But they're doing it for themselves too. No for glory or popularity, or even for the admiration. They are doing it because moments like these are rare, when the aliveness of life is crystalline and undeniable.

ROBERT: It's the ever-saving grace.

CHORUS

Forty-two. Thirty-four. Twenty-six!

ROBERT: Just hold on!

MATTHEW: I don't think they're gonna make it.

CHORUS

Twenty-two! Nineteen! Eighteen!

ROBERT: Are you kidding? As tight as Craig is holding him, Harry isn't going anywhere.

CHORUS

Seventeen! Sixteen! Fifteen!

ROBERT: Merrily, merrily, a blue-haired boy and a pink-haired boy row on a quiet river, serenaded by their own conversations. This is now their place. They will return here many times.

MATTHEW: Seriously?

ROBERT: What...

CHORUS

Thirteen! Twelve! Eleven!

MATTHEW: Hey, look at the boys in the back.

ROBERT: The boys holding hands?

MATTHEW: Somehow they know something monumental is happening, something that could change things.

ROBERT: It might not, but that feeling, that spirit will live on in everyone here.

CHORUS

Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six!

ROBERT: In the coming months over a million people will log online and watch the videos of Harry and Craig breaking the world record.

CHORUS

Five! Four! Three! Two!

MATTHEW: We are alive.

CHORUS

One.

(The music crescendos before halting as the lights go out.)

EPILOGUES

30. Chorus for when the time comes

*(Lights up. The music
restarts.)*

CHORUS

We watch you, but we can't intervene. We have already done our part. Just as you are doing your part, whether you know it or not, whether you mean it or not, whether you want to or not.

ROBERT: There will come a time when you will have the same unalienable rights as your straightest friend. There will come a time when you look at someone younger than you and feel that they will know more than you ever did. There will come a time when you will worry about being forgotten. There will come a time when the gospel will be rewritten.

MATTHEW: If you play your cards right, the next generation will have so much more than you did.

ROBERT: Choose your actions wisely.

*(ROBERT and MATTHEW begin to blend into
the CHORUS but then a thought occurs and they
turn around and look straight into the audience.)*

ROBERT: And if you feel the world attack.

MATTHEW: Let our love bring you back.

(They blend into the CHORUS.)

31. Chorus for Two Boys Kissing

CHORUS

Every time two boys kiss, it opens up the world a little more. Your world. The world we left. The world we left for you. This is the power of a kiss. It does not have the power to kill you. But it has the power to bring you to life.

32. In between

CHORUS

**There is the sudden.
There is the eventual.
And in between, there is the living.**

**We do not start as dust.
We do not end as dust.
We make more than dust.
That's all we ask of you.
Make more than dust.**

33. Make more than dust

**Make more than dust
Learn who to trust
Love the people who treat you
 with respect**

**Make more than dust
Leave who you must
There is a family waiting for you,
 I swear**

**Make more than dust
You will adjust
You are better and braver
 and stronger than you know**

**All is good
All is grace
All is light
Don't hide your face**

**Rise up, girls
Rise up, boys
Make some love
And make some noise**

**Make more than dust
Always be just
Walk another's footsteps,
even in heels**

**Make more than dust
Learn what to distrust
The devils of life
come in many pleasing forms**

**Make more than dust
Never be rushed
Life is wild and messy and
sometimes it takes patience**

**There will be joy
There will be tears
There will be smiles
Through all your years**

**There will be hate
There will be fear
There is your truth
And it never disappears**

**Make more than dust
Just like we discussed
You are amazing, and worthy,
and endlessly loved**

**Make more than dust
To you we entrust
Our past, your present,
and the future of all of us**

THE END

APPENDIX B – Score

*Two Boys Kissing: An Oratorio
for Men's Voices and Instruments*

SCORE

**THE FULL SCORE WILL BE ADDED IN WHEN
THE ADJUSTMENTS BY THE COMMITTEE
HAVE BEEN MADE.**

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Vita

Joshua Shank's works have been widely performed by educational and professional ensembles alike. His music has been called “jubilant...ethereal” (*Santa Barbara News-Press*) and “evocative and atmospheric” (*Gramophone*). The *Boston Classical Review* called his *Magnificat for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* “powerful” and “emotionally charged.”

He has been commissioned by some of the most exciting choral ensembles in the United States as well as abroad and has collaborated with organizations such as Conspirare, the Young New Yorkers' Chorus, the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, the American Choral Directors Association, The Esoterics, the Minnesota All-State Choir, and the Lorelei Ensemble. From 2004 to 2014 he served as Composer-In-Residence for the Minneapolis-based professional choir, The Singers: Minnesota Choral Artists, and alongside Artistic Director Matthew Culloton and fellow composers-in-residence Abbie Betinis and Jocelyn Hagen, collaborated annually to expand and invigorate the repertoire for professional-caliber ensembles through innovative programming as well as new works written specifically for the ensemble.

Joshua received his undergraduate degree in Vocal Music Education from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa where he studied conducting with Weston Noble and composition with John Morrison and Neil Flory. In 2002, he became the youngest composer ever awarded the Raymond W. Brock Composition Award by the American

Choral Directors Association. The winning piece, *Musica animam tangens*, was premiered at the 2003 ACDA National Convention in Avery Fisher Hall at the Lincoln Center and has since been performed and recorded from Los Angeles to South Africa.

His music was recently featured in a documentary about the extensive choral tradition in the Upper Midwest, *Never Stop Singing*, and his best-selling choral work, *The Boy Who Picked Up His Feet to Fly*, was featured in the book *Choral Charisma* by Tom Carter. His published works for choir, band, and solo voice have sold over 100,000 copies worldwide and are available through Santa Barbara Music Publishing, G. Schirmer, Alliance, Hal Leonard, and Daehn Publications. He is also an Artistic Founding Partner for Graphite Publishing's online distributing arm, Graphite Marketplace.

In recent years, Joshua has enjoyed writing program notes for various ensembles and composers around the US. He has been commissioned to write for The Singers for their choral celebration of the state of Minnesota's sesquicentennial as well as their premiere of Jocelyn Hagen's oratorio, *amass*. The Austin-based professional choir, Conspirare, commissioned Joshua to write extensive notes for their album of Samuel Barber's choral music on the Harmonia Mundi label, *Samuel Barber: An American Romantic*, as well as their program of the music of Stephen Paulus.

A native of Minnesota, he currently lives in the Brentwood neighborhood of Austin, Texas with his husband, Robert, and a cat named Obergefell. He is an avid cyclist, enjoys vegetarian cooking, and a good cup of tea.