

We Walk to the Fence:

Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard*

Introduction

On October 6, 1998, Reggie Fluty, a police officer responding to a tip, came across a limp figure tied to a fence in a field on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming. The college student who phoned in the tip had initially assumed that it was a felled scarecrow but, sadly, it was not. It was the body of Matthew Shepard, a gay 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming. He had been kidnapped by two men he had met at a local bar that night who subsequently drove him to the field, robbed him, tied him to a split-rail fence, beat him savagely, and left him for dead. He died of his injuries six days later. The media coverage of his death and the trial of his murderers ignited a national debate about hate crimes and, specifically, how LGBTQ+ people were (and often still are) treated in the United States.

The work you're about to hear, American composer Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard*, is a version of this story, and it masterfully communicates Matthew Shepard's life, death, and legacy. So, beyond the information about the events above, those details won't be discussed here because the work does that already; its proverbial heart right there on its sleeve. However, it's impossible to tell the story of this piece without talking about the historical genre its modern story has been overlaid on: the Passion. It's how the piece achieves its purpose.

The history

The narrative of a Passion traditionally follows the arrest, torture, and death of Jesus Christ as it's told in the New Testament. The popularity of musical events centered on the telling of this story stems from the fact that it allows the faithful to witness the event of the Crucifixion, experience some sort of aesthetic or personal catharsis, and leave somehow changed. Whether it's Johann Sebastian Bach's genre-defining *St. Matthew Passion* of 1727 or Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1970 musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, these performances present the recreation of an ancient event in the audience members' physical space in order to remind them of the most important aspect of the Christian religion: God sacrificed His only begotten son in order to absolve the human race of their past, present, and future sins. Because of the narrative of the story, the audience member is implicitly reminded that this sacrifice was made due to the sins of humanity as a whole—and therefore *their own* moral failings—so, in a sense, they have had some small part in the horrific violence visited on the character of Jesus.

Although the genre changes incrementally with the fashions of its time, a Passion contained a few central elements. There was a Suffering Figure (Jesus) surrounded and acted on by secondary characters who participate in the narrative (Peter, Judas, Pontius Pilate, etc.). Then, because Passions are almost never performed with theatrical trappings such as costumes, lighting, sets, or *movement of any kind*, a narrator character was invented—often called the Evangelist—who exists outside the narrative and simply describes the action of the story to the audience.

The Passion remained unchanged for centuries until 1966 when Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki wrote his *Passion of Our Lord According to St. Luke*. While the traditional Christ narrative was still intact, Penderecki took pains to point out that he reached for the archetype of the Passion, “in order to express not only the sufferings and death of Christ, but also the cruelty of our own century, the martyrdom of Auschwitz.”

This explicit association of Christ with subject matter outside the Bible spurred Penderecki's colleagues to view the Passion genre as more than just a vehicle for Christian evangelizing but, rather, as a vessel to hold other narratives. So, while Jesus had been the Suffering Figure in hundreds of works in the genre spanning over six centuries, composers after Penderecki began writing Passions focusing on the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., Hans Christian Andersen's “Little Match Girl,” Buddha, the planet earth itself as it struggles with the ravages of man-made climate change, and a 21-year-old man brutally murdered because of his sexuality.

The beauty of *Considering Matthew Shepard*—and the reason it has resonated with so many audiences since its 2015 premiere—is the sensitive way the composer leads his listeners to the fence in the American West where the crime took place, pleads with them to “see what was done to this child,” and then look inward—*together*—as they walk away. Johnson does this through his mastery of musical collage and, over the course of the work’s nearly two-hour run time, genres and musical tropes form a proverbial quilt which warms us as we move through the painful story. We hear music reminiscent of Gregorian chant, organ preludes, gospel music, spoken word poetry, spirituals, country and western music, and even the distinctive tintinnabuli style of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt; the composer also directly quotes the music of Bach and twentieth-century English composer Benjamin Britten. All of these influences combine and are laid over a Passion narrative with the Suffering Figure of Matthew Shepard as its focus.

The aftermath

Like the story of many marginalized peoples, the history of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States is marred with martyrs and shared sadnesses, and Matthew Shepard’s murder in 1998—as well as the public’s reaction to it—remains a powerful cultural breach. However, while that event was horrific and traumatizing for that community, it’s also important to note that gay stories aren’t always about sorrow. Despite the historical subjugation and the communal pain they’ve endured over the years, LGBTQ+ folks can live joyful lives—this writer included—with spouses, families, workplaces, and communities that love and support them. So, in this way, another one of the tragedies inherent in *Considering Matthew Shepard* is, among many other things, about a profoundly stolen opportunity.

That being said, progress has been made since 1998. In 2009, President Obama signed a stronger hate crime law named for both Matthew Shepard and a Black man named James Byrd Jr. who was chained to a truck and dragged to death in Jasper, Texas the same year as Matt’s murder. The “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy which stole the dignity of LGBTQ+ people serving in the U.S. military was lifted in 2011, and the Supreme Court legalized nationwide marriage equality with their landmark decision in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case in 2015. That success was further enshrined in a federal law passed with bipartisan efforts in Congress before it was signed by President Biden in December 2022. All of these things were made possible as broader acceptance grew in the years after Matt’s death; and in some cases because of it. In 1998, many Americans didn’t know—or at least they *thought* they didn’t know—someone like him.

After their son’s killers were found guilty, Dennis and Judy Shepard fiercely advocated that the two men responsible not receive the death penalty and, through a deal they brokered themselves, Matt’s murderers were instead each given two life sentences. The Shepard family went on to create a foundation in their son’s name which runs education, outreach, and advocacy programs on anti-hate and the importance of human dignity (especially on issues relating to queer youth). In 2018, they donated Matt’s belongings to the Smithsonian. According to Judy, “For 20 years, we have tried to share the meaning of our son’s life, as well as his dreams for a kinder, more accepting and loving world. While we always have our family memories, it is deeply comforting to know the Smithsonian will preserve his story and meaning for future generations.”

On October 26, 2018—nearly 20 years to the day he passed away—Matt’s ashes were interred in the crypt at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.; the Shepard family had held onto his remains due to concerns that any gravesite might be vandalized. Their son now rests alongside, among others, former U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, senators, former Secretaries of State and the Treasury, and the legendary disability rights activist, Helen Keller, and her teacher, Anne Sullivan. His burial is marked with a plaque that reads simply:

Matt, rest gently in this place. You are home safe now. Peace be with you and all who visit here.

During the ceremony, composer Craig Hella Johnson conducted excerpts of his piece, *Considering Matthew Shepard*, for the nearly 4,000 people in attendance.

The broader implications

Matt's death serves as a significant event to more than just the people involved in his story and, in *Considering Matthew Shepard*, the libretto touches upon the idea that his martyrdom represents something larger and more universal. Like all Passions, the entire point is to witness the suffering and be reminded that someone—*anyone*—has to make sure something like this never happens again.

The work, however, also poses several questions. Could we have a bit of Matt's killers in us? In our weakest moments, are we in some small part like them? Do we define someone by the worst thing they've ever done? What happens when we actively look away from people who are different from us? The episode in the piece in which a virulently homophobic Christian pastor shows up to protest Matt's funeral also asks us to examine what we do when we witness evil. Do we work to stop it? Or do we simply attempt to avoid acknowledging it because it's someone else's problem?

More broadly, what do we do when we witness more quotidian tragedies like large-scale homelessness or the use of the state to oppress and intimidate marginalized people? If we witness something inhumane or unjust and don't actively work to prevent it from happening again, does that make us complicit in some way? One of the dangers of the Passion genre is that, having had the moving experience at the performance, a listener may leave the space potentially feeling they've sufficiently "done the work" and subsequently return to their regular life in which they casually read about legislation targeting transgender citizens or the instituting of book bans without giving it a second thought or fail to speak up when they hear a homophobic or racial slur hurled at someone.

One question the work *doesn't* ask centers around why it was Matthew Shepard's murder that caught the 1998 version of the American public's attention in a way that had previously escaped them. "He could have been anybody's son" was a phrase often used to describe him after the story of his death became prominent in the national media, but that suggests something about why it was *his* murder that finally got Americans to pay attention to the horrible violence routinely visited upon queer people in our society. What about *him* was more palatable than the scores of victims of similar crimes the public hadn't yet identified with? The brutality of his murder—especially the image of the scarecrow and its similarity to a crucified body—was part of it, as well as how his parents refused to grieve privately; with the nation's attention briefly trained on them they insisted through the depth of their grief that their loss was *our* loss. But the answer to why the American public was finally able to muster outrage over the beating and death of a gay man is simultaneously unsurprising and deeply discomfiting. To put it plainly—and in no way to minimize the suffering Matt's family and friends endured—he was white and middle class. It feels indelicate to even say it that plainly.

Too frequently human nature leads us to categorize people as "other" and thereby distance ourselves from their pain and our culpability inherent in the willful ignorance of it. In a world where we feel safe because homophobic violence could only happen to others, Matthew Shepard's murder blurred the distinction between "us" and "them." It was difficult to think of him as "them" because he looked the same as the Americans whose culture dominated the discourse in the country; a general public who, by and large, had never been directly affected by violence against marginalized people.

But revelations like this—the ones about ourselves that are often painful to hear—are the central point of a Passion. These works make us witness the pain and suffering of someone else knowing full well it could have been prevented if someone had done something different; and it's implied that that "someone" may have been you. This is one of the reasons the genre has flourished for over 600 years: because it insists that we do better.

To borrow some phrases that open *Considering Matthew Shepard*, it's one of the reasons we continue to tell these stories. So we remember where and whom we came from; who we are. It's because sometimes there's a story that's painful to remember; one that breaks the heart of us all. And still we must tell that story, so we can listen...and confess what we've forgotten. Then maybe this story of a gay college student—just a child, really—can echo like a thunderclap across something larger than it would have ever during his short time on Earth. Grief turned into honorable action; pain to purpose; death into life.

Rest in power, Matt.