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Shared Dramatic Pacing in Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*

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A Doctor of Musical Arts Document submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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School of Music

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Abstract

Jake Heggie collaborated with Terrence McNally and Gene Sheer to infuse 21st-century topics into the chamber opera *Three Decembers*. This document traces the development of the Madeline Mitchell motif, followed by illuminating the concept of shared dramatic pacing through the use of score identifiers. Fueled by research into Heggie's compositional process, via personal interviews with the composer, it defines an effective method for character development, as well as provides suggestions for the successful preparation of a Jake Heggie opera. For this document, the concept of *shared dramatic pacing* refers to the time on stage during a performance that is defined by collective decisions. Shared dramatic pacing emerges through the rhythm of the text, the length of pauses, the tempi, the duration of phrases, and the fermatas. The responsibility of dramatic pacing in an opera like *Three Decembers* has a rather long list of participants: the composer, the playwright, the librettist, the performers (who are often influenced by teachers and coaches), the stage director, the music director/coach, the conductor, the orchestral players, and the technical crew. Section I focuses on the backgrounds of the artistic team, highlighting how they crossed paths. Section II focuses on Heggie's musical style and motifs. Section III focuses on the successful preparation of a Jake Heggie opera.

Introduction

This document will focus on Jake Heggie's opera *Three Decembers*, and show how Heggie collaborated with Terrence McNally and Gene Sheer to infuse 21st-century topics into the work. It will trace the development of the Madeline Mitchell motif, followed by illuminating the concept of shared dramatic pacing through the use of score identifiers. Fueled by research into Heggie's compositional process, it will define an effective method for character development, as well as provide suggestions for the successful preparation of a Jake Heggie opera.

To achieve a reliable interpretation of Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers* one should: first, understand the creative team's personal connection with portions of the storyline and how they came together to produce an opera about 21st-century topics; second, delve into Heggie's musical style by tracing motifs and investigating shared dramatic pacing; third, develop a rehearsal environment and performance techniques that align with Heggie's ideals to enhance the performance preparation of his operas.

For this document, the concept of *shared dramatic pacing* will refer to the time on stage during a performance that is defined by collective decisions. Shared dramatic pacing emerges through the rhythm of the text, the length of pauses, the tempi, the duration of phrases, and the fermatas. In sung theatre and opera, dramatic pacing has more active participants than most art forms. For instance, pacing in a play is shared between the playwright, the director, the actor, and the technical crew. The responsibility for dramatic pacing in an opera like *Three Decembers* has a rather long list of participants: the composer, the playwright, the librettist, the performers (who are often

influenced by teachers and coaches), the stage director, the music director/coach, the conductor, the orchestral players, and the technical crew.

Section I will focus on the artistic team that created the chamber opera *Three Decembers*: composer Jake Heggie, playwright Terrence McNally, and librettist Gene Sheer. To give perspective on the genesis of *Three Decembers*, we will commence with a look into the backgrounds of the creative team, highlighting how they crossed paths.

I. *Three Decembers* Creative Team: Collaboration on 21st Century Topics

We begin with the genesis of the Heggie/McNally partnership. The partners initially met through Lotfi Mansouri, who was the General Manager of the San Francisco Opera (SFO) at the time. While Heggie was working in the company's Public Relations department, Mansouri became acquainted with his skill as a composer and offered Heggie a position as the SFO's first composer-in-residence. Next, Mansouri asked Heggie if he would be interested in meeting Terrence McNally to discuss a possible collaboration on a new opera. That introduction soon turned into the genesis of the *Dead Man Walking* project. Commissioned by the SFO with a premiere in 2000, *Dead Man Walking* addresses the topic of capital punishment from all sides of the debate. It poses audience inquiry concerning the validity of the punishment without questioning the convict's guilt or excusing the crime committed. Playwright Terrence McNally proposed the idea during a discussion of their possible collaboration on a new opera. During an interview with the author, Heggie described his initial partnership with McNally:

And he was, you know, he believed in me before there was almost anything to believe in. At the San Francisco Opera, the people there had gotten to know me as a songwriter. And so, they asked me to write an opera that sent me to New York to meet Terrence McNally. And it took Terence a little while. But he said, yeah, I believe in serendipity, and I like your work, and I like the people that you like to work with. So, yeah, let's do a project together. That was huge, you know.¹

McNally's positive assessment of Heggie initiated a fruitful partnership that connected the world of contemporary opera with the thriving world of Broadway and theater in New York City. The resulting opera, *Dead Man Walking*, has since been produced on five

¹ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

continents, has been recorded live twice, and its creation was the subject of a PBS documentary which aired nationally in 2002: *And Then One Night: The Making of Dead Man Walking*. The Metropolitan Opera advertises their upcoming 2021 premiere of *Dead Man Walking* as follows:

American composer Jake Heggie's 21st-century masterpiece, the most widely performed new opera of the last 20 years, has its highly anticipated Met premiere, in Ivo van Hove's second new staging of the season. Based on Sister Helen Prejean's memoir about her fight for the soul of a condemned murderer, *Dead Man Walking* matches the high drama of its subject with Heggie's beautiful and poignant music and a brilliant libretto by Tony and Emmy Award-winner Terrence McNally.²

Heggie and McNally's partnership extended to working together on new operas and art songs. Their collaborations included *At the Statue of Venus* (2005), *Final Monologue from Master Class* (2007), *Three Decembers* (2008), *Talise Trevigne: At the Statue of Venus*, and *Great Scott* (2015),³ and the initial discussions for setting *Moby Dick* (2010). (This began as a partnership with McNally, but was completed in collaboration with librettist Gene Sheer when McNally needed to withdraw from the project for health reasons.) When asked what it was like to work with McNally, Heggie responded:

His goal always from the beginning was to set up scenes and to give me language that would inspire music. And then, once the music took off, he said, that's the most important thing. Go with it. He said, if you need new words because these words don't fit, just let me know, or put in your own words for a while. Maybe we'll keep them, or maybe they're markers until we find something else. And he also loved trying things in the room. He wanted me there with him when he was writing the first and second act librettos of *Dead Man Walking*. He wanted me there with him, even though we really didn't talk about it much. You know, it was

² Metropolitan Opera, "Dead Man Walking Debuts at the Met," accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.metopera.org/season/2020-21-season/dead-man-walking>.

³ Jake Heggie, "Performances Between McNally and Heggie," accessed November 11, 2020, <https://jakeheggie.com/tag/terrence-mcnally/>.

at the end of the week, but he wanted me to be there because he got energy from talking about other things that we would bring together.⁴

This developing partnership also resulted in McNally writing a play that would later turn into *Three Decembers*, the opera on which this document is centered. In 2000, after the premiere of *Dead Man Walking*, McNally gave Heggie the script *Some Christmas Letters (and a Couple of Phone Calls Too)*. Heggie recalls:

I first read the script in 2001, but due to several detours it wasn't until 2007 that librettist Gene Scheer and I were finally able to get going. It was our first opera collaboration. After considering several titles for the opera, we settled on *Three Decembers*...It is a play about identity and family, discovering the truth of who we are and who our parents are.⁵

Three Decembers is a chamber opera which contemplates a range of 21st-century topics dealing with family dynamics. The first contemporary topic involves a son who identifies as LGBTQ grappling with both having a relationship with, as well as feeling accepted by his mother. The plot places the characters amid the AIDS epidemic in its infancy. From 1986-2006, we observe the evolution of disease perception in society and family. Additionally, the plot includes the mother hiding their father's suicide from the children when they were young, giving the alternate story that he had been involved in an accident. This had a significant impact on their family when the truth was revealed in their adult lives. Finally, the storyline revolves around a mother who is charismatic and successful, yet selfish, avoidant, and narrow-minded. Her attempts to have a relationship with her two adult children form a focus of the drama. The libretto of *Three Decembers*,

⁴ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

⁵ Jake Heggie, "A Note from Jake Heggie."

based on the original, unpublished play *'Some Christmas Letters (and a couple of phone calls, too)'* was written for a benefit concert entitled *A Joyous Family Christmas* to support Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS in 1999. When delving deeper into research on the opera, similarities between the play's storyline and Heggie's life came to light. Discussing personal connections to McNally's original play *Some Christmas Letters* as well as changes made to the libretto of *Three Decembers*, Heggie mentioned:

There's a lot of my family history in there, too. With the father's suicide, and the mother not sure how to deal with it. My mom was very honest with us always. She never hid anything. My sister really struggled afterward to try to know what to do. And, actually, in Terrence's original script, Charlie is a composer... That's because, Terrence and I had already begun working. So, Charlie lives in San Francisco, and he's a composer. So, I wonder who he was thinking of? (*laughter*) And Charlie had a partner whose name was Burt. But Curt, you know... my husband's name is Curt...so I think I had probably told him a little bit about my life history. The story resonated with me personally, too, but it's not about me. It's just that I can connect with these characters on this level.⁶

So, it appears that McNally wrote the script for his play in 1999, after having met and begun work with Heggie on *Dead Man Walking*, which premiered in 2000. Although the character of Charlie and the concept of the story are not based on Heggie's life directly, there are shared details such as Charlie being a composer living in San Francisco in the original play, in addition to using the name of Heggie's real-life husband, Curt. McNally gleaned these details from Heggie's life, and they influenced the shape of his piece. The suicide of the father in the opera was a change made when Sheer was reworking the libretto, which is significant in that Heggie's father committed suicide in 1979 when he

⁶ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

was eleven. In addition to *Three Decembers* connecting to personal details of Heggie's life, the inclusion of the perspective of a gay partnership living through the AIDS epidemic was crucial for both McNally and Heggie to communicate through their art. Here, Heggie addresses one of the reasons the opera needed to include a gay partnership in the 1980s where one of the men has AIDS:

Another reason I felt it was very important was when I wrote it, which was already two thousand eight... It was interesting. There were a lot of younger singers who were looking at the piece and learning it, who had no reference point for what the AIDS crisis was like and how that destroyed families, and how it put a wedge between people, and how much fear there was...I was in my 20s in the 80s, and saw a lot of friends die. I saw their families shun them, and disown them, and saw other families rally and come back together like they never had before. So, it was something that I felt needed to be told.⁷

In addition to Heggie's desire to communicate about these subjects, Terrence McNally, the late playwright, was known for writing that showed his deep understanding of human connection, his AIDS activism, and his openness to writing about LGBTQ characters long before that became broadly acceptable.

Born in 1939, McNally lived in Manhattan in his forties while the AIDS crisis erupted. Being an open and affirmative member of the gay community at that time, he witnessed partners, friends, and colleagues die one after another due to the devastating disease. His remarks at an AIDS walk in New York in 2014 provide insight into his views on the role of artists in response to their life experience, as well as a glance into the

⁷ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

passionate way he felt about the disease and the society which surrounded it then and now:

I'm always startled when I'm asked why I chose to write about AIDS. There was no choice. An artist responds to their world and tries to make sense of it, even the bad things. What else was I going to write about... the weather? It was raining AIDS and there was no umbrella large enough to shelter us. I am thankful for the men and women who took to the streets and made our voices heard. They made a difference. But I'm also grateful to the artists who tried to make sense of the terror and confusion. We also made a difference. I am bewildered, and more than a little angry, by the artists who did nothing but fiddle while they're own disgraced city burned. Why did I choose to write about AIDS? The question is always put in the past tense. I am still writing about AIDS...If you don't know why we're here this morning (*at the AIDS walk*), you're the reason I still write about AIDS.⁸

In addition to writing about the topic of AIDS, McNally also infused his work with individuals dealing with the trials and tribulations of living as a part of the gay community. In the forward to *Every Act of Life*, an expanded script from the award-winning documentary on McNally's life as a playwright, Matthew Lopez mentions that McNally hated the label "gay playwright," even though he spent his life experiencing and thinking about what it was to be a gay man in the age of AIDS. Lopez says that McNally resisted the label because a tragedy for the *gay community* was, in fact, a tragedy for *all of humankind*.⁹

McNally's collaboration with Heggie was influenced by who McNally was as a person, as well as how he developed those characteristics. In the documentary on McNally, he remarks on the influence of his high-school English teacher, Maureen

⁸ Terrence McNally, "Terrence McNally remarks at AIDS Walk New York" (speech), posted June 10, 2014, accessed August 18, 2019, <https://youtu.be/SadIhl7JsrU>.

⁹ Jeff Kaufman, *Every Act of Life: the illustrated and expanded script for the award-winning documentary about Tony-winning playwright Terrence McNally*, (United States: A Smith and Kraus Book), 11.

McElroy. While not accepted by his parents nor his town, McElroy seemed to have a significant impact on the man and the writer he was to become. McNally said, "She's the first person I met who got me, got my humor, got what I'm smart about, understood what I'm not smart about."¹⁰ It is the following letter from her that forecasts a hint of the collegial man McNally was to become:

Terry,
 This is a piece of work you should cherish. It is extraordinarily good for a high school student... It will also be with pride that I watch your progress next year and the next and the next. At present, your greatest weakness is organization of material. Keep always the freshness of your viewpoint, the honesty of your convictions. Your integrity is your armor. I am glad you are planning to write professionally. Writing is a highly competitive occupation; it can be heartbreaking. But you have already learned that if you must write, you simply must.
 Mrs. McElroy A+

The relationship with Mrs. McElroy is notable, in that McNally pursued both writing and championing people, which later influenced his partnership with Jake Heggie. McNally was remembered by actors, directors, and members of the theatre community as someone who held incredibly high standards but was the first person to give a chance to someone new whom he felt had talent. When reflecting on McNally, Heggie said:

He was a real role model about how to live your life with enthusiasm, with gratitude, with generosity. Also, he was all about giving people opportunities, giving people a chance. He had a real eye for talent that might be hidden when it came to actors, singers, or directors. And, he was willing to give a chance. And, he was a real mentor, and friend, and a total professional. He was very, very demanding. It was impossible sometimes. But, you know, because he believed in it so much.

¹⁰ Jeff Kaufman, *Every Act of Life: the illustrated and expanded script for the award-winning documentary about Tony-winning playwright Terrence McNally*, (United States: A Smith and Kraus Book), 31.

McNally's total belief in the process also created demanding expectations of himself and others. For example, McNally felt it was crucial to pay close attention to punctuation when acting within his work. Lynn Ahrens attests to this, "I have actually been present, not once but several times, when he has gathered the company together, the actors, to lecture them about what his punctuation means."¹¹

With the knowledge that the excellence of McNally's life work was elsewhere in theater, my research steered toward possible motivations for McNally's collaboration with opera. It wasn't long before it was made clear that McNally had always had an affinity toward music and opera. In an interview with Mike Wood at the Manhattan Theatre Club McNally confessed:

I write to music. It does inform. Emotionally it creates... I think it puts you in a certain kind of mood and so *Love! Valour! Compassion!* I wrote almost entirely to Tchaikovsky's piano music... *The Ritz* I wrote entirely to Rossini overtures, mainly overtures, sometimes the operas... I listen to opera buffa, comic opera... Like for *Lisbon Traviata*, I played Rossini when I wrote Act 1, and I played *Cavalleria Rusticana* a lot when I wrote Act 2.¹²

In addition to listening to opera to assist in his writing of other pieces, McNally wrote three plays on operatic subjects - a trilogy entitled *Terrence McNally's Nights at the Opera*. *The Lisbon Traviata*, which premiered in 1989, tells the story of an obsessed opera fan. *Masterclass*, which premiered in 1995, is the portrayal of a fictional masterclass given by Maria Callas while featuring music by Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo

¹¹ *ibid.*, 71.

¹² Terrence McNally, interview with Mike Wood, February 23, 1994, accessed September 12, 2020, <https://youtu.be/KaNbGWf2Usk>.

Puccini, and Vincenzo Bellini. *Golden Age*, which premiered in 2012, is the portrayal of the first production of *I Puritani* by Vincenzo Bellini. In the documentary *Every Act of Life*, McNally remarked:

Opera is not a quiet, inward artform. It's a big generous art form, and it has very much shaped my sense of theatricality. Opera is about open emotions. No one sees an opera and says, 'I don't understand.'... When I was still in high school, I fell madly in love with the voice of Maria Callas. Living in Corpus Christi, I was close enough to hear the radio from Mexico. The sound was very poor, but there's something about her voice that cut through. I had never heard anything so beautiful as that unique sound, which I later learned that not everyone thought was beautiful, but I did. Once heard, never forgotten. There was a passion in her singing, which is something I always look for in singing.¹³

At age 78, referring to people's questions about when he might retire, McNally said, "I sort of want to hit them. I've got about three plays I want to write. I'm still the most critical of my work... I think maybe a lack of self-confidence has motivated me and kept me going 78 years."¹⁴ Working until the end of his life, McNally passed away due to complications from an infection with COVID-19 on March 24, 2020. In an interview with Steve Adubato reflecting on theatre today, McNally spoke directly to the next generation:

For those who want to write: Tell your own story. You know, Oscar Wilde said it best 'be yourself, everybody else is taken' and so many young people think *I'm* going to write *Hamilton* again. No. *Hamilton's* been written. Write *your Hamilton*. Make it up. You're the only one who can tell your story. When I try to teach, if I get someone to speak in their own voice, I feel they've, I've succeeded,

¹³ Jeff Kaufman, *Every Act of Life: the illustrated and expanded script for the award-winning documentary about Tony-winning playwright Terrence McNally*, (United States: A Smith and Kraus Book), 123.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 155.

you know. Don't sound like anybody else, and you... we really are unique. But it's very hard to find that when we are told to be like everyone else.¹⁵

Terrence McNally's ideals led him to produce works that represent real life, including the play that influences *Three Decembers*. Next, we look at the librettist who adapted the McNally play *Some Christmas Letters* into a libretto for *Three Decembers*.

The second member of the artistic team, librettist Gene Scheer, was pursuing opera performance before he began working as a librettist. Sheer trained seriously as an operatic singer. He received a bachelor's and master's degree from the Eastman School of Music, after which he moved to Europe to seek work as an operatic performer. While studying in Europe with a post-graduate grant at the Konservatorium der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, he began singing musical theatre. His time in Europe soon evolved into almost a decade working in German theatre, musical theatre, and film. Toward the end of his twenty years in pursuit of operatic singing, he began to study with a new teacher. She caused his life to turn in a different direction. In the Drexel Interview with Paula Marantz Cohen, Sheer remarked that studying with Pat Mislin finally gave him the courage to finish pursuing singing and to focus on writing librettos and composing.¹⁶ Thus Scheer was released from a struggle to further his singing career. However, his learning was not in vain. Sheer's twenty years of professional work as a singer gave him the skills that would make him a successful writer of librettos. He

¹⁵ Terrence McNally, Playwright Terrence McNally Reflects on Theatre Today interview with Steve Adubato, accessed October 1, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/video/playwright-terrence-mcnally-reflects-theater-today-efpmd5/>.

¹⁶ Gene Sheer, "episode 88 - Gene Scheer - part 01," interview by The Drexel InterView, posted June 15, 2011, accessed October 1, 2020, <https://youtu.be/rHnpP37XguA>.

developed hands-on stage experience, learned what was required to play a scene, and realized a gift he possessed to create a successful structure upon which the music can occur. Scheer refers to crafting librettos as creating the scaffold on which music is built.

Heggie discusses working with Sheer on *Three Decembers*:

Taking this 14-page script and turning it into a viable opera was a big leap requiring imagination, invention, and vision, all of which Gene has in spades. He enlarged the story and gave it dramatic conflicts and actions not found in the original script; he also invented the big family secret at its core... With Gene's clear libretto, I was able to compose the opera in about six months.¹⁷

Here, Heggie speaks to the difficulty that goes into working as a librettist:

I think a lot of the real hard work for the librettist is digging down deep to find the words that those people (*the characters*) can say at that moment and still leave room for music to tell the story. So, the character isn't saying, *I'm sad, I want this*. They're actually *doing* something. And through that, we can get that they're unhappy or frustrated. And what they want without them stating it overtly, you know. And so, I think that's a lot of the work that goes in from the beginning, with the libretto.¹⁸

Consistently throughout his career, Heggie has shown he understands the value of establishing a robust artistic team when creating a new opera. Fundamental to both the birth and growth of his composition career, collaboration remains a high priority.

Heggie speaks about the pathway to finding his identity. He confesses that a large part of his struggle was identifying as a gay male in communities where that was not entirely accepted:

It was 1979, and I already knew that my life would be about music. I also knew I was gay, and the idea that anybody else might also know it absolutely terrified me. In the small towns where I attended school in Ohio and Northern California, being gay didn't really fly... It took a lot of work to keep my sexuality hidden, but

¹⁷ Jake Heggie, "A Note from Jake Heggie."

¹⁸ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

I did, burying myself in piano and composition – realms in which I felt powerful and successful.¹⁹

In addition to the difficulties which accompanied the acceptance of his sexuality at that time, he talks of the struggle of being true to himself and searching for authenticity:

Dealing with being gay was one thing. For most of my life, I had coasted on being the person I thought other people wanted me to be. Over the years, I had met fearless, genuine people who are willing to put themselves on the line and take risks: I finally recognized that in order to find happiness and contentment, I needed to become one of them.²⁰

Transforming into what he believed others wished for him influenced his first marriage. While in university at UCLA, he had a very supportive and nurturing relationship with pianist Johana Harris which resulted in them getting married in 1982. Heggie felt that "being married to her would be more acceptable to my family than my being gay."²¹ Age difference aside (Heggie 21, Ms. Harris approaching 70), Heggie cherished this relationship. A year into their marriage, Heggie confessed he was gay. Harris understood but wanted to stay married. It was not until his second year of graduate school that he decided to come out to his family. Years later, Harris and Heggie agreed to move on with their futures apart.

Slowly working toward being his authentic-self created situations that led to his successful path in composition. Gradually, by pursuing his authenticity, Heggie created

¹⁹ Jake Heggie, "Jake Heggie Composer." in *Should I Go to Grad School? 41 Answers to an Impossible Question*, ed. Jessica Loudis, Boško Blagojević, John Arthur Peetz, and Allison Rodman (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014.) 181.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 184-185.

²¹ Jake Heggie, "Jake Heggie Composer." in *Should I Go to Grad School? 41 Answers to an Impossible Question*, ed. Jessica Loudis, Boško Blagojević, John Arthur Peetz, and Allison Rodman (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014.)

circumstances that led to a successful path in composition. A significant transition occurred in 1993 when Heggie moved from Los Angeles to San Francisco. His temporary shift from performing and composing to writing *about* music was born.

Within a few months, Heggie progressed from working as a writer for UC Berkeley's Performing Arts series to getting a job at the San Francisco Opera (SFO) as a writer in the Public Relations department. During this time with the company, Heggie interviewed and got to know many people. This networking allowed him to gain perspective on how business and interactions worked. In 1994, Heggie crossed paths with someone who would become a vital muse for him, mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade. Not only did Ms. von Stade become his friend, but she inspired Heggie to compose art songs again. When Heggie offered some of his art song arrangements to his new friend, she soon became a champion of his work. Ultimately, von Stade was the performer for whom he composed the role of Madeline Mitchell. When asked why *Three Decembers* was essential for him to write, Heggie responded:

I had been wanting to do something that had to do with AIDS for a long time. And it just felt like the perfect thing, because I really wanted to write the lead role for Flicka von Stade, and the fact that it was three characters, and family dynamics, and personal relationships were all brought into it. But it deals with it in a way that is very real.²²

Pam Kragen from the San Diego Union-Tribune wrote the article: "Composer and his famous muse reflect on 'Three Decembers.'" In it, she reports von Stade communicated that she had "a hard time at first embracing Maddy's self-centered nature...but that she

²² Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

found many qualities that she could relate to in the character, both good and bad."²³

Heggie confirms this and relates the following about von Stade and the character of

Madeline:

It's, yes, she's (*Madeline's*) complicated, and we had a lot of talks about that at the very beginning, and I kept telling Flicka, look, you know, you don't have to convince us to love you (*Madeline*). We're going to love you because you're amazing on the stage. And you've lived this big life and you do love your children. It's just complicated love... she does love them, and she does care about them. But she has a tough time showing it because of the things that have happened, and the way their lives have grown apart, and the way the world is... Finally, Flicka realized that a lot of that is a tough exterior that's a cover-up for what's underneath because there's been so much. There are the wounds, and they are so deep. And, you know, when people have been wounded, they do cover up for it in a certain way.²⁴

Discussing the depth of Madeline's character soon communicated the shared complexity of all of the characters. When reflecting on the storyline of *Three Decembers*, specifically the struggle Charlie has with his mother's opinion of him being openly gay, Heggie emphasizes the importance of including stories that retain cultural memory:

I know cultural memory is very, very short... and, that's why it's important to tell stories. That's why I try to pick subjects of stories that need to be told because they tell big stories about human nature and being on the planet. And one of the things that I found so amazing was a friend of mine when I went to his wedding. He's like thirty-two. So, it was already two years ago; he was 30. And I went to his wedding to his partner, his husband, and their huge family from all over Texas and Pennsylvania was there. And, you know, at one point later, he said, so you couldn't, you know, in the 80s, you couldn't have imagined something like this would have happened?... No way. No one imagined this in the 80s or the 90s. You thought that it couldn't have been possible, you know. So, it really is very, very

²³ Pam Kragen, "Composer and his famous muse reflect on 'Three Decembers,' *The San Diego Union-Tribune* (March 2019), accessed October 9, 2020, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/entertainment/classical-music/sd-et-opera-threedecembers-preview-20190303-story.html>.

different today. That's why I do think it's important to remember where it came from.²⁵

The complexity of the *Three Decembers*' storyline, as well as the characters developed by Heggie, Sheer, and McNally, affords the world of opera a contemporary work that assists in retaining the cultural memory of important 21st-century topics.

To recap, the three parties which came together to form *Three Decembers* were: First, playwright Terrence McNally who lived in Manhattan during the AIDS crisis, and watched multiple partners die from the disease. Second, librettist Gene Scheer who studied and performed opera and musical theatre for twenty years before he changed course, using his performing experience to establish the structure upon which the music for opera is built. Third, composer Jake Heggie, who struggled with the honesty of his sexual identity due to the social difficulty with the subject at that time, began as a pianist and, through an indirect path, ended up composing opera for some of the most prominent opera houses.

²⁵ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

II. Heggie's Musical Style: Tracing Motif and Investigating Shared Dramatic Pacing

As you get to know the piece, suddenly, you realize there's a rhythm and a momentum carrying it forward, and you are part of this momentum. That's what I'm looking for when I'm writing... - Jake Heggie

Jake Heggie has a prolific presence in the world of contemporary opera. He creates sound worlds that often transform the operatic stage into a forum on matters of social justice. If we look at Heggie through the lens of postmodernism, we do see defining characteristics of this movement. We hear moments of jazz and musical theater incorporated. The writing style is tonal, but with extended chromaticism. Although Heggie's writing shows the influence of film score composition, it still can be categorized as post-modern opera. The musical sound-space crafted for each production uses appropriate material for the sound-world each piece demands. We see rhythm and text accents used as devices to explain the language organically and naturally.

Score study reveals how Heggie's compositional style adds his voice and ideas to the dramatic pacing, by his placement of score markings that effect silence, tempo change, as well as those that extend time. He places fermatas over silence, which gives the ensemble permission to use silence as a tool for drama. His musical markings and the shifts in tempo reflect dramatic pacing and change, not just musical nuance. Heggie uses accents and breath marks to convey word stress. His process crafts each of the lines of text as he writes the scene, looking for both natural parlance and the pacing needed for organic action and reaction on stage. The use of silence can be studied in the score and defined with specific motivations. The importance of the libretto of this opera supports characters rehearsing with text alone as a play, to find natural and untimed delivery

before applying the score. When rehearsing with music, they should note occurrences in the score where Heggie marks changes to prompt discussion as to what could have occurred to make that character's reaction the most natural.

Many musical genres, artists, and composers influenced Heggie's style. His father introduced him to jazz standards. Other influences include the study of composition with Ernst Bacon, American musicals, and famous artists Julie Andrews and Barbara Streisand. Heggie dedicated *Moby Dick* to Steven Sondheim, whom he acknowledges as a significant influence on his career and to thank him for his generous support. Heggie mentions, "*Sweeney Todd* showed me there was still a lot to say on the American Lyric stage, and there were many ways to do it."²⁶ In placing the musical theatre influence prevalent in the score of *Three Decembers*, Heggie states, "There is a strong musical theater feel to *Three Decembers* because of Madeline's Broadway career. (At one point, *Three Decembers* was going to be a musical!")²⁷ Noting the hints of musical theatre that cross over into the work, I asked Heggie if he meant for the motif that opens the opera and laces through the show to be connected to Maddy because I had found patterns in the theme, and was curious if it had been on purpose. Heggie answered:

The first gesture is incredibly theatrical. And it's all Madeline Mitchell because she dominates the story because of the choices that she's made, and the world that she brings with her. You know, it is a music theater world. It's a big theatrical world. So, that's the gesture from the beginning. And that motif is very clear and very strong. And it gives us a sense of her, but not the whole picture of her.

²⁶ Craig Byrd, "Composer Jake Heggie Brings *Moby Dick* to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion," *Los Angeles Magazine*, (October 2015), accessed November 21, 2020, <https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/composer-jake-heggie-brings-moby-dick-to-the-dorothy-chandler-pavilion/>

²⁷ Jake Heggie, "email message to author," March 3, 2020.

From the crash of the cymbal on the first beat, the introduction to *Three Decembers* places the audience in an atmosphere one associates with musical theater overtures. Relating the overture of *Three Decembers* to the opening of the overtures to *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Gypsy*, and *Wicked*, one is transported to Broadway for a moment. Heggie's introductory material lasts a mere minute, yet is replete with meaning. While the overtures from musicals often echo some of the most popular tunes from the show, Heggie's brief ABA' lasts only a minute, yet establishes the mood and introduces the theme that we will come to connect with Madeline Mitchell.

Figure 1. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *Madeline Mitchell Theme* mm.1-10.²⁸

²⁸ Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 1.

Figure 1 illustrates the opening ten measures of the opera. The aura of grandness inaugurated in the A section is comprised of 2 four-measure phrases (1-4) and (5-8) that establish the longer Madeline Mitchell theme, followed by a transformed repeat. Within each of the four-bar phrases, we see one measure variations of the Madeline Mitchell Motif (MMM). Throughout the opera, the MMM is used and developed to remind us of the eccentric, outspoken, and captivating Madeline. Her presence will follow the listener through the show and will provide the primary viewpoint through which the story unfolds. Heggie's use of motif utilizes the musical memory and formed associations of the audience to bring the focus back to the drama. In Peter Burkholder's *Approaches to Meaning in Music*, the author develops a five-step process for connecting what a listener hears with what the music means:

1. Recognizing familiar elements
2. Recalling other music or schema that make use of those elements.
3. Perceiving the associations that follow from the primary associations.
4. Noticing what is new and how familiar elements are changed.
5. Interpreting what all this means.²⁹

As motifs from *Three Decembers* are identified, analyzed, or interpreted, they will serve a variety of functions within the drama. A motif is an associative, representational musical idea which recurs and transforms over time, and instills unspoken dramatic meaning into the score. At the same time, a composer balances the compromise between an "indexical underscoring of characters and stage properties," and the need to "create

²⁹ Peter J. Burkholder, *Approaches to Meaning in Music* e-book, ed. Byron Almén and Edward Pearsall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) 79.

effective musical momentum and structure."³⁰ When discussing the motif concept in *Leitmotif, temporality, and musical design in the Ring*, Thomas S. Grey creates a category of motif that identifies with individual characters and reminds the listener: "More than a calling card, the motive acts like a kind of nimbus externalizing the character's qualities and the effect of his presence on those around him."³¹ Grey introduces a process that categorizes the dramatic treatment of the motifs into the tenses of anticipation, realization, and reminiscence (future, present, and past),³² which will aid in the depth of our discussion. The first distinct and denotational motif we will discuss, I have labeled the "Madeline Mitchell" motif (MMM):



Figure 2. *Three Decembers*, introduction, Madeline Mitchell Motif (MMM), m.1.³³

In Figure 2, note the incipit of the opera. From the onset, Heggie deftly positions the motif we begin to associate with Maddy as the opera progresses. Envision and pronounce

³⁰ Thomas S. Grey, ed. "Leitmotif, temporality, and musical design in the Ring," *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner. Cambridge Companions to Music*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 88.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*, 97.

³³ Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 1.

Ma-de-line Mit-chell to the rhythm notated in the treble staff in Figure 2. Notice the accents on beats 1 and 4 of *Ma-* and *Mit-*, aligning with the syllabic stress of her name. In the duration of the introduction, Heggie uses the MMM in 10 repetitions. At this time, Heggie is beginning to establish for the audience, using Burkholder's system, the initiation of a familiar element. The next hint of the MMM is the use of its rhythm beginning on the second beat of m. 77:



Figure 3. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *MMM* rhythm sung by Charlie when explaining his Mother's Christmas letter, mm. 75-77.³⁴

In Figure 3, Heggie wittily sets this text using accents to create iambs in the line. The use of MMM rhythm on *pentameter* is the initial occurrence where a character describes an action Madeline does, in association with using the rhythm of her motif. A mere five measures later, Heggie pairs the MMM for the first time Charlie sings the name, Madeline Mitchell, causing the audience to recall other music that makes use of this element and perhaps make the connection with her name. This use of the MMM can be observed in Figure 4 below, mm. 78-79. Heggie uses a fermata on the first syllable of Madeline's name to allow Charlie to dramatically and sardonically bring attention to Madeline. At the same time, Heggie adeptly places the first association directly paired with her name for the audience to notice:

³⁴ *ibid.*, 8.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Well, she is the (great) Mad - e line". It features a fermata over the word "great" and markings for *f* and *rit.*. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment with lyrics: "Mitch-ell! A - mer - i - can" and "The - a - ter i - con!". It includes markings for *a tempo* and *mf*. A bracket on the left side of the image connects the two staves, indicating their relationship in the score.

Figure 4. *Three Decembers, Part One, Scene 1, MMM sung by Be on the text "Madeline Mitchell," MMM sung by Charlie: "Theater icon," MMM sung by Bea on "American sweetheart of the stage," mm. 79-84.*³⁵

As the score progresses into mm. 83-85 of Figure 4, Heggie continues to use the MMM to set text that describes how Madeline's adult children envision the world's perception of their mother. This motif advances us to the fourth step of the Burkholder system: "perceiving the associations that follow from the primary associations." By this point in the opera, the audience has heard the MMM introduced and repeated in the introduction, the rhythm of the motif used on a description of Madeline's behavior, followed by the motif being connected directly to her name. Now, we see the MMM linked to Madeline's perceived reputation.

Charlie and Bea continue to read their mother's Christmas letter when the first portion of the MMM is found while Bea is doing an impersonation of her mother. In Figure 5, Heggie uses an accent over the "*No!*" and a tenuto over "*dream*" in m. 105 to influence the acerbity of Bea's impersonation. Another half MMM is seen on "*A nobody*" in m. 106:

³⁵ *ibid.*, 8-9.

Figure 5 shows two musical staves. The top staff contains the lyrics "No! I would not dream of it!" with a melodic line above it. The bottom staff contains the lyrics "A no-bod-y." with a shorter melodic line above it. A large curly bracket on the left side of the image groups both staves together, indicating that the rhythm of the second phrase is derived from the first.

Figure 5. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, rhythm of MMM sung by Bea on the text: "dream of it!" and "A nobody," mm. 104-106.³⁶

With the example of the MMM seen in Figure 5, we add a caricature to the list of associations the motif is forming.

Figure 6 is a musical score for the scene. It features three staves: a vocal line for Charlie (B), a vocal line for Bea (C), and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "meno mosso". The lyrics for both vocalists are "look in the mir-ror, I don't see a star. Not". The piano part includes a crescendo in measure 116 and an accent over a note in measure 117. The score is numbered 115 at the beginning.

Figure 6. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, Heggie is building the intensity, anticipating the onstage entrance of Madeline.³⁷

Figure 6 highlights a moment where Heggie is building the intensity towards the upcoming entrance of Madeline. We see Charlie and Bea's vocal lines rise in pitch in mm. 115-117, in addition to Heggie placing a crescendo in m. 116 and an accent over

³⁶ *ibid.*, 11.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 13.

"star." In m. 117, Heggie writes a fermata over "star," followed by a breath mark, followed by a second fermata on "Not," as well as a fermata in the orchestra. These symbols influence how the intensity is built and how shared dramatic pacing optimizes freedom in the acting. To further solidify the connection between the MMM and Madeline, we look at an additional example when the motif connects to her name in Figure 7 below:

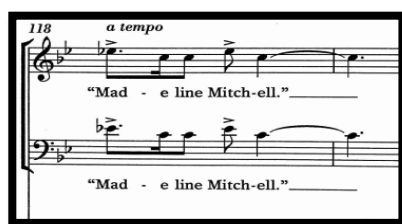


Figure 7. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, MMM sung in unison by Bea and Charlie on the text "Madeline Mitchell," mm. 118-119.³⁸

This iteration of the MMM has Charlie and Bea singing in unison, which contributes to the increased intensity. The measure following the Figure 7 excerpt is seen in Figure 8, where the orchestra echoes the MMM after the siblings sing it. M. 118 marks the first MMM iteration in the orchestra during scene one, which continues to crescendo until Madeline's entrance on the following page.



Figure 8. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, MMM played by the orchestra in response to Charlie and Bea singing Madeline's name, m. 119.³⁹

³⁸ *ibid.*, 13.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 13.

Once Madeline announces her presence in the scene, the motifs begin to morph association and take on meanings that can be applied to her consciousness. At this point in the motivic analysis, the Burkholder system would focus on "noticing what is new, how familiar elements are changed, and interpreting what those alterations mean." In Figure 9, there are two iterations of the MMM in the orchestra. The first occurs in m. 135, preempting Madeline's vocal line. The second is a double iteration in mm. 139-140, as both a commentary on her line and a background to Charlie's conversation with an offstage Burt:

The image shows a musical score for a scene from 'Three Decembers'. It consists of two staves: a vocal line for Madeline and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins at measure 135 with the lyrics 'I look in the mirror, I see me and both of you.' The piano accompaniment features a motif (MMM) in the right hand, marked 'p' and 'gently'. The score includes tempo markings 'poco rit.' and 'a tempo'.

Figure 9. *Three Decembers, Part One, Scene 1, MMM in the orchestra bookending Maddy's sung line, mm. 135-139.*⁴⁰

As Madeline continues to sing about their father in Figure 10, we see the MMM in the orchestra in m. 145. As Madeline observes the *poco rit.* in m. 146 over "God rest his," a change of direction, and a marking of *a tempo* takes her toward a topic she has an easier time discussing - herself. Heggie makes two iterations of the MMM in mm. 147-148, allowing the motif to match the musical focus and the dramatic focus, as Maddy begins a rant about herself and begins to discuss her acting career:

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 16.

Figure 10 shows a musical score for three parts: Maddy (M.), Charlie (C.), and piano accompaniment. The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of two flats. The tempo markings are *poco rit.* and *a tempo*. The lyrics for Maddy are "I see your fa - ther, God rest his soul. I" and for Charlie are "course I will...". The piano accompaniment consists of chords and melodic lines in both hands.

Figure 10. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, MMM in the orchestral accompaniment and connecting Maddy's sung lines, mm. 144-148.⁴¹

In Figure 11, Heggie uses the rhythm of the MMM twice in Madeline's vocal line. When combined with the text: "How did this letter become all about me?" this line emphasizes Madeline's self-perception as she confesses her egocentrism:

Figure 11 shows a musical score for a vocal line. The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of two flats. The dynamic marking is *mf*. The lyrics are "How did this let-ter be-come all a-bout me?". The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes.

Figure 11. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, MMM rhythm sung by Maddy, mm. 158-159.⁴²

As the scene continues, Charlie and Bea discuss how Burt is currently feeling, as he has AIDS. Charlie mentions that he is scared, and Bea responds with, "We're all scared." Charlie's response of "Not all. Not Madeline Mitchell" is seen in Figure 12 with the MMM occurring in both Charlie's vocal line as well as in the orchestra:

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 16.

⁴² *ibid.*, 18.



Figure 12. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *MMM* sung by Charlie and played by the orchestra, mm. 180-181.⁴³

This passage introduces the audience to the first inclination that Maddy may have an issue with Burt. When Maddy communicates the exciting news of starring in her "*first Broadway musical*" in Figure 13, the *MMM* sounds in the orchestra underpinning Charlie refusing to go. The *MMM* here could be significant to Charlie's feeling of being suffocated by the enormity of his mother's presence. That line of logic would continue in Figure 14, where the *MMM* sounds in the orchestra, underpinning Charlie and Bea's exasperation with their mother's exuberance over this news.

Musical score for Figure 13, showing vocal lines and piano accompaniment for the lyrics "first Broadway musical!" and "I won't go." The score is in a key with one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The vocal line consists of two lines of music. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing a simple bass line. The tempo is marked "a tempo" and the dynamics are marked "f" and "mf".

Figure 13. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *MMM* rhythm sung by Maddy and Bea on the text: "first Broadway musical!" followed by the orchestra playing the *MMM* as Charlie refuses to go, mm. 304-305.⁴⁴

⁴³ *ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 34.

The image shows a musical score for three parts: vocal line 1, vocal line 2, and piano accompaniment. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked 'a tempo' and the dynamics are 'f'. The lyrics are: 'Dear God... gain!' and 'Dear God...'. The piano part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords.

Figure 14. *Three Decembers, Part One, Scene 1, MMM in the orchestra as Charlie and Bea sing of their exasperation with their mother, mm. 310-311.*⁴⁵

Before Madeline exits the scene, there is another hint of her feelings about Charlie's partner of five years, Burt. In Figure 15, Heggie places an accent over the mistaken name of "Curt" followed by a breath mark. He then uses the rhythm of the MMM on "hug for me" to allow the musical markings and the shared dramatic pacing to reflect what Madeline's true feelings about Burt may be:

The image shows a musical score for two vocal parts: Maddy and Charlie. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: 'Char-lie, please give dear Curt a hug for me...'. The score includes an accent over 'Curt' and a breath mark after it. The piano part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords.

Figure 15. *Three Decembers, Part One, Scene 1, MMM rhythm sung by Maddy and Charlie as she asks him to give his partner 'Curt' a hug from her, 315-317.*⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 36.

It does not take long for the truth of this assumption to be clarified, as Charlie's anger boils over when he reveals that Madeline still doesn't remember Burt's name, despite meeting him *900 times*. At this moment, Madeline is displaying an avoidant, passive-aggressive behavior that noticeably causes Charlie pain.

By the time Madeline exits Part One, Scene 1, the audience has heard multiple repetitions of the MMM in the introduction, the rhythm of the motif used for a description of Madeline's behavior, followed by the motif connected directly to her name. Additionally, we see the MMM linked to Madeline's perceived reputation and used as a caricature of her personality. The motif is played by the orchestra to add emphasis, as a reflection of Madeline's thoughts and behaviors, and to emphasize Madeline's awareness of her egocentrism. The motif is used as a reference to Madeline's perceived behaviors, in the orchestra to show a sense of Charlie being overtaken by Madeline's presence, to show Charlie and Bea's exasperation with their mother, and to point out a moment where Madeline displays passive-aggressive behavior towards Charlie and Burt. Tracing the MMM in Part One, Scene 1 allows us to view how the concept of motif may be used to achieve a more profound awareness while preparing a performance of *Three Decembers*.

After observing the benefits of tracing the MMM, the next portion of this document will focus on the introduction of other motifs that I have analyzed in the score. I named each motif for the attributes of the story to which they appear connected as they reappear throughout the opera. We traced the MMM through a portion of a scene. Here, the intent will be establishing the other motifs in the score. When asked about his use of motifs in *Three Decembers*, Heggie responded:

I use them to remind the audience of that particular emotional current or that particular character, and that even sometimes when the character isn't there, the spirit of them is there. So, the father is there when the kids are yearning to know him or to share. Madeline is constantly there in different guises. The motif is drawn out in different ways. But, that's how I use motifs, is to give the audience information that the characters don't say outright. It's subtext, and it's in their emotional world.⁴⁷

With the knowledge that he had used motifs for plot reasons, I asked more about his process, which he begins to explain here:

My process is I work very closely with the librettist, and we cast it in our heads, and we start talking about what's essential about each character. And then I live with them. And then when the music starts to happen, I just start writing.... But, they sort of emerge as I compose, and like this sort of jaunty, fun atmosphere that goes between... which is kind of a rhythmic and harmonic motif that goes between Charlie and Bea when they're reading the letter.⁴⁸

The motif Heggie refers to is seen below in Figure 16. We first hear the *Gossip Motif* before Charlie and Bea make small talk. We also hear this theme accompanying them, written in cut time with a constant stream of staccato eighth notes:

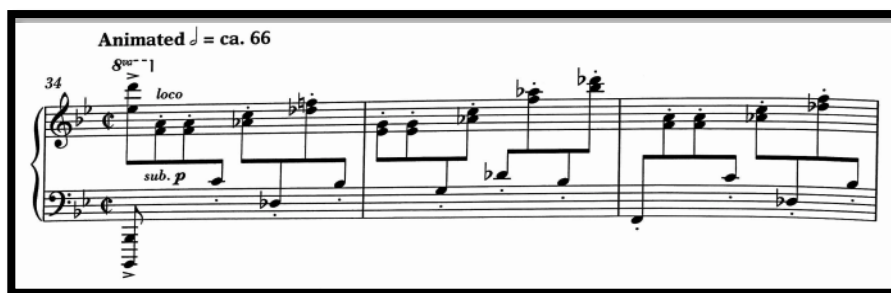


Figure 16. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *Gossip motif*, mm. 34-36.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 4.

Considering Figure 17, it is useful first to discuss the rotating sound worlds Heggie employs. Part One, Scene 1, occurs on Christmas day 1986, around dinner time. The clue for the time of day comes from Bea's line, "Damn! The oven. I forgot."⁵⁰ and a directive in the score that states, "*Lights up suddenly on Maddy, glamorous, radiant, dressed for the Christmas party.*"⁵¹ Scene 1 takes place in three environments at once. We find out at the beginning of the scene that Charlie is in San Francisco talking on the phone to his sister Bea, who is in Connecticut. They are reading the Christmas letter from their mother, Madeline, who is writing from the Caribbean. Madeline's presence in the Caribbean sets up the audience's connection that the family is not together at Christmas, and that this is a regular occurrence. In Part One, Scene 1, the musical sound world rotates between the *Gossip Motif*, which places Charlie and Bea on their phones in their respective homes, complaining about their mother. The MMM which we traced earlier, and a second motif relating to Madeline that I have named the *Maddy Motif*, seen in Figure 17:

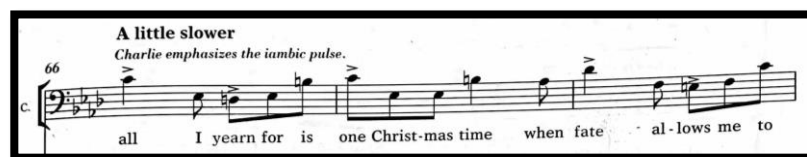


Figure 17. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *Maddy Motif*, mm.66-68.⁵²

The *Maddy motif* occurs throughout the opera when Charlie or Bea are talking about her, when some idea relates to her, and when Maddy sings about herself, with an example seen in Figure 18:

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 15.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 14.

⁵² *ibid.*, 7.

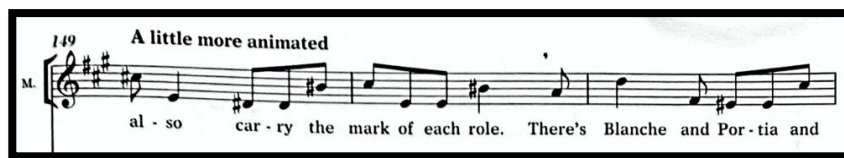


Figure 18. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *Maddy Motif* while *Madeline* is singing, mm. 149-151.⁵³

Another commonality noted when analyzing the first scene: while Charlie and Bea are reading their mother's letter, are talking about her, or if Maddy is singing, the music uses compound meters, including shifting between 6/8 and 9/8. Below in Figure 19, Maddy is singing as she writes the Christmas letter. Note the compound meters used, and then compare the meter and use of rhythm when Charlie and Bea are gossiping in Figure 16.

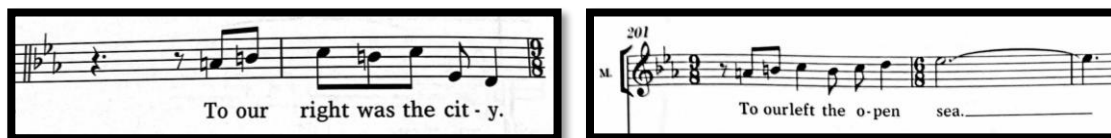


Figure 19. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *use of compound meter* while *Maddy* is singing, mm. 199-203.⁵⁴

As their conversation continues, Charlie sings: “*Whose greatest role to date is Absentee mother,*” followed by Bea’s, “*but we’re not bitter.*” Figure 20 below shows several “Heggie-isms.” The first is how he uses meter change to control dramatic pacing. In this example, we are starting in the compound meter of 6/8 and moving to cut time while keeping the eighth note pulse the same. The shift occurs when we go from the compound meter associated with Maddy to the cut time associated with the *Gossip motif* in mm. 89-90. Without giving credence to any other markings in the music, imagine the rhythm in

⁵³ Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 17.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 22-23.

Figure 20 stated plainly without markings. To bring out the sarcasm of "absentee mother," Heggie switches to cut time, uses tenuto and accent markings, and writes in a *ritardando* over the word "absentee," as well as for tenuto and *ritardando* on the word "mother." He asks for tenuto and *ritardando* on the word "absentee," as well as for accenting the first syllable of the word "mother." Note the dynamic marking with which Bea responds is *piano*, which could indicate that she says it to herself under her breath. The use of sarcasm here, which Madeline engendered in her children, gives us a more in-depth look at the relationship between Bea and Charlie.

The image shows a musical score for three parts: vocal line B (Bea), vocal line C (Charlie), and piano accompaniment. The score is in cut time and features various dynamic and tempo markings. Bea's line includes the lyrics "sweet-heart of the stage..." and "Whose great-est role to date is:". Charlie's line includes "But we're not bit ter..." and "Ab-sen-tee Moth-er.". The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *mp*, and *p*, and tempo markings like *rit.* and *a tempo*.

Figure 20. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, Heggie's use of shared dramatic pacing, mm. 85-90.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 9.

As Charlie moves into his aria, we witness one of the most lyrical and heartfelt moments of the opera. He sings of the way Madeline reacted when he introduced Burt. Charlie continually held out hope that the issue of his sexuality, which had been a struggle with his mother from the beginning, would result in her one day accepting him for who he is. However, Madeline denying who he is leads to the audience having the opportunity to experience the love that Charlie and Burt share. The motif in Figure 21, named *Charlie and Burt's Love Motif*, is seen here, as a representation of the love and support they show each other:

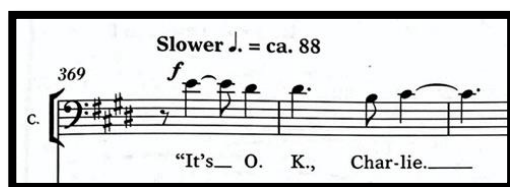


Figure 21. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *Charlie and Burt's Love Motif*, mm. 369-371.⁵⁶

At the end of Charlie's aria, he struggles with the idea of losing Burt. In Figure 22, we see another example of Heggie's dramatic pacing:

Figure 22. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, Heggie uses breath marks and fermata for dramatic pacing, mm. 426-428.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 47.

Note that Heggie places breath marks in three places in one phrase: after "Mom," after "Burt," and after "isn't going." He uses the marking *molto meno mosso*, which gives the actor ample room to take time. He places a fermata over the held chord in the orchestra in mm. 428, giving the actor liberty to take time for the dramatic moment. He then puts a second fermata in Charlie's line on the silence created by the breath before "away." These musical markings reflect dramatic timing that is shared. Eight measures later in Figure 23, we see an orchestral iteration of the *Charlie and Burt Love Motif* in mm. 436-438, preceding Bea's reference to the unique quality of Charlie and Burt's relationship:

Figure 23. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, *Charlie and Burt Love Motif*, mm. 435-440.⁵⁸

As we continued to discuss Heggie's method of composition and motif development, I asked Heggie: When you are composing, which comes first, the meter, or the rhythm of the individual line? To this, he replied:

Sometimes the emotion of it comes first, and what is the heartbeat of that moment? And sometimes, that means the language has to change a little bit. What I'm always trying to do is find the pulse and the heartbeat of a scene or a moment in the story. What's going on between those characters? What do they want, and how will I represent that musically? How do they want to be represented musically? So, it's really listening to the characters, getting to know them, and listening to what they want to say. Getting to know them well enough so that they

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 45.

sing it to me without me imposing something on them. And then suddenly that will change the meter of what's on the page, or suddenly a sense of line develops. And we have to rewrite, or we rearrange, or it might already be there. I don't know. But it really varies. Sometimes, it's all right there on the page, and sometimes it's elusive. And then somehow music emerges and it starts to lead. So sometimes it's the rhythm of a name like the Madeline Mitchell theme that happens a lot. Sometimes it's a tune that emerges and suddenly starts. The tune starts to determine the flow of the language, you know, between the characters. You know, it's many different things. It isn't just one thing, but a lot of my work is to listen and empathize, and then respond. And that's why there's so much work that goes on between us so that music can emerge and those motifs, and the rhythm of a scene, and the heartbeat of a scene, so that it's constantly driving forward with a rhythmic momentum.⁵⁹

Heggie's approach places value on the dramatic moment. He emphasizes the variability involved when composing, in that the impetus may come from many different directions. However, his method searches for the rhythmic momentum and dramatic heartbeat of each scene. The flexibility Heggie employs in his compositional process allows for a real and organic delivery of the scene.

I mentioned to Heggie that I noticed patterns during music rehearsals for his operas. For example, if one allows themselves to dig into the puzzle of the rhythms on the page, and the ensemble is paying attention, and are being accurate, and are staying open-minded, the dramatic meaning and pacing starts to connect. Suddenly the character's dynamic and the increase in organic delivery become extremely interesting. To this, he responded:

That's what I'm aiming for - trying to put those pieces together in an architecture where it can reveal itself to you in the rehearsal room... I want performers to have the room to find their own place within it... what I try to do is to leave space for the performers. And that doesn't mean it isn't complicated or complex, you know, because it is. But I want the performers not to feel like they're locked in a vise so

⁵⁹ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

that they're so freaked out about counting and pitches that they can't get into character. That matters enormously to me. So, yeah, it's trying to put the puzzle together again so that there's clarity, and there's room to explore and grow and make it your own as a performer.⁶⁰

In Part One, Scene 3, Madeline is coming from being on stage as a musical theatre actress singing "Day Break." While she is onstage for Scene 2, we do not hear motifs associated with the family life offstage. Madeline was at the theatre finishing her nightly performance, as well as allowing the audience to see *her* at work. The location is significant for the development of her identity. In a conversation about Madeline, Heggie remarked:

She's one of those... performers. She's just got to keep going on the stage... You know, it's what she's here to do. It's what she knows. It's when she feels alive and connected... I've known people like her, and I've known performers who have huge hearts, huge, vulnerable hearts, but they've developed a tough exterior to be able to get through because it's hard to live that way. It's hard to be that vulnerable all the time.⁶¹

The interlude between Scenes 2 and 3 creates continuity in focus, as the orchestra plays iterations of the MMM. During this interlude, Madeline walks offstage to her dressing room. Her daughter Bea has left the audience and is waiting for her. As Madeline and Bea talk about Maddy's performance, note in Figure 24 the musical markings Heggie has used to set up the awkward exchange:

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

Figure 24. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, Heggie uses fermatas to create awkward tension for dramatic pacing, mm. 591-595.⁶²

In m.591, Heggie uses a fermata to create tension before Bea sings about her mother's performance. When Maddy finishes her sentence with "hopeful?" The question mark shows signs of her need for approval. Bea's response "hard" denies the request for affirmation, which causes Maddy to question "Really?" The fermata at the end of this figure is a moment where Heggie influences the dramatic pacing by creating an extension of the awkward silence before they change the subject.

The dramatic purpose that Scene 3 fulfills is trifold. First, it introduces the awkward mother-daughter relationship in a location where Madeline is perhaps most comfortable. Second, it introduces the concept of Madeline's presumed problems with her son Charlie. Third, it sets up the audience's first notion that Madeline is hiding a family secret. Heggie continues to appraise her character:

Madeline's kind of a mess, too, because of the choices she made and this huge secret she's been carrying around on her life. And now she's just terrified because the secret is coming out little by little. She's making little mistakes. And she's also

⁶² Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 59.

at a stage in her career where it's not going to be forever, but she's going to keep trying for as long as she possibly can.⁶³

The first place in the scene that moves the story forward is when Bea brings up Maddy's lack of care and attention for her son, Charlie.⁶⁴ In Figure 25, we see the MMM rhythm used by Bea as she asks her mother why she hadn't yet mentioned her brother:

The image shows a musical score for three parts: vocal line (B), vocal line (M), and piano accompaniment. The key signature is three flats (B-flat major/D minor) and the time signature is 8/8. The piano part features a prominent MMM rhythm. The lyrics are: "What a-bout Char-lie?" and "What a-bout him?".

Figure 25. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 1, MMM rhythm sung by Bea on "What about Charlie," mm. 644-645.⁶⁵

Heggie's use of accent over "about" in m. 645, signals a place where the reaction shows that Madeline has an underlying emotion that is soon revealed as narrow-minded and judgmental when she responds, "I am somehow responsible now for the choices he's made in his life?" Which she soon masks by, "I am torn apart." Bea is not fooled, however, and tells her to stop. Bea's desperation leads her into an impassioned plea for Maddy to see Charlie for who he is and to recognize the significance of Burt having

⁶³ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

⁶⁴ Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 66.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 66.

AIDS. The next place that begins to lead to the climax of the scene is when Maddy erupts angrily at Bea and begins to rage, which leads into the culmination of Maddy bursting into tears at m.755.⁶⁶ The heightened emotion causes Maddy to make her first mistake in protecting the secret of their father's suicide by stating the color of the car that was not the same color as it had always been. Bea immediately catches the mistake, and when her mother attempts to regain composure, she sets up the scene turn around by asking: "Maddy? Was the car silver or blue? You always said silver before."⁶⁷ The three fermatas in m. 775 in Figure 26 are significant to the dramatic pacing:

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is for Bea (B.) in soprano clef, with lyrics "sil-ver be-fore." and a fermata over the final note. The middle staff is for Maddy (M.) in soprano clef, with lyrics "There are peo-ple" and a fermata over the final note. The bottom staff is for piano accompaniment, with markings for "poco accel.", "mp", "f", and "p". The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major.

Figure 26. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 3, *Heggie's use of fermatas and silence in shared dramatic pacing*, mm. 774-775.⁶⁸

In Figure 26, Heggie composed the first two fermatas in the orchestra, with the third, placed over silence. These fermatas can build the audience's suspense for Madeline's response. Madeline avoids a real response and answers, "*There are people waiting.*" She

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 81.

then exits the stage, accompanied by robust orchestral iterations of the MMM seen in

Figure 27 below:

The image shows a musical score for a scene from *Three Decembers*. It features a vocal line for Madeline Mitchell and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as 'Bold and bright' with a quarter note equal to approximately 66 beats per minute. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The vocal line starts at measure 776 with the lyrics 'wait-ing.' and 'Maddy and Bea leave.' The piano accompaniment is marked 'f' (forte) and consists of a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes in the right hand, and a bass line in the left hand.

Figure 27. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 3, *Madeline Mitchell Motif*, mm. 776-779.⁶⁹

When asked whether we as an audience are to like or dislike Madeline by the end, Heggie responded:

You know, a lot of actresses who have played her have struggled with this because as an actress, of course, you want the audience to like you. You want the audience to like your character... Madeline is not necessarily likable. She's amazing, and she's fabulous, and she's wonderful. Finally, Flicka realized that a lot of that is a tough exterior that's a cover-up for what's underneath, because there's been so much. There are the wounds; they are so deep. And, you know, when people have been wounded, they do cover up for it in a certain way.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 81.

⁷⁰ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

723 *mf*
 S So hard with-out Dad-dy. So
 M hard to make love work. So hard. So
 725
 S hard to be hu - man. So hard. So
 M hard to be hum - an. So hard.

Figure 28. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 3, *So Hard to be Human Motif*, mm. 723-726.⁷¹

The next significant motif is what I have labeled the *Father's Chair Motif*. Heggie explains it here:

The other big motif that comes in is about the father and the chair and the Golden Gate Bridge duet. And that to me not only represents the father, but it's their interpretation of the father, which is what kids have. That's all they have. And their mom hasn't given them much more to go on. So, they make up these things about him, and he can be a hero because he's not there for them to know about or to tell other stories.⁷²

932 Easily $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 56$
 S I re-mem-ber a man in a chair read-ing book af-terbook. Day and

Figure 29. *Three Decembers*, Part One, Scene 4, *Father's Chair Motif*, mm. 932-936.⁷³

⁷¹ Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 75.

⁷² Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

⁷³ Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 97.

We began this section with a discussion about how Heggie's American operas relate to concepts valued in postmodernism. This discussion included exploring Heggie's musical influences, as well as hints of musical theatre crossover. We made the connection of the musical theatre gestures in the piece tying directly to Madeline's profession as a famous actress. We discussed and traced the Madeline Mitchell Motif and gleaned a more profound understanding of Heggie's compositional perspective when talking about his concept of motifs in *Three Decembers*. This allowed a glimpse into his compositional process involving meter, rhythm, and score markings, in addition to the ways these tools can be used to influence dramatic pacing.

III. Rehearsal environment and performance techniques for Heggie operas

I do think there's a big future for the art form. It's just evolving, which it always does. The arts are supposed to evolve. It's when you lock them down that they start to just disintegrate... If the Opera House is a museum, it's dead, and we know that's not the case. We know it's a living, breathing thing. -Jake Heggie

The process of studying historical works involves both research and speculation. The following section of this document intends to address speculations that might arise while preparing a Jake Heggie opera. Heggie's candid responses regarding his values and preferences on portions of preparation and performance for his operas will be provided. Techniques and guidelines that can assist the performance team while preparing a Heggie opera will also be introduced. Topics to be covered include: setting up an effective rehearsal atmosphere, understanding the role of the conductor in shared dramatic pacing, being mindful of collaboration, and using Heggie's compositional process to help guide the preparation for a performance.

When asked if he noticed behaviors or atmospheres setup by stage directors and artistic teams in rehearsal that led to the type of performance he found to be successfully communicative, Heggie replied:

Oh, absolutely. It all starts in the room... That's where the creative process begins, and where it's nurtured along by being in the room with the people directly involved... that whole feeling in the room is what's going to create the sense for the audience of what's happening on stage in terms of cohesiveness, camaraderie, everyone telling the same story.⁷⁴

Heggie's thoughts on the genesis of the creative process acknowledge that the atmosphere of the rehearsal can influence the audience's perception of the performance. In my experience as a stage director and performer, it is also my observation that the atmosphere of a rehearsal shapes the performance. The creation of an open-minded and

⁷⁴ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

disciplined atmosphere allows the artistic team to have the opportunity to communicate clearly with the audience.

To encourage cohesiveness within a cast and crew, research has led me to what I deem the most efficient way to build this *team culture*. In my view, specific communication in the following areas is necessary:

- **Vision:** a picture of a desired future state that is sufficiently appealing and compelling to drive change - the 'where we want to be.'
- **Mission:** the purpose of the team - the 'what we want to achieve.'
- **Values:** the underlying principles and ethics that drive the team - the 'how we want to act to guide us towards our vision.'
- **Goals:** the objectives or targets that the team is trying to achieve - the 'what we need to achieve our mission.'
- **Strategy:** the approach the team is adopting to achieve the goals that support the strategy - the 'how we will achieve our goals.'
- **Behaviors:** the way people in the team act in terms of what they do and say that brings the strategy and desired culture to life - the 'what we will say and do to bring our values to life.'⁷⁵

Some may doubt there is time during a rehearsal period to address these concepts. The argument can be made that when pursued, these concepts will save time in other areas of rehearsal when the whole team is unified.

One of the most integral contributors to shared dramatic pacing in a Jake Heggie opera is the conductor. They control many aspects of the musical performance, including the choice of tempi, the use of silence, and the implementation of the composer's markings in the score. When discussing the idea of the dramatic pacing, Heggie and I had this exchange:

⁷⁵ Sarah Cook, "Creating a Team Vision and a Set of Values, " in *Building a High-Performance Team: Proven Techniques for Effective Team Working*, (IT Governance Publishing, 2009), 50-51, accessed April 1, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hh47q.11.

JH: That's why you need a really good conductor who understands the dramatic pacing. That's why a theater conductor and an opera conductor is very different from someone who's essentially an abstract symphonic conductor, you know, very different.

CW: So, what do you see as the difference? What makes someone an opera conductor?

JH: The same thing that makes someone an opera composer. I think there are essentially two kinds of composers. There are abstract composers who are really good at like chamber, symphonic, art song... And then, there are theater people... opera composers who are all about storytelling, and dramatic pacing, and the stage, and words, and how they're set... This is why Beethoven really struggled with *Fidelio*... and *Fidelio* has great music. But, it's a very problematic opera because he was not essentially a theater guy. His place was the concert hall. Now, it's the same thing with conductors. It's the mindset... in the classical concert world, we expect people to be good at everything... and yet, those are very distinct, different disciplines⁷⁶

Since an operatic conductor has control over the dramatic pacing, it would follow logically that they ought to understand the dramatic intent of each phrase. Rather than enforcing interpretations based on the music alone, as if it were absolute music, they should search for credibility through the understanding of the drama portrayed in the music.

When a conductor addresses the actors in a rehearsal with the actor's process in mind, they look to the score and libretto for clues to reinforce the decisions made. Boris Godovsky believed that the conductor is an integral part of the *dramatic* performance. Dr. Ernst Lert, his mentor, said, "the great tragedy in our field is that opera conductors fail to realize the fundamental interdependence of musical and dramatic nuances. It will be a great day for opera when all conductors study stage direction, and all dramatic directors

⁷⁶ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

are required to master more than the bare essentials of music."⁷⁷ When one thinks about it, conductors control pacing. Acting and believability link to pacing. Just as musical phrasing is affected by the handling of rests and pauses, a parallel exists in the way silence is used in acting. Many say that music happens in the moments between the notes, and acting reflects this as well.

Collaboration between composers and performers presents growth opportunities for both parties. The creative team collaborates on the mission of building the work and the performer is an extension of that mission. When asked about his relationship with performers, Heggie replied:

Singers are huge collaborators of mine. I've learned so much from them. And, literally watching and listening and learning what I could do better, what I could do differently in the next piece because I always want to challenge myself in a different way... I learn a lot from different performers.⁷⁸

The work ethic displayed in Heggie's quote exemplifies the type of lifelong learning that benefits a performing artist as well. To quote Goethe: "We know accurately only when we know little, with knowledge doubt increases." Confidence is vital in the establishment of leadership and growth. However, setting ego aside is essential to achieving the best product. Cleveland Clinic Neuropathologist Dr. Richard Prayson and Breast Pathologist Dr. Jordi Rowe authored characteristics one can use to foster effective feedback, which embraces feedback that is:

⁷⁷ Boris Goldovsky, *Bringing opera to life: Operatic acting and stage direction* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), 8.

⁷⁸ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

1. Detailed and specific
2. Based on good observation
3. Balanced
4. Actionable
5. Timely
6. Professionally Delivered
7. Constructive and purposed⁷⁹

Therefore, the pursuit of feedback can be encouraged to promote growth in the rehearsal process, when used effectively. Pursuing the rehearsal process with confidence, understanding the benefits of being a lifelong learner, and viewing all collaborations as opportunities to learn from our colleagues, highlights some of the benefits of collaboration.

To develop a guide to prepare a Heggie opera, using Heggie's compositional process as well as the qualities he values in a performance as a model, seems to be a cogent approach. Heggie's process, when *composing* a scene, can be applied as one does research to complete the *preparation* of each scene. When talking of his process, Heggie states:

It's all about clarity, clarity, the story, the story... the characters within that. What do they want? Why are they in the room? Why are they in that scene? What are they carrying with them into the room and into the scene? What is transforming at that moment that gives us information? Why is that scene essential that if we don't have that information, we can't go forward with the story? All of that is in play.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Richard A. Prayson and J. Jordi Rowe, "Effective Feedback in the Workplace," *Critical Values* Volume 10, Issue 3 (July 2017): 24-27, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://academic.oup.com/criticalvalues/article/10/3/24/3884489>

⁸⁰ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

Heggie's compositional process focuses on the dramatic function of the scene. In response to the questions Heggie posed, the following character development method looks to establish thorough, preemptive research that allows a performer to prepare for the rehearsal process. Development and discovery of natural and honest actions and reactions will continue to grow in the processes of rehearsal and performance. This section will develop a method that addresses the questions used in Heggie's process.

When developing a method that uses Heggie's process as a model, the pursuit of clarity is of great significance. We will begin with the concept of whole-work mapping, which will allow us to see the architecture of the work. Concepts included in whole-work mapping are: synopsis, plot, theme, understanding the social climate of a work, questions on personal identity, motivations, physical characteristics, and Freytag's Pyramid (exposition/ inciting moment, complication/rising action, climax/turning point, reversal/falling action, denouement/moment of release). Continuing with the development of the method, the answers to “What does the character want?” will be answered through personal identity and motivation questions found in Table 1:

Whole-Work Mapping:

WHOLE-WORK MAPPING
Synopsis
Plot
Theme
Understanding the social climate
Personal Identity and Motivations
Who are you?
What do you want out of life?

What are your beliefs and convictions?
What are your likes and dislikes?
What is your age?
Do you have a profession?
How does your personality express itself?
Are there stage directions that relate to the development of the character?
Are there descriptions of the character in the libretto?
Are there written clues to who the character is, based on what they say and do?
Physical Characteristics
What does the character look like? Include body type, features, hair, makeup
What clothing would they have worn?
How does clothing affect movement as that person?
Do you dress as if you have money?
What social class do you represent?
How do you walk?
How fast do you talk?
What is your body posture?
Do you have an accent or a specific way of speaking?
Do you talk with your hands?
Find a picture of how you imagine your character to be.
Write a description of your character from the perspective of someone watching you walk down the street.
Freytag's Pyramid
exposition/inciting moment
complication/rising action
climax/turning point
reversal/falling action
denouement/moment of release

Once the Whole-Work Mapping process is complete, one sees the big picture. The next step in working towards clarity is developing the specifics of each moment.

Table 2 below includes a list of questions that one might use to map each scene:

SCENE MAPPING
What are you physically carrying with you into the scene?
Imagine real-time situations of the character in terms of entrances, exits, likely costume changes, and props used.
Note the characters on stage with you, as well as the location entrances/exits for other characters that pertain to your scenes.
What are you emotionally carrying with you into the scene?
What do you want in this scene?
Do you achieve what you want in this scene?
Is there something blocking what you want?
If yes, how do you overcome this obstacle?
What happens in the scene that determines changes in the character?
For each scene, write sentences in the first person as your character that say who you are and what you want.
Which lines of dialogue contain essential pieces of information that relate to the development of the character?
Are there punctuation markings in the libretto that are significant to the character?
Are there markings or composer directives that are significant to the character?
What is their emotional and psychological relationship with the character?
What is the character's emotional and psychological relationship with them?
What has occurred in their past together that is of significance?
What do other characters say about the character?

Does your character believe that what they say is true?
If not, why does your character think that they say that?
What does your character say about other characters?
Are they truthful?
If not, why would they say it?
Location
What physical location are you coming from?
Why were you there?
Why did you leave?
What was the last thing that you said that the audience heard?
Who did you say it to?
What has occurred for you between when you last left the stage and now?
What physical location are you moving toward?
Why are you in the room?
Why are you in the scene?
Dramatic Arc
What dramatic purpose or intent does the scene fulfill?
What are the places in the scene that move the story forward?
Within the scene, is there a climax?
Is there a turning point?
What is the resolution of the scene?
Which character controls the scene and pushes the story forward?
What is transforming at that moment that gives us information?
Why is that scene essential that if we don't have that information, we can't go forward with the story?

This method for preparing a Heggie opera ties into both specificity and awareness, and utilizes Heggie's compositional process for writing opera as a guide to develop a

character within one of his operas. For an example of a fleshed-out Scene Map, you will find one for *Three Decembers: Part One, Scene 3* in the appendices.

A benefit of performing operas of a living composer is the opportunity to discuss their preferences and opinions regarding how performers should approach their work.

When asked what he values when a singer is presenting his work, Heggie unhesitatingly answered:

Honesty. That it comes from a very real place, that it's not presentational. No, it's not I'm "sad" or "mad." You know that it's coming clearly, and simply, and authentically, and honestly. I love stillness. But an energized, empowered stillness, an activated stillness. Of course, I want the voice to be engaging, and interesting, and beautiful, and well-trained. But, I don't want to be thinking about technique. I want it all in service to the line, and the story, and the character... I don't want to be thinking about how impressive it all is. I just want to be moved. I want to be engaged and taken in.⁸¹

Heggie's performance values reflect goals shared by many audience members and stage directors. One who is acting from an honest place can show human vulnerability, as well as a keen sense of awareness of the world around them. The goal of an efficient singing technique is not to draw attention to itself, rather to become the vehicle for real communication.

Communication with an audience uses effective diction as a vehicle. Stanislavski often said diction was more than fifty percent of the performance. I was interested to see where Heggie stood on diction's importance. He responded:

I want the singers to have the confidence that they can get those words across clearly. That's incredibly important to me... I like to do my best to make sure that the performers feel like they can get it across clearly. Diction... final consonants... that there are places to breathe...and yet still get a sense of the line that I'm looking for because it is all about a long line... I want the words to have emotional

⁸¹ *ibid.*

content, but also, I don't want to put wrong accents and wrong syllables just to be clever. It's very important to me that it feels very natural.⁸²

Often the musicality and expression are built within the words themselves. Legato aids diction if the vowels within it are the correct color for the word sung. Singing into the stressed syllables and arranging the weight of voice around the important and less important words within the sentence structure aids in intelligibility. From the audience's perspective, word recognition is essential to understand the detail within the expression of the actor. The diction is the vehicle for the expression of the action.

Finally, Heggie values a performance that is fully in the service of the line, story, and character. Other points of significance are the necessity of projected supertitles in a native language opera and the need for opera to be believable to the audience. I asked Heggie if he thought that supertitles benefit or detract from the performance if the opera is in the language of the audience. He responded:

They help... In a new opera, the first thing the ear is going to do is try to understand every word, if that's your language. And if you're struggling with that, already you're starting to tune out. So, until you're confident that you're understanding the language, and that you're getting the words, you have a little help. Then you can start to get the music, because there's so much to take in on the first hearing of a new opera...or an old opera. You're looking at the characters, the costumes, the set, the setting, you know. And, if any of those things don't jive or make sense, all of a sudden, you're not in the story anymore, and you're focused on that thing... I think supertitles are essential anymore. It's just a lot to take in.

Heggie's answer addressed the need for supertitles for new opera because of the sheer amount of information the audience has to process at once. Even when the audience can understand every word, there are many other levels of detail for them to take in. When

⁸² *ibid.*

Heggie productions are in another country, they are still produced in English due to how the language is set. Therefore, supertitles are highly recommended when producing Heggie operas in either the native language or abroad.

When performing the works of Heggie, one should search for believability and naturalness, eschewing the artificial performance in search of the organic one. While encouraging the believability of opera, one ought to pursue opera as more than voice or beauty alone. In his book *The Empty Voice: Acting Opera*, Leon Major states:

A tradition of opera performance that has grown up over many years and that, in spite of some encouraging signs, persists. According to this tradition, opera is only voice. It's enough for singers to move about the stage gorgeously costumed, appearing and disappearing in magnificent sets, if only the sound is right. Beyond sketching the broad outlines of a character, they do not have to act; the audience has come to listen to them and look at the sets and costumes...But in theater, the voices are *not* everything⁸³

Opera is music, yes. However, it is also theater. Theater begins with words. According to Heggie, so do his operas:

Collaborations with writers are especially important because, of course, without words there could be no songs and no opera. I cannot fathom why it is common practice in opera to leave the librettist's name off the billing. Why is it only Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and not Mozart and Da Ponte's? Yes, music makes it an opera. But if the libretto isn't strong, the opera will be flawed. A composer may write a fine score, but a weak libretto will compromise it as an opera. It is theater, and an excellent libretto gives the composer the best chance to create a successful work.⁸⁴

⁸³ Leon Major and Michael Laing, *The empty voice: Acting opera* (Milwaukee: Amadeus Press, 2011), xiv-xv.

⁸⁴ Jake Heggie, "First the Words."

Ultimately, more often than not, when searching for answers in a Jake Heggie opera, begin with the words. If that doesn't immediately solve the issue, the answer almost always involves collaboration. In the words of Heggie:

Composition can be a lonely business. You spend days or even months by yourself, sometimes writing easily, sometimes smashing your head on a table or a keyboard to get any notes out at all. That is alternately enjoyable and frustrating. But a theater composer by nature has an intense need to be connected with people. For me, collaboration is what delivers the most inspiration to compose. It always has. The alone time is terribly important, but the creative interaction invigorates my imagination like nothing else.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

Conclusion

With *Three Decembers*, I seized the interesting opportunity to analyze a contemporary American opera written for a modern audience with a plot that relates to current societal experience. This opera looks at LGBTQ issues. It deals with the AIDS epidemic, which is not too far in our past. The suicide of a parent and its effect on family dynamics is also a central theme that is very applicable today.

This document utilized direct input from Jake Heggie about his hopes for the performance of his work. It showcased a contemporary opera that inspires thought about diversity and social justice that has not yet been addressed by scholarly research. It described the creation of a working network that transformed careers and brought about a surge in new opera composition and production.

The goal for the analysis of the Madeline Mitchell Motif was not to make that motif a central focus, per se. Rather, it was intended to set a precedent for future, more in-depth motivic analysis, and to inspire artists working on a Heggie opera to follow a similar methodology by tracing motifs to glean a deeper understanding of Heggie's dramatic context. The methodology used to trace the Madeline Mitchell Motif could, for instance, be used to trace the *Loss of Burt motif* or the *Moon Motif* in *Three Decembers*, or motifs in any Heggie opera. The ideas on shared dramatic pacing stemmed from my experience working as both a stage and music director in opera and recognizing the need for the development of pedagogy in this area.

The purpose of the director's analysis is to help directors understand more about what inspired Heggie to write the piece and transfer that inspiration to the stage

effectively. My hope has been, as well, to make a director's manual that might serve the perspective of a performer who finds themselves in the role of the stage director. Many faculty members are asked to direct opera when their background has focused largely on performing opera. Additionally, students enter university without a depth of experience in opera, yet a desire to learn more about the art form.

This scholarship intends to assist opera directors and performers by providing synthesized research materials on this opera derived from the testimony of a living composer. For scholars, this document provides primary source materials directly from the composer and his team. The materials provided in the appendices are intended to serve as researched assistance for rehearsal preparation of *Three Decembers*, as well as including two unpublished primary source essays from Heggie and a transcription of our full interview.

Opportunities for Future Research

I intend to write further about Heggie and his operatic compositions, expanding my study on motifs in his operas to book-length. I believe there is room for both a performer's and director's guide to this Heggie opera – as well as others. My intention would be to break down each opera so that all the motifs, signposts, and background research could be synthesized into a resource for anyone working on the opera.

Shared dramatic pacing in opera is a line of research I will continue to pursue, as well as research into best practices - psychologically and sociologically - to achieve success in opera rehearsals and performances. My interests have been inspired by this research toward further work concerning the education of audiences - especially young audiences, psychology, the promotion of underrepresented composers, and fostering art-based conversations around social justice.

Specifically, motifs from *Three Decembers* I intend to trace in an upcoming publication are listed below.

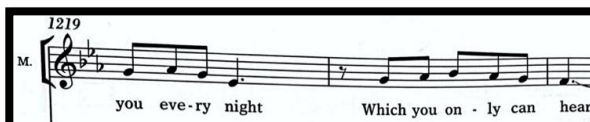
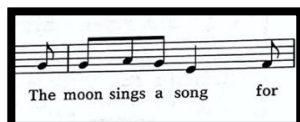


Three Decembers, Part Two, Scene 1, *Loss of Burt Motif*, mm. 1113-1114.⁸⁶

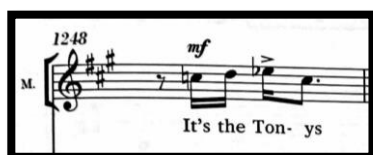
⁸⁶ Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 109.



*Three Decembers, Part Two, Scene 1, Burt's Memory Motif, m. 1131.*⁸⁷



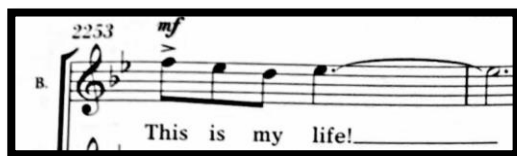
*Three Decembers, Part Two, Scene 2, Moon Motif, mm. 1218-1221.*⁸⁸



*Three Decembers, Part Two, Scene 2, Tony Awards Motif, mm. 1248.*⁸⁹



*Three Decembers, Part Two, Scene 3, Lies Motif, mm. 2208-2209.*⁹⁰



*Three Decembers, Part Two, Scene 3, How Could You Motif, mm. 2253- 2254.*⁹¹

To quote Madeline Mitchell, "All in all isn't life simply grand? I'm so glad I showed up for it."⁹²

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 111.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 121-122.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 125.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 198.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 203.

⁹² Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 231.

Appendices

Compositions for the Operatic Stage, Jake Heggie

Dead Man Walking (2000); Opera in Two Acts with Orchestra; Follows the journey of a nun who becomes the spiritual advisor for Joseph de Rocher, a murderer on death row in Louisiana; Book by Sister Helen Prejean; Libretto by Terrence McNally; Commissioned by San Francisco Opera

Again (2000); Libretto by Kevin Gregory; Commissioned by EOS Orchestra; Operatic scene in 10 minutes for soprano, mezzo, tenor and baritone and chamber orchestra (24 instruments)

The End of the Affair (2003); Opera in Two Acts with Orchestra; Follows a love affair between a writer and the wife of a public servant after World War II in London; Book by Graham Green; Libretto by Heather McDonald; Commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera with Madison Opera and Opera Pacific

At the Statue of Venus (2005); A musical scene for soprano and piano; A woman standing at the Statue of Venus waiting for a blind date; Libretto by Terrence McNally; Commissioned by Opera Colorado

To Hell and Back (2006); Opera in One Act for Soprano, Broadway Soprano, and Period Instruments; Based on The Rape of Persephone; Libretto by Gene Scheer; Commissioned by the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra

Three Decembers (2008); Chamber Opera in Two Acts; Unpublished play *Some Christmas Letters* by Terrence McNally; Libretto by Gene Scheer; Commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera and San Francisco Opera; Three principal roles for soprano, mezzo

and baritone; Chamber orchestra includes 1 flute (doubling soprano saxophone, alto saxophone), 1 oboe (doubling English horn in F), 1 clarinet in Bb (doubling bass clarinet in Bb), 1 percussion, 2 pianos, 3 violins, 1 violoncello, 1 contrabass; Originally titled *Last Acts*

Moby Dick (2010); Opera in Two Acts; Set in 1820, it tells the story of Ahab, the captain of the whaleship Pequod, and the crew he commands; Libretto by Gene Sheer; Book by Herman Melville; Commissioned by Dallas Opera, San Francisco Opera, San Diego Opera, State Opera of South Australia, and Calgary Opera; For 1 soprano, 3 tenors, 4 baritones, and men's chorus. The orchestra includes 3 flutes, 3 oboes, 3 clarinets, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 trombones, 1 bass trombone, timpani, 3 percussion, harp, and strings

Another Sunrise (2012); Dramatic 30-minute scene; Based on the life and work of Holocaust survivor Krystyna Zywulska; Libretto by Gene Scheer; Commissioned by Music of Remembrance; For soprano; Chamber ensemble includes clarinet, violin, violoncello, bass, piano

The Radio Hour (2014); Choral Opera in One Act; Follows a middle-aged woman (silent actress) through a bad day where she turns on the radio for comfort - the choir becomes not only what is coming out of the radio, but also a stream of her subconscious thoughts; Libretto by Gene Scheer; Commissioned by Pacific Chorale, Vocal Essence, Conspirare, Philadelphia Singers; For chamber choir and silent actress; Chamber ensemble includes flute, clarinet, alto sax, percussion, piano, violin, cello, bass

Great Scott (2015); Famous singer returns to her hometown to save the struggling company that launched her career. The opening night performance of the long-lost opera she discovered falls on the same night as the home team's first National Championship game; Libretto by Terrence McNally (original story); Commissioned by The Dallas Opera and co-produced with San Diego Opera, with support from The Eugene McDermott Foundation, The Hoblitzelle Foundation and The Carol Franc Buck Foundation; For 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, bass trombone, 2 percussion, timpani, piano, harp, strings

It's a Wonderful Life (2016); Opera in Two Acts; Set on Christmas Eve 1945, it tells the story of a man who is sent a guardian angel and shows him the value of his life; Libretto by Gene Sheer; Short story *The Greatest Gift* by Philip Van Doren Stern; Commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera with San Francisco Opera and the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University; For six principal roles, four secondary roles, several smaller roles which can be drawn from the chorus, and five speaking roles for children; Orchestra includes 24 players: 1 flute (piccolo), 1 oboe (English Horn), 1 clarinet (bass clarinet), 1 bassoon, 2 horns, 1 trumpet, 1 trombone, 2 percussion, 1 harp, 1 piano, 6 violins, 2 violas, 3 cellos, 1 contrabass

Two Remain (2016); Opera in Two Acts; Based on the stories of two Holocaust survivors; Libretto by Gene Sheer; Source material for the libretto includes documents and journals in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Zywulska's *I Survived Auschwitz* (1946), as well as various interviews, including several from the documentary film *Paragraph 175* (directed by Rob Epstein & Jeffrey Friedman); Commissioned by Music

of Remembrance through the National Endowment for the Arts and the Music of Remembrance Commissioning Circle; For 3 sopranos, 2 mezzo-sopranos, 1 baritone and 1 actor with an ensemble of six instruments including flute, clarinet, violin, cello, bass and piano

If I Were You (2019); Opera in Two Acts; Modern rendering of the Faust story; Libretto by Gene Scheer; Book *Si j'étais vous* by Julien Green; Commissioned by the Merola Opera Program; For 2 sopranos, 1 mezzo, 2 tenors, 2 baritones, 1 bass-baritone, and small chorus; Orchestra includes 2 flutes (piccolo), oboe (English Horn), clarinet (bass clarinet), bassoon, 2 horns, 1 trumpet, trombone, bass trombone, 2 percussionists, harp and strings

List of Awards, Terrence McNally**Tony Awards**

1993 Best Book of a Musical, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*

1995 Best Play, *Love! Valour! Compassion!*

1996 Best Play, *Master Class*

1999 Best Book of a Musical, *Ragtime*

2019 Special Tony Awards for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre

Drama Desk Awards

1995 Outstanding Play, *Love! Valour! Compassion!*

1996 Outstanding Play, *Master Class*

1998 Outstanding Book of a Musical, *Ragtime*

Primetime Emmy Awards

1990 Outstanding Writing in a Miniseries or a Special, *Andre's Mother*

Obie Awards

1974 Distinguished Play, *Bad Habits*

1995 Winner, Playwriting Award, *Love! Valour! Compassion!*

Lucille Lortel Awards

1992 Winner, Outstanding Play, *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*

1992 Winner, Outstanding Body of Work

Hull-Warriner Award

1974 *Bad Habits*

1987 *Frankie & Johnnie in The Claire De Lune*

1989 *The Lisbon Traviata*

American Academy of Arts and Letters Honor Society

2018 Newly Elected Member in Literature

Theatre Hall of Fame

1996 Induction

Three Decembers Synopsis by Jake Heggie

Part One: 1986

Scene 1: A Letter and a Phone Call

Siblings Charlie and Bea are on the phone to share their famous mother's annual Christmas letter. They laugh about her theatrical writing style and muse on their strained relationship with her. Charlie is in San Francisco and Bea is in Hartford while Madeline (Maddy) is spending Christmas in the Caribbean. She describes a long-ago Christmas in San Francisco with their late father, before they were born. They hardly remember their dad as they were terribly young when he died.

Maddy gleefully announces that she will soon star in her first Broadway musical and concludes her letter by sending love to Bea's family and to Charlie's partner, Curt.

However, his name is actually Burt, and he is very sick with AIDS. After five years with Burt, Charlie is deeply hurt that his mother still doesn't know his name. This has been a constant battle for Charlie and his mother. Bea tells Charlie how she envies the love he and Burt share. Charlie convinces her to come to San Francisco to visit.

Scene 2: A Broadway Stage

Maddy sings *Daybreak*, the final number from her Broadway show.

Scene 3: Backstage

Beatrice joins Maddy in her dressing room after a hugely successful opening night performance. She expresses her concern for Charlie and Burt and accuses Maddy of continuing to be an absent, unsupportive parent. Maddy proclaims her deep love for them and explains that as a single mother, she had to work and miss much of their childhood.

She describes the terrible, sudden car accident that caused their father's death, but Bea notices that a detail of the story is a little different this time. When she asks Maddy about it, Maddy leaves the room.

Scene 4: The Golden Gate Bridge

Bea and Charlie are walking on the Golden Gate Bridge. They imagine their parents as young actors with their lives, dreams and careers ahead of them. Charlie tells Bea that Burt is not doing well and may be dying. Together, they think back on their childhood, what they actually remember about the father they never really knew, and what they've invented over the years.

Part Two: 1996

Scene 1: Charlie's Apartment

Charlie sits alone in his apartment, surrounded by numerous shipping boxes, all packed and sealed. He reads through his journal and talks to Burt, who died seven weeks ago at Christmas time. He remembers how his mother finally came to visit right before Burt's death. She touched his hand and sang the lullaby that Charlie's father used to sing to him. As Charlie remembers, Maddy sings the lullaby. During the song, Bea and Maddy have a quick phone call in which Maddy tells her she's been nominated for a Tony Award. The plan is for all three of them to be together again for the big night. They finish the lullaby as a trio.

Scene 2: Maddy's Apartment

Bea is alone in her mother's apartment. Maddy had promised to be there to help her pick out something special to wear to the Tony Awards, but she never showed up. Bea stands

in front of a mirror, drinks wine, and tries on her mother's clothes as she sings of how deeply she misses her father. Her deep sense of worthlessness isn't helped by her mother's absence or her husband Syd's infidelities. Charlie rushes in and notices how upset she is. He cheers her up with a story about their mother and a rousing number inspired by her passion for shoes.

Madeline enters and tells Charlie that if she wins the Tony, she will speak of how moved and inspired she was by Burt's struggle, and that by working together, we will defeat AIDS. Bea and Charlie are mortified that their mother now wishes to capitalize on Charlie's relationship with Burt: a relationship she had disdained and discarded for so many years.

With emotions and tensions running high, Maddy accuses Bea of being a "sad, sorry, drunken mess" just like her father. Unable to mislead her children any more, Maddy reveals the grim truth about their father and the dark secret she'd been keeping: he suffered from depression, drank heavily, couldn't get work, and wasn't able to help support or raise his young family. One night, without warning, he got up, walked to a subway station, and stepped in front of a train. Maddy made up a story about a car accident to protect her small children from the truth: their father had committed suicide. Bea and Charlie are devastated by the sudden knowledge that they have built their identities and lives on a lie. Is this something one can forgive? They leave their mother alone in her apartment. Maddy slowly pulls herself together and goes to the Tony Awards.

Part Three: 2006

On an empty Broadway stage, Charlie and Bea speak at a memorial service for their mother. Maddy died suddenly and quietly in her sleep after writing her annual Christmas letter. Bea and Charlie acknowledge that they still struggle to understand their mother and reconcile the lie she told about their father. But Bea says, thanks to her own children, she now understands what the theater meant to Maddy: it was her religion, it was her way of forgetting and of feeling deeply. Maddy's ghost joins in, asking their forgiveness and explaining that she found on the stage what every person desires: not escape, but connection. Bea and Charlie offer a loving tribute to their parents' souls. Maddy gratefully accepts. The service concludes with the final line from Maddy's Christmas letter: "All in all isn't life simply grand? I'm so awfully glad I showed up for it."

Understanding the Social Climate of *Three Decembers*

Three Decembers allows the audience to view the AIDS crisis over a timeline, which begins just years after physicians noticed groupings of unusual symptoms in New York and San Francisco. The experience of the AIDS epidemic commenced suddenly at the beginning of the 1980s. In 1981 the CDC announced an outbreak of rare *Pneumocystis pneumonia* in “five white, previously healthy gay men in Los Angeles...all of the men had other unusual infections as well, indicating that their immune systems were not working.” The 80s was a time of deep fear, for they did not know enough information on the disease to make appropriate decisions. For too long of a time, many mistakenly considered AIDS to be a biological attack on the gay community. We might ask ourselves, how did this misinformation flourish, and for how long was the world in the dark about this disease? In 1982, the *New York Times* published the term “GRID,” which stood for Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, which made a further connection to the public that this epidemic only affected gay men. The disease became more frightening in 1984 when *The New York Times* published that “new scientific evidence has raised the possibility that AIDS may be transmissible through saliva.” It would be two long years before that evidence was proven false. The false propaganda of a gay “cancer” was still being researched and refuted in an article as recent as 2016, which discusses new scientific evidence that there is no biological or historical evidence “Patient 0” was the first case in the US. It is difficult to describe the extent to which the AIDS crisis affected the arts.

Losses in the performing arts affect a tightly knit community of performers, directors, stagehands—people who work together daily. Matthew Epstein, a vice

president of Columbia Artists Management, ticks off the opera-world casualties like baseball statistics: “At the Met, several members of the chorus and musical staff. At the Washington Opera, the managing director. At the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the sales manager...” At the New York City Opera, the first deaths stirred fear as well as sorrow: performers who shared wigs and stage makeup worried that AIDS might be transmitted by sweat.⁹³

Musicologist Susan McClary wrote the following in a review:

although a number of highly significant plays... films... and performance art... have focused on AIDS to great critical and popular acclaim, opera has lagged behind. This is in part because opera houses require extensive funding, making them reluctant to take what they perceive as grave financial risks... Even music academics have balked at addressing this issue: a meeting of the program committee for one of our societies broke down in insults and tears last year over a proposed session on AIDS-related pieces.⁹⁴

With all of the difficulties they were up against, I believe that contemporary opera benefited from Terrence McNally, Jake Heggie, and Gene Sheer taking a chance on this subject matter. When asked in an interview with the author if the creative team ran into problems with producing the subject matter in opera, Heggie responded:

I think people were so grateful to have a piece they could dig into. And it's the way it handles it, too... which is that its part of a story. It's part of a story of a family and a community. And when I read the script, I had been wanting to do something that had to do with AIDS for a long time... It's not that it's this is a story about AIDS, you know, because the opera deals with abandonment, suicide, alcohol addiction, you know? Yeah, look, it has depression, all kinds of things. And AIDS is part of that story, too.⁹⁵

⁹³ Michael Shnayerson, "One by One," *Vanity Fair*, last modified August 21, 2013, accessed September 9, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/1987/03/devastation-of-aids-1980s>.

⁹⁴ Susan McClary, review of *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* by Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 175-181, accessed November 11, 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/832065?seq=5#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁹⁵ Jake Heggie, interview by Cynthia Wohlschlager, "Three Decembers and Madeline Mitchell." Online, April 10, 2020.

The opera introduces the issue of AIDS in that Charlie's partner Burt, whom we never meet in person, is sick with the disease. Madeline's thoughts on AIDS, as well as her judgment of Charlie being gay and living in San Francisco with his partner, plays a role in the family disfunction and provides social commentary. In *Three Decembers*, we do not experience death on stage. Instead, the story deals with the psychological effects that death has caused. The first of three deaths is Burt's when he dies from AIDS before the beginning of Part Two.

Full AIDS Quote, Terrence McNally

I'm always startled when I'm asked why I chose to write about AIDS. There was no choice. An artist responds to their world and tries to make sense of it, even the bad things. What else was I going to write about... the weather? It was raining AIDS and there was no umbrella large enough to shelter us. I am thankful for the men and women who took to the streets and made our voices heard. They made a difference. But I'm also grateful to the artists who tried to make sense of the terror and confusion. We also made a difference. I am bewildered, and more than a little angry, by the artists who did nothing but fiddle while they're own disgraced city burned. Why did I choose to write about AIDS? The question is always put in the past tense. I am still writing about AIDS. Each of us here this morning in our own way is still writing about AIDS. As individuals, as a city, as a nation, we are no more done with AIDS than AIDS is done with us. Its scars are lasting, the trauma has not gone away. But it is to the future we look today. A world without AIDS for sure, but a world that has not forgotten, and we must be vigilant it never will, a time when AIDS was a death sentence, and those who were infected with it were treated as the unholy damned...I walk for all the men and women who never had the opportunity of life not cut unreasonably short. So many possibilities denied, so many voices stilled before they could be heard, so many plays about AIDS not written. I weep for them, but I walk in thanks for all that was done to make our lives a safer and better one. I walk in remembrance. I walk in love. If you don't know why we're here this morning (*at the AIDS walk*), you're the reason I still write about AIDS.

***Three Decembers* Whole Work Map Excerpt from Part One, Scene I**

Three Decembers takes place on one day per decade, from 1986-2006.⁹⁶ Part One occurs on Christmas day 1986, around dinner time. The clue for the time of day comes from Bea's line, "Damn! The oven. I forgot."⁹⁷ and a directive in the score that states *Lights up suddenly on Maddy, glamorous, radiant, dressed for the Christmas party.*⁹⁸ Scene One takes place in three environments at once. We find out at the beginning of the scene that Charlie is in San Francisco talking on the phone to his sister Bea, who is in Connecticut. They are reading the Christmas letter from their mother, Madeline, who is writing from the Caribbean. Madeline's presence in the Caribbean sets up the audience's connection that the family is not together on Christmas, and that this is a regular occurrence. As for the surrounding physical environment, we know that Madeline is inside and that she is sitting down writing the letter. *Why now* is answered in that the *now* sets up the family dynamic from the beginning of the opera. Madeline is always on the go and absent from her children's lives.

⁹⁶ Jake Heggie, *Three Decembers, An Opera in One Act*, libretto by Gene Scheer (San Francisco: Bent Pen Music, 2013), 14.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 14.

A list of character mentions by another character and what was said**Part One, Scene I****About Maddy**

Bea: She'd say "replete."

Charlie: Replete with overblown...

Bea: She'd say, "judicious."

Charlie: "replete with judiciously worded" bullshit

Charlie: Year after year, it's the same old...

Bea: The same old ...bullshit

Charlie: Our mother writes in iambic pentameter

Bea: Well, she is the great Madeline Mitchell!

Charlie: Theater icon

Bea: American sweetheart of the stage.

Charlie: Who's greatest role to date is "Absentee Mother."

Charlie: (in reference to everyone being scared) Not all. Not Madeline Mitchell.

Charlie: Not a question like: (in reference to Maddy's letter) "How is Burt?"

Bea: She was already a widow at your age. (26 - same as Charlie)

Charlie: I'm pissed at Mom, but I like when she talks about our dad.

Charlie: (in reference to first Broadway musical) I won't go...you can't make me

Charlie: "Curt." She called him "Curt." His name is Burt. It's been Burt the 900 times she's met him.

Bea: How could she do that?

Charlie: No! All of my life, I've struggled and fought with her about this. Hoping she'd come around. All of my life, hoping she'd say: "It's OK, son." Finally I find him, and I take him home to mother, Thinking, now she'll come around.

Charlie: He's the best man I've ever known and she doesn't remember his name. Calls him "Curt," sends him a hug, and thinks that's OK?

Charlie: Tell Mom: Burt isn't going away.

Bea: "Curt"! I could kill her!

About Charlie

Maddie: Charlie, I'm sorry for all the vile things I said to you.

Maddie: And I forgive you for the even viler things you said to me.

Bea: I envy you guys. What you share. (about Charlie and Burt's relationship)

About Bea

Charlie: What do you mean? Your life is perfect.

Charlie: I really need to be with my big sister.

About Burt

Charlie: I'm just worried about Burt

Charlie: He coughs a lot. But he's so optimistic.

Charlie: His name is Burt.

It's been Burt the 900 times she's met him.

Burt with her grandkids.

Burt at her opening nights.

For the past five years of my life it's been Burt.

But he was the one holding me close and saying: “It’s OK, Charlie. I love you like this. Love you just as you are. It’s OK. I’m right here. I’m not going away.”

He’s the best man I’ve ever known

Well, I’ll be right here taking care of him.

I’ll be here when his health turns around.

I’ll be the one holding him close and saying: “You’re OK, Burt. I love you like this. Love you just as you are. It’s OK. They’ll find a cure. I’m not going away.”

Bea: Send him all of our love.

About the Father

Maddie: Once, before you were born...

your father and I spent Christmas in San Francisco.

And we walked across the Golden Gate Bridge.

We stood on the bridge and made a vow:

We would be great stars and set the world on fire.

Then we walked to Sausalito and your father ordered crab and chowder for Christmas dinner.

Bea: I hardly remember Daddy, but I miss him.

Charlie: You were just seven when he died.

Bea: You were just five.

Bea: I wish I remembered.

Charlie: I don’t remember, either.

All: I had only begun to fathom the depths of his goodness.

And then he was gone.

Part 1, Scene Two

None

Part 1, Scene Three

About Maddie

Bea: (about Maddy's performance) It's even better than you said. Yes. And you were amazing. Gorgeous. Drop dead gorgeous.

Bea: Actually, you're luckier than most. You're a great actress. You can fake it.

Bea: Those are words, Maddy. Only words.

Bea: (in reference to believing that Maddy cares if Charlie is gay) Yes, I do.

About Syd

Bea: Real life is messy

Maddy: Where's Syd?

Bea: Home with the children.

Maddy: Everything okay?

Maddy: How 'bout Syd?

Bea: **Syd?** He's. You know. This and that.

About the father

Bea: We want to remember things about him

Who he was.

What he thought about.

Was he happy?

Maddy: He loved you both so much

Bea: Was he a good actor?

Maddy: He. Yes. A very good actor. He just never got a chance. Fate. A silver car. A patch of ice. He slipped and was gone.

Bea: Was he handsome?

Maddy: Very.

Bea: Were you good together?

Maddy: In bed? The best! Passionate and fun. No one's ever been better

About Charlie

Bea: What about Charlie?

You haven't mentioned him once.

Do you even care about what is happening To him and Burt?

Maddy: I am somehow responsible now for the choices he's made in his life?

I am torn apart.

Bea: Charlie's going to need our help We must be strong for him.

Bea: Charlie is the reason he is who he is:

Loving, giving, kind. And scared.

Your son, my brother, he loves this man and will probably lose him.

We must stand by him.

Maddy: I love you and your brother with every inch of my soul.

I loved him even when he cut me off

And moved away to pursue his... new lifestyle.

Maddy: You think I care he's gay?

About Burt

Bea: Yes. Burt is a member of our family. God help him.

Bea: (to Maddy) It's clear that you don't like him.

But, he's not the reason Charlie is who he is.

Note by Jake Heggie

“All in all, isn’t life simply grand? I’m so awfully glad I showed up for it.” (Madeline Mitchell in *Three Decembers*)

Shortly after the premiere of *Dead Man Walking* in 2000, the opera’s librettist, the great American playwright Terrence McNally, mentioned a short script he’d written for an AIDS benefit in 1999. He gave me a copy of *Some Christmas Letters (and a Couple of Phone Calls)* and from the first words, the story sang to me. It felt true, honest, emotionally big, and exactly what I was looking for as a chamber opera. I started sketching musical ideas in the margins and knew I wanted to compose it for the great, inspiring American mezzo-soprano, Frederica von Stade. She and I have a rich history of collaborating, and by then I’d already written many songs for her as well as a major role in *Dead Man Walking*. She was on board right away.

A brief but powerful fourteen pages long, the script is about the stormy, emotional lives of a famous stage actress named Madeline Mitchell and her two adult children, Bea and Charlie. The script was created for an AIDS benefit at Carnegie Hall in New York and was performed one time only by the astonishing cast of Julie Harris (Madeline), Cherry Jones (Bea) and Victor Garber (Charlie). Told through letters and phone calls, the story follows these characters through two decades of their lives.

It is a play about identity and family, discovering the truth of who we are and who our parents are. Hovering over it all is the difficult, tense history of the AIDS crisis in America. Houston Grand Opera and San Francisco Opera co-commissioned the piece as a

chamber opera that could be done in different size venues with three singers and 11 instrumentalists all on stage together.

I first read the script in 2001, but due to several detours it wasn't until 2007 that librettist Gene Scheer and I were finally able to get going. It was our first opera collaboration. Taking this 14-page script and turning it into a viable opera was a big leap requiring imagination, invention and vision, all of which Gene has in spades. He enlarged the story and gave it dramatic conflicts and actions not found in the original script; he also invented the big family secret at its core. After considering several titles for the opera, we settled on *Three Decembers*.

With Gene's clear libretto, I was able to compose the opera in about six months. The flavor of musical theater heard throughout is due to the dominance of Madeline Mitchell, the famous Broadway star who is also the matriarch of this family. Though Bea and Charlie each have their own musical personalities, Madeline's influence and gravitational pull is inevitable.

The premiere of *Three Decembers* took place at Houston Grand Opera's Cullen Theater on February 29, 2008 with Frederica von Stade (Madeline), soprano Kristin Clayton (Bea) and baritone Keith Phares (Charlie). The cast reunited later that year for a production by San Francisco Opera at UC Berkeley. Following that production, we made a few essential rewrites and ten years later, *Three Decembers* has received nearly two dozen international productions with several more on the horizon.

First the Words - written by Jake Heggie

“Composition can be a lonely business. You spend days or even months by yourself, sometimes writing easily, sometimes smashing your head on a table or a keyboard to get any notes out at all. That is alternately enjoyable and frustrating. But a theater composer by nature has an intense need to be connected with people. For me, collaboration is what delivers the most inspiration to compose. It always has. The alone time is terribly important, but the creative interaction invigorates my imagination like nothing else. During the past 15 years, I have been fortunate to collaborate not only with some of the great singers of our time, but with inspirational conductors, directors, instrumentalists, arts administrators, and most of all: *wonderful* writers.

Collaborations with writers are especially important because, of course, without words there could be no songs and no opera. I cannot fathom why it is common practice in opera to leave the librettist's name off the billing. Why is it only Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and not Mozart and Da Ponte's? Yes, music makes it an opera. But if the libretto isn't strong, the opera will be flawed. A composer may write a fine score, but a weak libretto will compromise it as an opera. It is theater, and an excellent libretto gives the composer the best chance to create a successful work.

When I was a teenager, I set my own texts and wrote pop songs and musical theater ballads. (I was sure I'd be writing for Barbra Streisand or Carly Simon. No dice.) But when I was 17, my first composition teacher, the late Ernst Bacon, introduced me to poetry by Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, and after that, nothing was the same. Those poems leapt off the page and sang to me, and throughout my twenties I wrote

songs based on poetry by wonderful dead authors. A great and rewarding challenge, but very lonely. Rewrites by dead poets are out and there's no way to ask what this or that meant to the writer.

In my late twenties, I suffered an injury to my right hand (focal dystonia) that forced me to stop playing piano, and as a result I stopped composing, too. I moved from Los Angeles to San Francisco and landed a job at the San Francisco Opera in 1994 as the staff writer. I was in the public relations and marketing department and interacted with some of the world's great singers on a daily basis. A few of them became very good friends and they inspired me to compose again. Thanks to watching rehearsals for Conrad Susa and Philip Littell's *The Dangerous Liaisons*, I became interested in collaborating with a writer.

So, for countertenor Brian Asawa and baritone Earle Patriarco, I asked my friend John Hall in Los Angeles for new texts (*Encountertenor* and *Thoughts Unspoken*). For soprano Nicolle Foland, I went to the Bay Area poet Gini Savage (*Natural Selection*). For soprano Kristin Clayton, it was Philip Littell (*Eve-Song*). For Frederica von Stade, she herself wrote the words (*Paper Wings*, *On the Road to Christmas* and *Winter Roses*). For Jennifer Larmore, it was Gavin Dillard (*Of Gods and Cats*) and so on. I also continued to set the classic poets, and it was a rich time of learning and growing through lively exchange, challenge and comparison. This period of exploration with writers led to a conversation that changed my life forever.

In 1996, Lotfi Mansouri, who was then general director at San Francisco Opera, called me into his office and said, "I want you to write a new opera for the millennium.

And I want to send you to New York to meet with Terrence McNally. I think you would make a great team." Now remember, I was the PR guy at the time. The PR guy who wrote songs.

So how is a 35-year old composer supposed to respond to that? A new work for San Francisco Opera? With Terrence McNally? It seemed impossible, improbable, terrifying and incredibly exciting. What young composer would turn it down? I met with Terrence in May of 1996 when he was still working on his book for the musical *Ragtime* and preparing his play *Love! Valor! Compassion!* to be made into a movie. He was also moving to a new apartment and sorting through his vast record collection. He was a bit distracted. Lotfi had proposed a comedy for the millennium. Terrence wasn't interested. I thought it was a no-go, and then I got a surprise phone call in February 1997. Terrence wanted to meet and talk about the opera. We met in June and he said the words "Dead Man Walking" and life again took a surprising turn. It was the last thing I'd expected to hear-and it was an inspired idea.

We talked about how we would work together and Terrence told me upfront that he is not a poet, a novelist or a librettist per se. He is a playwright. And he told me he would write a play and set up scenes and dialogue that he hoped would inspire music. If I felt the music taking me in a certain direction and the words were not going there, he would rewrite, or I could fill in with my own words and he'd work on it later. It was to be a real exchange and collaboration. Terrence has a famous passion for opera, and a brilliant sense of how to set things up to work on the stage. All I had to do was trust, listen, feel and write.

After discussing the opera for about nine months, Terrence was ready to write the first act libretto. He wanted me to be with him, so in March 1998, we flew to his house in Key West. On the cab ride to the airport, the main hymn "He will gather us around" came to me, so I knew it would be a good trip. He wrote the first act libretto in four days and then read it to me. Six months later, in December 1998, I played through Act 1 for him at his house in Bridgehampton, and he wrote the second act libretto in four days. Less than a year later, we had the entire opera. Revisions after a workshop in August of 1999 were minimal and I had plenty of time to orchestrate. Throughout, there was a constant exchange of thoughts and ideas.

I had found a generous collaborator with an innate sense of how opera differs from straight theater, and what it does best. I had also found a great friend and a mentor. That first major collaboration has served as the standard and model for every collaboration I have had since. It was my good fortune to start by working with the very best.

I learned several big lessons through that experience. Collaborators are creative partners who will often work together for many years. To make it work, each has to respect the other and share a common goal. They have to be able to depend upon each other. And they have to be flexible enough to see other points of view and make changes, but also know when to defend a position. They cannot be afraid to speak their minds but must do so constructively-and always for the strength and benefit of the work.

Working with Terrence inspired me to go on to several other gratifying collaborations, including original works with Armistead Maupin, Sister Helen Prejean

and Charlene Baldrige, among others. I also collaborated again with Terrence to create a musical scene for soprano called *At the Statue of Venus*, and I set the final monologue from his play *Master Class*. These collaborations have subsequently informed my perspective on classic poems and texts, and have actually given me a new freedom to explore those with fresh eyes.

In 2004, I finally had the opportunity to work with the very gifted writer Gene Scheer. When we met, I knew I'd found a collaborator for life. From day one, there was a natural ease and free-flowing exchange of ideas. Gene works passionately and with infectious enthusiasm. We have great respect for each other's work and we enjoy being together. We challenge each other, inspire each other, and feel free to comment on all aspects of our work together. My work is definitely better thanks to working with him, and I know he feels the same about his own work. He's quick and prolific and in a short time we've written several song cycles and two stage works.

For seven years, I searched for the right circumstances to create a music theater piece based on Terrence McNally's short play *Some Christmas Letters*. I wanted it to be a chamber opera for three characters. Gene felt inspired by it and agreed to create a libretto based on Terrence's play, and that is how *Three Decembers* came about. My two primary collaborators involved in the same project. A dream come true.

The freedom and adventure I find in fresh, lively collaborations has led me to work almost exclusively with living writers now. Somehow, everything about the work feels more vibrant, flexible and theatrical this way. Maybe later, I'll get back to some of the

dead poets whose work I adore. But for now, it is intensely rewarding to be able to look somebody in the eye and say "So, I have this idea..." "

Interview with Jake Heggie

Jake Heggie: How are you?

Cynthia Wohlschlager: I am doing well. The world is a little crazy right now. But other than that...

Jake Heggie: Did you hear that there's like a virus? Did you hear that?

Cynthia Wohlschlager: No... *laughter* I was talking to my friend today, and I'm like, I don't even know... the entire world is inside right now.

Jake Heggie: I know. It's a very, very strange time. Are you staying sort of healthy and sane though?

Cynthia Wohlschlager: So far... Yeah, I'm staying inside all of the time. Well, I was thinking that it was weird because, as a doctoral student, going into the third year, I feel like I've been in quarantine for three years, and the whole world has now joined me. But it's definitely extra in that I can't even go to the store regularly.

Jake Heggie: Well, I have a studio that is completely separate from where we live, so all I do is go from the house to my studio. There's no one there, no one around there, and then back home. But I'm very grateful to have a place to go that's away from here. Because if I had to stay here and write an opera, it would just never happen.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Right. Because it's like, you know, you feel like you're just living the same day over. It's Groundhog's Day over and over.

Jake Heggie: Yeah.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: But I mean, at least there are good things coming from it, if one looks for the silver lining and all that.

Jake Heggie: Oh, I mean we have to. Otherwise, it's all doom and gloom. No, no way.

You know, there has to be some sense of direction and possibility and opportunity on the horizon. Otherwise, why bother with anything, right?

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Jake Heggie: Well, all in all, is it life simply grand!?! (*shared laughter*)

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Like all of this was set up just for my *Three Decembers* paper

Jake Heggie: Amazing.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Thank you so much for taking the time out today.

Jake Heggie: It's my pleasure.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: I wanted to give you just a little bit of background on the topics covered in my document so that you know where some of the questions are coming from and you know the premise on which they're being formed. So, my document is at first a stage director's handbook on approaching 21st-century opera, followed by a discussion of the creative team of *Three Decembers*, a character analysis of Madeline Mitchell, a musical discussion of your music, motifs, and score markings, and then it talks a little bit about 21st-century topics that *Three Decembers* explores. So, it's kind of a wide variety of things so the questions will not be overly specific in nature all in one spot.

Jake Heggie: All right.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: OK, shall we start?

Jake Heggie: Yeah.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: OK. So, my document looks into how the atmosphere that is set up in a rehearsal leads to the quality of onstage performance. Have you noticed behaviors

or atmospheres setup by stage directors and artistic teams in rehearsal that lead to the type of performance that you find to be successfully communicative?

Jake Heggie: Oh, absolutely. It all starts in the room. You know, that's where everything begins. That's where the creative process begins and where it's nurtured along by being in the room with the people directly involved. And that whole feeling in the room is what's going to create the sense for the audience of what's happening on stage in terms of cohesiveness, camaraderie, everyone telling the same story. You know, so. Yeah, no, it's huge.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: I want to thank you for the risk you took in writing an opera that brings up the subject of AIDS. In my research, I've read many times that other art forms are way ahead of opera in talking about the subject. I was wondering what gave your creative team the confidence to move forward with this in opera, and have you run into any problems due to the subject matter?

Jake Heggie: No, totally the opposite. I think people were so grateful to have a piece they could dig into. And it's the way it handles it, too, is very much the way Terrence McNally's script handled it, which is that it's part of a story. It's part of a story of a family and a community. And when I read the script, I had been wanting to do something that had to do with AIDS for a long time. And it just felt like the perfect thing, because I really wanted to write the lead role for Flicka von Stade, and the fact that it was three characters, and family dynamics, and personal relationships were all brought into it. But it deals with it in a way that is very real. It's not that it's this is a story about AIDS, you know, because the opera deals with abandonment, suicide, alcohol addiction, you know?

Yeah, look, it has depression, all kinds of things. And AIDS is part of that story, too. And how it affects Charlie's life and Charlie's family and his relationship with his sister and his mother. So, yeah, it was just it was very, very important to me to do it. And, I wanted to do it in a way that it could be taken on by many, many different companies and people. And another reason, I felt it was very important was when I wrote it, which was already two thousand eight...It was interesting. There were a lot of younger singers who were looking at the piece and learning it, who had no reference point for what the AIDS crisis was like and how that destroyed families and how it put a wedge between people and how much fear there was. You know, we're dealing with that right now. There's a lot of fear out there. And that's what it reminds me, a little bit of that whole situation. But, you know, I was in my 20s in the 80s and saw a lot of friends die. Saw their families shun them and disown them and saw other families rally and come back together like they never had before. So, it was a was something that I felt needed to be told.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Yeah, I agree completely. I mean, even in the way that I gave a lecture-recital on Three December in February, and the young audience, I mean, they were surprised. When working with Charlie, he had to dig in to understand how bad it was then. I had him watch numerous movies on it. And he was just in shock at what families and people went through.

Jake Heggie: I mean, I know cultural memory is very, very short, you know, and that's why it's important to tell stories. That's why I try to pick subjects of stories that need to be told, because they tell big stories about human nature and being on the planet. And one of the things that I found so amazing was a friend of mine when I went to his wedding. He's

like thirty-two. So, it was already two years ago; he was 30. And I went to his wedding to his partner, his husband, and their huge family from all over Texas and Pennsylvania was there. And, you know, at one point later, he said, so you couldn't, you know, in the 80s, you couldn't have imagined something like this would have happened?... No way. No way. No one imagined this in the 80s or the 90s. You thought that it couldn't have been possible, you know. So, it really is very, very different today. That's why I do think it's important to remember where it came from.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Well, and even to have the audience think, you know, that there is a possibility for change... That change does occur and can occur and that we just have to keep fighting for what we believe in.

Jake Heggie: Exactly.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Yeah. OK. When I first think about the character of Madeline Mitchell, I see a mother with narcissistic personality traits. The opera focuses a lot on her bad behavior, but in the end, Charlie comes full circle. What do you think the audience needs to learn from her? Do we like her? Do we hate her?

Jake Heggie: Well, it's interesting. You know, a lot of actresses who have played her have struggled with this because as an actress, of course, you want the audience to like you. You want the audience to like your character. And it was really hard for Flicka at first because Madeline is not necessarily likable. She's amazing, and she's fabulous, and she's wonderful. Finally, Flicka realized that a lot of that is a tough exterior that's a cover-up for what's underneath because there's been so much. There're the wounds. They are so deep. And, you know, when people have been wounded, they do cover up for it in a

certain way. But she's also, she's one of those...performers. She's just got to keep going on the stage. She's just got to do it. You know, it's what she's here to do. It's what she knows. It's when she feels alive and connected. And, you know, she's like, you know, a soldier that constantly has to go off to war. You know, she just has to do it. But you know, I've known people like her, and I've known performers who have huge hearts, huge, vulnerable hearts, but they've developed a tough exterior to be able to get through because it's hard to live that way. It's hard to be that vulnerable all the time. So, she's, you know, she's very complicated, all the characters are very complicated. Charlie is the most honest and open. You know, he's the most honest and open. Bea is a mess. And Madeline. Madeline's kind of a mess, too, because of the choices she made and this huge secret she's been carrying around all her life. And now she's just terrified because the secret is coming out little by little. She's making little mistakes. And she's also at a stage in her career where it's not going to be forever, but she's going to keep trying for as long as she possibly can. Yes, she's complicated, and we had a lot of talks about that at the very beginning, and I kept telling Flicka, look, you know, you don't have to convince us to love you. We're going to love you because you're amazing on the stage. And you've lived this big life, and you do love your children. It's just complicated love. You know, no one has a perfect family. Well, I mean, if they say they do, I don't believe them. And so that's why a lot of people see this show and go, wow, do I recognize these people? But she does love them, and she does care about them. But, she has a tough time showing it because of the things that happened and the way their lives have grown apart and the way the world is, you know?

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Yeah. And I think about your remark on Charlie and how he's the most open and honest. And he still has to deal constantly with other people not being that way towards him.

Jake Heggie: Right.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: All you see. Like even someone who is open and trying to communicate with the world, there are still these barriers.

Jake Heggie: Yeah. Yeah.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: OK. So, when studying scholar's interpretations of motifs in different composers' work, there've been theories such as the ability for motifs to represent the past, sometimes the present, or sometimes the future in a story. How do you see the use of your motifs? Do you see them, you know, as you talked, being part of the musical language, the musical world? Do you use them in specific ways?

Jake Heggie: They well, you know, they actually they emerge. That's how they happen. They reveal themselves to me. My process is I work very closely with the librettist, and we cast it in our heads, and we start talking about what's essential about each character. And then I live with them. And then, when the music starts to happen, I just start writing. And the first gesture is incredibly theatrical. And it's all Madeline Mitchell because she dominates the story because of the choices that she's made and the world that she brings with her. You know, it is a music theater world. It's a big theatrical world. So, that's the gesture from the beginning. And that motif is very clear and very strong. And it gives us a sense of her, but not the whole picture of her. But, they sort of emerge as I compose, and like this sort of jaunty, fun atmosphere that goes between... Which is kind of a

rhythmic and harmonic motif that goes between Charlie and Bea when they're reading the letter. At first, that sort of playful thing that they have, you know, and that oh, *it was thrilling about the letter*, you know? *Oh, we were happy that day*. You know, that's something that comes back to them and returns. I think the you know, and the other big motif that comes in is about the father and the chair and the Golden Gate Bridge duet. And that to me not only represents the father, but it's their interpretation of the father, which is what kids have. That's all they have. And their mom hasn't given them much more to go on. So, they make up these things about him, and he can be a hero because he's not there for them to know about or to tell other stories. So those are the strongest motifs that come to mind, but they emerge in the moment. And I use them to remind the audience of that particular emotional current or that particular character, and that even sometimes when the character isn't there, the spirit of them is there. So, the father is there when the kids are yearning to know him or to share. Madeline is constantly there in different guises. The motif is drawn out in different ways. But, that's how I use motifs, is to give the audience information that the characters don't say outright. It's subtext and it's in their emotional world.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: And I love that. OK. So, when you're composing, what comes first, the meter or the rhythm of the individual line? I can just imagine you practicing the lines over and over to find your declamation, how you want them expressed. Does that happen?

Jake Heggie: It's interesting, as I'm writing a new opera right now. So, it's interesting, because sometimes the emotion of it comes first, and what is the heartbeat of that

moment? And sometimes, that means the language has to change a little bit. What I'm always trying to do is find the pulse and the heartbeat of a scene or a moment in the story. What's going on between those characters? What do they want, and how will I represent that musically? How do they want to be represented musically? So, it's really listening to the characters, getting to know them, and listening to what they want to say. Getting to know them well enough so that they sing it to me without me imposing something on them. And then suddenly that will change the meter of what's on the page or suddenly a sense of line develops. And we have to rewrite or we rearrange, or it might already be there. I don't know. But it really varies. Sometimes, it's all right there on the page...and sometimes it's elusive. But, it's all about clarity, clarity, the story, the story, the clarity, clarity, the story, the story, the characters within that. What do they want? Why are they in the room? Why are they in that scene? What are they carrying with them into the room and into the scene? What is transforming at that moment that gives us information? Why is that scene essential that if we don't have that information, we can't go forward with the story? All of that is in play. And then somehow music emerges and it starts to lead. So sometimes it's the rhythm of a name like the Madeline Mitchell theme that happens a lot. Sometimes it's a tune that emerges and suddenly starts. The tune starts to determine the flow of the language, you know, between the characters. You know, it's many different things. It isn't just one thing, but a lot of my work is to listen and empathize, and then respond. That's why I think a lot of the real hard work for the librettist is digging down deep to find the words that those people can say at that moment and still leave room for music to tell the story. So, the character isn't saying, *I'm sad, I want this*. They're actually

doing something. And through that, we can get that they're unhappy or frustrated. And what they want without them stating it overtly, you know. And so, I think that's a lot of the work that goes in from the beginning, with the libretto. And that's why there's so much work that goes on between us so that music can emerge and those motifs, and the rhythm of a scene, and the heartbeat of a scene so that it's constantly driving forward with a rhythmic momentum. You know, when you learn a classic role in an opera that you don't know... As you get to know the piece, suddenly, you realize there's a rhythm and a momentum to the piece carrying it forward, and you're part of this momentum. That's what I'm looking for when I'm writing...what is the impetus that is driving this forward always, so that when it does sit back for a moment and something blossoms and emerges, it's really, really special.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I'm thinking about being in rehearsal with the music. Like the more and more...it's almost like you allow yourself to dig into the puzzle on the page and all of a sudden if people really, really pay attention and are accurate and are staying open, all of a sudden everything starts to connect, everything is relatable to the next thing. And it's very, very interesting.

Jake Heggie: That's what I'm aiming for - is trying to put those pieces together in an architecture where it can reveal itself to you in the rehearsal room. But I also don't want to micromanage singers, because I want performers to have the room to find their own place within it. Like when I see scores that are in 7/16, and then there's a retard, and then there's an accelerando, then it's in eight, you know, then in two and then all of these meter changes that are trying to micromanage the motion of it too much. I mean, what I tell

young composers all the time is like if it's in 4/4, just put 4/4 and either *accelerando* or *retard* and they will figure it out. So, that's what I try to do is to leave space for the performers. And that doesn't mean it isn't complicated or complex, you know, because it is. But I want the performers not to feel like they're locked in a vise so that they're so freaked out about counting and pitches that they can't get into character. That matters enormously to me. So, yeah, it's trying to put the puzzle together again so that there's clarity and there's room to explore and grow and make it your own as a performer. But, that's the general message that we were trying to create...Is it very strong and very clearly there?

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Mm-hmm. One hundred percent. My document talks about sharing dramatic pacing, and I think of it showing up in your scores... they're full of statements like *take time here*...And, you know, when it goes together with the conductor and the orchestra it's like there's just enough solidity of where things have to just be, and then so much freedom in other places and it is fun.

Jake Heggie: And that's why you need a really good conductor who understands the dramatic pacing. That's why a theater conductor and an opera conductor is very different from someone who's essentially an abstract symphonic conductor, you know, very different.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: So, what do you see as the difference? What makes someone an opera conductor?

Jake Heggie: The same thing that sort of makes someone an opera composer. I think there are essentially two kinds of composers. There are abstract composers who are really

good at like chamber, symphonic, art song...things like that. And then, there are theater people...opera composers who are all about storytelling, and dramatic pacing, and the stage, and words, and how they're set. That's why, you know, Verdi, very clearly, a theater composer, did not have a lot of abstract music. That's not where he lived, and that's not where he was comfortable. Same thing with Puccini. Can you imagine Brahms writing an opera? No, it would be terrible. Right. This is why Beethoven really struggled with *Fidelio*...and *Fidelio* has great music. But, it's a very problematic opera because he was not essentially a theater guy. His place was the concert hall. Now, it's the same thing with conductors. It's the mindset. And, there are people who are, you know, I find it so interesting that in the classical concert world, we expect people to be good at everything. So, a composer should be able to write a symphony and an opera, you know, whereas out in the actual theater world, there are musical theater people, there are playwrights and in the literature world, there are novelists. There are people who do write really well, short stories. Poets, playwrights, those are very different disciplines, and we respect them. We don't expect playwrights to also write poetry and novels. But for some reason, there's this confounding thing in the concert world. And yet, those are very distinct, different disciplines. And I think it's the same with performers, for example, singers. There is no singer that is good at doing everything right. I don't necessarily want to hear Patti LuPone sing *Tosca* or *Butterfly*, but I want to hear her sing *Momma Rose*. But, I don't know if I want to hear Christine Goerke sing *Momma Rose*, you know, or *My Fair Lady*. You know, there are different voices, different kinds of things. So, it's knowing what you do well. Now and then, there are those exceptions. There are people who are really good at a

lot of things... Like Mozart, the freak, you know. And Janacek and Tchaikovsky knew how to write concert and opera. But those are exceptions. Not everyone's like that. Same thing with performers. Like there's very few singers who do opera and musical theater really well. And I think it's true with conductors, too.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Jake Heggie: Sorry, I went on a long cycle

Cynthia Wohlschlager: I loved it because I was thinking about writing about absolute music in my document...And how in opera that dramatic pacing cannot cross with the needs of absolute music. Like musical beauty can exist, and it should, but it can't be the driving force of the character. It was just making me think. And then I looked down, and I saw the name Terrence McNally, and I just wanted to cry. I'm so sorry for the passing of Terrence McNally. What are your favorite memories of working with him?

Jake Heggie: Oh, my God. His generosity and his incredible spirit. He had such enthusiasm for...he loved opera. He loved theater more than anything. You know, that line that Madeline says in *Three Decembers*... "Not escape, but connection." That's Terrence. It's all about connecting. It was like it's the most vital, wonderful way to connect us through theater. And he was, you know, he believed in me before there was almost anything to believe in. You know, at the San Francisco Opera, the people there had gotten to know me as a songwriter. And so, they asked me to write an opera that sent me to New York to meet Terrence McNally. And it took Terrence a little while. But he said, yeah, I believe in serendipity, and I like your work, and I like the people that you like to work with. So, yeah, let's do a project together. That was huge, you know. So, he was

incredibly generous, and I think I loved his theater instinct, I loved that we thought the same way about character and the combination of music and words. His goal always from the beginning was to set up scenes and to give me language that would inspire music. And then, once the music took off, he said, that's the most important thing. Go with it. He goes, if you need new words because these words don't fit, just let me know, or put in your own words for a while. Maybe we'll keep them, or maybe they're markers until we find something else. And he also loved trying things in the room. He wanted me there with him when he was writing the first and second act librettos of *Dead Man Walking*. He wanted me there with him, even though we really didn't talk about it much. You know, it was at the end of the week, but he wanted me to be there because he got energy from talking about other things that we would bring together. And so, he was a real role model about how to live your life with enthusiasm, with gratitude, with generosity. Also, he was all about giving people opportunities, giving people a chance. He had a real eye for talent that might be hidden when it came to actors, singers, or directors. And, he was willing to give a chance. And, he was a real mentor, and friend, and a total professional. He was very, very demanding. It was impossible sometimes. But, you know, because he believed in it so much.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. The direction portion of my document talks about the difference between demanding excellence and giving away parts of who you are... that it doesn't have to be one or the other. Just the whole having a standard, and at the same time, meeting people where they are. OK. What do you see opera moving towards in the near future...Let's say in the next 20 years in America?

Jake Heggie: Well, I think we can see the trajectory. I think the big problem is the big houses that we built for opera that are like 3,000, 4,000 seats. They're gonna get more and more difficult to fill. And that's why a lot of smaller companies and alternative venues have emerged. Also, we have all these singers coming through programs who want to perform. And so, they're finding friends to create small companies with. They're finding composers that they like to work with that they met. It's really amazing about the interest in newer work because of course, that was sidelined for a long time. Because it had been taken over...the concert music world had kind of been taken over by academia. So, the general public was terrified of all new work because they thought it was, you know, obtuse, and acerbic, and difficult to know...and they don't want to hear people screaming. And, you know, a lot of singers avoided it, too. And that started changing in the 80s, 90s, and when *Dead Man Walking* came along. It was one of maybe two new operas that season. And now there are like dozens every year. So, I think that trajectory is going to continue. And there are singers who make their whole career out of singing new work, which I find incredibly inspiring, too. So, there's this mutual inspiration and looking for a home. I think talent is always going to find a way to express itself. And if there isn't a venue, it will look for a venue, or create a venue. And so, I think in a lot of these bigger houses we've seen the seasons get shorter and shorter and shorter. For example, when I started at San Francisco Opera twenty-five years ago, we did 10 operas in the fall. Now they do five, you know, and that's a huge difference in 25 years. And yet, the budget is higher than ever, and it's harder to get people in. So, they're having to look to be smarter, and to find other venues, and other ways to perform, and other ways to excite and entice

an audience in. And I think that's going to continue. I think, you know, opera started as this full afternoon/evening thing where you went with your friends, you had dinner, you had diversions, and you spent the whole day. And now I think people who go out are gonna go out for an evening. They want to be able to do it with their friends, and they want it to be fun, and they don't want it to be overblown or too long. And they want to enjoy it. They want the whole experience to be fun. And so, I think there's a movement in that direction as well. And, I think we're looking for pieces, both new and old, that can fit that model. But, I also think people look for big events. It has to feel like an event. It can't feel like, oh, yeah, that's going on. I can catch it whenever I feel like it. It needs to feel like a special event, the same way if Lady Gaga is coming to town, and it's one night only... You buy the ticket, you go, if you're a huge fan. Right. So, it needs to be that kind of excitement again. But, you know, I know companies are working on this. So, I do think there's a big future for the art form. It's just evolving, which it always does. The arts are supposed to evolve. It's when you lock them down that they start to just disintegrate. You know, the arts happen. If the Opera House is a museum, it's dead, you know, and we know that's not the case. We know it's a living, breathing thing. I think it's new ideas, and new innovations and new things come along. It's pretty exciting, actually.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: What do you think an opera has to have to stand the test of time?

Jake Heggie: Well, OK. First of all, it has to be... I find that the stories that tend to work the best are very intimate stories with large forces at work, large forces beyond the character's control. Or, maybe they're trying to control those forces, but they can't. And

stories that deal with social justice, like some of the great stories of the past deal with social justice...*Marriage of Figaro*...big social justice opera...*Semele*... big social justice opera... *Butterfly*...you know, all the Verdi operas. They are all drawn to these things about different classes and casts, and why people wind up in these roles, and how they deal with it. I think that's an important element. But it has to have extraordinary, powerful, strong music that draws the audience in, challenges them, but also welcomes them in. And, you have to have things that singers love to sing and can't wait to get into. So, I mean, there's no magic formula. You know, it's tricky. It's a big combination of things. But I always tell composers, if you want great singers to do your work, you have to write music that great singers want to sing... you know, that they can't resist. There's a reason Lyric Sopranos all want to do those great roles. You know, they're fascinating characters...The music is out of this world...You get to develop and use everything you've worked on, you know. But it's as if there's no secret formula... Except for a great story, great roles, great music, great possibilities for staging, and audience engagement. That's all. *(shared laughter)*

Cynthia Wohlschlager: It's a huge list, but all parts of it make sense. OK. So, couple of questions about language. Have you experienced growth in your awareness of how to set the English language for various voice types? And if you have experienced changes, what has helped you?

Jake Heggie: Oh, definitely, over time. And it's just doing it, you know, and working with great singers who will tell me, you know, that it is going to work better if I have this vowel, or if I get to breathe here, I can do that or, you know, certain voice types telling

me, you know, it's easier for me to springboard up to that high note or just punch it rather than work my way up to it. You know, it's, learning from doing it, and from writing for singers, and also singers encouraging me to push it sometimes, you know. I think in a lot of my earlier songs, I was so cautious and worried about pushing the range or, you know, wearing them out, that I didn't let them use everything they've got. And I think any singer wants to use everything that they have on the stage. You know, whether it's a big or a small role. So, it comes from doing it and also listening to my own work be done by really great performers where I'm learning something new from them and hearing what might be possible for another project. That makes a big difference too.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: the act of collaboration...literally in all aspects of the process.

Jake Heggie: Singers are huge collaborators of mine. I've learned so much from them. And, literally watching and listening and learning what I could do better, what I could do differently in the next piece because I always want to challenge myself in a different way. That's why my subjects are so different. The stories are so different, even though there might be some commonalities. And the size of the ensembles is different because I want to try to learn something new. I don't want to just repeat myself as a creative person. But, I learn a lot from different performers. That's why I enjoy collaborating with them. Sometimes the same people many times, but also letting different voices emerge.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: So, in terms of diction, Stanislavski would talk often about how diction was more than 50 percent of the performance. Like if you don't get diction, you don't get the performance. Where do you stand on this?

Jake Heggie: I want the singers to have the confidence that they can get those words across clearly. That's incredibly important to me. I want the audience, even though supertitles are essential and people are addicted to them, I want the audience to feel at the end of the evening that they could have understood the whole opera without supertitles. That's how I want them to feel and I want the performers to feel that way, too. Now, obviously, in opera, you have several people singing at once, and you have a chorus, and you have other things going on. So, it is almost impossible to get it all the time. But, I like to do my best to make sure that the performers feel like they can get it across clearly. And that's one of the things that I work with the singers on in a workshop situation, even before it opens, is to make sure that they have the confidence to get the words out... Diction...final consonants... That there are places to breathe...And yet still get a sense of the line that I'm looking for because it is all about a long line. You know, it's incredibly important and sometimes, like you said, the shape of a phrase or the words or the flow of that phrase or the rise and fall, those words will determine the vocal line. Because I want the words to have emotional content, but also, I don't want to put wrong accents and wrong syllables just to be clever, you know. So, it's very important to me that it feels very natural, the way that the words flow, and the language, and... I mean, it is the reason my music sounds the way it does. It's because of American English. And that's why French music sounds French, because of the language, and Italian music sounds Italian, and German music sounds German, because of the language and the idiosyncrasies of that language. And that's why I write the way I do. That's why, so far, my operas, in whatever country they're done, they're always done in English, because otherwise, the music isn't

gonna make any sense. Just like when you hear a really bad English translation of a Mozart Italian opera, it's like, oh, my God. Stop. (*shared laughter*)

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Yes, when the audience is in the native language, do you think that supertitles above benefit or detract from the performance?

Jake Heggie: They help. And audiences are very used to them now. In a new opera, the first thing the ear is going to do is try to understand every word, if that's your language. And if you're struggling with that, already you're starting to tune out. So, until you're confident that you're understanding the language and that you're getting the words, you have a little help, then you can start to get the music because there's so much to take in on the first hearing of a new opera...or an old opera. You're looking at the characters, the costumes, the set, the setting, you know. And, if any of those things don't jive or make sense, all of a sudden, you're not in the story anymore, and you're focused on that thing. So aurally, I have to make sure that the audience and the characters are coming across clearly. Again, I think supertitles are essential anymore. It's just a lot to take in. But I've heard so many times the audience say, oh, well, the diction was so good. I mean, we could have done without supertitles. But, you know, the other thing is then the supertitles go out and everyone's like, how am I going to know what they're saying? I don't know what's up? It happens a lot.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: So, yeah, it's like, not having them makes them tense up and think did I make up my own words? *laughter* OK. When a singer is performing your work, what do you value or look for in the presentation?

Jake Heggie: Honesty. That it comes from a very real place, that it's not presentational.

No, it's not *I'm sad* or *mad*. You know that it's coming clearly and simply and authentically and honestly. I love stillness. But an energized, empowered stillness an activated stillness. Of course, I want the voice to be engaging, and interesting, and beautiful, and well-trained. But, I don't want to be thinking about technique. I want it all in service to the line, and the story, and the character. You know, I think I had a huge revelation after I wrote *Dead Man Walking*. At the Met, I heard Natalie Dessay sing Lucia. And it was like one of the great revelations of my life because it was like it was the first time, and I'd heard Lucia many times. It was the first time every one of those phrases and all of those notes, they all meant something. Every single one of them was essential to the emotional truth of that character in that moment. And that's when I started adding more melisma to my work, was after that. As I was... I was a little suspicious of melisma before then because I hadn't heard them done necessarily very well. And now I just, you know. I mean, when I heard that it was life-changing. And so, I'm listening for the color of the voice. And I've heard voices that are not necessarily the most beautiful voices, but they're fine. I can find them compelling...and I can't wait to hear what's going to happen next because the character is so clear and they're bringing me to them. They're not like trying to project everything. So that's it. It's that simplicity, that stillness, that activated stillness, that honesty, that engagement. And that it's all translating into a very natural line. It's very hard to do. I know how hard it is to do. But I don't want to be thinking about technique. I don't want to be thinking about how impressive it all is. I just want to be moved. I want to be engaged and taken in.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Wonderful. Is there anything today we haven't mentioned about *Three Decembers* that you would like the world to know about it.

Jake Heggie: There's a lot of my family history in there, too. With the father's suicide, and the mother not sure how to deal with it. My mom was very honest with us always. She never hid anything. My sister, who really struggled afterward to try to know what to do. And, actually, in Terrence's original script, I don't know if you've ever seen it, but Charlie is a composer.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Yeah, I've read the script, and I found that very interesting!

Jake Heggie: That's because, Terrence, we had already begun working. So, Charlie lives in San Francisco and he's a composer. So, I wonder who he was thinking of? And Charlie had a partner whose name was Burt. But Curt, you know, my husband's name is Curt anyway.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Yes. Yes.

Jake Heggie: But anyway, so I think I had probably told him a little bit about my life history. But, the story resonated with me personally, too. But it's not about me. It's just that I can connect with these characters on this level. But it was about telling the truth of these people and their struggles without judging them, you know. And how difficult it is to be on the planet with these different forces we have working with us and how difficult it is to be a family sometimes. And yet you are a family. And that's the thing. In the very end, that last scene is one of the most you know, first of all, the Golden Gate Bridge scene is, I think, one of the best things I've written. And that last scene too, Maddy's memorial. I just find the redemption in that scene incredibly profound and beautiful. And

this new understanding they can have of each other. And I think as difficult as family and life can be, there are those moments of redemption and understanding that can transform us and bring us to a different place. And, I believe in that with all my heart and that's one of the things I wanted to achieve with that piece as well.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: I am such a fan. I can't even tell you.

Jake Heggie: Thank you.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: It's hard to put into words, but I'm so thankful for your openness, your honesty. Like not only today but in everything that you write. I truly appreciate and value the things that you're trying to accomplish.

Jake Heggie: Thank you. Well, I appreciate all the hard work you've put into this piece and getting to know it. And any questions that I can answer, you know, as you proceed, you let me know. I really appreciate that.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Sure.

Jake Heggie: OK.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: OK, well, thank you again so much.

Jake Heggie: Thank you so much.

Jake Heggie: All right. Take care.

Cynthia Wohlschlager: Bye-bye.

Jake Heggie: Bye.

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