

REVISIONING A MASTERPIECE: JON MAGNUSSEN'S *PSALM*

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In 2001, composer Jon Magnussen met the unusual challenge of unifying his new score for *Psalm*, an already-existing dance work from 1967, with the original artistic conceit of the choreographer, José Limón, who died in 1972. Limón was inspired directly by his reading of André Schwartz-Bart's Holocaust novel, *The Last of the Just*, and had initially desired to use Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* as the score for the dance. Faced with cost-preclusive licensing fees for the Stravinsky, Limón engaged Eugene Lester to compose a score for *Psalm*. The Lester score, now lost, served the work for only a brief time, when the piece fell out of the repertory. When approached to create a new score for the extant dance work, Magnussen chose to draw his own influence from three works: the dance itself, Schwartz-Bart's novel, and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. In addition, Limón Company Artistic Director Carla Maxwell served as Magnussen's collaborator in reworking *Psalm* to resemble the work she believed Limón had desired all along.

Magnussen's influence from Stravinsky and Schwartz-Bart are revealed in the choices of text, the scored forces, and melodic ideas generated by the composer by mapping the names of significant Holocaust sites onto scalar patterns. Limón's memoir, personal articles, and sketches of artistic ideas along with personal interviews with Magnussen and Maxwell will inform my research. These sources easily establish Magnussen as a significant composer, and *Psalm* as a significant work of art; its value is reflected in the careful confluence of the artistic contributions of three significant artists, Limón, Schwartz-Bart, and Magnussen.

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Special thanks are in order to Jon Magnussen, whose immense musical talent and accomplishment is matched only by his rare generosity of time and spirit, and to Carla Maxwell, whose insights into the story of *Psalm* have been essential and fascinating. It is no surprise that these two artists have shared such a fruitful and meaningful professional partnership in the reshaping of *Psalm*.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Psalm* is a thirty-minute work for chorus, chamber ensemble, and baritone soloist. Conceived as a dance score by composer Jon Magnussen, the work was commissioned by the José Limón Dance Foundation, and was premiered with the Limón Dance Company on November 13-14, 2002 in conjunction with the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympic Arts Festival. It was performed on the campus of Weber State University in Ogden, Utah. Jon Magnussen conducted the Weber State Concert Choir, Kay Starr Singers, chamber ensemble, and baritone André Solomon-Glover.<sup>1</sup> Limón's ballet had been performed previously, but in coincidence with the thirtieth anniversary of his death, the work was re-premiered in a new format for which the Magnussen score was intended.

In 1967, legendary choreographer José Limón created *Psalm*, a work for a small ensemble of dancers that abstractly portrays a community of people in interaction with each other and a single soloist dancer. The soloist represents a heroic figure who sustains great suffering but carries it dutifully, serving as what Limón referred to as a collective "burden bearer."<sup>2</sup> As in all his work, Limón drew inspiration from a specific source, crafting *Psalm* to reflect a specific idea and point of view. The work was a response to Limón's intense and personal reaction to his reading of André Schwartz-Bart's Holocaust novel, *The Last of the Just*.<sup>3</sup> The novel, to be detailed in Chapter 2, traces the lineage of the Levy family in Poland, who were fabled to be the progenitors and propagators of the Lamed-Vov, individual righteous men upon whom the suffering and sorrows of the world rest. Limón referred to the role of the solo dancer

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Magnussen, *Psalm* (New York: Jon Magnussen, 2002), Title Page.

<sup>2</sup> Carla Maxwell, interview by author, personal interview, telephone, March 17, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> André Schwartz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, trans. Stephen Becker (New York: The Overlook Press, 2002).

as the “burden bearer,” his own descriptive name for those referred to as “just men” in the Jewish legend.

Limón, an admirer of classical music, and having often used standard classical repertory to great success as scores for his dance works, envisioned the Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms* as the score for this new work.<sup>4</sup> When the José Limón Dance Company approached the Stravinsky estate to acquire licensing rights to use the *Symphony of Psalms* in their performances, the hefty price quoted by the estate proved cost-preclusive for the small dance company. Committed to seeing this work through, Limón began looking for a composer to create a new score for the dance. Eugene Lester, a composer with a few significant dance score credits already, agreed to collaborate with Limón on *Psalm*. The result was a work nearly an hour in length, that comprises nearly twenty dances. The work was performed relatively few times in this format, and subsequently fell out of the regular repertory of the Limón Dance Company. Lester’s score is now lost.

In the early seventies, Ruth Currier served as artistic director for the Limón Company. She was never pleased with the continuity and cohesiveness of the Limón/Lester version of *Psalm*, complaining that its length and scoring did not adequately satisfy Limón’s original intent for the work. After Limón’s death in 1972, Currier suggested that former Limón dancer Carla Maxwell, who succeeded Currier as artistic director, edit *Psalm* to create a work more cohesive in nature and more in keeping with Limón’s original vision.<sup>5</sup> Maxwell had danced the original version of *Psalm*. Having a fondness for the work, she took on the challenge of remounting and

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<sup>4</sup> Limón often used music from the standard western classical canon as scores for his works. Examples of this include his most celebrated work, *The Moor’s Pavane*, to music of Henry Purcell, and other pieces danced to works by Bach, Schubert, Chopin, Debussy, Kodály, Dello Joio, and Villa-Lobos, among others. Limón Dance Foundation website. <http://www.limon.org/dance-company/repertory> (accessed May 10, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Carla Maxwell, interview by author, personal interview, telephone, March 17, 2013.

reworking it to create a cohesive piece, capable of serving as a better, more unobstructed conduit through which Limón's initial impulse (as she understood it) could flow.<sup>6</sup>

Carla Maxwell knew that the edited dance work would require a new score.<sup>7</sup> Having established a strong professional relationship with composer Jon Magnussen through their previous collaboration on another Limón work called *The Winged*, Maxwell approached him about the *Psalm* project. Upon discussing the story of *Psalm* with Carla Maxwell, Magnussen accepted the commission to create a new score for the work.<sup>8</sup> Magnussen knew at the outset that he was faced with a unique task when commissioned to rescore the existing dance piece. The most pressing question in making early progress on the score was this: How can a composer create music for an extant dance piece created by a choreographer who is nearly thirty years deceased and whom he has never met?

A significant compositional challenge was present in creating music for choreography that was already prescribed. Perhaps more important was Magnussen's desire to bind his musical work to the creative thrust of Limón's original vision. To do this, the composer looked to the sources of the choreographer's own initial inspiration and concept. Magnussen ultimately drew influence from three main sources: the existing choreography, Limón's notion to use the Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms* as the score, and Schwartz-Bart's novel, *The Last of the Just*. All of this was facilitated by his own close working relationship with Limón Dance Foundation Artistic Director Carla Maxwell.

Composer Jon Magnussen met the unusual challenge of unifying his new score for *Psalm* with the original artistic conceit of the choreographer, José Limón, who died in 1972.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Jon Magnussen, interview by author, personal interview, telephone, March 10, 2013.



Magnussen's influence from Stravinsky and Schwartz-Bart are revealed in the choices of text, the scored forces, and melodic ideas generated by the composer by mapping the names of significant sites of human atrocity onto scalar patterns to generate melodic material.

Magnussen's efforts resulted in a compelling score, rich in textural variety and rhythmic and lyrical balance, and crafted successfully to underpin the message-rich choreography of José Limón.

## CHAPTER 2

### ANDRÉ SCHWARTZ-BART'S *THE LAST OF THE JUST*

*The Last of the Just* (*Les Dernier des Justes*) was the first of three novels by André Schwartz-Bart<sup>9</sup>, and certainly the most celebrated one. The novel earned Schwartz-Bart France's highest literary award, the prestigious Prix de Goncourt (1959). A work of historical fiction, *The Last of the Just* uses as its premise the Jewish legend of the Lamed-Vov, or the Thirty-six. As is typical of the substance of legends, the origin is unclear, and the story is the subject of a fair number of variants with respect to specific details. In attempting to locate the fountainhead of the legend, many scholars point to the Book of Genesis and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities that fell victim to the wrath of God due of the wickedness of their inhabitants. According to the story, God revealed Himself to Abraham and informed him of His intent to destroy the cities. Abraham asked God to spare the cities if fifty righteous men could be found within the cities. Not finding fifty, Abraham renegotiated the terms to ten. Not even ten righteous men could be found in the cities; they were ultimately destroyed by God.

The legend of the Lamed-Vov may have its origin in this Old Testament story because it too is based upon the premise of salvation and destruction based on the finding of Just Men. The legend of the Lamed-Vov asserts that there is a minimum of thirty-six Just Men living on the earth at any given time. The presence of these righteous men justifies the existence of humanity to God. If just one of the Lamed-Vov failed to adequately sustain his responsibility to live as a righteous man, God would destroy the earth. Essentially, these men are assigned the burden of

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<sup>9</sup> He was also singularly responsible for two other novels, *A Woman Named Solitude*, published in English in 1973, and *The Morning Star*, published in English posthumously in 2011. With his wife Simone, he wrote two others, *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*, in 1967 (not available in English, but translated as "A Plate of Pork with Green Bananas") and *In Praise of Black Women*, written in 1989 and published in English in 2001.

bearing the sins and evils of the rest of humanity on their shoulders.<sup>10</sup> They possess incredible compassion for their neighbors, virtuous humility, and mystical powers that allow them to restore peace and goodness to disaster-prone humanity. In the more widely told varieties of this legend, the thirty-six just men are unaware of the honor and responsibility conferred upon them. They do not know that they are Lamed-Vovniks; only at the end of their lives is it revealed that they have played such a role in the world, for, because of the humility entwined in exceptional righteousness, no true Lamed-Vovnik would ever conceive of the possibility that he were one! In Schwartz-Bart's novel, the narrator explains the legend:

According to it, the world reposes upon thirty-six Just Men. The Lamed-Vov, indistinguishable from simple mortals; often they are unaware of their station. But if just one of them were lacking, the sufferings of all mankind would poison even the souls of the newborn, and humanity would suffocate with a single cry. For the Lamed-Vov are the hearts of the world multiplied, and into them, as into one receptacle, pour all our griefs.<sup>11</sup>

Ernie Levy is the hero of Schwartz-Bart's novel, the exploits of whom fill the pages of the second half of the novel. What is unique about those known as the Lamed-Vov is their anonymity. Such is the condition of Ernie Levy, the final member of the succession of Lamed-Vovniks who defined the Levy lineage for centuries. The first half is devoted to tracing the very Levy lineage that Ernie would eventually inherit, beginning in the late twelfth century with the martyrdom of some twenty-six Jews and their families. Rabbi Yom Tov Levy, the first Levy to whom we are introduced in the novel, had retreated with his brethren to a tower in York, England, the subjects of Anglican aggression. When the fate of Rabbi Levy and his faithful was clear, he told them, "Brothers, God gave us life. Let us return it to him ourselves by our own

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<sup>10</sup> Schwartz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

hand.” With that, “each yielded a forehead to his blessing and then a throat to the blade he offered with the other hand.”<sup>12</sup>

The suicide martyrdom of those gathered in that watchtower sets the tenor of the novel, and in the following several chapters, the author offers brief synopses of the many descendents of Rabbi Yom Tov Levy, careful to make clear the many differences in their personalities, life circumstances, and of course, the tale of their demise. Some are rather dramatic – some not so – and the author allows for some flexibility in the legend by showing Lamed-Vov who accomplish heroic things, and ones whose actions leave significant doubt about the likelihood of their appointment as Just Men. The reader is allowed, and possibly encouraged, to question whether each succeeding Levy is in fact a Lamed-Vovnik.

Through eight centuries, the reader meets these Levys whose eventual progeny arrives in the form of Mordecai Levy of Zemyock, Poland. Mordecai was a quiet, deliberate, and devout man whose wife Judith’s traits stood in stark contrast to her husband’s. Their relationship was difficult, but together they parented a son, Benjamin, who they believed was favored by the incumbent Just Man of Zemyock. It is unclear whether Benjamin was actually a Just Man, but his importance as a central character lay in his eventually fathering Ernie Levy, the hero of the novel.

Ernie is the character through whom the reader begins to understand what it means to be a Just Man. While a complete synopsis of Ernie’s whole life would, in light of the novel itself, be redundant, there are three main episodes in his life that show the depth of his sentience, the fervor of his disposition, and the boldness of his character.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 3.

Ernie displays distinct personality and spirit, and a deep sensitivity to his environment and the actions of others, even as a child. One evening, Ernie's grandfather relates to him the legend of the Lamed-Vov, after finding Ernie indignant and emboldened as the result of Nazi aggression in their town. On the night of that lesson, Ernie experiences the first of a number of vivid dreams narrated in the novel. The dream demonstrates Ernie's immature understanding of the nature of a Just Man; in a deluded act of self-mutilation, he lights a match and holds the flame to his palm.<sup>13</sup> The result is a searing wound, which he leaves unattended until morning. His lack of alarm at his injury demonstrates a profound capacity to bear pain. For Ernie, physical pain seems to be the point of access to a waiting repository for the emotional agony that would characterize his later years.

Eventually, the young boy explains that his exploits of the previous night had been a training exercise for his own death. Mordecai, realizing Ernie had misunderstood some of the points of the Lamed-Vov story, helps him understand more clearly. Through a series of leading questions, Mordecai escorts his grandson to the conclusion that a Just Man need not actually experience the travails of others in order to empathize with them; a Just Man need not see, hear, or feel another's pain in order to sense it. Moredcai pressed his grandson,

“And if the other is far away, if he can neither hear him nor see him and not even touch him – do you believe then that he can take in his pain?”

“Maybe he could guess at it,” Ernie said with a cautious expression.

Mordecai went into ecstasies. “You’ve said, my love – that is exactly what the Just Man does! He senses all the evil rampant on earth, and he takes it into his heart!”<sup>14</sup>

So began Ernie's early understanding of the Lamed-Vov tradition. A second example of his Just qualities happens later, when Ernie develops a fondness for a Christian girl named Ilse.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 174.

They share friendship and mutual admiration – Ilse seems to be Ernie’s first love. When their school is inevitably infected with the hatred of the Nazis, the playground becomes fertile ground for the bullying of Jewish students by their non-Jewish peers. Ernie is assaulted and humiliated, scarcely defending himself because of his nonviolent upbringing. He is reduced to abject debasement, and attempts to take his own life by slicing his wrists and plunging head first out a window.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, Moredcai was woken by the sound of Ernie’s fall. Though Ernie did not perish as the result of his wounds from the blade or the fall, the author does describe this as “the first death of Ernie Levy.”

Unfortunately, with the benefit of historical retrospect, the reader is able to foresee the inevitability that is the close of the story of Ernie Levy – the chapter in which he emerges as a truly Just Man. As the Nazis expurgated their cities of Jews, Ernie, now older, takes refuge in Paris. He meets Golda there, a young redheaded Jewish girl who limps from an injury as a child. They fall in love as they watch their brethren rounded up and sent off to internment camps. They enjoy only a short time together, after which Golda Engelbaum and her family are collected by the Germans and taken to a concentration camp called Drancy. Outraged and despondent, he travels alone to the gates of Drancy, where he demands to be admitted to the camp.<sup>16</sup> He eventually locates Golda there – in poor health from malnutrition and exposure to the elements. She is scheduled for departure from Drancy, and Ernie manages to get his own name on the list as well. With Golda and hundreds of other Jews, he is packaged on a freight train for three days, bound for an undisclosed location. The train ride is the picture of human degradation. Packed like merchandise, the victimized hundreds face frozen temperatures, starvation, disease, and death. Ernie spends time caring for Golda and the numerous terrified orphans that accompany

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 333.

them, providing them comfort and encouragement. He becomes their leader – their only hope in those dreadful hours.<sup>17</sup>

As a reader, one can sense now that Ernie is in fact a Just Man. In his heroic hour, he does the work that needs to be done, absolved of any aspiration to Justness, yet embodying it completely. When the train finally arrives at its destination, machine gun brandishing soldiers direct the infirm men and all the women and children in one direction, and the well men in another. Not wanting to be separated, Ernie convinces the soldiers that he is weak and disabled, allowing him to stay with Golda and his orphans. As they are led to the “baths,” Ernie continues to be the picture of bravery and compassion, though he knows he is accompanying his people to their deaths. Facing the inevitable end, Ernie allows his beloved people to depart in faith, dignity, and honor through their very last minutes in the gas chamber.<sup>18</sup> Thus ends the novel and a third episode that poignantly captures Ernie’s character. He is a hero – truly Just – and by his grace and generosity to the faithful at his side, proves their collective death a triumph over hate and evil.

It is easy to understand why this novel impacted José Limón so deeply, and why the basic story drew his artistic attention. Limón desired to create a ballet that could convey his own reaction to the piece as one that is “...an evocation of the heroic power of the human spirit, triumphant over death itself...”<sup>19</sup>

### Chapter 3: *Psalm* by José Limón

Early in the year nineteen hundred and twenty-nine I was born at 9 East Fifty-Ninth Street, New York City. My parents were Isadora Duncan and Harald Kreutzberg. They were not present at my birth. I doubt that they ever saw one other or were aware of their responsibility for my being. Presiding at my emergence into the world were my foster

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 363.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>19</sup> José Limón, Epitaph in his choreographic notes for *Psalm*.

parents, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. It was at their dance studio and in their classes that I was born. I had existed previously in human form for twenty years. My grandparents were equally illustrious. They were Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. All this constitutes an imposing pedigree and, with the exception of Harald Kreutzberg, a very American one. Duncan was born in San Francisco, St. Denis in Somerville, New Jersey, Humphrey in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago, and Weidman in Lincoln, Nebraska. *Muy Americano. Muy yanqui.*<sup>20</sup>

So begins the eloquent first page of the unfortunately truncated autobiography by José Limón. Limón's first entry in his memoir did not describe his actual birth, but rather his artistic one. Those "parents" and "foster parents" did not give birth to him or raise him as a child; Limón is of course referring to his major personal and professional influences. It seems fitting that he would frame his life in that way, when considered alongside his tendency to remain private about his early years. In the collection of essays entitled *José Limón*, Ann Vachon devotes her entry to the choreographer's Mexican connection.

Of course I knew that he had been born in Mexico, that English was not his first language, and that he had the high cheekbones and dark eyes of a Native American. But since José never spoke of his family or his childhood, I thought of the Mexican part as almost a novelty...In interviews during the last year, people who had known him even better than I...all said the same thing; he never spoke of his childhood.<sup>21</sup>

José Limón was physically born in Culiacán, Mexico on January 12, 1908, the eldest of twelve children. His father Florencio, a widower of French and Spanish descent, was a bandmaster and conductor who played cello and clarinet. He held the position of director of the Academy of Music for the state of Sonora. By the age of eighteen, José had watched as his mother continued to get pregnant, even after her doctor advised against it. In recalling her final pregnancy, Limon wrote, "she became subject to acute suffering, and finally after an agonized

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<sup>20</sup> José Limón and Lynn Garafola, *José Limón an unfinished memoir*. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ann Vachon, "Limón in Mexico" in *José Limón*, ed. Jane Dunbar (New York: Routledge, 2003), 71.



crisis, she departed this valley of tears at the age of thirty-four, leaving an inconsolable widower, a large brood of infant, and a brutally embittered firstborn.”<sup>22</sup>

The death of his mother was not his first encounter with death, obviously. His family was surrounded by war until they immigrated to the United States. Also, he had watched several siblings die early. As an adolescent who learned the facts of human reproduction, he blamed his father for his mother’s death. Of the moments after her passing, Limón writes of the blame he placed on his father,

I was eighteen years old, tall like my father and dark like my mother. I had spent the final hours at my mother’s death bed, heard the death rattle become the long, drawn-out sibilance of finality, taken her gold wedding band and irrationally slipped it on my finger. Now, in the hospital corridor, I confronted a broken man, sobbing like a child, and in the cold April dawn took a terrible and heartless revenge. Why do you cry, I asked. You killed her. And God permitted you.<sup>23</sup>

Amid a violent Mexican revolution, the Limón family fled the country in favor of the more peaceful United States, ultimately settling in Los Angeles. Limón fell in with a group of young men who considered themselves artists who rejected the bourgeois norms. They discussed art and literature, and the opposition to pursuits of materialistic acquisition. The sessions with his friends piqued his interest in artistic thought and expression, and coincided with other situational factors such that it led to his “conversion” to art. Speaking of this, Limón writes that his “conversion was destined. My mother’s death, the break with my father, my loss of religious faith, my disenchantment with the University of California, Southern Branch (as UCLA was then called) were unmistakable signs that my young life was in a state of crisis.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Limón, *An Unfinished Memoir*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Limón opted then in favor of the Bohemian allure of New York City, where he enrolled in the New York School of Design. Shortly after arriving there, he discovered dance for the first time. He was immediately transfixed by the beauty of the dancers and the art.

Instantly and irrevocably, I was transformed. I knew with shocking suddenness that until then I had not been alive or, rather, that I had yet to be born. Just as the unborn infant cannot know the miracle of light, so I had not known that dance existed, and now I did not want to remain on this earth unless I learned to do what this man – Harald Kreutzberg – was doing.<sup>25</sup>

And so was born the career of José Limón, dancer and choreographer. Through mutual friends, he gained access to dance lessons given by Dorothy Humphrey through a company run by her and her partner, Charles Weidman. Limón trained intensely, determined to make up for lost time. He made his debut as a dancer and met his wife Pauline. He danced for Humphrey for over ten years, all awhile watching the horrors of World War II take their tolls. At the age of thirty-two, Humphrey assigned Limón to choreograph his first lengthy work, *Chaconne*, to the music of Bach. It is at this point that his memoir manuscript ends, and the reader is left without his account of the most prolific period of his life, and the era that made him famous as a choreographer.

Having been surrounded by music as a young person, it should come as no surprise that Limón was a lover of great music. He used music by the great composers of the classical canon as scores for his dance works (with a particular affinity for the work of J.S. Bach) and believed in the interrelatedness of the crafts of music and dance.

I have always maintained that musicians are dancers, and that dancers can be good dancers only when they are also good musicians. This does not mean that a composer need perform, literally and physically, all the arduous vocabulary of the dancer, nor that the dancer need be proficient with a violin, kettledrum or harp.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>26</sup> José Limón, “Dancers are Musicians are Dancers” in *José Limón*, ed. Jane Dunbar (New York: Routledge, 2003), 9.

Certainly Limón's connection to music helped shape him as a dancer and choreographer. He knew Kodaly, Schönberg, Dello Joio, Hindemith, having collaborated with these musical pillars. His inherent musicality, coupled with his aesthetic awareness of art and design gave him a very unique and powerful point of view that inevitably informed his work. But it was Doris Humphrey who taught him most about dance, refining him as a dancer and choreographer, and serving as mentor and colleague throughout the development of his talent and artistic voice.

Humphrey was responsible for instilling in Limon the concept of fall and rebound, which became a foundation of his technique. She referred to it as “the arc between two deaths.”<sup>27</sup> Humphrey and Limon believed that attention to the way the body falls and rebounds would lend an organic quality to the movement. Limon's work embraced the concept of arsis and thesis, excursion and retreat. It is reflected in movement techniques for the hands, chest, arms, and legs. He, like Humphrey, placed special importance on the moment of suspension – the seemingly infinitely small point in time where the excursion ends and the retreat begins.<sup>28</sup> There is a moment at the other end of the cycle, as well, which Humphrey referred to as succession. Limon also liked to think of the body as an instrument, with certain parts of the body “speaking,” that is, expressing a point of view. He referred to this as “voices of the body.”<sup>29</sup>

When approached about items of his technique, Limon was always careful to avoid the restrictive forces placed on his future work by codifying his technique. Former Limon dancer Betty Jones was asked to create a syllabus for use in teaching the Limón technique. In speaking with Limón about this, he rejected the idea. “He felt that the idea of a rigid outline would limit

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<sup>27</sup> Betty Jones, “Voices of the Body” in *José Limón*, ed. Jane Dunbar (New York: Routledge, 2003), 38.

<sup>28</sup> Limón, *An Unfinished Memoir*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

the possibilities and would establish a structure that would confine and constrict the creativity that was inherent in the technique.”<sup>30</sup>

Limón’s legacy left a corpus of dance works that comprises over one hundred pieces over a thirty-two year period of great industriousness. Limon composed at least one, and more often three to five works a year until his death in 1972. Many of his pieces are landmarks of modern dance, including *The Moor’s Pavane* (1949), his most celebrated work, representing in roughly twenty minutes the story of Othello, *There is a Time* (1956; formerly called *Variations on a Theme*; music by Norman Dello Joio), *Missa Brevis* (1958, music by Zoltan Kodaly), *The Winged* (1966; Hank Johnson/ rev. ?), and *Psalm* (1967; Lester/rev. 2002; Magnussen).<sup>31</sup>

In addition to his personal concepts of movement, Limón’s legacy as a choreographer was defined by his inclination to tell stories with his dance works. Limón said of his choreographic process, “My first requisite is an idea. I cannot function with abstractions, or with what is called absolute dance. I work out of the emotions, out of human experience, mine or those about which I have read or heard.”<sup>32</sup> He went on to describe the source material for some of the ideas, “My father and mother and my grandmother in Mexico were fond of telling us stories, and I have made effective use of the some of them.”<sup>33</sup> In the case of *Psalm*, his idea came directly from his recent reading of André Schwartz-Bart’s *The Last of the Just*. Limón’s desire to address compelling stories of human experience was fueled when considering the story of Ernie Levy. This character served direct influence on Limón’s *Psalm*, evidenced by the way he paired a single male soloist against a group of dancers. The soloist portrays the “Just Man,”

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>31</sup> [www.limon.org](http://www.limon.org)

<sup>32</sup> José Limón, "Composing a Dance," *The Juilliard Review* 2, no. 1 (1955): 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 13.

or, as Limón preferred, the burden bearer. In *Psalm*, he confronted pain and suffering directly, but not without the possibility of redemption. Carla Maxwell summarized this by writing, “José’s work has always been life-giving because it is so full of hope and harmony, even in his most extreme tragedies. He was letting us know that we have a choice, that we do not have to act out our darker sides.”<sup>34</sup>

When José Limón conceived *Psalm*, he initially desired to use Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* as the musical score to which the work would be performed. When the Limón Dance Company approached the Stravinsky estate to request licensing for use with *Psalm*, the cost quoted to the company was very high, and therefore cost preclusive to the relatively small dance company.<sup>35</sup> Since much of the choreography work had already been done, Limón approached Eugene Lester, a composer and conductor who had significant dance scores to his credit, to compose a score alongside the choreographer as he worked out the dances. The initial conceit of the piece, being compatible with the Stravinsky score, was approximately thirty minutes in length. However, as Limón and Lester’s work together progressed, *Psalm* took on a bulkier, lengthier, and less cohesive quality.<sup>36</sup> It is Maxwell’s opinion that the resulting version of *Psalm* was never satisfactory; it did not convey the intended artistic vision clearly. The work was performed a number of times in the early 1970s, and after Limón’s death in 1972, the work was dropped from the regular repertory of the dance company. The Lester score, which comprised only of percussion and baritone cantor, was subsequently lost.

It was Carla Maxwell, artistic director of the Limón Dance Company, who desired to rework and remount *Psalm* as a consolidated piece more cohesive in quality and narrative.

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<sup>34</sup> Carla Maxwell, foreword to *José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir*, by José Limón, ed. Lynn Garafola. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), vii.

<sup>35</sup> Carla Maxwell, interview by author, personal interview, telephone, March 17, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Having forged a connection with composer Jon Magnussen on a previous dance work by Limón entitled *The Winged*, Maxwell engaged the composer to conceive a new musical score for the revised *Psalm*. Since the choreography was pre-existent, a special challenge was present for Magnussen – to devise music consistent with the specific artistic statement suggested by the creation of the great José Limón, and to render freshly that statement in his own musical voice. He did so by consulting and considering some of Limón’s initial inspirations, the Schwartz-Bart novel, and the Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms*. The result was a score for the new *Psalm*, reworked by Maxwell, which was premiered in February 2002.

It is evident from many of his comments that Limón (like Ernie Levy) was a man who felt the trials of life very deeply. Though in his memoir he does not offer a large volume of narrative dedicated to his childhood, the anecdotes he does provide describe an experience that made him familiar with most profound of hardships. He also experienced love and devotion deeply.

I have always been a lover. At seven I began to fall madly, obsessively in love, first with the Spanish-speaking girls... And I have always been a friend... the innocent selflessness of loving a fellow being was pure rapture.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Limón, *An Unfinished Memoir*, 13.

## CHAPTER 3

### *PSALM* BY JON MAGNUSSEN

*Psalm* is a moving work that many listeners have found compelling. Early performances of the piece earned positive reviews. Anthony Tomassini, chief music critic of the New York Times, wrote that an early performance “showed that Psalm settings for chorus and orchestra bursting with demonic rhythms and angular melodies can achieve a different kind of reverence.”<sup>38</sup> Of the premier, Salt Lake Tribune reviewer Karen Webb said, “Jon Magnussen's commissioned score was hauntingly beautiful... Underlying all is a sense of deep spirituality, creating a towering testament to the indomitability of the human spirit.”<sup>39</sup> After watching the last moments of the premier of *Psalm*, Carla Maxwell, whose vision prompted the revised ballet, told Magnussen, “*Psalm*, in my mind, is like the birth of a planet or a star.”<sup>40</sup> The circumstances of its commission, the substantive list of credits of the composer, and the unique process by which it was informed speak to the quality, depth, and worthiness of this music for both performance and scholarship.

Jon Magnussen was born in Sierra Leone, where he lived until the age of 5. As a very young person, he was exposed to the music of roving musicians and dancers who would appear in “scary masks”<sup>41</sup> and perform acrobatics to their rhythmic percussion music. Magnussen says his “love for percussion, cross-rhythms and rhythmic complexity comes from those experiences.”<sup>42</sup> His family moved to Southern California for a time before moving permanently

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<sup>38</sup> Anthony Tomassini, “MUSIC REVIEW; Show of Ambition for New Conductor,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Karen Webb, “Limon's 'Psalm' Succeeds,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 16, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, March 17, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, May 24, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

to the island of Kaua’I, Hawaii when Magnussen was ten years old. There, he got his first taste of musical improvisation playing the ‘ukuele with his peers during recess. He also began piano study around that time, incorporating his enjoyment of the element of improvisation, which made for a logical first step toward composition. He wrote some pop tunes beginning at the age of fifteen. His compositional and piano pursuits took on a more serious quality upon his arrival at Cornell, where he gained access to the university digital studio. There, Magnussen made his first forays into the realm of technology-assisted composition, which he employed in some of his later work on *Psalm*.

In a relatively young career, Jon Magnussen has written a considerable number of works in a wide variety of genres including: solo works for cello, guitar, piano, and voice; as well as short works for orchestra and chamber ensembles; theatre music; music for young performers; and several pieces for choir. He is a graduate of the Juilliard School with masters and doctoral degrees in composition, the *Conservatoire Nationale Supérieure de Musique de Paris*, and Cornell University, where his teachers included Robert Beaser, Jean-Paul Holstein, Steven Stucky, and Karel Husa. Magnussen was the recipient of a rare consecutive appointment at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, where he served as Artist-in-Residence from 2000-2007. His works have been commissioned and premiered by organizations such as American Ballet Theatre, The Juilliard School, New Juilliard Ensemble, Ebb and Flow Arts, The Shakespeare Theatre (Washington, D.C.), Symphony Silicon Valley and James Goldworthy’s New Works for Young Pianists Commissioning Project, in addition to his work with the Limón Dance Company. Foundations including the Argosy Foundation, Aaron Copland Fund for New Music Recording Program, Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, Library of Congress, Meet the



Composer, and National Endowment for the Arts have demonstrated their confidence is Magnussen through their financial support of his work.<sup>43</sup>

In 1998, Limón dance foundation Artistic Director Carla Maxwell first broached the subject of collaboration with Jon Magnussen. She had in mind the revision and rescoring of *Psalm*, which she had performed in the early 1970s as a dancer with the Limón Company. Maxwell loved the work, and believed that in order for the work to return successfully to the repertory of the company, it needed to be revised and rescored. She explains that in 1967, José Limón was diagnosed with prostate cancer – a development that she believes caused him to consider his life with new urgency. At the same time, Limón was reading *The Last of the Just*, and the thematic material of the book spoke to him deeply as one who had lived through World War II and who now was facing the sobering reality of his own mortality. Carla Maxwell credits the creative fervor he demonstrated in creating *Psalm* to a new perspective on his own life as the result of his illness, commenting that each individual piece within *Psalm* was rendered with an intensity that suggested that it could have been his last.<sup>44</sup> She also explains that by this point in Limón's career, his close associate Doris Humphrey had died. Without her, Limón's creative energy could not benefit from her role as editor. *Psalm* became longer and longer, suffering from a lack of focus and economy of message.<sup>45</sup> As part of her revision process, Maxwell was forced to make difficult decisions about which parts of the dance to keep and which to omit, though she considered all of the dances outstanding.<sup>46</sup> She elected to give the solo pieces a more prominent function, in reflection of the significance of the role. In keeping with her goal of

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<sup>43</sup> "jon magnussen, composer." jon magnussen, composer. <http://www.jonmagnussen.com> (accessed March 10, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Maxwell, telephone interview.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

making the work more cohesive, she knew it would need a new score – one that would support the reworked choreography and that would draw on Limón’s most initial intentions for the piece.

In 1995, Magnussen was completing his doctoral studies in composition at Juilliard, where a call for scores was issued for a collaborative project with the Limón Dance Company. Maxwell chose Magnussen’s work from the group of submissions, resulting in his commission to compose a new score for *The Winged*, which has served the work in performance ever since.<sup>47</sup> Quite pleased with the fruits of their first collaboration, Maxwell grew to appreciate Magnussen as a musician, artist, and human being, and thus engaged him for her next project, *Psalm*.<sup>48</sup>

Magnussen’s *Psalm* is roughly thirty minutes in length, divided into twelve sections, which correspond to individual dance units. It is scored for flute (dbl. Picc.), clarinet in Bb, bass trombone, harp, piano, three violoncelli, contrabass, and two percussion players who handle crotales, timpani, large suspended cymbal, large tam-tam, large bass drum, two triangles of differing timbre, and tambourine. The score also calls for SATB (divisi) choir and baritone soloist. Since its premier in Salt Lake City in 2002, the work has been recorded and released on Albany Records with the Institute for Advanced Research Festival Orchestra, Westminster Kantorei, Fuma Sacra, and Sumner Thompson, baritone and Mark Laycock, conductor. The album also includes Magnussen’s score for *The Winged*.<sup>49</sup>

Magnussen’s time-consuming work on *Psalm* involved hours dedicated to viewing video of selected pieces in performances of the work from the early 1970s. He would watch in silence, often with a stopwatch to gauge time of sequences of movements. Magnussen says that his first considerations were meter and instrumentation. He would carefully observe what he perceived

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<sup>47</sup> Jon Magnussen, telephone interview.

<sup>48</sup> Carla Maxwell, telephone interview.

<sup>49</sup> Jon Magnussen. *Music for Limón Dances*. Conducted by Mark Haycock. Performed by Sumner Thompson and others. Westminster Kantorei, Fuma Sacra, Institute Festival Orchestra. TROY1021. CD. 2008.

to be the pulse and meter of the dance, and would compose to support the dancers in their movements. When the meter was hard to detect, he would allow the dance phrase beginnings and endings to help him shape the music. Not always does the music's phrasing or metric emphasis underpin the literal movements of the dancers. Magnussen explains, "Fundamentally, my musical decisions came down to one central question: should the music support the dance or oppose it?"<sup>50</sup> He was constantly in pursuit of a score that would create a sound world that advanced the aesthetic and communicative goals of the Limón choreography.

Inherent in the challenge of composing a score for extant ballet is that the composer is chronologically removed from the creative process of the work. Since Limón's work on *Psalm* was an endeavor of passion rich in personal, social, and political commentary, it follows that its score should attempt to support that endeavor with clarity and unity of point of view. Magnussen did not have the benefit of working alongside Limón, so the composer turned to the choreographer's major influences to bind the musical vision to the dance somewhat by proxy.

Limón's dance was inspired by the message of Schwartz-Bart's novel in that it speaks to the victory of the human spirit. The composer quoted Carla Maxwell, who said that the message "is about a people faced with annihilation, rising above it all."<sup>51</sup> This is in keeping with what Limón wrote in 1967 in his own choreographic notes for *Psalm*. He said that the work is "...an evocation of the heroic power of the human spirit, triumphant over death itself..."<sup>52</sup>

Magnussen made many initial decisions with respect to the nature of the score in consultation with Carla Maxwell. He explains that they decided "the music should model aspects of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, since that was José Limón's original musical

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<sup>50</sup> Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, April 7, 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Jon Magnussen, interview by author, personal interview, telephone, March 10, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> José Limón, Personal choreographic notes, Manuscript, c.1966.

impetus. For his *Symphony of Psalms*, Stravinsky chose text from the Latin Vulgate version of the Book of Psalms, so I went to that source for our text.”<sup>53</sup> There are other reflections of Stravinsky as well, in terms of length, chamber orchestration, and prominence of wind instruments and percussion.

For his *Symphony of Psalms*, Stravinsky employed an orchestra of winds (4 flutes, piccolo, 4 oboes, English horn, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon) brass (4 french horns, 4 trumpets in C, trumpet in D, 2 tenor trombones, bass trombone, tuba), and low strings (cello and bass), plus harp, 2 pianos, and percussion (timpani and bass drum). Magnussen opted for yet a smaller ensemble, due in some part to financial limitations for live players. “Most modern dance companies have small budgets, and live music, while a wonderful thing, is also a luxury. Knowing this, I had to be very careful in my instrumentation choices. I didn't want my instrumentation to be too expensive to produce, yet I also needed to maintain the balance between the orchestral and choral forces.”<sup>54</sup> Magnussen looked to the Stravinsky in terms of preference of orchestration – flute and clarinets (in place of double reed instruments<sup>55</sup>), brass (bass trombone), low strings (only cellos), harp, piano, and percussion. Magnussen’s score calls for an increased variety of percussion compared to Stravinsky – consistent with Magnussen’s own penchant for rhythmic drive, culled from his early experiences in Sierra Leone and from his admiration for the percussion writing by his teacher at Juilliard, Robert Beaser.<sup>56</sup>

While Stravinsky did not, Lester’s score also called for solo baritone. With the Just Man in mind, Magnussen adopted this as well, realizing that a solo singer could serve as musical

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<sup>53</sup> Magnussen, Telephone interview, March 10, 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, May 29, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> “Stravinsky did not use the clarinet, but I chose it over the oboe because of its range and blending abilities.” Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, May 29, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, May 29, 2013.

analog to the solo dancer in representation of the burden bearer.<sup>57</sup> For the movements for baritone, Magnussen chose Vulgate texts from Psalms 21, 12, and 112 (in order of their appearance in the work). The natures of these texts are plaintive, even desperate – advancing the understanding of the condition of the Just Man as one of suffering. “In choosing the specific texts, I looked for ways to support [Limon’s] message.”<sup>58</sup>

Psalm 21:2, 3, 15, 16

<sup>2</sup>My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? [why art thou so] far from helping me, [and from] the words of my roaring?

<sup>3</sup>O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.

<sup>15</sup>I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.

<sup>16</sup>My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.

Psalm 12:1-3

<sup>1</sup>How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?

<sup>2</sup>How long shall I take counsel in my soul, [having] sorrow in my heart daily?

<sup>3</sup>How long shall mine enemy be exalted (over me)?

The writing for baritone is characterized by a frequency of repeated pitches, often in the singer’s higher range, usually coinciding with importuning text. The repetition provides a nearly spoken quality, but the tessitura suggests urgency. Often there is movement to the octave below the high repeated pitch; this causes the listener to sense a (human) limit to the amount of desperation and suffering that can be endured. This is evidenced as Figure 3.1, measures 94-105 within the movement titled “Burden Bearer Solo I.” Here, the baritone cries to God the text “far from helping me [and from] the word of my roaring.”

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<sup>57</sup> Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, May 24, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, April 7, 2013.

Figure 3.1:

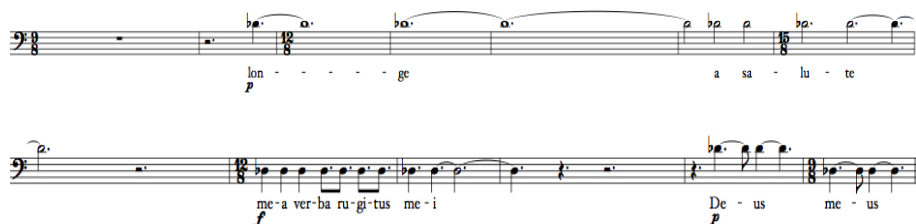


Figure 3.2 shows a similar instance in measures 124-128. Here, the baritone is lamenting his heart, which has turned to wax in his bowels. In both examples, the elevated and repeated pitch level serves to accentuate the poignant portions of the text, further conveying the depth of suffering of the Just Man.

Figure 3.2:

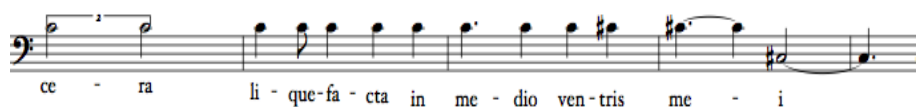


Figure 3.3 (a and b) shows yet another example of this technique from later in the work, measures 272-273 and 278-280 in the “Burden Bearer Solo II.” The text here is also directed to God, “how long will you hide your face from me?”

Figure 3.3a:



Figure 3.3b:



For the chorus, Magnussen also drew texts from the Vulgate Psalms – Psalms 112, 38, and 60 (in order of appearance in the work).

Psalm 112:1,3

<sup>1</sup>Praise ye the LORD. Praise, O ye servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD.

<sup>3</sup> From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same the LORD’S name [is] to be praised.

Psalm 38:13

Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I [am] a stranger with thee, [and] a sojourner, as all my fathers [were].

Psalm 60:2,3

<sup>2</sup>Hear my cry, O god; attend unto my prayer.

<sup>3</sup>From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed lead me to the rock [that] is higher than I.

The verses from Psalm 112 represent the constant praise the faithful people give to God in all circumstances, a recurrent subject in Schwartz-Bart’s story. In the ballet, the chorus represents the community – Magnussen’s analog in the score is the SATB chorus, whose Psalm 112 text likewise recurs throughout the entire work (see Table 3.1). Again, Magnussen writes, “This message of undying praise, even amidst the horrors and atrocities of war, inspired me to set...the Vulgate’s Psalm 112.”<sup>59</sup> The verses from Psalm 38 and 60 show the readiness of the faithful people to lift their sorrows to the Lord in acknowledgement that they are visitors in God’s creation. Psalms 38 and 60 are less joyful than Psalm 112, and reflect the faithful dependence of the people upon their Lord. When considered with respect to the text given to the baritone, the people’s prayers are different in tenor. The poignant cries of the baritone, rich in specificity and sensory detail, stand out in relief to those of the chorus.

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<sup>59</sup> Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, April 7, 2013.

Table 3.1 shows the division of the score into dance pieces, and the applicable text for each piece. Note the frequency with which Psalm 112 appears, conveying the faithful community's abiding praise.

Table 3.1:

Section Title	Measures	Scoring	Text
Ouverture	1-7	Instrumental	-
Walking Dance	8-71	SATB, inst.	Ps. 112
Burden Bearer Solo I	72-167	Baritone solo, inst.	Ps. 21
Jumping Dance	168-191	SATB, inst.	Ps. 38
Solo & Tableau	192-227	Instrumental	-
Jumping Dance Reprise	228-259	SATB, inst.	Ps. 112, 38
Burden Bearer Solo II	260-281	Baritone solo, inst.	Ps. 12
Trio	282-299	SATB, inst.	Ps. 112
The Awakening	300-348	Instrumental	-
Trio Exit	349-359	SATB, B solo, inst.	Ps. 12
Silent Dance	-	Tacet	-
Running Dance	360-564	SATB, B solo, inst.	Ps 12, 112
Finale	565-656	SATB, B solo, inst.	Ps 60, 112

This devout faith and enduring praise for God, even in the face of suffering and death, was something that struck both Limón and Magnussen in Schwartz-Bart's novel. It reaches the reader in the form of a quotation found on the last page of Schwartz-Bart's novel:

And praised. *Auschwitz*. Be. *Maidanek*. The Lord. *Treblinka*. And praised. *Buchenwald*. Be. *Mauthausen*. The Lord. *Belzec*. And praised. *Sobibor*. Be. *Chelmno*. The Lord. *Ponary*. And praised. *Theresienstadt*. Be. *Warsaw*. The Lord. *Vilna*. And praised.

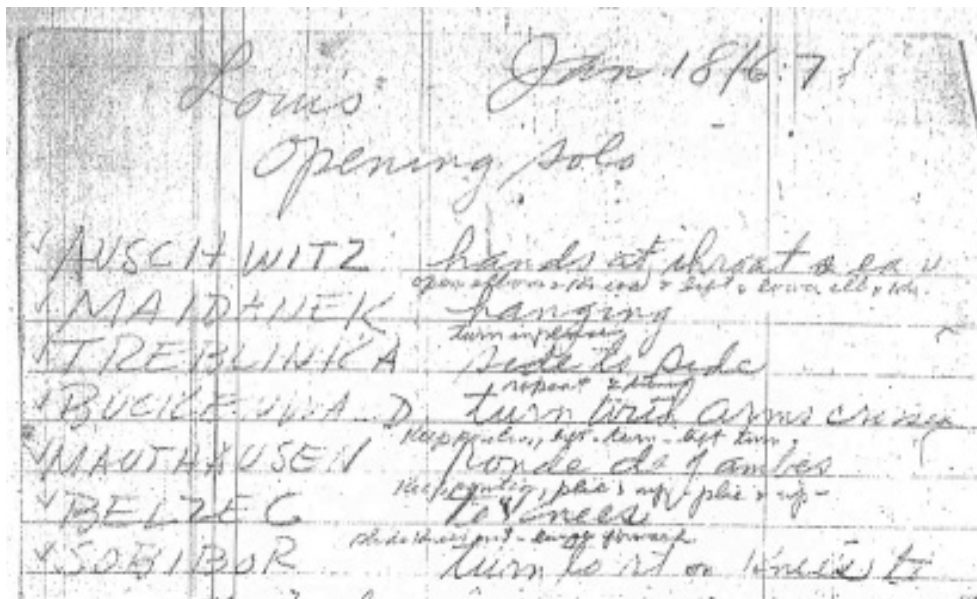


Skarzysko. Be. Bergen-Belsen. The lord. Janow. And praised. Dora. Be.  
 Neuengamme. The Lord. Pustkow. And praised...<sup>60</sup>

This paragraph was in fact the epigraph assigned to *Psalm* by José Limón. Interpolated into the common prayer, “And praised be the Lord,” are names of locations where atrocities during World War II were committed against the Jews, and by extension, all humanity. Certainly the direct juxtaposition of the names and the prayers produces a sobering feeling, prompting Magnussen’s earlier comment about his choice of Psalm 112.

In his choreography, Limón chose certain gestures and movements to represent these notorious sites. Figure 3.4 shows a partial list of the historical sites (listed on left) and the appointed gesture or motion that corresponds to that site. The list is in Limón’s own hand, and is part of a small collection of choreographic notes made available courtesy of Carla Maxwell and the Limón Dance Foundation.<sup>61</sup>

Figure 3.4:



<sup>60</sup> Schwartz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, 370.

<sup>61</sup> José Limón, unpublished choreographic sketch for *Psalm*, c. 1967, used with permission of the José Limón Dance Foundation.

In an analogous way, composer Jon Magnussen chose to use this same passage as source material for the generation of melodic musical material – a means of aligning his musical work with the spirit of Limón’s concept. Using a standard pitch cipher, Magnussen was able to assign pitches to letters of the alphabet in order to produce melodic pitch combinations to represent the spelled-out names of sites. In sketches for his compositional work, Magnussen worked out permutations for all of the sites in Schwartz-Bart’s paragraph mentioned above, where the horrors of the Nazis’ genocidal efforts met fruition.<sup>62</sup> Since the bulk of his compositional period lay shortly subsequent to the atrocities of 9/11 in New York City, Magnussen, deeply impacted by the events in the city where he had lived and worked, decided to broaden his range of source names to include locations where crimes against humanity have occurred since World War II. Included in his early experimental name-sources the names New York, Hiroshima, Sabra and Shatila<sup>63</sup>, Thanh Phong<sup>64</sup>, Yakaolong<sup>65</sup>, and Sovu Convent among others.<sup>66</sup> Magnussen explained that while the numerous names available to him generated a large volume of possible melodic material, his selection was based largely on his preference for the way certain combinations of pitches sounded. His approach was not one of formulaic development. Rather, the composer used the pitch collections suggested through his process as a point of departure, exercising his own intuition and preferences in selecting which collections to use. By reserving for himself the role of aesthetic arbiter, he was able to make musical choices that he felt supported the dance. Had there been a more inflexible approach to the treatment of the melodic

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<sup>62</sup> Jon Magnussen, e-mail message to author, May 25, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> In Beirut, Lebanon in September of 1982, a Lebanese Christian militia massacred thousands of civilian refugees.

<sup>64</sup> During the Vietnam War (1969), American operatives executed thirteen civilian inhabitants of the Vietnamese hamlet of Thanh Phong.

<sup>65</sup> Taliban forces summarily executed hundreds of non-combatants in Afghanistan in 2001.

<sup>66</sup> At Sovu Convent in Rwanda, thousands of Tutsi refugees were burned to death and slaughtered by Hutu extremists. Two nuns from the convent were among the four individuals found guilty of aiding the Hutu mob.

material, it would have made the crafting of a score informed by the dance much more problematic. Because he was not bound by a rigid mathematical confine in his composition process, it allowed the melodic material generated by his process to be similarly flexible, subject to modification through transposition, inversion, and other permutations.<sup>67</sup> In fact, most of the materials in his sketches did not find their way into the musical text. Magnussen further explained that he only needed a small amount of musical material to provide enough food for musical development.<sup>68</sup>

Standard modes/scales, octatonic scales, and chromatic scales were employed by assigning successive pitches within a scale to successive letters of the alphabet. Through the use of a computer program called “Max Runtime<sup>69</sup>,” Magnussen was able to create a tool that allowed him to sit at a normal computer keyboard and type in letters to hear the pitches assigned by any of the ciphers he had prescribed in the program. That way, he could key in names such as Auschwitz or Treblinka to hear the melodic figure generated by their alphabetic spellings.<sup>70</sup>

Tables 3.2-3.5 demonstrate the pitch ciphers Magnussen used.

Table 3.2: Standard Pitch Cipher

PITCH NAMES	ALPHABETICAL CORRELATES
A	A, H, P, X
B	B, I/J, Q, Y
C	C, K, R, Z
D	D, L, S
E	E, M, T
F	F, N, U/V
G	G, O, W

<sup>67</sup> Jon Magnussen, interview by author, personal interview, telephone, May 27, 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Max Runtime is a program created by the company Cycling '74. “Cycling '74 creates software for the specialized needs of artists, educators, and researchers working with audio, visual media, and physical computing. Our visual programming tools Max, MSP, Jitter, and Gen serve as the creative engine behind thousands of innovative projects.” <http://cycling74.com/company/>. Accessed May 25, 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Jon Magnussen, interview by author, personal interview, telephone, May 23, 2013.

Table 3.3: Octatonic Pitch Cipher 1

PITCH NAMES	ALPHABETICAL CORRELATES
A	A, I, Q, Y
B $\flat$	B, J, R, Z
C	C, K, S
C $\sharp$	D, L, T
D $\sharp$	E, M, U
E	F, N, V
F $\sharp$	G, O, W
G	H, P, X

Table 3.4: Octatonic Pitch Cipher 2

PITCH NAMES	ALPHABETICAL CORRELATES
A	A, I, Q, Y
B	B, J, R, Z
C	C, K, S
D	D, L, T
E $\flat$	E, M, U
F	F, N, V
G $\flat$	G, O, W
A $\flat$	H, P, X

Table 3.5: Chromatic Pitch Cipher

PITCH NAMES	ALPHABETICAL CORRELATES
A	A, M, Y
A $\sharp$	B, N, Z
B	C, O
C	D, P
C $\sharp$	E, Q
D	F, R
D $\sharp$	G, S
E	H, T
F	I, U
F $\sharp$	J, V
G	K, W
G $\sharp$	L, X

Figure 3.5 is an excerpt from the second movement, “Walking Dance,” measures 37-38.

The flute and piano lines contain an eleven-note figure, which is the Octatonic 1 permutation of

the name Sovu Convent. The pitch content is C, F#, E, D#, C, F#, E, E, D#, E, C#. Note that measure 38 contains the pitch collection in retrograde, beginning with the pitch E (the second pitch in retrograde permutation; the collection concludes with the first pitch in retrograde, C#). In the first measures of the same movement, the collection appears as the basis of the harp and piano parts, but is transposed down a semitone. In both instances, the text that coincides is Psalm 112. There is a rather palpable irony given the story of the massacre at Sovu Convent, where innocent villagers sought refuge in a building that housed nuns. Two of those nuns were complicit in their slaughter.

Figure 3.5:



Figure 3.6 is an excerpt from the third movement, “Burden Bearer Solo I,” measures 93-99. The flute line contains a nine-note figure, which is the Octatonic 1 permutation of the name Treblinka. The pitch content is C#, A#, D#, A#, A, E, C, A. The score does respell some pitches with their enharmonic equivalents. Octave displacement is at the discretion of the composer.

Figure 3.6:



Through the appointment of names such as Treblinka and Sovu Convent as source material, Magnussen imbued his work with a musical imprint that helped determine the soundscape of the work. The incorporation of intact musical material effected by these two names afforded the work a connection to symbolic historical events whose horrors stand out as monuments to human wickedness and suffering. Though this emblematic material is not apparent or instantly symbolic to a listener, it provided Magnussen a means to connect his work to the work of those who contributed to the earlier effort of creating *Psalm*.

Ultimately, the text selection, use of baritone solo, and creative way in which melodic material was generated form a compelling connection to José Limón, Stravinsky, and the plight of Schwartz-Bart's "just" protagonist, Ernie Levy, as a symbol of all who endure abject suffering and whose spirits transcend.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

In 2014, the Limón Dance Company will embark on a European tour. The repertory will include a revival of *Psalm* utilizing Magnussen's score. Obviously, *Psalm* is a work that remains close to the hearts of those in the company – of the wide array of available works to present on an international tour, the inclusion of the 2002 revision of *Psalm* with Magnussen's score points to the company's belief that it is a work of substance, effective as representation of the essence of the company and José Limón's legacy in its depth of message and artistry.

The creative journey of *Psalm* is clearly a compelling one. Having been deeply moved by his reading of André Schwartz-Bart's novel, *The Last of the Just*, Limón's vision of *Psalm* was to convey a theme of triumph of the human spirit. His original score preference of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* being inaccessible, the choreographer worked tirelessly alongside Eugene Lester to create the original version of *Psalm*. Though Limón sanctioned this work and it was performed a number of times, it did not survive in the regular repertory of the company. Carla Maxwell's decision to edit the work, commission a new score, and remount it for performance in a streamlined form gave the powerful message of the work new life.

Jon Magnussen's compositional process was removed from Limón by thirty years since the choreographer's death, but his enthusiasm for the project and desire to create a score that served the aesthetic of the dance prompted him to seek inspiration in the sources that inspired its creator. Through his own reading of Schwartz-Bart, careful research of the inception of *Psalm*, close collaboration with Carla Maxwell, and an already powerful musical prowess, Magnussen was able to fall effectively into the fold of a creative confluence that comprised four significant artists – Schwartz-Bart, Limón, Maxwell, and himself.

The task that Magnussen faced was a complicated one. He wanted to create a sound world that advanced the artistic sphere created by the dance. He did this in four major ways: through his choice of texts, inspired by Stravinsky's choice of Psalms, his inclusion of a baritone soloist to parallel the solo dancer's role as "burden bearer," by making use of text from Schwartz-Bart's novel to beget musical figures, and by applying his own creative voice and understanding of the dance. His choice of texts highlighted the suffering of the burden bearer while pointing to the devotion of the faithful in their praise for God, even in the face of death. The melodic figures produced by supplying historical site names to a pitch cipher serve as a musical emblem for the suffering of people. His own musical creativity provided a framework for the inclusion of these choices, yielding a compositional fabric woven with intention.

The result is a work rich in significance, both historical and artistic. It brings into focus the indomitability of human resolve, rooted in powerful personal spirit. The musical work closely underscores the intention of the choreography, such that the score could be performed without dancers with a very satisfying effect. Rife with complex rhythm and intense vocalism, the work is accessible to accomplished singers and players at the university or professional levels.

Magnussen met the distinct demands of this project with originality and care. Perhaps those qualities are the very ones required to further the artistic aims of a mature ballet he encountered in relatively complete form. The trust Carla Maxwell showed in Jon Magnussen was well placed.



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