

THE CHORAL MUSIC OF OLA GJEILO: A NEW VISION OF THE  
CHORAL INSTRUMENT IN THE 21st CENTURY

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The choral music of Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo (pronounced “yay-loh”) is gaining international acclaim and is widely performed and commissioned by prominent high school, university, and professional choirs. It represents a philosophical approach and vision of the choral instrument for which the conductor must have a clear understanding in order to prepare a meaningful performance. In particular, his music merges diverse musical influences, which results in a product of unique character among choral compositions in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Gjeilo draws inspiration from a text but then uses its sonic qualities (the sounds of vowels and consonants) to create an atmosphere of sound instead of following the traditions in choral and vocal music of using musical mechanisms (melody, rhythm, and harmony) to reinforce the text poetically.

This study provides an overview of Gjeilo’s background, in Chapter 1, and discusses its influence on his compositional philosophy. Chapter 2 contains musical examples from selected works, which are used to illuminate unique attributes found in Gjeilo’s music. Chapter 3 presents important implications to consider aiding choral conductors in their preparation of future performances of Gjeilo’s music.

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# CHAPTER 1

## OVERVIEW OF OLA GJEILO

### Introduction

The choral music of Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo (pronounced “yay-loh”) is gaining international acclaim and is widely performed and commissioned by prominent high school, university, and professional choirs. It represents a philosophical approach and vision of the choral instrument for which the conductor must have a clear understanding in order to prepare a meaningful performance. In particular, his music merges diverse musical influences, which results in a product of unique character among choral compositions in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Gjeilo draws inspiration from a text but then uses its sonic qualities (the sounds of vowels and consonants) to create an atmosphere of sound instead of following the traditions in choral and vocal music of using musical mechanisms (melody, rhythm, and harmony) to reinforce the text poetically.

This study provides an overview of Gjeilo’s background and discusses its influence on his compositional philosophy. Musical examples from selected works will be used to illuminate unique attributes found in Gjeilo’s music, aiding choral conductors in their preparation of future performances of Gjeilo’s music.

### Background and Early Development

Ola Gjeilo (b. 1978) is a composer and pianist born in Sandvika, Norway who developed a passion for music early in his life through exposure to a broad range of musical styles. His father, Inge Gjeilo, is an amateur saxophone player and music aficionado who filled the house with music during Gjeilo’s formative years. With regard to choral music, Gjeilo comments, “I

think it was a natural area for me because I grew up with it. My father loved choral music and played a lot of recordings when I was growing up.”<sup>1</sup> Gjeilo also gravitated to jazz and improvisational piano experimentation at an early age. He often wanted to play his own music, improvise, or learn music by ear.<sup>2</sup> Gjeilo says, “I began improvising when I was young. I don’t remember exactly when, but it was one of the first things I did. I started playing the piano as soon as I could reach the keys.”<sup>3</sup>

Gjeilo did not receive any formal training early on and could not read music until he was seven years old when he began lessons with his first piano teacher. He admits to exhausting several piano teachers through the years because he was much more interested in playing his own music than the music being assigned to him.<sup>4</sup> About his natural ability at the piano, Gjeilo states, “I guess I had a good ear early on. I remember being able to listen to things on the radio and then play it back on the piano.”<sup>5</sup> This skill helped Gjeilo experiment with compositional ideas at a young age.

Beginning in high school, Gjeilo engaged in a sequence of formal study that deepened his skill and moved his creative output in new directions.<sup>6</sup> Gjeilo engaged in jazz study with high school teacher, Ole Henrik Giørtz.<sup>7</sup> Gjeilo comments, “That is pretty much all of the jazz education I have had. Otherwise, it is more of a process of exploration by listening to people and music that I admire.”<sup>8</sup> Following high school Gjeilo studied with Wolfgang Plagge, a well-known composer and pianist in Oslo, who introduced Gjeilo to writing music in the classical

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<sup>1</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in the liner notes to Gjeilo, Ola. *Stone Rose*, 2L 2L48SACD, 2007. Compact disc.

<sup>3</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.



style as well as his first choral music.<sup>9</sup> Gjeilo then received formal training in classical composition at the Royal College of Music in London and moved to New York in 2001 to begin composition studies at the Juilliard School, from which he graduated in 2006. During the 2006-2007 year he studied film scoring in the Los Angeles area and worked on music for short films and commercials.<sup>10</sup> The breadth of these activities, which occupy approximately a 10-year period, would later contribute to Gjeilo's formation of very personal philosophies regarding classical choral composition, and lead him to form a musical language that offered something new to the choral repertory.

For several years, Gjeilo's choral music resembled very conventional choral composition techniques. These early works were intriguing to choral conductors leading ensembles at varying levels of experience because of their accessibility. When asked about his earlier works and their very traditional construction, Gjeilo responded, "I think that is definitely where I was at that point. It is just what I liked at that time. I was listening to a lot of traditional classical music like Duruflé, Bruckner, Britten, Vaughan Williams, and early church music. So, when I started out I think my music had more influence from these types of works."<sup>11</sup> Z. Randall Stroope, a nationally known composer and director of choral activities at Oklahoma State University, was intrigued by Gjeilo's early compositions. He states, "One of the first pieces that became very well known in America is *Ubi Caritas*. It is set for unaccompanied mixed chorus, and is very accessible for high school and collegiate ensembles. It is a beautiful, lyrical piece with very attractive harmonic colors."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Z. Randall Stroope, interview with author, 21 February 2012.

The improvisational spirit discovered in his childhood remained with Gjeilo as he studied composition and became more active in writing classical choral music. At this point in his young career, Gjeilo carried on in a very segmented compositional manner with an improvisational piano style and more classically based choral composition. Gjeilo recognized this by stating, “For a while, I had these two sides, or periods, that I experimented with. I was definitely split. On the one hand I was writing music more like traditional church music and at the same time doing this improvisatory, somewhat cinematic type of music at the piano.”<sup>13</sup>

Gjeilo maintained an active schedule as a piano performer and his debut recording as a pianist-composer, the album *Stone Rose*, was released in 2007 on the 2L label, and contained music that Gjeilo composed. The sequel, *Piano Improvisations*, an album of entirely improvised music, will be released in April 2012 on the same label. When commenting on his creative process for the solo piano writing, Gjeilo states, “ I think that, generally, the closer music is to improvisation, the better the result. Then the music tends to be deeper and more spontaneous, not cluttered by calculating thoughts. A big part of it is just staying out of the way.”<sup>14</sup> The advancement of his formal composition study and solo piano abilities would later contribute to his concept of integrating new ideas into his choral works.

### Development of His Philosophy

Sometime after his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, Gjeilo began to evaluate his work as a composer and prioritize his musical goals. He realized that most of his favorite living composers were film composers, which raised the question of why that was not being reflected more qualitatively in

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<sup>13</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in the liner notes to Gjeilo, Ola. *Stone Rose*, 2L 2L48SACD, 2007. Compact disc.

his own writing, especially his classical choral music.<sup>15</sup> After this time, the boundaries between his improvisatory piano work and classical compositions began to dissolve, and his musical styles began to merge. The type of music heard on his solo piano album *Stone Rose* began appearing his classical compositions, which resulted in a hybrid of both. Gjeilo comments, “After that, I think I was just happier because I was less conflicted about what I wanted to do as a composer. I became a lot more discerning about what exactly it is that I really love to hear, and compose.”<sup>16</sup> Gjeilo mentions that finding one’s voice is a common barrier for many composers:

I think it is real easy to get caught up in external factors and questioning oneself. What does my teacher want me to do? What are others expecting from me? Is my music modern enough? Is it too pretty? Is it too cerebral? We get caught up in these things and distracted from the core question, which is, what is it that I really love? What is it that I really want to listen to? This should be the benchmark of all that we composers are looking for. It is so important in music. If we don’t enjoy our own music – audiences won’t either. So, this is the principle I work with now. Is the music I am currently writing something I want to put on my iPod and listen to every day? That is what I realized at that point in my life and exactly the reason I started to write more music that reflected what I was listening to. It made me happier, I felt a lot less creative doubt, and I just began to enjoy composing in a new way.<sup>17</sup>

This period of philosophical reconsideration is the genesis of many of Gjeilo’s most recent developments in choral composing, marking the point at which Gjeilo begins to transfer his philosophy for improvisation and admiration for film music into his classical work.

As is discussed later in Chapter 2, Gjeilo also begins to view the choral instrument as symphonic in nature, resulting in a unique treatment of text and a new singing role for the chorus. He explores the concept of creating a musical atmosphere through the use of large blocks of sustained sound and also uses the choir as a supporting, or accompaniment texture to other instruments. When Gjeilo uses the choir as a supporting texture, he often chooses to employ the

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<sup>15</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

sonic qualities of the text (using vowels and consonants for their sound instead of meaning) rather than the poetic meaning with respect to proper word stress and phrase shape. Finally, Gjeilo transfers or adapts techniques used in symphonic compositions and works them into his choral compositions.

### The Current State of Gjeilo's New Concepts

Gjeilo's jazz and improvisational piano background combined with training in film scoring, classical piano and composition have fostered the creative development of a unique compositional language for choirs. Award-winning conductor Charles Bruffy says the following about Gjeilo's music: "He doesn't sound like he is writing Norwegian music, or American music. He is writing new music that utilizes the tools of the past, in terms of harmony and rhythm, but in such a refreshing and magnetic way."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Gjeilo has been increasingly involved with numerous collaborative improvisational performances of his own music. These performances consist of a choir singing one of his earlier, more traditional choral compositions (which are intended to be performed unaccompanied) with Gjeilo at the piano improvising an accompaniment. In April of 2011, Gary Weidenaar of Central Washington University spearheaded a recording project, titled *In the Moment*, with the goal of creating high-level video recordings of several improvisations with Gjeilo at the piano. These one-take improvised performances of Gjeilo choral works are now documented and disseminated on YouTube making these performances readily accessible around the world.<sup>19</sup> Z. Randall Stroope, has also performed Gjeilo's works with him in residence:

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<sup>18</sup> "Recording the Music of Ola Gjeilo." Online Posting. YouTube, 12 April 2011. Web. 15 January 2012. <http://youtu.be/nBWgkuhXUHI>

<sup>19</sup> "In the Moment." Online Posting. YouTube, 24 May 2011. Web. 12 January 2012. <http://youtu.be/YrvEgQl57b0>.

When you bring him into the process, that is a definite intensifying agent that doesn't exist in most other choral music. Cinematic music, in general, is background music to another drama. It is supportive material that moves in and around something else that's happening. When he's there with you, the "something else" that's happening is him. The music is sort of swirling around him at the piano and that adds a lot to the performance. His music is effective with another pianist, but his energy adds a lot to the vitality to the music.<sup>20</sup>

The increasing visibility gained through professionally produced recordings and YouTube video releases, combined with Gjeilo's creative musical style has helped build support across a diverse representation of choirs – high school, amateur, university, and professional.

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<sup>20</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 21 February 2012.

## CHAPTER 2

### UNIQUE ATTRIBUTES IN GJEILO'S MUSIC

Jo Michael Scheibe, director of choral activities at the University of Southern California, discusses his impression of Gjeilo's distinct style: "When I heard this music, I thought, this is really unique writing. This is not coming from a person who has been crafted in the traditional mold of choral composition in America."<sup>21</sup> Composers form their own specific language, or vocabulary, through employment of musical devices (harmony, melody, rhythm, and form), which becomes a base of their creative output. Gjeilo's use of melody, rhythm, and harmony are not unusual but his method of construction is atypical for choral music. Stroope talks about Gjeilo's musical structure:

My attraction to his music is that, first, it is well crafted and, second, he has found a 'sound vocabulary' that is attractive to the broader public. When you are composing, the first thing you have to do is create a sound, mood, or vocabulary that gives the music a uniqueness and interesting musical structure. Our singers and I found Gjeilo's vocabulary very interesting and so did our audiences.<sup>22</sup>

Gjeilo's unique sound vocabulary can be understood through detailed discussion of his vision of symphonic construction for the choral ensemble.

#### Vision of the Choral Instrument as Symphonic

Gjeilo has formed a vision of the choral instrument as "symphonic" in nature, meaning he views the chorus as a block of sound much as an orchestral composer views a woodwind, brass, or string section. Gjeilo comments, "My ideal sound world is generally symphonic. I always think in a symphonic manner and that is the sound I try to get at no matter how small the forces

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<sup>21</sup> Jo-Michael Scheibe, interview with author, 14 February 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Z. Randall Stroope, interview with author, 21 February 2012.

are.”<sup>23</sup> Gjeilo achieves a symphonic quality in his choral music by, (1) employing the choir as a background texture and (2) working with the sonic qualities of the text, which both contribute to his desire to create a musical atmosphere.

### *The Choir as a Background Texture*

Gjeilo often conceives the choir as a background texture, or as a “supporting choir.” In *Dark Night of the Soul*, Gjeilo employs four contributing sonorities to the overall musical texture: (1) eight-part chorus, (2) piano, (3) string quartet, and (4) soprano soloist. Unique to choral music, Gjeilo intends for the choir to remain in the background commenting: “Often in choral music, the piano gets relegated to a background role. I wanted to bring the piano out in a choral piece and elevate the instrument in somewhat of a solo role to create an equal dialogue with the choir.”<sup>24</sup> To enhance the role of the piano, Gjeilo has made two specific designations in the initial construction. Dynamic markings in the opening measure of *Dark Night of the Soul* as well as the sparse assignment of text, as seen in Example 1, both clearly point to the choir’s place as a supporting color or background texture. Gjeilo’s technique of lengthening the text over multiple bars weakens its presence and produces an orchestral block of sound.

The strings exist to add additional orchestral color by doubling piano or voices depending on the mood Gjeilo intends to create. The soprano soloist is added intermittently throughout the work as an additional layering color, (Example 2) often with a soaring presence above the rest of the choir and instruments. The result is an atypical piano dominance with supporting symphonic

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<sup>23</sup> “Featurette: Ola Gjeilo’s *Dark Night of the Soul*.” Online Posting. YouTube, 23 July 2011. Web. 12 January 2012. <http://youtu.be/i-VNCxxso4Q>.

<sup>24</sup> “Recording the Music of Ola Gjeilo.” Online Posting. YouTube, 12 April 2011. Web. 15 January 2012. <http://youtu.be/nBWgkuhXUHI>

colors (chorus, strings, and soprano solo). The choir exists as an additional orchestral section instead of holding the principal position of delivering the text over a supporting accompaniment.

Musical Example 1: Illustration of the choir's background role as an orchestral block of sound and the piano role as a solo instrument. (Ola Gjeilo. *Dark Night of the Soul*, mm. 1-5. Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

Full Score

Commissioned by Gjeilo Lohoff in memory of Norman Lohoff  
for the Phoenix Chorus with Charles Driffill, cond.  
Premiere in Phoenix, AZ, Feb. 2013

## DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Dedicated to Gjeilo Lohoff  
Memoriam, N.Y. Jan. 2013

\* 9th Edition of the Score (1942-1991)

For SSAATTBB Chorus, Piano and String Quartet

Ola Gjeilo

$\text{♩} = 192 \text{ (♩}^2 = 384)$

Violin 1  
Violin 2  
Viola  
Violoncello

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Another example in which Gjeilo envisions the choir as background to a solo instrument arises in his work for unaccompanied SSAATTBB choir and violin, *Serenity*, which is set to the Latin text, “O Magnum Mysterium” (*Oh great mystery*). Gjeilo’s concept is again realized through a non-melodic, orchestral, supporting role, which uses the words for the beauty of their vowel sounds, rather than their literal meaning. The static nature of the text softens the choir’s aural presence allowing the solo instrument to be elevated to the foreground. Gjeilo uses a sparse



background texture in the opening by breaking the text (Example 3) and later broadens the texture (Example 4) to add color and depth to the supporting sonority. Gjeilo has a tendency to use octave doubling to reinforce melodic material, which also aids in cutting through the texture.

Musical Example 2: Soprano solo first entrance – soaring melody with doubling. (Ola Gjeilo. *Dark Night of the Soul*, mm. 53-59. (Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

This musical score snippet shows the Soprano solo first entrance (mm. 53-59) from *Dark Night of the Soul*. The Soprano solo part (Sopr. solo) is marked *mf* and features a soaring melody with octave doubling. The lyrics "I went out" are written below the notes. The Tutti part (Tutti) is marked *mf* and features a supporting melody with the lyrics "Aah". The parts for S2, A1, and A2 are also shown, with A2 circled in red. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Musical Example 3: Choir employed as orchestral-like accompaniment – and use of text breaking. (Ola Gjeilo. *Serenity*, mm. 7-14. (Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

This musical score snippet shows the Violin and Choir parts (mm. 7-14) from *Serenity*. The Violin part is marked *p* and *mf* and features a melodic line. The lyrics "num my ste ri" are written below the notes. The Choir parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) are marked *mf* and feature a supporting melody with the lyrics "num my ste ri". The parts for S, A, T, and B are shown, with the lyrics "num my ste ri" written below the notes. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Musical Example 4: Lyric melody of solo instrument is doubled (at the octave) in the voice parts as the texture broadens. Gjeilo uses a voice overlapping technique creating a slow motion undulation between dissonance and consonance. Discussed in more depth later in example 5 and 6. (Ola Gjeilo. *Serenity*, mm. 35-39. Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

### *Using Sonic Qualities of Text*

Another key attribute of Gjeilo's music related to his symphonic vision in choral writing is his unconventional setting of text. Gjeilo discusses his philosophy of setting text in his choral works with respect to (1) breaking apart the text, (2) diverting from setting words with traditional descriptive phrase shape and word stress, and (3) working to create a musical atmosphere:

I think the words, for me, are more of a servant to the music...rather than the other way around. Obviously that is a choice. There are composers who are much word oriented and more meticulously analyzing the meaning of the poem, and then the music somewhat comes out of the detailed analysis of the poem. For me, it's always been a little bit the

other way around. The text is really important to me – in the sense that I want it to express something that I believe in. Usually, the text has somewhat of a spiritual content that inspires me. The general meaning matters, therefore, but the text itself has been more of an inspiration for the music, somewhat of a catalyst, rather than something that is dictating the music.<sup>25</sup>

*The Spheres*, written for SSAATTBB choir as the first movement to the *Sunrise Mass*, (Example 5) is based on the traditional text from the Roman Catholic Mass, “Kyrie eleison” (*Lord have mercy*). Gjeilo achieves a symphonic texture in this work by employing fragments of the text to form the overall sonority, which requires the chorus to sustain the vowels creating an orchestral block of sound. As has been stated, choral and vocal composers most often use melody, harmony, and rhythm to enhance the poetic shape of a text. In Example 5, Gjeilo opposes this by breaking the Greek word, “Kyrie,” distributing it among the overlapping voices. Most significantly, each individual vocal part may not contain all of the syllables to each word, and Gjeilo freely breaks each word to enhance the beauty of the total sound. Gjeilo believes in the auditory power of the music alone:

We can listen to an entire opera in another language and really enjoy it, even if we don’t know what they are saying. The music itself is powerful. Also, Latin motets and Russian church music come to mind. These are other examples where the power of the music alone, without knowing the meaning of the text, has the potential to be unbelievably inspiring.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, Gjeilo’s belief in the power of musical sounds guides his aspiration to first create music of beauty that conveys a broad meaning of the text through the musical experience, rather than relying the declamation of the words for emotional understanding.

*Serenity* (Example 3) represents another example in which Gjeilo uses the text breaking technique but with the choir in homophonic synchronicity. By breaking the text into individual syllables he creates periods of rest between the vowel sounds. The result forms a rich, orchestral

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<sup>25</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

block of sound underpinning the solo instrument. Gjeilo comments, “I was interested in using the sound of the choir in an accompanying role,” and he also mentioned that the orchestral accompaniment concept for this piece was primary and the text was worked into the music.<sup>27</sup>

Musical Example 5: Illustration of text breaking. Select voices only contain fragments of words. Also, noted is a voice overlapping technique derived from Aaron Jay Kernis’ piece, *Musica Celestis*. Vertical squares represent consonant sonorities and vertical ovals represent points of dissonance. (Ola Gjeilo. *The Spheres*. mm. 1-7. Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

### Musical Atmosphere

Gjeilo formulates the idea of a musical atmosphere in several ways, of which using the choir as a background texture and amplifying sonic qualities of the text have already been discussed. As seen already, in *Dark Night of the Soul* (Example 1) the chorus deepens the musical atmosphere with rich background sonority, intensifying the rhythmically driving piano

<sup>27</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

and string parts. In the beginning of *Serenity*, (Example 3) a mysterious musical atmosphere is achieved through swelling chords and pauses of silence, which reinforces the general meaning of the text, (*Oh great mystery.*)

Another example of a Gjeilo's desire to form a distinct musical atmosphere can be seen in, *The Spheres*. The meaning of this text, "Kyrie eleison," was not the solitary inspiration for the music. Gjeilo comments on his concept for this piece:

The idea for this piece came out of the concept for the whole *Sunrise Mass*. The first movement, *The Spheres*, is intended to sound celestial, like it is out in space. As the Mass progresses the music becomes more solid or more human, which is the opposite of the normal philosophical and religious progression. I like the image of becoming more self-aware and more grounded.<sup>28</sup>

Gjeilo's desire to represent his philosophical ideas in broad musical textures takes precedence over more traditional "text painting." He begins the *The Spheres* (Example 5) by working to form an ethereal musical atmosphere with (1) a transparent musical texture, (2) the absence of bass voices, (3) establishment of a repetitive pattern of overlapping, swelling chords and, (4) a subtle and slowly descending harmonic progression. The piece then reaches a climax with a homophonic chorale-like section (Example 6) that is a condensation of the opening overlapping section.

Gjeilo was inspired to adopt the overlapping technique from a composition by American composer, Aaron Jay Kernis. In Kernis' *Musica Celestis*, he used such a technique with strings to create a celestial atmosphere. The characteristic of this overlapping technique comes to life when one consonant harmony is sustained while a different consonant harmony gradually emerges against the first. The two harmonies together create a dissonance until the first fades away

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<sup>28</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

leaving only the second. The slow moving harmonic motion of this overlapping technique, in repetition, creates a slow-motion undulation between consonance and dissonance.

Musical Example 6: Chorale-like section that concludes *The Spheres*, which resembles a condensation of the opening overlapping technique. (Ola Gjeilo. *The Spheres*, mm. 81-86. Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

81 *ff sempre*

S Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, ky - ri - e

A *ff sempre* Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, Ky - ri - e

T *ff sempre* Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, e - le - i - son, ky - ri - e

B *ff sempre* Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, e - le - i - son, ky - ri - e

Gjeilo admired this effect in Kernis' piece and had a strong desire to recreate it with voices. This type of musical texture also harkens back to Gjeilo's earlier composition styles. Gjeilo comments, "The sound in *Musica Celestis* also reminded me of my early composing on the synthesizer where I experimented with chords fading in and out."<sup>29</sup>

Gjeilo's methods for constructing his symphonic vision and musical atmosphere are often influenced by film music, especially that of Howard Shore, composer of the film scores for the *Lord of the Rings* series.<sup>30</sup> Similar to Shore's writing in the *Lord of the Rings*, Gjeilo uses a supporting choir to produce a complimentary texture to the instruments, adding depth to the

<sup>29</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

comprehensive sound and range of expression. Shore's use of chorus then, within the context of the entire film score, simply adds color or emotional characterization to the overall musical atmosphere. Gjeilo draws inspiration from the idea that the comprehensive musical atmosphere and texture can invoke feeling and meaning on its own, without text-based musical phrases or, more significantly, understandable text. Drama is achieved through contrast and layering much as in orchestral composition.

Contrast in Gjeilo's music is achieved in ways similar to orchestral styles of composition, but with the choral texture acting as an additional block of orchestral sound. One example, in *Dark Night of the Soul*, occurs in a minimalistic manner (Example 7). The first large section of music ends with the rhythmically driving piano part moving swiftly into the next section without cadence or preparation, creating a sudden shift into a new musical atmosphere. In this new section, the choir's role is to transport the listener from the mood of the rhythmically driving opening section to a peaceful, contrasting musical atmosphere. The minimalist piano solo is very exposed, and maintains its prominence as the primary musical interest.

Gjeilo also makes use of layering rhythmic textures, block sonorities, and lyric melodies to heighten the musical atmosphere. Gjeilo introduces a melodic gesture sung by the tenors and basses (Example 8) with a new rhythmic ostinato played by the piano. In Example 9, he reassigns this melodic gesture to the violin 1 and employs the full color palette at his disposal by using the (1) piano as the rhythmic energy, (2) choir as a background texture, (3) solo violin playing the lyric melody, (4) lower strings doubling the choir, and (5) solo soprano voice with a counter melody to the violin. This is largely similar to the layering texture from the beginning of the piece, (Example 2) but now with more levels of contrast.

Musical Example 7: Illustrating Gjeilo's use of sudden contrast to shift the musical atmosphere or mood. (Ola Gjeilo. *The Spheres*, mm. 107-116. Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

The musical score for 'The Spheres' by Ola Gjeilo, measures 107-116, is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 107-112) features a choral ensemble (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) with 'pp' (pianissimo) dynamics and 'Mmm' lyrics. The second system (measures 113-116) features a symphonic orchestra (Piano, Violins, Viola, Cello) with 'p' (piano) dynamics and 'con sord.' (con sordina) markings. The score is marked with '17' in the top right corner.

Creating a symphonic texture, like Gjeilo often does, may generate the question of why the text is not used to convey meaning. Some of Gjeilo's music could easily be accompanied by instruments and generate a similar effect even without the words. The fact that choral music has a text with specific meaning in addition to the music has long been the argument of what distinguishes our choral and vocal arts from other musical genres. The symphonic style of



composition for Gjeilo is a choice, to be sure, and also a tool. He uses this method to imitate musical styles and composers he admires, thus developing something atypical in classical choral music today.

Musical Example 8: Melodic gesture introduced by tenors and basses. (Ola Gjeilo. *Dark Night of the Soul*, mm. 136-139. Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

The musical score is for a choral setting with four vocal parts (T1, T2, B1, B2) and piano accompaniment (Pno.). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 8/8. The vocal parts are written in treble and bass clefs. The lyrics for the vocal parts are "dark - - - - - ness, and se - cure,". The piano accompaniment is written in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a bass line with occasional rests.

Musical Example 9: Full use of choir and instruments in an orchestral-like layering. (Ola Gjeilo. *Dark Night of the Soul*, mm. 156-159. Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

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The musical score is for measures 156-159 of 'Dark Night of the Soul' by Ola Gjeilo. It is written for a choir and an orchestra. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes the choir (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and the piano. The second system includes the strings (Violins 1 and 2, Viola, Violoncello). The choir parts are marked 'pp' and the instrumental parts are marked 'p'. The score is annotated with an orange box around the choir parts, a red oval around the piano part, and a red oval around the string parts.

**System 1:**

- Soprano:** Solo, marked 'pp'. The melody is:  $\text{Ah, the sheer grace!}$
- Alto:** Marked 'pp'. The melody is:  $\text{Ah, the sheer grace!}$
- Tenor:** Marked 'pp'. The melody is:  $\text{Ah, the sheer grace!}$
- Bass:** Marked 'pp'. The melody is:  $\text{Ah, the sheer grace!}$
- Piano:** Marked 'pp'. The accompaniment is a continuous eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a continuous eighth-note pattern in the left hand.

**System 2:**

- Violins 1 and 2:** Marked 'f' and 'senza sord.'. The melody is:  $\text{Ah, the sheer grace!}$
- Viola:** Marked 'p'. The melody is:  $\text{Ah, the sheer grace!}$
- Violoncello:** Marked 'p'. The melody is:  $\text{Ah, the sheer grace!}$

## CHAPTER 3

### CHALLENGES FOR THE CONDUCTOR

Gjeilo's treatment of the choral instrument creates several challenges for any conductor intending to perform his works. Since his music is written from a unique viewpoint and breaks conventions of traditional choral music, there is some advantage to having him in residence while the music is being shaped. Understanding that a residency with the composer is not the norm, it is this author's hope that providing a base of resources will aid the performance of Gjeilo's music, especially for a conductor and ensemble approaching his compositions for the first time. Specific issues to be discussed are, (1) balance of forces, (2) vocal health, (3) communicating structure to the performers, and (4) text declamation.

#### Balance of Forces

The first challenge that immediately surfaces is that of total ensemble balance. Performers of vocal music work diligently to convey the text and balance their parts within or above a supporting accompaniment. For example, Gjeilo's desire to elevate the role of the piano in *Dark Night of the Soul* requires the conductor to shape the overall sonic texture and balance the ensemble in a more orchestral manner. Scheibe comments on his experience with this piece, "I was concerned about getting the text to cut through but Ola was not worried about it being understood as much. As a choral conductor, I am always working to convey the understanding and meaning of the text, and I think Ola looks at it as a sound palate, or texture, that he uses to heighten the drama of the music."<sup>31</sup> Gjeilo has many experiences working with choirs on his own music and this is admittedly one of the biggest adjustments for singers. He comments, "I guess

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<sup>31</sup> Jo-Michael Scheibe, interview with author, 14 February 2012.

the most unusual thing about some of my music is that the choir isn't always in the foreground.”

Gjeilo continues, “I think they just need reassurance that the choir is just part of a larger symphonic sound. Especially when strings double the vocal parts.”<sup>32</sup> This is not a complex concept, but a conductor must know this from the outset to avoid unnecessary frustrations attempting to balance the choir above the instruments in Gjeilo’s similar works.

### Vocal Health

One challenge of singing the sustained passages in Gjeilo’s music relates to vocal health. This type of singing can be tiresome when long, sustained tones (Example 10) lie in difficult tessiturae at challenging dynamic levels. The driving rhythmic energy of the piano and strings in a piece like *Dark Night of the Soul* may encourage young singers to raise their singing dynamic unconsciously because of adrenaline or difficulty hearing surrounding chord tones. Conductors must be aware of the choir’s background role, and educate singers about healthy vocal technique for passages as seen below. The development of a system to employ staggered breathing, where singers breathe intermittently while the overall integrity of the sound is not compromised.

Musical Example 10: Soprano solo and soprano. Illustration of lengthy sustained passages. (Ola Gjeilo. *Dark Night of the Soul*, mm. 53-73. Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

The musical score for Musical Example 10 consists of three systems of music. Each system features a Soprano solo part and a Soprano (Tutti) part. The Soprano solo part is marked with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic and contains long, sustained notes with lyrics underneath. The Soprano (Tutti) part features a continuous, sustained melody. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is labeled with 'D' and 'E' at the beginning and end of the systems respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

## Communicating Structure to the Performers

The symphonic texture represented in some of Gjeilo's choral music poses unique challenges for the performers. Scheibe discusses a specific difficulty for the string quartet in *Dark Night of the Soul*. Scheibe comments, "The strings found some of the patterns challenging. Moving quickly in 7/8 meter with such a repetitive pattern was not something they were really used to. [Ultimately] the prominence of the piano aided in developing a foundation on which the strings and chorus could play and sing more easily."<sup>33</sup> This points to the central role of the piano in Gjeilo's compositions of this type. It is both the driving force and cohesion agent that holds the entire sound texture together. Stroope comments in a similar manner, "The piano is what leads the music. It's the primary motivator."<sup>34</sup> The conductor must first recognize the central role of the piano and then communicate the necessity to key into its place as the leading instrument.

Gjeilo's music requires a conductor to study the score from a different viewpoint and rethink one's usual approach to preparing a choir. The balance of the textures, as previously discussed, is one necessary adjustment to identify prior to rehearsals. Another challenge exists in defining the construction of the piece with respect to musical form and relaying that information to the musicians. By using the choir in blocks of sound with long sustained notes, Gjeilo eschews traditional phrasal and structural indications of form within the choral parts. This requires each singer to grasp the overall shape of the piece, since such shape cannot be easily determined within individual musical phrases. Stroope comments on his approach to training the choir:

One of the main things I focused on with the chorus was understanding the architecture of the piece. The construction is critical for the singers to grasp. When they do so, they can understand where the music is headed. A lot of other choral music is made of very

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<sup>33</sup> Jo-Michael Scheibe, interview with author, 14 February 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Z. Randall Stroope, interview with author, 21 February 2012.

the end result.<sup>35</sup>

illustrated in Example 11. The leading choral gesture in this section is the broader melodic idea

*Soul*, mm. 235-241. Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

255

**T**

**f**

S1. Ah, the grace, nor did I look,

S2. Ah, the grace, Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace,

A1. Ah, the grace, Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace,

A2. Ah, the grace, nor did I look,

T1. Ah, the grace, Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace,

T2. Ah, the grace, nor did I look,

B1. Ah, the grace, Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace,

B2. Ah, the grace, nor did I look,

**f**

Piano. Ah, the grace, Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace,

**f**

**T**

Vln. 1. Ah, the grace, Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace,

Vln. 2. Ah, the grace, Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace,

Vla. Ah, the grace, Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace,

Vc. Ah, the grace, Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace, ah, the sheer grace! Ah, the grace,

<sup>35</sup> Z. Randall Stroope, interview with author, 21 February 2012.

This takes the form of a rhythmic mantra that stands in stark comparison to the leading melodic material.

The major challenge of this section, which begins in Example 11, lies in the persistence of Gjeilo's patterns. For example, the chorus sings the secondary gesture, or rhythmic mantra, for a consecutive 83 measures and roughly two minutes of singing (at Gjeilo's tempo marking.) The breadth of this passage highlights the necessity for outlining broad structures with the choral singers. Specifically, the voices singing the rhythmic mantra must retain a sense of the melodic gesture in the other voice parts. On one hand, a conductor could simply require the singers to count properly and follow along. However, an understanding of where the music is headed with respect to interweaving melodies and harmonic shifts, as Dr. Stroope states, will guide them toward a more cohesive performance.

### Text Treatment

Although Gjeilo's treatment of text has been discussed already to some extent, it is a distinct feature of his music and one of the most important distinctions a conductor must recognize. After distinguishing whether the choir has been assigned an accompaniment-like role, it is crucial for the conductor to consider how the sound of the text should be shaped more than the poetic quality of the text.

Gjeilo comments, "In pieces like *Serenity* and *Dark Night of the Soul*, I treat the text more as a part of a general sound. It is definitely more about the beauty of sound and the emotional experience for the listener."<sup>36</sup> Example 12 illustrates Gjeilo's use of text as part of a general sound with three different blocks of sound in the choir singing different portions of the

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<sup>36</sup> Ola Gjeilo, interview with author, 13 February 2012.

same text at different speeds. The result is a stream of various and simultaneous vowels being sung that contribute to the “general sound,” as Gjeilo described.

One must always consider that Gjeilo aims to create musical sounds inspired by text but not limited by its poetic and linguistic qualities. This produces a general musical atmosphere rather than a declamation of text.

Musical Example 12: Illustration of polytextual use and Gjeilo’s indications of shaping. (Ola Gjeilo. *Serenity*, mm. 83-88, Reproduced with permission from Walton Music Corp.)

12

Violin

*f* *ff*

S *p* *mf* *mp* *f*  
um, por - ta - re

S2 *p* *mf* *mp* *f*  
um, por - ta - re

A *f*  
num my - ste - ri - um, por - ta - re

A2 *mf* *f*  
num my - ste - ri - um, por - ta - re

T *p* *mf* *mp* *f*  
re Do - mi

T2 *p* *mf* *mp* *f* *mf* *f*  
re Do - mi

B *p* *mf* *mp* *f*  
re Do - mi

B2 *p* *mf* *mp* *f* *mf* *f*  
re Do - mi



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Gjeilo's ability to merge, or imbue, his classical compositions with popular music sonorities brings an appeal to his music for listeners that do not have a history as classical music connoisseurs. Such appeal is already reaching a widespread audience, as is seen through international performances, large audiences on YouTube, as well as the international sales of the commercial recording produced by the Phoenix Chorale. Gjeilo has created a niche within the choral music profession allowing conductors and choirs to explore a new concept of composition, which benefits performers and audience members alike by broadening their experience of what choral music encompasses.

## APPENDIX A

### TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH OLA GJEILO

**Brian Schmidt:**

Did you begin composing in your youth?

**Ola Gjeilo:**

I started improvising when I was young. I don't remember exactly when, but it was one of the first things I did. I was sort of self-taught as a kid. I guess I just started playing the piano as soon as I could reach the keys. My grandmother gave my parents a piano when I was very young.

I guess I had sort of had a good ear - some natural ability as a kid. I could listen to things on the radio and play it back on the piano. So, very early on I began developing some sort of style and preference for what I liked, and I started composing very early.

**Schmidt:**

Did you begin lessons or training?

**Gjeilo:**

I didn't have any real formal training; I couldn't read music until I was 7 when I had my first piano teacher. I wore out my share of piano teachers. I didn't really care about playing what my teacher told me...I was much more into doing my own thing.

In high school (in Norway) I had a jazz teacher who gave me private jazz lessons. He taught me some of the fundamentals of jazz piano. That's pretty much all of the jazz education I've had. Otherwise, it's more of a process of exploration by listening to the people I admire. First and foremost, Keith Jarrett, has always been one of my leading inspirations. He somewhat pioneered the concept of an improvised concert. Maybe others did it before him – but I really think he perfected the idea of an entire concert that is completely improvised with a depth and technique that is unmatched.

**Schmidt:**

What was the earliest type of choral writing?

**Gjeilo:**

In Norway, right after high school, I got my first real classical composition teacher (Wolfgang Plagge). That was the first time I really started writing "classical" music, and choral specifically. When I was growing up I was much more into jazz and improvisatory types of writing. I think it (choral music) was a natural area for me because I kind of grew up with it. My father loved choral music and played quite a bit of it (recordings) when I was growing up. He is a good amateur sax player and music lover – so there was always a lot of music in the house when I was growing up.

**Schmidt:**

What is different about your earlier works? They seem a bit more conventional choral than your newer music. What were your influences?

**Gjeilo:**

I think that is definitely where I was at at that point. In many ways, those earlier works reflect what I liked at the time. I used to listen a lot more to more classical (traditional) music...like Durufle, Brucker, Britten, RVW, or early church music. So, when I started out I think my music had more influence from these types of works. Also, Russian choral music - I think some of the most successful a cappella choral music ever written comes from people like Rachmaninoff and Grechaninoff.

**Schmidt:**

You mentioned jazz and improvisatory influences, like Keith Jarrett. Are there other influences?

**Gjeilo:**

I have always been inspired by film music, even since I was a teenager. I love the sentiment of it. The music I was writing as a teenager definitely had a lot of that type of sound. I used to use a lot of synthesizer, etc. to amplify those sounds.

But then I got into classical writing after high school, which is a bit more austere or subtle in a way. So, for a while, I had these two sides (or periods) that I experimented with. I was a bit more split – on the one hand was writing music more like traditional motets and church music, and at the same time I had an improvisatory, somewhat cinematic, type of music especially coming out in my piano writing.

**Schmidt:**

Your music now seems more integrated. When did that change?

**Gjeilo:**

When I turned 30, (I was in the desert in Arizona) and had a moment where I really evaluated what I really want to do (with my composing) – and spent time trying to figure out what I really care about. I realized most of my favorite living composers are pretty much all film composers and I asked myself, “why isn’t that reflected more in my own music, or especially in my classical writing?”

After that, things started to merge a bit more. The kind of music you hear on my Stone Rose album began mixing with my more classical stuff, which resulted in pieces like “Dark Night of the Soul,” which is somewhat of a hybrid of those styles. After that, I think I was just happier because I was less conflicted about what I wanted to do as a composer. I became a lot more discerning about “what is it I really love?”

This is a big issue for composers. I think it is real easy to get caught up in external factors. What does my teacher want me to sound like or do? What are others expecting from me? Is it modern enough? Is it too pretty? Is it too cerebral?

We get caught up in these things and distracted from the core question, which is: What is it that I really love? What do I really want to listen to? This should be the benchmark of what we composers are looking for. So that’s what I try to go by. I ask myself whether

the music I'm writing right now something I want to put it on my iPod and listen to it every day.

I have always been a huge fan of Pixar, because they have this unbelievable passion and make successful movies. They make movies that they themselves want to see. It sounds so obvious, but it's really not that simple.

Steve Jobs did the same thing with Apple and the iPhone. They were just frustrated with their own cell phones so they just made a phone that they themselves wanted to have. It came from a source of passion.

This is so important in music. If we don't feel a source of passion, audiences won't either.

So, that's what I realized at that point and why I started to write more music that reflected what I was listening to. And it made me happier, and I felt a lot less creative doubt, and just began to doing what I enjoy doing.

**Schmidt:**

Discuss your view of the text? Are you consciously thinking about how you set the text? You often break the text up, which is contrary to the tradition of setting words with poetic word stress. You seem to use the words to create an atmosphere. Is this true?

**Gjeilo:**

Yes, definitely. I think the words for me in general, are more of a servant to the music...rather than the other way around. Obviously that is a choice. There are composers who are much word oriented and more meticulously analyzing the meaning of the poem and the music somewhat comes out of the poem. People like Morten Lauridsen and Eric Whitacre are very successful with this.

For me, it's always been a little bit the other way around. The text is really important to me, in that I want it to express something that I believe in. Usually it has a spiritual content that inspires me. The general meaning matters, therefore, but the text for me has been more of an inspiration for the music, somewhat of a catalyst, rather than something that is dictating the music. Sometimes, I even adapt the text to the music...which is much more common in the pop (music) world.

This is part of a realization that, first and foremost, I care most about what is being perceived and heard by the audience. To me, the audience is the primary consideration, almost even more important than the performance. I definitely aim to write music that is interesting for the performers. But in the end, the audience is kind of the reason we are all doing this.

There are many cases where the text is not the main concern. We can listen to an entire opera in another language and really enjoy it, even if we don't know what they are saying. The music itself is powerful. Also, Latin motets and Russian church

music...these are other examples where the power of the music alone, without knowing the meaning of the text, can be unbelievably inspiring. Another influence is Howard Shore, composer of the *Lord of the Rings* film scores, who uses a lot of chorus in the orchestration. I think Shore's music is brilliant.

**Schmidt:**

There are a several pieces where you make a unique use of the text. Did this develop out of influences from other composers?

**Gjeilo:**

One of them, "The Spheres," came out of the concept of the whole Sunrise Mass. The Kyrie is kind of out in space, and as the Mass progresses the music becomes more solid, more human, which is the kind of the opposite of the normal philosophical and religious progression. I like the process of becoming more and more self-aware.

The particular technique of overlapping voices comes from Aaron Jay Kernis. In his *Musica Celestis* he does this with strings and I wanted to replicate it with voices. Also, that (overlapping) sound kind of reminded me of my younger composing on the synthesizer with chords fading in and out.

**Schmidt:**

How about "Serenity"?

**Gjeilo:**

I was interested in using the sound of the choir in an accompanying role. The orchestral accompaniment concept for this piece was primary and the text was worked into the music.

**Schmidt:**

You have been involved with a lot of performances of your own music. What are some of the challenges of performing your unique concepts?

**Gjeilo:**

Generally, performers seem to catch on pretty quickly. But, I guess the most unusual thing about it is that the choir isn't always in the foreground the entire time. So sometimes I think they just need a reassurance that the choir is just part of this larger symphonic sound, especially when it's doubled by strings.

In vocal music, the singers are most often used to being in the foreground. In some of my pieces I sometimes treat it more as part of the general sound. It's a little bit more about the beauty of sound and the emotional experience for the listener than showing off the choir.

## APPENDIX B

### TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH Z. RANDALL STROOPE

**Brian Schmidt:**

How did you come to know Ola's music?

**Z. Randall Stroope:**

One of his first pieces that became very well known was "Ubi caritas." It is for mixed chorus, unaccompanied, and an accessible piece for high school and collegiate ensembles. It's very lyrical and has attractive harmonic colors.

**Schmidt:**

Why perform with a living composer in residence?

**Stroope:**

I think it's positive experience anytime you can bring a composer into a residency with performances of their own works. They bring a definite energy to the music making. They can share their philosophical backgrounds for the piece and text. They can share their experiences growing up and how that affects/influences their music.

**Schmidt:**

What makes Gjeilo's music appealing to you?

**Stroope:**

My attraction to his music is that, first, it is well crafted and second, he has found a "sound" vocabulary that is attractive to the masses. When you are composing, the first thing you have to do is create a sound or mood or vocabulary that makes the piece have a uniqueness, an interesting harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic vocab. Our singers found this very interesting, as did I.

His early pieces have a bit more of a classical influence, and his more recent pieces share a definite cinematic influence. He achieves the cinematic quality through rhythmic vocabulary and use of repeated patterns with percussion, which for Ola is the piano. Then he uses expansive melodies that somewhat cascade over the quick undulating rhythms. He also uses a lot of repeated text, which is very cinematic. Cinematic music is a lot of background to another drama - it's a very supportive material and moves in and around something else that 's happening.

In his music, when he's performing with you, the something else that's happening is him at the piano. The music is sort of swirling around him and that adds a lot to the performance. His music is effective with another pianist, but his energy adds a lot to the music.

**Schmidt:**

His pieces with the cinematic construction, as you have discussed, are structured in a way unusual from traditional choral music. Did this require anything different with singers?



**Stroope:**

I think they respond positively, in general. However, the music has a real constancy with rhythmic underpinning, melodies soaring over the top, as well as repeated passages – and they can sometimes lose sense of where the music is going.

The piano is what leads the music. It's the primary motivator. We of course are used to the piano being an equal partner in choral music, or subservient. Gjeilo's music is now using the piano is primary – it's piano accompanied by chorus. Singers are used to having lead lines and now they are in the background with long phrases and sustained sonorities.

The main thing I focused on with the chorus was the architecture of the piece. The construction, or building blocks, are critical for the singers to grasp so they can understand where the music is headed.

A lot of other choral music is very simple forms. There is not usually much complexity in shorter pieces of choral music. Sometimes, especially in Gjeilo's longer pieces, the form can get a little lost, and if that happens the singer just ends up singing notes without any sense of the end result.

Then, when you bring him into the process at the piano – that is a definite intensifying agent that doesn't exist in most other choral music. That comes from his background as a fine pianist, and it is such a natural outgrowth of his background to compose music that emphasizes the piano.

**Schmidt:**

Do you find his music to be pretty universally accepted?

**Stroope:**

My experience is that it is very universally accepted. He uses a lot of harmonic shifts to create drama.

If he is breaking new ground, I would say it might be in his use of the piano as a prominent texture as well as the merging of popular styles and cinematic music with classical repertoire, which offers the opportunity to attract a greater audience. People who don't know much about classical music may really find this music interesting or find a kinship with it.

**Schmidt:**

Can you speak about his method for setting text?

**Stroope:**

Composers align themselves with text in many ways. For him, it seems to be part of the tapestry, but it doesn't drive the tapestry. His compositional process doesn't originate from the text, with the text dictating everything from rhythm, harmonic selection, melodic movement. He is not a slave to word accentuation. He breaks words up, uses portions of words, and frequently repeats sounds.

I believe that the beauty of the words is as important as the meaning of the words. In his case, the sound of the words is as important as the beauty and meaning. He uses lots of repetition of ideas – and the importance of the words varies depending upon which section of music you might be in.

**Schmidt:**

One of the methods for creating a background support with the choir requires long sustained passages with very little text movement. Was it hard for your singers to sustain these passages?

**Stroope:**

Yes, it can be tricky and requires singers to count in long sections and be keen to quick harmonic switches, which are especially important in his writing. On the one hand, the singers just simply need to count. On the other hand, the lack of structure requires the conductor to point out overall shape to the performers.

## APPENDIX C

### TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH JO-MICHAEL SCHEIBE

**Schmidt:**

What was unique about Gjeilo's music that captivated you initially?

**Scheibe:**

My initial views of his music showed me something that is a bit out of the typical mold of choral music. When I heard this music, I thought this is really unique writing. This is not coming from a person who has been crafted in the traditional mold of choral composition in America. I was attracted to the tonal palate and his ability to create sudden harmonic shifts.

His music has a different compositional motivation behind it, with obvious influences from film music, jazz, and his background as a pianist.

I think there is flexibility with Ola's writing that exists because of his diverse musical background. His music is atmospheric at times and usually has some type of form – but not under the same form constructs as most often seen in classical composition.

**Schmidt:**

You mentioned atmospheric, can you explain that?

**Scheibe:**

There's less of an imposition of his music onto the listener, but each listener still really gets it and enjoys it.

**Schmidt:**

Why did you choose to have the composer involved? How did that affect the experience?

**Scheibe:**

Having the composer in the room with you helps the ensemble shape the music. It really tended to guide what I was doing musically because I heard it slightly differently than the composer. Especially with "Dark Night of the Soul" with him at the piano and playing with the strings – that really shaped the way the strings played in a positive manner.

Also, I was worried about the text cutting through and I don't think Ola was worried about the text. As a choral conductor, I am always working to convey the understanding and meaning of the text, and I think Ola looks at it as a sound palate, or texture within all of the music.

**Schmidt:**

What is your impression of his text setting process?

**Scheibe:**

He is not as worried about text stress. We choral musicians are always working for impeccable diction, proper syllabic emphasis, and finding the poetic arch of phrases. However, Ola may have looked at it simply as an inspiration – rather than as an integral part of the craftsmanship of the piece.

**Schmidt:**

Were there any challenges for your musicians?

**Scheibe:**

The strings found some of the patterns challenging, moving quickly in 7/8 meter. [Ultimately] the prominence of the piano aided in developing a foundation on which the strings and chorus could play and sing more easily

**Schmidt:**

Did the choir have to adjust or employ a different approach to singing?

**Scheibe:**

Certainly, he uses a more sustained type of writing with longer phrases. Ola aims for a pretty thick, orchestral-like sound with piano and strings. He uses lots of solid block chords and words, even consonants, are sometimes very few and far between.

Trying to get the sound to cut above the rhythmically driving piano and string parts was challenging. Then, I began to think of it as a palate of color and, specifically, one additional color rather than a primary color. It's not as much about the clarity of the text as it is about the color of the text.

One could spend hours trying to get the text or sound (of the choir) to come out over the piano and strings – mostly because of the block nature of the sound.

**Schmidt:**

How is his music perceived by your musicians and audience?

**Scheibe:**

It captures people. I think mostly because it is so different than most of the things on a traditional choral program.

**Schmidt:**

What kind of place do you think this music has in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**Scheibe:**

I think it is one stream of creativity. I don't think we have defined or discovered where we are going in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it's one of many streams that is leading us in some direction. He's a composer who seems readily influenced by lots of great music – so it will be interesting to see what he decides to do in the future.

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