Sacred Matters:
Contemporary Oratorio Practice Through A New Lens

by

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My heartfelt thanks to Jane Alden, to Noah Baerman, to my mother, to Medha, and to Becket
Introduction

This thesis explores the question of what unites us at the intersection of social theory and musicology. As secularism has risen in America, the gap between sacred and secular musics has grown colossal. Still, I have faith that there remains music whose content engenders emotional responses which may have the capacity to unify listeners. I believe the oratorio, due to its unique history, is a music genre which can serve a sacred function, even in a secularizing world. That being said, the sacred-secular musical dichotomy poses a threat to this possibility if interpreted too strictly.

In Chapter 1, after a brief investigation of sacred music’s significance according to contemporary literature, I will begin to deconstruct the dichotomy that renders music “sacred” if it is religion-based. Drawing on the theories of one of sociologies’ founding fathers, Émile Durkheim, I will use Durkheim’s sociological framework of the sacred to support my claim that a “sacred-secular” music dichotomy is baseless in today’s musical landscape. Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religion* (1912),\(^1\) provides that the idea of the sacred is established principally as a force for societal cohesion, to be differentiated from institutionalized religion. Durkheim’s interpretation of sacredness remains extremely valuable in understanding the relevance and function of the oratorio in the 21\(^{st}\) century.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss oratorio’s origins in the prayer halls of 17\(^{th}\) century Rome and examine the evolution of oratorio’s social function in the centuries following. Looking at Handel’s seminal *Messiah* will provide further insight to how the form has achieved a monumental reputation in its’ modern-day usage. Today, the oratorio remains popular, despite its departure from the church and its subsequent categorization as

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“secular” music. Contemporary oratorios often engage humanistic themes rather than Judeo-Christian ones, and in doing so oratorio finds new methods of storytelling. Through examination of these methods I intend to recharacterize the oratorio form as one which not only has roots in sacred practice but remains a “sacred genre.”

Durkheim’s framework challenges the understanding of “sacred music” as music utilized by or related to institutionalized religious practice, and instead highlights sacred properties which I will identify within select contemporary oratorios in Chapter 3. These works, *Anthracite Fields* by Julia Wolfe and *Dreamers* by Jimmy Lopez, valorize individual experience and communicate shared values. The subject matter of these oratorios are expressed through libretti crafted from ethnographies instead of religious text, as used to be typical of the oratorio. That these oratorios engage ethnographic approaches becomes a means of inculcating in audiences a moral standpoint on contemporary issues. In the process of proliferating moral messages, these oratorios present specific subject matter as sacred to their audience.

This thesis treats the exploration of the 21st century oratorio as a musical medium through which performance of the libretto engenders shared interest and values. To this end, I conclude with an explanation of my own ventures into the sacred through ethnographic oratorio. In composing *Above The Noise*, an oratorio based exclusively on interviews with Wesleyan students, I seek to recreate the sacred community of which I speak in previous chapters. In both my creative and rhetorical endeavors, it is my intention to use a Durkheimian framework to elaborate on the oratorio’s ability to sacralize and to reconsider what sacred music means in the context of the 21st century oratorio.
Chapter 1:
Sacred And Secular In Music And Beyond

Sacred Music in a Secular World

“In the present day, when the altar trembles and totters, when pulpit and religious ceremonies serve as subjects for the mocker and the doubter, art must leave the sanctuary of the temple, and, coming abroad into the outer world, seek a stage for its magnificent manifestations... To attain this the creation of a new music is indispensable. This…, must be inspired, strong, and effective, uniting, in colossal proportions, theatre and church; at the same time dramatic and holy.”

Franz Liszt, 1834

As Liszt’s poetic invocation suggests, the role of religious-based music in the context of a secularizing society was already a topic worthy of intellectualization in 19th century Europe. In a globalized, 21st century where the religious decline continues, so too does the heated debate amongst composers, theologists, and musicologists: what is sacred music’s place in society?

Yes, in 20th and 21st century America, secularism is on the rise and popularity of institutionalized religion is declining. And, yes, unfounded claims of periodical trends (“People don’t read anymore,” and “It’s way harder to make authentic connections now”) are all too common these days. For this reason, it would seem appropriate, if not necessary, to provide bona fide evidence that both religious affiliation and religious service attendance in the U.S have all declined significantly in the past 50 years.

According to the yearly GSS (General Social Survey) conducted by the University of Chicago, the percentage of Americans who do not attend religious services is rising rapidly and the number of Americans who frequently attend services continues to decrease. GSS census data shows that the fraction of Americans who do not attend religious services has

seen a 200% increase in the past 50 years, and a 32% increase in the past 10 years alone. Simultaneously, the percentage of Americans who attend religious services at least once a week has decreased by over 40% in the past 50 years. While the percentage of Americans frequenting religious services was equivalent to those who do not attend at the end of the 20th century, hovering just under 20% of the population for each, the most recent numbers show that frequent attenders comprise under 20 percent of the population, while non-attenders make up over 30 percent of the population. Finally, the fraction of Americans with no religious affiliation has doubled from less than 10% in the 1990s to more than 20% now. What’s more, since 2012 this fraction has increased by nearly 20 percent.

These secularizing trends of the past half-decade, often called the rise of the “nones,” are present across political divides, GSS data also indicates a significant generational divide, with over 33% of adults under 30 having no religious affiliation, compared to just 11% of adults over 65. This is significant. That these trends are driven by a generational displacement indicates Americans will almost certainly continue to flee from organized religion at increasing rates in the decades to come.

With confirmation that secularization is on the rise, I turn to questions: Where does this leave sacred music? Is sacred music relevant? I have found that oratorio, a centuries
old musical form, happens to be ripe with answers. As I will discuss later, a closer look at oratorio’s function in America today provides an exciting new approach to understanding the relevance of religious music and to re-evaluating the very meaning of sacred within the sacred-secular musical dichotomy. However, appreciation of the oratorio’s 21st century stature as a musical form requires a frame of reference. In order to understand oratorio’s role and impact in the 21st century, I investigate the current status of sacred music at large. In my brief investigations of contemporary literature regarding sacred music in organized religion, I hope to expose a major lack of consensus in response to the question of sacred music’s place in the modern world. This later encourages me to depart from contemporary perspectives on music in theology and seek an alternative approach.

While formal institutionalized religion is clearly on the decline, religious worship rituals endure in America. In light of this, musicologists and theologists continue to grapple with sacred music’s function and impact within religious institutions. Some seek to understand why sacred music’s sound is evolving, some seek solutions for integrating sacred music into a modern society, and others question whether it should be integrated at all. Ethnomusicological literature from turn of the 21st century elucidates these varying perspectives on the evolution of sacred music and sacred music’s role today.

It may be most reasonable to turn to American youth for the answer. In seeking to retain young people’s interest in religion, many religious institutions are trying to change the style of music played in their services. Ethnomusicologist and American studies scholar Mark Slobin considers the musical shift in Jewish services seen over the past several decades in Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate. Slobin suggests that the shift towards the

pop, folk, and rock inspired music present in reform synagogues across America today is a response to “current conditions” of musical taste and a search for musical relevance amongst youth. Janet Walton affirms that the emergence of “religious rock” goes beyond the synagogue and can be traced across faiths in America today. Walton details the circumstances of today’s worshipping communities, comprised of individual members who are exposed to a wide variety of musical styles, both within and beyond the church and synagogue every day. As a result, it is to be expected that these worshipping communities would seek out ways to integrate sounds they find compelling into their religious practice. In this context, “sacred music” undergoes a sort of religious reupholstery, retaining the religious texts and messages, while altering its musical aesthetics (exterior) for the sake of accessibility. However prevalent, this religious reupholstering is not unanimously accepted.

In Sacred Sound and Social Change, Samuel Adler considers the challenge American churches face against the popularity of secular music, and warns against susceptibility to popular music, as he contends that pop music has always posed a menace to the church. In his chapter, “Sacred Music in a Secular Age,” Adler asserts that secularity is no new

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The term “religious rock” was coined by composer and American Conference of Cantor leader, Raymond Smolover. Smolover uses this term to “express a tradition as ancient as the chanting of scripture, as joyful as a Hassidic niggun and as contemporary as folk, folk-rock, jazz, and rock. It is an attempt to add the rhythmic beat of the heart and the restless yearning of the soul; and to enable the earthbound flesh to take melodic flight with the spirit.”

threat to sacred music in the contemporary era, but an age-old one. Adler ventures further to explain that music has now become a scapegoat which clerics blame for low attendance rates; Adler laments this reality, yet remains strongly adverse to the idea of making sacred music sound more like contemporary popular music as a solution -- insinuating that such attempts would only generate “pabulum,” and would not solve the attendance problem.  

Instead, Adler believes that it is the responsibility of musicians to remedy the secularization situation. Adler claims that “people, young and old, yearn for a more meaningful spiritual experience,” amidst largely secular America, and that “musicians must seize the moment and formulate a sacred sound that is rooted in the several genuine traditions that constitute our religious past.” I happen to agree with these statements, but Adler’s following statements lose me in their oversimplified dichotomization. Adler believes, “the prevailing secularity of our society must be overcome if genuine music is to flourish.” This notion that prevailing secularity must be overcome communicates several troublesome presumptions. First, by claiming that sacredness (read “religiosity”) will engender genuine music where secularity will not, Adler applies an inherent value judgement to religiosity as superior to secularity, and perhaps even insinuates that secularity is detrimental to society. Additionally, Adler does little to expand on this idea of ‘genuine music,’ and doing so leaves a gaping hole in his rational. What is this ‘genuine music,’ and who is to say that it is of any value or benefit to the society in which we live today?

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19. Adler, 299.
20. Adler, 298.
Adler’s concept of “the genuine” is actually quite problematic. For many people, the shift from genuine, untouched, or traditional religious music, towards adapted music with socially-relevant lyrical content means the chance to be included in the language of musical prayer, rather than othered. Such is the case for June Boyce-Tillman, who discusses the liberation and empowerment that comes from contemporary hymnody composition which lyricizes more modern concepts of the divine. Boyce-Tillman’s auto-ethnographic article indicates that changes in religious music are not just an issue of youth wanting to hear pop in any and every circumstance. Rather, these changes are the result of people realizing they don’t want to affiliate themselves with institutions for which a whole demographic of people is disregarded and demeaned by the exclusion and partisanship of religious institutions. For Boyce-Tillman, a God-loving woman, this disregard has been distilled from hymn lyrics with concepts of the divine that were expressly masculine. This assertion is relevant on a larger scale as well, as Virinder S. Kalra proves in Sacred and Secular Musics: A Postcolonial Approach.

Instead of honing in on the church’s lyrical bias, Virinder Kalra examines dynamics of systematic prejudice present in ethnomusicological literature regarding sacred music. Kalra, a sociologist of postcolonial musical culture, unveils the role of the colonized/colonizer relationship in musicological literature of the 20th-21st century discussing Indian music, explaining that there is inherent Eurocentrism in the musicological modes of classification regarding what is considered “sacred” music. As Kalra proves, this classification process of sacred music creates and perpetuates unfavorable value judgements of non-western

music. With such a system in place, trying to universalize the idea of sacred music or sacred sound by any fixed or technical standards is clearly problematic.\(^{24}\) As Virgil C. Funk confirms,

“there is no such thing as sacred music, if by that term you mean a particular series of notes or chord progressions sacred in and of themselves. There are such notes and progressions attached to certain words that particular cultures have learned to identify with religious experiences, but these notes and even the words vary from culture to culture.”\(^{25}\)

Funk aptly deconstructs the generalized interpretation of sacred music. At this point, the archetypical undergraduate may reasonably deduce, “Well, everything is a social construct,” thereby dropping the academic mic. However, I assert that simply accepting no definition will only lead me further astray from understanding what “sacred music” really means today. Jon Michael Spencer, Professor of Sacred Music, similarly deconstructs normative notions of sacred music and provides a promising direction in his writing on theomusicology.\(^{26}\) Spencer’s approach argues for an understanding in which music cannot inherently belong to a sacred or secular category, but is rather made sacred by the actions directed towards it, and by the way in which it is referred to or treated. Thus, it is unsurprising that a universal definition of sacred sound is unattainable. By understanding the term “sacred” as a social construction, I realize that my questions regarding sacred music and its place in the modern world must be renegotiated. Not, “what is sacred music?”, but “what is sacred about music?” With acknowledgment of “sacred music” as a social construction, this new question incites me to seek an a new approach to unraveling its meaning.

\(^{24}\) Virinder S. Kalra, Sacred and Secular Musics, 7.
Adler believes it the composer’s duty to reintroduce the sacred into people’s lives, for “who more than the composers among us should take up the task of differentiating the sacred from the profane?” However, it is beginning to appear as though Adler’s conception is entirely backwards. What if the sacred comes from a reflection of people’s lives? Perhaps “sacred” sound does not actually derive from adherence to a set of parameters, but, rather, because of how it makes someone feel and whether or not it brings people together – whether it represents a sacralization of certain values. So what, then, is sacred? If the term is socially formed, the most useful answer will come from a sociological perspective. To properly attain one, I turn to the inventor of the “sacred-profane” definition of religion, and the father of sociology, Émile Durkheim.

What is Sacred? A Durkheimian Definition

France’s belle époque was a time of great innovation, both cultural and technical, but it was also a time of great national division on notions of religion, class, money, and regionalism. In many ways, it may be seen as closely resembling the conditions of the present day United States. It was during this time that French sociologist Émile Durkheim would write Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse, (hereafter referred to as Forms). Forms is an innovative and complex exploration of the role of religion across cultures. It is Durkheim’s most powerful work and it has become a classic in the realm of sociology and the study of religion.

28. la belle époque (“the beautiful age”) is the time period in France after the Franco Prussian War (1870) and before World War I (1914). (from Encyclopedia Britannica. “France: The Prewar Years.”)
Amidst this period of societal and political flux, Durkheim considered the forces of division in society, and interested in what enabled structure to prevail in society despite dividing forces. The son of a third generation Rabbi, Durkheim seemed destined for the Rabbinate until he arrived at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure and became enraptured by political and philosophical debate with his contemporaries, discussing the aforementioned social phenomena.  

Captivated by societal norms, forms, and functions, Durkheim endeavored to formulate a social science that might make sense of the way shared experiences, values, and beliefs direct people’s behaviors towards greater solidarity and thus retain societal stability. Among his assorted interests, Durkheim gravitated towards a subject that hit close to home: religion. Durkheim took interest in the social aspects of religion, its prevalence in society as an establishment, and its impressive powers both to unify and divide peoples. The culmination of this curiosity is *Forms*, in which Durkheim explains religion’s function within contemporary society.

Through an elaborate theoretical framework in *Forms*, Durkheim surpasses the scholarly discourse of his time, most of which was focused on a dichotomy between appearance and essence in religion. Alternatively, Durkheim held that every religion was inherently real because it affects the way people think and interact, and ultimately affects society. Durkheim thus presents a theory of religion free from prejudice, based upon the

33 “there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence.” - Émile Durkheim, “Introduction,” *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1915, 15.
common characteristics amongst all the known systems of religion.\footnote{Durkheim, “Introduction”, \textit{Forms}, 1915.} In the introduction of \textit{Forms}, Durkheim provides the following definition for religion:

“A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church,\footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Forms}, 62.} all those who adhere to them.” \footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Forms}, 22.} This definition aligns with Durkheim’s assertion of religion as an eminently social phenomenon.\footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Forms}, 22.} As such, Durkheim universalizes religion, arguing that in all cultures this social phenomenon serves to affect society. This organization stems from a systematization of all things into one of two categories: sacred and not sacred. By this same account, the organization of sacred things is present in and crucial to every religion. Through Durkheim’s definition, sacred things are defined by the fact that they are set apart and by their relation to ideals which unify a moral community. This understanding is both revolutionary and relevant to modern times, as Kenneth Thompson helps to elucidate in \textit{On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life}.\footnote{Kenneth Thompson, “Durkheim and Sacred Identity” in \textit{On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life}, by N.J. Allen, W.S.F. Pickering and W. Watts Miller, (London: Routledge, 1998).} Thompson’s neo-Durkheimian reconceptualization defines the sacred as “that which is socially transcendent and gives a sense of fundamental identity based on likeness (kinship), constructed and sustained by difference or opposition over and against (1) the other and (2) the mundane/profane i.e. the world of everyday routine.” \footnote{Thompson, “Durkheim and Sacred Identity” in \textit{On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life}, 101.}

Thompson’s reiteration emphasizes the ability of the sacred to form a symbolic community (a community based on symbolic unity) in relation to the profane or mundane.

\footnote{Durkheim, “Introduction”, \textit{Forms}, 1915.} \footnote{Though Durkheim uses the term ‘church’ in reference to a community to convey that religion is an eminently collective thing, it should be noted not to attach contemporary notions of the ‘church,’ which has inherent Christian connotations, to Durkheim’s definition.} \footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Forms}, 62.} \footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Forms}, 22.} \footnote{Kenneth Thompson, “Durkheim and Sacred Identity” in \textit{On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life}, by N.J. Allen, W.S.F. Pickering and W. Watts Miller, (London: Routledge, 1998).} \footnote{Thompson, “Durkheim and Sacred Identity” in \textit{On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life}, 101.}
In a somewhat circular (though sound) logical progression, a symbolic community also holds sacred significance because it sustains a sense of total identity for a group of people.\textsuperscript{40} Essentially, the sacred serves to stabilize society via the sacred things which transcend the everyday, and interactions with these sacred things inform individual and group identities. Accordingly, sacred activity is something that fosters a sense of group identity. Collective ritual serves to shape collective identity, because collective ritual reaffirms the meaning of the sacred.\textsuperscript{41} This Durkheimian framework presented in \textit{Forms}, and elaborated upon by Durkheim’s disciples, explains that sacred things are not necessarily religion-based, but rather that they serve an equivalent function to religion. Both religion and sacred things serve to unify groups around shared values.

Much like Durkheim’s conception of the world, the world of music has been divided between works that are sacred and those that are secular. However, the sacred-music/secular-music dichotomy functions quite differently from Durkheim’s conception. It adheres to a standardized conception of sacred and secular which I find problematic. In the social sciences, the relationship between the \textit{sacred} and the secular is often conceived as equivalent to that between the \textit{religious} and the secular. As such, the domain of the sacred may only be considered with regard to religious institutions and must be separated from the secular state. This is an unfortunate misconception. It prevents the “nones”\textsuperscript{42} from exploring the sacred aspects of life beyond formal religious institutions. It may even be disadvantageous for those engaged with religious institutions, as notions of sacredness may prevent from them from gleaning more critical awareness of religious practices which no longer function in a sacred way. The same misconception of “sacred” music

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{40}{Werner Gephart, “Memory and the Sacred” in \textit{On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life}, 127-136}
\footnotetext{41}{Werner Gephart, “Memory and the Sacred,” 129.}
\footnotetext{42}{“Nones” refers to those who do not affiliate with or frequent religious institutions. See Footnote 2.}
\end{footnotes}
discourages exploration of the sacred in other contemporary musics, like the oratorio, which should not be neglected.

Durkheim’s theory of religion provides that sacred things are determined by their functionality – whether or not they embody societal values to maintain societal structure. This framework encourages an evolving definition of sacred, not a fixed one. In accordance, I reject the application of qualifiers which standardize a sacred/profane dichotomy in music that does not exist. A Durkheimian perspective qualifies music that adheres to specific properties as sacred, regardless of institutional affiliation. Taking Tillman’s ethnography as an example, the church hymnody which does not properly embody the values of its worshippers should not be considered sacred in the Durkheimian sense, even if it emanates from the church, because it fails to include women/female-identifying people and thus fails to represent the group (or clan, in Durkheimian terminology). As Durkheim would have suggested, I have neither interest nor reason to assess sacredness as an inherent character of institutionally-affiliated musical works. I mean to discuss music that is sacred (music that transcends the secular) rather than music that is representative of any particular religious tradition (generally denoted as “sacred music”).

While secularization theories propose that sacredness and sacred communities are both dwindling as secularization rises, I urge a reconsideration. Principles of the sacred and of the sacred community still constitute sources of identity for individuals, just not in the way they once did. In other words, what many be considered the demise of the sacred should really be considered its relocation. The sacred and secular do not exist as separate

44. Kenneth Thompson, 92-105.
45. Kenneth Thompson, 92-105.
entities, and they never did. Their existence can and should be considered across each other’s socially conceived boundaries. The oratorio genre exemplifies this. In the following section I will begin to unpack oratorio and its unique relationship to the sacred.

The Oratorio, A Musical Answer

As I have discussed, the role of music in contemporary worship remains a heated debate amongst musicologists, theologists, and religious leaders over questions such as: “How should it sound?” and “Should it stay true to traditional styles and content? Or should it roll with the changing music ‘scene’ of the 21st century?” With Durkheim’s premise, these questions are better understood as, “how can religious music remain a sacred music?” Nevertheless, the oratorio appears to have stuck its 21st century landing. Contemporary oratorio strikes a balance between adherence to public taste and reverence for tradition. Though non-religious, oratorio retains a sacred property.

For many, the oratorio may be equated with religious institutions and institutional conventions. This is easy enough for those whose only point of reference for the genre is an annual Christmas-time performance of Messiah, (a tradition dating back to the 19th century in America, still popular in churches across the nation). Hearing the oratorio in this context, one might even consider oratorio a paradigm of Christian convention, however, that conception leaves much to be desired.

Oratorio originated with a sacred function, born in the prayer halls of Rome for devotional and didactic purposes. Now oratorio is performed in concert halls and serves to reestablish moral communities. By bringing people to a heightened state of engagement with lyrically-profound music, the oratorio brings us to a heightened state with each other.
Through this process, collective values are re-established. For this reason oratorio remains a sacred genre, and “sacred music” continues to serve an important function for the public, although it is not a religious one.

Oratorio continues to evolve through the work of 21st century composers, occupying the intersection between convention and contemporary consciousness. Returning to Durkheim’s ideology, 21st century oratorio constitutes an undeniably sacred and significant musical medium. Durkheim emphasized that public ritual practices celebrate the sacred and unite those who believe in the practice as a key feature of religion (which serves to stabilize society). 46 Through this conception, oratorio constitutes a collective and public ritual in which individuals reconfirm their shared values.

In the next chapter, we will look back at the oratorio’s origins as a sacred genre and at its subsequent development. As I reach the rise of the English oratorio I will take a closer look at Handel’s Messiah, examining its presentation of both individual and collective narrative through a monumental musical composition. These considerations will contextualize oratorio’s standing with a 21st century secularizing American audience. Later, I will engage several case study examples of 21st century oratorio. These examples will support my assertion that 21st century oratorios function as a medium through which composers and their librettists engage with moral, social, and political issues of today.

**Chapter 2 :**

**From Oratory To Modernity, A Sacred Genre Then And Now**

“in popular parlance of the 20th century, the word oratorio has become virtually synonymous with monumentality, so much that large choral works that clearly represent other genres – Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis, for instance—are sometimes referred to as oratorios. How is it possible that a genre with such humble beginnings has grown to one that bears the implication of monumentality?”

Origins

An oratorio is an extended narrative musical work written for voices and instruments, usually consisting of an overture, arias, recitatives, and choruses. An oratorio’s libretto offers a narrative, but does not require a story or plot. Howard E. Smither, the leading oratorio expert and author of a four volume work detailing the history of the oratorio, defines the oratorio as a nearly always sacred, unstaged work with a text that is either dramatic or narrative-dramatic. Most formal definitions place the oratorio somewhere between opera and sacred music, and while similar to opera, oratorio conventionally lacks in scenery, costumes, and staged action.

By the 1660s in Rome, oratorio was firmly established as a genre, described by musical settings of a sacred, narrative dramatic text. The first oratorios emerged in St. Philip Neri’s oratory congregation, where these musical retellings of Bible passages were performed as a musical service in the oratory, from which the term oratorio emanates. As

50. Smither, A History of the Oratorio :Volume 1, 4
51. Upon founding an oratory congregation, Saint Philip Neri (1515-1595) used music as a means of drawing as many priests and lay-people as possible to his congregation in order to lead them on a path of salvation. In the mid 16th century, Neri included laude, vernacular sacred song, and religious dialogues performed amidst prayer and scripture reading during religious meetings to engage attendees further. In the congregation after Neri’s death, Neri’s clergy remained faithful to their founder’s legacy and continued engaging with popular music forms in order to draw larger crowds. Though the first oratorios date back to 17th century Rome, their emergence stems from The 16th century and Neri’s spiritual exercises.
52. oratory denotes the small Roman prayer hall in which St. Philip Neri’s society of gathered for services. As a society of priests without vows, they were unable to lead services in the church.
53. Many consider Emilia de’Cavalleri’s Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo (1600) (“Representation of the Soul and the Body”) the first oratorio, although the earliest record of use of the term oratorio dates to a letter written forty years later in 1640 in which Pietro Della Valle calls his brief, un-staged, sacred dialogue an oratorio. Along with Cavalieri, Giacomo Carissimi (1605-1675) laid the foundation for the original Italian
such, oratorio originally served a devotional and didactic function— they educated service-
goers about stories from the bible while drawing in greater crowds as an engaging musical medium.

The earliest oratorios bear clear resemblance to opera of the time and as such, oratorio’s emergence must be largely attributed to opera’s popularity. By the 17th century, as opera was increasingly popular in Rome, it is understood that oratorio was modelled after operatic form to cater to the musical tastes of an opera-enraptured society.54 One of the earliest known oratorios, *Jepthe Judicium Salomonis* (1648) by Giacomo Carissimi exemplifies the similitude of oratorio and opera form in the 17th century. *Jepthe* has a libretto derived from the Old Testament and is written for four soprano soloists, a small chorus (ATBB), and minimal instrumentation besides the basso continuo.55

In the second half of the 17th century in Italy, oratorios were performed more and more regularly outside of the church oratory and instead in theaters and courts. Though the earliest oratorios bore close resemblance to madrigals, and functioned to enhance liturgical church services, in the latter half of the century they began to fulfill a new civic need: the need for entertainment during Lent. During Lent, oratorio performance was permitted while opera houses were closed, and as such this sacred narrative form grew more and more popular in secular contexts.56 Subsequently, the oratorio’s function shifted from a devotional and didactic experience to a form of sacred entertainment, to be enjoyed for its own sake, independent of organized religion.57

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56. Smither, 5.
57. Smither, 361.
Along with the oratorio’s growing popularity and shifting function in the late 17th century, several key characteristics began to change, namely, the expansion of the instrumentation to an orchestra, more distinctive arias, and increased complexity of melody, harmony, and texture. Amidst these changes, two main oratorio conventions remained consistent: the use of sacred subject matter and the paraphrasing/interpretation of biblical passages in the formation of the libretti. This second convention allowed composers the liberty to select from and alter a wide variety of sources for their libretto. Consequently, while the musical characteristics of oratorio may closely resemble the contemporaneous opera of its era, the late 17th century oratorio offered something distinct. Oratorio offered a narrative storytelling experience: a window into sacred text with musical interpretation. By the end of Carissimi’s life, it is clear that this form of musical storytelling had gained wide appeal as it flourished in Rome and other Italian cities. By the beginning of the 18th century, oratorio would spread through Vienna, Paris, and Germany. Oratorio would take another 20 years before reaching English shores, but once it did, the genre would be forever changed.

The English Oratorio

Though the forerunners of oratorio were perhaps already in England at the time the genre was first introduced to the London public, it is difficult to imagine the oratorio growing such profound roots in England without George Frideric Handel (1685-1759). Handel is, perhaps more than any other figure, decisive in the history of the oratorio.

58. Smither, 145.
wildly prolific composer, he was born and trained in southern Germany (then a province of Brandenburg-Prussia). As a composer he worked first in Hamburg, then in Italy, before arriving in London in 1712. While in Rome, Handel composed several operas, and even a few oratorios in Italian (Il trionfo del tempo e del disinganno, “The Triumph of Time and Truth” 1707, and La Resurrezione, “The Resurrection” 1708). Upon moving to England, Handel intended to prosper by way of Italian opera, hoping it would be well received amongst the English nobility. However, the production costs of opera proved overwhelming, and as Handel struggled to profit via the opera houses he had established in London, he also composed several nondramatic and dramatic works in English on commission.62 These works can be understood in part as the antecedents for the masterful works to come.

By 1732, Handel had spent over a decade trying to spark interest in Italian operas among Londoners to no avail. In the same year, Bernard Gates, master of the Children of the Chapel Royal, became interested in Handel’s Esther, an unstaged dramatic work based on an Old Testament story.63

On Handel’s birthday, February 23, 1732, Gates presented a staged a performance of Esther for the Philharmonic Society at The Crown and Anchor Tavern.64 It was so well received that it was performed twice more for private societies in the following month before an unauthorized public performance of the work was announced for late April by an anonymous source in the London Newspaper. In response to the prospect of a public performance with a pirated score, Handel announced his own forthcoming presentation

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63. Esther was composed in 1718 for James Brydges, for which the French dramatist Jean Racine had written a famous English play (sacred tragedy) of the same title and subject 50 years prior (Smither, 188-189).
64. Smither, 193.
of *Esther* in the *Daily Journal*, scheduled for the 2nd of May at the King’s Theatre.\(^{65}\) Handel’s announcement of the performance was the first major genre designation to reach Londoners. It read:

> “the Sacred Story of ESTHER: an Oratorio in English. . . there will be no action on the stage, but the house will be fitted up in a decent manner, for the Audience.”\(^{66}\)

Although Handel had wanted to stage the production, Bishop Gibson refused because of the work’s sacred subject matter and because the boys of the Chapel Royal were to be performing. Handel was willing to compromise, and with this compromise the English oratorio was born.\(^{67}\) *Esther*’s premiere was such a great success that it merited six more performances at the Opera-House, each of which was presented, unstaged, to a full house. What was initially titled “Esther: an Oratorio; or, Sacred Drama,”\(^{68}\) was lauded *definitely* as an “oratorio” in performance reviews in London’s press.\(^{69}\) Despite its sacred subject matter, *Esther* established the English oratorio as an unstaged musical drama, a concert genre intended more as entertainment than as a vehicle for devotion.\(^{70}\)

With the emotional and financial toll of producing operas, and the success of *Esther*, Handel’s interests in sacred oratorio grew, as their presentation was far less expensive than for his operas. Handel thus turned his attentions towards the oratorio, hoping to profit off what he presumed was a changing trend in the public’s taste.\(^{71}\) Nine years after the London premiere of *Esther*, Handel emerged with *Messiah*, a three part work outlining the birth,

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65. Smither, 195.
66. Smither, 195.
67. Smither, 196.
69. “An Entertainment of Musick call’d Esther, an Oratorio” A quotation from the Daily Courant, 22 May 1732, reviewing Esther (in Smithers, *Volume 2*).
crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ, and the most famous oratorio to date. This work would become widely regarded as the epitome of oratorio. As such, Messiah exemplifies several conventions that came to define what could be understood as a sub-genre (the English or Handelian oratorio).

Most significant amongst the paradigm features of Handel’s Messiah are the work’s substantial length (generally 1-3 hours) and the extensive use of the chorus. These key features influenced later oratorios and this poses interesting implications from a Durkheimian perspective. First, many musicologists claim that Messiah is best known and most generally admired for its ceremonial, anthem-like choruses. In Messiah, the most prevalent type of these choruses includes a mixture of contrapuntal and homophonic textures. In addition to providing musical intrigue, the chorus also serves an important dramatic function, both participating in and commenting on dramatic action. Handel’s creative use of chorus in Messiah has been frequently compared to the Greek chorus of a Greek tragedy in its function. As Handelian expert, R. A. Streatfield, explains:

> Attitude and functions of the chorus are those of interested and sympathetic spectators who rarely if ever take part in the action, but punctuate the various scenes with choral odes of a meditative or gnomic cast, often deducing a wholesome moral from the events enacted before their eyes.

Messiah’s rousing “Hallelujah” chorus certainly set Handel’s work apart from the earliest Italian oratorios of the early 17th century, brief sacred works which were to be performed in an oratory, and the Italian and German oratorios of the later 17th and early

18th centuries, which mirrored the developments in opera of the time yet featured the chorus sparingly.\(^{75}\) However, it must be noted that the popularity of *Messiah* promoted the misconception that Handel’s oratorios are dominated by the chorus. In fact, in every other oratorio Handel wrote (aside from *Israel*) the role of the chorus was secondary to that of the soloists. Admittedly, success of *Messiah* amongst the British public can be understood in large part as a result of the public resonating with the *Messiah’s* Israelite chorus. In protestant England, the public identified very much with the Israelites because they were “both intensely nationalistic, led by heroic figures, and given the special protection of God, who was worshipped with pop and splendor.”\(^{76}\) While the chorus thus provided a nationalistic and sacred identity to the British public, *Messiah’s* solos were also integral to this sacred work.

After Handel’s death, his Italian operas fell into obscurity while his oratorios continued to be performed.\(^{77}\) These elaborate and expressive large-scale works influenced subsequent generations of composers, including Mozart who successfully endeavored to modernize Handel’s work by re-orchestrating the *Messiah* and several others. In doing so, the Handelian oratorio remained a model for the genre, exerting influence on oratorio of the next three centuries.\(^{78}\) Handel’s seminal oratorios, including *Messiah* and *Sampson* remained popular throughout Anglophone countries, and continue to be performed by choruses of amateur and professional singers alike. Because most oratorio compositions thereafter were compared to Handel’s work, it is not an overstatement to say that Handel’s oratorios came to redefine oratorio genre as a whole.

\(^{75}\) Smither, *A History of the Oratorio* 4, 714.

\(^{76}\) Smither, *A History of the Oratorio* 2, 352.


\(^{78}\) Smither, *A History of the Oratorio* 4, 714.
The inception of the English oratorio was a rather haphazard one, perhaps necessitated more by incentive for profit than innovation, passion, or anything else. Nonetheless, once introduced, the English oratorio tradition established new stylistic and structural conventions which would retain audience interest in oratorio form. As I will discuss, oratorios of the 19th century and beyond began to change the genre again with new libretto subject matter. The oratorios’ arrival in America cultivates a new conception of oratorio function and diverse musical stylings.

19th Century and the Emergence of the American oratorio

In the early 19th century, oratorio compositions by Americans were few, especially compared to English and German composers. According to Smither, the earliest known American oratorio is Jeptha (1845) by J.H. Hewitt. Smither describes Jeptha as “a modest work with essentially the same turns of melody, simple harmony and unadorned patterns of accompaniment that Hill had already established in his extremely popular parlour songs and was soon to apply in his operettas.” This is of note as it remains true to form for oratorio, as a work which reflects the popular sound of its given era.79

Towards the mid-century, however, American composers found increased interest the oratorio, and new styles of oratorio began to arise. As evidenced by American reviews, this trend was a consequence of America seeking to distinguish itself (moreover it’s social/cultural body) from England. Critics like William Henry Fry, a composer and strong American nationalist, argued vehemently against performances of English oratorios on

American soil, and instead encouraged presentations of new works by American composers. Fry showed particular distaste for Handel’s Messiah (presumably because, as I have discussed, Messiah embodies the English oratorio). He criticized the libretto’s extraction of biblical text and expressed a general frustration for the work in the following way: “so few of the pieces suit the public taste, being antiquated, and devoid of interest either in music or words.”

Ultimately, Fry’s frustrations amounted to an evident interest in oratorio that better represented Americans. In extreme contrast, Fry reviewed Hiawatha, the work of Robert Stoepel, a German-born American composer, with the utmost admiration. Hiawatha’s libretto is based on Song of Hiawatha, an epic poem of fictional adventures of Native Americans by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Where Fry praised Hiawatha’s libretto, he attacked Handel’s Messiah as he did all oratorio assembled from bible verses. Through his contrasting reviews, Fry reveals apparent preference for American-written oratorio, telling distinctly American (or at least distinctly non-British) stories. After all, for 19th century Americans, freedom from Great Britain was more sacred than the authoritative rule of the bible.

As American oratorio proliferated over the course of the 19th century, several divisions of oratorio emerged. Amongst treatment of libretti, there were both biblical and non-biblical oratorio. In the late 19th century, American oratorio made a major break

82. Smither, A History of the Oratorio 4, 441.
83. Smither, A History of the Oratorio 4, 450.
from tradition in regard to musical style. A new sub-genre of oratorio emerged, the “easy” oratorio.  

Easy oratorio, sometimes referred to as “light” oratorio, were composed explicitly to be performed by volunteer church choirs and children’s choirs. As such their music was characterized by simple and easy to sing melodic lines, and their libretto focused strongly on ethics. The earliest American easy oratorios on record, *Absalom* (1850) and *Abraham and Ishmael* (1854), are both compositions by Isaac B. Woodbury. Woodbury’s works include recitatives, arias, ensembles, choruses, and even spoken lines, as was often characteristic of the sub-genre. Easy oratorio also tended to be written for voices and piano only. Near the end of the 19th century a considerable market for easy oratorio emerged, and as the sub-genre proliferated, easy oratorio works began to diverge significantly both in style and function. The easy oratorio represents a step away from the monumentality that came to characterize oratorio in the 20th and 21st centuries, however this sub-genre notably reflects an important aspect of oratorio tradition, the notion of a large-scale work written with an intention of accessibility. With the expansion of variety of 20th century oratorio, both in musical style and libretto, the effort for accessibility remains constant, though it manifests in diverse ways.

**Turning to Face the Changes (Advantages of An Adaptive Medium)**

By the 20th century, oratorio could be described as broadly as a long concert piece with narrative or dramatic texts set to music for soloists, chorus, and instrumentalists. Moreover,

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84. Reference to “tradition” denotes oratorio written in a musical style intended to follow that those composed by the most significant oratorio composers of the 17th and 18th century, namely Handel, Haydn, and Mendelssohn.
86. Smither, 465.
87. Smither, 466.
while the majority of 20th century oratorios continued to be religious, religious subject matter was no longer a definitive criterion for a work to be considered an oratorio. Far more oratorios with secular themes were written in the 20th century than the 19th. 88 The 20th and 21st centuries have seen a wide variety of works either called oratorios or likened to oratorios. Some of these works are rather brief, some for chamber ensembles, and the vast majority of them are monumental works. 89 Now, perhaps more than anything else, the oratorio stands for monumentality. To this end, the most common arrival of new oratorio are the result of significant commissions, like Michael Tippett’s A Mask of Time, commissioned by the Boston Symphony to celebrate its 1981 centenary.

Oratorios have made several drastic jumps in the last several decades. Musically we can see a clear initiative to satisfy popular taste. Simultaneously, oratorio libretti evolved from dependence on sacred text to creative use of non-sacred texts. As the oratorio takes larger and larger steps away from its initial form in some regards, the genre continues to receive attention and praise, and it remains sacred in that composers use it to engage with important socially- and politically- conscious subject matter and to bring people together.

Musically speaking, many 20th century oratorios begin to bridge the gap between popular and classical music forms. Namely, in 1968, Dave Brubeck conceived of The Light in the Wilderness, the first American jazz oratorio noted. In addition to his undeniably jazz-influenced movements, Brubeck’s oratorio includes optional improvisational sections for piano, bass and drum trio which in the preface are indicated that they “may or may not be

88. Smither, 631.
89. Smither, 713. (Smither cites La Transfiguration by Oliver Messiaen and Die Jakobsleiter by Arnold Schoenberg amongst others as primary examples of monumental oratorios.)
in the jazz idiom, depending on the musical orientation of the performer.”  

Several decades later, oratorio found its way to some of the biggest names in pop and jazz music, with works written by Paul McCartney and Wynton Marsalis.

Further changes are notable amongst the libretto of late 20th century oratorio. While a significant proportion find basis in religious subject matter, the works that do so seek innovative and inclusive means of narrativizing the religious texts. An example of this is John Adams’ *El Niño* (2000), a nativity oratorio with texts drawn from English, Spanish and Latin sources including several mid-twentieth century Hispanic women writers amongst Christian texts. In his choice of libretto source, Adams’ work proliferates understanding that non-European voices may take part in telling a sacred story. The majority of late 20th century oratorio libretto go one step further, and began using text sources with humanistic themes more often than traditional texts. 

Amongst these, libretti are based on literary works, mythologies, historical events, and other texts (like the aforementioned oratorio by Paul McCartney and Wynton Marsalis). Others, like Nathan Currier’s *Gaian Variations*, an environmental oratorio based on texts

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91. Paul McCartney and Carl Davis’s *Liverpool Oratorio* (1991) and Wynton Marsalis’s *Blood on the Fields* (1994). Both works are based on historical subjects. Wynton Marsalis’s *Blood on the Fields* (1994) was commissioned by the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in NYC. It is a 3-hour piece composed for 3 soloists, a jazz orchestra, and a chorus that recites the brief narratives connecting numbers.


94. Smither, 632.
by James Lovelock, Loren Eiseley, and Lewis Thomas, indicate the oratorios’ departure from Judeo-Christian messages, and increased focus on universal statements.

From Saint Philip Neri’s oratory congregation to the theaters of Rome and Germany and then the Opera houses of England, oratorio’s evolution lies at the intersection of religious values, musical values, and public interest. The oratorio arose out of desire to accommodate a Roman love of opera in the 17th century, and later found its way into England’s good graces by appealing to their sense of nationalism and belief in a heroic, God-ordained leader. While the oratorio’s religious foundation is fundamental to its identity, the notion of adapting to serve popular musical interests and social sentiments is also written into the figurative bylaws of the genre. Just as the name for oratorio itself was borrowed and converted from another language by the Romans, the genre is similarly adaptable. As the times change, so too, will the oratorio. I believe this defining characteristic has allowed composition of oratorio, a classically religious genre, to prevail despite the changing musical landscape and rise of secularism in 20th and 21st century America.

Taking note of two significant oratorios of the past five years, another evolution in oratorio becomes evident: the emergence of original librettos which employ ethnographic methods (rather than creative synthesis of previous writings). Both works use individualized ethnographic focus to engage with socio-political subject matter in a personal musical manner. In the 21st century, this ethnographic approach uniquely enables oratorio to engage with, evaluate, and redefine the sacred.

96. “Oratory” comes from Late Latin oratorium, from Latin orare.
Chapter 3:

21st Century Oratorio, A Closer Look And A Creative Answer

“Oratorio comes from a long history of storytelling (...) A very heightened, very personal kind of story does find its way into oratorio. The framework of a chorus can be the beating heart of humanity, joined by an astonishing solo singer who brings the stories of this community to life with incredible honesty.

Rob Bailis on Dreamers by Jimmy Lopez. 97

At the intersection of Sacred and Collective Identity

In the 21st century use of the term oratorio becomes a way of adding grandeur to one’s piece and its’ subject material. Simultaneously, most oratorio of the past 20 years seem to focus on a diversity of profound intense topics (See Appendix A).98 In the context of this diversification of subject matter, the past ten years have seen several compositions of oratorio which focus on the narratives of everyday individuals. This distinguishes 20th and 21st century oratorio from 18th century oratorio, which focused on biblical narratives of holy individuals, and also from 19th century oratorio, in which grandiose philosophical messages were conveyed by the choruses (inspired after Messiah).

In lieu of adapting libretti to meet the needs and values of 18th and 19th century audiences, many began to embrace what I like to call the docu-collage method, in which libretto is the compilation of a series of varied documents and texts. By nature of using diverse source material, the docu-collage lends itself to a less biased and generally more interesting narrativization. This methodology is particularly effective for narrating distinct

97. Rob Bailis (Cal Performances interim artistic director) on Dreamers in an interview with Playbill.com: Thomas May, “Cal Performance presents Dreamers, an Oratorio Inspired by the Immigrant Experience,” Playbill, March 12, 2109,
98. See appendix A. Some of these diverse topics include Gaia’s Hypothesis, Acadia National Park, the Sandakan Death Marches, and the life of the Buddha.
historical events from many different angles and became quite popular in the past several decades where many oratorio were based on historical events.\(^9^9\)

From the single composers who reworded scripture in the earliest oratorio, to the composers now who engage a multitude of voices for the construction of their work, the oratorio has notably evolved. As such, oratorio engages and represents more and more voices, while still maintaining its monumentally-set-apart-character. However, this change is not a definitive improvement. In the next section, Jonathan Harvey’s *Welthelos* will evidence this. Oratorio with monumentally-set-apart-character are not all necessarily sacred. The work must also represent and embody the people it narrativizes. *Welthelos*’ evident shortcomings point me away from the *docu-collage* and towards the *ethno-libretto* for sacred storytelling.

**Towards an Ethnographic Methodology in Music**

*(Putting the “ethno” in Oratorio)*

In 2012, Jonathan Harvey’s 80-minute oratorio *Welthelos* premiered in Berlin. The work utilized a libretto by Swiss Roman Catholic Hans Kung and attempted to describe the common values of six of the world’s leading religions: Confucianism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. At the work’s premiere, its libretto received the most attention. It was torn apart in reviews by critics with remarks such as: “Kung’s mixture of patronizingly simplistic description, extracts from each faith’s sacred scriptures, and hopes for the future of humanity may be well intended, but comes across as

\(^{99}\) See Appendix A.
tendentious and mawkish.” 100 Though inspired by an honorable mission, Kung clearly failed to represent these worldwide religions, because his idea of presenting them in universal manner was a nonstarter.

While Durkheim conceived of religion as a collective phenomenon, he also believed that individualism was the only system of beliefs which could ensure moral unity. 101 In this way, Durkheim argues that individualism provides social solidarity and cohesion to modern societies – no longer religion itself. Now, individualism is the religion of modernity par excellence. 102 Kung reminds us that the oratorio cannot universalize or homogenize voices, cultures, or religions if it aims to be sacred, because sacred reality is a projection of social reality, and contemporary social reality is far too complex to generalize by group. 103 However, several contemporary oratorio give me hope with an innovative and creative approach. In this approach, the libretto is derived from neither religious nor secular texts. Instead, these oratorio are the powerful product of ethnographic methods. As two more recent oratorios (Anthracite Fields and Dreamers) exemplify, oratorios can be sacred when the public is represented by individual accounts, rather than overarching and normalizing universals.

Society remains a symbolic community, but this modern symbolic community does not represent an attempt to resist fragmentation so much as it provides a collective acknowledgement of difference. As such, the modern oratorio, whose libretti are constructed from ethnography of individuals’ stories rather than a popular text or narratives, embodies the modern symbolic community. This coincides perfectly with

102. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, Religions of Modernity, 13.
103. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, 13.
Durkheim’s prediction of “an increasingly nebulous civil religion of the nation-state or a secularized ‘cult of man,’”\footnote{Kenneth Thompson, “Durkheim and Sacred Identity” in On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms, 104} in which individualism is modernity’s quintessential value. For this reason, ethnography is the best way to approach libretto composition for any work which aims to convey universal values. This method gives the public an important voice, one which was certainly absent in the presentation of oratorio derived from scripture, and in doing so makes oratorio a truly sacred form. Two recent oratorio stand out as key examples of this modern oratorio approach: *Anthracite Fields* by Julia Wolfe and *Dreamers* by Jimmy Lopez. By taking a closer look at the ethnographic influence in creating both of these powerful works, I will examine how each composer uses the monumental vocal form oratorio to honor and remember personal rather than public or general histories.

**Anthracite Fields (2014)**

Julia Wolfe’s Pulitzer prize-winning *Anthracite Fields* narrativizes Pennsylvania coal-mining life around the turn of the 20th century by utilizing text based on oral histories, a political speech by labor leader John L. Lewis, and interviews.\footnote{“Anthracite Fields,” Music, juliaWolfemusic.com, accessed April 2, 2019, https://juliaWolfemusic.com/music/anthracite-fields.} Wolfe’s research for the project took over a year, and included visiting museums and mining sites, reviewing archival documents, and interviewing miners. The work is only five movements but through its unique ethnographic methods offers an unparalleled musical recount of a little-known history.\footnote{Tom Huizenga, “Julia Wolfe Wins Music Pulitzer For ‘Anthracite Fields,’” Deceptive Cadence from NPR Classical, *National Public Radio*, April 20, 2015.} Over the course of these movements, Wolfe evokes the coal-mining community through various methods: street rhymes, family gardens, and community

104. Kenneth Thompson, “Durkheim and Sacred Identity” in On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms, 104
members’ names from a list of the Pennsylvania Mining Accident index. In tribute to those who persevered and endured in this specific anthracite coal region, the libretto displays a community “as wealthy in interdependence and character as they were endangered in their line of work.”

How did Wolfe manage to create both a public history project and a music project that moved audiences and received rational acclaim? In an NPR interview with Tom Huizenga, Wolfe explains “I didn't want to hammer them over the head and say, 'Listen to this. This is a big political issue.' It really was, ‘Here's what happened. Here's this life and who are we in relationship to that?’”

In revealing her intentions for the listener, Wolfe returns us to the sacred capacity of contemporary oratorio. Wolfe’s fourth movement, “Flowers” is a perfect example. The lyric of this movement is concise and yet extremely powerful. Based on an interview conducted with Barbara Powell, the daughter and granddaughter of miners, this movement uses Powell’s words verbatim. Powell’s simple phrases “we all had flowers” and “we all had gardens” are sprinkled in canon across first two minutes of the movement. The lyrics are sung in repetition by the soprano and alto sections, floating like dust over a guitar’s sixteenth note picking pattern. This initially melancholy music grows more energetic as the Soprano and Alto sections sing “flowers” with increased rhythmic intensity and irregularity. In measure 70, the Sopranos introduce new lyrics, now

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singing the names of flowers without repetition.\textsuperscript{112} The flowers listed go from two syllables (violets, asters, lilacs, etc.), to three syllables (lavender, irises, daffodils, etc.), and finally to four syllables (chrysanthemums, wisteria, geraniums), where “for-get-me-not” rings from the Soprano section and continues through to the movement’s final measures.\textsuperscript{113}

With “Flowers,” Wolfe honors Powell’s memories and captures their complexity. While the oratorio’s first movement expresses the sadness of the lives lost, Powell’s words express the sweetness of the daily life that was also lost.\textsuperscript{114} This movement reflects an American story from a new angle, memorializing a way of life riddled with hardships and beauty. Concurrently, Wolfe’s ethnographic libretto elevates an individual voice to communicate the importance of a collective history, marking an evolution in oratorio which serves to more accurately reflect audiences taste— an evolution away from the universal and towards the collection of individuals which make up a larger social body.

\textbf{Dreamers (2019)}

One of the most recent and politically relevant oratorios to receive national attention, \textit{Dreamers} reveals how the ethnographic oratorio can harness the power of the sacred against governmental injustice. \textit{Dreamers} is composed by Jimmy Lopez and librettist Nilo Cruz. It tells the stories of undocumented immigrants and it is based on interviews that Lopez and Cruz conducted with Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient DREAMers\textsuperscript{115} on University of Berkeley’s campus. In an interview with Brian

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{112} Julia Wolfe, \textit{Anthracite Fields} (2014), 113.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Julia Wolfe, \textit{Anthracite Fields} (2014), 117, mm115-169, https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/anthracite_fields_49200.
\item \textsuperscript{115} “DREAMer” in this context refers to “a person who has lived in the US without official authorization since coming to the country as a minor. People of this description who met certain conditions would be eligible for a special immigration status under federal legislation first proposed in
\end{itemize}
Wise, Lopez explains he chose the oratorio form for his ambitious musical project because it allowed him to tell many stories without necessarily falling into a continuous narrative. To communicate the vast variety of undocumented students’ experiences, *Dreamers* engages a single student’s story in it’s fourth movement. Much like Wolfe’s “Flowers,” “Dreamer Who Studies Linguistics” brings an individual interview to center stage. Over a largely unaccompanied vocal melody, the soprano soloist sings:

*Although I have lived here all of my life*  
*I live in silence in my mouth,*  
*with the secret that I am landless.*  
*I came in with a passport that wasn’t mine.*  
*It was two or three in the morning when I arrived at checkpoint.*  
*I was the boy who feigned to be asleep in the backseat of a truck.*  
*I was the one who travelled with a family unknown to me,*  
*And I was twelve, and I was twelve*  
*I grew up and educated myself, while scorn multiplied all around me*  
*I grew up as more agents with rifles appeared to hunt down…*  
*(spoken) to hunt down people like me (…)*  
*I lived in shame, I lived in fear,*  
*Knowing that if I said too much I would expose myself.*

This text paves an uneven path for a meandering melody which is met with sporadic orchestral response. Though presumably doctored to some degree by Cruz (the librettist of *Dreamers*), the lyric is entirely devoid of rhyme scheme. As a result “Dreamer Who Studies Linguistics” is almost painfully awkward and unpredictable, thus, capturing the same confusion and discomfort of the interviewee. In this movement’s clunky-ness, there is an authenticity and.


Through an ethnographic approach, Lopez and Cruz not only communicate a compelling and honest narrative, but also give voice to the struggles and perils of a group of people who have been silenced out of fear. *Dreamers* allows undocumented students to tell their stories without risking harm by exposing their identities to government authorities.\(^{118}\) In doing so, *Dreamers* provides a sacred safety to those who helped shape the piece.

*Anthracite Fields* and *Dreamers* both elevate secular, lived experiences to the mythic, sacred realm imbued by oratorio history and monumental character. In parallel, they suggest an area ripe with development: contemporary oratorio engaging relevant themes through a focused ethnographic approach. These works influenced my exploration into oratorio composition, for which I will detail in the next section.

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**A Creative Answer**

The emerging trend of ethnographic contemporary oratorio composition is fairly intriguing in my sociological inquiry of sacred music in the 21st century. With this exciting trend also comes important questions of how to use ethnography ethically in art (see foot

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If approached correctly, the ethno-oratorio can reach audience members in a very unique and transcendent way. There is extreme power in bearing witness to people’s everyday lives presented through a musical medium. When the libretti’s content also engages relevant moral, social, or political issues, this creates a sacred experience for the audience, because the work so authentically represents the modern-day social body. The oratorio thus creates a community, not simply of audience members, but of participants in collective experience premised upon the simultaneous engagement with a relevant narrative set to moving music. The contemporary oratorio does not seek to universalize, but rather to elevate individuals, thus highlighting and embracing the lack of homogeneity of the modern social body.

At the time of my freshman fall at Wesleyan, I wasn’t sure how much of my religious upbringing I was interested in bringing with me to campus. News coverage was focused intensely on ISIL, and I noted upsetting trends on a national level, regarding the proliferation of in-group/out-group biases. This reminded me how religion was in many ways a source of violence and a force of division. However, I soon met Wesleyan students with diverse beliefs, feelings about their religious identities, and experiences of their faith being questioned or reinforced. I realized that, though my relationship to my faith was unique, I wasn’t alone in feeling that it might be changing. Amidst this, Wesleyan seemed to create a social setting where religious prejudice was far less present. I set out to

119. The topic of cultural appropriation across artistic mediums is one which should not be overlooked. I don’t intend to make a claim as simple as “the more you use other people’s words in your own creative endeavors the better” because I don’t believe that to be true. Rather, ethnography is a great approach to use in composing significant music work, but if you are going to use it you also have to be conscious of how you do so. (For further reading on the ethics and problematics of ethnography, please see “Spencer and Gillen in Durkheim” in On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 13-28, Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, Roger Sanjek, “Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology”, and Morten Klass, “Chapter 1” in Ordered Universe)
investigate this further, but I never hoped to make any universal claims. I simply sought to better understand Wesleyan’s campus as a spiritual environment—how it contained believers of different faiths and non-believers—and to learn more about specific students’ religious sentiments.

This past year, with the help of Ramsay Burgess, a third-year theatre major, I conducted over 60 interviews with Wesleyan students about their religious beliefs and identity on campus. Afterwards, I selected words and stories from these interviews and formed them into a series of narratives which I later set to music.\(^\text{120}\) With this music I set out to construct an oratorio, entitled, *Above The Noise*. I chose the oratorio form for this project because of oratorios’ connection to sacred texts. The arias, recitatives, and chorus movements in my composition explore how religious identity is expressed, reinforced, and questioned on a college campus, but do so without use of any religious text or music.

In the musical language of *Above The Noise*, there is clear influence from contemporary genres including pop, folk, and jazz. This does not exclude the composition from consideration as an oratorio. It should be noted that several of Handel’s contemporaries initially argued *Messiah* should not be given oratorio status.\(^\text{121}\) Now, *Messiah* is the most famous oratorio in the Western world. Though many of Handel’s movements were likened to hymns, others were strongly likened to madrigals and further, one-third of the numbers in Handel’s Messiah were in a dance style that was popular in the dance halls at the time in London. Let us also remember that the oratorio was initially born in the image of Italian

\(^{120}\) My ethnographic process was similar to that used for the libretto of Dreamers. For more detail, see: Thomas May, “Cal Performances Presents *Dreamers*, an Oratorio Inspired by the Immigrant Experience.” *Playbill*, March 12, 2019.

\(^{121}\) In a 1736 writing, John Brown states, “Though that grand Musical Entertainment is called an Oratorio, yet it is not dramatic; but properly a collection of Hymns or Anthems drawn from the sacred scriptures: In strict Property, therefore, it falls under another Class of Composition.” (From Smither, Volume 2)
opera. Suffice to say that influence from contemporary musical styles does not make a work any less characterizable as an oratorio. Additionally, I hope that my 20th and 21st century oratorio examples legitimize nuanced notions of oratorio sound as the current norm and makes rigid views of what constitutes oratorio as themselves outdated.

My lyrics were directly informed by the interviews I conducted with Wesleyan students. For the composition of chorus movements and certain arias, the text from interviews was significantly altered in an effort to create more accessible and pleasing melodies. For the recitatives, the text was still altered, but far less so, in an attempt to reflect more natural speech patterns. Finally, there are three interlude movements in *Above The Noise* for which the dialogue is taken verbatim from interviews.
Select Movement Examples

“With everyone shouting so loudly here” (Appendix C, 59)

If my oratorio seeks to convey any universal truths, it is through the admission that no two religious experiences on college campuses are the same. In order to communicate this musically, my oratorio refrains from extensive use of chorus, and most importantly refrains from any extended instances of homophony in the chorus. “With everyone shouting so loudly here,” is a recitative for trio which accomplishes this through an instructed lack of synchrony (See performance notes). This movement offers a musical portrayal of individuals grappling with their voice amidst a wall of sound.

“Trust In You” (Appendix C, 59-62)

This aria is almost exclusively transcribed from an interview with one student. In this movement, clear effort is made to match and reflect the rhythm of the interviewee’s speech pattern. Additionally, the melody for the phrase “trust in you” is treated with a steady rhythm and a harmonic resolution every time it is encountered. This reflects that trust in God is what gives the soloist comfort.

“Let Me” (Appendix C, 63-64)

In this chorus movement, dissonance conveys the difficulty of letting one’s guard down in the first four measures. When the lyric (“let me let my guard down”) returns, it is as a counter, rather than principle melody. In this counter melody there is harmony and consonance. The musical differences between the two utilizations of the same phrase (“let me let my guard down”) are written in this way to convey the difference
between the simplicity of the concept (of letting one’s guard down) compared to the
difficulty of the practice.

As polyphonic texture emerges between vocal parts – this comes to symbolize a lack
of consensus amongst students regarding their faith. In measure 17, percussion enters,
adding clarity to where the downbeat lies. The downbeat supports the chorus rather than
the soloist, drawing focus again to the words “let me let my guard down,” over the
soloists, “When I can’t feel the ground, I wonder if faith is all I need…” to indicate that
not all students find security from their faith in God amidst times of difficulty. In my
interviews, students more commonly expressed an attraction to the idea of higher power,
and a wish to be openminded enough to do so, but not a firm belief. Subsequently I
sought to prioritize this lyric motif.

At the very end of the movement, a new lyric is introduced by a single character. It is
barely audible amongst the other melodies. Molly sings “I believe in a power, but it’s not
higher, it’s inside.” This gives voice to the students who find comfort in the knowledge
that there is no higher power, and thus confronting adversity is within their control, and
their control only.

Through the narratives displayed in these varied musical techniques, I sought to
represent what I have found sacred on this campus— awareness of and comfort with our
interconnected differences. I seek to reflect the varied perspectives from these interviews
through music with many voices, for I believe community can be fostered by shared
listening.
Conclusion

Musical ritual holds significance in society. At least that is what two of the most seminal sociologists in history, including Émile Durkheim, have attested. As Radcliffe Brown, Durkheim’s contemporary, also states, rituals and ritual ceremonies “maintain and transmit from one generation to another the emotional dispositions on which the society depends for its existence” 122 Though Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown proposed their sociological claims to a 20th century European audience, their theories continue to gain traction in today’s social and cultural landscape. As we continue to learn more and more about our evolutionary past, amassing empirical data on how our brains work, the notion that musical ritual serves an essential social function becomes even more legitimate.123

Over 100 years after Durkheim’s Forms, Ellen Dissanayake returns to the exploration of ritual function with fresh eyes and an exciting psycho-scientific approach. In Ritual and Ritualization, Dissanayake asserts rituals have the capacity to transmit essential information and group tradition. 124 In technical terms, formalization, repetition,


If not a direct response, this quote is at the very least, heavily influenced by Durkheim’s theoretical writings. After two-years in the Andaman Islands conducting an ethnographic study, British anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown returned to London and subsequently became aware of Durkheim’s work. This inspired Brown to reinterpret his own thinking and return to the field. Between 1910-1912 Radcliffe-Brown conduct a new study in Western Australia, where he would establish the theory of “structural functionalism” in his later works The Andaman Islanders (1922) and The Social Organization of Australian Tribes (1930).122 The theoretical approach of structural-functionalism is one of the primary reasons Radcliffe-Brown is regarded as the father of modern social anthropology.

123. I use Ellen Dissanayake’s Ritual and Realization to elaborate on the relevance of Durkheim’s sacred framework at the intersection of contemporary oratorio practice. This is by no means the only relevant or definitive text source on music’s social function. For further applicable reading on how music contributes to the integration, stability, and continuity of the society, culture, or social groups, please see Merriam (1964), Lomax (1968), Nettl (1983). For further reading on how musical ritual transfers cultural information please see (Vinnicombe (1976), Guss (1989) Kaeppeler (1990), Seremetakis (1991), and Knopoff, 1993). These works were also referenced by Dissanayake.

exaggeration, and elaboration all give salience to stimuli, and when we are presented with salient (read “significant”) stimuli, an emotional response is elicited.\(^{125}\) Note that these are all prominent elements of ritual. Thus, in other words, specific rituals pose a discrepancy to our generalized state of consciousness in daily life, and in doing so compel us to feel. These emotion-inciting stimuli engender the expression of feelings and thus play a principal role in transmitting information and group tradition.\(^{126}\)

Dissanayake reframes Durkheim’s theory of rituals’ significance and proves it in a modern framework. Durkheim’s idea of the sacred (things set apart that embody the community) is essentially interchangeable with Dissanayake’s description of a discrepancy in our daily life which ultimately communicates group information and tradition. As such, her writing restates the claim that rituals affirm the meaning of sacred to a given community. Perhaps most importantly, Dissanayake also offers and expands on a link that Durkheim never did: a link between music and ritual.

> “I suggest that the component operations used in ritualized behaviors—formalization or regularization, stereotypy, repetition, exaggeration, and elaboration—are also prototypes for the creation of expressiveness, and hence “emotion,” in music (and the other arts).”\(^{127}\)

As I have laid out, oratorio is a formalized, exaggerated, and musically elaborated presentation of a narrative. These features coincide perfectly with Dissanayake’s list of characteristics that make stimuli salient. Citing the attendance of a music performance as the primary example for an activity that poses discrepancies to our generalized state,\(^{128}\) Dissanayake helps to prove that attending an oratorio can be a ritual activity. Ergo, the object of the ritual activity, in this case the oratorio, is sacred.

\(^{125}\) Dissanayake, “Ritual and Ritualization”, 9.
\(^{126}\) Dissanayake, “Ritual and Ritualization”, 7.
\(^{127}\) Dissanayake 9.
\(^{128}\) Dissanayake, 8.
Though oratorio today has diverged from its original religious role in society, it retains strong ties to its roots, carrying with it a potential for transcendent experience with each performance. When experiencing oratorio, it is not the set design, the costumes, or the drama that dazzles and moves us, rather, it is the power of the music, the narratives told, and the voices brought together to tell them. With these elements, the oratorio has the potential to create a transcend the everyday, and bring us to a sacred place. As such, *Above The Noise* is my creative exploration into the contemporary ethnographic incarnation of oratorio. With this work, I hope that oratorio continues to approach the sacred by bonding humans to one another through honoring their individual stories.
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## Appendices

### Appendix A: A List of 21\textsuperscript{st} Century English Language Oratorio

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Composer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not the Messiah (It’s a Very Naughty Boy)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Monty Python’s Life of Brian Mock of Handel</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>First Light: Acadia National Park, Maine: Mount Desert Island</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bible and other texts “from pre” (Gaia’s Hypothesis)</td>
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Appendix B: *Above The Noise* Libretto

Above The Noise

*Oratorio Libretto*

Music and Lyrics by
DAPHNE GAMPEL

Ensemble

Daphne  Soprano
Molly    Soprano
Samia   Soprano
Alex    Alto
Sama    Alto
Nick   Tenor
Babe   Bass
Ed   Bass

SATB Chorus
Soprano Trio

Guitar I & II
Bass
Percussion I & II
PART 1

1 Overture

Trio
With everyone shouting so loudly here it’s hard to feel heard.
How do I listen to me, what I believe?
How do I rise above the noise

2 Dragonfly

Daphne
Dragged, quietly resting as the world passes you by
Still with folded wings
No concern for things that meet the human eye
Insight takes a will to see and you won’t
You don’t know enough to notice what you don’t
Just the same, we live heedless, blind to the rules of our domain
In the levels I can’t reach, there are always systems,
Veiled forces affecting my trajectory
You can trust you’ll never know or you can wonder why
You can fear or you can marvel at the dragonfly

3 Interlude 1

4 Trust In You

Nick
I’ve gone to church every Sunday of my life,
I’ve gone to church every Sunday of my life,
It’s always been the act for me, the ritual not the congregation
My parents practice differently, they moved with their parish from
Long Island to rural mass
I go to lots of churches and I guess I have a favorite
It’s not like a cathedral, there’s no soaring stained glass windows.
Just an old priest with a creaky voice and a small group of Bay-
Staters, and we all hold hands during prayer at Saint Joseph.
That’s not something you usually see
Saint Joseph, father and carpenter, he never knows what
he’s getting into but decides to go through with it anyway.
Trust in you, I trust in you
Every Sunday of my life I’ve trusted you.
Now I go to mass on campus
And it feels like I’m at home,
With the same commands to sit or stand,
And the songs I’ve always known.
Most of my friends who are catholic
Wish they could be more open about their faith,
And most of my artist friends, closest friends,
They’re not religious and with them it’s hard to relate.
So I’m trying to navigate just being a normal college student,
But also staying dedicated to my beliefs and it’s hard to
Compromise the two, but I trust in you, I trust in you, because
I want to study these things while I’m here,
But so many people who I’m studying with are anti-religious...
And it makes me feel a lot of the time like I’m not supposed to be
Pious while here.
And I almost go into the opposite way of thinking

where I think, “oh my God, I’m not meant to practice art or be a
Filmmaker. I’m supposed to be a priest…”
And that’s a really scary thing for me...
Because I don’t think I want to do that.
Besides, the more I research the more I realize the answer
Is no. There’s so much scandal and violence, oppression and the
more I read, the less I know.
I see the danger in exclusion. The mindset that Catholics
Are wiser more special than the rest of the world it’s not true, it just
Builds a curtain between the rest of the world and you.
And it clashes with the actual teaching to look after your
Brothers and sisters of Christ. That means everyone, that means I
can’t hide away with your light.
Saint Joseph, father and carpenter, he never knows what
He’s getting into but decides to go through with it anyway.
Do I go through with it anyway?
Trust in you. I trust in you, and I’ll pray that my classmates can
Understand. I’ll pray they can trust in me, too.

5 1 Would Be There

Ed
If I could be anywhere I would be right there
Everyone is waiting for October to arrive
Malshere music playing as the city comes alive
I remember eleven,
Finally got my hands on a big red kite. Watched it fly up into the sky,
And dance across the mountainside,
If I could be anywhere I would be right there.
If I could be anywhere I would be there
Gathered round outside giving blessings
Parents, cousins nieces and nephews playing cards with money piled
High. My brother and I, tried to steal it every time.
Ten days to sit and eat with family, that’s my favorite memory
Chorus
If I could be anywhere I would be right there
If I could be anywhere I would be there

6 Recitative

Sanam
I didn’t get to think for myself
Dreaded being home on the holidays above all else
Every rule, cruel or old. No dispute, just do as your told
Sheep hanging from the wall, and blood at my feet
Feeling sick from the smell, and terrified to eat. There are other
Ways of defining your values without the strings.
Religion makes people do crazy things
Chorus
Religion makes people do crazy things
Sanam
I’ve never questioned identity as a believer, but now I question
How my actions get seen as a believer defying the rules
Where I see reason to contravene.
Does that make me bad?
7 Does That Make Be Bad?

Sanam
Does that make me unfaithful, lazy, or ill?
Is it my nature, or is it my will?

Sanam
I can’t promise that consistency,
every week is just too much for me

Molly
The past is past and now the rules are wrong,
call me crazy to want them gone

Sanam
If I defy the scripture, does that make me bad?

Sanam
Engage from time to time, does that make me bad?

Molly
How about judging morality from an angle forced on me
Am I unfaithful, lazy or ill?

Trio
Does that make me bad?

8 Recitative

Alex
My grandma says
"with my right hand I can reach back and hold hands with
my grandmother, and with my left I reach out to touch you
with the other, and with my hands outstretched I can span three
hundred years."
She brings that phrase out now and then like a favorite
souvenir. Her family went to Belize, she escaped, the only one.
She doesn’t like to talk about it, cause “the stories aren’t fun.”
Just a child then, she saw countless deaths, survived atrocity.
You’d think she’d steer clear from poking fun at mortality
But every year at break-fast she says,
"If you don’t marry Jewish, you’re dead to me."

9 So We Laugh

Alex
From the Romans who sacked our temples,
to the Persians who burned our books,
We’ve been baptized, murdered, exiled,
And Fox news calls us the crooks!
We could hide the trials the charges,
but we put them on display
With a dry and bold sarcastic my grandma calls the Jewish way
She laughs, she’s gotta laugh, like the lamp that lit her way
along a dark and shmutz-y path.
With a history as dark as night, she’s made her way by making light.
Besides, if it’s not funny, it’s just sad and so she laughs.
"We work with what we have”,
she says, “just think of it like that…Haman hatched a plot to kill us,
so we bake treats shaped like his hat!”
and sure enough the same old trick would pave my college track
I was just another friendless freshman crossing college row

When I saw a comedy try-out sign, and heard grandmas voice
saying, “dauling go?”
So I walked my way to try-outs with my dry and bold
sarcastic. My ego wasn’t ironclad,
but funny spiels, I knew I had,
So I gave them my best shot…
And they all laughed, they laughed at me!
But in a kind of way that’s good because I wanted them to be.
Freshman year is dark alright, but I made my way by making light
Look at that, it turns out grandmas lamp still had some gas
Strutting through senior year now, I’ve been happy in my
shoes. Till “eleven shot in Pittsburgh” struck my early morning news
At first it didn’t faze me much, that we’re targets isn’t unknown.
Then it hit and I felt hatred, scared, alone.
With a mind running wild, and a heart feeling hollow
My friends asked of the news and I said
“Same old Jewish Telegram. Begin worrying. Details to follow.”
And we all laughed, I made us laugh
With the humor I’ve inherited and trauma I’ve been passed
Maybe it’s in my blood to make a crack, but maybe it’s
more than that. A laugh-line linking present dread to past
This country’s still so far, from a peaceful promised land
When that reality’s more than I can stand
A joke is like an outstretched hand
Holding to what I can to make it better, saying
"Let’s be hated, let’s be scared,
lets feel those things together"

Chorus
This country’s still so far from a peaceful promised land
And sometimes that reality’s more than I can stand

Alex
So I find the humor when I can,
while holding to my grandma’s hand
Saying “let’s be hated let’s be scared together.”
And so I laugh, take it all in stride
as a testament to what I have and a source for Jewish pride.
I can hold my tongue. I can raise my voice,
the point is we still have a choice and there’s a miracle in that, yes,
there’s a miracle in that and so I laugh, I laugh.

10 Let Me Let My Guard Down

Chorus
Let me let my guard down

Sanam
When I can’t feel the ground, I wonder if faith is all I need
There in the God I’ve heard about, or in the spaces in between

Trio
When I can’t feel the ground, I wonder if faith is all I need
There in the God I’ve heard about, or in the spaces in between

Molly
I believe in a power, but it’s not higher, it’s inside
PART 2

11 Interlude 2

12 My Father Wasn’t Good

Samia
“T’ll be right back,” he said, turned the lights out, and spent the night out gambling, trusting a child to stay in bed.
Knowing those four words don’t cast the same spell.
Don’t bring the same hurt coming from anyone else.
Coasting by, all along he cheated and lied, saying he could
Do no wrong, ‘cause he had the lord on his side.
My father wasn’t good, but he had god, no he wasn’t good, but he had god.

I still have Christian habits that I can’t shake, but in these past years I’ve started trying different things.
I spend 10 minutes sitting in this alter space that I made,
to meditate every morning, even if it makes me late.
I realign myself, while I’m by myself, and it’s nice to start my day like that, say my prayers in my own time,
preaching that gets practiced and a practice that feels mine.

Chorus
My father wasn’t good, but he had god no he wasn’t good but he had god

Samia
And I don’t see a higher power helping me to be, so I’d rather work with what I’ve got
My father wasn’t good, but he had god, no he wasn’t good but he had god.

Last year my father passed away. Left me nothing, just a lesson in his wake. He lived his life scattering pain,
I couldn’t bear to do the same, so
I can put control back in my hands, practice love and kindness, skip the godly guidance. Using my faith to embrace who I am, come to terms with what I can’t, and prove to myself that I’m trying, instead of justifying what I’m not
My father wasn’t good, but he had god, no he wasn’t good but he had god

13 Recitative

Molly
Full stop at the chapel gates
Years since I’ve gone inside that place
Praying eyes watch my face
Pleated slacks and funeral blacks all in my mother’s name

14 Muted Shades

Molly
We called her heart evergreen, she made time for anyone in need
First to lend the church a hand
She gave to her community, took pride in her family,
love warm like the sun-kissed sand
love that couldn’t understand the world
in more than muted shades, rainbow colors had no place,
my world was more than muted shades

Service starts with her favorite song as the pastor says,
“her soul lives on”
Grit my teeth, I know it’s wrong.
College friends on either side, they sit quiet and let me cry
While holding tight to my hands
With love that understands
my world is green, blue, orange, grey.
Love, strong like the pain I faced
Love, stronger than the chapel gates
Love strong like the pain I faced.

Please don’t say she’s in a better place,
I know she wanted better days.
Please don’t say she’s in a better place
Please don’t say she’s in a better place

15 God Was All I Needed

Maya
I didn’t know that god was all I needed, until god was all I had
I gave the counselor half an hour of honesty
She took my word, and took my liberty away from me
Liability in a hospital bed, liability in a hospital bed
I study science because of faith, research is a way to worship
all the beauty god creates. I wonder in this world divine,
how does it happen right so much of the time?

Chorus
A 30 hour holding room, visit from a friend
Gave me Philippians. I read it start to end
“I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength”

Maya
Words that turned me red

Chorus
Words that turned me red
Misprints, like the one in me passed along the family tree
Written in my book of life and staying there.

Maya
staying there. It won’t be faith or grace alone, or prayer
if my mind can’t seal it’s cracks . . .

Chorus
A term away from school, new hospital back home
Reading through the psalms in bed so I don’t feel alone
Moving slow, searching with the strength left, any lesson I can
Weeks gone feeling worse, Chaplin by my side
Read allowed the verses pain that sounds like mine

Bass
“How long o lord, must I have sorrow in my heart?”

Chorus
Will you forget me forever? Will you hide your face from me?
I will still rejoice in god and sing”

Maya
Not ready for that yet, I said, enraged that he forgets, his children
How can he forget? How can he forget?

Molly
How can he forget? How can he forget?
Bass
“This is just the lesson for you. We don’t always know how to feel about god. If you need to, you can leave your anger with him. Leave your anger with him.”

Maya
I gave the answer days to settle in. Still with anger, fear, and hurt -- still unheard. But now, a lesson learned.

Chorus
Hanging Christmas lights, tears and moving slow
Better days in sight, learning to let go

Maya
Seek his words in comfort if not remedy
For all his distance, never turned away from me
Faith to wait, heal, and grow, courage to be mad
That was what I needed when god was all I had

16 Take What You Need

Daphne
What if I believe in learning to question things,
There’s got to be a place in between
Can you lean beside the tree without touching every leaf?
Take what you need, leave what you don’t.
Give me comfort, give me shade,
Save the guidelines, save the blame
Not to lie on, just to lean. I’m hoping I can find a place in between.

Chorus
What if I believe in learning to question things,
There’s got to be a place in between
Can you lean beside the tree without touching every leaf?
Take what you need, leave what you don’t.

PART 3

17 Recitative

Bass
I remember sneaking past the counselors after midnight
No idea what love or what believing really looked like
Maybe you did, and I’m the one still figuring out
Look at you, Lisa, look at me now
Maybe I’d like to be spiritual too,
Maybe I still don’t know how
Look at you, Lisa, look at me now

18 Interlude

19 Home for the Holidays A

Daphne
So fast, November past. With reading week next Monday,
and finals round the bend. Next thing we’ll packing up,
and texting all our high school friends, “are you home yet?”
Headed home for the holidays, again, home for the holidays again

Molly
My family went to church on Christmas morning
Sometimes we even went the night before, but we don’t go at all anymore. And I just don’t feel the magic. I remember as a kid
Every Christmas eve, too wired to sleep, couldn’t wait to find my gifts, now it’s send me your list type shit

Daphne
And it’s stressful for my parents, that I know

Molly
As grandpa’s getting older, now we go
to visit him in Washington where it doesn’t even snow

Daphne
Dad worries about his parents, mom worries over dad
For me it’s just a break from campus, not much more than that
I guess it’s a little sad

Molly
Christmas dinner I try taking stock of all I have,
cause soon enough we’ll have to go repack
The Holiday’s the only thing that keeps my family in contact.
And we always wait for grandpa to say grace,
it’s nice to know some things change, but some things stay the same

Daphne
it’s nice to know some things change, but some things stay the same

Chorus
Nice to know something’s change but somethings stay the same
Nice to know something’s change but somethings change

19 Home for the Holidays B

Sanam
Going home for the holidays, all my travel plans arranged
with a tattoo reminder of what I’ve reclaimed.
Home for the holidays, with a family that cares,
and a way of believing that’s different from theirs.
So it’s me at the table now, it’s my voice alone
and a meaning of faith that I found on my own, so
I grow, and I try, take control, take my time

Sanam, Molly
I grow, and I try, take control, take my time

Sanam, Molly, Sania
I grow, and I try, take control, take my time

Maya
One more year, just one more year
Make the most you can while you’re here

Maya, Ed
One more year, just one more year
Make the most you can while you’re here

Chorus
It’s me at the table now, it’s my voice alone
With a meaning of faith that I’ve found on my own

~ End ~
Appendix C: Selections from *Above The Noise* Score

"WITH EVERYONE SHOUTING SO LOUDLY HERE"

This movement is inspired by Alvin Lucier's *For Emily*. Note to singer: sing with no specified rhythm, meter, or dynamic expression. Instead, interpret this melody individually. Each singer should spend 1-3 seconds on each note, with awareness of, and deliberate effort to avoid synchronicity or parallel rhythm with the other singers' melodic trajectories.

This movement also includes a drone. Conductor should assign this part to a chordal instrument. Instrumentalist should interpret freely their use of the notes indicated, given the instructional markings below.

*dronce entrance immediately after OVERTURE*
*instrument sustains drone at the discretion of the player (for example: guitar player may use a sustain or delay pedal)*

"TRUST IN YOU"
most of my good friends, my closest friends are... to... to a woman with them it's hard to re... So I'm trying to navigate just... going a non-egal student but... I'm... dedicated to my... be feels. And it's hard to compensate the... now, but I trust in you... I trust in you. I trust in you. I trust in you... you be some... I want to... these things while I'm here. But so many people who I'm talking with are... so I'm going to be... will... a lot of the time, like I'm... not supposed to be... while here. And I almost go in to... like the... way of thinking like... my God. I'm not supposed to practice as to be a first-rate
"LET ME LET MY GUARD DOWN"

SANAM:
When I can't feel... the ground
I wonder if faith

SAMIA:
I can see... the ground

MOLLY:
When I can't find... the ground

Let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me let me...