

The Wages of Dying: A Performance Guide to Jake Heggie's *From The Book of Nightmares*

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This article introduces the reader to composer Jake Heggie's song cycle for soprano, cello, and piano, *From The Book of Nightmares*. The composer set four poems from Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Galway Kinnell's book-length poem *The Book of Nightmares*, which was inspired by Kinnell's experiences during the Vietnam era and is framed by images of life through the births of his two children. Heggie drew from his own life experiences as a parent himself to capture, through music, the joy and struggle of parenthood. The article discusses both the poet's and the composer's biographies, then moves to Heggie's stylistic influences and compositional process, as well as his most important works and their critical reception. The last portion of this article focuses on the commission, premiere, recording, and public reception of *From The Book of Nightmares* specifically, including short analyses of each song, thus serving as a performer's guide to the cycle. The article is noteworthy for its many quotations derived from multiple personal interviews between Heggie and the author, which appear with permission from the composer.

JAKE HEGGIE'S OPERA *MOBY-DICK* WAS, "an undeniable success: The end of its maiden voyage was greeted with a sustained, rousing ovation, with shredded programs fluttering down from the highest seating level."¹ The opera's Dallas premiere and subsequent success, including the world television premiere of the opera produced by PBS in 2013 as part of their "Great Performances" fortieth anniversary season, was a triumph for Heggie, paralleled only by his opera, *Dead Man Walking*, in 2000. This American composer (b. 1961) has had considerable success in the operatic genre.

Heggie, however, has been most prolific in his composition of American songs. While performing in Atlanta in the Summer of 2013, Frederica von Stade had just returned from the premiere performance of a song cycle called *From The Book of Nightmares*. She described the cycle as "hauntingly beautiful," and encouraged all singers in a masterclass she was teaching to explore the music of this masterful composer who has had an indelible impact on the genre of American song.²

Beautiful melodic lines and an unusual blending of popular and classical styles permeate Heggie's music, but most striking is his lyrical setting of the poetry. This is especially the case in *From The Book of Nightmares*. The composer set four poems from the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Galway Kinnell, which were taken from *The Book of Nightmares*, a book-length poem that was influenced by Kinnell's experiences during the Vietnam era, framed by images of life through the births of his two children. As a parent himself, Jake

Heggie was able to draw from his own life experiences to capture the inexplicable joy and struggle that coexist throughout the experience of parenthood.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the reader to Jake Heggie's song cycle *From The Book of Nightmares* by examining the four songs and offering performance suggestions. Part one will discuss the composer's biography and compositions, including a discussion of his most important works and their critical reception. This section will also address stylistic influences and Heggie's compositional process and the author of the text, Galway Kinnell. Part two will discuss the commission, premiere, recording, and public reception of the piece, and will serve as a performance guide to the cycle.

JAKE HEGGIE, COMPOSER

The music of Jake Heggie's life (a life which *New York Times* writer Paul Blumenthal called "operatic") is, for that very reason, characterized by eclecticism.³ The journey taken by this composer whom mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade calls "one of the dearest, gentlest souls God ever put on this earth," has been far from ordinary.⁴ John "Jake" Heggie was born on March 31, 1961 in West Palm Beach, Florida to John and Judy Heggie. Heggie's father was a doctor.

He was an M.D. who served in Japan for a year after the Korean War was over. During the time I was growing up, my mom didn't work—she was trained as a nurse, but she stayed at home to raise four children, so the demands weren't on both parents' careers, just my dad's. He liked to move a lot because it kept things fresh and exciting for him—and kept his depression demons at bay for a while.⁵

The family finally settled in Bexley, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus.⁶ It was in Ohio at the age of six that Heggie became interested in the piano. "Heggie loved the instrument.... He already liked music, thanks to his father, who played jazz saxophone for fun and had introduced him to big-band music and jazz by spinning records by Tommy Dorsey, Herb Alpert, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee at home."⁷ But sadly, Heggie's homelife changed forever at the age of ten with the tragic suicide of his father. When asked what he remembered about the incident, Heggie recalled:

He was a very sick man, alas. He suffered from terrible depression and had told my mom many times that he

wanted to kill himself throughout their years of marriage. He was with a therapist, but back then they didn't have the medications we have today – so there was nothing to help his suffering. It just got worse and worse. So, one day he just took off and killed himself where nobody could stop him or interfere. He needed to stop the suffering and felt the world would be better off without him.⁸

After this personal tragedy, Heggie immersed himself in his music—the only place he was always comfortable—and continued to study piano. By age eleven, Heggie's interest in composition began to emerge. Heggie says, "I was impressed with making lots of noise with lots of notes. I spent all my extra money from my paper route buying scores, records and especially music paper."⁹

In high school, Heggie's family moved from Ohio to Martinez, California, where he met his first great artistic mentor, Ernst Bacon, in 1977. According to Heggie, the private tutelage of Ernst Bacon, which began in 1978, "opened the door to what music could be."¹⁰ Heggie's passion for setting text began with Ernst Bacon, who introduced him to the poems of Emily Dickinson, whose poetry the composer adapted in 1995 to win the G. Schirmer Art Song Competition.¹¹ "The most valuable [lesson from Ernst Bacon] was about word setting and connection to the text—a deeply personal connection... He was the foundation that set me on the whole route of art song. Because before that, everything to me was a Broadway ballad."¹² Bacon helped Heggie to find this personal connection through various exercises.

First we started writing canons, and then we started writing three-part counterpoint, but the canons were always based on someone's name. So you'd take someone that mattered to you and their name, and you'd figure out a tune based on the letters in their name, so what he was giving me was that there was a personal connection to the line that you were writing. It wasn't just this abstract thing. It wasn't just an academic exercise. It had emotional meaning.¹³

Ernst Bacon helped Heggie to develop a technical understanding of harmony and voice leading, but perhaps his greatest influence was in helping Heggie to begin to find his voice as an emotionally connected song composer.

Jake Heggie's own personal struggle with his sexual identity began to wreak havoc on his development as an artist, however. The self-doubt that had plagued

him since his father's suicide when he was ten began to resurface as he struggled to find his "people."¹⁴ He knew in 1979 that his life would be about music, but he also knew that he was gay, and it terrified him that someone might find out. So, he buried himself in piano and composition because it was the one area in his life in which he felt truly successful.

After seeing a poster in high school French class about the American College in Paris, Heggie applied. He hoped to escape his emotional struggles and meet like-minded people. "Burying myself in music felt like a really safe, empowering place, and running to Paris felt like a great place to find out who I was."¹⁵ For Heggie, Paris was a liberating experience. It was there that he was introduced to classical singing and immersed himself in the cultural arts of Paris while composing and studying piano.

After two years in France, Heggie felt pressure from his mother to return home. So, in 1981 he left Paris and returned to California to study at UCLA with the great pianist Johana Harris. Jake remembers this time in his life very fondly because through Johana Harris he began to understand what being a composer fully entailed.

It really was not just about the notes, but the composer, and what was going on in their life at the time they wrote this. What were they reading? What were they listening to? Who were their friends and influences? Why did they write this piece? What compelled them to take the time to put these notes on the page? Cause as a composer, I can tell you. It takes a commitment.¹⁶

Jake had had several great teachers before Johana Harris, but none of them had talked about music the way she did. He was completely in awe of her. "She was the most natural musician I have ever met, where music was her first language. It was in the core of her. . . . What I didn't realize was happening was that not only had she become very fond of me, but she had fallen in love with me. And that was terrifying."¹⁷ At the age of twenty-one, Heggie married his teacher who was nearly seventy years old. Heggie justified this union because he thought it would be more acceptable to his family and friends than the truth—that he was gay.

If I have one regret in my life, it's that I wasn't strong and wise enough and really independent enough at that time to really put things in perspective; 'cause she and I should have been great friends our entire—you know—till she

died. And instead, I let her believe that I was in love with her as she was with me, and then we got married, because she wanted to get married, and it was really tough.¹⁸

The pair became a two-piano team and traveled performing. Through Harris, he met Leonard Bernstein, John Browning, Lorin Maazel, William Schuman, and Isaac Stern. After a year of denying his feelings, Heggie was finally able to confess his sexuality to Johana—a fact which she likely already suspected. She understood his conflict, but would not accept divorce as an option, so the couple remained married and opted to live a celibate life.

Heggie graduated from UCLA in 1984 and helped to create a composer's group called "Lo Cal Composers." He began to claim his identity as a creative artist, but realized he still needed more education and experience, so in 1986, he began graduate school at UCLA. As a graduate student, he was afforded the opportunity to turn pages for performances at the UCLA Center for the Performing Arts where he was privileged to be onstage with Leontyne Price, Montserrat Caballé, Renata Scotto, violinist Itzhak Perlman, and many others. This experience for him only enhanced his overall vision of emotionally connected artistry.

During his graduate school years, Jake began to develop a condition called *focal dystonia*, in which the fingers of his right hand curled up uncontrollably. Because of this condition, he was forced to quit performing. Devastated by this news, he stopped playing and composing and left graduate school. Although he had already revealed to his family and friends that he was gay, he remained married to Johana Harris. Heggie's identity up to this point had been as a musician, and the debilitating hand condition left him questioning his identity once again.

In 1991, Johana developed cancer and retired from UCLA in 1993 at the age of eighty. The couple decided it was time for him to move on. So, in 1993 Heggie made the fortuitous move to San Francisco, where he was eventually offered a job at the San Francisco Opera as the company's public relations associate.¹⁹

The move was important for so many reasons. First, I needed to start living my own life as a gay man, and Johana recognized and supported that. We always remained very close and the best of friends, and she was more than understanding. I was feeling stifled profes-

sionally and personally in Los Angeles and knew I had to start over in a new place—but not so far away that I couldn't be near her or see her often. I also felt that if I was going to have a chance at pursuing a musical career, it would be much more likely in San Francisco. The cultural climate and the support for the arts are tremendous here. It turned out to be the right choice on all levels.²⁰

It was at the opera that Jake began to receive the remarkable opportunities that would bring his music to the attention of important people in the world of classical music, such as meeting the famous mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade. While working at the opera, Jake gifted "Flicka" with some of his folk song arrangements, composed for her.²¹ Heggie had met her during the 1994 production of *The Dangerous Liaisons* by Conrad Susa. Von Stade instantly became one of Heggie's biggest advocates and began programming his works in her recitals.²²

The instrumental support of Frederica von Stade gave Heggie the confidence he needed, and the composer entered and won the G. Schirmer song competition with a setting of Emily Dickinson's poem, "If you were coming in the fall," recorded by soprano Kristin Clayton.²³ Very soon, famous singers, including Renée Fleming and Brian Asawa, were approaching Heggie for new compositions, and the humble composer was flattered but surprised.²⁴ "I was surprised about the singers who approached me because the song literature is already so vast—but they were looking for pieces that they connected with on an immediate, personal and very American level."²⁵

In 1995 after physical therapy improved his focal dystonia, Heggie began to compose prolifically, as well as to concertize with singers. Harris and Heggie stayed in touch until her death that same year, and the couple never divorced.

Even though Heggie had never composed an opera before, the San Francisco Opera commissioned him in 1996 to write one for their 2000-2001 season. "They took a risk on me, and I took a risk, too, by jumping into such a big project. I knew I had the drama for an opera in my music, but I never realized I could do it on such a large tableau."²⁶ The same year, Jennifer Larmore was the first of many singers to record his songs. Her album *My Native Land* included five of his songs, and in 1998, BMG recorded a collection of his songs titled *The*

Faces of Love, featuring Renée Fleming, Sylvia McNair, Frederica von Stade, and other famous artists.

In 1998, the general director of San Francisco Opera, Lotfi Mansouri, officially announced the premiere of *Dead Man Walking* and named Jake Heggie the company's first composer-in-residence.

I owe everything to Lotfi. Who gets a break like that when you're on the PR staff? I was called in to see him, and I thought I was going to have to write another press release or a speech. Instead, he said, "I'm going to send you to New York to meet Terrence." I thought, "I can't believe it. Are you sure you have the right guy?"²⁷

Dead Man Walking connected Heggie with some of the most sought-after talent in the operatic genre, including playwright Terrence McNally as librettist, Joe Mantello as director, Patrick Summers as conductor, and a cast that featured superstar mezzo-sopranos Susan Graham and Frederica von Stade. The opera premiered at San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House in October 2000 and at the time of this publication, has been produced in over seventy-five productions around the world.²⁸

Due to the success of *Dead Man Walking*, Heggie was finally able to focus solely on composition. From 2000-2002, he was composer-in-residence for Eos Chamber Orchestra in New York, and that summer he premiered his song cycle *The Deepest Desire* at the Vail Valley Music Festival. *The End of the Affair*, his opera based on the novel by Graham Green, opened in 2004 in Houston, and *To Hell and Back*, Heggie's one-act retelling of the Persephone myth, premiered in 2006. His opera that was originally titled *Last Acts (Three Decembers)* debuted in Houston in February of 2008.

Heggie's next opera, *Moby-Dick*, was a grand operatic success, and as epic as the novel on which it is based. With a libretto by Gene Scheer, *Moby-Dick* was commissioned by a consortium of five opera companies, including the Dallas opera, where the work premiered in 2010. The opera had its world broadcast television premiere in 2013 when the 2012 San Francisco opera production aired as part of the PBS fortieth anniversary season of *Great Performances*. Then in 2015, the Dallas Opera premiered Heggie's opera *Great Scott* with librettist Terrence McNally, the librettist of *Dead Man Walking*. When asked what his greatest accomplishments have been in the past several years, Heggie said:

It has been a really interesting adventure the past eight years through many different journeys and pushing really hard. *Great Scott* premiered in the fall of 2015, and *It's a Wonderful Life* opened the fall of 2016, and I had not written a note of *It's a Wonderful Life* when I was working on *Great Scott*, so I wrote *It's a Wonderful Life* in a matter of months. We revised it pretty extensively. So, when it landed in San Francisco in 2018 it was a totally different piece, and it really exploded. It was great. And then I wrote that piece for Merola [the San Francisco Opera's professional training program] that was for young singers that I didn't even know. That was a new experience. It has been a really interesting journey of challenging myself in different ways and hearing how the music grows and what is consistent for me, which is lyricism, long line writing for the voice, and storytelling through music... making sure that the music is telling the story as much as the words, so that the character can deliver the message orally, not necessarily totally dependent on the words, infusing it with so much emotion and drama that if you don't understand every word, you still know what the character is feeling.²⁹

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Heggie captured the feelings and stories of real women in his recent song cycle with texts by Joyce DiDonato, Patty Lupone, Sister Helen Prejean, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Kathleen Kelly. Heggie recalled:

It was commissioned by the Tucson Desert Song Festival, and it's called *What I Miss the Most*. The texts were all written just about a year ago in April when the shutdown was new, but it felt overwhelming, and I just wanted to hear from them the things that they were missing in that moment. It seemed like a moment to capture. It was actually a sweetly naïve kind of moment because we hadn't yet gone through all the terrible anguish and social protest and unrest of last summer [2020] and all the political upheaval of the fall, so it was people just being home for the first time in a very long time and talking about what they were missing and what they weren't missing.³⁰

Composing music during a global pandemic, Heggie says, is "interesting...with oceans of time around me [during the pandemic] last year, I completely shut down. I couldn't write a note for months. I think there was just so much uncertainty about what was going on in the world.... It just sort of rippled into my creative psyche. Writing music—there's enough uncertainty—but then you add all the uncertainty everywhere in the world. It's just a lot."³¹

COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

When asked to describe his own compositional style, Jake Heggie does not hesitate: "Lyrical drama."³² According to the composer, his music has a very American sound with lyricism and a long vocal line that is in service to the drama. "In that way, it's very much related to the traditional opera world...maybe of *bel canto* because I'm always looking for that long line."³³ Jake Heggie is known by others as an expert at crafting beautiful, singable melodies. It is for this reason that Heggie's compositions consist mostly of vocal works.

When asked why his compositions focus mainly on the human voice, Heggie explains, "The voice still takes my breath away. It is the most expressive, most magical instrument ever."³⁴ And, while Jake Heggie has received most attention for his operatic compositions, it is the American song that permeates his overall compositional output.

I love songs. I'm a songwriter by heart and by nature so that's why I keep going back to it. It's the kind of texts that I'm drawn to that seem to be recurring themes. As I get older and I set more texts, I realize what it is that draws me in. The song and the song cycle is a great form to explore all that stuff, but it's the text that keeps drawing me back more than anything.³⁵

While he sometimes uses his own texts, Heggie most often turns to the poetry of great American writers, such as Emily Dickinson, Maya Angelou, and Terrence McNally. Although he originally had aspirations of becoming a Broadway composer, Heggie discovered that he excels at song composition.³⁶ He admits that he focuses on what he does best.

I found out that what I do well is to bring out the things that I love about musical theater—the pacing, the story telling, the clarity with words, the clarity with characters—and bring that to the opera house, but write well for opera singers, so that we have the best of both worlds, which is what I think all along... that's what Mozart, Verdi, and Puccini...that's what they wanted. They wanted to have that vitality and sense of pacing and thrill that we get from a great night of theater.³⁷

Because Heggie focuses on the story and the characters, a style emerged that is both praised and criticized for being eclectic. But Heggie explains that each piece is

so different because his musical settings come from the nature of the poetry and the emotions experienced by the characters depicted. “The story is the most important thing because if the story is valuable, the right words will emerge...and the right way to tell the story, and from that will come the music.”³⁸ Heggie says, “I think of it [my music] as lyrical.” It is this lyrical quality that makes his compositions work so well for the voice, and its emphasis on melody is what Heggie considers to be the most fundamental part of his songs.³⁹

Despite his own description of his compositional style, critics have reservations about the eclectic nature of his music. Anthony Tommasini, a critic for the *New York Times*, describes Heggie’s songs as neo-Romantic, noting that “his harmonic language, rooted in tonality, is spiked with astringent bits of dissonance and enriched with murky Impressionistic colors.”⁴⁰ Tommasini and others criticize Heggie and other modern American song composers for blending genres: “It’s fashionable today to applaud creative artists who blur categories and blend elements of popular and serious traditions. But there is no inherent value in doing so, and there are a lot of pitfalls.”⁴¹

Heggie, however, embraces the role of popular music in his work. “In these songs, the singer encounters the full gamut of the influences I grew up with: folk music, jazz, pop, opera, rock, art song. I encourage performers to embrace these elements in the songs and not shy away from them. If it feels jazzy, well, it probably is.”⁴² And still, critics are frustrated by the use of popular styles within classical music. Critic for the *American Record Guide*, John Boyer, addresses this issue in a review of Heggie’s songs.

He’s clearly a multi-talented man, but his eclecticism is a problem. . . . Bernstein could write for the Broadway stage and the concert hall with equal facility, but he knew how to keep those talents separate. Heggie doesn’t. We are left with an eclectic hybrid that stubbornly defies classification.⁴³

Tommasini, however, groups Heggie in a category of “composers who have embraced the art song genre anew. Mr. Musto, Mr. Hagen and Mr. Heggie are serious and gifted musicians clearly enthralled with the singing voice and engaged by the practice of setting words to music. Mr. Heggie works especially hard to tailor his songs to

the specific qualities of the artists who sing them. This diligence has won him powerful supporters, many of whom he first met while working in the press office at the San Francisco Opera.”⁴⁴

COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

According to Jennifer Larmore, “Sometimes modern song composers try too hard. Jake doesn’t have to try; he’s a natural.”⁴⁵ This “natural” quality that Jake Heggie possesses seems to lie at the heart of his compositional process. He does not construct a harmonic trajectory before setting the piece. Jake Heggie, although educated in the art of composition and harmonic analysis, chooses not to think about the logistics when composing a piece.

I don’t analyze my music. I was terrible at harmonic dictation, and analysis. I never think that way. I just feel it. And, it’s like, “That sounds right” or “That doesn’t sound right.” I don’t know what the name of the chord is. I really don’t. That’s for someone else who cares about it. That’s not what interests me.⁴⁶

The composer credits his mentor and late wife for his ability to trust his instincts and compose organically. For Heggie (and Harris), composition is more about trusting what sounds right.

All the great composers—they weren’t sitting there analyzing their music. They were writing what sounded and felt right to them. You know? And afterwards somebody analyzed it and said “That was so ground breaking.” But I don’t think they were groundbreaking in the moment and thinking, “I’m going to change the chord to this. That’s never been done.” They were listening to what was going on. They were all products of their time, and then pushing the envelope to something personal that they heard and felt. So, that process comes later, but it’s definitely not for me.⁴⁷

For Heggie, the compositional process begins with the poem. In a 1999 interview, Heggie stressed the importance of understanding the nuance of the text and poetry first. “I think you have to look between the lines and behind the lines and think about the character who’s talking. Who are they? What’s their frame of mind . . . All of these things count.”⁴⁸

This organic feature of Heggie’s compositional style is not an original concept. As a young composer, Heggie sought the advice of British collaborative pianist Roger

Vignoles, who told him (paraphrased by Heggie), “If you’re really going to make music, you’ve got to mess with the poetry. You’ve got to mess with it all. Read a poem that a great composer has set. Read the poem, and then listen to what they did with that and what isn’t found in there when you read it. They’re messing with the poem. Because someone else would have set it completely different, but look what they did. And it feels so right. They weren’t just setting words. They were writing music.”⁴⁹ Heggie says, “So when I started writing music again, I said, ‘That’s what I need to aspire to.’ It’s that you know what’s going on, even if you don’t understand a word of English.”⁵⁰

Once Heggie has lived with a poem for a while, he says, “Suddenly a poem will just start singing to me.”⁵¹ At this point in the compositional process, Jake Heggie develops a theme or motif that permeates the entire piece. He recalls composing *The Deepest Desire*, a song cycle to texts by Sister Helen Prejean. The theme for Heggie “represents a calling—an internal something that is very unstable that is pulling you in some direction, and maybe you aren’t even aware, but when you get to it, you’ll know.”⁵² Once the theme or motif has been established in a song or cycle, Heggie says it will begin to evolve based on the dramatic direction of the piece.

I need to know where I’m going dramatically. I have to have a basic sense of what the shape of the piece is going to be—the architecture: who it’s being written for, what forces... all of that has to be in my head. I guess I just need to dwell on that and the journey... the different threads of the journey that the piece is about.⁵³

Once the overall theme and the journey are planned, according to Heggie, the rest of the piece reveals itself organically. A composer who is “marvelously intrepid in his ability to match words and text,” Jake Heggie continues to write innovative settings of America’s best literature.⁵⁴

POET GALWAY KINNELL

The poetry of Heggie’s song cycle *From The Book of Nightmares* was written by Galway Kinnell, who emerged as a noteworthy American Poet in 1983 when he won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award. The sum of Kinnell’s experiences as a civil rights activist, world traveler, and anti-Vietnam war demonstrator eventually surfaced through his poetic works.

One of the first voices to mark the change in American poetry from the cerebral wit of the 1950s to the more liberated, political work of the ’60s, Kinnell ‘is a poet of the landscape, a poet of soliloquy, a poet of the city’s underside and a poet who speaks for thieves, pushcart vendors and lumberjacks with an unforced simulation of the vernacular,’ noted the *Hudson Review* contributor Vernon Young.⁵⁵

Poet James Dickey once observed that Kinnell’s first book of poetry, *What a Kingdom It Was* (1960) was an authentic beginning by a poet who “recognized the difference between knowing something because you have been told it so” and “knowing it because you have lived it.”⁵⁶

While Kinnell seemed to reinvent himself with the book-length poem *The Book of Nightmares*, which he dedicated to his children, his triumphant success was his 1982 book *Selected Poems*, which received both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award the following year.

The *New York Times Book Review* essayist Morris Dickstein called Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Galway Kinnell “one of the true master poets of his generation,” adding, “there are few others writing today in whose work we feel so strongly the full human presence.”⁵⁷ Kinnell is best known for connecting the experiences of normal, everyday life to much larger poetic, spiritual and cultural forces.⁵⁸

One theme which appears most often is an obsession with death and mortality. Kinnell, however, makes no apology for his obsession with death. His most recent volume of poetry, *Strong Is Your Hold* (2006), was titled after the last lines in Walt Whitman’s “Last Invocation”: “*Strong is your hold, O mortal flesh, / Strong is your hold, O love.*”⁵⁹ Kinnell continuously approached the questions of life and death from a neoromantic perspective and asserted that living with death is the only way to live. In fact, his book length poem *The Book of Nightmares* begins with this dedication to his children:

To
MAUD and FERGUS
But this, though: death,
the whole of death—even before life’s begun,
to hold it all so gently, and be good:
this is beyond description!
-Rilke

Kinnell explains this dedication as follows:

From one point of view, the book is nothing but an effort to face death and live with death. Children have all that effort in their future. They have glimpses of death through fatigue, sleep, cuts and bruises, warnings, etc., and also through their memory of the non-existence they so recently came from. They seem to understand death surprisingly clearly. But now time passes slowly for them. It hardly exists. They live with death almost as animals do. This natural trust in life's rhythms, infantile as it is, provides the model for the trust they may struggle to learn later on. *The Book of Nightmares* is my own effort to find the trust again. I invoke Maud and Fergus not merely to instruct them, but also to get help from them.⁶⁰

The births of the poet's two children are the framework of the poem. Section I, "Under the Maud Moon," sets the overall theme of *The Book of Nightmares*, which is also the theme of Heggie's song cycle, *From The Book of Nightmares*. The last poem in this first section presents Kinnell's desire for his daughter to find her way in the world after his death. We are presented with the raw emotion of a father who fears his own mortality—only fully realized through the birth of his first child. Kinnell recounts, "In *The Book of Nightmares* I seem to face time's passing as if for the first time. It is bound up now with the twin fears that parents of small children feel, the fear of losing the children and the fear of leaving them."⁶¹ Despite its raw look at life and death, *The Book of Nightmares* has the potential to appeal to all of humanity. What lies ahead beyond the human experience is a timeless question, and an even more poignant one, from the perspective of a parent who leaves behind a child.

The next part of this article will discuss how Jake Heggie explored and developed this timeless theme through the eyes of a scared parent in *From The Book of Nightmares*, and serves as a performance guide to the cycle.

FROM THE BOOK OF NIGHTMARES

Conception

The idea to set songs from poet Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares* was born on the floor of a bookstore in California with Lisa Delan, the soprano for whom Jake Heggie's song cycle was written.

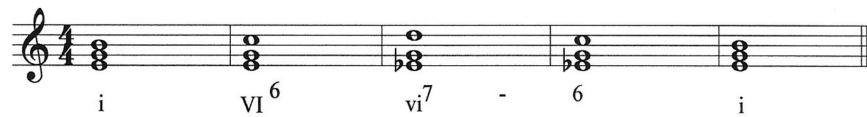
One afternoon I was sitting on the floor of Bay Books in Half Moon Bay, California, with my shoes kicked off, perusing volume after volume of poetry, and I happened to open the Kinnell volume *The Book of Nightmares* to "Little Sleeps-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight."⁶²

American soprano Lisa Delan is the director of Rork Music in San Francisco and Director of the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation. Through her work with composer and patron of the arts Gordon Getty, she has been instrumental in helping Jake Heggie with his musical endeavors. As a performer, Delan has won acclaim as an interpreter of a vast repertoire, but the soprano is best known for her interpretation of American song. Joanne Sydney Lessner of *Opera News* wrote, "Lisa Delan has established herself as a passionate advocate of contemporary art song, commissioning and singing the premieres of new works, as well as extending the life span of repertoire that might otherwise slip into oblivion."⁶³ The soprano premiered the title role in the world premiere of Gordon Getty's *Joan and the Bells* in 1998, which she reprised in France, Germany, Russia, and the United States. Critics praised her "beautifully sung" premiere performance and characterized it as "refreshingly unpretentious."⁶⁴

Delan and Heggie have been close friends for more than twenty-five years. Planning to record a new album of American song, Delan approached Jake Heggie in 2011 about composing a new song cycle for the project. When asked why she chose these particular poems, Delan recalls: "I was immediately struck. Aside from the profundity of the narrative voice and the exquisite beauty of the language Kinnell uses in these poems, I was deeply moved as a mother as I knew Jake would be as a father."⁶⁵ Delan said she first reacted to the pieces with goosebumps and tears; "It was as if the music must have been in the words all along. The experience was so organic. And I was completely overwhelmed that Jake had written such heartbreakingly beautiful music for me to sing."⁶⁶

Premiere and Reception

The song cycle premiered in San Francisco at a benefit with Noe Valley Chamber Music on May 19, 2013—weeks after the recording was released by PentaTone. Jake Heggie himself played piano for the premiere, along with Lisa Delan and cellist Emil Miland. The recording



Example 1

of the cycle appears on Lisa Delan's album, *The Hours Begin to Sing*, which also contains works by William Bolcom, John Corigliano, D. Garner, Getty, and L.P. Woolf. Steven Ritter of *Audiophile Audition* praised both the composer and performance of the cycle.

We have four more songs from the intensely talented and lyrical genius Jake Heggie, this time a little dark and creepy (with the addition of cello), but still affecting and marvelously intrepid in his ability to match words and text. This time the text is by poet Galway Kinnell, and I would not be lying if I said Kinnell's work is actually *improved* by Heggie, and there is not a lot of poetry you can say that about.⁶⁷

Not all critics share this impression of the cycle, however.

A child's nightmare is the subject of Jake Heggie's short cycle. Not every composer would have found Galway Kinnell's poetry suited to musical setting, and you might not have grasped that the cycle is a "tender meditation about our brief, impermanent time on the planet" had the composer not told us so in the booklet. The musical language can be challenging, though there are sweeter sounds in the last song, a kind of lullaby as the child returns to bed.⁶⁸

Opera News praised not only Heggie, but also Delan for her "sense of ownership and true connection. Spooky cello harmonics and wispy piano roulades beckon the listener into Heggie's looking-glass world. Delan approaches the first song, 'The Nightmare,' with tenderness and bright, poignant tone, and in the quirky song 'In a Restaurant,' she imitates a loud child's inappropriate expostulation ("caca") with deadpan authenticity."⁶⁹

Performance Guide

Heggie's opera *Moby-Dick* (2010), like his opera *Dead Man Walking* (2008), was a work so significant in his compositional development that it influenced all of his writing for the next several years. While composing *From the Book of Nightmares*, he was working simultaneously

on his song cycle *Camille Claudel: Into the Fire* (2012), a chamber piece for mezzo-soprano and string quartet. According to the composer, these two pieces were greatly influenced by *Moby-Dick*. The main chord progression from *Moby-Dick*, according to Heggie, influenced the "sound world" of *From the Book of Nightmares* in the same way that *Dead Man Walking* influenced his song cycle *The Deepest Desire*.⁷⁰ Heggie reflected on the chord progression he fashioned for *Moby-Dick* (see Example 1).

When I found this, I mean, this is very Phillip Glass, but it made sense to me. Because while this is pulling up on the top (*he plays the progression, highlighting the top notes of the chords*) the bottom is going down and back up. So, it's constantly undulating, and I really had never worked with that sort of texture before, and that dictated the entire opera basically. It's based on these four chords, and so to find different permutations of that in the harmony and melody was really cool, but it's almost crept into everything that I've written since then.⁷¹

The composer calls the chord progression (an E minor chord with contrapuntal elaboration) "a meditation on a root position E minor triad."⁷¹ Heggie has attributed the discovery of this compositional technique to his work on *Dead Man Walking*.

I learned that you can say a lot with very little. I learned the value of melodic and rhythmic gestures that repeat in different dynamics—*leitmotifs*, you could say, but beyond that, gestures that might be just a drop in the pond, but the ripple effect is strong. I learned that it is important for the characters to each have a musical language that defines them so that they are recognizable immediately.⁷²

When composing *From the Book of Nightmares*, Heggie was searching for a "nightmare theme" that was relentless (see Example 2).⁷³

For Heggie, the theme (seen in measures 3 and 4 of Example 2) represents a nightmare that is two-fold: a child's nightmare that wakes him in the night, and a parent's nightmare. As a parent himself, Heggie relates his own experience: "For us, the nightmare is being separated or disconnected, or losing control, or knowing

Restlessly ♩. = ca. 88
sul pont.

pp *very smooth*

Example 2

that we're not always going to be around."⁷⁴ The piece takes the listener on a journey from the perspective of a parent through the development of this theme, which first appears in the piano part at the outset of the piece (see Example 3).

The overall journey for the nightmare theme, according to Heggie, is represented in the transformation from the first appearance of the theme to the "love melisma" in the last movement (see Example 4). For Heggie, the piece illustrates the beauty of the temporal nature of life. "There is actually great beauty in the fact that it is only temporary because you really have to appreciate every moment."⁷⁵

All of the poems in the cycle are from Chapter VII of Galway Kinnell's book-length poem *The Book of Nightmares*. The poems do not follow a chronological order nor present a narrative. They do, however, seem to have an underlying theme, which is the realization of mortality through the experiences of parenthood. In the first song, "You Scream," a parent soothes her sleeping child after a nightmare and realizes her own mortality. The second song, "In a Restaurant," presents a caricature of a child's disruption in a crowded restaurant. In the third song, "My Father's Eyes," the parent recalls the vision of her own reflection in her father's eyes as he takes his last breath. Finally, in the fourth song, "Back You Go," the parent comes to the realization that "the wages of dying is love."

Each of these movements presents the theme in different permutations, and each instrument presents the theme. The vocal line most often represents the parent's thoughts or words, but it occasionally takes the role of the child. The cello and piano take on varying roles throughout the cycle. Heggie uses them to create a mood or "sound world."⁷⁶ In the second song, for example, the instruments create the sounds one would hear in a crowded, noisy restaurant. Other times the cello and piano represent an inner voice or ever-present idea. For

Restlessly ♩. = ca. 88
(3+3+2)

Piano *pp* *Ad. very freely throughout*

Example 3

example, the cello in the third song seems to take on the role of the ever-present reminder of mortality.

The level of difficulty for these songs for the singer is moderate, due to the murky tonality and tonal juxtaposition between the instruments, combined with its rhythmic difficulty. Ever mindful of the singer and her ability to communicate text and story, Heggie has set all of these songs in a tessitura that lies in a soprano's middle range, making these pieces wonderful tools for the voice studio for developing the middle voice while teaching intelligibility and interpretation of text.⁷⁷ Understanding the poetic themes, tracking the development of the "Nightmare Theme," and identifying the roles of the instruments will enable the performer to deliver a successful, engaging performance of *From the Book of Nightmares*.

Performance Analysis

I. You Scream



Voice Range

The first song of the cycle, "You Scream," is set to the first poem in Chapter VII of *The Book of Nightmares*, "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight";

73

S. *is* *love.*

Vc.

77

S.

Vc.

Example 4

(Heggie changed the title for the song). The poem tells the story of a mother waking up to the screams of her child, who is having a nightmare. Through this experience, the mother realizes that there will come a day when she is not able to soothe her child in his time of need. When preparing this piece, Lisa Delan discovered the importance of this first song and how it presents the underlying emotional theme of the piece.

In many ways this is the hardest of the four songs; you are establishing the relationship between the parent and child but entering through the lens of the child's visceral experience. Whereas the other songs evoke humor or tenderness, there is a great tension and passion contained in this song, and a balance must be struck . . . the tremendous vulnerability of a parent is held here; the dichotomy of omnipotence and impotence, the profound duality of responsibility and surrender.⁷⁸

The movement begins with a child's nightmare, which is characterized by the restless intonation of the "nightmare theme." The piano presents the theme and Heggie establishes the restlessness of the child with a duple meter (8/8) that is uncharacteristically notated in rhythmic groupings of 3+3+2. However, when the cello enters at measure 3 with the theme, the piano plays an undulating pattern of 16th notes which are subdivided into 4 beats per measure, so that there is the grouping of 3+3+2 in the cello against the grouping of 2+2+2+2 in the piano; (see Example 5).

The various effects used throughout the instrumental prelude, including rhythmic accents and *sul ponticello* by the cello, effectively create a child's thrashing and screaming in the panic of a nightmare.⁷⁹ This song gives us the first glimpse of the mother's own sense of mortal-

Restlessly ♩. = ca. 88
(3+3+2)

Example 5

ity. As she consoles her child in his bedroom, lit only by the moonlight, she becomes aware of her mortality and the day when she will not be there to console her child. Heggie establishes this underlying sense of doubt with the mocking echo of the cello after she sings “I think you think I will never die” in measures 62–63.

After a frustrated outburst by the soprano from measures 63–68, in which she sings, “I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke,” the singer finally submits to her overwhelming sense of mortality, illustrated by the *decrescendi* in the following measures. The *portamenti* on the word “stars” in mm. 71–74, according to the composer, represent a “loving caress and sigh.”⁸⁰ Heggie suggests a *portamento* with *vibrato*, toward the end of the measure (see Example 6).

Heggie says, “There is a little bit of a desperation in the last bit of it. ‘Even as my broken arms heal themselves around you,’ . . . all of a sudden you’re holding as tight as you possibly can. . . . To your child you’re trying to be strong, but the minute their head is turned there is a sense of desperation. You’re clinging to them as hard as they are to you.”⁸¹

II. In a Restaurant



Voice Range

This song, “In a Restaurant,” is a caricature of a child’s disruption in a crowded restaurant. As a parent himself, Jake Heggie has experienced attempting to bring a small child out to a restaurant, which any parent knows is quite a feat if successful. At any moment, an elegant dinner could inevitably result in catastrophe.

In this movement, the *pizzicato* of the cello and the syncopation of the piano part oscillate between 6/8 and 5/8, giving the listener a sense of the hustle and bustle of the wait staff, as the theme has now evolved rhythmically and melodically to take on the character of the child. Heggie says of the motive’s evolution in this song, “The second song takes the 8/8 rhythmic pattern of 3+3+2 and stretches it out to 3+3+2+3 (i.e. 6/8 & 5/8 instead of straight 8/8) — and then plays around with it, so that you can hear the teaspoons hitting on the plates (see Example 7).”⁸²

The soprano successfully maintains a sense of elegance and decorum until measure 22 as the cello paints a picture of the clumsy climb of a child into his mother’s lap. But at measure 31, Heggie says, “Suddenly, the child has emerged as being in control of everything because they’re going to take the room for a minute.”⁸³ This sense of a shift in control is colored by a shift in key to E flat major. At measure 44, the soprano becomes the child who suddenly has something very important to say, and she blurts out a *forte* “caca!” Heggie advises the singer

71 *dim.*
S. stars,
Vc. *dim.*

73
S.
Vc. *pizz.*

Example 6

Very polite, not too fast
♩. = ca. 84
II.

Vc. *pizz., gently*
p

p lightly

Example 7

to give both notes accent and sing them straight and for their full duration. The full measure of rest that follows represents the restaurant coming to a halt in response to the child's outburst.

The final text, "in its withering steam," recalls a brief sense of fleeting time, with the image of the escaping steam withering away. Heggie suggests anticipating the consonant "s" on the fourth beat of measure 70 to give

III.

Slowly $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 54$

Vc. *con sord.* *pp* very pale

pp *l.h.* *sim.*

Red.

Vc. 5

Red.

Example 8

the hissing sound of escaping steam.⁸⁴ The instrumental postlude suggests that all return to normal as the cello and piano in their rising parallel sixths close the curtain on the scene with a G major chord in second inversion. “In a Restaurant,” provides a surprising contrast to the first movement and demonstrates Heggie’s sensitivity to the human experience, which would not be human without laughter.

III. My Father’s Eyes



Voice Range

Once again pondering her own mortality, the soprano is alone with her child in his dark bedroom and sees her reflection in his eyes, which brings her back to the moment when she saw her reflection in her father’s eyes as he took his last breath. In the key of A minor, the piano and cello create a beautiful moonlit “sound world” which seems to remain suspended in time with the piano’s steady, gentle repeated V^7 roulades.⁸⁵ The cello is marked *con sordino* (muted) and “very pale” as it repeats the same note (A, notated here in tenor clef)

Vc. *ppp*

Example 9

over and over throughout measures 1 through 12 (see Example 8).

This repetition by both piano and cello creates a sense of inner turmoil, or a question that is longing to be resolved because of the strong tendency of a V^7 chord to resolve to tonic. Heggie cleverly keeps the listener waiting for that resolution.

As the soprano enters at measure 9, she must quietly echo the cello with the same color, as if her thought began with the cello’s intonation of the note. At measure 17 the cello plays the “Nightmare Theme” marked *ppp* as the piano continues with the same V^7 roulades (see Example 9).

21
S. eyes _____ the hand _____ that waved _____
Vc. _____
Ped. _____

25 *poco rit.* *a tempo*
S. _____ once _____ in my fa - ther's _____
Vc. _____
poco rit. *a tempo*
Ped. _____

Example 10

As the soprano takes on the theme in measures 22 and 23, the theme is in G minor (see Example 10). This sudden shift in key indicates the soprano's sudden emotional shift from the present to the past as she recalls the memory of her own reflection in her father's eyes. Heggie says the text "once in my father's eyes" should be one phrase, observing a *poco ritardando* at measure 26 which immediately returns to *a tempo* at measure 27.

The mood changes at measure 31 as the composer colors the kite imagery with a "new feel and spirit" which he calls, "a little playful." The handwritten notes (as seen in Example 11) indicate that the composer sees death not as a sad, dramatic event, but as a kite wobbling playfully before being released in the wind.

As the soprano repeats the text, "let's go," in mm. 60 through 63, the dichotomy ceases as the cello plays half note figures, suggesting that here the soprano comes to terms with letting her father go. The rest in the vocal line at measure 64 seems to represent the quiet, open-eyed passage of life as the soul is released like the string of a kite in the wind. The hum by the soprano in mm. 69–72 resembles the sweet "amen" cadence at the end of traditional church hymns, indicating that the soul has become immortal.

IV. Back You Go



Voice Range

29 rit. *a tempo* 21
new feel & spirit a little playful
 S. eyes, a tiny kite
 Vc.
 Ped. Ped. Ped.

Example 11

5
 Vc.
 10 rit. a tempo
 Vc.
 15 arco
 pp

Example 12

The last song takes us back to the baby’s room, where the mother is rocking him to sleep. The opening cello solo is incredibly difficult for the cello because of the requirement for left-handed *pizzicato* playing. It is marked “slightly playful and a little lazy” because it is painting the image of the child fighting sleep, but eventually succumbing to the rocking. While playing the motive, the cellist must be able to pluck the bass clef notes with the remaining left-hand fingers.

At measure 5, the left-handed pizzicato bass notes give the motive a new, dance-like feel as the mother rocks her child to sleep. At measures 8 through 20, the meter changes back and forth between 8/8, 6/8, and 5/8 and continues to alternate similarly until the end of the prelude, creating the feeling of the child falling in and out of slumber (See Example 12).

The mother then begins a gentle lullaby, accompanied only by the cello, until measure 46 when the piano

49

s.

Vc.

Example 13

enters with a new sound world as her mind shifts focus to the future. Throughout the cycle, the cello has been representative of an inner turmoil, but at measure 53, according to Heggie, there is great harmony between the cello and soprano. Finally, her head and her heart agree that everything is going to be all right.

Heggie stresses the importance of creating a different color at the next vocal entrance. A trio between voice, cello, and piano begins at measure 46. The color change in the voice suggested by Heggie in the score should be one that tells the listener that the mother is now sure that the child is truly asleep. Heggie adds, “This is a prayer, not only for them, but for you.”⁸⁶ While the soprano sings (as directed in the score) “warmly” in a major key, the dissonance by the D-natural in both instruments seems to suggest the subtle return of an awareness of mortality, confirmed by the reappearance of the “nightmare” theme in measure 49, this time from the piano (see Example 13).

At measure 50, the song finally takes on the tonality of the key signature—B major—as the cello and piano begin a beautiful duet. About this section Heggie says, “There’s great harmony suddenly, instead of this fight.”⁸⁷ The line, “When I come back we will go out together,” represents for Heggie the idea that everything is going to be okay. The line, “We will walk out together among the ten thousand things,” represents a parent and child going out together and playing and looking at all the world has to offer.

Lisa Delan offers an interpretation of the last line of the poem, “The wages of dying is love.” She says it is

“the powerful revelation that in the face of mortality and loss we are given the great recompense of love.”⁸⁸ However, after this revelation the “nightmare” theme returns. Heggie explains:

Because just as you feel that everything is settled and your child is going to sleep and you’ve convinced them and yourself that it is all okay, there’s still this haunting question behind you. Is it really okay? . . . There’s a scene in *Dead Man Walking* where the mother has to say goodbye to her son who is going to be taken away and executed, and she’s saying goodbye to him for the last time. And instead of falling apart in front of him, she says, “Look I’m smiling. I’m okay. You know what I’m remembering? I’m remembering when you were little and splashing and laughing around. That’s what I’m gonna remember.” And the minute he goes, she falls to pieces. But it’s a little bit a similar kind of thing of staying positive and upbeat for yourself to give yourself hope, as well as for your child who needs that sense of peace and comfort. But then there’s that question and that sense of reality in that “I don’t know,” which is your own nightmare. I don’t know. So it leaves the question mark at the end.⁸⁹

Heggie transposes the motive, which was so beautifully altered in B major throughout the “prayer” section, back to the original G minor, and the theme appears in the piano exactly as it did in measure 1 of “You Scream” (see Example 14). This return of the original motive so brilliantly expresses the nightmare created by the parent’s awareness of her own mortality. Heggie creates even further instability at the end with his final chord, which is a G minor chord with G in the bass, but altered with the added C by the cello.

For Heggie, the poetry in this last piece represents the end of an emotional journey. “I think it’s an interesting journey to go from ‘you scream waking from a nightmare’ to ‘the wages of dying is love.’ That’s a big journey, and it’s kind of amazing to get there. And we even get to laugh once in the middle of the journey, and that’s important. It’s so important to laugh.”⁹⁰

Acknowledgment

The author wishes to thank Jake Heggie for generously giving his permission to publish all quotations that appear in this article, which were taken from personal interviews with the author. A complete transcript of the author’s interviews with Jake Heggie can be found in

88

Vc.

senza vib.

mf

ppp

Ped.

*

Example 14

the author's dissertation: Kristen Bauer Marchiafava, "A Performance Guide To Jake Heggie's *From "The Book of Nightmares"*" (2014). *LSU Doctoral Dissertations*, 2356. https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/2356

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88. Delan, email correspondence with the author, February 19, 2014.

89. Heggie, interview with the author, November 18, 2013.
90. Ibid.

Kristen Marchiafava is Assistant Professor of Voice and Director of Graduate Studies at Southeastern Louisiana University where she teaches applied voice and diction for singers. Dr. Marchiafava holds a DMA in Vocal Performance from Louisiana State University, an MM in Vocal Performance from the Mannes College of Music, and a BA in Music from Loyola University New Orleans. She has studied voice with Ruth Falcon, Philip Frohnmayer, Ellen Frohnmayer, and Patricia O'Neill. Performing highlights include the title role in Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* with Nevada Opera, Mimi in *La Bohème* in the *Festival nel Montefeltro* in Novafeltria and Cesena Italy, Nella in *Gianni Schicchi* and Mrs. Gobineau in *The Medium* with Opera Mississippi, and Marcellina in *Le Nozze di Figaro* with Mobile Opera. Dr. Marchiafava has appeared in concert internationally and throughout the Gulf Coast Region. Her former students have sung at the Metropolitan Opera, Spoleto Festival, Bayerische Staatsoper, Teatro Regio Torino, Komische Oper Berlin, Houston Grand Opera, and New Orleans Opera, among others. Dr. Marchiafava is on the voice faculty at La Musica Lirica International Opera Festival in Novafeltria, Italy and currently serves as the President of the Louisiana Chapter of the National Association of Teachers of Singing.



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