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Pity the Nation

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Butler University

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THESIS TITLE

PITY THE NATION

Song for alto, tenor, & chamber ensemble

COMPOSER:

Kameron Zebadiah Mechling

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Music in Composition in the School of Music
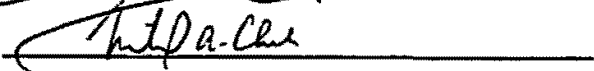Jordan College of Fine Arts, Butler University, Indianapolis, IN, USA
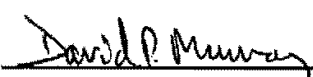
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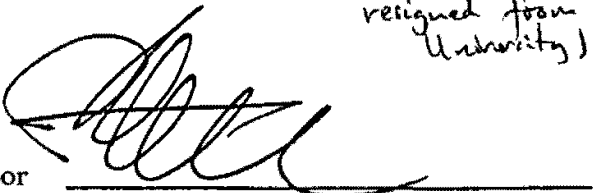
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PITY THE NATION
Song for alto, tenor, & chamber ensemble

The Origin of the Work

The political poem Pity the Nation by Lawrence Ferlinghetti was introduced to me after watching an interview by composers Samuel Andreyev and Van Dyke Parks.[1] In the video, Parks prefaces it by praising the relevance of the seasoned, Beat poet, and by sharing how "This [poem] has to do with our hood [U.S.A.] — the very nationhood of who we are," before reciting the poem:

"PITY THE NATION"
(After Khalil Gibran)

Pity the nation whose people are sheep
And whose shepherds mislead them
Pity the nation whose leaders are liars
Whose sages are silenced
And whose bigots haunt the airwaves
Pity the nation that raises not its voice
Except to praise conquerers
And acclaim the bully as hero
And aims to rule the world
By force and by torture
Pity the nation that knows
No other language but its own
And no other culture but its own
Pity the nation whose breath is money
And sleeps the sleep of the too well fed
Pity the nation oh pity the people
who allow their rights to erode
and their freedoms to be washed away
My country, tears of thee
Sweet land of liberty! [2]

Upon first listening to this poem, I was immediately drawn in and moved by its arresting truths. When I had first heard it back in 2018, I did not feel confident in my writing

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[1] "A discussion with Van Dyke Parks: The Vernacular & Beyond" YouTube video, 1:40:26, "Samuel Andreyev," May 18, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0X55NIrlOA&t=3381s.

[2] "Pity the Nation" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, from BLASTS CRIES LAUGHTER (09), copyright ©1988, 1998, 2002, 2014 by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

and text setting abilities. However, my sense of musical direction and composition capacities have grown in the years since. I was eagerly encouraged by my professor Dr. Michael Schelle, who not only knew of Ferlinghetti, but who had also met him. With all of this in mind, I began to realize the necessity of utilizing composition as a coping tool by which to process the unprecedented events happening in America at that time.

The events and atrocities in 2020 and early 2021 accumulated into the shared trauma amongst the U.S. which included, but were not limited to: a) instances of police brutality and racism brought to light by the murder of George Floyd, and the protests and civil unrest that followed, b) uncertainty provoked by a lame-duck president who flirted with the idea of a civil war, disregarded his opposing U.S. citizens as his constituents, and incited a U.S. Capitol attack, c) a general quasi-Weimar Germany situation where political extremists on either ends of the spectrum are pulling the middle-ground, thus limiting means of banding together, and d) the change from analog media sharing to digital platforms. Due to the advent of social media within the last two decades, this created more accessibility for those on political extremes to participate in a propagandic free-for-all populating our minds. All of this happened within the span of months, and while in the midst of a global pandemic, that would have otherwise drawn us closer together, kept us distanced from each other physically and nationally.

I also want to preface by saying that I am not a political savant, and I cannot provide personal experience when it comes to the extreme ramifications of the events listed above because of my specific social privilege. I do not share this work in order to educate on social matters, or to wag my finger at anyone, rather, I feel compelled to communicate my reception of those months through music, and place the poem of the late, great Ferlinghetti on a pedestal.

Layout Construction and Textures

Building a layout for the piece that best fits the narrative of the poem was a foundational process. With the text playing the most prominent role in dictating the form of the piece, I organized the musical events strictly in relation to the text. Since each verse of the poem moves forward with no repeating lines, I allowed the form to be through-composed.
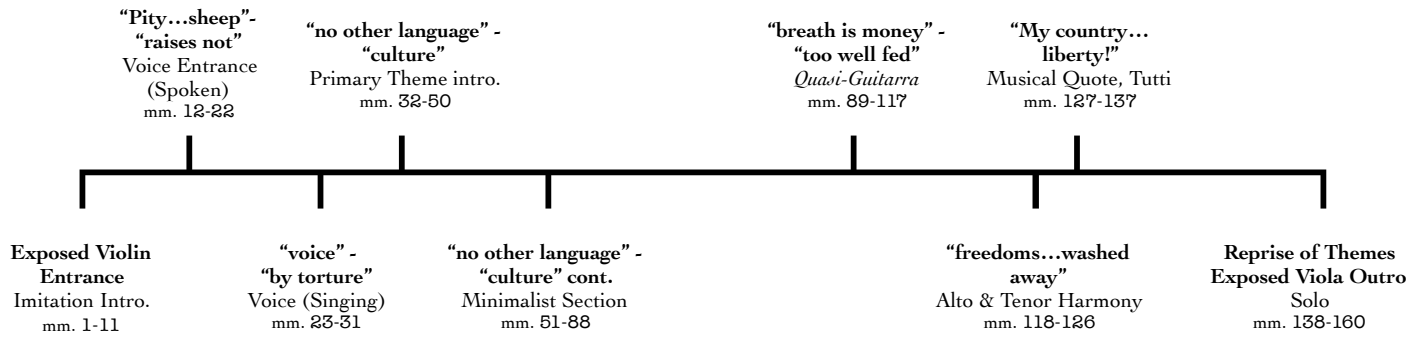
Figure 1. *Pity the Nation* Timeline

Every musical event in the piece is tailored to each concept in the poem. Even though the sections are distinct within themselves, the music traverses fluidly between textures. In this way, the form of the piece is completely linear, barring the brief return and variations of themes. The main example of this is the return of the opening string part at the end.

The textures throughout derive the layout of the narrative as well. The beginning opens with dry, frigid strings imitating each other. I decided to start this way in order to create a somber and despairing atmosphere. That texture evolves as the argument between the vocalists escalates into busy eruptions (mm. 23 & 32). This leads to m. 51, where a good portion of the piece is designated to a warm, repeating lilt between the French horn and bass clarinet. This grows and fades into the pulsating *quasi-guitarra* section within the strings (m. 89), and the clarinet and flute meet with piercing, disjunct, staccato rhythms. The cello appears below — breaking the silence — with a sustained double-stop, the other strings cascade in with a beautiful anxious polychord, ushering in the voices as they sing the recognizable tune. The voices disappear after a final call-and-response as the strings unnervingly undulate and reprise the beginning section again. The final texture heard is a thin, singular viola note supported with a faint floor tom roll. The eerie and jarring textures in this piece are only made possible by the wonderful qualities of the chamber ensemble.

Orchestration Choices

In order to create a soundscape equal to this exemplarily poem, I carefully cast the ensemble in *Pity the Nation*. Although the song is less than 8 minutes, I believe the muscle behind the instrumentation is necessary to support such a weighty text.

Flute		
B-flat Clarinet	Horn in F	
Bass Clarinet		

	Piano	
Violin I	Percussion 1	
Violin II	- vibraphone, low-mid glass, metal platter, floor tom	
Violin III	Percussion 2	
Viola	- copper tubes or steel pipes (high, mid, low), high tom, mid tom, low metal, kick drum	
Cello		

It may seem strange for a composer living in the 21st-century to orchestrate for such a typical ensemble, however, I wanted to maintain all traditional facilities while also practicing the effective techniques I have learned from my influences. For example, three violins matched with viola and cello allows for powerful unisons, triadic events, and homophonic textures within the string section alone.

One of the two noteworthy oddities to my instrument choice is the lack of low-end. I decided to omit bass instruments such as double-bass, bassoon, bass trombone, etc. in order to enhance the uneasiness otherwise balanced by the presence of low frequencies. Another noticeable exception to the standard ensemble's instrumentation is in the percussion. After listening to the sonically-thrilling, percussion trio piece *An Index of Possibilities* by Robert Honstein, I studied the score to see how he utilized inexpensive and easy to find percussive materials. The way in which Honstein constructed a world of fluid textures in his piece baffled me, and I wanted to exercise my creativity by attempting something similar, but on a much smaller scale. In this same vein, I wanted to compose using techniques and percussion that I would have to imagine in my head. With all of this considered, I believe this ensemble gave me a wealth of potential that opened up the door for a lot of unique and experimental decision making.

Major Musical Ideas, Inspiration, and Musical Borrowings

I used a number of musical works as models for my thesis. My intentions in borrowing and reusing musical material in this piece are to not supercede my influencers, rather to create something new in respect to them.

The quote that is the most perceptible is "America (My Country 'Tis of Thee)." At the end of his poem, Ferlinghetti extracts the familiar text from its patriotic context and replaces one word, modifying the entire meaning: "My country, <u>tears</u> of thee…" This sarcastic trope summarizes and concludes the piece with audacious finality. It seemed obvious to underscore these familiar words with their well-known melody, altering the narrative as Ferlinghetti did. The purpose of this is to help propagate the voices of those who suffer as a result of the corruption within the nation's government. Rather than merely misconstruing historical ideology — strongly embedded, long-held conceptions — we are pulling back the veneer to reveal a reality of suppression. Throughout the piece, musical effects play an important role to lay bare these ideas and emotions.

The first moments of the piece are very closely borrowed from movement II: "Polar Night" from Robert Honstein's *Arctic* (See Figure 2A, 2B).

Figure 2A. Honstein's *Arctic* mm. 11-15

Figure 2B. Mechling's *Pity the Nation* mm. 1-6

I wanted to start my piece in a similar way to Honstein's, with the purpose of presenting the idea of dualism through the imitation between the first and second violins. Rather than starting on an interval of a minor 3rd (not pictured), my piece starts with a perfect 4th, imitating the "Taps" bugle call. This overlapping of the quasi-"Taps" theme evokes a frigid

eeriness. The cold atmosphere is also exploited by instructing the violins to play with "n.v." (no vibrato); only straight-tones. The lack of vibrato helps to welcome intended intonation errors, as well as the *desafinado* (agreeably out-of-tune) that occurs from the pairing of two instruments of infinite, approximate pitch. All of these techniques, including the nuance of dynamic bow placement, are learned by studying Honstein's music, and for that I am beholden to him.[3]

The second event in the piece that draws influence from another composer takes place within mm. 22-24. This first build-up and large tutti event is inspired from a similar moment in Arthur Honegger's *Une Cantate de Noël.* In the context of his piece, Honegger sets Psalm 130: "Out of the depths, I have cried unto Thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!" and in his large fortissimo event (4 measures before Rehearsal Number 11), the orchestra wails as the choir cries "Oh, Come" (Emmanuel)! Honegger's captivating handling of the vertical responsibilities in this moment of the music personified a deep desire to be rescued from despair. That is what I wanted to interpose in my piece through an identical orchestration. In my thesis, the text is "Pity the nation that raises not its voice, except to praise the conquers…" This instance of exclamation portrays desperate frustration, which is a slight twist of what I believe Honegger was after.[4]

One theme that predominates throughout the piece is a distortion of a J.S. Bach's Musette in D. Once, when listening to someone sight-read this piece, the pianist happened to fumble a few melody notes, therefore changing the character of the passage from a pleasant tune to a moment of panic.

Figure 3A. Bach's Musette in D mm. 13-16
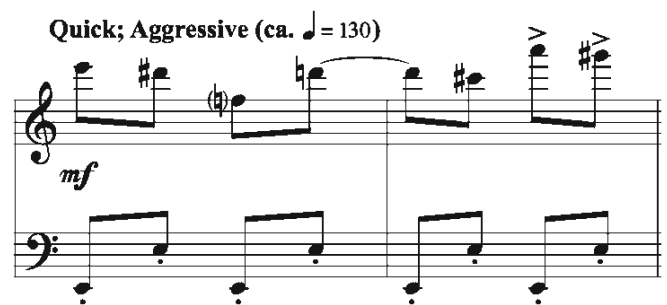
Figure 3B. Mechling's *Pity the Nation* mm. 32-22

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[3] Robert Honstein. "Polar Night" *Arctic* New York, NY: Robert Honstein, 2013.

[4] Honegger, Arthur. Une Cantate De Noël. Saint-Denis, France: Salabert, 1953.

As shown by Figures 3A-3B, both passages are nearly identical, except for one note. Changing an E to an F-natural and throwing the melody into a more hectic context transforms the playful musette into impressions of urgent despair. This theme is placed throughout the piece, in mm. 27-28 with the clarinet, mm. 32-50 spread out through the ensemble, mm. 34-36 in the tenor, mm. 122-124 between the flute, clarinet, alto, and tenor, and lastly, mm. 147-148 in the piano.

The last musical idea borrowed is Stravinsky's famous *Rite of Spring* polychord. In the score, the strings are given the pitches verbatim (mm. 28-30), however they are strummed rather than bowed. I set the chord beneath the tenor while singing lines 9 and 10, "…And aims to rule the world, By force and by torture…" As the polychord is associated with concepts such as exoticism and barbarism, it fits with the meaning behind the text.

The Process of Text-Setting

The task of setting music to a Beat poem was a unique challenge. The process of piecing together the musical materials for the text gave me insight to better understand Ferlinghetti's poem-writing style and Beat poetry in general. Unlike traditional poetry, Beat poetry is often devoid of reliable conventions, such as meter (iambic pentameter, for example) and rhyme scheme. This, as well as non-traditional subject matter, can make setting music to this type of poetry especially difficult for the inexperienced or unwilling composer.

One of the first unique choices I had to make was to decide in what type of soundscape I should place the poem. It could be argued that since Ferlinghetti is often grouped with the Beat poets of his day, the music surrounding his work should be modern, avant-garde, and entirely untraditional. Some could also argue that a contrast between setting traditional music to non-traditional poetry (and vice versa) could be an effective compositional choice as well. (Of course, there is no right or wrong choice of the matter. But, I did remember to keep in mind Ferlinghetti's words: "that art should be accessible to all people, not just a handful of highly educated intellectuals."[5]) I had decided to allow my setting to be free of strict adherence to particular traditions, such as, key, theme, or form, but authorize my ear to make

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5 "Lawrence Ferlinghetti". *Poetry Foundation*. Retrieved November 4, 2016.

final choices based on my aesthetic preferences. Once I gave myself that creative freedom, I was able to make other unique judgements determined from my interpretation of the text.

At the start of the monastic process, I printed out the text, posted it on my wall, and stared at it bewildered, thinking how to ameliorate the crisis in front of me. Due to the political conflict I kept seeing all around me, I decided to create a left and right dichotomy through my analysis of the text. By dissecting each line, I could piece together a flowing narrative, and make sense of the seemingly disjunct crux.

Text

Pity the nation whose people are sheep
And whose shepherds mislead them
Pity the nation whose leaders are liars
Whose sages are silenced
And whose bigots haunt the airwaves
Pity the nation that raises not its voice
Except to praise conquerors
And acclaim the bully as hero
And aims to rule the world
By force and by torture
Pity the nation that knows
No other language but its own
And no other culture but its own
Pity the nation whose breath is money
And sleeps the sleep of the too well fed
Pity the nation oh pity the people
Who allow their rights to erode
And their freedoms to be washed away
My country, tears of thee Sweet land of liberty!

Color Key

Democrat

Republican

Shared thoughts amongst both parties

Figure 4. Political Dualism in Text

I color-coded the text in respect to how I assigned each line to either or both political sides. This table was particularly helpful when deciding how to distribute the vocal responsibilities amongst each singer, and which lines of music to repeat and expand on.

I placed the alto in the role in the perspective of the Democrat and the tenor in the role in the perspective of the Republican. The element of assigning conflicting parts creates dynamic character roles that can be personified dramatically through music.

Figure 5A. Mechling's *Pity the Nation* mm. 28-30

Figure 5B. Mechling's *Pity the Nation* mm. 118-124

Figure 5C. Mechling's *Pity the Nation* mm.129-135

9.

In Figure 5A. the alto and tenor are arguing back and forth in a shouting contest. The tenor exclaims his line and the alto offers even louder rebuttals. Figure 5B. shows both the alto and tenor singing together in polyphony. In this moment of the piece, they are sharing an idea, not in spite, but in company of each other — sharing hardship. The last vocal events in the piece consist of the two distanced, yet sharing the sarcastic line, "My country tears of thee, Sweet land of liberty!" The relationship between the two perspectives is a salient feature of the piece. Starting with the violins imitating each other, foreshadowing the back-and-forth between the voices, and ending again with the violins. The timely narrative I extracted from Ferlinghetti's poem will not always be circumstantially befitting as compared to the timeless poem. However, my purpose in setting this poem was to rethink, debrief, and share what I witnessed in my limited, but important perspective.

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PITY THE NATION

Song for alto, tenor, & chamber ensemble

music by
Kameron Zebadiah Mechling

poem by
Lawrence Ferlinghetti

2021

Kameron Zebadiah Mechling

PITY THE NATION

Duration ca. 7 minutes

Instrumentation

Alto
Tenor

Flute
Clarinet in B♭

Bass Clarinet

F. Horn

Piano
Percussion 1
(vibraphone, glass, metal platter, floor tom)
Percussion 2
(copper tubes or steel pipes, high and mid toms, low metal, kick drum)

Violin I-III
Viola
Cello

Notation Instruction

Strings

ord.	ordinary bow position	n.v.	indicates no vibrato
s.p.	sul ponticello, bow near the bridge	p.v.	indicates very little vibrato
m.s.p.	molto sul ponticello, bow extremely close to the bridge		indicates a glissando, all glissandi should be played gradually with as little interruption as possible
m.s.t.	molto sul tasto, bow over the fingerboard		glissandi that extend through the bar have beats indicated with stems. They should not be accented in anyway. The stems help indicate the duration of the glissandi.
quasi guitarra	indicates to be played strummed like a guitar, without bow. Violins and viola may hold their instruments in a "guitar" position in order to strum more easily. Strum direction is to be ad-libbed unless otherwise specified.		Glissandi always begin immediately after the first striking pitch. Pitches written between two glissandi are merely guides for the rate of change and should not be held or emphasized.

percussion key

percussion 1

Vibraphone	
Glass	Drinking glasses of any pitch so long as there is a clear Mid and Low.
Metal Platter	Harsh, intense and smash. An empty metal file cabinet is good too.
Floor Tom	

percussion 2

3 Copper Tubes or Steel Pipes	Bright; clear and resonant. Galvanized Steel.
High Tom	Any pitch so long as it is clearly High.
Mid Tom	Any pitch so long as it is clearly Mid.
Low Metal	Any pitch so long as it is clearly Low (e.g. a large, suspended saw blade)
Kick Drum	

Pedal 1
(metal platter)   Floor Tom   Mid Glass   Shot Glass

Kick Drum   Low Metal   Mid Tom   High Tom   Low Steel Pipe   Mid Steel Pipe   High Steel Pipe

Short swoosh air sound

Long swoosh air sound, for the duration of the pitch

All other Notation is standard.

Note

In efforts to process the unprecedented events of social unrest that took place in 2020, I became familiar with this powerful poem: "Pity the Nation" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Upon receiving permission from the publishers, I got to work setting these timeless words. In the midst of completing this composition, Ferlinghetti sadly passed away (February 22, 2021). Upon hearing of his passing, and with a heavy heart, I quickly completed the work under a Ferlinghetti umbrella of deep respect and appreciation. This piece is dedicated to the memory of Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Text

"PITY THE NATION"
(After Khalil Gibran)

Pity the nation whose people are sheep
And whose shepherds mislead them
Pity the nation whose leaders are liars
Whose sages are silenced
And whose bigots haunt the airwaves
Pity the nation that raises not its voice
Except to praise conquerers
And acclaim the bully as hero
And aims to rule the world
By force and by torture
Pity the nation that knows
No other language but its own
And no other culture but its own
Pity the nation whose breath is money
And sleeps the sleep of the too well fed
Pity the nation oh pity the people
who allow their rights to erode
and their freedoms to be washed away
My country, tears of thee
Sweet land of liberty!

TRANSPOSED SCORE

PITY THE NATION

Song for alto, tenor, & chamber ensemble

music by *Kameron Zebadiah Mechling* (2021)

poem by   Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Cold; Exposed (ca. ♩ = 60)

Flute

Clarinet in B♭

Bass Clarinet

Horn in F

Alto

Tenor

Percussion 1

Percussion 2

Piano

Violin I

Violin II

Violin III

Viola

Cello

7

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

B. Cl.

Hn.

A.

(Spoken, approx. rhythm)
Quiet, but not timid
Pi - ty the na - tion   Pi - ty

T.

(Spoken, approx. rhythm)
Interupting the alto
Pi - ty the na - tion

Perc. 1

Perc. 2

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vln. III

Vla.

Vc.

Lyrics (Alto): the na - tion ... And whose shep - herds mis - lead them.

Lyrics (Tenor): Pi - ty the na - tion whose peo - ple are sheep

Lyrics (Alto): Pi - ty the nation whose lead - ers are li - ars Whose sa - ges are si - lenced And whose bi - gots haunt the air - ways.

Lyrics (Tenor): are li - ars bi - gots haunt the air - ways.

Lyrics visible in the vocal parts:

Alto (m. 22): Pi- ty the na- tion that rai- ses not its voice

Tenor (m. 22): its voice

Tenor (m. 25): ex- cept to praise the con- quer- ers

Alto (m. 25): And who a- claims the bul- ly as her- o

Tenor (m. 25): And who a- claims the bul- ly as her- o

5

39 **A bit slower (ca. ♩ = 100)**   *accel.*   **As before (ca. ♩. = 80)**

46

Lyrics (A. and T. voices, m. 114 onward):

Pi - ty the na - tion, oh, Pi - ty the pe - ople who al - low rights e - rode.

Pi - ty the na - tion, oh, Pi - ty the pe - ople who al - low their rights to e - rode e -