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WE CARRY THEM FORWARD:  
A PERFORMER'S GUIDE TO HEGGIE AND SCHEER'S *ICONIC LEGACIES: FIRST  
LADIES AT THE SMITHSONIAN*

by

Rachel Catharine Alexander Gibson

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
and the School of Music  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer's 2015 song cycle *Iconic Legacies: First Ladies at the Smithsonian* offers an interesting challenge for a singer. First Ladies of the United States – real people – make up the characters of the cycle, requiring the singer to know their histories and their personalities rather than making arbitrary acting decisions. Heggie and Scheer insist that the singer honor each woman by telling her story with emotional authenticity.

This document provides the singer guidance, offering historical context for each story and biographical information for each woman. Each of Mr. Scheer's texts are examined, exploring his treatment of time, the concept that the women are ghosts, and his expressive use of rhyme and repetition. Mr. Heggie's music is analyzed, following his use of half steps, scales, chromatic passages, manipulation of motives, quotes from "My Country, 'tis of Thee," and spoken words. Heggie uses these techniques to emphasize emotional aspects of the stories, so the singer must know the woman's stories and realize that his music is meant to be emotionally representative. With knowledge of each woman's stories and personalities, and an understanding of Heggie's emotional music, the singer fulfills her duty to perform these songs with emotional authenticity.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Special thanks also to Jake Heggie, Gene Scheer, and Susan Graham for the graciousness, engagement, and enthusiasm with which they discussed *Iconic Legacies*.

## DEDICATION

This project would not have happened without the support of my family. Alice Alexander never gave up. Morris Alexander is the best editor this side of the Mississippi. Anna Grace Alexander always provided a smile. Ariel Jackson offered a friendly, constructive ear. My friends Dr. Peter Lake, Dr. Ann Henning, Emily Thorner, and Rev. Susan Sowers bolstered me up through the difficult times. Ultimate thanks goes to my husband, Jacob Gibson. His quiet, calm encouragement, his unfailing support, and his taking over of the household duties of dinner-making and dish-washing absolutely made this possible. My sincerest thanks to you, too, dear reader. Thank you for your interest.

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## CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Jake Heggie has established himself as one of the most prominent composers of contemporary American opera.<sup>1</sup> Jake Heggie’s personal life and artistic growth have been documented thoroughly, but a quick overview would not be amiss. Born in 1961, at age 10 he suffered the loss of his father, and found refuge in playing the piano and composing.<sup>2</sup> As a teen, he studied as a pianist, and at 21 he married his piano teacher Johana Harris, despite being significantly younger than her. He credits her as being one of his most significant influences.<sup>3</sup> During their marriage, he developed focal dystonia that disabled his right hand and forced him to quit playing piano. Heggie also grew into accepting himself as homosexual, but remained married until his wife’s death in 1995.<sup>4</sup>

He had moved to San Francisco in 1993 and worked for San Francisco Opera’s public relations department. He spent significant time with singers such as Frederica von Stade, and eventually showed her some of his music. She was enchanted, and began to support him.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the artistic director of San Francisco Opera commissioned him to write an opera, which became *Dead Man Walking*.<sup>6</sup> To date, Heggie has written eight

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1. June Thomas, “The Most Popular Opera Composer of Our Time on Why His Work Resonates,” *Slate*, August 4, 2021, <https://slate.com/culture/2021/08/jake-heggie-on-dead-man-walking.html>.

2. Matthew Sigman, “Composing a Life,” *Opera News*, July 2015, [http://www.operanews.org/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2015/7/July\\_2015.html](http://www.operanews.org/Opera_News_Magazine/2015/7/July_2015.html).

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. Rebecca Choate Beasley, “The Influence of Sister Helen Prejean on the Life and Work of Jake Heggie as seen in the Song Cycle *The Deepest Desire: Four Meditations on Love*” (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2008), 12, [https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc9795/m2/1/high\\_res\\_d/dissertation.pdf](https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc9795/m2/1/high_res_d/dissertation.pdf).

6. Mary Daily, “The Natural,” *UCLA Magazine Online*, April 1, 2016, <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/the-natural-of-opera>.

full-length operas, quite a few one-act operas, chamber music, and over 300 songs. His music is extremely popular, having been performed at opera houses and recitals across five continents.<sup>7</sup> His style was perhaps summarized best by Joshua Kosman in his review of the premier of *Dead Man Walking*:

The strength of this composer's music lies not in breaking new ground but rather in deploying well-known resources with new skill. All the chords in 'Dead Man' are essentially familiar, as are the melodic contours and the formal outlines of aria, ensemble and recitative; what's thrilling is the communicative splendor that Heggie brings to them.<sup>8</sup>

Heggie occupies a special place in American classical music. American art song, according to Carol Kimball, "defies description, since its development has been sporadic at best."<sup>9</sup> It has grown from the folk tunes of Stephen Foster, to the European influences apparent in the musics of Charles Griffes, Virgil Thompson, and Aaron Copland, to the emergence of unique voices focusing on poetry with Ned Rorem. In the more recent past, American composers such as Ricky Ian Gordon, Jake Heggie, and Ben Moore have honed a style that blends classical and Broadway, spotlighting vocal expression, delivery of emotion, clarity of text, and harmony that serves the story. They pull inspiration from musical theater, jazz, blues, and classical European influences.<sup>10</sup> These composers have

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7. "Biography," Jake Heggie Composer and Pianist, accessed February 15, 2022. [www.jakeheggie.com/biography](http://www.jakeheggie.com/biography).

8. Anne Midgette, "Jake Heggie, composer of 'Moby-Dick,' chases his Ahab: The 'Moby-Dick' composer, adored by the public but not always by the critics, matures," *Washington Post Online*, Feb. 16, 2014, <http://lynx.lib.usm.edu/blogs-podcasts-websites/jake-heggie-composer-moby-dick-chases-his-ahab/docview/1498352659/se-2?accountid=13946>.

9. Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2006), 245.

10. *Ibid.*, 245-246.

often been accused of being too “accessible,” too simplistic, too derivative. Matthew Sigman, editor of *Opera America* magazine, says, “‘Accessible’ is a word often used with regard to Heggie’s scores, implying that ... audiences are so musically disabled they need a ramp to appreciation.”<sup>11</sup> What others call derivative, Heggie calls direct. When asked about his style, Heggie responded:

“Do I have a particular style?” I don't think so? You know, I come from a world where my big influences are musical theater, American song, Bernstein, Sondheim, Britten, Poulenc, Debussy. I mean, there's this... A style of directness and storytelling and not stretching things out. It's really about telling the story.<sup>12</sup>

Heggie certainly does not shy away from his main influence of musical theater. It fuels his approach of writing characters instead of just music. In spite of his musical theater ties, he prefers classically trained voices for their range of expression. His work would be inherently changed by a singer from outside the classical music world.<sup>13</sup> Heggie combines the technical prowess of classical musicians with the emotional immediacy of story-driven text to create music that is both approachable and powerful.

As evidence of his quality and magnetism, prominent singers flock to him. He has worked especially closely with Frederica von Stade and Joyce DiDonato. But many other stars – Renee Fleming, Kiri Te Kanawa, Paul Groves, Ben Heppner, and Bryn Terfel, not to mention Broadway’s Patti LuPone and Audra McDonald – have all sought him out.<sup>14</sup>

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11. Sigman, “Composing a life.”

12. Heggie, interview by author, Zoom, March 22, 2021.

13. David F. Wylie, "Jake Heggie, a Singer's Composer," *CS Music*, January 1, 2010, <https://www.csmusic.net/content/articles/jake-heggie/>.

14. “Biography,” <https://jakeheggie.com/biography/>.

Also, critically, Heggie focuses on stories that entice audiences. His songs have stories with deep universal themes that are easily relatable. Ned Rorem famously lamented in 1996 that “Art song is dead.”<sup>15</sup> Sarah Broomell, whose research showed that most art song recitals take place in academic environments, echoed his concerns in 2014.<sup>16</sup> She also noted that art song recitals that occur outside academic environments are ill-attended, attributing this to a lack of audience engagement. Organizations that excel at drawing the audience in through crafted programming, such as the New York Festival of Song, Vancouver International Song Institute, and SongFest, aim to keep art song relevant. They engage composers, such as Heggie, who also feel that song has something relevant to offer an audience member, forging connections between the character, the singer, and the listener.

He draws in both singers and audience crowds, and though opera is where most of the money is for classical music, Heggie still has a passion for song. In Heggie’s own words:

The song recital has become almost obsolete. But, I also think that the definition of what makes an art song is changing. It has to. . . . Recitals need to be about a very intimate and engaging musical experience between a singer and the audience . . . something exciting needs to happen: joy in singing, joy in music making, emotional journeys.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Ned Rorem, “The American Art Song: Dead or Alive,” *Opera News* 61, no. 2 (1996): 14-30.

16. Sarah Broomell, “Transformation and Connection through Art Song and Jake Heggie’s *The Starry Night*,” eScholarship, University of California, 2014, 5.

17. Meredith Ziegler, “Jake Heggie’s Paper Wings: Feeding the Genre of American Art Song,” *Journal of singing* 64, no. 3 (January 2008): 287-293.



Four of Heggie's songs make up his 2015 song cycle *Iconic Legacies: First Ladies at the Smithsonian* for mezzo-soprano and piano. In each song, a different First Lady of the United States tells a story from her life involving an artifact from the Smithsonian Institution. Gene Scheer's texts tell vivid, compact personal stories that also have universal relevance. Heggie's music enhances the stories with beauty and pointed use of dissonance as an emotional intensifier.

On September 12, 2015, Mr. Heggie and mezzo-soprano Susan Graham premiered *Iconic Legacies* at the Kennedy Center. While it was well-received at that concert, it did not gain much attention until Heggie and mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton recorded the cycle in 2020. Part of the purpose of recording the songs was to set standards for "tempo, line, and intent."<sup>18</sup> Heggie had previously received recordings that troubled him - especially regarding how slowly the songs were being taken - and wanted to provide a gentle guide for how they should generally go. These songs now appear more frequently on recitals, and the number of student recordings online keeps growing, prompting this document. As of 2021, there are only four songs in the cycle. Heggie and Scheer both have expressed interest in creating songs for other First Ladies.<sup>19</sup> Scheer has penned a text for Michelle Obama,<sup>20</sup> but they have not completed any additional songs. Since *Iconic Legacies* is a relatively new work, there is not currently any gathered literature on it that may be useful to performers.

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18. Heggie, interview.

19. Ibid.

20. Gene Scheer, interview by author, Zoom, March 23, 2021.

The purpose of this document is to provide singers with the dramatic, historical, and musical knowledge necessary for preparing *Iconic Legacies*. Since Heggie wrote his music in reaction to Scheer's texts, and Scheer's texts are based on historical stories, each woman's history and psychology will be examined before any musical discussion, so the singer will understand why Heggie wrote as he did.

Chapter 2 outlines Heggie and Scheer's requirement that the singer portray each woman with emotional authenticity. Gleaned from knowledge of each woman's history and personality, authenticity requires the singer to use empathy and specificity of acting decisions.

Chapter 3 provides the singer with the history of how Eleanor Roosevelt arranged Marian Anderson's performance at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, followed by a general biography of Eleanor that pays particular attention to events that shaped her, and a study of Scheer's poetry. Heggie's vision of these women as ghosts is also explained, giving insight into the text.

Chapter 4 details Mary Todd Lincoln's lifetime of tragedies, which forms the basis of her song's story. Chapter 4 also contains an explication of Scheer's text, detailing his unusual, nonlinear treatment of time.

Chapter 5 focuses on Jacqueline and John F. Kennedy signing a Christmas Card and picking out clothes the night before his assassination. Special attention is given to the historical record of Jacqueline's reaction to the murder, and to Scheer's use of repetition and the structure of his text.

Chapter 6 reviews Barbara Bush's appearance on *Sesame Street* to further her campaign for literacy, offers an overview of Barbara's life, and ponders Scheer's use of rhyme and his belief in the cycle's message of endurance.

Chapter 7 begins the musical discussion. Heggie's music emotionally supports the characters. Heggie manipulated half steps differently in each song, in order to highlight different emotions. Cross-relations depict conflict in "Eleanor Roosevelt." Two chords a half step apart form the motive in "Mary Todd Lincoln." Thirds that fall in half steps provide a feeling of duty in "Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis." In "Barbara Bush," he reinterprets the motive from "Mary Todd Lincoln" to show determination instead of despair.

Chapter 8 follows Heggie's use of scales for text painting and chromatic passages for underscoring the women's emotional states.

Chapter 9 highlights Heggie's use of "My Country, 'tis of Thee" and the Golden Ratio in "Eleanor Roosevelt," and spoken text in "Barbara Bush." Transcripts of the author's interviews with Jake Heggie, Gene Scheer, and Susan Graham may be found in the Appendices.

## CHAPTER II – EMOTIONAL AUTHENTICITY

Heggie and Scheer strongly believe that character is the driver of a story, not the plot. Scheer describes their artistic style:

Everything we do is theatrically-based because that's who we are as artists and as people. We're people of the theater. So our song cycles tend to be very character-driven. ... Jake and I... are very much about *who* is singing the song. It's not a question of writing a love song. It's writing a song about a *specific person* in a *specific situation* in their life.<sup>21</sup>

Since the characters are of the utmost importance, and the characters in these songs are women who actually existed, it falls to the singer to portray them in a way that both honors the historical woman, and also holds personal truth for the singer. Heggie and Scheer are asking their singers for emotional authenticity. They also crave for the singer and pianist to make these songs their own, even to the point of changing the score.<sup>22</sup>

A performance is emotionally authentic when the performer uses history as a basis for their character, and then uses their own personal truths to augment any holes in the historical record.<sup>23</sup> These songs ask the singer to step into the stories of real women who each had definite personalities and experiences. Knowledge of their histories provides the first step in adequately performing these songs, and to that end, brief biographies of the four First Ladies can be found in subsequent chapters.

Actors of any kind may find the prospect of portraying a historical person daunting. Brooke Allen, an arts critic for *The Hudson Review*, asks this in her 2018 review of the WWII film *Darkest Hour*, which featured Gary Oldman as Winston

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21. Scheer, interview.

22. Heggie, interview.

23. Ibid.

Churchill: “One of the greatest challenges for an actor, then: to play a renowned public figure without *impersonating* him. How far do you take the imitation? When do you let your own acting choices override sounds or gestures your subject more probably would have made?” Each of these women were renowned public figures, and as such the singer may not simply invent their character. But she also does not have to go overtly far in her portrayal of them. Heggie sums up emotional authenticity by saying:

It's really about feeling like you're inhabiting that character, but not imitating them: being them. There's a big difference. So, it's not presentational. It's honest, which means you don't have to transform yourself and put on a hat and things like that.<sup>24</sup>

So, when singing as Barbara Bush, the singer does not need to wear pearls and find a Muppet to put on the piano. When singing as Jacqueline Kennedy, the singer does not need to adopt a breathy tone to imitate her speaking voice. Eleanor Roosevelt does not need a transatlantic accent. Mary Todd Lincoln does not need a Civil War-era gown. These superficial, physical distractions do not tell the story. In order to give an authentic performance the singer must embrace honesty, since the emotional story is more important than the plot.

Together with being emotionally authentic, the text is also of paramount importance. Since the words provide the most direct connection between the singer and the listeners, Heggie emphasizes the importance of enunciation:

Being honest and authentic about it is the most important thing. And making sure the words are as clear as possible. If that means pulling back a little bit or pushing a little bit, then that's what you do. I think that voices have different vibratos and speeds of vibrato, and I think that affects the tempo you take.<sup>25</sup>

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24. Heggie, interview.

25. Ibid.

Scheer and Heggie see the interpreters of their work as co-creators. In spite of expecting the singer to be faithful to each woman's history, they do not expect the performers to all perform their songs the same way. They invite the diversity of interpretation ushered in by the performer's individuality. When asked about possible interpretations of these songs, Scheer opened wide the doors of possibility:

The songs are obviously the collective merging of our [Scheer's and Heggie's] imaginations. And then, of course, the imagination of the singer, too, who is interpreting it. ... This is the beautiful thing: that we hand it to you folks who interpret the songs, and this is what we love: when a great interpreter brings his or her imagination to it and reveals dramatic overtones of meaning that maybe we didn't even know were there.<sup>26</sup>

Scheer essentially gives the performer permission to make their own choices, decisions, and conclusions about the work, without fear of it being "incorrect" or "not what the creators intended." They want the songs to be true to the spirits of both the character and the actor. Heggie went a step further in giving control to the performer: he wants the performer to feel free to make musical changes, bar changing the tempo:

A couple of people had sent me recordings, and they had done them so slowly. ... Really, REALLY slow. I'm glad we got the recording out there, so there's a standard for tempo and line and intent. And now everyone can do what they want, but there is something you can refer to. To see how they go, but then say, "here's how I feel them," which I yearn for. I don't want people just do them all the same.<sup>27</sup>

In 2020, Heggie recorded *Iconic Legacies* with mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton, and they made many departures from the score. Heggie encourages performers to make their own changes:

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26. Scheer, interview.

27. Heggie, interview.

Jamie interpolated a lot of notes, and I've changed notes that were in the score, and you are allowed to use any of those changes that you want. I like for a score to feel alive, so if something feels right in the moment, you should try it. The way we interpret late old scores, you know, there's something great about looking at old figured bass and realizing they wanted that improvisatory quality to it. They wanted it to be alive for whoever was performing it in that moment. And since these are such personal songs, you know, it's your interpretation of Eleanor Roosevelt, of Mary Todd Lincoln, etc.<sup>28</sup>

Heggie and Scheer give their willing permission for the singer to make their own decisions, but how does one start? Especially if the character is speaking about something of which the singer has no firsthand knowledge, making an acting decision can be difficult. Heggie says that he faces this very dilemma when writing music:

I'm drawn to big human themes. Big, transformative events that we can all connect with in some way. Things that feel very much of our time and yet are timeless. Things that feel—because I was born and raised in this country—very American and yet are universal. I can't write a piece about the death penalty. I can't write a piece about domestic violence. But I can write a piece about people who are experiencing that. That's the line for me: big transformative events, intimate stories with large forces at work that are beyond our control. I find those very, very inspiring.<sup>29</sup>

He can empathize with the people experiencing events, and that to him is the gateway to being able to write about them. The singer, similarly, can empathize with these historical women. The singer uses empathy as the ultimate tool. They will never know *exactly* what it was like to be Mary Todd Lincoln, but they can read about her and empathize with a woman in the 1800s, bereft of her husband and scared for her financial situation.

Heggie also suggests that to inhabit the character for each song, the singer must ask herself “the Big Why:” Why must you do this? Why must you be on stage? What

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28. Heggie, interview.

29. June Thomas, “The Most Popular Opera Composer of Our Time on Why His Work Resonates,” *Slate*, August 4, 2021, <https://slate.com/culture/2021/08/jake-heggie-on-dead-man-walking.html>.

happened right before you came on stage? He also challenges the singer to envision every detail of the story:

Recital and song is very different. It's just you standing there. So it's finding "what is the truth of that moment" and then... Graham Johnson I heard once in a masterclass talk about this. He said all the great singers that he has worked with, they have a movie going in their head where they clearly see where they are, what is going on, who those people are, why they are saying this, what is propelling them to say this, why they must tell the story, this event, this moment, this emotion, this transformation. But it's all very, very clear. So I think you have to be very aware of how it feels to sing that song honestly and what is going on around you. Visualize it. You know, where are you when Eleanor Roosevelt is talking about this coat? Are you next to the coat? Are you, as Eleanor, standing there talking? Or have they just seen the movie of Marian Anderson singing? What is the situation? Why?<sup>30</sup>

Singers bring the women to life by using both empathy and imagination to make specific character decisions.

The genesis of emotional authenticity is when the singer makes an emotional, artistic decision based on the historic truth of the character. Where the history lacks detail, then the singer may use her imagination to fill in the gaps. She must ask herself why she is singing, choose which moments to make her own, and decide if she wants to change the score. By using emotional authenticity, the singer brings these women and their stories forward to the present, achieving one of Heggie's principle goals as a composer: to remember. He says, "Sharing memories and sharing stories that happened, I think, is very, very important. And it is central to my work: remembering. Helping people remember what happened before. ... That's why you need to *be* that person in the moment, you know? And honor their spirit and their legacy. Walk their shoes."<sup>31</sup>

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30. Heggie, interview.

31. Ibid.



### CHAPTER III – “ELEANOR ROOSEVELT: MARIAN ANDERSON’S MINK COAT”

In order for a singer to achieve emotional authenticity, first she must research the woman’s history. This chapter provides an historical overview of Eleanor Roosevelt, Marian Anderson, racism in the 1930s, and the Easter Day concert of 1939, as well as an analysis of the song’s text. The cycle begins with Eleanor Roosevelt’s memories of Marian Anderson, a Black American operatic contralto, wearing a mink coat for her 1939 Easter Day concert, showing poise and nobility in defiance of America’s racism. In the song, Eleanor speaks of her own hopes for a racially equal country. The song also alludes to President Obama singing “Amazing Grace” at a funeral in 2015. The singer must know the history of the concert, Eleanor’s involvement with it, and the 2015 funeral. Not only will it help the singer, but it would behoove them to provide context to their audience, as well. After an exploration of the history of the song’s story, an overview of Eleanor’s life provides a sense of her personality, values, and character. This helps the singer to make educated acting decisions. Finally, an explication of the text helps to clarify textual questions the singer may have.

#### Song’s Story: Marian Anderson’s 1939 Concert

In 1935, President Roosevelt invited Marian Anderson, fresh from the European opera circuit, to perform at the White House. In 1936, ‘37, and ‘38, Anderson sang benefit concerts for D.C.’s Howard University School of Music. Each year, more and more people clamored to hear her, and for the 1939 concert, she requested use of the largest venue in Washington: Constitution Hall.<sup>32</sup>

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32. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Marian Anderson,” FDR Library and Museum, accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/anderson>.

The Daughters of the American Revolution owned Constitution Hall. The D.A.R., founded in 1890, aimed to promote patriotism, preserve history, and secure America's future through children's education.<sup>33</sup> Members must be descended from a patriot of the American Revolution, which effectively limited membership to wealthy white women. Constitution Hall had an unwritten rule banning all performers of African descent due to the undesirability of Blacks and Whites sitting together. When Marian Anderson, an African American, requested to book her 1939 concert at Constitution Hall, she was deceitfully informed of the unavailability of dates.<sup>34</sup>

When Eleanor Roosevelt heard of it, she experienced a conflict of conscience. Eleanor had been granted membership to the D.A.R. when she became First Lady – despite the D.A.R.'s significant reservations about Eleanor's progressive ideas. Eleanor incited public uproar over the D.A.R.'s refusal of the concert and chose to dissolve her association with the group.<sup>35</sup> She famously resigned her membership, saying:

I am afraid that I have never been a very useful member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, so I know it will make very little difference to you whether I resign, or whether I continue to be a member of your organization. However, I am in complete disagreement with the attitude taken in refusing Constitution Hall to a great artist. You have set an example which seems to me unfortunate, and I feel obliged to send in to you my resignation. You had an opportunity to lead in an enlightened way and it seems to me that your organization has failed. I realize that many people will not agree with me, but feeling as I do this seems to me the only proper procedure to follow.<sup>36</sup>

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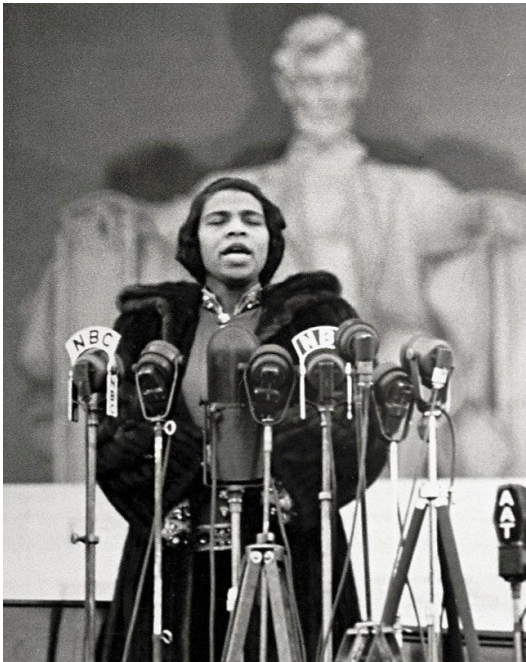
33. "Who We Are," Daughters of the American Revolution, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.dar.org/national-society/about-dar/who-we-are/who-we-are>.

34. "Eleanor Roosevelt and Marian Anderson," FDR Library and Museum, accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/anderson>.

35. Ibid.

36. "American Originals: Eleanor," National Archives and Records Administration, last modified March 1996, [https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american\\_originals/eleanor.html](https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/eleanor.html).

When this negative press did not convince the D.A.R. to change its mind, Mrs. Roosevelt went behind the scenes. She enlisted the help of Harold Ickes. As Secretary of the Interior, he could approve events at sites under his purview, including monuments. Mrs. Roosevelt arranged for Ms. Anderson to perform at a venue with deep symbolic meaning: the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. On Easter Day, wearing a mink coat (see fig. 1), before 75,000 spectators, Marian Anderson opened her recital with “My Country, ‘tis of Thee.”<sup>37</sup> The recital, considered one of the first acts of the Civil Rights Movement,<sup>38</sup> was broadcast live via radio to the entire country.



*Figure 1. Song’s artifact: Marian Anderson singing in her mink coat.*

*Photograph by Thomas D. McAvoy, The LIFE Picture Collection, Getty Images*<sup>39</sup>

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37. FDR Library, “Eleanor and Marian.”

38. Raymond Arsenault, *The Sound of Freedom: Marian Anderson, The Lincoln Memorial, and the Concert that Awakened America* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), p. 2.

39. Ben Cosgrove, “The Concert that Sparked the Civil Rights Movement,” *Time*, April 8, 2013, <https://time.com/3764037/the-concert-that-sparked-the-civil-rights-movement/>.

Seventy-six years later, on June 17, 2015, a white supremacist attended bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Emanuel AME, one of the country's oldest African American places of worship, serves as a center for Civil Rights activism. After the bible study, the white supremacist opened fire on his classmates. Nine people were killed, including State Senator and Emanuel AME senior pastor Clementa Pickney. Senator Pickney's funeral became a national event when President Obama decided to deliver the eulogy. After speaking eloquently and pointedly about grace, the president closed his eyes and began singing "Amazing Grace." The community gathered there joined him in a symbol of resilience and unity in the face of hatred.<sup>40</sup> This shooting ignited discussion nationwide about removing the Confederate flag and Confederate memorials from federal land.<sup>41</sup> Three-quarters of a century after Marian Anderson sang, America has not yet achieved one of Eleanor Roosevelt's dreams: racial reconciliation.

### Eleanor's Life

Inevitably, there will be moments in the song's text that do not have a direct acting choice indicated by history. In these moments, the singer must use what they know of the lady's life and character in general to make informed acting decisions. Here follows a brief biography of Eleanor Roosevelt with emphasis on what issues were important to her, defining life events, and indications of her personality.

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40. "Charleston church shooting," History, last updated June 15, 2021, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/charleston-ame-church-shooting>.

41. Dillon Thomas, "Public Debates If Confederate Monuments Should Remain," KFSM, June 24, 2015, <https://www.5newsonline.com/article/news/local/outreach/back-to-school/public-debates-if-confederate-monuments-should-remain/527-27c2e28c-52dc-4cea-93e5-d185e4957b2c>.

Eleanor had not envisioned a life in the political spotlight. By nature quiet and awkwardly shy, Eleanor nonetheless filled the mold of a dutiful 1920s housewife and mother.<sup>42</sup> Eleanor learned to be a hospitable politician's wife, while simultaneously becoming interested in her husband's political pursuits, seeing them as a way to enhance her personal missions of charity. Her early education taught her to value social responsibility and women's independence. As a woman, she used these sensibilities to advocate for an end to unsafe factory working situations, volunteer for the American Red Cross during World War I, and foster poor children's education, among many other endeavors.<sup>43</sup>

The need for charity work increased significantly with the effects of the stock market crash on Black Friday, 1929. President Hoover, erroneously convinced that the market would correct itself, contented himself with a hands-off approach to the Great Depression. When it became apparent that the market would not correct itself, and his last-ditch efforts to restore the economy failed, the country elected Franklin Roosevelt, a democrat, to the presidency. The new First Lady Eleanor, now a seasoned activist, encouraged her husband as he made sweeping social and economic changes. The first 100 days of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency saw the birth of the New Deal, a massive expenditure by the federal government to ease unemployment, reduce homelessness, and rescue the economy. In 1935, he introduced a Second New Deal, which created the Social

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42. Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1961), p. 54.

43. "Eleanor Roosevelt," History, last modified April 3, 2020, <http://history.com/topics/first-ladies/eleanor-roosevelt>.

Security Act, unemployment insurance, and public housing. The president wanted to include civil rights legislation in the Second New Deal but conceded it due to opposition; racial division in America was the status quo.<sup>44</sup>

When Marian Anderson challenged that status quo, Eleanor supported her and arranged the concert at the Lincoln Memorial. Throughout the rest of FDR's presidency, and indeed throughout the rest of her life, Eleanor became a champion of human rights. She traveled America, ensuring that her husband's New Deal policies were achieving the relief they promised, and reporting her observations to the president.<sup>45</sup> She remained friends with Marian Anderson until the end (see fig. 2).



*Figure 2. Eleanor and Marian in Japan, 1953*

*Photo courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park.<sup>46</sup>*

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44. "The 1930s Government, Politics, and Law: Overview," U\*X\*L American Decades, Encyclopedia.com, accessed August 16, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/culture-magazines/1930s-government-politics-and-law-overview>.

45. "Eleanor Roosevelt Biography," FDR Library and Museum, last updated 2016, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/er-biography>.

46. "Eleanor Roosevelt and Marian Anderson in Japan," National Archives Catalogue, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/195989>.

When her husband died in 1945, she did not abandon public life. She was appointed to the United Nations General Assembly and encouraged that body to adopt her Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That document recognizes all humans, regardless of anything, as worthy of dignity, equality, and personal rights.<sup>47</sup> She continued her work with the U.N., serving under President Kennedy as a member of the National Advisory Committee of the Peace Corps and chair of the President's Commission on the Status of Women. Eleanor, once a shy, awkward girl, grew to be an advocate and instrument of betterment for those who had no voice. She dedicated her life to human rights.<sup>48</sup> As seen in her DAR resignation letter, she respects even people she disagreed with, never letting her passion undermine her own quiet dignity. Using this greater understanding of Eleanor's life and personality, the singer can inform her performance with greater authenticity.

#### Song Text

*Listen!  
Listen!  
Marian Anderson is singing of thee.  
Beyond compromise,  
Beyond recrimination,  
Beyond the anger of a divided nation  
Marian Anderson is singing.  
  
Wearing this elegant mink,  
she stood on the steps beneath Lincoln's  
stony stare,  
intoned our nation's hymn  
and let freedom ring and ring and ring.*

*Oh what a sound!  
Of thee I sing.  
  
There are some paths no map will ever  
trace.  
But, from Lincoln's steps  
to Charleston's "Amazing Grace"  
With every step on the way,  
I think about what she showed us that  
day:  
No one can make you feel inferior  
without your consent. No one.*

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47. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, accessed September 1, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

48. Ibid.

*Who are we?  
Beyond compromise,  
Beyond recrimination,*

*Beyond the anger of a divided nation  
Marian Anderson is singing  
of thee.*

The song's text provides the first opportunity for the singer to apply what she knows of the First Lady's history and personality. There are a few places in this text, specifically, that could be confusing. For example, it seems to speak of both the past and the present day, which is strange for a first-person story by a woman who is now dead. The following analysis of the poetry aims to clarify Heggie and Scheer's intentions for this song, as well as provide the singer with a starting point for her own analysis.

At the beginning of the poem, Eleanor speaks about the past – specifically about Marian Anderson's 1939 Easter Day Concert. She says that Marian Anderson sings to an America "beyond compromise, beyond recrimination." Scheer intentionally chose these specific words. "Compromise" implies that no one gets what they want. Compromise leaves both parties lacking. In addition, using it in the context of race, "compromise" recalls the Three-Fifths Compromise. Under this 1787 law, the Founders of America counted enslaved people as only  $\frac{3}{5}$  of a person for purposes of the census, restricting Congressional representation. "Recrimination," a loaded word, means "an accusation in response to one from someone else."<sup>49</sup> Recrimination is one of politics' oldest campaign tactics: mudslinging to discredit one's opponent, ultimately ending with both people covered in filth and the argument without solutions. Both compromise and recrimination do not provide solutions to problems. In 1939, Ms. Anderson sang of a Future America without concessions, where arguments constructively attack ideas instead of people.

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49. "Recrimination," Lexico, accessed August 12, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/recrimination>.



*Stanza 2:*

*Wearing this elegant mink,  
she stood on the steps beneath Lincoln's  
stony stare,  
intoned our nation's hymn  
and let freedom ring and ring and ring.  
Oh what a sound!  
Of thee I sing.*

In the last line of stanza 2, Eleanor shifts from speaking about what Marian Anderson was saying to 1939 America, to speaking about her own thoughts on current-day America. She says, “*Of thee I sing.*” Of thee (modern Americans) I (Eleanor) sing. In Ms. Anderson’s concert, when she came to that line of “My Country ‘tis of Thee,” Marian changed the words to “of thee *we* sing.” She was firmly convinced that “we cannot live alone,”<sup>50</sup> and Eleanor agreed.

*Stanza 3:*

*There are some paths no map will ever trace.  
But, from Lincoln's steps  
to Charleston's "Amazing Grace"  
With every step on the way,  
I think about what she showed us that day:  
No one can make you feel inferior  
without your consent. No one.*

Eleanor then speaks of the Civil Rights journey “*from Lincoln’s steps to Charleston’s Amazing Grace,*” referencing President Obama singing, as if she has been there “*every step on the way*” to Charleston. This, of course, seems preposterous. How can a woman who died in 1962 speak of events from 2015? Perhaps a narrator’s voice

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50. “Denied a Stage, She Sang for a Nation,” reported by Susan Stamberg, *Morning Edition*, on NPR, April 9, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/04/09/298760473/denied-a-stage-she-sang-for-a-nation>.

speaks in addition to Eleanor's, but if so, who is the narrator? The singer? Heggie offers illumination:

Oh no, it's totally Eleanor Roosevelt! Because part of the thing is: their spirit is still alive. You know, that's why she's saying "Listen! Listen, Marian Anderson is singing!" And, you know, it's still like if you listen you can still hear it. In other words, these ghosts are still vibrating. They're still present. What they accomplished is still here; they still walk among us. We carry them forward. So, you have to imagine that you went to the Smithsonian and you're looking at Marian Anderson's coat, and all of a sudden Eleanor Roosevelt walks around the corner and starts talking to you, telling you this story, in the present day, because she is still there. . Everything is very much still alive, as long as we keep it alive. That's why you need to *be* that person in the moment, you know? And honor their spirit and their legacy. Walk their shoes.<sup>51</sup>

If Eleanor's shade still vibrates, as Heggie says, she would certainly still walk the road to racial reconciliation. President Obama sang in June of 2015, and *Iconic Legacies* premiered three months later. At the time of the premiere, the singing of "Amazing Grace" marked the most recent step on the Civil Rights journey.

Then Eleanor Roosevelt's alleged quote appears: "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." While attributed to Mrs. Roosevelt, she did not actually say this. It does, however, align with her spirit of dignity and resilience. Scheer couches this quote as Eleanor's admiration of Ms. Anderson's poise in the face of racism. The text says, "*With every step on the way, I think about what she showed us that day: no one can make you feel inferior without your consent.*" This features as the only direct quote in the songs.

*Stanza 4:*

*Who are we?  
Beyond compromise,  
Beyond recrimination,*

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51. Heggie, interview.

*Beyond the anger of a divided nation  
Marian Anderson is singing  
of thee.*

Eleanor continues by asking, “*Who are we?*” and echoing the poem’s beginning. Mr. Scheer ends by saying, “Marian Anderson is singing of thee.” Eleanor says that she is singing of *us*: we current-day Americans will realize Marian Anderson’s – and Eleanor’s – dream of a better America.

The singer’s embodiment of Eleanor’s shade is dependent on her knowledge of the woman’s history and personality. Beginning as a timid, unsure young woman, Eleanor grew into a bastion of advocacy for the voiceless, and according to Heggie, Eleanor walks among us still, as long as we carry her forward.

## CHAPTER IV – “MARY TODD LINCOLN: ABRAHAM LINCOLN’S HAT”

If Eleanor glowed full of hope about the future, Mary swirls in darkness, stuck in a hopeless past. In this song, Mary relives the many traumas of her life, drifting in and out of time. While the story of this song ultimately centers on the death of her son, William, she also speaks of her other experiences of bereavement, ostracization, and institutionalization. Examining these traumas and exploring her madness informs the singer about choices she must make in this song. The text often does not specify which trauma Mary is reliving. For each section of the text, the singer must choose a specific trauma and understand how Mary felt about it.

### Song’s Story: Mary’s Lifelong Traumas

Mary Todd, born to an aristocratic family from Kentucky, was a vivacious, headstrong girl.<sup>52</sup> She often had trouble keeping her thoughts to herself, whether polite or not, and while this sometimes made her the life of the party, it also sometimes offended her companions.<sup>53</sup> Mary lived very comfortably, wanting for nothing. She married Abraham in 1842 against her family’s wishes after a tumultuous courtship and broken engagement. Abraham’s calm nature seemed to balance Mary’s willfulness. Once married, she threw herself into domestic life, adored her husband, and bore four sons. Only one of those sons outlived Mary.<sup>54</sup>

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52. “First Lady Biography: Mary Lincoln,” National First Ladies’ Library, last modified 2018, <http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=17>.

53. W. A. Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln: A Study of her Personality and her Influence on Lincoln* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p. 107.

54. “First Lady Biography: Mary Lincoln,” National First Ladies’ Library.

When Abraham became President in 1860, the country teetered on the edge of dissolution. Americans elected Lincoln hoping that he could hold the country together, and when Civil War broke out in 1861, he did his best to find peace. Mary staunchly supported all his policies. She endeavored to be an excellent support to him and fulfill the role of social hostess for the White House. Despite this, the press and populace turned firmly against her. When she undertook a significant renovation of the President's mansion, the press skewered her, viewing such extravagant spending in a time of war as unpatriotic.<sup>55</sup>

When her third son, William, died in 1862 at age 12, Mary's grief knew no bounds. This tragedy reached beyond the Lincoln family; it caused politicians to lay aside their party lines. Former President Pierce, who opposed practically all of Lincoln's policies, also had lost a child shortly before assuming office. Upon hearing of William's death, he wrote a heartfelt letter of condolence to Lincoln.<sup>56</sup> Mary had already lost her second-born, Edward, in 1850, and the further catastrophe of losing William was overwhelming. The president hired a nurse to tend to the despondent Mary, and all entertainment at the White House ceased.<sup>57</sup> The press attacked again, saying that Mary was neglecting her duty as First Lady. The Unionists distrusted her, convinced she was a Southern spy because her brothers fought for the Confederacy. The Southerners denied her, claiming she had betrayed her blood.<sup>58</sup>

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55. "First Lady Biography: Mary Lincoln," National First Ladies' Library.

56. Neely and McMurtry, *Insanity*, 2.

57. Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987), 232.

58. "First Lady Biography: Mary Lincoln," National First Ladies' Library.

After Lincoln's assassination in 1865, she moved to Chicago with her remaining sons and began exhibiting strange behavior, mostly paranoia about money. She petitioned Congress about receiving a pension, which they reluctantly awarded her, but even this did not make her feel secure. She had \$35,000 in government bonds sewn into her clothes, so she would always know the location of her money, resulting in a fear of being robbed.<sup>59</sup>

When her youngest son Thomas died in 1870, she slipped into a deep depression, and her erratic behavior increased. She began seeking supernatural assistance. According to her biographer, "In the seances she attended, she responded to something that was lacking in orthodox religion. Unlike the ministers, the spiritualists never encouraged her to submit and behave like a resigned, Job-like victim; instead, they offered a form of power by which she could defy her punishers and undo the terrible things in her life." In 1872 she visited a "spiritualist photographer," who supplied her with a hoax photograph of herself with the ghost of Abraham standing behind her (see fig. 3). She treasured it.<sup>60</sup>



*Figure 3. William H. Mumler's hoax photograph of Mary Todd with Lincoln's "ghost."* Photograph courtesy of the Indiana State Museum and Allen County, Public Library.<sup>61</sup>

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59. Baker, *Mary: A Biography*, 335.

60. *Ibid*, 331.

61. William H. Mumler, 1872, Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, courtesy of the Indiana State Museum and Allen County, Public Library, accessed at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/photographer-who-claimed-to-capture-abraham-lincoln-ghost>.

By 1875, her last remaining son Robert, concerned about his mother's mental state and fed up with her behavior, arranged to have her committed to a psychiatric institution. She remained only three months, and through devious planning, devised to have herself declared sane. She moved to Springfield to live with her sister, then traveled to Europe and lived in France, keeping close correspondence with her daughter-in-law Mary but refusing to speak any more than necessary to her son. She sent increasingly lavish gifts to Mary, who did not know what to do with the excessive baby clothes, home furnishings, bolts of fine fabric, plate silver, and various other oddities.<sup>62</sup> In 1880 Mary Todd Lincoln moved back to Springfield, and in 1882 passed away from a stroke.<sup>63</sup>

While historians and doctors from the 1860s onward have tried to diagnose Mary's madness, there has been no consensus. They have suggested Lyme disease, vitamin deficiency, menstrual disorder, hypochondria, narcissism, anemia, bipolar disorder, and diabetes, among others.<sup>64</sup> Whatever the cause of her madness, she suffered trauma, depression, financial paranoia, an unwillingness to settle down, and a habit of blaming her misfortunes on jealous family members and ungrateful politicians.<sup>65</sup>

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62. Mark E. Neely and R. Gerald McMurtry, *The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993.) EBSCOhost, 150.

63. "First Lady Biography: Mary Lincoln," National First Ladies' Library.

64. Kat Echner, "People Have Spent Years Trying to Diagnose Mary Todd Lincoln From Beyond the Grave," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 13, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/people-have-spent-years-trying-diagnose-mary-todd-lincoln-beyond-grave-180961405/>.

65. Neely and McMurtry, *Insanity*.

## Song Text

*Your measured gestures mock me.  
Words of kindness feel like crimes.  
In a world where this can happen  
Only madness rhymes.*

*I am drowning, but will not die.  
Rip the stars from out the sky.  
The ship is lost and you pretend  
We'll find our way, the pain will end.*

*Your measured gestures mock me.  
Words of kindness feel like crimes.  
In a world where this can happen  
Only madness rhymes.*

*He wore this hat the day he died.  
A grieving nation cried.  
But long before - for me -  
He wore it as an elegy.*

*Around his hat he tied a mourning band.  
Spoke through tears, but - somehow -  
Did not understand.  
"Oh, husband! Oh, my Abraham!" I said  
"Our son, our world, our William is  
dead."*

*I am drowning, but will not die.  
Rip the stars from out the sky.  
The ship is lost and you pretend  
We'll find our way, the pain will end.*

*Your measured gestures mock me.  
Words of kindness feel like crimes.  
In a world where this can happen  
Only madness rhymes.*

*Your measured gestures mock me.  
Words of kindness feel like crimes.  
In a world where this can happen  
Only madness rhymes.*

Mr. Scheer plays with time in the text of this song. The singer must decide *when* something is said. For example, to what does Mary refer when she says, "*In a world where this can happen,/only madness rhymes?*" Deciding on an event determines Mary's location in time and informs the singer's acting choices. As a reminder, Mary's traumas were national (the Civil War, being attacked by the Press) and personal (death of two sons, murder of her husband, financial insecurity, and never feeling settled). She could be distraught at her son's death or furious at her institutionalization. While Heggie subtly hints at interpretation in his markings of tempo and dynamics, the singer must concretely know what she is singing about. If the singer does not realize that time shifts in this song, interpretation may be difficult.



The question of “when *in time* the First Lady is speaking” also creates confusion. Since Heggie sees these women as ghosts, they exist with the audience in the actual moment of the performance of the cycle. They are not necessarily singing from within their lifetime. Each lady manifests this differently. Eleanor tells the story aware of her audience, and advocates for racial reconciliation. In contrast, while Mary Todd Lincoln stands before the audience, she tells the story from the past, trapped in the madness of her traumas. Placing these women in the audience’s present achieves Heggie’s goal of remembering what has come before.

Stanzas 1, 3, 7, and 8  
*Your measured gestures mock me.  
Words of kindness feel like crimes.  
In a world where this can happen  
Only madness rhymes.*

Stanzas 2 and 6  
*I am drowning, but will not die.  
Rip the stars from out the sky.  
The ship is lost and you pretend  
We'll find our way, the pain will end.*

The words of stanza 1 repeat exactly in stanzas 3, 7, and 8. The words of stanza 2 repeat exactly in stanza 6. In these stanzas, Scheer’s words apply to many situations in Mrs. Lincoln’s life and can be said with many different shades of emotion. We never quite know to which of her traumas she is referring: the loss of her children, her husband, her freedom, the country’s unity, or the loss of her position as First Lady, to name a few. We never know if she feels angry, bitter, self-pitying, accusatory, weary, despairing, or raging. This text allows for a myriad of different interpretations by the singer, and because of textual repetitions it can feel like she is shifting through time in her memories.

Two vague lines particularly could cause the singer confusion. The stanza 2 line, “*The ship is lost and you pretend/We'll find our way, the pain will end*” has many possible interpretations. If the singer believes it references William’s death, she could be

despondent. If she believes it references the secession of Southern states from the Union, she could be bitter. Mr. Scheer said this about it:

It's the idea of this person [President Lincoln], with this personal tragedy, juggling this personal tragedy and trying to rally and maintain the union, the country. The dream of a nation where the majority would rule, and wouldn't just break off into little pieces. And not to mention racism and what's going on with everything else. People forget that these politicians are not just dealing with the politics of the moment. They're also dealing with their own personal travails, and in this case, they were so incredibly enormous. And so, Lincoln was trying to keep it together, and I understand: from her perspective, she lost her baby, her little boy. And to watch this person be as functional as he was when she was so dysfunctional, it would drive you crazy. I think that's what I was thinking about when I wrote that line.<sup>66</sup>

Scheer repeats the vaguest line in the song four times: “*In a world where this can happen, Only madness rhymes.*” He gives four opportunities for the singer to make different decisions. Speaking about this line and the repetitiveness of his text, he explains:

You know, even if you're not mentally ill, if you're concerned about something, or really have a major “thing,” your brain is going on and on and on over and over, rehashing “What should I have said, what should I've done,” ... so I think the line about rhyming - “In a world where this can happen, only madness rhymes” - was repeated in my original text. I thought it was a line that was worth repeating and also was at the core of who was singing, who this person was, what this moment was that she was singing about. That was her life.<sup>67</sup>

While the other stanzas can refer to many events in Mary's life, stanzas 4 and 5 are tied to specific moments in time. Stanza 4 references Abraham's assassination, but that death merely points to their son William's death in stanza 5. Abraham tied a black ribbon around his hat to memorialize his son, and this ribbon, rather than the iconic hat,

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66. Scheer, interview.

67. Ibid.

serves as the song's artifact (see fig. 4).<sup>68</sup> It has remained around his hat ever since. The singer's decisions about stanzas 4 and 5 are much more set than in the other stanzas. Mary was despondent after William's death. After Abraham's death, she was alone, spiraling into madness.



*Figure 4. Song's artifact: Abraham Lincoln's Hat with memorial silk ribbon.*

*Photograph courtesy of the National Museum of American History Behring Center.*<sup>69</sup>

Repeating the words of stanzas 1 and 2 before and after stanzas 4 and 5 sets the deaths of Abraham and William at the center of Mary's pain, swirling her lifetime of trauma around those two central tragedies. Her pain existed whether or not her madness did. This points to the most tragic aspect of her story: we all can lose ourselves in grief.

Character drives the songs, and Mary has a huge personality. To portray Mary well, the singer must take what they know of Mary's traumas and combine it with their own empathetic powers. Making decisions about which trauma Mary relives in each stanza adds specificity to her character, and also honors Mary.

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68. Scheer, interview.

69. "Abraham Lincoln's Top Hat," National Museum of American History Behring Center, [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_1199660](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1199660).

CHAPTER V – “JACQUELINE KENNEDY ONASSIS: WHITE HOUSE  
CHRISTMAS CARD, 1963”

Even people born after Jacqueline Kennedy’s death know who she is and know about the Kennedy assassination. For the singer, stepping into Jackie’s shoes can be intimidating because Jackie exists as part of the American cultural consciousness. However, the singer should revisit her story and gain a glimpse of the Jackie behind the icon.

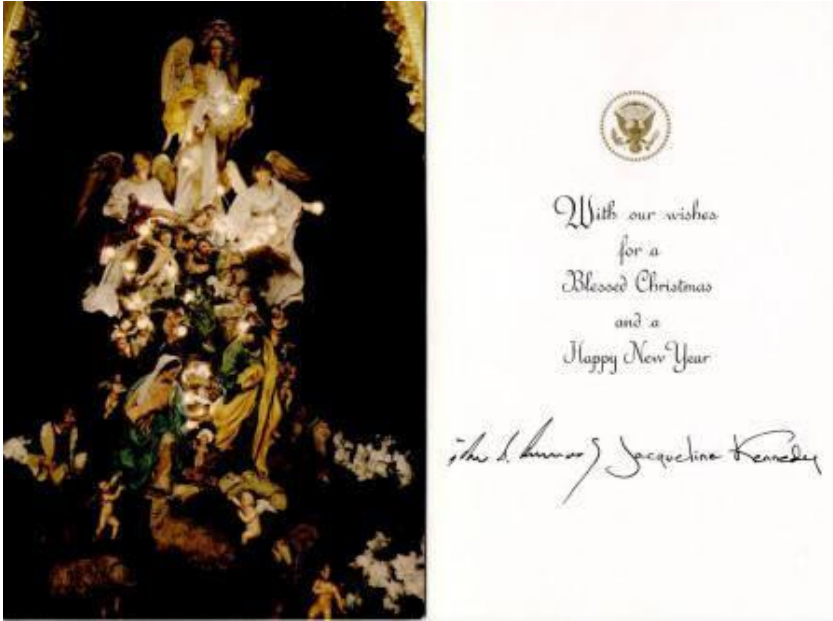
Like Mary, Jacqueline had the choice to fall into despair or rise from it. The story of the song focuses on the nights before and after the assassination. The night before, Jacqueline and her husband are signing Christmas cards and picking out her clothes for the next day. As opposed to the Mary Todd Lincoln song which jumps in time, here Scheer’s text tells a straightforward story. In this song, the singer gleans almost all her acting decisions from the documentation of Jacqueline’s actions at the time of the assassination. Mr. Scheer’s text brings her to the decision of whether or not to give in to sorrow. The singer must know Jackie’s history to portray her authentically.

Song’s Story: Signing Christmas Cards before the Trip to Dallas

In 1963, the Kennedys ordered a Hallmark Christmas card with the White House creche on the front and an eagle holding an olive branch and arrows over the message “With our wishes for a Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year” inside (see fig. 5). They also ordered cards for the non-Christians that only mentioned New Year’s.<sup>70</sup>

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70. James L. Swanson, “The JFK Christmas Card That Was Never Sent,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/jfk-christmas-card-was-never-sent-180948006/>.



*Figure 5. Song's artifact: the Kennedy's Christmas Card, 1963.*  
*Photograph courtesy of Reuters.*<sup>71</sup>

They had signed 75 of them by late November and planned to sign the rest when they returned from a campaign trip to Texas.<sup>72</sup> This was to be Jackie's first official trip since the death of their premature infant son, Patrick, in August<sup>73</sup> (the loss of a child is a common thread among these four First Ladies). But they never sent the Christmas cards. On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was shot while being driven through Dallas, Jackie just beside him. (This also mirrors how Mary Todd was also right next to Abraham when he was assassinated.)

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71. Tom Doggett, "White House tour omits rare 1963 Christmas card," *Reuters*, December 21, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-31086020071222>.

72. James L. Swanson, "The JFK Christmas Card That Was Never Sent," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/jfk-christmas-card-was-never-sent-180948006/>.

73. "November 22, 1963: Death Of The President," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed August 11, 2021, [November 22, 1963: Death of the President | JFK Library](https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/1963/11-22-1963-death-of-the-president).

Jackie's biographer said, "The reports are that she did not weep. From the moment the shots robbed her and the nation of its leader, she had summoned some deep strength, a kind of spiritual armor that was to make her behavior in the following days a model of grieving deportment for an agonized world."<sup>74</sup> And later, "It was as though she knew that this was what he would have expected of her - that it was how the widow of a martyred President must act."<sup>75</sup> An hour and a half after the President's death, Jacqueline saw a change of clothes waiting for her on Air Force One - the pink suit and stockings she had worn that day were splattered with blood (see fig. 6; viewer discretion advised: blood). As she told a reporter from Life Magazine, she wiped her face, then "One second later, I thought, 'Why did I wash the blood off?' I should have left it there; let them see what they've done."<sup>76</sup> She refused to change out of her blood-stained suit.



*Figure 6. Jacqueline Kennedy's Pink Chanel suit.*

*Photograph courtesy of Jason Ponic*<sup>77</sup>

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74. Simmons and Pinchot, *Jacqueline Kennedy: a Biography*, 18-19.

75. *Ibid.*, 20.

76. Sara Kettler, "Why Jacqueline Kennedy Didn't Take Off Her Pink Suit After JFK Was Assassinated," *Biography.com*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.biography.com/news/jacqueline-kennedy-pink-suit-jfk-assassination>.

77. Jason Ponic, "Whatever Happened to Jackie Kennedy's Pink Suit?" *Owlcation*, December 14, 2017, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/jackiekennedy>.

Mrs. Lyndon Johnson, the new First Lady, recorded her memory of that awful day. “Mrs. Kennedy’s dress was stained with blood. Her right glove was caked – that immaculate woman – it was caked with blood, her husband’s blood. She always wore gloves like she was used to them. I never could. Somehow that was one of the most poignant sights – exquisitely dressed and caked in blood.”<sup>78</sup>

The image of Jacqueline Kennedy in her blood-stained Chanel suit was seared into the minds of a generation. She arranged for President Kennedy’s funeral to mirror the funeral of Abraham Lincoln.<sup>79</sup> The sobering sight of Jackie and her two young children walking beside the horse-drawn casket intensified the tragedy. Her early biographers boil it down to this: “The woman whose role in the White House had originally been likened to that of the glittering Dolley Madison, now found herself cast as the tragic Mary Todd Lincoln.”<sup>80</sup>

### Jacqueline’s Life

While often viewed as a fashion icon, Jacqueline Kennedy’s style merely overlaid her brilliance and accomplishments. Highly educated, she attended Vassar, the Sorbonne, George Washington University, and Georgetown. She spoke Italian, French, and Spanish fluently, giving international speeches during her husband’s presidency. Jacqueline had an inquiring mind for politics, admiring Charles de Gaulle and Winston Churchill. She worked as a journalist, interviewing and photographing political figures in Washington

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78. Warren Commission, *The Witnesses: Selected and Edited from the Warren Commission’s Hearings by the New York Times* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 13.

79. “November 22, 1963: Death of the President,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

80. Simmons and Pinchot, *Jacqueline Kennedy: a Biography*, 9.

D.C. for her daily column in the *Washington Times-Herald*.<sup>81</sup> At 17, when her finishing school yearbook asked about her life's ambition, she shot back, "not to be a housewife."<sup>82</sup>

Jackie balanced her life between the public's expectation of a demure, dutiful wife and her spunky individualism. Biographer Barbara Leaming opens her 2014 book with a story of this dichotomy. In 1945 a pretentious young man regaled 16-year-old Jackie with a story about Charles de Gaulle – a story she knew well. Instead of interrupting him to correct his assumption of her ignorance, she smiled and nodded, appearing "bright enough to interest a man but not so bright as to imperil his ego."<sup>83</sup> Afterward, however, she wrote of this encounter to a friend of hers, saying, "He sounded like a little boy who's just read a big book and is having a lovely time expounding it all to a little country urchin without really knowing what it was all about. I wanted to give him a big maternal kiss on the cheek and tell him he was really a big boy now!"<sup>84</sup> In an age where June Cleaver from "Leave it to Beaver" personified the ideal wife, snarky opinions ran against the grain.<sup>85</sup>

When she married John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1953, she had found someone who appreciated her individualism, and as such, she didn't mind being a housewife for him. Despite many problems – notably including John's infidelity – theirs was a marriage of

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81. "First Lady Biography: Jackie Kennedy," National First Ladies' Library, last modified 2018, <http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=36>.

82. Barbara Leaming, *Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: The Untold Story* (Thomas Dunne Books: New York, 2014), 12.

83. *Ibid*, 3.

84. Leaming, *Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: The Untold Story*, 3.

85. Barbara Pascarell Brown, "Pretty in Pink: Jacqueline Kennedy and the Politics of Fashion," (master's thesis, University at Albany, 2012), 3.



equals. In 1957 or '58, Jackie wrote a love letter to Jack, as she called him: "You are an atypical husband—increasingly so in one way or another every year since we've been married—so you mustn't be surprised to have an atypical wife—Each of us would have been so lonely with the normal kind."<sup>86</sup> With him, she did not have to feign interest as she had with the poor young man in 1945.

When JFK announced his campaign for the Presidency in 1960, his staff considered Jacqueline a possible liability - not as big a liability as his Roman Catholicism, but still significant. They thought that her culture, education, and European fashion would repel the "everyman" voters they so desperately needed.<sup>87</sup> However, their fears were assuaged when she could not join much of the campaign due to her pregnancy. She instead wrote a weekly column entitled "Campaign Wife," offering personal anecdotes and Democratic party views, and giving foreign and domestic interviews.<sup>88</sup> Her pregnancy also reinforced her husband's youth and virility. When JFK won the election, the country looked forward to what the vivacious couple would bring to Washington.<sup>89</sup>

The new president's staff needn't have worried about Jackie. She proved to be *instantly* popular, even to the point of overshadowing the Inauguration simply by wearing a pillbox hat, setting a new fashion trend.<sup>90</sup> She viewed taking care of the President and

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86. "Jackie Kennedy love letter revealed in RR Auction Nov. 7," Auction News Central, October 31, 2018, <https://www.liveauctioneers.com/news/auctions/upcoming-auctions/jackie-kennedy-love-letter-featured-in-rr-auction-nov-7/>.

87. Brown, *Pretty in Pink*, 1.

88. National First Ladies' Library, "First Lady Biography: Jackie Kennedy."

89. Brown, "Pretty in Pink."

90. National First Ladies' Library, "First Lady Biography: Jackie Kennedy."

her children as her most important goal as First Lady, adding “if you bungle raising your children, I don’t think whatever else you do well matters very much.”<sup>91</sup> Besides raising her children, the other things she did as First Lady *did* matter. She planned a historic renovation of the White House – like Mary Todd Lincoln did – and gave a televised tour of the finished product in 1962 to huge success. Fifty-six million American viewers – over a third of the population at the time – watched the tour.<sup>92</sup> She heavily patronized the Arts, inviting Robert Frost to read<sup>93</sup> and Marian Anderson to sing<sup>94</sup> at the Inauguration. She filled the White House with ballet, opera, modern jazz, and Shakespeare.<sup>95</sup> Jackie created a stir when, during a party in the East Room, she taught the Secretary of Defense, a former New York Governor, and the publisher of the Washington Post precisely how to do the Twist.<sup>96</sup> In her own subtle way, she supported the Civil Rights movement; when she established a kindergarten for her daughter Caroline, she published pictures of the multiracial class in the newspapers. She established the position of the Official White

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91. Allida Black, “Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy,” *The First Ladies of the United States of America*. (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 2009). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/first-families/jacqueline-lee-bouvier-kennedy/>.

92. “Jacqueline Kennedy in the White House,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/jacqueline-kennedy-in-the-white-house>.

93. Dawn Langley Simmons and Ann Pinchot, *Jacqueline Kennedy: a Biography* (New York: F. Fell, 1964), 14.

94. Sarah Seidman, “Marian Anderson, the Presidential Inauguration, and the Order of History,” Museum of the City New York, January 27, 2021, <https://www.mcny.org/story/marian-anderson-presidential-inauguration-ceremony-and-order-history>.

95. National First Ladies’ Library, “First Lady Biography: Jackie Kennedy.”

96. Sally Bedell Smith, *Grace and Power: the private world of the Kennedy White House* (New York: Random House, 2005), 253-4.

House Photographer to help control the paparazzi. She also was President Kennedy's secret weapon: charming, glamorous, beautiful, and deceptively intelligent, she forged friendships with many foreign leaders, subtly furthering Kennedy's aspirations. In this role, she traveled more than any other First Lady, visiting Afghanistan, Austria, Colombia, England, France, Greece, India, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Turkey, and Venezuela in less than three years.<sup>97</sup> Of her international charm, President Kennedy famously quipped, "I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris."<sup>98</sup>

After her husband's death, she focused on raising her young children. But just as when she was First Lady, she also focused on major projects outside her family. She became increasingly involved in historical, architectural conservation and preservation, saving the Old Executive Office Building and other important structures on Pennsylvania Avenue. She moved her family to New York in 1964 while designing the landscape and architecture of the JFK Presidential Library, and even advocated for foreign interest projects such as combating rising water in Venice, Italy. In 1968, she married Greek businessman Aristotle Onassis, and after his death in 1975 she moved back to New York and reentered the writing profession she had left when she married Kennedy. She became an editor at Viking Press and Doubleday. She also continued her conservation efforts of historical spaces. Jacqueline Kennedy is responsible for the revitalization of Grand Central Station, the Broadway theater district, Central Park, The Metropolitan Museum

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97. National First Ladies' Library, "First Lady Biography: Jackie Kennedy."

98. "New Conference 12, June 2, 1961," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed July 14, 2021, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-press-conferences/news-conference-12>.

Egyptian Wing and Costume Institute, and the American Ballet Theater at Lincoln Center.<sup>99</sup>

Jacqueline Kennedy exhibited an astonishingly strong character, refusing to confine herself to the 1950s sensibility of the be-pearled wife in the kitchen. Cultured, stylish, and intelligent, she cared equally for her family and for national and international conservation. She was forever marked by the trauma of Kennedy's assassination: her biographer Barbara Leaming posits that she suffered from PTSD for the rest of her life.<sup>100</sup> But she did not allow the tragedy she experienced to stop her from living. Unlike Mary Todd Lincoln, her trauma did not become her identity.

#### Song Text

*Jack walked into the room and said:  
"Diamonds! Minks and diamonds!  
That's what they'll be wearing in  
Dallas."*

*I looked up from signing a Christmas  
card:  
"What would you like me to do?"  
He said: "Let me help you choose."*

*I was delighted! We'd never done this  
before.  
The beige and white dress? No?  
The blue and yellow suit? Maybe?  
The pink Chanel?*

*"Yes! Yes!" he said "Wear that.  
With the hat."*

*Before I left the room, I said:  
"Jack, I just started the Christmas cards.  
There... add your name."*

*Fifty hours later, I walked back into the  
bedroom  
Wearing the pink Chanel suit he'd  
chosen  
Covered in his blood.*

*And there it was, signed by both of us:  
A Christmas card propped up on the  
table  
Like a question mark.*

*Oh Jack, what would you like me to do?*

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99. National First Ladies Library, "First Lady Biography: Jackie Kennedy."

100. Leaming, *Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: The Untold Story*.

This text has some basic differences from the other songs. As the most straightforward, linear text of all the songs, it does not require the explication and explanation that the previous two texts did. As opposed to the other songs, this one has two voices: the First Lady's and the President's. The story centers on a private event instead of Marian Anderson's public concert or Mary Todd's public tragedies that led to her inner madness. It also has whimsy, fun, and playfulness - qualities necessary to "make us realize what was lost and what's at stake. The joy and the beauty that can't happen now because of what has taken place."<sup>101</sup>

Scheer provided two significant opportunities for Heggie to sink his emotional teeth into the listener: the very structure of the song itself, and the deft use of repetition. Because of how the story unfolds, the listener forgets that Kennedy will be assassinated. Scheer shows us an intimate glimpse of Jack and Jackie enjoying each other and then blindsides us with "*Fifty hours later I walked back into the bedroom, wearing the pink Chanel suit he'd chosen covered in his blood.*" By not describing the assassination, Scheer highlights its horror - Jackie refuses to speak about it. Scheer also affects the listener by repeating the line "*What would you like me to do.*" In the beginning, Jackie dutifully asks it of her husband. At the end, she asks it again, even though now there can be no answer.<sup>102</sup> The singer faces the choice of how to make the questions different, based on their knowledge of Jacqueline. First, she asks about what to wear in Dallas, and the singer can choose to deliver the first question flirtatiously or listlessly, for example.

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101. Thomas, "The Most Popular Opera Composer."

102. Scheer, interview.

The second question - what to do with her life and children without him - offers only one interpretation. History clearly recorded Jackie as stoic, dutiful, and almost detached after her husband's murder. The singer may be tempted to perform that line as a distraught, bereaved wife, but that would not align with Jacqueline's personality. She did not display her grief. By framing the assassination with these two questions, Scheer highlights the loss of Kennedy's presidency, that "one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot."<sup>103</sup>

In personal stories, one can only imagine what really happened. As Scheer said, "I wasn't in the bedroom with Jackie and Jack,"<sup>104</sup> so of course, he invented the dialogue. But the assassination did happen, and the President also chose Jackie's clothes for that trip. The President did not make a habit of choosing her clothes, but he did make it known what he liked to see on her. He shrewdly wanted her to be in bold, eye-catching colors. Especially with the advent of Kodachrome and color photography, he wanted her to stand out. Jacqueline revealed in 1990 that her husband had picked out her pink suit for the trip to Dallas.<sup>105</sup>

The text for this song consists of straightforward storytelling. It doesn't shift in her lifetime like "Mary Todd" or stand in the audience's present like "Eleanor."

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103. A week after the President's death, Jacqueline invited two Life Magazine reporters to her home. In the interview, she equated JFK's presidency to King Arthur's Camelot, quoting the Lerner and Loewe musical that was JFK's favorite: "Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot." She emphasized the nostalgia, making the country ignore the adultery and betrayal in the musical. The analogy has endured to this day.

104. Scheer, interview.

105. "Jackie Onassis said JFK "picked" her Pink Suit for Dallas, 4 Years Before She Died," Carl Anthony Online, November 16, 2013, <https://carlanthonyonline.com/2013/11/16/jackie-onassis-confirmed-jfk-picked-her-pink-suit-for-dallas-four-years-before-she-died/>.

Jacqueline Kennedy begins as a storyteller in the present, then is drawn in by the story, trapping her in the memory of the assassination. Scheer says, “I think if I had just made this stuff up, the songs would be less impactful, because the fact is: they are true.”<sup>106</sup> The unadorned writing allows Heggie’s music to shine. The singer has great responsibility to portray these women as accurately as possible. Thankfully, Scheer offers strong texts to interpret, but an emotionally authentic performance can only come from a knowledge of Jacqueline, how she reacted to the assassination, and her relationship with her husband. As Heggie said, the singer must “*be* that person in the moment, . . .and honor their spirit and their legacy.”<sup>107</sup> We keep her alive by authentic interpretation, carrying her forward,<sup>108</sup> remembering her to the audience.

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106. Scheer, interview.

107. Heggie, interview.

108. Ibid.

## CHAPTER VI – “BARBARA BUSH: THE MUPPETS”

The cycle closes on a whimsical note: Barbara Bush talks about going on *Sesame Street* and reading a story. Mrs. Bush focused her tenure as First Lady on the issue of family literacy, and she created a First Lady trend by appearing alongside the Muppets of *Sesame Street*. After the heaviness of “Mary Todd Lincoln” and “Jacqueline Kennedy,” a little Muppet-induced playfulness is welcome. This song also provides an end to the dramatic line of the cycle: in spite of America’s racial conflict or Mary and Jackie’s personal tragedies, we can choose to rise above it, bettering ourselves and thereby bettering our collective lives. Barbara answers Eleanor’s hopeful question of “who are we:” we are better than we were.

### Song’s Story: Mrs. Bush Appears on *Sesame Street*

When Barbara became First Lady in 1989, she arrived fully prepared to focus on family literacy as her platform. She had spent eight years as Second Lady making significant connections and learning national statistics about literacy. According to her research, in 1989, “35 million adults could not read above the eighth-grade level, and 23 million were not beyond a fourth-grade level.”<sup>109</sup> She believed that the key to ending generational illiteracy lay in teaching *parents*. The parents would encourage and teach the children.

To that end, in 1989, she created the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy and a weekly radio show, “Mrs. Bush’s Story Time,” which encouraged reading

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109. “First Lady Biography: Barbara Bush,” National First Ladies’ Library, last modified 2018, <http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=42>.



aloud as a family.<sup>110</sup> In 1990, she created a First Lady precedent by appearing on *Sesame Street*, a show that aims to “create a successful television program that would make a difference in the lives of children, in particular, poor inner-city children, and help prepare them for school.”<sup>111</sup> She sat amongst a handful of children, as well as Big Bird and Count von Count (who joyfully counted the pages of the book), and read “Peter’s Chair” by Ezra Jack Keats (see fig. 7). As of 2021, every First Lady since Mrs. Bush has appeared alongside the Muppets of *Sesame Street*, with the exception of Melania Trump.<sup>112</sup>

The video of Mrs. Bush reading “Peter’s Chair” is readily available online. It would behoove the singer to watch it, noticing how Mrs. Bush interacts with the children and the Muppets. This will significantly inform her performance and interpretation of Mrs. Bush.



Figure 7. Barbara Bush on the set of *Sesame Street*, 1990.

Photograph still from *Sesame Street* episode 2660.<sup>113</sup>

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110. Karen Bornemann Spies, *Barbara Bush: Helping America Read* (New York: Dillon Press, 1991), 55.

111. Brian Jay Jones, *Jim Henson: the Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2013), 138.

112. Maria Puente, “In first lady tradition Jill Biden hits ‘Sesame Street,’ talks to Mexican-American Rosita about racism and kindness,” *USA Today*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/tv/news/exclusive-jill-biden-joins-sesame-street-to-help-military-families-tell-kids-about-race-kindness/ar-AAM30ci>.

113. *Sesame Street*, Season 21, Episode 2660, “Telly’s Old Tuba,” aired January 12, 1990, on Children’s Television Workshop.

## Barbara's Life

Barbara Bush had already lived a full life by the time she became First Lady in 1989 at age 63. Born to a magazine producer, her family often spent quality family time by sitting in the living room, each reading their own book.<sup>114</sup> She became especially concerned with literacy when she discovered that her youngest son, Neil, had dyslexia. Since their public school had nothing to help the 6-year old, she enrolled him and three of his siblings in a private school with the resources to help Neil. Literacy – and especially adult literacy – became a life-long project.<sup>115</sup>

Her husband had many roles that prepared her for a life in the political spotlight. He served as a Texas senator, Chairman of the Republican National Convention, Head of the US Liaison Office in Beijing, and head of the CIA before becoming Vice President. In this time, Barbara freely voiced her opinions contrary to typical Republican stances: she supported Roe v. Wade, gun control, civil rights, and human rights for the gay and lesbian community. Both she and George H. W. described themselves as fiscally conservative and socially liberal. By the time she became the wife of the Vice President, however, she had learned that she needed a public persona. Like Jacqueline Kennedy, Barbara publicly deferred to her husband while privately having *strong* opinions.<sup>116</sup> She cultivated an image of “everybody’s mother:” white hair, large fake pearls, with interests only in gardening, her family, and her faith. These things truly did interest her, but they

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114. “First Lady Biography: Barbara Bush,” National First Ladies’ Library, last modified 2018, <http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=42>.

115. Barbara Bush, *Barbara Bush: a Memoir* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 59.

116. “First Lady Biography: Barbara Bush,” National First Ladies’ Library.

did not show the complete picture. When she became Second Lady, she stopped offering her opinions to reporters, refusing to create unnecessary drama for her husband.<sup>117</sup>

Barbara’s appearance on *Sesame Street* began a relationship with the Muppets. Mrs. Bush submitted a recipe (wickedly, for bologna) for Miss Piggy’s 1996 cookbook.<sup>118</sup> Cheryl Hansen caricatured her as “Barbara Brush” in her 1994 book *The Muppets Make Puppets*. The Muppeteers ultimately honored her in 2012 by making her into a Muppet for the *Sesame Street* segment “Elmo the Musical: President the Musical” (see fig. 8).



*Figure 8. George and Barbara “Brush,” and Muppet Barbara.*

*Photo credit for Barbara “Brush:” John E. Barrett. “Muppet Barbara” courtesy of Sesame Street.<sup>119</sup>*

By the time Mrs. Bush appeared on *Sesame Street*, public television provided a haven for children’s education. Back on May 1, 1969, Mr. Fred Rogers stood before the Senate to defend public educational television. He had spoken in his slow, thoughtful

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117. “First Lady Biography: Barbara Bush,” National First Ladies’ Library.

118. Time-Life Books. *In the Kitchen with Miss Piggy*, (New York: Jim Henson Productions, Inc., 1996), 96.

119. *Sesame Street*, Season 43, Episode 4311, “President the Musical,” aired November 6, 2012, on Children’s Television Workshop.

way for only five minutes, emphasizing television's impact on children. In five minutes, he secured \$20,000,000 for educational television.<sup>120</sup> Six months later, *Sesame Street* aired its first episode. It aimed to combine appropriate pedagogy for children with a fun, upbeat atmosphere to hold a child's attention.<sup>121</sup> The creative team included puppeteer Jim Henson. He had been hesitant to join the children's show because he had created his puppets for adult entertainment, having already made appearances on *Saturday Night Live* and the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Henson ultimately agreed to do the show, and on *Sesame Street* he began assembling the core of his Muppeteers, honing his slapstick humor, and giving in to the wild, zany energy that defined the Muppets. He believed that he spoke to children in a way they could understand: with "complete and utter silliness and abandon."<sup>122</sup>

Throughout the years, celebrities have made guest appearances on *Sesame Street* simply because "nothing else in show business is quite as much fun as working with the Muppets."<sup>123</sup> In 1990, shortly after Jim Henson filmed his final appearance on *Sesame Street*, Barbara made her debut. Barbara made use of the fact that public television had been a significant space for learning and literacy ever since 1969, with shows like *Reading Rainbow*, *The Electric Company*, *Zoom*, and others, as well as programs that

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120. "Mr. Fred Rogers Senate Statement on PBS Funding, delivered 1 May 1969," American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank, last modified April 30, 2021, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fredrogerssenatetestimonypbs.htm>.

121. Jones, *Jim Henson: the Biography*, 138.

122. *Ibid.*, 160.

123. Christopher Finch, *Jim Henson: The Works - The Art, the Magic, the Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1993), 72.

emphasized science. While Mrs. Bush had no hand in making public television a center for youth education, she recognized it as a powerful tool to further her campaign for literacy.

Barbara intentionally met life with a positive attitude. She said, “You have two choices in life: you can like what you do OR you can dislike it. I choose to like it, and what fun I have had.”<sup>124</sup> She packed her memoir full of superlative statements, so much so that her editor sent her a note saying she may “only use one ‘wonderful’ a page and one ‘precious’ a chapter.”<sup>125</sup> Choosing a positive attitude allowed her to navigate through life’s pain. Like every other lady featured in this song cycle, Barbara traumatically lost a child. In 1953, Barbara’s first daughter Robin was diagnosed with leukemia. She succumbed to it suddenly, and Barbara attributes her white hair to the stress and anguish that accompanied the loss of that three-year-old girl. In 2000, Barbara had her baby girl re-interred on the grounds of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.<sup>126</sup> Like Mary and Jacqueline, she had the opportunity to allow a death to rule her life, and while she still held the memory of her daughter close, she intentionally chose to experience joy and not succumb to despair.

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124. Barbara Bush, *A Memoir*, 10.

125. *Ibid.*, preface.

126. “First Lady Biography: Barbara Bush,” National First Ladies’ Library.

## Song Text

*This is Pete.  
He looks like a piano, but wait...*

*It's magic!  
A squiggle, a curve, a line  
blossoms into a letter,  
a letter into a word.  
Then words that rhyme  
and phrases like "Once upon a time."*

*It's magic! The phrase becomes the  
mountain you're climbing that –  
oh, my goodness! -  
might not be a mountain at all!  
But an incredibly fleet, not petite,  
very sweet dinosaur named Pete,  
who wakes and takes you on his  
shoulders  
where the water splashes and flows  
and tickles the end of your nose  
with a drip, drip, drop and a tiny tap.  
And all of this happens from your  
mother's lap.*

*Imagine! You can travel anywhere.*

*And it all begins with "Once upon a  
time."  
Four little words.  
Imagine you could not read them to your  
child.  
Something must be done, I thought.  
Which is how I made my way  
to Sesame Street.  
Surrounded by dozens of muppets  
you discover your cup it's  
overflowing with possibility.  
Fabric, buttons and thread.  
Dreams woven from Jim Henson's head.  
An alphabet of riffs and dreams.*

*And suddenly you're on  
the incredibly fleet, not petite,  
very sweet dinosaur named Pete  
whose feet treat you to a ride  
to the gate through a berry patch.  
There's a sign on the latch.  
And for the first time - all by yourself-  
You read the words: "Once upon a  
time."*

*(Thanks, Pete!)*

Scheer's text bounces back and forth between Mrs. Bush reading the story and her inner thoughts about her cause. However, this text diverges from history the most. While Mrs. Bush did go on *Sesame Street* and read a story, she did not read a story about Pete the Dinosaur. Mr. Scheer explains,

I made up the story ... of Pete and all that. But the idea was, she was trying to advance *the cause*. Significantly with Barbara Bush, it wasn't advancing literacy for kids. It's advancing literacy for adults. And, to me, the poignant thing about that song is this idea. ... We can talk about multiple different ways in which legislation can be enacted to empower people and so forth. But nothing empowers people more than being able to read. Or, more significantly put, nothing

disempowers people more than not being able to read. ... And not to be able to do it, and then to learn as an adult to read, and then to share it with your kid...that, to me, seemed worthy of a song.<sup>127</sup>

So, he took poetic license while remaining true to Barbara's spirit. As Mark Twain once quipped, and as Scheer echoed, "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story."<sup>128</sup>

Of the four songs, this one alone contains rhyme as a function of comedy instead of as a poetic device: "an incredibly **fleet**, not **petite**, very **sweet** dinosaur named **Pete**, who **wakes** and **takes** you on his shoulders where the water splashes and **flows** and tickles the end of your **nose**." The Mary Todd Lincoln song mentioned rhyming ("In a world where this can happen, only madness rhymes"), and actually did employ a rhyme scheme. However, by the intensity of the story and the oppressive, repetitive motive bury the rhyme scheme. The Barbara Bush song revels in rhyme's pleasure, bringing relief from the previous songs' darkness.

Scheer says that the whole cycle contains a strong message of "endurance, enduring, and the *idea* of the country rather than the *reality* of the country, and moving, as ever, one step at a time closer to it."<sup>129</sup> Scheer hopes that this song encourages the betterment of our collective lives through individual people's choices:

You know, while we need legislation to empower people and make sure that certain people aren't running away with all the spoils of this country, we need legislation to meet our collective goals, whether it's defense or education or right now the [Covid-19] pandemic. You know, so much of the quality and the trajectory of our lives is done one person at a time. So it's not just a bill being passed, but it's volunteering at your local church or synagogue to participate in a program where you help someone - in this case - learn how to read. ... Like

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127. Scheer, interview.

128. Ibid.

129. Ibid.

Barbara's husband, George Bush [said], it is “a thousand points of light,” [George H.W. Bush’s phrase praising American individuals’ volunteerism that bettered the whole nation] so where we end up as a country depends not just on what we do collectively, but what we do individually. And that is something that, albeit in a light-hearted, fun way, is brought to the foreground in the Barbara Bush song.<sup>130</sup>

As Scheer said, few things disenfranchise someone more than being illiterate, and Barbara took her mission of literacy seriously. In spite of the silliness of the story, this song speaks to how we can achieve Eleanor’s dream of a better America: by bettering ourselves, one person at a time, our lives become collectively brighter. Barbara shows us that we have a choice about how we respond to our difficulties: by spiraling into despair, or by being thankful and raising ourselves (and each other) up.

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130. Scheer, interview.



## CHAPTER VII – MUSICAL ANALYSIS: VARIED USES OF HALF-STEPS

Once the singer knows the history behind the songs' stories and the personalities of the women, she can better understand Mr. Heggie's music. Heggie does not actively plan out his musical structures or motives.<sup>131</sup> He writes by instinct instead, allowing the flesh-and-blood character to dictate the story's "sound world."<sup>132</sup> He listens to the story, allowing the character and the situation to suggest the music. This does not mean, however, that his music has no organization. In *Iconic Legacies*, Heggie hangs his emotional story on the interval of the minor second. He uses the minor second differently in each song, showcasing different emotions. Heggie uses cross-relations in "Eleanor Roosevelt," two chords a half step apart in "Mary Todd Lincoln," thirds that descend in half steps in "Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis," and a rework of the "Mary Todd" theme in "Barbara Bush." Once the singer understands that Heggie mirrors emotion with his music, she can apply what she knows of each woman, gaining emotional guidance from the music itself.

### Cross-Relations in "Eleanor Roosevelt"

"Eleanor Roosevelt" centers on the conflict between the wish for America's ideal and the reality of America's racism. Heggie uses cross-relations to highlight that conflict. Heggie does not wait for the words to show conflict; he doesn't even wait for a full two beats. Less than half of the first three measures have consonance (see Musical Example

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131. Heggie, interview.

132. Robert Wallace, "The Ache of Longing and the Song of Redemption: An Interview with Jake Heggie, Composer of the Opera *Moby-Dick*," *Leviathan*, 13, no. 2 (2011): 67, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/493041>.

1). Dissonance marks every remaining beat, mainly in the form of seconds. With these cross-relations, Heggie informs us that this song will have conflict.

A: Consonance                      B: Cross-relation                      C: Dissonance

Musical Example 1 Consonance and dissonance in opening bars.

If one cross-relation denotes conflict, then more than one cross-relation must mean more conflict. In measure 34, Eleanor sings, “*Wearing this elegant mink, she stood on the steps beneath Lincoln’s stony stare, intoned our nation’s hymn.*” Eleanor admires Marian Anderson for singing “My Country ‘tis of Thee” to open her concert, highlighting the overt conflict inherent in a Black woman singing about the “sweet land of liberty” of the racially divided 1930s. Heggie illustrates this conflict by simultaneously sounding Eb against E♯, and F# against G (see Musical Example 2). The voice provides the Eb of the double cross-relation on the word, “hymn.” The singer must be stalwart in order to not be tempted away from her note. Knowing that this dissonance embodies the divide between America’s racism and freedom can help the singer remain resilient.

The image shows a musical score for measures 33-35 of 'Eleanor Roosevelt'. It consists of a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in a treble clef with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). The lyrics are 'hymn' and 'and let'. The piano accompaniment is in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature. A double cross-relation is highlighted with a large bracket, showing the conflict between Eb and E#. The score includes dynamic markings 'f' and 'rit.' and a 'ped.' marking in measure 34.

Musical Example 2 Double cross-relations, “Eleanor Roosevelt” mm. 33-35.

Having four notes within five half-steps emphasizes the conflict here. Furthering the dissonance, Heggie instructs the pianist to use the pedal in measure 34 and through measure 35, muddling the sound. The pianist also hammers the E $\sharp$  in both measures, against the singer’s sustained, crescendo-ing E $\flat$ . The E $\flat$  and E $\sharp$  fight for supremacy: the E $\sharp$  with repeated blows, and the E $\flat$  with consistently increasing volume. Neither the E $\flat$  nor the E $\sharp$  wins, though. The fight intensifies in measures 84-90 under the words “Who are we?” (see Musical Example 3).

84 *mf* *f* *rit.*

Who are we? Who are we? Be-yond

Musical Example 3 Dissonance on “Who are we?” mm. 84-90.

Heggie even repeats these words, applying more dissonance the second time.

After introducing the F# and Eb in the left hand as before, the left hand keeps hitting the Eb for the next two measures. That Eb still sounds against an Eb in the right hand, but the vocalist holding the Eb now has back-up in the fight. Conflict remains, but it looks like the battle lines are being redrawn in Eleanor’s (and the singer’s) favor. Also, giving these words an underpinning of struggle changes the question “*Who are we?*” from a mild, contemplative one to a question that demands an answer. If Mr. Heggie had not used dissonance so pointedly, the question would not have so much meaning.

At the end of the song, measures 104 and 105 almost exactly copy measures 1 and 2, but without the cross-relations (see Musical Example 4). Also, instead of being followed by successions of cross-relations, it ends in consonance. It ends with hope.



Musical Example 4 Comparison of beginning and end of “Eleanor Roosevelt”

Using the dissonance of the cross-relation to embody conflict, Heggie creates an auditory discomfort and hope for resolution. This mirrors Eleanor’s hope for a brighter, more equal future. The singer, knowing that dissonance has emotional purpose, should purposefully emphasize any dissonances she may have, in accordance with what she knows of Eleanor’s sensibilities.

#### The Mary Todd Motive

Heggie used half steps as cross-relations in “Eleanor Roosevelt,” but he switches tactics in “Mary Todd Lincoln.” Instead of appearing simultaneously in a cross-relation, the notes of the minor second become the basis of two chords that form the motive for her despair (see Musical Example 5).



Musical Example 5 Mary Todd motive: arpeggiated F minor and G $\flat$  major chords.

The song opens immediately with the motive, marked “Haunted” – very appropriate for Heggie’s idea of ghosts. The motive repeats obsessively, reminding the listener of Schubert’s “Gretchen am spinnrade,” but instead of obsession due to love, this

shows obsession due to loss. This motive occurs in every measure of the stanzas that can apply to any of her traumas: stanzas 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8.

Stanzas 4 and 5, however, depict specific traumas. In stanza 4, when she relives her husband's death, the motive disappears abruptly. The motive returns in stanza 5, as Mary confronts the death of her son William. As she gets closer and closer to admitting that the child is dead, the music slows. Instead of sixteenth notes, the motive transitions to eighth notes, then chord clusters, and then briefly, she sings unaccompanied. She is alone (see Musical Example 6). Then the wheel of the motive starts again, and she sings stanzas 6 and 7.

38 *rit.* *pp* **Slower still ♩ = 52**

Did not un-der-stand. "Oh, hus-band!

Musical Example 6 Slowing accompaniment in "Mary Todd Lincoln," mm. 38-39.

The last stanza functions as a coda, and the motive completely disappears from the piano. Only a handful of notes support the voice, and when she sings, "only madness rhymes," the piano drops out entirely. Mary, left truly alone with her madness, sings the motive unaccompanied. (In Jamie Barton's recording, she changes the song's final note from an F to an E, denying resolution and highlighting her insanity.)

The Mary Todd motive embodies Mary’s despair, but it only means that in the Mary Todd song. Heggie inserts the Mary Todd motive in “Jacqueline Kennedy” and “Barbara Bush,” giving it new meaning in each song.

In “Jacqueline Kennedy,” the motive signifies the moment of the assassination. The motive remains musically unchanged, but listeners know immediately what it means in this new context. Interestingly, it also appears in “Barbara Bush,” but it does not indicate a negative connotation. Heggie does change the motive here, but only slightly: the motive appears twice as fast as it did in “Mary Todd Lincoln.” As Barbara speaks of *almost* being able to read (“*A line blossoms into a letter, a letter into a word*” and “*An alphabet of riffs and dreams*”), the motive appears, making the goal of literacy feel both urgent and attainable. Due to the text and the tempo, the motive takes on a feeling of determination, working toward the goal of literacy.

The motive does not appear in “Eleanor Roosevelt,” but it has its roots there. Heggie used the arpeggiated chord and the fast rhythm from the very first measures of “Eleanor” as the basis of the Mary Todd motive (see Musical Example 7).<sup>133</sup>

The image shows a musical score with two parts. The first part, labeled "Opening bars of 'Eleanor Roosevelt'", has a tempo marking of ♩ = 80. It consists of two measures in a piano setting. The right hand plays a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The left hand plays a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. The second part, labeled "Mary Todd Motive", has a tempo marking of ♩ = 62. It consists of two measures. The right hand plays a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The left hand plays a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. The two parts are separated by a double bar line.

Musical Example 7 Elements of Mary Todd motive from “Eleanor Roosevelt” opening.

133. Heggie, interview.

The Mary Todd motive musically dominates the cycle, but despair does not dominate the emotional story of the songs. The singer must remember that, in spite of the pervasive quality of the motive, the cycle begins and ends with hope.

#### Dutiful Thirds in “Jacqueline Kennedy”

Sets of thirds that descend by half step (see Musical Example 8) underpin “Jacqueline Kennedy,” giving a brisk, business-like feeling of duty (remember that duty to her family was a hallmark of Jacqueline’s tenure as First Lady). With these thirds, you can almost see JFK striding into the room, declaring, “*Diamonds! Minks and diamonds! That’s what they’ll be wearing in Dallas.*” The thirds begin the song, right as the President enters to tell Jacqueline what to wear for their trip to Dallas. She asks him, “*What would you like me to do?*” while the thirds play under her, indicating that she’s asking out of duty.



Musical Example 8 “Jacqueline Kennedy” m. 1-4.

The dutiful thirds disappear as Jack and Jackie playfully decide what she will wear, and then the Mary Todd Lincoln motive jarringly appears, illustrating the assassination. It continues under the text, “*Fifty hours later, I walked back into the bedroom wearing the pink Chanel suit he’d chosen covered in his blood,*” stressing the grisly horror. Then, the dutiful thirds come back, feeling more frantic this time, under



“And there it was, signed by both of us: a Christmas card propped up on the table like a question mark.” Then Jacqueline asks again, “Oh Jack, what would you like me to do?”

The falling thirds, emphasizing her sense of duty, play under “O Jack,” but the accompaniment drops out from under the rest of her question. She no longer asks out of duty, but out of necessity. The Mary Todd motive briefly punctuates her question, followed by the falling thirds; her sense of duty overpowers her grief (see Musical Example 9).

The image shows a musical score for the final measures of the song "Jacqueline Kennedy." It consists of two staves: a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower staff. The vocal line is in treble clef and contains the lyrics "would you like me to do?". The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The piano part includes a section labeled "Grief" and another labeled "Duty". The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and a 4/4 time signature. The piano part features a prominent melodic line of falling thirds in the right hand, which is highlighted by a slur and labeled "Duty". The vocal line has a melodic line that is more complex and less predictable, with some notes that are not clearly defined by the piano accompaniment.

Musical Example 9 Final measures of “Jacqueline Kennedy,” mm. 113-120.

The Jacqueline Kennedy song presents the most musical problems for the singer due to the constantly shifting tonality of the falling thirds. This is a song that sounds fairly natural, but absolutely is not. Heggie mixes sharps and flats, barely establishing a tonal center before leaving it. While the piano generally supports the singer and the music doesn’t sound discordant, the harmonic progression and rhythm can be disorienting, leaving the singer unsure of her notes. Mezzo soprano Susan Graham said, “The thing about his music is that it is deceptively difficult, because it's written to not sound difficult. It's written to sound like natural speech. Sometimes even in terms of pitch, but

particularly rhythmically. Very tricky.”<sup>134</sup> For example, the singer’s first entrance is on an A. The accompaniment in the preceding measure is octaves of D $\flat$ . This encourages the singer to enter on A $\flat$  - the 5<sup>th</sup> scale degree of D $\flat$  - instead of A $\natural$ . When the audience hears it, it sounds perfectly natural. As Ms. Graham says: tricky (see Musical Example 10).

Musical Example 10 Mixing sharps and flats in Jacqueline Kennedy, mm. 2-5.

The appearance of the Mary Todd motive in this song shocks the listener because of how the text unfolds. As it vies with Jacqueline’s sense of duty, the singer must employ her empathy. In Jackie’s situation, it would be tempting to give in to despair. The dutiful thirds illustrate her resiliency. Following the musical motives literally shows Jacqueline overcoming her grief with duty. Also, knowing that the tonality shifts look more difficult than they sound aids the singer in learning.

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134. Susan Graham, interview with author, Zoom, March 22, 2021.

### Reworking the Mary Todd motive in “Barbara Bush”

The Barbara Bush song has an answer to the Mary Todd motive. Just like the Mary Todd motive, it also starts with an F minor chord. If you look at the melody line in measure 5, it looks like it outlines an “E diminished” chord (see Musical Example 11). This would make sense, following the pattern of using a minor second as the basis of the two chords, as “Mary Todd” did.



Musical Example 11 “Barbara Bush” motive, mm. 3-5, melody only.

But the bass line must be considered as well. Measure 5 actually outlines a C7 chord, making this new motive a simple i-V progression (see Musical Example 12). Additionally, this motive spins out its own melody instead of repeating unceasingly, like the Mary Todd motive. With this, Heggie winks at us, saying that things are not as difficult as they appear, just like learning to read.



Musical Example 12 “Barbara Bush” theme, mm. 3-5.

If the Mary Todd motive feels unnerving and unsettled, then this answer feels calming, providing familiar harmonic structure. Barbara Bush *chose* to live her life positively. One can choose, like Mary, to hear only the e diminished chord, or to hear the C major 7 chord that actually sounds.

Heggie tied the songs together by basing his writing on half steps. Eleanor's conflict-ridden cross-relations, Mary Todd's traumatic F minor and G $\flat$  major chords, Jackie's dutiful falling thirds, and Barbara's new vision of the Mary Todd motive all carry emotional weight. The singer who acknowledges these emotional signposts transforms the songs from merely pleasant to deeply meaningful.

## CHAPTER VIII – MUSICAL ANALYSIS: CHROMATIC PASSAGES AND SCALES

In addition to organizing his music around half steps, Heggie also uses scales and chromatic passages to depict emotion or to paint text. The chromatic passages in particular hold some difficulty for the singer. As the harmony shifts under the vocal line, the singer may lose their notes. Knowing that Heggie wrote chromatic passages to reflect the character’s emotions helps the singer navigate them. Heggie uses scales exclusively for text painting in these songs, adding delight.

### Chromatic Passages

Heggie uses chromatically meandering passages in the first two songs to illustrate the lady’s emotional state. In “Eleanor Roosevelt,” the chromatic scale uses the movement of half steps to show Eleanor’s determination (see Musical Example 13). This nine-measure ascent underscores Eleanor’s text, “*With every step on the way, I think about what she showed us that day.*” Eleanor steadfastly walks the path of racial justice, and each ascending half step in the bass serves as another step along that journey. It leads directly to the climax of the piece, with the famously attributed quote, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” The climax would have less of an impact without this ascending line creating a sense of arrival.

*m. 54-63 (chord progression only)*

The musical score shows a piano accompaniment for measures 54-63. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The music is written for piano with a treble and bass clef. The bass line features a chromatic ascent of half steps. Dynamics are marked as *p*, *mp*, and *mf*.

Musical Example 13 Chromatic progression, “Eleanor Roosevelt” mm. 54-63.

Contrastingly, in “Mary Todd Lincoln,” the chromatic line does not point to a moment of surety; it shows the dissolution of Mary’s hold on reality and her own mind. The chromatic line occurs in stanza 4, when she talks about the death of her husband. The harmony underneath loses its order, showing Mary’s loss of her grip on her mental state. Instead of a continually ascending bass line as before, Mary’s line hovers around an F#, never settling, meandering in half and whole steps (see Musical Example 14). The chord progression, eschewing functional harmony, goes from C major to F# minor in ten measures. Heggie uses chromaticism to emphasize Mary’s instability and Eleanor’s determination.

C e C C<sup>b</sup> B<sup>b</sup> C<sup>b</sup> D<sup>b</sup> f<sup>#</sup> C<sup>#</sup> f<sup>#</sup> g<sup>#</sup> C e e<sup>b</sup> A7/E<sup>b</sup> f<sup>#</sup>

m. 22-23                      24                      25                      26                      27                      28-29                      30-31                      32

Musical Example 14 Chromatic wandering, “Mary Todd Lincoln” mm. 22-32.

There are many connections between “Mary Todd Lincoln” and “Barbara Bush,” mostly through the use and reworking of the Mary Todd motive. Adding to the connections, at measure 23 of “Barbara Bush,” Heggie mirrors the 10-measure chromatic passage from measure 22 of “Mary.” In measure 23 of “Barbara,” Scheer introduces Pete the “*incredibly fleet, not petite, very sweet*” dinosaur. It is the beginning of the literacy journey. In “Mary Todd,” he used the progression to show her instability and the disconnection from reality caused by her trauma. The broken chords hovered around F#, never settling. In “Barbara,” the broken chords also hover, but they do not feel

directionless. The chords proceed with tonic, subdominant, and dominant functions. It feels goal-oriented, functional, and determined (see Musical Example 15). In both songs, Heggie uses almost the exact same tactic – a chord progression hovering around F – to achieve wildly different emotional results.

Musical Example 15 shows a bass line with chords for measures 23 through 31. The chords are: F (dim), F, g, F, C6, d, C, F, g, F, Bb, C, F. A bracket under measures 28-30 is labeled 'F pedal point'.

Musical Example 15 Chord progressions in “Barbara Bush.”

While the accompaniment generally supports the vocal line in these progressions, it often carries the voice in an unexpected direction. But, if the singer knows why the chords move the way they do, she will navigate the unexpected harmony. For example, in “Mary Todd Lincoln,” the singer sings a tri-tone between F and C $\flat$  over a B $\flat$  chord (see Musical Example 16). If the singer does not appreciate the anguish Mary feels here over Abraham’s death – and realize that the changing harmony shows her losing her mind – the tri-tone and dissonance could be tricky.

Musical Example 16 shows a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "A griev-ing na-tion cried." The piano accompaniment features a chromatic passage in the right hand and a steady bass line in the left hand.

Musical Example 16 Unusual harmony in Mary Todd Chromatic Passage, m. 24-25.

## Scales for Text Painting

In the last two songs, Heggie uses scalar passages for pure text painting. In “Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis,” the scale appears as she and President Kennedy decide what she will wear when they go to Dallas. The scale, appropriately in thirds, represents Jackie considering her closet or pulling out a dress to show him (see Musical Example 17).

Musical Example 17 consists of two systems of music. The first system, starting at measure 38, features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics: "The beige and white dress? No?". The piano accompaniment features a scale in thirds, starting on G4 and moving up to D6. The piano part is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic in the first measure and a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic in the second measure. The second system, starting at measure 41, also features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics: "The blue and yel-low suit? May-be?". The piano accompaniment features a scale in thirds, starting on G4 and moving up to D6. The piano part is marked with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. Both systems are in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature.

Musical Example 17 Scales, “Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis” mm. 38-42.

Similarly, in “Barbara Bush,” the scale directly paints the text. In this song, Barbara Bush tells the children of *Sesame Street* a story about a dinosaur who picks them up and helps them learn to read. When Pete the dinosaur picks up the children, a five-octave scale illustrates Pete’s impressive height (see Musical Example 18).



Musical Example 18 Scale, “Barbara Bush,” mm. 76-78.

The last measure of “Barbara Bush” also has a scale, but unlike previous scales it has no text to paint (see Musical Example 19). The lack of action text here leaves the meaning open to interpretation. Is it just a cute ending? Is it expressive of self-betterment through literacy? Is it the piano also giving thanks after the voice says “*Thanks, Pete?*” Is the piano actually Pete saying, “you’re welcome?” Heggie leaves it open-ended, allowing the performer (and audience) to decide.

Musical Example 19 “Barbara Bush” mm. 96-97.

These moments of pure text painting happen in the most whimsical moments of the cycle, using familiar musical techniques to add to the levity. Heggie believes lightness and laughter must be included in any work with heaviness like madness and assassinations.<sup>135</sup> It reminds us of the good side to our humanity, enduring beyond pain and suffering.

Heggie's exploration of chromatic and scalar passages makes for expressive, emotional music. Since he does not confine himself to one method of musical organization or emotional delivery, the performer must make sense of each moment. The performer may choose how to interpret dissonance, as long as it honors the spirit of the First Lady and remains in Heggie's tempos.

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135. Thomas, "The Most Popular Opera Composer of Our Time."

CHAPTER IX – OTHER MUSICAL FEATURES

Heggie used half steps to tie the songs together. He used chromatic passages and scales to underscore emotion and paint the text in the songs. Heggie makes use of two other techniques, but they only apply to one song each. In “Eleanor Roosevelt,” Heggie heavily uses “My Country, ‘tis of Thee” in the accompaniment to honor the history of Marian Anderson’s concert. He fragments it, spinning out accompanimental figures based on the repeated notes of “land where my fathers died,” and builds intensity, leading to the golden ratio of the song. In “Barbara Bush,” he uses spoken text to emphasize gratitude.

“My Country, ‘tis of Thee” and the Golden Ratio in “Eleanor Roosevelt”

Marian Anderson opened her 1939 concert with “My Country, ‘tis of Thee,” and Mr. Heggie makes sure that we do not forget it. The melody of the patriotic song weaves throughout the accompaniment, beginning in measure 4 with the direction “ghostly;” a direct reference to Heggie’s conception of these women as ghosts (see Musical Example 20).

Heggie:



Original:



Musical Example 20 “Eleanor Roosevelt” mm. 4-7 compared to “My Country, ‘tis of Thee.”

The melody gains some simple harmony in measure 12, and then the accompaniment changes tactics in measure 23. Mr. Heggie takes the repeated melody notes of “land where my fathers died,” and uses that melodic fragment to spin out his accompaniment as repeated chords (see Musical Example 21). This is significant, when one remembers that it was Marian Anderson, a Black woman, singing the words “land where my fathers died” in a time of racial divide.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G-flat major (two flats) and 5/4 time. The lyrics are: "Wear-ing this e - le-gant mink she stood on the steps be-neath". The piano accompaniment consists of repeated chords in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. The chords are G-flat major, F-flat major, and G-flat major. The melodic line in the left hand is a simple harmonic accompaniment.

Musical Example 21 Repeated chords as an accompanimental device, mm. 23-26.

This repeated-chord accompaniment not only relates to “My Country, ‘tis of Thee.” The repetitive movement between two chords also subconsciously relates to the Mary Todd motive. While not a perfect relation – here, the G $\flat$  repeated chords move down to F $\flat$  major instead of “Mary Todd’s” F minor up to G $\flat$  major – Heggie is subliminally preparing our ears for the “Mary Todd” motive.

The repeated-chord gesture continues gently until measure 54, when the chords begin the 10-measure chromatic ascent under the words, “*with every step on the way, I think about what she showed us that day.*” The chromatic ascent (detailed in Chapter 9) represents steps toward a goal: measure 67, the Golden Ratio moment of the song. The

golden ratio, a moment almost two thirds of the way through a piece, is a mathematical way to find the most effective time for a climactic moment. Heggie puts the full “Land where my fathers died” melody right at the golden ratio and follows it with “*No one can make you feel inferior without your consent*” (see Musical Example 22).

Musical Example 22 Chromatic ascent, Heggie’s score, and Golden Ratio m. 54-68.

At the end of the song, after Eleanor sings “*Marian Anderson is singing of thee,*” the piano plays “My Country, ‘tis of Thee” one last time, ending the song with the hope of a better future. Using “My Country, ‘tis of Thee” grounds “Eleanor Roosevelt” in history. By making it appear at the Golden Ratio, giving it pride of place, Heggie emphasizes the dream of “one nation, with liberty and justice for all.”

### The Goal of Gratitude and the Spoken Word

Scheer ends the cycle with the words, “Thanks, Pete.” Heggie chose to not set these words to music: the singer speaks them. Both Heggie and Scheer believe in the power of music to speak beyond the words. Scheer says,

In the end it's all about the music. We are here because of the music. The text is obviously very, very important, but it is the doorway for the music, so we can feel the music. Which kind of seals the deal, because otherwise we would just say the words, right? A lot of this is about creating the scaffolding so the music can do what only music can do, which is access the feeling of everything we're talking about.<sup>136</sup>

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136. Scheer, interview.

What must it mean for these words of gratitude to not be set to music? If music enhances the words' meaning, and Heggie left these words as spoken, he must believe that the word "thanks" speaks for itself. This cycle overflows with big, deep experiences and emotions that benefit from music's enhancement: loss, despair, the joy of simple play, injustice, hope. But by the end, words alone suffice. Gratitude does not need music to explain it. We struggle, we live, we chase our goals, and at the end, we give thanks. Barbara Bush, who says these words, chose to live her life gratefully, joyfully. The singer must take what they know about Barbara and speak appropriately.

## CHAPTER X – CONCLUSION

*Iconic Legacies: First Ladies at the Smithsonian* details four extraordinary women. Their personal sorrows, pain, hope, and joy were also universal, a quality Mr. Heggie feels necessary for his musical stories. Mr. Scheer’s creative writing makes these women feel like they are flesh and bone instead of something from our history books. The music in which Mr. Heggie clothes these women is emotionally revealing, exploring the many manipulations of half steps, showing determination or dissolution in chromatic passages, and using scales for whimsical text painting. As performers, we honor these women by learning their stories and taking emotional cues from Heggie’s music, “carrying them forward” as Heggie says.<sup>137</sup>

Heggie and Scheer use characters rather than plot to drive their stories forward. This requires the singers to know the histories and personalities of each woman. Heggie and Scheer also require that the singer base her acting on emotional truth, being authentic to the reality of each First Lady. Heggie sees these women and their accomplishments as “still among us, still vibrating.” He says, “Everything is very much still alive, as long as we keep it alive.”<sup>138</sup> The singer has a duty to honor that and carry these stories forward to the audience.

Eleanor Roosevelt’s lifelong activism on behalf of human and civil rights sets the stage for these pieces. Heggie uses “My Country, ‘tis of Thee” to ground the song in history, a chromatic passage to display the journey of Civil Rights, and cross-relations to highlight the conflict between who we are and who we might be. Eleanor’s ghost,

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137. Heggie, interview.

138. Ibid.

embodied by the singer, speaks directly to the audience, giving immediacy and emphasizing that Marian Anderson is singing *of us*. Connecting the past and the present helps the singer understand why the text feels so free from time. It is not chained to a moment in history; it transcends that moment, showing that there is not so much difference between then and now, after all.

“Mary Todd Lincoln” can challenge singers because it requires stepping into Mary’s mind, and deciding which trauma applies to which stanzas and how she feels about it. Musically, the shifting tonalities in the chromatic passages can be disorienting, and the melismas of the motive may challenge the singer. The singer finds meaning in the changing tonality by understanding that it reflects the unmooring of Mary’s mind from reality. The continuous repetition of the motive mimics Mary’s madness and embodies her pain. When the music and drama are tied together, this song satisfies the singer and affects the audience. We empathize with Mary because we have also grieved, making this song personal *and* universal, perfect for Heggie.

“Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis” provides fun and playfulness before the shock of the assassination, emphasizing what has been lost. The singer must navigate the falling thirds’ shifting tonalities that sound natural but prove difficult. In order to portray her accurately, the singer must know how Jacqueline interacted with her husband and how she reacted to his murder. This song shows a woman at a precipice: she must choose whether to give in to despair, or to do her duty and rise above it.

“Barbara Bush” closes the cycle with lighthearted fun and the hope that comes from bettering one’s self. Heggie transforms the Mary Todd motive’s F-G $\flat$  chords to F-C chords, making this song’s harmony functional and familiar. He paints the text with



scales and answers the chromatic progression in “Mary Todd Lincoln” with a functional progression. The singer’s embodiment of Barbara’s can-do, positive attitude should dominate her interpretation. This song provides the antidote to Mary’s despair and the answer to Eleanor’s question: with gratitude and self-betterment, we overcome our hardships and raise up others.

From Eleanor’s dissonance-laden yearning to be better than we collectively are, through Mary’s trauma and Jackie’s heavy-hearted duty, to Barbara’s triumph through individual betterment, Scheer and Heggie paint a picture of the people we can be. The singer’s task is to know each woman, and also honor her own self by making artistic decisions, even to the point of personalizing the score. Together with the performer’s informed, authentic interpretation, *Iconic Legacies* enlivens these women, their struggles, their goals, and their hopes, making the audience remember. Not only does the singer carry each First Lady forward, she also carries Heggie’s music forward, creating new shades of meaning.

APPENDIX A – TRANSCRIPT FOR INTERVIEW WITH JAKE HEGGIE

March 22, 2021, via Zoom

**Gibson: Thank you so much for writing for the mezzo voice! It's a blessing.**

Heggie: Well, thank you! It's a lot of fun for me. Someone was trying to analyze why I am so drawn to the mezzo voice, and baritones as well, and I think it's because I grew up with a lot of pop singers from the 60s and 70s, and I grew up with that sound, so that was sort of the register. And also I love musical theater and those registers, and I recognized early on that that was where I could hear the words most clearly. So I think it's a combination of all of those things, but... I'm definitely drawn to mezzo voices and mezzo personalities. [Laughs] They tend to be really nice people.

**Gibson: We certainly do have personalities!**

Heggie: Well, it's a much mellower, fun personality. It isn't like... Tenors and Sopranos can be really high strung, and understandably so!

**Gibson: This is where we say "bless their hearts."**

Heggie: Exactly!

**Gibson: We don't mean it unkindly, though.**

Heggie: Exactly.

**Gibson: Their hearts just need some blessing. Well, I'm going to get started. I don't want to take up too much of your time. *Iconic legacies* was commissioned by DC**

**Vocal Arts, right? What did they ask you for?**

Heggie: They said that they wanted to do a new song cycle. They talked to me first about doing a commission, and who I would want to write that for that would also fit into their plan of who they want to present. And I had written a lot for Susie Graham early on, but

then not for... You know I wrote *Dead Man Walking* for her and *The Deepest Desire*, and then we hadn't really collaborated a lot from that time. So I thought it was time to check in with her. And she was into it. And then I thought, "well let's write something that's meaningful for the place." Previously, Gene Scheer and I had written a set called *Statuesque*, and that had to do with the people who commissioned it and the place. And we had also written *A Question of Light*, which was for the Dallas Museum of Art, so it featured works there, and so I thought "let's do something that's particular to DC." And so we started thinking about what that would be, because there's so much art, there's so much *everything* that is iconic. At first, we thought about doing the paintings that the Supreme Court Justices have chosen to hang in their offices, in their chambers. Because they are allowed to borrow almost any piece of art from the National Gallery and have it hanging in their chambers. And I thought that's probably an interesting reflection of who that person is... but then I thought that could get really yucky because I'm going to favor certain ones over others, and that's not fair. Even though it was an interesting idea. And then, we started thinking about the Smithsonian. We started thinking about famous objects in the Smithsonian, like Dorothy's ruby slippers, you know, and very famous things like that. And then I thought "but that's still not enough. What is it going to be?" And then Gene, I think, found the reference to Marian Anderson's mink coat. And all of a sudden something clicked and I thought "there's got to be iconic objects connected to these very famous First Ladies." And so Gene started doing research and found all these possibilities for us. And then we had to settle on just a few because of the length of the cycle of the commission. But it left the door wide open to expand the cycle, or to do a subsequent cycle at some point. But it was really eye-opening and it was also a way to

make those important women come to life in a very special way. And to connect them to important things that happened, and why those objects are there, and wake up the spirits of those objects and those lives and bring them to the fore. And it felt like the right time to do that. What year did I write that? 2015, right? Yeah, it just felt like the right time, so it worked out. And Susie loved the idea. And they were a little slow to take off, but when Jamie Barton recorded them last year that's when they started to really take off. Because we didn't have a record really. I'm glad that Jamie's recording is out there because... it's really interesting. A couple of people had sent me recordings, and they had done them so slowly. It was like... There was one person who sent me just three of the songs, and just three songs took 15 minutes. And I was like "that is really slow. Really REALLY slow." So I'm glad we got the recording out there so there's a standard for tempo and line and intent. And now everyone can do what they want, but there is something you can refer to. To see how they go, but then say "here's how I feel them," which I yearn for. I don't want people just do them all the same.

**Gibson: That is something that I noticed when I was listening to them. I thought "oh that's a lot faster than I was doing them."**

Heggie: and Jamie interpolated a lot of notes, and I've changed notes that were in the score, and you are allowed to use any of those changes that you want. I like for a score to feel alive, so if something feels right in the moment, you should try it. The way we interpolate late old scores, you know, there's something great about looking at old figured bass, and realizing they wanted that improvisatory quality to it. They wanted it to be alive for whoever was performing it in that moment. And since these are such personal songs,

you know, it's your interpretation of Eleanor Roosevelt, of Mary Todd Lincoln etc. It does have to feel like it's a character for you.

**Gibson: Right, and thank you for that! It makes my job a lot more interesting as a singer to realize that I have a little bit of freedom.**

Heggie: Yeah! I want you to create something that feels authentic and truthful for you.

Our job is to tell the truth, right? And that will come from inside of you, what you feel the truth of that person and that character and that moment really is.

**Gibson: I love it. You knew you were going to work with Gene on that?**

Heggie: Yeah. We've worked so well together in the past. He's such a great collaborator. You know, there's just an unspoken language between us, and there is a reason writing teams stay together over time. I feel like he challenges me and makes my work better and I do the same for him. And he is going to surprise me and I'm going to surprise him. I've been telling the story a lot recently, of creative teams because of a couple of projects that I'm working on that people are questioning choices, and I'm reminded of a story. I was lucky enough several years ago to be at dinner at a table with Meryl Streep. It was right after she was supposed to do a movie of Terrence McNalley's play "Masterclass," as Maria Callas, directed by Mike Nichols, and Mike Nichols suddenly died. And she had done a lot of work with him through the years. During my conversation with her I said "I'm so sorry that you decided not to go forward with *Masterclass*." And I could tell it irked her a little that I brought it up, but she sort of looked down for a second, and then she looked me right in the eye and said "I couldn't fall in love again." And that's everything with the creative, collaborative partner. It is a very special bond. And those projects and those ideas that are associated with certain people... If it starts to fall apart,

it means you have to re-create it and fall in love with the whole idea over again.

Sometimes you just don't want to. You know, your heart has to be in 100%. And so suddenly it didn't feel like a good idea to her, and so that's why I go back to Gene again and again. I don't want to fall in love again!

**Gibson: Y'all do such beautiful work together! And one of the things that I'm drawn to about your writing and specifically your writing with him, is that you are able to dig through the weeds and get to some deep, unspeakable human truths about the nature of love, forgiveness, or justice like in *Dead Man Walking*, or "what is art?" or "what is soul?" that you get at in *Great Scott*. And it is stated so beautifully and simply, when the two of you get together, that it just...**

Heggie: Well, thank you. The point of it, to me, is to get at the heart and soul of it. Find beauty or the many different shades of beauty. You know, there are very dark things and there are very bright things. But to allow you to go to the emotional core of it. Speaking of Susie Graham and Jamie Barton, they're always saying to me "Heggie, what is it with you and the emotions?! Why? Why?!" And Susie Graham in particular would say "I hate the feelings! No! I just want to sing beautifully. Why are you doing this to me, it's torture!" Because she went from doing Sister Helen to the role that Frederica von Stade created, The Mother, in *Dead Man Walking*, which is a very emotional role. But it's just who I am as a composer. It's how I connect to music, so I try to find that and make that available to the singer, and not complicate it, not micromanage. But allow you, again, to bring something to it. I'm so tired of looking at scores... I have a friend who specializes in looking at New Music. It's very academic and, you know, some of the scores that she shows me, I'm like "how do you even begin to navigate this?!" I mean, there's a whole

chart of what the language is for the piece, in terms of the notation etc. And then it's in 11/16 followed by a bar of whatever, and this, and that; and you know, it's all so micromanaged! And I'm like, "aren't you going crazy?!" And... Yes. I am.

**Gibson: Yes! Well, I love emotions. My parents are psychologists, so I am about it. And I thank you. The clarity with which you are able to speak about those kinds of deep human truths... Thank you.**

Heggie: Well, it has to resonate that way with me or I'm not going to write the piece. That's the thing, you know, when an idea happens for a new work, I need to feel that sort of emotional shiver. The same way, I'm sure, when you're thinking about taking on a project, and you have to feel excited about it. You know that passion, and that's what happens to me when I hear the right idea. I get this emotional, musical shiver where I can feel that there is music there, a lot of it, and a very deep. I don't know how it sounds yet, but I know it's there. So it's all possible. If I don't feel that right away, it's not the right story for me.

**Gibson: Did you come up with which First Ladies you were going to use? Did Gene?**

Heggie: Well, we knew that we were going to do Eleanor Roosevelt, because that was the first one he found. Then he started digging around and he found other objects and things. And some of them spoke more loudly and clearly to us, so we wound up with these four. He had also found one of Jane [Abigail] Adams, which we'd still like to do. There are any number of the others that we would still like to approach, we just haven't had the time because we've been busy writing operas. But there are so many possibilities that we would like to explore. This felt like a good range of really interesting women who've

made a difference, and who were dynamic, and who went through a lot during their time there, and had something to say. So it just felt right.

**Gibson: I would like to start talking about the music. So, obviously you have this fantastic motive of the F and G flat chords going back-and-forth. It ties the last three songs together, but it's not in the first song. So are we considering the Eleanor Roosevelt song to be like “here is our premise, in this question of who are we?”**

Heggie: That “who are we” was really, really important. No, I think I was finding my way with that first song, and it felt right on its own, that it stood apart, and sort of brought us into the world of the songs. Because it's a question we are still dealing with, obviously very deeply. That song resonates even more truthfully now than it even did five years ago. And then the “Mary Todd Lincoln” - the madness - that suddenly appeared, emerged, and then it just felt like it was the right motive for the rest. And it still is somewhat connected, it's just not harmonically the same. But the opening measures of the Eleanor Roosevelt song, that motif flows into the Mary Todd motif. They *are* connected, it's just that the last three are more obviously connected to that motif. In “Mary Todd Lincoln” and “Jackie Onassis,” it's tied to tragedy and a kind of madness. And in the last song it's tied to joy! It's a very flexible theme, obviously. I wasn't necessarily thinking about... I love motifs and how they give us information, but I also just let the pieces emerge. I just listen, based on the text and the character that I am hearing, what the situation is. I just listen and let something emerge that's really... I can't give you too much more than that because I write by instinct. I don't really map things out and say ‘okay well I'll use this over here, and I'll use this over here.’ I'm not that kind of composer.



**Gibson: Right. Well, I love that this motive... You didn't really change it; I mean, you made it faster in the last song, but there's this kernel, this core of these women's experiences and their strengths and their power that doesn't change in spite of their situation, their grief, their tragedy, their whatever. And that strength in that last song propels you into 'right, we're going to be better for our children, we're going to grow and use the strength that we have found in this galvanizing experience.' That's how I took it [the flexibility of the theme].**

Heggie: Right, I love it! And that's what Barbara Bush was trying to do with the Muppets and the literacy campaign, which was try to take something that is very hard for people and try to make life better for the next generation through reading, so they can learn about the past, they can learn about what happened before. The same way *we* need to learn about what happened before. Sharing memories and sharing stories that happened, I think, is very, very important. And it is central to my work: remembering. Helping people remember what happened before. Because cultural memory is very short -like, 72 hours. So whatever we can do to keep telling stories, which is a long tradition with human beings because memory has always been short. To try to remind younger people of what came before them so they don't take as much for granted. And they realize the sacrifices that happened before, and that life was hard for other people too. And yours is better because those people struggled. And that is easy, especially for young people, to forget. Because they haven't lived through it. So, telling stories through song, through opera, through theater, all of that is really important.

**Gibson: Yes. In the Eleanor Roosevelt song, there is this mention of "Charleston's Amazing Grace." And I have to ask: what is that?**

Heggie: That is when Obama sang “Amazing Grace.”

**Gibson: Okay! I thought that's what it was! But I got nervous about it.**

Heggie: Yeah, that's when... because you have to look at when the songs were written.

That was 2015, and so the only reference we have to Charleston at that point was Obama singing “Amazing Grace.” Not the horrible thing that happened just a couple years later.

But yeah that is a reference to that event.

**Gibson: Okay, so good! I was racking my brain thinking ‘what else could it be?**

**“Amazing Grace” wasn't written there...’**

Heggie: So, the thing with that moment was there had been this tragedy and the President of the United States showed up and started singing “Amazing Grace,” and it was just this remarkable moment in time. And so that's what it's referring to.

**Gibson: So then, is there a narrator quality? I mean it's obviously not Eleanor Roosevelt who's talking about that. Or I don't know, is it?**

Heggie: Oh no, it's totally Eleanor Roosevelt! Because part of the thing is: their spirit is still alive. You know, that's why she's saying “Listen! Listen, Marian Anderson is singing!” And, you know, it's still like if you listen you can still hear it. In other words, these ghosts are still vibrating. They're still present. What they accomplished is still here, they still walk among us. We carry them forward. So, you have to imagine that you went to the Smithsonian and you're looking at Marian Anderson's coat, and all of a sudden Eleanor Roosevelt walks around the corner and starts talking to you, telling you this story, in the present day, because she is still there. Everything is very much still alive, as long as we keep it alive.

**Gibson: Oh. I love that. that's... Fantastic. Vibrational memory. It's good stuff!**

Heggie: That's why you need to *be* that person in the moment, you know? And honor their spirit and their legacy. Walk their shoes. You know, the interesting thing about when Eleanor Roosevelt arranged for Marian Anderson to sing... you know the Daughters of the American Revolution had denied her singing in Constitution Hall because she was black. So Eleanor Roosevelt got her to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. It was a big, big deal, but Eleanor Roosevelt did not go to it. Because she did not want to draw focus. She wanted attention to be on the event, and on Marian Anderson and what she had to say. Not on the woman who organized it. She wanted the hero of the day to be Marian Anderson and freedom and liberty and what she had to say with her voice. And I think that spoke volumes about her.

**Gibson: Yes, she was astonishingly wise. Well, I'm just going to ask. Do you have any suggestions for performing these pieces of that... You obviously want it to go at a good clip, but do you have any style preferences, or opinions about what American art song should sound like in your songs?**

Heggie: I mean... Huh. That's interesting. I've never thought about that. "Do I have a particular style?" I don't think so? You know, I come from a world where my big influences are musical theater, American song, Bernstein, Sondheim, Britten, Poulenc, Debussy. I mean, there's this... A style of directness and storytelling and not stretching things out. It's really about telling the story. And so, being direct and getting into character... Because what I do, I'm a theater composer. I write characters. So it's really about feeling like you're inhabiting that character, but not imitating them. Being them. There's a big difference. So, it's not presentational. It's honest. Which means you don't have to transform yourself and put on a hat and things like that. It should always be

Rachel singing the songs, you know? But channeling this truth. You know, being honest and authentic about it is the most important thing. And making sure the words are as clear as possible. If that means pulling back a little bit or pushing a little bit, then that's what you do. I think that voices have different vibratos and speeds of vibrato, and I think that affects the tempo you take. Different pieces as well... recital and song is very different. It's just you standing there. So it's finding "what is the truth of that moment" and then... Graham Johnson I heard once in a master class talk about this. He said all the great singers that he has worked with, they have a movie going in their head where they clearly see where they are, what is going on, who those people are, why they are saying this, what is propelling them to say this, why they must tell the story, this event, this moment, this emotion, this transformation. But it's all very very clear. So if they're doing a song in which there is a tree or a lake or whatever... how big is the lake? How cold is the water? Is it winter, is it fall, spring? Is the tree alive? What kind of tree is it? Does it have blossoms? Does it have flowers? You know, all of that stuff is very important information to a complete performance of the song. So I think you have to be very aware of how it feels to sing that song honestly and what is going on around you. Visualize it. You know, where are you as Eleanor Roosevelt is talking about this coat? Are you next to the coat? Are you, as Eleanor, standing there talking? Or have they just seen the movie of Marian Anderson singing? What is the situation? Why? Why are you doing this? You know, the Big Why. Why are you on stage? What happened right before you came on stage? It's all acting technique.

**Gibson: Well, I think that's it. Unless you have any other comments or anecdotes or stories.**

Heggie: Let me think. No, I mean, the cycle did come about pretty quickly. I was working on *Great Scott* when I wrote it. And literally gave the songs to Susie like a week before the premier. It was insane. Insane! But she was so generous and kind, and they were all so thoughtful because at first I thought there was no way that I was going to be able to write these. I thought maybe we should do something I've written before, and then DC Vocal Arts, they really really wanted a new piece, so I pushed myself really really hard. And I'm glad I did because I'm very proud of the pieces. And while we were doing an event in DC, at the Smithsonian, to talk about them and do a preview, this docent came up to me out of the blue and said "I have the idea for your next opera." And I thought, ".....great." Anyway, I said "I have to do this event, can you wait here?" And he did. And then he said "have you ever heard of Mary Jane Bowser and Elizabeth Van Lew?" And I said no, he said "well, you need to look them up. And that needs to be the subject for your next opera because that story needs to be told." And so I started looking it up and it's these women spies in Richmond during the Civil War. One of them was a hidden slave and secret spy in the Jefferson Davis White House and the top of my head started to fly off, and I thought "you're right! That's my next opera!" So the First Ladies is associated, to me, with the birth of this next opera, my 10th opera, which is called *Intelligence*. It was supposed to happen this Fall in Houston, But it'll be... Anyway. But it's another big mezzo role that I'm writing for Jamie Barton.

**Gibson: Bless you sir.**

Heggie: Bless my heart!

**Gibson: Indeed! Bless your heart!**

Heggie: Hah! And actually, I use that line in the libretto! Right after a very tense, difficult scene when two people leave the room, and the main character, Jamie Barton, who's singing the role of Elizabeth Van Lou, and as they're leaving, through gritted teeth she smiles and goes [singing] "bless their hearts." [laughter]

**Gibson: Oh, it's just... perfect.**

Heggie: I know, right? So this piece is associated with that. And Gene and I have talked about expanding the cycle. A few other people have asked for songs, so we will at some point when we have a little time. I'm still finishing the second act of *Intelligence*. I still want to write it, even though it's been postponed. And we have a big workshop of it this summer.

**Gibson: That's awesome. Well, thank you again for writing them in the first place even though it sounded a little stress-y.**

Heggie: It was very stress-y! It all goes to show you that it's all possible! It was Leonard Bernstein who said "For really great work you need a really wonderful idea is not quite enough time." It's kind of how I work. If I'm not in a panic and stress about it, I'll never write it.

**Gibson: My dad always says "if you want something done, give it to a busy person."**

Heggie: Yeah, totally! I get things done when I'm really really busy. If someone gives it to me with the oceans of time, if it's a project that is going to take me a week to write, it will still take me a week to write, but I will wait until that last week. Because for some reason I need that terror, you know? In order to get it done.

**Gibson: Yes! We all need that fear of failure.**

Heggie: Yeah! I don't know, there's not even any time to think about it, you just have to do the work. That's part of it too. There's too much time to think about it, like think about all the possibilities, there's also the risk, when a project has a long long lead time, of it becoming too familiar that the magic and the mystery of it starts to wear off, especially as you start to share the idea. That's why keeping ideas for new projects in a bubble is very, very important. You don't want to let it disseminate. You want to keep the excitement of the unknown.

**Gibson: Well, I love your storytelling and love that you really get at those big enormous truths, and you do that whether it's in a three hour opera or a 15 minutes set and I completely adore it.**

Heggie: Well, it's great to visit with you and thank you so much for giving them so much time and attention.

**Gibson: It is my pleasure! They're just delightful. If you hear them and don't ever think about them again, they are delightful, and if you do dive into them like I've been, there's so much good soul to be found.**

Heggie: There's a lot of stuff in there, yeah. Well, they're really interesting women with big stories and big truths to tell.

## APPENDIX B –TRANSCRIPT FOR INTERVIEW WITH GENE SCHEER

March 23, 2021, via phone

[Beginning of interview was cut off - he wasted no time starting to talk! I had asked about what the criteria were for choosing the subjects of the songs, and who chose the First Ladies]

Scheer: Earlier in her [Anne Sullivan's] life, she'd worked as a teacher for the deaf, and I was looking through items in the Smithsonian collection and one of the things was a hand mirror. And, you know, before sign language was created in the teens, when she would have been doing this, you know 19...whatever that was...I don't know exactly what the year is...but at the turn of the 1900s...when she was doing this, sign language hadn't been developed. So, for the deaf, they were using mirrors, just sort of reading people's lips. And I thought it might be interesting to do a song with that, and that did not...I'm just sort of remembering the whole process. But that's kind of illustrative of the fact that I was looking for songs based on items in the collection that triggered [an idea], or sort of a window could be opened up. So I was thinking about that, but of course that song didn't make it in. And so, we went with a...uh, you know, I found out about the card...the Kennedy's Christmas card that they had signed. That's in the collection. And, of course, Lincoln's hat. And Lincoln's hat was interesting because you would be thinking about the hat, but it's actually about the band that was around the hat, which was connected to his son's death. Which I didn't know until I started...you know, Lincoln's hat, of course, is iconic and it's a big thing that's at the Smithsonian. But when I started reading about it, I learned it. And then, you know, for variety we were looking for other things...and Barbara Bush and her campaign for literacy... When you're writing a cycle, you're trying



to balance different moods, different times, different people, and trying to get a glimpse of the collection of the Smithsonian and also how these First Ladies contributed in different ways. And, of course, you know, the role of the First Lady has changed over time, and also depending upon the person. Abigail Adams is definitely someone...there wasn't a thing at...sometimes these people were very interesting but there wasn't a thing at the Smithsonian that I could use, and that was kind of the hook for this cycle, right? That it would be connected with the Smithsonian. I have written a song for Michelle Obama...a text for Michelle Obama that Jake has not yet set. And I'm not sure if he will set it. But, it's a very interesting song, and song text, and we'll see whether that gets done down the road - if it gets added to the cycle or not. I'm not sure. And maybe we will add additional songs as time goes on. Or maybe not. I think both Jake and I are very happy with the cycle. Susan did such a great job singing it, and now Jamie Barton's recorded it really beautifully as well. How else can I help try to figure out what I can do for your...to help you with your project?

**Gibson: Of course, I've got a list of questions that may or may not...**

Scheer: Oh, good! Good, I'm glad. Because otherwise I'll just be babbling incoherently. So, go ahead. Yes! Questions.

**Gibson: Well, I'm more than happy to let you babble, because it's all great babbling! I loved that these are not songs *about* these women, these are texts *from* these women, first-person.**

Scheer: Yes, that is something that Jake and I have done a lot. When we did *Statuesque*, which is the first cycle we did. That was something, that idea to do it from the perspective of the statue, of the sculpture. And it was a great idea. It makes it much more

active. Everything we do is theatrically-based because that's who we are as artists, and as people. We're people of the theater. So our song cycles tend to be very character-driven. It's not like... I love Rogers and Hart. But one of the things about Rogers and Hart songs, I absolutely think they are wit-based rather than character-based songs. Which is why they work so beautifully in cabarets because anyone can sing them. Anyone can sing *My Funny Valentine*. It's not a specific person. Even though it probably came from a show in which it was a specific person singing it. But, Rogers and Hammerstein... the songs were much more... absolutely a specific individual was singing that song. Which is probably why those musicals endure in a way that the Rogers and Hart shows don't. In other words, the Rogers and Hart songs have become the American standard of the cabaret scene, and Rogers and Hammerstein's songs have become these shows that are done all the time because they are character-driven. I'm using these examples from musical theater, but the point is that Jake and I... our medium is opera... are very much about *who* is singing the song. It's not a question of writing a love song, it's writing a song about a specific person in a specific situation in their life, for example. Using that as a point of departure for these *Iconic Legacies* songs – yes, these songs were in first-person. Mary Todd, for example – the madness that overtook her as her life progressed and she lost her son, and then Lincoln's presidency, and then of course being shot. But this song focuses on the loss of a child, which is enough to make anyone lose their moorings – and I think that's what happened. So, yes, it was a dramatic device, and it's something that emerges out of who Jake and I... perspectives of who we are, and we are definitely storytellers first and foremost.

**Gibson: Yes, and let me just take this opportunity to thank you for that because it aligns very significantly with what I think opera's purpose is, which is to explore these kind of big, unbelievably deep, unspoken, human, emotional truths that, if we did talk about them out loud and in public, it would be inappropriate to talk about the depths of our love, or our pain, or our *whatever*, but offers a place for us to...**

Scheer: Right. Unfortunately, it's things that people experienced. In this case, it's writ large because these people were sort of the prow of the ship because of their position, their celebrity, and their place in the culture was such...and in American history! For example, Marian Anderson singing...that is a song about the fulcrum of American history, which is of course race. But, it's from her perspective, of course.

**Gibson: Obviously, these songs are all centered on one event in these women's lives that is true. But, how much did you fabricate?**

Scheer: Well, there's always a little bit of poetic license. But, the basic facts of these songs...like the Barbara Bush, I wouldn't say it was an exception. She *did* go on Sesame Street to advance the literacy campaign. I made up the story of the dragon, flying on top of the dragon's back, and the whole thing, if I remember correctly...the story of Pete and all that. But the idea was, she was trying to advance the cause. Significantly with Barbara Bush, it wasn't advancing literacy for kids, it's advancing literacy for adults. And, to me, the poignant thing about that song is this idea...it's an incredible thing to not be able to read and then to be able to read. It's like not being able to see and then being able to see, or hear, or something. And then to be able to share that with your child. That is...you want to talk about transforming someone's life. We can talk about multiple different ways in which legislation can be enacted to empower people and so forth. But nothing

empowers people more than being able to read. Or, more significantly put, nothing *disempowers* people more than *not* being able to read. If you're illiterate, it's just an incredible burden. It's such a stigma. In addition to the practical effects of not being able to read, it's such a stigma in terms of self-esteem and so forth. And not to be able to do it, and then to learn as an adult to read, and then to share it with your kid...that, to me, seemed worthy of a song. So even though that one is light-hearted, there's something that's very significant, I think, that's at the center of that song. And, of course, the other ones...the Kennedy assassination. If there's any song...I wasn't in the bedroom with Jackie and Jack, but I do know from reading, that day - there is so much...Manchester wrote a book on it...it's been explored so much. Not just how the assassination took place, but everything around it. And, it is true. The basic outline of that song is true, that they did sign that card. It is in the Smithsonian. And he told her to wear the Chanel suit. And she was worried about what to wear in Texas, because those women are going to be dressed in their Texas wares, and what should she wear, and it was an unusual thing because Jacqueline Kennedy did *not* need someone to tell her how to dress. So the fact that he contributed in that way seemed like a nice detail to weave into the mix of the song. And she didn't want to go to Texas that day, right? She did not want to go. But she went, in order to support him, and we all know what happened. And then famously the Chanel suit that she wore, she refused to take it off even though it was splattered with blood. And she said "I want them to see what they've done." And that's part of the story. So the major facts of that are true. With Lincoln... I wouldn't say it's more poetic than the other, but as you remember there's rhyme in it, I don't know if I'm remembering correctly. It was really just imagining. Of course, there's a lot in the Lincoln biographies,

and the death of that child was a hugely impactful, significant thing in their lives. Since she famously had all sorts of mental strain and problems, and clearly that was something that was a big part of the decline of her mental health. So, it's all true, but when you're writing a song, there's a line "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story. [by Mark Twain]" It is true, and I think if I had just made this stuff up the songs would be less impactful, because the fact is: they are true. And I remember one line from the Marian Anderson when I reference - which just brings tears to my eyes - when Obama sang "Amazing Grace." It seemed to me to be such an incredibly poignant and powerful moment. When words fail, music is our conduit to express what we feel. And I think for this gun violence and racism, what else is there to say but to sing "Amazing Grace" in that moment? It was such an incredibly moving moment to me. And that's why I referenced it in the song.

**Gibson: And that moment - I got my hands on this in 2016 or 2017, I saw it was in Heggie's catalog and I just said "Well I'm going to order that," and the Eleanor Roosevelt song confused me the most, because I wondered if there was a narrator voice in addition to Eleanor's voice, what is going on? But then I spoke with Jake yesterday, and he mentioned the fact that it's like these women's energies, their shades, are standing there in the museum, telling you these stories, and it's time-less. And I thought that was brilliant. Is that something that you talked about?**

Scheer: Not so much. The songs are obviously the collective merging of our imaginations. And then, of course, the imagination of the singer, too, who is interpreting it. But I think I was not thinking about that the way Jake was, in terms of being in the museum. He was when he wrote the music, so there you have it. He took the texts and

wove that into...Unless Jake were to tell you that, I don't think you would know that that was in his mind, but that's okay because this is like the scaffolding for a building. The scaffolding goes away, but the building stands. But you need the scaffolding in order to build it. So I'm sure what Jake is saying is exactly what he went through when he wrote the music for the songs.

**Gibson: I thought that was such an interesting way to see it, and certainly something I had not thought of. Okay. So direct quotations. There's of course that attributed "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent" from Eleanor. But are there others? I didn't recognize anything else.**

Scheer: No, I don't think so. That line and that came, of course, from Eleanor Roosevelt, but if you've ever read Doris Kearns Goodwin's books on Eleanor, there's Franklin and Eleanor, there's another one too, but I read them, and that was cited in those books as I recall, and also it was a way of linking Marian Anderson to Eleanor, of course the other thing is, and these choices that people made which seem if not just self-evident, but they don't seem as courageous as they were at that time, you know what I mean? I mean Eleanor Roosevelt prodding FDR to advance the cause of race relations in this country, and Roosevelt trying to juggle the democratic south and fight World War II, it's such a complicated story. But she was, in the White House anyway, she was the better angel of our nature and, you know, urging and nudging him towards more inclusive policy and ways of advancing the cause. And he did as much as he could, in his mind. My point is that when the Daughters of the American Revolution would not allow her to sing, it was a big thing at the time for her to do what she did. But again I don't want to overstate it, because it's not as big as people showing up and getting beaten for being at rallies and so

forth, you know what I mean? And also, what a moment for Marian Anderson, I mean what a moment in American history! It's just an unbelievably powerful moment. And not to mention her incredible talent and dignity, and the coat is sort of connected to all of that right? Just amazing.

**Gibson: Yes, it's such a good story to begin with. Well I think you've answered my questions about the Eleanor Roosevelt one. For the Mary Todd Lincoln song, the text is very repetitive. Did you intend that to be repeated?**

Scheer: I think that Jake might've repeated it once, but of course he has the weaving motif, which echoes her madness like the windmill of your mind, not to quote another song. You know, even if you're not mentally ill, if you're concerned about something, or really have a major "thing," your brain is going on and on and on over and over, rehashing "What should I have said, what should I've done," - that thing becomes a musical motif which is then woven through the entire cycle, so I think the line about rhyming - "In a world where this can happen, only madness rhymes" - was repeated in my original text. I thought it was a line that was worth repeating and also was at the core of who was singing, who this person was, what this moment was that she was singing about. That was her life.

**Gibson: There is another line in that song: "The ship is lost and you pretend we'll find your way. The Pain will end." That is a stunning line.**

Scheer: You know, I mean, what pressure he was under! Unbelievable. And how he rallied. It brings tears to my eyes, especially considering how low we've fallen with Trump and all. It's the idea of this person, with this personal tragedy. Juggling this personal tragedy and trying to rally and maintain the union, the country. The dream of a

nation where the majority would rule, and wouldn't just break off into little pieces. And not to mention racism and what's going on with everything else. People forget that these politicians are not just dealing with the politics of the moment, they're also dealing with their own personal travails, and in this case they were so incredibly enormous. And so, Lincoln was trying to keep it together, and I understand: from her perspective she lost her baby, her little boy. And to watch this person be as functional as he was when she was so dysfunctional, it would drive you crazy. I think that's what I was thinking about when I wrote that line.

**Gibson: For the Jackie Kennedy one, I don't really have a question about it but I just wanted to say that I think it's a masterful bit of miniature storytelling. It's businesslike, and then it turns fun, and then you get blindsided by the assassination that you know happened. Obviously, you know. And then when she comes back again at the very end and asks "Oh Jack... what would you like me to do?" it's just so horribly tragic and it hurts.**

Scheer: Well one of the things that that underscores is that for what I do, and Jake too, but the first link in the chain is the text, and it's all about structure. So much about writing a song is about how you structure it, and like I said earlier on, for us it's like these little mini-dramas in each song. To be blindsided like the shot of an assassination which you don't see coming, you need to structure it in a way that that will be mirrored in the way the song unfolds. And so that was the idea there. And then of course to use a line, if I'm remembering correctly, that I used that line ["Oh Jack... what would you like me to do?"] earlier and that it has a different connotation at the end. It's like re-harmonizing the melody. You can take this little tune and you harmonize it one way, then you sing it, and



you sing the exact same melody at the end but then you reharmonize it, and suddenly there are different overtones of meaning, and that's what happens here, just with text.

**Gibson: Yes, it's so good. So, I have this idea in my head that throughout these songs... the Eleanor Roosevelt one asked the question "who are we?," and I feel like the rest of the songs try to answer that question and say "yes, we have this personal pain, this collective pain: the loss of a child, the brokenness of our nation, the loss of a husband. And throughout it all there's this strength and fortitude that keeps us moving forward," that is realized in the Barbara Bush song. That in spite of our pain and our past we're going to improve ourselves, we're going to be literate, we're going to do what we can for ourselves and our future.**

Scheer: It might be hard to extend this to the Jackie Kennedy song, but there is a triumph in the other songs. I mean, Marian Anderson standing on those steps was a triumph, and was part of the march towards justice in the history of this country. And Lincoln enduring and functioning in such an incredible way, to become by general consent the greatest president in the history of this country, when he's dealing with the death of his son. This kind of endurance that you're describing. And with Barbara Bush, even though the song is fun, I think there's something that is very profound about that. You know, while we need legislation to empower people and make sure that certain people aren't running away with all the spoils of this country, we need legislation to meet our collective goals, whether it's defense or education or right now the pandemic. You know, so much of the quality and the trajectory of our lives is done one person at a time. So it's not just a bill being passed, but it's volunteering at your local church or synagogue to participate in a program where you help someone - in this case - learn how to read. For example, my

niece has gone into prisons and taught art classes to prisoners, you know? These are little heroic acts, I mean not to single her out, but they're happening millions of times. Like Barbara's husband, George Bush, it *is* "a thousand points of light," [George H.W. Bush's phrase praising American individuals' volunteerism that bettered the whole nation] so where we end up as a country depends not just on what we do collectively, but what we do individually. And that is something that, albeit in a light-hearted, fun way, is brought to the foreground in the Barbara Bush song. And even with the Jackie Kennedy song... what's ironic, of course about this is... this isn't part of the song and it's part of history. I don't know this - I'm not a historian, but I read history - I don't know that Kennedy would have been able to accomplish what LBJ accomplished in terms of race relations and the Voting Rights Act of '65. There was something about him coming from Texas and being "Master of the Senate" and being a Southerner and being able to cajole Richard Russell and these others to push this across the finish line. So it's an amazing story, and while a tragedy and never to be wished for, it's amazing how things unfold. LBJ was unfortunately, tragically (in a Shakespearean-tragedy-like way) because what he did was eclipsed in large measure by his mishandling of the Vietnam war, but in terms of the Great Society and certainly in terms of the voting rights, that was a huge deal. It was 100 years since the Civil War, and ninety since reconstruction, So the Compromise of 1876 just really underlines so much of the promise of winning the Civil War. And it was the fact that Kennedy was assassinated led to it. I'm guessing here of course, no one can really know what would have happened. I'm saying it's a complicated story. But yes, many of the stories, if not all of them, are about endurance, enduring, and the idea of the

country rather than the reality of the country and moving, as ever, one step at a time closer to it.

**Gibson: I did wonder about Heggie's theme that he got. Is that the American spirit weaving through, trying to find its way?**

Scheer: I said earlier in our conversation, it's the imagination of the singer - of the artist - and if that's how you interpret it, that's fine. To me, that motif, that wheel that Jake has woven in, from my mind is the madness of Mary Todd Lincoln. But if you view it as the irritant that's woven throughout I don't know. I have no problem with what you're suggesting. This is the beautiful thing: that we hand it to you folks who interpret the songs and this is what we love, when a great interpreter brings his or her imagination to it and reveals dramatic overtones of meaning that maybe we didn't even know were there. For me, that motif is different, but that doesn't mean that I'm right! That's just how I interpret it.

**Gibson: Indeed, and your interpretation is something I do want to hear!**

Scheer: That musical thing is really for Jake to speak to, but to me it's so linked to Mary Todd Lincoln and the cycle, if I'm remembering correctly. It seems to me that it's about this challenge to overcome.

**Gibson: Yes, it does pop up in the Jackie Kennedy and the Barbara Bush songs which I just think it's amazing. Your work with Heggie is stunning. I really love the way that...well, you both individually are so gosh-darned good at what you do, but you together are able to access these deeper statements, these things that only music can do.**

Scheer: Well, in the end it's all about the music. What I mean by that is that we are here because of the music. The text is obviously very very important, but it is the doorway for the music, so we can feel the music. Which kind of seals the deal, because otherwise we would just say the words, right? A lot of this is about creating the scaffolding so the music can do what only music can do, which is access the feeling of everything we're talking about.

APPENDIX C –TRANSCRIPT FOR INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN GRAHAM

March 22, 2021, via Zoom

Graham: You know, that Mary Todd Lincoln song really blew me away because of the continuous sewing machine mania going on in her brain. Throughout the thing until the very end. Then it disappears and she sings it. That little lick at the end, you know?

**Gibson: And it feels like she's kind of jumping in time - it's part of her madness - but she's jumping around.**

Graham: Yeah for sure. So did you just channel all of these different eras and decades that these women were in and where they were coming from when they were singing about what they were singing about?

**Gibson: Yeah I certainly tried to. I mean there's only so much that one can do.**

Graham: Well Gene and Jake did a lot of the work for us, didn't they?

**Gibson: Yes! And God bless them for it!**

Graham: No kidding.

**Gibson: I'm trying to look at the general history of the time and what happened and what was relevant to these ladies...**

Graham: I got chills at the Jackie Kennedy one because ... I'm a lot older than you, I was three when he was assassinated, but we've all grown up with those iconic photos of her in that pink suit, and knowing of the trouble of their marriage, and you can only imagine what she was going through trying to get him to sign a Christmas card before they left and all of that. So, what can I do for you?

**Gibson: So I have some basic questions, like, what was the premier like, and did you and Jake talk about specific performance nuance or ideas?**

Graham: You know, my history with Jake... He wrote *Dead Man Walking* for me, so we go way back. And he wrote this piece for me and he knows me so well, and he knows my voice so well that I think a lot of it was very intuitive between the two of us. He played for me at the premier. I've only done it the one time, and he played the piano for me. We've performed together so often and we know each other so well, that the way that he plays the phrase tells me how he wants me to sing it. You know how that goes. Oh, I just noticed. It says 'lovingly dedicated to Susan Graham.' Oh, that's sweet. I was doing this recital in Washington, and I'd been asked to do it. They love him there too. So he wanted to write a piece that was Washington-centric. And he talked about something about First Ladies and then it became interesting to think about not just the First Ladies but iconic items at the Smithsonian that are connected to each of these four ladies. And the one I connected with the least was the Barbara Bush one with *Sesame Street*. Just because it's a little more abstract. The other ones are pretty literal. But that's okay. But I think... who was it that he wanted to add? Oh, he wanted to add something snarky for Melania [laughs] See, I think he should add a Laura Bush one. I think he should take out the Barbara Bush one and replace it with Laura Bush because she, you know, she was such an advocate for education and reading and everything like that. Oh, I know he will do a Michelle Obama one, and that would be awesome. Because talk about an influencer!

**Gibson: No kidding. And he had also mentioned Jane Adams, and I thought that's cool.**

Graham: Oh! That would be cool. I played Jane Adams in 1776. No! I didn't play Jane Adams, I played Abigail Adams. It's a different one. Right?

**Gibson: Yeah, I think so. There were two Adamses.**

Graham: Yes, father and son. It was extra cool that it was at the Kennedy Center. There was a little sizzle around it, because everyone knew it was about First Ladies and here we are at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, and it was something very special.

**Gibson: I think it's so nifty when you can zero in on a place like that, and say, "we're going to do something Washington-centric."**

Graham: Exactly. And it just became more and more specific until they got to "items in the Smithsonian Institution." He was writing the pieces and tweaking up until quite close to performance time. And I don't memorize very fast, so I did not do them for memory. It was okay, it was fine. I had the music on a stand, and I see some places where the text had to be written in larger print so that I could actually read it. I'm looking at my notes to see what I have written in here in terms of interpretation or anything. The last phrase [of "Eleanor Roosevelt"], "Marian Anderson is singing," I wrote "If you can imagine; in the memory," Because that phrase is reliving the glory of Marian Anderson singing. Oh! And in the Mary Todd Lincoln, where it says "a little faster," "Your measured gestures mock me," [measure 16] Jake said "don't try to console me." She's like, "Don't pity me."

There's a little defiance in that. The line "In a world where this can happen..." Not only is she grieving the death of her son, Which is sort of the genesis of her madness, perhaps? And now she can't even accept him [President Lincoln] trying to comfort her. Then for Jackie Onassis, I mostly have rhythms marked! That's the thing about Jake's writing. In a very general note about Jake's writing - the thing about his music is that it is deceptively difficult. Because it's written to not sound difficult. It's written to sound like natural speech. Sometimes even in terms of pitch, but particularly rhythmically. Very tricky. Because people don't speak in 4/4. Sadly. So when you go through it, when you're just

sorting out the rhythms in the beginning of learning the piece, you think, “one AND two and three AND.” You’re just trying to sort out the crispness of every dotted note and then there’s a 32nd note after it, or something. And then you go, “wait a minute, what if I just say it in a natural way?” And then it turns out to be the right rhythm! (laughs) When you knocked yourself out before that! Anyway, it’s deceptively difficult because he wants it all to sound so natural.

**Gibson: It makes sense, but you’ve got to reverse engineer it, and then realize that he’s done the thinking for you.**

Graham: I know, right? Just relax and let it happen. And that’s the thing. I try to abide by this with all music, but particularly someone like Jake: it never wants to sound like you’re making it happen. It wants to sound like you’re letting it happen. It’s really all about the storytelling. And if something wants to have a little more time here, or be a little more relaxed in the rhythm, then that’s okay. Because he’s really after the storytelling, and so is Gene of course, in writing these texts.

**Gibson: And they are so good at it, too. The two of them together. Individually they are good, but together they are awesome. And because they give so much, we as the performers feel like we are given even more license to help create.**

Graham: And the more you bring to it the happier they are. They love expressing with colors of the voice, and different shadings, and different kinds of expression. They give it to you on a silver platter, and then it’s yours to do with as you like.

**Gibson: What a blessing, To be a part of the creative process instead of “Here is this piece that I have written and you may change nothing.”**



Graham: Well, I tell you, *Dead Man Walking* was his first opera. Like, Ironic, since it's the most widely-performed opera written in that century. And in the process of rehearsing it he was still changing things because he had never written an opera before, and while he knew people's voices, he didn't really know mine that well. He was very close with Flicka by that time. He knew her voice. But there were certain times when he was hanging up a little too high for the mezzo tessitura, for too long. And I kept saying to him, "Jake, you can go up there, but you have to come back down and dip your toe in the water, and then you can fly up there again." And my dearly departed friend, Kristine Jepson, was double cast with me in that role. She was hilarious, and also a really really good friend of Jake's. And he was hanging in the passaggio too much, and she was particularly sensitive to it. And finally she just said, "Jake, would you just get your pen out of my crack?!" (raucous laughter) Oh, It was so funny! And he tells that story all the time, and so do I. But, he's very sensitive to singers and their needs, and wants them to be happy. Because he knows if we are struggling with something, it won't make him look any better. He wants to make it as easy on us as he can. So that we can serve him and the music.

**Gibson: It becomes an impediment to that wonderful storytelling that he does, if we struggle.**

Graham: And to ours!

**Gibson: One thing that he told me that blew my mind was that he's seeing these characters as their spirits. It's not a snapshot in time. They are with us here, now, today.**

Graham: That's interesting! As if we're taking a tour through the Smithsonian, looking at these items, and the ghosts of these ladies are talking to us. They are our tour guides.

That's interesting.

**Gibson: That pulls in that moment in the Eleanor song when she talks about "Charleston's amazing grace" - Obama's singing - And then in the Mary Todd Lincoln, "in a world where this can happen," it opens up the question of "which this?"**

Graham: Yes! Which "this" is it?

**Gibson: All the "this."**

Graham: Is it her "this," or is it our "this?" So, do you think that Jake wants to leave those questions open?

**Gibson: Probably. He certainly did not provide me any answers.**

Graham: Well, there you go.

**Gibson: And what a lovely way to do it, too! To have it not be closed. To have it be open-ended.**

Graham: It's like a book that doesn't give you all the answers.

**Gibson: It makes you think. And they're such cute little pieces! They're just lovely.**

Graham: I really have never seen or heard or sung anything of his that wasn't.

**Gibson: And all of his work points to some deep, unspoken, emotional, universal thing. And he says it so beautifully and clearly and boldly. I feel like he really is talking about how these women are so strong and how some of them went through such horrors, but still they have this perseverance, this strength.**

Graham: This strength, and the ability to use even their hardship for some kind of positive outcome. You know, Jake has overcome so much in his life, and he is probably the single most positive person I know. He is always happy and cheerful and sees potential and possibility, and he never says no. And that comes out in his writing a lot, I think.

**Gibson: He is so generous. Let me see if I've anything else. We've kind of already touched on it, but is there anything else in these pieces that makes you stop, and think, "Oh!"**

Graham: The one that got to me the most was the Mary Todd Lincoln one. Just because there are so many layers of stuff that's going on in her head, and how it is so beautifully described in the piano. And also in her switches of temperament, like, "This thing happened to me, and I'm so sad. Don't try to comfort me!" You know, her madness.

**Gibson: She certainly felt betrayed by life by the end of it .**

Graham: She lost everything, at one point or another. And then it sounds kind of like a wail, like when she sings [the melisma] on "A grieving nation cried." It's such a cool piece.

**Gibson: You get to explore so much!**

Graham: I'm so sorry I haven't had a chance to do it again. I need him to finish those two other songs, we need to do it again!

**Gibson: The "re-premiere!"**

Graham: That's good!

**Gibson: I think it's interesting that you didn't really like the Barbara Bush. I love the Barbara Bush, but just because it's the Muppets. I adore the Muppets.**

Graham: Well, remember that chronologically I'm a lot farther from the Muppets than you are. They're probably still in your recent memory, and for me they're way, way back.

I never was much of a *Sesame Street* girl.

**Gibson: You know, I wasn't either. But I did watch the Muppet movies; *Muppet Christmas Carol* is my Christmas Carol. There is no other.**

Graham: It's ironic, because I am friendly with the Bush family. So, sorry Barbara! She would probably forgive me.

**Gibson: I imagine so. (We laugh) Well, do you have any other anecdotes? Thoughts? Opinions?**

Graham: I'm just so honored to be channeling these women. And honored to be channeling Jake and Gene, because their words and their ideas and the directions that they take you are so clever. And especially with Jake, there is always so much of him in his music. The things that mean a lot to him for the things that make it into the music.

## APPENDIX D – PERMISSION TO USE MUSIC

William Holab <bill@holabmusic.com>



Tue 9/7/2021 7:31 AM

To: Rachel Gibson

Thanks Rachel. For the credit, please list the following notice in the front matter to your dissertation:

*Iconic Legacies: First Ladies at the Smithsonian*

Music by Jake Heggie

Text by Gene Scheer

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I'm sure Jake and Gene would enjoy having a copy of your dissertation when it's finished. If you have it in pdf format and can just email it to me, I'll be happy to forward it on to them.

With kind regards,

Bill

## APPENDIX E - IRB Approval Letter

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### NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.
- Face-to-Face data collection may not commence without prior approval from the Vice President for Research's Office.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-20-536

PROJECT TITLE: Performance Guide for Heggie's "Iconic Legacies"

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Music

RESEARCHER(S): Rachel Gibson, Jonathan Yarrington

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

CATEGORY: Expedited

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: February 25, 2021

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donald Sacco".

**Donald Sacco, Ph.D.**  
**Institutional Review Board Chairperson**

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