

The Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon

The Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon:

Choral Kaleidoscope

By

William Skoog

Edited by Meagan Mason

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PREFACE

My introduction to Jennifer Higdon was through her choral music in 2008 when I served as Director of Choral Studies at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio. BGSU is home to the annual New Music and Art Festival, which features esteemed contemporary composers and their new works, many of them premiers. Jennifer was invited to participate in this festival. Interestingly, Jennifer was a student at BGSU prior to my appointment.

After I later accepted a new position as Department Chair and Professor of Choral Music at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, a packet of Jennifer's small-form choral music arrived for my review. She had become an acclaimed composer, having won a Pulitzer Prize for her Violin Concerto in 2010. Her envelope of works went on a shelf for consideration for future concerts.

While Rhodes College did not offer a new music festival, it has for decades offered an esteemed and historical music lecture series entitled the Springfield Music Lecture Series. This series has brought internationally renowned and respected composers, theorists, and musicologists to campus annually for lectures and residencies. I contacted Jennifer in 2010 to see if she would consent to be our Springfield Lecturer for 2011–12, and she enthusiastically accepted.

Jennifer sent me a score and the yet-unpublished CD of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra with Robert Spano conducting *The Singing Rooms*, a major work for violin, orchestra, and choir, with Jennifer Koh as the solo violinist. The piece resonated with me immediately, and we agreed I would conduct the work with the Rhodes College MasterSingers and the Memphis Symphony Orchestra for a performance during her weeklong residency.

The week of her visit was extraordinary, even life-changing for me. The lecture was inspiring and relevant, the symphony and chorus were electrified with her presence and her music, and the concert was enthusiastically received. Students found Jennifer to be extraordinarily approachable; they were thrilled and inspired to meet her and to hear her lecture and her music.

Jennifer informed me that *The Singing Rooms* had not yet been presented in Europe and that she would hold the European premier for me, if I would like. How does one say no to that? I had conducted a number of European choral festivals with orchestras, and so a performance was soon scheduled at La Madeleine in Paris for summer of 2014 through Music Celebrations International. Susanna Perry Gilmore was the violin soloist with a Parisian orchestra. The premier was attended by Jennifer, her business partner Cheryl Lawson, and Jeanne Minahan, the poet for *The Singing Rooms*. La Madeleine was packed, and the audience was immediately on their feet in a lengthy ovation for this extraordinary work.

In August of 2015, I attended one of the first performances of Jennifer's opera, *Cold Mountain*, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was an honor to sit with her and Cheryl for this performance, which was simply breathtaking. One chorus from that opera was subsequently extracted and became a stand-alone a cappella choral piece for male voices entitled *Our Beautiful Country*. My professional men's ensemble, BealeCanto, premiered this setting sometime later with Jennifer in the audience.

Following that experience, I asked if she would consider accepting a commission from Rhodes for a new work. Though she could not accept any new ones at that time, she said if I would consider a co-commission with another organization, something might work out. That led to a co-commission, ultimately based on several poems by Rumi, with the Washington Master Chorale. In April 2017, our regional premier of the subsequent piece, *Ruminations*, was presented along with *The Singing Rooms*, this time with Barrie Cooper, concertmaster for the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, as the solo violinist. Completing the program, the Rhodes choirs performed several of Higdon's shorter works, and BealeCanto premiered the new version of *Our Beautiful Country*. With Jennifer and Cheryl present, the concert received a lengthy standing ovation.

My wife, Elaine, purchased a book for me by Christina Reitz entitled *Jennifer Higdon: Composing in Color*, published in 2018. Elaine, who deserves credit for inspiring this project, told me that a companion book on Higdon's choral works was now needed. Jennifer and Cheryl agreed—but cautioned me that the aforementioned book took years in the making.

I am a conductor and educator; I live and breathe on the podium. Analysis is an essential part of what a conductor must do, and an analysis of music-text relationship is critical for conducting any choral work. I enjoy and even thrive on the thorough study of music. The process of writing,

however, is a challenging one for me. But I had to agree with my wife: Jennifer's music was simply too important to allow it to live in obscurity. I felt compelled to take on what would become, over several years, an enormous but deeply meaningful project.

Her music is very special, unique, so worthy of dissemination, that I felt obligated to share my experiences. It has been, and continues to be, a special privilege to have performed much of her choral music, and personally knowing Jennifer, Cheryl, and Jeanne has enriched this experience for me.

As you read these pages, it is my hope that they might inspire you to listen to and appreciate Jennifer's compositions. I hope you will be drawn to attend concerts of her music, perhaps to study it, and to be grateful for inviting it into your life. Whatever inspires you to participate in Jennifer Higdon's music—as a performer, scholar, or audience member—it will have made this entire effort worthwhile.

FOREWORD

In my undergraduate years as a budding composer, I devoured with a ravenous appetite the music by leading women composers. I grew up performing, as a singer and pianist, music by many of the world's greatest composers, yet I cannot recall performing any particular piece by a woman. When I started college, the music library became a magical place to peruse score upon score of works by female composers. Jennifer Higdon's music, of course, was there. Her *blue cathedral* and *Concerto for Orchestra* introduced me to her intriguing compositional voice, and composers like her inspired me to pursue my dreams voraciously.

It is remarkable that her choral works have not been celebrated with the same fervor as her instrumental works. Sure, she is a masterful orchestrator with an incredible ear for color, but a deeper look into her choral pieces reveals her mastery of counterpoint and four-part chorale writing. Many of these pieces pay tribute to tradition with elegance and a fresh perspective.

Higdon's choral works prove her to be a truly American voice, adventurous and colorful, patriotic and thoughtful. Her *Southern Grace* set should be featured in choral literature classes and sung often by choirs of all sizes. *Alleluia* sparkles with exciting energy and would make an excellent concert opener. Parallels to today's pandemic and political division are easily found in *Our Beautiful Country*, an excerpt for TTBB choir from the opera *Cold Mountain*. My favorite discovery, her *O magnum mysterium*, shines in the most haunting and soulful way, a welcome and notable addition to the repertoire that showcases her keen sense of color and virtuosic instrumental writing.

Higdon is not just one of the top female composers of her generation, she is one of the top composers of her generation. I look forward to the day our gender becomes less of a distinguishing characteristic when our works are classified, catalogued, and taught. I am grateful that books like this are being written and for the continued growth I see in the musical community toward equity and diversity.

—Jocelyn Hagen
Composer / Performer / Publisher

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Mention the name Jennifer Higdon to most classical musicians and the response is near universal recognition for her instrumental compositions. In opera circles, she is hailed as a rising star due to the enormous success of *Cold Mountain* and anticipation for a commission she has underway. However, among choral musicians, there appears to be little to no awareness of her accomplishments as a composer of quality choral music.

Higdon's choral works are abundant, profound, varied, and highly acclaimed by those who know them. A full list is provided in the appendix. By her own admission, her instrumental works and opera have largely overshadowed the choral pieces. The book *Jennifer Higdon: Composing in Color* by Christina L. Reitz has greatly expanded the awareness of Higdon's instrumental output.¹ A similar resource has not yet been available for her choral music.

This book brings Higdon's choral works to light, exploring them with respect to their stylistic characteristics and their relationship between music and text. As an analytical piece, it reveals immediate and demonstrable connections between musical elements drawn directly from the text. A thorough analysis demonstrates that structure, melody, harmony, counterpoint, rhythm, meter, texture, and accompaniment are all intimately linked to the poetry. Often, several musical elements combine and conspire to bring out the meaning of the text.

To attempt to summarize any composer's theoretical tendencies is something of a slippery slope, as interpreting links between text and music is unavoidably threaded with a degree of subjectivity. But Higdon wholeheartedly embraces such deductions in analyses of her work.

As Higdon is not well known in the choral community, a brief introduction to her seems appropriate. She has become one of the most

¹ Christina L. Reitz, *Jennifer Higdon: Composing in Color* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2018).

frequently performed living American composers.² She has received an abundance of commissions from prestigious musical organizations for orchestral works, operas, and choral compositions, large and small. Her work has attracted awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Koussevitzky Foundation, the Pew Fellowship in the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Most notably, her Viola Concerto won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Classical Composition in 2017, her Percussion Concerto won the same award in 2010, and in the same year she received the Pulitzer Prize in Music for her Violin Concerto, with the committee citing Higdon's work as "a deeply engaging piece that combines flowing lyricism with dazzling virtuosity."³

Higdon's choral works may have been overshadowed by those of other genres, but this is changing. Growing numbers of prestigious choral organizations are performing her works and making commissions. Their attention serves as evidence of the pieces' worthiness of critical scrutiny, bringing them to a level similar to her other genres.

This study offers representative stylistic characteristics of her choral pieces. It is tempting to refer to Higdon as a neo-Renaissance composer because of the close connection between her music and its text and since each line of a text seems to generate a new musical thought or region of construction. But that description, while appropriate in some ways, would fall far short of defining her overall compositional style. The compositional fabrics she weaves are diverse, complex, and contemporary.

She employs sophisticated forms based in traditional constructions. Though tonal, her works employ harmonic colors that are refreshing and distinctive. She frequently uses short motivic ideas that she expands and alters into thick contrapuntal fabrics. Complex rhythms and harmonies align with text structure, enunciation, and delivery. Her compositions, as communicated to this author by singers and audience members alike, tend to create "atmospheres" that at first blush give the impression of being somewhat transparent, seemingly accessible. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the compositional processes behind these effects are far more challenging than may have first appeared. Each work represents something

² "Biography," *jenniferhigdon.com* (accessed January 16, 2021).

³ "Violin Concerto, by Jennifer Higdon (Lawdon Press)," Pulitzer Prize, 2010, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/jennifer-higdon> (accessed January 16, 2021).

of a musical mosaic; combinations of innovative musical elements are used to create form and to balance unity with variety.

Higdon's large-form choral works are accompanied by orchestra, and the small-form works are performed either a cappella or with chamber instruments. The secular pieces use English texts, and some of the sacred pieces use Latin. In the latter cases, such as in *O magnum mysterium* and *Sanctus*, Higdon ensures text comprehension by setting English translations alongside the Latin in the same piece, eliminating the language barrier for the singer and listener.

I have had the privilege of conducting many of Higdon's choral pieces with the composer present. I find them to be challenging, intriguing, highly effective, and inspirational in rehearsals and performance. Singers, instrumentalists, and audience members receive her work with tremendous enthusiasm and appreciation. I am grateful that Jennifer has given her strong support to this study.

An analysis of a relationship between text and music in any composer's works brings with it a degree of subjectivity and interpretation. The analyst must use his or her expertise to deduce the components of such connection with as keen an eye as he or she is able. To quote Keith Burris in his book on Robert Shaw, in doing such work, an author

discovers how much he does not know, and can never know, about it. He discovers that he cannot, finally, "get to the bottom" of the subject's nature, though his job is to try. He knows he must be wary of broad claims and generalizations. ... So, [he] creates a portrait. He can only paint from his own perspective and his portrait cannot be other than subjective. For no two people see another in the same way.⁴

Burris is discussing a biography on Shaw, but his words resonate with this author as they relate to this discussion of Higdon and the analysis of her works. Higdon's compositional style does not lend itself to being succinctly summarized. It is the hope that this analysis will be of assistance in assessing and approaching her compositions and intrigue readers—inspiring them to delve further into her significant contributions to the choral repertoire.

Higdon continues to add to her work, which is already voluminous, creative, and deep in its offerings to this genre. Her future compositions are

⁴ Keith C. Burris, *The Life and Music of Robert Shaw* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2013), xi–xii.

eagerly awaited. The music world will be well rewarded by growing awareness of her choral works and their more frequent presentation in concert.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SINGING ROOMS

The Singing Rooms

(2007) 37 minutes

In 7 movements

Full orchestra, SATB chorus, solo violin

2, 2 (2nd also Eng. hn.) 2, 2, 4, 3 (1st also picc. tpt.)

3, 1 hp., timp, 2 perc., strings

Poetry by Jeanne Minahan, secular/spiritual

Jennifer Higdon's ability to connect music with text is well illustrated in *The Singing Rooms*, a large-form work for choir, orchestra, and solo violinist. The work displays compositional traits that can be found in most of her choral compositions. Composed in 2007, its seven contiguous movements are set to six poems by Jeanne Minahan. As Higdon writes in the program notes on her website,

When I was asked by the Philadelphia Orchestra to write a concerto for violin that would include a choral part, I immediately started searching through all sorts of poetry. The poetry would need to speak to me in order for me to be able to set it to music. ... To create the best form for the piece, I needed a group of poems that would not be too long (because I wanted to create different moods within this large work) and that would fit together thematically. I looked for a long time, through poetry from various countries and time periods. ... When I got some books of [Minahan's] poetry in my hands, I knew I had found what I was looking for—a series of poems that resonated with me and would provide different emotional settings, as if they were lessons in life arranged like different rooms within a house.¹

Higdon adapted and edited the poems for her composition. In the score, Minahan's full poems are provided at the beginning of each movement.

As the piece is designed as one complete work, no movement can be extrapolated and performed on its own. Distinct musical elements characterize

¹ Jennifer Higdon, "Program Notes: *The Singing Rooms*," <http://www.jenniferhigdon.com/pdf/program-notes/The-Singing-Rooms.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2021).

each movement, and most are not directly connected to the others by poetic theme, except the first and last, which use the same text.

I. Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day (4')

*Three windows offer two versions of the day,
the first: cool and sweet, a blue cascade
of watered light,
the second: bright heat barely held back
by the venetian blind.*

*Inside, the blue falls across
the small kitchen (a breeze
at your back), and angles
into the living room where
the table and two chairs swim.*

*The couch, the desk, bookshelves,
the bed, they submit
each morning to the thin cloths of light
that drape, linger and slide
across them; its shape their shape.*

*Both are here, though you
cannot be:
that heat, that long shade of blue.*

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Higdon's dedication to painting the text in music is immediately evident: the orchestra produces an ethereal atmosphere for the mystery of the day ahead. The introduction begins with ambient percussion, including crotales mounted on timpani played while pedaling freely, and bowed vibraphone. Harmonics and other-worldly sounds fill the air, along with lilting, seemingly unmeasured counterpoint, together representing the mystery of time. The violin solo represents a soul traveling from room to room in search of the day's meaning.

This movement is characterized by secundal and quintal harmonies and Lydian mode, especially in the solo violin. In Higdon's choral works, Lydian is frequently associated with uplifting or ethereal passages, as in this introduction. The first notes of the chorus are stacked open fifths on the tuning notes of the violin, G–D–A–E (see Figure 2-1). These stacked fifths represent the spaciousness of the room, the expansiveness of the soul, and a link between the chorus and the violin.

7

S *p* Three win - dows

A *p* Three win - dows

T *p* Three win - dows

B *p* Three win - dows

Orch.

10

S *mp* *p* of - fer two ver - sions of the day,

A *mp* *p* of - fer two ver - sions of the day,

T *mp* *p* of - fer two ver - sions of the day,

B *mp* *p* of - fer two ver - sions of the day,

Orch.

Figure 2-1. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 1, mm. 7–12
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 Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan.

“Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day” is constructed in seven short choral sections, the longest of which is eight measures. The longest choral sections are recitative-like passages that deliver a large amount of text quickly and transparently. The text is delivered without much melodic variance, and the rhythms align with natural scansion and syllabic inflection. This type of choral setting, called choral chant or choral recitative, is common in Higdon’s works. Because the poetry is articulated

without the interference of complex musical development, short segments of text are set to short motives of music.

Figure 2-2 shows an example of choral chant as well as parallel harmonic motion. Higdon often uses such planing to heighten the effect of an approaching cadence. In the ensuing section of choral chant as the chorus mentions the window's blinds, the blinds seem to close as the lines descend.

The musical score is for Jennifer Higdon's *The Singing Rooms*, movement 1, measures 18-22. It is written for four vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and an Orchestra. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and the time signature is 4/4.

Measures 18-20: The vocal parts enter with a choral chant. The lyrics are: "the sec-ond bright heat bare-ly held back_____ by the ve". The music is marked *mp* (mezzo-piano). The orchestra enters in measure 18 with a melodic line marked *mp* and a rhythmic pattern marked *f* (forte).

Measures 21-22: The vocal parts continue with a descending choral chant. The lyrics are: "- ne - tian blind.". The music is marked *p* (piano). The orchestra continues with a melodic line marked *mf* (mezzo-forte) and a rhythmic pattern marked *mp* (mezzo-piano).

Figure 2-2. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 1, mm. 18–22

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Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan.

Higdon typically crafts choral lines that are narrow in range, somewhat in the lyric and expressive style of an art song, where rhythm, text, and modest melodic motion are bound to sensitive poetic expression. In Figure 2-3, the text “the couch, the desk, bookshelves” is set in such a fashion. The voices move in rhythms that articulate the natural inflection and rhythm of the poetry. The vocal harmony is in parallel thirds and incorporates the tones G–B–A–B (mm. 33–34), G–A–B (mm. 35–36), G–A–G (mm. 36–37), and F–E \flat (m. 38) before rising, still in parallel motion, to the prevailing tonality of B major in measure 40. These harmonies are freely used to provide a mystical reference to the effects of the morning light. The descending thirds seem to represent the “thin cloths of light that drape, linger and slide” mentioned in the poetry. Decorative instrumental commentary enhances the peacefulness of this sunlit room at the start of the day.

The image displays a musical score for measures 33 through 38 of Jennifer Higdon's *The Singing Rooms*, movement 1. It features a vocal line (Soprano) and an instrumental line (Orchestra). The vocal line is written in a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The instrumental line consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, with a key signature of one sharp. The vocal line includes lyrics: "The couch, the desk, bookshelves, the bed, they sub-mit each" (measures 33-34) and "morn-ing to the thin cloths of light that drape, lin-ger and slide a-" (measures 35-38). The instrumental line features a continuous, flowing melody in the right hand and a more rhythmic, supportive line in the left hand. Dynamic markings include *p* (piano) at measure 33, *mf* (mezzo-forte) at measure 35, and *mp* (mezzo-piano) at measure 36. The score is marked with measure numbers 33, 36, and 38.

Figure 2-3. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 1, mm. 33–38
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In Figure 2-4, the homophony gives way to interwoven lines. The tenor is particularly florid, though the bass serves this function more often in Higdon’s choral works. The tenors, imitating the sopranos at a half-beat delay, hand off their movement to the basses, who resolve to the root of the harmony. The cascade through the voices characterizes the decaying light of day. One can almost see the light diminishing as the lines descend. The passage demonstrates one method of mood coloring in Higdon’s writing.

44

S *mf* *mp* *p*
of the day

A *mf* *mp* *p*
of the the day

T *mf* *mp* *p*
of of the day

B *mf* *mp* *p*
of of the day

44

Orch. *mf* *mp* *p*

Figure 2-4. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 1, mm. 44–46

Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].

Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan.

Higdon often develops motives through rhythmic metamorphosis, using one rhythmic figure then adjusting it. When mixed meter or asymmetrical meter is used in choral portions, it brings the text either new meaning or heightened attention. One instance in which rhythm and meter enhance the text is in the treatment of the repeated word “blue” in Figure 2-5. The measures contract from 4/4 to 3/4 to 2/4 as the word is repeated in more compact and intensified statements. The word describes growing light coming through the windows as the day breaks.

Figure 2-5 also contains the movement’s high point, which is in part accomplished through these altered rhythmic entrances and meters. The voices are in homophony, alternating between B major and F major, by roots of a tritone, and then between B major and G major, by roots of a third. The latter alternations are much more consonant and peaceful, but the tritone movement returns to end this section, perhaps emphasizing the volatility of life.

53 *f*

S blue. blue. blue.

A blue. blue. blue.

T blue. blue. blue.

B blue. blue. blue.

53 *ff*

Orch

56 *accel.* *♩ = 142*

S blue. *accel.*

A blue. *accel.*

T blue. *accel.*

B blue. *accel.*

56 *accel.* *♩ = 142* *mp*

Orch *accel.*

Figure 2-5. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 1, mm. 53–58

Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].

Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan.

Choral passages in this movement are usually chordal and homophonic, but counterpoint occurs briefly during the final syllables of phrases, to color those moments. The seven choral passages deliver six sections of the poem, then repeat the poem's opening in the penultimate section of music before offering the seventh and final part of the poem. "Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day" concludes with a tense orchestral bridge that highlights the dramatic mystery of the windows.

II. Things Aren't Always (3')

*Not every newborn cries in hunger,
not every dog barks in alarm.
Musicians, on a whim,
break our hearts,
lovers take the blame.*

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When the orchestra pauses at the end of the previous movement, a single repeated note in the solo violin takes over, bringing the next room to explore. This pitch, E, is rhythmically varied and then expanded melodically, first to a half-step alternation with F, and then to other pitches. This introduction to movement two is lengthy, lasting seventy-nine measures.

The violin's E–F note alternation becomes the chorus's opening line (see Figure 2-6); this motive will be altered throughout the movement. The chorus sings again in planing choral chant, alternating between the chords of E minor and F major. The text is “Things Aren't Always,” and, as events are not always predictable or consistent in life, likewise the alterations and adjustments around the note E. Higdon has explained that this poem means that “things in life are always changing, always moving... not at all what they seem.”

80

mf

S Things Aren't Always

mf

A Things Aren't Always

mf

T Things Aren't Always

mf

B Things Aren't Always

Orch

Figure 2-6. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 2, mm. 80–81
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 Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan.

The chorus never utters a complete, continuous phrase of text or melody; rather, they articulate splices of poetry set to short sections of music. The splices are then bridged by a few orchestral measures.

E minor is the dominant harmony in this movement, but subtle harmonic variations are coupled with text meaning. An example occurs in the phrase “Not every newborn cries in hunger,” which begins alternating by thirds between the parallel triads E minor and G major. On the word “cries,” the harmony changes to an F major triad (Figure 2-7)—here, the F major chord, broadened on a dotted-quarter note, paints a newborn’s cries in real time. Attention is given to those cries by breaking from the harmonies that govern the movement.

85

S *mf* *pp*
Not ev - ry new - born cries in hun - ger; —

A *mf* *pp*
Not ev - ry new - born cries in hun - ger; —

T *mf* *pp*
8 Not ev - ry new - born cries in hun - ger; —

B *mf* *pp*
Not ev - ry new - born cries in hun - ger; —

Orch.

Figure 2-7. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 2, mm. 85–87
Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].
Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan.

While the first section ends in E minor on the word “hunger,” the next section, set to the text “Not every dog barks,” takes up F major. The solo violin’s active line represents unsettled life amid constant changes. On the text “break our heart,” the chorus breaks the rhythm; they match the idea of breaking in the text with a staccato note on beat one and a rest in beat four (Figure 2-8).

103 *mp* *mf*

S Mu - si - cians, on a whim,

A Mu - si - cians, on a whim.

T Mu - si - cians, on a whim.

B Mu - si - cians, on a whim.

103

Orch.

105 *mp* *mp* *mp* *mp*

S break our hearts,

A break our hearts,

T break our hearts,

B break our hearts,

105

Orch.

Figure 2-8. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 2, mm. 103–106
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Concluding this movement is a protracted orchestral interlude. It develops the dominating half-step alternation motive. Modeling life's unpredictability, the orchestration escalates to a peak that ends suddenly and without resolution.

III. The Interpretation of Dreams (6')

*If I told you my dream
(the one on a boat);
if I told you how I read
your dream with a cello:
a new laugh
an old hush.*

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“The Interpretation of Dreams” has a different melodic character from the previous movement, appropriate to its different text. The poetry describes a dream sequence, which Higdon orchestrates with ethereal, other-worldly effects, achieved in part through a sudden shift in dynamics, tempo, and orchestration. Organic continuity between the movements is preserved as the previous movement’s half-step motive is alluded to, overlaced with the violin in Lydian mode. The melody, akin to others in the work, begins with a short statement that expands and evolves into a longer statement. But in contrast with previous themes, this one is longer, more legato, and lyrical. It also uses wider intervals, ascending a major sixth; the larger melodic range helps to describe the elevation of a dream. In Higdon’s words, the melody has “a gentle, boat-rocking sensation,” which is achieved through alternations between high and low notes. See the first measures of Figure 2-9.

The short poem is stated three times, Higdon explains, “because it is the third poem in the set.” The first four measures of the melody are built using a pentatonic scale, F–G–A–C–D. The melody, and this movement’s theme, eventually expands to consist of seven different tones, the number of tones Higdon normally favors in her extended melodies. In the fifth measure, the melody changes to F Mixolydian for the text “a new laugh, an old hush”; the reference to newness, then, is set in a mode other than what was first used. The word “hush” ends the phrase on an open fifth, D–A: a “hush” is silence between utterances, and here the hush is delivered musically via the emptiness in that spacious interval. Lyricism, open fifths, and modal mixture typify this movement and bring out the dream aspect.

Consistent with Higdon’s custom of starting with a short motive and then expanding it, the melody begins with unison sopranos, and then the altos, also in unison, are added. Finally, the male voices join in open fifths on the word “hush” and provide a sense of gravity to the word. Underneath, the lowest notes in the orchestration move in thirds, D–F–Ab,

188 *p*

S If I told you my dream (the one on a boat); if I told you

T *p* If I told you my dream (the one on a boat); if I told you

Orch *p* *mp*

191 *mp* *p*

S how I read your dream, your dream with a celo: a

T *mp* *p* how I read your dream, your dream with a celo: a

Orch *mf* *mp* *mp*

Figure 2-10. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 3, mm. 188–193

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A lengthy orchestral development follows. Planing in the upper orchestra and a rocking motion in the solo violin and trumpet continue to convey the dreamlike state. The music builds to a high point, and, unusually, this movement's peak occurs during the orchestral interlude—during the wordless dream itself—rather than in a choral section. The interlude relaxes into the poem's third iteration.

This iteration has expanded into three-voice counterpoint that intertwines the sopranos, altos, and tenors. The main melody is set in alternating voices—a form of voice exchange—between the sopranos and tenors, as seen in Figure 2-11. This is another device that distinguishes

Higdon's work: she alternates words or syllables between voices, sometimes in a pointillistic fashion. In this case, subphrases of the melody are exchanged.

Figure 2-11. Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, movement 3, mm. 211–215
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The cadence culminates in homophony in open fourths. An orchestral codetta follows using materials from the interlude and, like in the passage from movement two to movement three, a sudden shift of character begins the fourth movement, “Confession.”