

Voices for Water: An Examination of Four Choral Works Advocating for Water
Sustainability

by

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ABSTRACT

Water can shape landscapes, inspire art, and sustain life, making it fundamental to human existence. It has come to symbolize renewal, interconnectedness, and transformation across cultures and generations. Despite its vital role, a growing water crisis threatens ecosystems and communities worldwide with increasing scarcity, worsening droughts, and overuse. In the American Southwest, Arizona, California, and Utah face urgent challenges, including declining water supplies, intensified wildfires, and ecological disruptions like the shrinking Great Salt Lake. I argue that these interconnected problems demand innovative solutions integrating water conservation with public engagement through choral music.

I believe that choral music can create a unique opportunity for advocacy by connecting with audiences on an emotional and communal level. Performances that highlight water's cultural, spiritual, and environmental significance have the potential to transform scientific data into relatable narratives. By collaborating with environmental organizations and community leaders, I argue that choral ensembles can inspire action and raise awareness about critical climate issues, such as Arizona's aquifers, California's wildfire risks, and Utah's ecological losses. Concert programs centered on water themes may spark reflection and advocacy, demonstrating the ability of music to drive meaningful change.

In this paper, I examine four choral works that address water sustainability, analyzing their musical, thematic, and ecological significance. I explore how composers engage with water-related environmental issues and use choral music as a platform for

advocacy. Through contextual, lyric, and musical analysis, I investigate how these works represent water, examining the role of text and musical elements in conveying these themes. By analyzing these works, I aim to illustrate how choral music can extend beyond artistic expression to inspire awareness and action on critical water issues while offering strategies for conductors to interpret and perform these works in ways that enhance their impact.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the composers whose music has brought awareness to the urgent need for water sustainability. Anders Edenroth, Glenda Blok-Wilson, Matthew Culloton, and Andrea Ramsey have each contributed profoundly to this cause through their artistry. Their commitment to using choral music as a platform for advocacy has been at the heart of this research, and I am honored to engage with their work.

To my wife, Debbie—your unwavering love, patience, and belief in me have been my rock. Through every late night, every challenge, and every milestone, you have stood by my side, and I couldn't have done this without you.

To my children, Braden, Dallen, Rylee, and Makenna—you are my greatest joy. Your curiosity, laughter, and boundless wonder fill my life with meaning and purpose. You inspire me more than you know.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Water flows through every aspect of human existence—shaping landscapes, inspiring art, and sustaining life. Water’s presence in nature is constant, familiar, and vital to the balance of our world. Water nourishes body and spirit, and can inspire reflection, peace, and a sense of interconnectedness with the natural world. Composer and Vice Dean of the Boyer College of Music at Temple University, Rollo Dilworth, said the following about his choral arrangement of “Take Me To The Water”:

Water functions as a symbol of both spiritual and physical freedom. In the spiritual realm, water serves as an outward sign of sanctification through baptism. In the physical realm, water serves as a means of escape for enslaved people in search of freedom. These freedom seekers felt that water would provide for their spiritual liberation even if they were unable to attain their physical emancipation.¹

Dilworth emphasizes how water can embody both a physical and spiritual longing for freedom, establishing it as a powerful symbol that resonates across time, geography, and artistic expression.

We as humans find survival, beauty, joy, and tranquility in water—whether in a quiet lake or the mighty crash of ocean waves. Cecilia Chen and her colleagues explain that “Water is arguably as essential to our self-understandings as it is to the vitality of

¹ Rollo Dilworth, email message to author, June 11, 2023.

ecosystems,”² serving not only as a life-giving force but also as a profound symbol of cleansing, renewal, and transformation across cultures and generations.³

As Anders Endentroth notes in the choral piece “Water,” “Water is essential to human life just like the air we breathe.”⁴ Yet, the environmental crises caused by the scarcity of water are often overlooked. The American Southwest is experiencing unprecedented drought conditions, exacerbated by climate change and unsustainable water management practices.⁵ Despite clear evidence of worsening water shortages, recurring droughts, and the rapid depletion of freshwater supplies worldwide, public engagement with these pressing issues remains limited.⁶ The crisis is particularly severe in the American Southwest, as states such as Arizona, California, and Utah face the compounded impacts of over-extraction, population growth, and inefficient water management.⁷ These pressures threaten water security and exacerbate the risk of wildfires, with dry landscapes and prolonged drought conditions creating a volatile

² Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, *Thinking with Water* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 56.

³ Chen et al., 56.

⁴ Anders Edenroth, *Water*, ed. Walton Music Corporation, vocal score (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Walton Music Corporation, 2015), 2.

⁵ Daniel R. Cayan, Tapash Das, David W. Pierce, Tim P. Barnett, Mary Tyree, and Alexander Gershunov, "Future Dryness in the Southwest US and the Hydrology of the Early 21st Century Drought," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107, no. 50 (2010): 21271-76.

⁶ David J. Hess, Christopher A. Wold, Elise Hunter, John Nay, Scott Worland, Jonathan Gilligan, and George M. Hornberger, "Drought, Risk, and Institutional Politics in the American Southwest," in *Sociological Forum*, vol. 31 (2016): 807-827.

⁷ Robert M. Marshall, Marcos D. Robles, Daniel R. Majka, Jeanmarie A. Haney, and Brian Gratwicke, "Sustainable Water Management in the Southwestern United States: Reality or Rhetoric?" *PLoS One* 5, no. 7 (2010): doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0011687.

environment for increasingly destructive fire seasons as evidenced by the wildfires in the Los Angeles metro area in January 2025.⁸

Arizona's reliance on the Colorado River has led to unsustainable water diversions since the mid-1990s, depleting water levels in Lakes Powell and Mead to approximately half-full as early as 2007.⁹ Climate change has produced a megadrought that has reduced water in the already over allocated Colorado River,¹⁰ straining the Central Arizona Project (CAP), which supplies much of the state, while also exacerbating precipitation variability and evaporation rates.¹¹

In California, prolonged droughts have intensified catastrophic wildfires, compounding water scarcity. The 2025 Southern California Palisades Fire, which destroyed over 6,800 structures, and the Eaton Fire, which killed 17 people and devastated 9,418 structures, serve as stark examples of the devastating relationship between dry conditions and water shortages.¹² Fires devastate communities and strain water resources, as demonstrated by the Hughes Fire near Castaic Lake, where depleted

⁸ Sarah Shamim, "Why Fire Hydrants and Water Supply Failed During Los Angeles Wildfires," *Aljazeera*, January 14, 2025, www.aljazeera.com.

⁹ Michael Dettinger, Bradley Udall, and Aris Georgakakos, "Western Water and Climate Change," *Ecological Applications* 25, no. 8 (2015): 2069-2093.

¹⁰ Mary Beth Faller, "The Future of Water in Arizona," *ASU News*, November 15, 2022, <https://news.asu.edu/20221115-arizona-impact-future-water-arizona>.

¹¹ Emile Elias, Al Rango, Ryann Smith, Connie Maxwell, Caiti Steele, and Kris Havstad, "Climate Change, Agriculture and Water Resources in the Southwestern United States," *Journal of Contemporary Water Research & Education* 158, no. 1 (2016): 46-61.

¹² Jeremia Kimelman, "The LA County Fires Devastated Homes in the Wildland Urban Interface. Here's What That Is," *CalMatters*, January 28, 2025, <https://calmatters.org/environment/wildfires/2025/01/la-county-fires-wildland-urban-interface>.

water supplies hindered containment efforts.¹³ The depletion of groundwater reserves is no longer a distant concern but an urgent crisis. Hydrologist Jay Famiglietti emphasizes the severity of the situation, stating, “All around the world, we have been kicking the can down the road for a long time on effectively managing groundwater. Now we are at the end of the road, and it’s a dead end.”¹⁴

Utah is confronting a similarly dire situation with the dramatic shrinking of the Great Salt Lake, which has lost over 60% of its volume since the 1980s due to agricultural and industrial water diversions.¹⁵ The Great Salt Lake is the largest saline lake in the Western Hemisphere and the eighth largest in the world.¹⁶ Several authors describe the Great Salt Lake’s decline, which has caused ecological consequences including habitat loss for migratory birds, increased dust pollution, and disrupted regional water cycles, as reduced evaporation alters precipitation patterns, threatening both local ecosystems and water availability.¹⁷ “We have a window of opportunity here,” said Bart

¹³ Sarah Shamim, "Firefighters Battle to Maintain Upper Hand on Huge Fire North of Los Angeles," *Eyewitness News*, January 23, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/XkQys>.

¹⁴ Sandra Leander, "Study of California Groundwater Prompts a Wake-Up Call for Arizona," *ASU News*, January 9, 2023, <https://news.asu.edu/20230109-study-california-groundwater-prompts-wakeup-call-arizona>.

¹⁵ Richard Seager, Connie Woodhouse, and Bethany Bickford, "The Decline of the Great Salt Lake: Climate Change and Water Management Failures," *Journal of Water Resources and Climate* 15, no. 4 (2023): 223–240.

¹⁶ Utah Division of Water Resources, "Great Salt Lake," accessed February 12, 2025, <https://water.utah.gov/great-salt-lake>.

¹⁷ Utah Division of Water Resources, "Great Salt Lake," accessed February 12, 2025, <https://water.utah.gov/great-salt-lake>; Brigham Young University, "Great Salt Lake," accessed February 12, 2025, <https://pws.byu.edu/great-salt-lake>.

Miller, the Healthy Rivers program director for Western Resource Advocates, an organization dedicated to protecting the West’s land, air, and water. “The time is past due to take more aggressive steps. We don’t need federal agencies to come in and do this. States and individuals can take action. And it’s high time to do that.”¹⁸

Water-related crises across the Southwest region of the U.S. underscore the critical need for sustainable water practices and greater public involvement in conservation efforts.¹⁹ Despite the tireless work of environmental organizations and policymakers, their messages often struggle to connect with the broader public. I argue that the deepening disconnect with communities calls for fresh, engaging methods to advocate for water conservation.

In this paper, I explore how choral music can serve as a powerful medium for environmental awareness, particularly in addressing water issues. To ground this exploration, I include my personal experiences, formatted as figures, and evolving understanding of water conservation. As illustrated in Table 1, I reflect on the catalyst for this project and my early engagement with the topic.

¹⁸ Scott Bordow, “Why should you care about the Colorado river cuts?” <https://news.asu.edu/20221018-arizona-impact-why-you-should-care-about-colorado-river-cuts>.

¹⁹ Tess Russo, Katherine Alfredo, and Joshua Fisher, "Sustainable Water Management in Urban, Agricultural, and Natural Systems," *Water (Switzerland)* 6, no. 12 (2014): 3934–3956, <https://doi.org/10.3390/w6123934>.

Table 1. Personal Connection to Project

At the beginning of my doctoral studies at Arizona State University, I took a course on water and music taught by Dr. Sabine Feisst. Through various activities and assignments exploring the connection between water and music, I became more aware of my water consumption, even making small personal changes—like switching from single-use water bottles to refilling my tumbler. During this summer music humanities course, we engaged deeply with literature and musical repertoire that explored the intersection of water and music. We began by actively listening to water and opening our ears to the sounds around us, including those heard underwater. We studied global and local water issues, particularly in Arizona, and analyzed water-themed music, articles, videos, and books. Each theme—rivers, lakes, oceans, weather-related water disasters, and even the role of water in daily life—revealed new ways that music can advocate for sustainability. While studying Stephanie Martin's "Water: An Environmental Oratorio," I came across a question that Martin posed: "Can a piece of music enact social change?" Her response was profound: "Probably not. But it can bring us together to engage in conversation, challenge us to think and feel in new directions, and open our ears to other ways of knowing."^[1] Dr. Feisst's Water Music course deepened my interest in the connection between music and water, as well as how music can raise awareness and inspire action for water conservation.

When reaching out to Moira Smiley about her composition “Stand in the River,” she discussed the profound significance of water in community singing, stating:

Water's utter significance for our material and spiritual survival makes for weighty, relevant text to share in community singing. We can all feel viscerally how important and almost miraculous the presence of water is - and, really, we're a planet of water with some land on it...we just amplify the land importance because we're land dwellers!²⁰

Choral music can connect with people on an emotional and communal level, making it a powerful tool for raising awareness about water sustainability. I contend that the act of singing together not only amplifies a message but also embodies unity, reinforcing the social bonds that have the potential to drive change and foster community engagement. By bridging art and advocacy, I posit that water-themed choral music provides a platform to inspire action, engaging both performers and audiences in exploring humanity's relationship with water—its beauty, destructive power, and the urgent need for conservation. Performing such music can help to mobilize communities to address critical issues like the fragility of Arizona's aquifers, California's escalating fire risks, and Utah's disappearing Great Salt Lake.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze four choral works that address water sustainability and related environmental themes, examining their musical, thematic, and ecological significance. I explore how choral music can extend beyond artistic expression to serve as a tool for education, advocacy, and meaningful engagement with issues like water conservation. I chose choral music as the medium because I believe that it can embody collective action—voices coming together to create something greater than the

²⁰ Moira Smiley, email message to author, February 25, 2025.

sum of their parts. In the same way, addressing sustainability requires collaboration, empathy, and a shared vision for the future. By analyzing these choral works and offering performance strategies for conductors, I explore how choral music intersects with environmental activism, illustrating how these works can inspire awareness and action on pressing water issues.

To consolidate my findings, I seek to answer the following research questions:

- In what ways do composers incorporate environmental, spiritual, and metaphorical representations of water in their compositions?
- How do the lyrics, text, and contextual elements of these works facilitate discussions about water sustainability among performers and audiences?
- How can conductors effectively prepare and interpret these works through musical analysis to enhance their impact in performance?

I begin with a literature review on music's role in activism, particularly its ability to inspire social and environmental change. I highlight successful music festivals and campaign initiatives focused on ecological issues, examine scholarly perspectives on composers who have shaped ecomusicology, and explore current choral projects that use music to drive awareness and action.

Literature Review

“Music is a cultural universal and for centuries has been used to bind people together, change their minds, and promote participation in group enterprises for social change.”

--Lindsay A. Fleming and Daniel J. Levitin²¹

Music and Activism

The connection between music and environmental activism has gained significant attention in recent years, with music emerging as a powerful tool for raising awareness and inspiring action on ecological issues.²² By tapping into music's emotional and communal aspects, environmental movements have engaged broader audiences. In this section, I review various studies examining music's role in environmental change. I also explore how music can influence psychological responses, fostering community involvement and encouraging pro-environmental behaviors.

Stuart Oskamp's argument, made two decades ago in the *Journal of Social Issues*, challenges the common perception of music's role in addressing climate change. He states:

At first glance, music might seem irrelevant to this problem, and the notion that music could be viewed as an important tool in addressing climate change might seem naïve or even ridiculous – after all, perhaps we should be leaving the study of the climate crisis to the climate scientists.²³

²¹ Lindsay A. Fleming and Daniel J. Levitin, "Waking Up to No Sound: Music Psychology and Climate Action," *Impact: The Journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Teaching & Learning* 13, no. 1 (2024).

²² Brett Milano, "Don't Drink The Water: How The Environmental Movement Shaped Music," *uDiscoverMusic*, April 22, 2024, <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/environmental-movement-in-music/>.

²³ Helen M. Prior, "How Can Music Help Us to Address the Climate Crisis?," *Music & Science* 5 (2022): 20592043221075725, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20592043221075725>.

Helen M. Prior references Oskamp's argument, noting that the behavioral sciences should play a key role in climate research.²⁴ Oskamp asserts that environmental problems are primarily driven by human behavior and, consequently, can be mitigated or reversed through changes in human behavior.²⁵ Prior explains how music has been used to impart urgent and important messages about the environment and how organizations like Artists and Climate Change²⁶ and Climate Music²⁷ have fostered collaboration among artists, providing platforms for the development and sharing of climate-themed artistic projects.²⁸ Prior explains how both Artist and Climate Change and Climate Music encourage the creation of new works by connecting artists and facilitating the exchange of ideas related to climate action. In my project, I focus on analyzing new choral works through which composers advocate for water sustainability and safety, which aligns with Prior's observation that artistic projects can either communicate or convey climate-related themes.²⁹ Prior acknowledges that while some works explicitly use lyrics or data to

²⁴ Helen M. Prior, "How Can Music Help Us to Address the Climate Crisis?", Stuart Oskamp, "Psychology of Promoting Environmentalism: Psychological Contributions to Achieving an Ecologically Sustainable Future for Humanity," *Journal of Social Issues* 56, no. 3 (2000): 373–390, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00173>.

²⁵ Stuart Oskamp, "Psychology of Promoting Environmentalism: Psychological Contributions to Achieving an Ecologically Sustainable Future for Humanity," *Journal of Social Issues* 56, no. 3 (2000): 373–390, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00173>.

²⁶ Chantal Bilodeau, "Artists and Climate Change," *Artists and Climate Change*, 2013, <https://artistsandclimatechange.com/about/>.

²⁷ "Science+Music+Action." *ClimateMusic*. ClimateMusic, <https://climatemusic.org/>.

²⁸ Helen M. Prior, "How Can Music Help Us to Address the Climate Crisis?," *Music & Science* 5 (2022): 1-4, 20592043221075725, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20592043221075725>.

²⁹ Prior, "How Can Music Help Us to Address the Climate Crisis?," 2.

deliver a clear message, others rely more on the music itself or additional context to evoke feelings or ideas related to climate action. I posit that Prior's distinction is significant as it highlights the varying ways music can engage audiences—ranging from direct representations of environmental issues to more poetic and symbolic interpretations—and acknowledges how the way a message is perceived can vary, making music a powerful tool for fostering awareness and dialogue around topics like water sustainability.³⁰

The presentation and performance of music can play a critical role in enhancing its emotional and narrative impact, influencing how listeners engage with the environment and their values. Patrick Juslin and John Sloboda argue that music's emotional impact and story-telling qualities prompt listeners to question their perceptions of and relationship with the environment, reassess their values, and connect to broader beliefs.³¹ I posit that the way we stage and present the music impacts the storytelling and that performers should engage more with how they present the songs they are singing. Weston and colleagues state “while music can and should be enjoyed simply for its own sake, it also makes sense for us to harness the powerful nature of music for the benefits it can bring, and to try to help us solve the world’s problems.”³² Juslin and Sloboda note

³⁰ Prior, "How Can Music Help Us to Address the Climate Crisis?," 2.

³¹ Patrik N. Juslin, *Musical Emotions Explained: Unlocking the Secrets of Musical Affect* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Patrik N. Juslin and John Sloboda, *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Donna Weston, Leah Coutts, and Marcus Petz, "Music and the Twenty-First Century Eco-Warrior," *SN Social Sciences* 1, no. 9 (2021): 245; Helen M. Prior, "How Can Music Help Us to Address the Climate Crisis?," *Music & Science* 5 (2022): 20592043221075725, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20592043221075725>.

³² Prior, "How Can Music Help Us to Address the Climate Crisis?" 2.

that music’s emotional power can prompt listeners to reevaluate their values and align with broader beliefs.³³

Table 2: Personal Reflection, Performance Potential

In my work, I tell the choirs with whom I have the privilege of working that each performance holds the potential to transform lives, impacting both the audience and the performers. My perspective on this potential for change has been shaped by my mentor, Bart Evans, a retired choral educator from Mesa, Arizona, who believed in the power of music to foster communal experiences. I aim to instill this sense of connection in my students, encouraging them to see performances not merely as artistic endeavors but as opportunities for collective and inward growth. Singing in a choir requires each member to contribute to a greater whole, which can cultivate a shared sense of purpose and connection. I believe that this collective effort has the potential to strengthen social bonds and promote empathy, leading to transformative experiences for both performers and audiences.

The psychological and social power of music can shape collective behavior and foster collaborations regarding environmental activism. Kevin Kniffen and colleagues suggest that positive musical environments can enhance collaboration and collective action, which are essential for effective environmental initiatives.³⁴ Through its ability to

³³ Juslin and Sloboda, *Handbook of Music and Emotion*, 2011.

³⁴ Kevin M. Kniffin, Jubo Yan, Brian Wansink, and William D. Schulze, “The Sound of Cooperation: Musical Influences on Cooperative Behavior,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 38, no. 3 (2017): 372–90.

bring people together, music can help strengthen collective initiatives focused on addressing environmental challenges. Tim Hollo, co-founder of Green Music Australia, observes the lack of critical and theoretical exploration regarding the role of the creative arts in climate change activism. He states that music has often played a key role in social movements, which “provide spaces in the broader culture for new forms of knowledge-making and socio-cultural learning as a central part of their activity.”³⁵ Frith Simon describes how music serves as a “metaphorical ‘badge’ to indicate certain values and beliefs.”³⁶ Teruo Yamasaki discusses how music can alter perceptions of the environment, potentially influencing individuals' emotional responses and engagement with ecological issues.³⁷ By fostering emotional and social connection, music can help to cultivate a shared environmental consciousness, and perhaps strengthen collective resolve to take action. Together, these researchers highlight the power of music to shape individual perceptions and bring people together for a common cause.

Music and Environmental Campaigns/Initiatives

Campaigns and initiatives like *Save the Whales*, *Live Earth*, *Songs of Earth*, and *Sounds Right* have harnessed the power of music to mobilize public engagement and raise awareness, and create platforms in which music serves as a rallying cry, uniting

³⁵ Donna Weston, Leah Coutts, and Marcus Petz, “Music and the Twenty-First Century Eco-Warrior,” *SN Social Sciences* 1, no. 9 (2021): 245.

³⁶ Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

³⁷ Teruo Yamasaki, Keiko Yamada, and Petri Laukka, “Viewing the World Through the Prism of Music: Effects of Music on Perceptions of the Environment,” *Psychology of Music* 43, no. 1 (2015): 61–74.

diverse audiences and sparking conversations that extend beyond the concert stage. Through their global reach and emotional resonance, campaigns and music festivals highlight music's role in fostering a sense of shared responsibility and urgency in addressing environmental challenges. Timothy Wager asserts that music remains an enduring means to unite people around critical issues, such as environmental conservation, embracing its power to galvanize collective action.³⁸ Aligning with this ideal of collective action, Larry Hoffer emphasizes that environmental protest music does more than inform—it can call people to act.³⁹

Save the Whales: Advocating for Marine Conservation

The *Save the Whales* campaign is a conservation movement that began in the 1970s to raise awareness about the plight of whales and marine ecosystems and advocate for their protection.⁴⁰ Through music and public campaigns, *Save the Whales* focused on the environmental threats posed by industrialization and human exploitation of marine life. Using songs to emphasize the plight of whales and ocean ecosystems raised public awareness about critical environmental concerns. Roger Payne, a key figure in the *Save the Whales* campaign, played a pivotal role in raising public awareness about whale conservation through his work with whale songs. Payne, along with his wife, Katy Payne,

³⁸ Timothy Wager, "Music Education for Surviving and Thriving," *Frontiers in Education* 6 (2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.648799>.

³⁹ Larry M. Hoffer, "Protest Music: Cultivating Emotional Well-Being and Wild Nature," *Frontiers in Education* 6 (2021): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.648799>.

⁴⁰ Paul Robbins, "Save the Whales Movement," in *Encyclopedia of Environment and Society* (2007), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412953924.n954>.

pioneered the study of humpback whale songs, which revealed the complexity of whale communication and helped to raise public awareness about the plight of these marine mammals.⁴¹ Payne's 1970s recordings of humpback whale songs, which he helped popularize, became a central element of the campaign. His work, particularly through the album *Songs of the Humpback Whale*,⁴² demonstrated the complexity and beauty of whale communication, captivating audiences and drawing attention to the threats whales faced from industrialization and hunting. As Helen Prior argues, music fosters emotional connections that are essential for mobilizing support and influencing public behavior. By exposing listeners to the sonic world of whales, Payne's work evoked a powerful emotional response, galvanizing support for the campaign and the broader cause of marine conservation.⁴³

In the 1980s, *Save the Whales* also leveraged popular music to spotlight endangered species and raise awareness of environmental threats. Paul McCartney's song "We All Stand Together," along with his active role in anti-whaling protests, exemplified how music can symbolize collective responsibility for environmental protection.⁴⁴ As David Weston observes, McCartney's music is a prime example of how popular culture serves as a platform for addressing global environmental issues, making them accessible

⁴¹ Diana Reiss and Stuart Firestein, "Roger Searle Payne (1935–2023)," *Science* 381, no. 6656 (2023): 380, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adj9987>.

⁴² Roger S. Payne, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*, Capitol CRM ST-620, 1970.

⁴³ Prior, 1.

⁴⁴ Donna Weston, Leah Coutts, and Marcus Petz, "Music and the Twenty-First Century Eco-Warrior," *SN Social Sciences* 1, no. 9 (2021): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00253-z>.

and engaging to a broad audience. The connection between music and activism shows how cultural figures can use their platform to mobilize listeners and foster a sense of global solidarity in the face of ecological crises.⁴⁵ While conductors of choral programs may not be high-profile cultural figures, I argue they can still serve as influential representatives of their communities, using music to engage and inspire action on local environmental issues.

Live Earth: Combating Climate Change Through Global Concerts

Live Earth, a global concert series in 2007 organized by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore and The Alliance for Climate Protection, brought together millions to address climate change. Music festivals like *Live Earth* raised awareness about environmental crises and fostered collective action. Matt Brennan and colleagues discuss how such large-scale music festivals can effectively promote sustainability by turning environmental engagement into an enjoyable and memorable experience, creating lasting impressions on participants.⁴⁶ *Live Earth* demonstrated music's capacity to inspire public engagement, turning passive awareness into tangible advocacy and action.⁴⁷ A study by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication found that the concerts played a

⁴⁵ Weston et al., 245.

⁴⁶ Matt Brennan, Jo Collinson Scott, Angela Connelly, and Gemma Lawrence, "Do Music Festival Communities Address Environmental Sustainability and How? A Scottish Case Study," *Popular Music* 38, no. 2 (2019): 252–75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143019000035>.

⁴⁷ Anthony Leiserowitz, Edward Maibach, and Connie Roser-Renouf, *Surveying the Impact of Live Earth on American Public Opinion* (New Haven, CT: Yale Project on Climate Change, 2007), https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2007_09_Surveying-the-Impact-of-Live-Earth.pdf.

significant role in shaping public attitudes toward climate change and sustainability, influencing both knowledge and behavior in the months following the events.⁴⁸ Sophie Barrett describes *Live Earth* as a groundbreaking initiative, illustrating how music's ability to engage and inspire transcends entertainment, reaching millions worldwide and transforming awareness into action.⁴⁹ The underlying principles of *Live Earth*—using music concerts to inspire action—are directly relevant to my work in this paper. I posit that performing concerts in areas facing critical conservation issues can make the impact of the performance more personally and collectively resonant, which is the aim of this project.

Songs of Earth: Mahler Foundation

The *Songs of the Earth* initiative is a global project led by the Mahler Foundation seeking to raise awareness about environmental issues through artistic expression.⁵⁰ It draws inspiration from Gustav Mahler's symphonic masterpiece, "Das Lied von der Erde," to engage audiences in discussions about the planet's future.⁵¹ Mahler's granddaughter, Marina Mahler said "Das Lied von der Erde "may inspire us to rethink, to bring urgency into the task of rewilding our planet so it can sustain future generations so

⁴⁸ Anthony Leiserowitz, "Surveying the Impact of Live Earth: Global Warming Awareness, Opinions, and Attitudes".

⁴⁹ Sophie J. Barrett, "Assessing the Effectiveness of Artistic Place-Based Climate Change Interpretation," *Journal of Interpretation Research* 19, no. 2 (2014): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/109258721401900202>.

⁵⁰ Mahler Foundation, "The Song of the Earth Project," accessed February 19, 2025, <https://mahlerfoundation.org/foundation/themahlerhour/the-song-of-the-earth-project/>.

⁵¹ Mahler Foundation, "Projects," accessed February 19, 2025, <https://mahlerfoundation.org/foundation/projects/>

we will not die out as a species.”⁵² In 2021, the Mahler Foundation collaborated with the Choir of the Earth to perform Mahler's Symphony No. 8, also known as the "Symphony of a Thousand"--an unprecedented performance involving over 1,200 vocal parts, including contributions from the children's choir of the Conservatorio Gustav Mahler in Irapuato, Mexico, and soloists from the Sansara Choir.⁵³ The event was conducted as a virtual performance, showcasing the foundation's commitment to innovative approaches in promoting Mahler's music and environmental advocacy.⁵⁴

Sounds Right Global Initiative

Norwegian singer-songwriter AURORA, known for her ethereal voice and environmentally conscious music, shared a powerful sentiment while working on the *Sounds Right* global initiative: "The world is calling for us. And it has been for a long time. We can feel deep inside our very core that something is wrong."⁵⁵ In April 2024, the Museum for the United Nations—UN Live launched *Sounds Right*, a worldwide music initiative that allows nature to generate conservation funding through its own

⁵² Morton Solvik, "The Mahler Hour: Song of the Earth and Its Implications for Today's World," Mahler Foundation, YouTube video, 1:13:57, posted November 20, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\[video_id\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=[video_id]).

⁵³ Choir of the Earth, "International Musicians in Landmark Performance of Mahler's Symphony of a Thousand," *Choir of the Earth*, January 10, 2025, <https://choiroftheearth.com/latest-news/international-musicians-in-landmark-performance-of-mahlers-symphony-of-a-thousand>.

⁵⁴ Choir of the Earth, "International Musicians in Landmark Performance of Mahler's Symphony of a Thousand".

⁵⁵ UN Department of Global Communications, "The Museum For The United Nations - UN Live Launches a New Global Music Initiative to Recognize the Value of Nature," press release, April 19, 2024, <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO2404/S00127/the-museum-for-the-united-nations-un-live-launches-a-new-global-music-initiative-to-recognise-the-value-of-nature.htm?>

sounds. The project evolved from earlier work that began in 2019, when a group of artists and activists explored how music could drive sustainability. One key moment was the release of "Earth" by David Andrew Burd, known as Lil Dicky—a collaborative song featuring a wide range of artists across pop, hip-hop, R&B, and even film and sports. With appearances by stars like Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande, Snoop Dogg, Ed Sheeran, John Legend, and Leonardo DiCaprio, the song aimed to raise awareness about climate change and environmental conservation through a unifying, global message.⁵⁶ The release of "Earth" included a music video and merchandise, with a portion of the proceeds directed to nonprofits focused on climate solutions.⁵⁷ Burd's work on "Earth" also laid important groundwork for the vision behind Sounds Right. Around the same time, the *Sounds From Your Window* initiative emerged during the COVID-19 quarantine, inviting people to record and share sounds from nature. These nature recordings were used to create music that reached 1.6 million people and won the Latin American Green Awards. Building on these efforts, the founders developed the concept of granting nature intellectual property rights, ultimately leading to the creation of *Sounds Right*.⁵⁸ The initiative aims to spark a global conversation about the value of nature and inspire millions of music fans to take meaningful action to protect the planet.⁵⁹ Cosmo Sheldrake, a British musician, composer, and producer known for his experimental and

⁵⁶ "A New Song for the Earth," *One Earth*, April 2019, <https://www.oneearth.org/a-new-song-for-the-earth/>

⁵⁷ "A New Song for the Earth," *One Earth*, April 2019, <https://www.oneearth.org/a-new-song-for-the-earth/>

⁵⁸ UN Department of Global Communications, "The Museum For The United Nations - UN Live Launches a New Global Music Initiative to Recognize the Value of Nature"

⁵⁹ UN Department of Global Communications, "The Museum For The United Nations - UN Live Launches a New Global Music Initiative to Recognize the Value of Nature"

eclectic approach to music said, “I am excited to be part of this campaign that seeks to recognize the creative contribution and authorship of the more-than-human world. It is an essential first step towards acknowledging that humans are not the only species that respond creatively to the world around us.”⁶⁰ In a time of environmental crisis, projects such as *Sounds Right*—like the choral works that I am exploring in this paper—demonstrate how creativity can inspire collective responsibility and a renewed commitment to preserving our planet.

While environmental campaigns and initiatives have successfully harnessed music to mobilize audiences and foster engagement, commissioned choral works take this a step further by embedding ecological themes directly into the artistic process. Unlike broad awareness efforts, commissioned compositions can serve as intentional artistic responses to environmental concerns, which can offer a deeper, more personal exploration of humanity’s relationship with nature.⁶¹ For conductors, composers of large-scale water-inspired commissions create opportunities to program concerts that can transcend activism, impacting audiences on a global scale and inspiring reflection and engagement.

In the following section, I will examine two notable commissioned choral works that engage with water sustainability, climate change, and environmental advocacy, highlighting how composers have translated ecological urgency into compelling musical narratives. I chose to discuss these commissioned works because they are larger-scale

⁶⁰ UN Department of Global Communications, "The Museum For The United Nations - UN Live Launches a New Global Music Initiative to Recognize the Value of Nature"

⁶¹ Timothy Wager, "The Power of Music in Collective Action and Environmental Advocacy," *Music and Social Change Journal* 22, no. 1 (2010): 34-35.

compositions, with performances at notable venues such as the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Royal Albert Hall, highlighting their ability to address profound themes such as water scarcity and the global water crisis on a grand stage. Large-scale commissioned works may offer a deeper lens through which to analyze how choral music engages with the theme of water. Commissioned compositions of this scale and size are often supported by major organizations with the resources to create expansive works that reach wider audiences and carry significant artistic and social impact. Because of this, there is a wealth of contextual information available regarding the intent, development, and reception of these works that provide a foundation for my analysis of songs in this paper. The composers of the following commissioned works demonstrate how they respond to pressing real-world themes. Well-received and influential, I argue that these works exemplify music's power to raise awareness and inspire action on important issues.

Commissioned Choral Works for Water Advocacy

Beyond festivals and grassroots initiatives, major organizations are increasingly commissioning new choral works to address environmental concerns, particularly water conservation. As part of this paper, I sought to explore larger-scale choral compositions that engage with the theme of environmental advocacy, particularly works that elevate water conservation through expansive musical settings, diverse cultural perspectives, and institutional support. I posit that the following choral compositions not only amplify the urgency of ecological issues but also demonstrate how choral music can function as a catalyst for awareness and change on a broader public stage.

The British Broadcasting Company (BBC), for example, commissioned *The Water Diviner's Tale* by Rachel Portman, which brings attention to the importance of protecting water. The Los Angeles Master Chorale commissioned *Malhaar: A Requiem for Water* by Reena Esmail, blending Hindustani and Western classical traditions to reflect on water scarcity.

The BBC Proms commission of *The Water Diviner's Tale* (2007)

The BBC Promenade Concerts (BBC Proms) is an annual summer festival of classical music concerts, founded in 1895, and organized by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).⁶² It is one of the most prestigious and widely attended classical music festivals in the world held primarily at the Royal Albert Hall in London, featuring a diverse range of performances, from orchestral and choral works to contemporary compositions and cross-genre collaborations.⁶³

Rachel Portman's *The Water Diviner's Tale*, commissioned by the BBC Proms in 2007, is a 60-minute choral performance addressing the urgent issue of climate change, written for children's and youth choirs, five professional soloists, orchestra, and narrator. In the synopsis of the work, Portman describes how the sounds of a terrible storm filter through into the auditorium. Everyone is sheltering from a massive natural disaster outside. In the score, the composer gives this direction,

A massive storm is raging outside the auditorium. The sounds of rain and wind beat against the building. Groups of children emerge from several entrances and begin moving through the audience. As they move towards the central stage and

⁶² "The Proms on World Service," *BBC*, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4j5vvcM6Cf3jKns3Lzvc1dM/the-proms-on-world-service>.

⁶³ "The Proms on World Service," *BBC*.

the choir stalls under the organ, they begin to sing. Forty Lost Children enter, weaving through the audience singing of the storm that has taken away their homes and families, flooding the city, sending cars and trees flying through the sky.”⁶⁴

As the narrative unfolds, the *Water Diviner* reveals humanity’s neglect of the natural world—particularly the consequences of fossil fuel dependency—leading to irreversible ecological devastation.

More than just a dramatic retelling of environmental destruction, *The Water Diviner’s Tale* is designed to engage young performers in climate activism. Portman seeks to “give an emotional voice to the science behind climate change,” using *The Water Diviner’s Tale* as a means of connecting audiences to the consequences of environmental mismanagement.⁶⁵ Librettist Owen Sheers explains that the work explores the “emotional questions and human dilemmas surrounding one of the most vital challenges of our age—carbon-induced climate change.”⁶⁶ He further argues that it “deserves, and more importantly, needs to be heard now,” as it is told through the voices of children who will inherit the consequences of their parents’ decisions.⁶⁷ Director Denni Sayers similarly emphasizes how the piece broadens young performers' perspectives by helping them empathize with the global impact of climate change, particularly the ways it manifests

⁶⁴ “The Water Diviner’s Tale: Rachel Portman,” Wise Music Classical, accessed February 9, 2025, <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/36030/The-Water-Diviners-Tale--Rachel-Portman/>.

⁶⁵ “The Water Diviner’s Tale: Rachel Portman,”

⁶⁶ Owen Sheers, quoted in Michael Billington, “Review of *The Water Diviner’s Tale*,” *The Guardian*, August 27, 2007; Michael Billington, “Prom 51: *The Water Diviner’s Tale*,” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/aug/28/proms2007.proms>.

⁶⁷ Owen Sheers, quoted in Michael Billington, “Review of *The Water Diviner’s Tale*,” *The Guardian*, August 27, 2007; Michael Billington, “Prom 51: *The Water Diviner’s Tale*,” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/aug/28/proms2007.proms>.

through extreme weather events and water crises.⁶⁸ Critic Michael Billington echoes this sentiment, describing the work as an urgent call for a younger generation to redeem the environmental mistakes of its elders. Billington states that *The Water Diviner's Tale* is “an hour-long music-theatre piece” that “urgently calls on a younger generation to redeem the sins of its elders on the subject of climate change.”⁶⁹

From a musical standpoint, *The Water Diviner's Tale* balances a range of styles to make its message both accessible and impactful. Billington describes the score as alternating between “Britten-style choral writing for young voices” and “bouncily ironic Broadway tunefulness.”⁷⁰ Mezzo-soprano Frances Bourne, who performed the role of the Weather Girl in *The Water Diviner's Tale*, delivered satirical lines such as “The flight of the swallow is canceled / The waterways of Venice no more,” a darkly humorous reflection on the disruption of natural ecosystems. The character offers an ironic commentary on climate change, reinforcing the work’s urgent environmental message. Bourne, known for her performances in opera and contemporary theatrical works, brings a sharp, engaging presence to the role, heightening the piece’s mix of poignancy and wit.⁷¹ I believe that the conclusion of the work is particularly relevant to discussions of water conservation. As the lost children reclaim their agency, they declare, “Our future will not be our past,” rejecting environmental fatalism and embracing collective action.⁷² Future programming for water conservation initiatives can draw from *The Water*

⁶⁸ Denni Sayers, interview in *BBC Proms Program Notes*, 2007.

⁶⁹ Sheers, quoted in Billington, “Review of *The Water Diviner's Tale*,” 2007.

⁷⁰ Sheers, quoted in Billington, “Review of *The Water Diviner's Tale*,” 2007.

⁷¹ Owen Sheers, quoted in Michael Billington, “Review of *The Water Diviner's Tale*,” *The Guardian*, August 27, 2007; Michael Billington, “Prom 51: *The Water Diviner's Tale*,” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/aug/28/proms2007.proms>.

⁷² Sheers, quoted in Billington, “Review of *The Water Diviner's Tale*,” 2007.

Diviner's Tale's ability to merge narrative, musical diversity, and immersive performance to create an emotional and intellectual connection to environmental issues.

Los Angeles Master Chorale Commission of
Reena Esmail's *Malhaar: A Requiem for Water* (2023)

The Los Angeles Master Chorale has a distinguished history of commissioning works that engage with pressing social issues, including environmental activism. In 2023, the Chorale launched the "25 in 5" initiative, aiming to commission 25 new works over five seasons, with a focus on composers from historically underrepresented groups.⁷³ Notable commissions under this program include Reena Esmail's *Malhaar: A Requiem for Water*, which explores the intersection of Indian classical music and water scarcity, and Rufus Wainwright's *Dream Requiem*, which intertwines themes of environmental disruption with the Latin Requiem text. I believe that the Los Angeles Master Chorale's dedication to music as a catalyst for social change and environmental awareness is evident in its commissions that spark dialogue and engage communities.

Reena Esmail's *Malhaar: A Requiem for Water* in 2023 was commissioned and premiered at the work at Walt Disney Concert Hall under the direction of Artistic Director Grant Gershon. The performance paired *Malhaar* with Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem*, highlighting the adaptability of the Requiem text and form across cultures and contexts. Esmail's work, grounded in both Western choral traditions and Hindustani classical music, addresses the sacredness of water and its fragile state in the modern world. Esmail describes *Malhaar* as a response to the worsening drought in Southern California, a way

⁷³ "25 in 5: A Commissioning Project," *Los Angeles Master Chorale*, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://lamasterchorale.org/25in5>.

to process the "rising panic" surrounding water scarcity.⁷⁴ The *Malhaar* raga, long associated with rain and renewal in Hindustani music, plays a central role in the piece. "As the legend goes," Esmail explains, "the greatest musicians could cause a downpour from even the most severely parched skies by the power of their song."⁷⁵ By drawing on this tradition, Esmail situates the piece within a broader musical and spiritual context while emphasizing water's universal significance.

Musically, *Malhaar* blends Western choral textures with Hindustani melodic and rhythmic elements. The premiere featured Indian classical vocalist Saili Oak and tabla player Abhiman Kaushal, who collaborated with the Los Angeles Master Chorale.⁷⁶ The interplay between these musical forces reflected the cross-cultural dialogue at the heart of Esmail's compositional approach, merging structured choral writing with the improvisatory nature of Indian classical music.

The text of *Malhaar* interweaves selections from the traditional Latin Requiem Mass with poetry by Wendell Berry and William O'Daly. Esmail explains that the work follows a journey beginning with reverence for water, descends into the fear and devastation of its loss, and culminates in a plea for renewal. The final movement recalls themes from O'Daly's *The Dream of the Waterfall* and incorporates a rare *In Paradisum* section, a nod to Fauré's Requiem.⁷⁷ Esmail describes *Malhaar* as "a hopeful requiem," offering a vision of renewal if humanity can change its relationship with the earth:

⁷⁴ Reena Esmail, "Program Notes: *Malhaar: A Requiem for Water*," Los Angeles Master Chorale, 2023.

⁷⁵ Reena Esmail, "Program Notes: *Malhaar: A Requiem for Water*".

⁷⁶ Josef Woodard, "Los Angeles Master Chorale's Requiem Doubleheader at Disney Hall," *San Francisco Classical Voice*, March 28, 2023

⁷⁷ Woodard, "Los Angeles Master Chorale's Requiem Doubleheader," 2023.

"While the collective loss has been so tremendous, we can still hold out hope that if we change our relationship to the earth, we might beckon the rain back."⁷⁸

At its premiere, the performance was accompanied by an atmospheric projection design featuring the phrase "Water is holy" in English and Sanskrit, reinforcing the work's spiritual and ecological themes.⁷⁹ Gershon, referencing Esmail's remark that "when you sing *Malhaar*, rain comes," noted with humor that rehearsals had coincided with an unusually wet season in Los Angeles.⁸⁰ Yet, *Malhaar* is more than an "L.A. story"; it carries a universal message about water's sacredness and the urgent need for conservation. The premiere demonstrated the power of choral music to engage with environmental issues, making *Malhaar* not only a profound artistic statement but also a call to action.

As these two commission projects demonstrate, choral music can become a compelling platform for addressing environmental issues, particularly water conservation. By blending diverse musical traditions and engaging performers in storytelling, composers like Esmail and Portman have created works that not only highlight the fragility of water resources but may also inspire audiences toward awareness and action. The following analysis examines how choral compositions centered on water—whether as a life-sustaining force, a symbol of renewal, or a source of destruction—serve as powerful tools for both artistic expression and environmental advocacy.

⁷⁸ Esmail, "Program Notes."

⁷⁹ Woodard, "Los Angeles Master Chorale's Requiem Doubleheader at Disney Hall"

⁸⁰ Josef Woodard, "Reena Esmail's *Malhaar* Is a Rainmaker for Los Angeles Master Chorale," *San Francisco Classical Voice*, March 28, 2023.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STUDY AND ANALYSIS OF FOUR WORKS

In this chapter, I focus on in-depth analysis and discussion of four water-themed choral compositions, offering insights into how the musical structure, vocal techniques, and textual interpretation can bring greater meaning to the works. The goal is to explore how these songs can be studied for score preparation and performance, helping conductors and performers fully engage with the themes of water sustainability. By analyzing vocal textures, dynamics, phrasing, and word painting, I explore how composers use these musical elements to emphasize the ecological, spiritual, and metaphorical significance of water. My goal is to enhance the understanding of these works, allowing for performances that deeply resonate with the audience while promoting a strong message of water conservation.

Framework of Analysis for Choral Works on Water Advocacy

The framework for my analysis of four choral works focused on water advocacy involves a systematic approach that ensures both the personal and artistic aspects of the composer's work are considered in relation to environmental issues. The process is organized into four sections: the composer's background, contextual analysis, lyric and text analysis, and musical analysis.

Background of the Composer

I explore the biographical details of the composer, including their personal experiences, influences, and career. Understanding the composer's background provides insight into how their life and worldview may have shaped their approach to water advocacy in their music. I draw from sources such as bios, interviews, and secondary scholarship to provide a comprehensive view of the composer.

Contextual Analysis

In the contextual analysis, I examine the broader social, environmental, and cultural circumstances surrounding the work's creation. I discuss environmental context, focusing on water-related issues at the time of composition. Understanding the context of the work's creation offers a deeper understanding of the composer's intentions and the social relevance of the music.

Textual Analysis

For the textual analysis, I focus on the words that accompany the choral work. I explore a close reading of the lyrics or poetry, examining how they engage with themes of water sustainability and environmentalism. I analyze the language choices, imagery, and metaphors used to evoke water's significance

Musical Analysis

In my musical analysis, I examine the composition for its musical structure, harmonic choices, and vocal treatment, particularly as they relate to the thematic content of the piece. In my analysis, I will consolidate my findings to explore the following:

- How does the composer use melody, rhythm, and harmony to reflect the emotional and environmental themes of water?
- Are there any specific musical techniques used to evoke the sound or movement of water, or to suggest the urgency of water advocacy?

By examining choral works on water advocacy through these four lenses, I hope that my analysis will create a comprehensive understanding of how choral composers use music to engage with and raise awareness about critical water-related issues, while also considering the broader artistic and environmental context in which the work was created. I chose the four pieces selected for analysis in this chapter—“Water” (2015) by Anders Edenroth, “Dried Up River” (2024) by Gerda Blok-Wilson, “Famine Song” (2004) by Matthew Culloton, and “But a Flint Holds Fire” (2016) by Andrea Ramsey—for their varied yet interconnected portrayals of water as both a literal and metaphorical element. Each work presents a distinct compositional approach, allowing for a broad exploration of how choral music can reflect environmental themes, human resilience, and collective experience. I searched for songs that reference drought, rivers, lakes, storms, rising seas, weather change, and water as a metaphor—across a wide range of thematic and musical categories—and selected these four particular choral works because I relate to the contextual motivations behind their creation and recognize the parallels between their messages and my own experiences. Working on this paper provided an opportunity to perform these pieces and incorporate them into the curriculum within my college district, where I currently serve in a sustainability fellowship focused on advancing sustainability initiatives across both the district and the broader community.

In this paper, I discuss these four choral works in the order in which they would be performed in a concert setting, beginning with an urgent plea for water, then progressing through grief, communal struggle, and ultimately, quiet resilience. Each piece broadens the lens—from individual need to environmental loss, to the global consequences of scarcity, and finally, to the enduring strength of a community facing systemic injustice. The latter half of the final piece offers a sense of hope, which I believe can create space for reflection and resolve.

“Water” by Anders Edenroth⁸¹ (2015) — Duration: 3:45

Background on Composer: Anders Edenroth (b. 1963)

Anders Edenroth has made a significant impact on the world of a cappella music as a composer, arranger, and performer. Born in Stockholm, Sweden, Edenroth's time at Adolf Fredrik's School of Music, a renowned institution with a strong emphasis on choral singing, early shaped his musical education. His formative years at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm led to the founding of The Real Group, a vocal ensemble that blends Swedish choral traditions with jazz influences. Over the years, Edenroth has expanded his musical impact by composing, arranging, and producing, with his works performed globally.⁸²

⁸¹ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010).

⁸² Anders Edenroth, "Bio," *Anders Edenroth Official Website*, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://andersedenroth.com/bio>.

Edenroth's musical journey began at a very young age, with early memories of experimenting on his grandmother's piano. Despite struggling with formal classical piano lessons, Edenroth was drawn to the expressive freedom of playing outside the traditional boundaries of his assignments. This early exploration of music laid the foundation for his later work as a composer and performer. He explains, "I didn't really listen to that much of it... it was just adding to your subconscious,"⁸³ emphasizing the subconscious influence of this formative experience.

Edenroth's path as a musician took shape during his time at the Royal Academy of Music, where he met fellow aspiring musicians and educators who introduced him to the possibility of making a living through music. Before this, he had considered other careers, such as journalism. The Real Group's sound blends Swedish choral traditions with influences from American jazz and vocal groups like the Manhattan Transfer and the Hi-Lo's. Edenroth recalls, "We were initially focused on jazz standards, but over time, our Swedish heritage became a defining feature of our sound."⁸⁴ Writing lyrics in both English and Swedish, Edenroth navigates the nuances of communicating emotional and lyrical messages. He shares, "I believe language and music are inseparable... It's about capturing a moment and conveying a feeling, no matter the language."⁸⁵

⁸³ Aarya A. Kaushik, "Anders Edenroth: Musician Extraordinaire, 'Real' to his Core," *WHRB Online Content*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.whrb.org/content/anders-edenroth-musician-extraordinaire-real-to-his-core>.

⁸⁴ Kaushik, "Anders Edenroth: Musician Extraordinaire".

⁸⁵ Kaushik, "Anders Edenroth: Musician Extraordinaire".

Edenroth's approach to music is not only about artistic expression but also about recognizing the societal importance of the arts. Reflecting on his role in the Real Group, he believes that music, like cooking, is a process of creativity, collaboration, and sharing. "It's a creative process, too—you have to combine stuff, you have to be inspired, and then you make something and share it."⁸⁶ Edenroth advocates for the centrality of the arts in societal well-being, writing: "I think it should be the goal for any society to have a great art scene. Everybody should chip in. Everybody should participate".⁸⁷ This view reflects the understanding that the arts can foster community and contribute to collective mental health.

As Edenroth reflects on the challenges faced by young musicians, particularly in Sweden, he has expressed appreciation for the democratic socialism system in Sweden that provides equal access to education. He contrasts this with the financial limitations in the U.S., which often discourage students from pursuing careers in the arts. Despite these challenges, Edenroth has expressed a commitment to creating music that is personally meaningful and universally accessible, and that music should be a tool for connecting with others and conveying powerful messages: "When a meal is over, you do the dishes—it's gone, it's a memory at the most."⁸⁸ Through his work, Edenroth continues to explore the intersection of life, music, and art, creating music that resonates on both a

⁸⁶ Kaushik, "Anders Edenroth: Musician Extraordinaire".

⁸⁷ Kaushik, "Anders Edenroth: Musician Extraordinaire".

⁸⁸ Kaushik, "Anders Edenroth: Musician Extraordinaire".

personal and societal level, while championing the importance of the arts in fostering community and collective human expression.

Contextual Analysis: “Water”

Anders Edenroth’s “Water” offers a deep and philosophical exploration of the vital element that sustains all life on Earth. As a composer, Edenroth consistently has demonstrated a commitment to environmental consciousness through his music. Along with his ensemble, The Real Group—a Swedish a cappella group—he has used his platform to advocate for the protection of the Earth and its resources. During their visit to Arizona in 2018, Edenroth, Emma Nilsson, and Morten Vinther expressed their hope for a future driven by stronger environmental efforts in personal conversations.⁸⁹ In my conversation with the composer, Edenroth explained:

Water was written as a tribute to this element but also criticism against the way we exploit it. Filling plastic bottles with water and transporting them on diesel trucks is such a bad idea for the environment. Water should be a human right, not a commercial product. Writing the song was kind of special since I had to compose it with the five bottle notes on fixed pitches and when the singer played her bottle she could not sing. This was a challenge. Much of the song was composed on the island of Hokkaido, Japan and I think it influenced me a bit. The bottle melody is very much like a pentatonic Japanese Shakuhachi tune.⁹⁰

The Real Group’s broader commitment to environmental awareness is reflected in their music, including “World for Christmas,” written by Emma Nilsson as a

⁸⁹ Anders Edenroth, Emma Nilsson, and Morten Vinther, personal communication, 2018.

⁹⁰ Anders Edenroth, personal communication, 2025.

dedication to her newborn daughter and the world she hoped she would grow up in. The song juxtaposes the familiar opening phrase “Twas the night before Christmas” with a poignant message of global concern, urging listeners to cherish and protect the beauty of the planet.⁹¹ The Real Group’s “World on Our Shoulders” was released globally for charity as a call to climate action, with free sheet music provided to encourage choirs to spread the message. On the final page of the “World on Our Shoulders,” the group explicitly states, “This piece has been created to unite people. Singing is a powerful democratic tool, and we hope you will sing this song with volume and honesty.”⁹² It also emphasizes, “Together, we call for urgent action on the climate crisis. Stand with us and make a resolution for the planet.”⁹³

Edenroth’s program notes for “Water” reinforce this perspective, addressing both the ecological and humanitarian aspects of water distribution:

The single most important reason why our planet bubbles with life is water. All plants and animals need water to survive and reproduce. It plays a key role in Earth’s ecosystem, where all living things interact and collaborate to maintain a delicate balance, everyone benefits from. Water unites us—plants, animals, and human beings. We become one great organism connected by the ocean waves, the clouds in the sky, the Arctic ice, and the pouring rain. Water is essential to human life just like the air we breathe. However, this source of life is nothing we share equally. Some of us have plenty while millions have less than they need to even survive. We begin to consider water a possession and a product rather than a basic human right. With a growing climate crisis, this will gradually get worse. Not because we don’t have enough water but because we don’t share the water we have. In a way,

⁹¹ Anders Edenroth, *The World for Christmas (Original Version)*, accessed February 16, 2025, <https://andersedenroth.com/shop/#!/products/the-world-for-christmas-original-version>.

⁹² Robin Howl, Violet Skies, and Holly Fletcher, "World On Our Shoulders," #Resolution2020, arrangement by Emma Nilsson and Morten Vinther. 2020.

⁹³ Howl et al., "World On Our Shoulders".

water is also poetry, and poetry can flow just like water—telling us stories, bringing meaning to life, and giving hope to future generations.⁹⁴

Edenroth's words reflect water's essential role as a life-sustaining force and a metaphor for unity and interconnectedness. His music not only conveys the beauty and fluidity of water but also serves as a reminder of the urgent need for equitable distribution and conservation. In "Water," he transforms music into a vehicle for advocacy, encouraging performers and audiences alike to recognize their shared responsibility in protecting this critical resource.

Textual Analysis: "Water"

The poetry written by Anders Edenroth is as follows:

*In the mind of a melting snowman,
in the sound from a whistling kettle,
in the gently alighting crystal of ice,
in the dewdrops of a colourful petal.*

*To live, everyone must have water,
to give, not to deny each other,
to bring from source to mouth just like
the food of love from a nursing mother.*

*Sweet as an angel's kiss,
salt as her falling tears,
droplets in patience wearing away
the mountain of time for billions of years.*

*In the shape of a cloud evolving,
in the gleam when your skin perspires,
in the curse of a lost and foundering ship,
in the silent face Narcissus admires,*

⁹⁴ Anders Endentroth, *Water* (original version), accessed February 9, 2025, <https://andersedenroth.com/shop/index.html#!/products/water-original-version>.

*To kill for in a global battle,
to chill well in a plastic bottle,
to find between air and earth,
both cold and wet says Aristotle.*

*Mild as a mermaid's song,
wild when the oceans roar,
never been born and never been buried,
infinite waves caressing the shore.*

*Water...*⁹⁵

Edenroth's poetic lyrics explore various states and functions of water, incorporating natural imagery, mythology, and philosophical references. The opening lines describe water in different forms, such as melting snow, steam from a kettle, ice crystals, and dew on petals. The second stanza emphasizes water's necessity for life and its role in sustaining humanity, drawing comparison to a nursing mother providing nourishment. The text references Narcissus, a figure from Greek mythology who became enamored with his reflection in a pool of water, ultimately leading to his demise.⁹⁶ The mention of Aristotle aligns with his classification of water as one of the four classical elements alongside earth, air, and fire.⁹⁷ The final lines contrast water's gentleness—likened to a mermaid's song—with its destructive power in roaring oceans, illustrating its dual nature.

⁹⁵ Anders Edenroth, *Water*, published by Walton Music, 2010.

⁹⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 3.339–510.

⁹⁷ Aristotle, *Meteorology*, trans. H.D.P. Lee (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 2.3

Musical Analysis: “Water”

In my analysis, I explore the prominent water themes present in Anders Edenroth’s *Water*, examining how the music embodies the fluid, wave-like qualities associated with water. The piece’s dynamic range is a key focus, as the shifts in volume and intensity reflect the ebb and flow of water, adding texture to the piece. I also explore how various musical elements—such as counterpoint, structural choices, and compositional techniques—contribute to the song’s evolution, creating a sense of movement and transformation throughout. Operating within the jazz a cappella tradition, I examine how Edenroth shapes the musical narrative through rhythmic layering, vocal precision, tight jazz harmonies, syncopated rhythms, and scatted syllables (non-lexical vocables). I examine how the text is set to music, exploring the relationship between the lyrics and the musical setting, and how the composer uses these elements to evoke the essential, life-sustaining nature of water.

Edenroth skillfully uses melody and harmony in “Water” to evoke the fluid, ever-changing nature of water, both sonically and thematically. The piece opens with tuned water bottles, which provide a unique sonic texture and reinforce the theme of water’s essential role. These instruments create an atmosphere of calm, mirroring the tranquil surface of water, while also symbolizing the life-giving force of water itself (see Figure 1). The water-filled bottles serve as musical instruments and visual symbols of water’s vital role in human life.



Figure 1. Tuned Water Bottle Notation, mm.16-19⁹⁸

To understand the structure of Edenroth’s “Water” it is important to look at the overall form of the piece. “Water” begins with what resembles a 5-part rondo (ABACA) from measures 1 to 62 followed by a section that combines elements of a Chorus and Bridge. The piece concludes with a through-composed section that moves from B to C, then to Chorus, and ends with A (See Table 3). The form itself has an ebb and flow about it that mirrors the movement of water.

Table 3: Form, “Water” by Anders Edenroth

	Intro	A	B	A	C	A	D-Chorus	E-Bridge	B	C	D-Chorus	A				
Section	mm.1-23	mm.24-31	mm.32-39	mm.40-47	mm.48-55	mm. 56-62	mm.63-70	mm.71-86	mm.87-96	mm.97-105	mm. 106-113	mm.114-End				
Dynamics	mp	mp	mp	mf	mf	mp	p	cresc.	mf	mf	pp	mf	cresc.	f	f	p cresc.

A Section

The A section serves as a structural and thematic anchor throughout *Water*, reinforcing the central idea of water’s presence and significance. Each return of this section not only recalls the wave-like musical motif but also continually reintroduces the

⁹⁸ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 3.

text “water,” emphasizing its importance both musically and poetically. Edenroth’s dynamic choices across each recurrence shape the section’s impact, allowing it to evolve in expression and intensity.

The first statement of the A section is marked *mezzo-piano*, introducing the theme with a sense of gentle fluidity, much like a calm stream. This subdued opening allows the listener to settle into the piece, establishing the serene yet persistent nature of water. When the section returns a second time, Edenroth raises the dynamic to *mezzo-forte*, subtly intensifying the energy and urgency.

In its third appearance, the dynamic drops to *piano*, softening the theme and creating a moment of delicate reflection. This subdued rendering provides contrast, mimicking the natural ebb and flow of water as it temporarily recedes. In its last and most powerful return, Edenroth builds to *forte*, giving the word its fullest expression. This climactic statement commands attention, emphasizing the immense and unstoppable nature of water.

By continuously returning to the A section, Edenroth ensures that the word “water” remains central to the piece. Each recurrence serves as a reminder of its essential role, both in the music and in life itself. Edenroth bookends the song with this final, resounding call of “water,” providing a sense of closure while reinforcing the cyclical, ever-present nature of the element that inspired the piece.

Wave-like Motives

Throughout “Water,” Edenroth employs wave-like melodic figures to capture the movement of water. The voices exchange motifs in a flowing, overlapping manner, creating a sense of undulating motion. In measures 24–27, for example, the altos begin with an appoggiatura on the word “water,” joined by the tenors as they ascend in parallel (see Figure 3).

Edenroth skillfully constructs small motivic figures that mimic the movement of water, using overlapping entries and contour shaping to create a continuous, wave-like effect. In the A section, the voices exchange motifs in a flowing, overlapping manner, reinforcing the sensation of undulating motion. In measures 24–27, for example, the altos introduce the wave motif with an appoggiatura on the word "water," immediately joined by the tenors ascending in parallel motion (see Figure 2). The interplay between both the Alto and Tenor voices builds a layered texture, where each entrance subtly shifts the melodic contour, much like the gentle crashes of waves against a rocky shore. Water motives continue in the A section as seen in measures 28-31(See Figure 2)

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Water" by Anders Edenroth. It consists of two systems of four staves each. The first system shows measures 24-27. The second system shows measures 28-31. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The lyrics "Wa - ter" are written under the notes. Red boxes highlight specific melodic phrases in the Soprano, Alto, and Tenor parts. The dynamic marking "mp" is present throughout.

Figure 2: Wave Motives on "Water," mm. 24-27⁹⁹

The interplay between both the Alto and Tenor voices builds a layered texture, where each entrance subtly shifts the melodic contour, much like the gentle crashes of waves against a rocky shore. Water motives continue in the A section as seen measures 28-31(See Figure 3).

⁹⁹ Anders Edenroth, "Water" (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 4.



Figure 3: Wave Motives in Section A, mm 28-31

Throughout “Water,” Edénroth continues this technique, staggering entrances between vocal lines and using stepwise motion, to imitate the natural ebb and flow of water. He uses embellishments such as anticipations and appoggiaturas. Edénroth employs simple dotted quarter note figures to enhance the embellishments. Each time the A section returns, it brings a calming effect, much like the sea settling. Drawing on Anders' expression of water being as essential as the air we breathe,¹⁰⁰ he mirrors this idea by bringing the music back, offering a “breath of fresh air.”

Dynamic Waves: Swelling and Receding Motion

I contend that the dynamic shaping of motives within “Water” enhances the illusion of waves, as swells of intensity give way to moments of calm, with the exchange of musical material between voices reflecting the organic, ever-moving nature of water

¹⁰⁰ Anders Edénroth, *Water*, ed. by Walton Music Corporation, 2015, vocal score (Walton Music Corporation, 2015), 2.

itself. In measure 52, the alto and tenor trace a melodic arch, rising and falling in a wave-like motion (see Figure 4) with dynamics that intensify the phrase.



Figure 4: Alto and Tenor Melodic Arch Representational of Waves, mm. 52-55¹⁰¹

Edenroth employs dynamics throughout the song to follow the wave-like motives, creating a focal point as the volume swells and recedes in each line. Edenroth adds crescendos and decrescendos amplifying the wave-like material as seen in Figure 5 and Figure 6.



Figure 5. Dynamic Contrast and Wave-Like Motion, mm. 29-31

¹⁰¹ Anders Edenroth, "Water" (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 8.

52

do

bring from source to mouth just like... the food of...love from a nurs-ing mo-ther. Wa

bring from source to mouth just like... the food of...love from a nurs-ing mo-ther. Wa

do do from a nurs - ing mo-ther.

bm bm do do do do do

Figure 6. Dynamic Contrast and Wave-Like Motion, mm. 52-55¹⁰²

Edenroth carefully places dynamic markings throughout the piece, using crescendos to shape each phrase and guide transitions between sections (see Table 4). Each crescendo serves a distinct purpose—leading into a homophonic section, as in measures 60–62 and 103–105, creating a sense of ascent, as in measures 36–39, or bringing a phrase to a close, as seen in measures 90–92 and 126 to the end.

Table 4: Crescendo Markings

<p>36</p> <p>gent-ly a-light-ing cry-stal of ice... in the dew-drops of a col-our-ful pet-al</p> <p>bm bm...bm bm bm... bm...bm bm bm... wa</p> <p>bm bm bm bm bm bm bm bm wa</p> <p>gent-ly a-light-ing cry-stal of ice... in the dew-drops of a col-our-ful pet-al</p> <p>mm.36-39</p>	<p>60</p> <p>wa - ter wa - ter</p> <p>ter</p> <p>ter wa - ter</p> <p>wa - ter wa - ter</p> <p>wa - ter wa - ter</p> <p>mm. 60-62</p>
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¹⁰² Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 8.

<p>mm.90-9</p>	<p>mm.103-105</p>
<p>mm.126-End</p>	

Parallel Motion

In the B section, Edenroth features a duet and incorporates a vocal rhythm section that supports it. Beginning in measure 33, Edenroth introduces the first verse with the baritone and alto singing a melodic passage in parallel sixths, with the text, “In the mind of a melting snowman.” Parallel motion appears throughout the piece (See Table 5). In measures 36-39, Edenroth incorporates parallel thirds, while measures 67-70 and 90-92 feature parallel sixths. I feel the use of parallel melodies emphasizes the smooth, flowing qualities of the text.

Table 5: Parallel Motion

 <p>mind of a melt-ing snow-man, in the sound from a whis-tle-ing let-tle, in the <i>mp</i> bn bn bn bn bn bn bn bn <i>mp</i> bn bn bn bn bn bn bn bn mind of a melt-ing snow-man, in the sound from a whis-tle-ing let-tle, in the</p> <p>mm.32-35</p>	 <p>in the dew-drops of a col-our-ful pet-al <i>mf</i> bn bn bn bn wa <i>mf</i> n bn bn bn bn wa in the dew-drops of a col-our-ful pet-al</p> <p>mm.36-39</p>
 <p>drop-lets, in pa-tience wear-ing a-way the moun-tain of time for bill-ions of years. drop-lets, in pa-tience wear-ing a-way the moun-tain of time for bill-ions of years. drop-lets, in pa-tience wear-ing a-way the moun-tain of time for bill-ions of years. drop-lets, in pa-tience wear-ing a-way the moun-tain of time for bill-ions of years.</p> <p>mm.67-70</p>	 <p>spi-res in the curse, of a lost and four-der-ing ship... in in the curse, of a lost and four-der-ing ship... in do</p> <p>mm. 90-92</p>

Non-Lexical Vocables

As is common with a cappella ensembles, Edenroth incorporates non-lexical vocables to add rhythmic elements, express the essence of water without words, and provide a tonal foundation. In “Water,” the non-lexical vocables often mimic the fluidity and movement of water, creating a sense of natural flow. By using sounds that are not tied to specific meanings, Edenroth allows the performers to explore the emotional and sonic qualities of water, enhancing the piece’s immersive experience. As seen in Table 6, Edenroth has crafted several moments within the song that highlight this technique.

Table 6: Non-Lexical Vocables

<p>mm.32-35</p>	<p>mm. 52-55</p>
<p>mm.48-51</p>	<p>mm.71-73</p>

The parallel duet in measure 32 is further supported by an arpeggiated, percussive hocket-like non-lexical vocables in the sopranos and bass, alongside a tuned bottle in the bass, which adds rhythmic energy and complexity to the texture. At measure 52, the soprano, baritone, and bass are singing non-lexical vocables to complement the alto and tenor duet. The bass continues the vocables to sing a bassline, reminiscent of a string bass starting at measure 48 and continues singing the foundation till the return of the A section in measure 58. The entire bridge section transitions into an interwoven contrapuntal

vocalization on “*dn*,” with voices ascending and descending in an inverted imitation of each other, offering a moment of reflection without words

Contrapuntal and Harmonic structure

In section E, at the Bridge section starting at measure 71, Edenroth showcases his ability to masterfully employ counterpoint, incorporating a polyphonic texture with intertwining melodies that weave through the musical fabric. Edenroth has the soprano and alto voices ascending and descending in an inverted imitation of each other as seen in Figure 7. Each melodic motive seems to answer the next, creating a fluid and dynamic interplay. To me, the melodic interplay evokes imagery of a pod of dolphins gracefully swimming through the water, each voice moving independently yet in harmony with the others (See Figure 7)

The image shows a musical score for five voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor 1, Tenor 2, and Bass) in measures 71-73. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. A rehearsal mark 'H' is placed above measure 71. Red boxes highlight specific melodic motifs in the soprano, alto, and tenor parts. The lyrics are: Soprano: 'do dn de do, do'; Alto: 'do dn de do'; Tenor 1: 'do dn de dun, do dee do'; Tenor 2: 'do dn de do'; Bass: 'do do dun do do'.

Figure 7. Counterpoint and Inverted Imitation, mm. 71-73¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 10.

Continuing the counterpoint vocalize, Edenroth has the alto and tenor descend one after another in a playful duet as seen in Figure 8.

The musical score for Figure 8 consists of four staves. The first staff has the lyrics "dun" and "do". The second and third staves are enclosed in a red box and contain the lyrics "do de dn do" and "do do de dn do do do de dn". The fourth staff has no lyrics.

Figure 8: Playful Descending Duet, mm. 77-78¹⁰⁴

The duet continues as the tenor and alto chase each other, passing the melody back and forth, rising ascending back to the surface (See Figure 9).

The musical score for Figure 9 consists of three staves. The first staff has the lyrics "in de do" and "do de do dun do". The second and third staves are enclosed in a red box and contain the lyrics "dun" and "do dn de dun da do dn". The third staff also has the lyrics "do de do dn do de do do dun do do dn" and "dun".

Figure 9: Melodic Exchange Between Tenor and Alto, mm 80-82¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Anders Edenroth, "Water" (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 11.

¹⁰⁵ Anders Edenroth, "Water" (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 12.

At measure 83, the entire ensemble joins in with scat syllables—non-lexical sounds—responding to one another with increasing rhythmic intensity, further enhancing the sense of movement and energy within the texture (See Figure 10).

The image shows a musical score for five staves, numbered 83 to 86. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The lyrics are scat syllables: 'ya da da dun da do de do dun', 'dey ya dee dun do do do do', 'do do dun do do dun...dun do dey', 'dey da do do dn do dey', 'do dun do do de dun', and 'do do dun do de do dun do do'. Red boxes highlight specific rhythmic patterns in each staff, showing how different parts of the ensemble enter and interweave their lines.

Figure 10: Polyphonic Interplay Between Ensemble, mm.83-86¹⁰⁶

Setting of Text and texture

Edenroth paints text through his musical choices, emphasizing key words and phrases by altering texture, rhythm, and harmony. By shifting between polyphonic and homophonic textures, he enhances the impact of specific statements, allowing the text’s meaning to resonate more deeply. Fluid, interwoven melodies often reflect the movement of water, while sudden changes in texture create moments of emphasis. At measure 48, Edenroth builds rhythmic intensity through a melodic duet of eighth notes, creating

¹⁰⁶ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 12.

urgency as the alto and tenor sing “everyone must have water.” The baritone joins in reinforcing the text, emphasizing “not to deny” in measure 50 (see Figure 11)

48 **E** *mf* *mp*

do—

live, ev - 'ry-one must___ have wa - ter, to give, not to de - ny___ each oth - er, to

live, ev - 'ry-one must___ have wa - ter, to give, not to de - ny___ each oth - er, to

mf

live, ev - 'ry-one dm give, not to de - ny___

mf

dm dm bm bm bm bm

Figure 11: Harmonized Emphasis of Text, mm. 50¹⁰⁷

The text “everyone must have water to give, not to deny each other to bring to mouth” is followed by the analogy “food of love from a nursing mother” in measures 48 to 51. Edenroth’s intricate counterpoint builds to a dynamic arch over “food of love,” then gently resolves as the phrase concludes with “from a nursing mother” (see Figure 12).

¹⁰⁷ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 7.

52

do

bring from source to mouth just like the food of love from a nursing mother. Wa

bring from source to mouth just like the food of love from a nursing mother. Wa

do do from a nursing mother.

bm bm do do do do do

Figure 12: Dynamics Focused on “Food of Love,” mm.52-55¹⁰⁸

Edenroth emphasizes the text at measure 63 with a homophonic chorus singing, “Sweet as an angel’s kiss, salt as her falling tears.” at rehearsal G (See Figure 13).

63 **G** *mf*

mf

Sweet as an angel's kiss, salt as her falling tears,

mf

Sweet as an angel's kiss, salt as her falling tears,

mf

Sweet as an angel's kiss, salt as her falling tears,

mf

Sweet as an angel's kiss, salt as her falling tears,

mf

Sweet as an angel's kiss, salt as her falling tears,

Figure 13: Homophonic Chorus, mm.63-66¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 7.

¹⁰⁹ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 9.

With rolling eighth notes, Edenroth drives forward with the text “droplets in patience wearing away the mountain of time for billions of years.” The top four voices ride an ascending wave together, bringing the chorus to a cadence of a vibrant F-sharp ninth chord at measure 70 (See Figure 14).

The image shows a musical score for five voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Baritone, Bass) in F# major, measures 67-70. The lyrics are "drop-lets in pa-tience wear-ing a-way the moun-tain of time for bill-ions of years." Red boxes highlight the ascending eighth-note patterns in measures 68-69 and the final cadence in measure 70.

Figure 14: Ascending Wave, mm.68-69 and Cadence to an F-Sharp Ninth Chord, m.70¹¹⁰

At rehearsal I, the soprano reintroduces the original melody from section B in a delicate pianissimo before joining the alto to sing “in the gleam when your skin perspires.” The baritone reinforces with “in the curse of a lost and foundering ship,” leading to a fermata as all voices unite on “in the silent face,” followed by the lone soprano’s poignant “narcissus admires.”

In measure 97, the alto, tenor, and baritone lines move through a harmonically ascending sequence, building on the text “sing to kill for in a global battle” and

¹¹⁰ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 10.

continuing with “to chill well in a plastic bottle.” The displaced text setting reflects the influence of jazz and contemporary a cappella traditions, adding rhythmic momentum to the layered ascent. (See Figure 15).

Figure 15: Ascending Harmonic Sequence, mm 97-100¹¹¹

At measure 101, the parallel sixths come back between the soprano and tenor. The alto is intermixed in this section and voice crosses with the soprano at measure 102, while they sing “air and earth,” possibly for a shift in tone color (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: Voice Crossing Between Soprano and Alto, m. 102¹¹²

¹¹¹ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 14.

¹¹² Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 16.

At measure 106, Edenroth returns to the homophonic chorus on the text, “Mild as a Mermaid song”. At this point, the bass voice is dropped down the octave and all voices sing on a forte dynamic (See Figure 17). The chorus continues “wild when the oceans roar, never been born and never been buried, infinite waves caressing the shore”.

106 **K** *f*

Mild as a mermaid's song, wild when the oceans roar,

f

Mild as a mermaid's song, wild when the oceans roar,

f

Mild as a mermaid's song, wild when the oceans roar,

f

Mild as a mermaid's song, wild when the oceans roar,

f

Mild as a mermaid's song, wild when the oceans roar,

Figure 17: Forte Chorus With Bass Down an Octave, mm. 106-109¹¹³

“Water” by Anders Edenroth not only explores the physical properties of water but also delves into its symbolic and emotional significance. Edenroth masterfully utilizes compositional elements such as dynamic contrasts, wave-like melodies, and intricate counterpoint to create a sonic representation of water's fluidity and transformative power. The structure of the piece, with its cyclical and evolving sections, mirrors the continuous flow and shifting nature of water itself. The interplay between vocal lines, from parallel motion to the contrapuntal textures, creates a layered, rich soundscape that embodies the interconnectedness of water's many forms. Through the use of non-lexical vocables,

¹¹³ Anders Edenroth, “Water” (Published by Walton Music, 2010), 16.

Edenroth further emphasizes the essence of water, allowing the performers to convey its presence without the constraint of language, elevating the piece's emotional impact. In moments of dynamic swelling and receding, as well as in the text setting that emphasizes the life-giving nature of water, Edenroth creates a profound reflection on both the literal and metaphorical importance of water to life. "Water" stands as a powerful artistic expression of nature's most essential element, inviting listeners to reflect on the depths of its meaning both as a source of life and as a symbol of movement, change, and resilience. While Edenroth's "Water" celebrates the life-sustaining force of water, I now turn to Gerda Blok-Wilson's "Dried Up River," where the composer expresses a deep concern for the loss of water in her hometown.

"Dried Up River" by Gerda Blok-Wilson¹¹⁴ (2024) — Duration: 4:20

Background on Composer: Gerda Blok-Wilson (b. 1963)

To understand the full context behind "Dried Up River," it is important to consider the background of Gerda Blok-Wilson, a composer whose personal experiences and connection to environmental themes profoundly shape her musical expression. On her website, she Blok-Wilson states, "Because my parents immigrated from the Netherlands with nothing, I had my first formal lessons entering high school."¹¹⁵ She found her way into music through school and church choirs, where she first experienced

¹¹⁴ Gerda Blok-Wilson, "Dried Up River" (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024)

¹¹⁵ "About," *Gerda Blok-Wilson*, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://gerdablokwilson.ca/about/>.

the joy of singing. Her formal musical training began in high school, where she studied piano, voice, and theory, eventually leading her to pursue a Bachelor of Music at the University of British Columbia (UBC).¹¹⁶

Blok-Wilson's career includes experience in performance, education, and composition. After receiving her degree and professional teaching certification, she sang with the semi-professional Cathedral Singers in Montreal under the direction of Gerald Wheeler while also teaching private lessons. Blok-Wilson later settled in Prince George, British Columbia, where she dedicated herself to music education, teaching kindergarten through grade 12 and conducting adult, church, and community choirs.¹¹⁷

Blok-Wilson explains how her composing career initially stemmed from a desire to create music tailored to her students' needs, crafting pieces that aligned with curriculum concepts and vocal development. Over time, she says composition became a passion of its own, leading her to write works that have since been performed and recorded by choirs across Canada and internationally.¹¹⁸ Ensembles such as Britain's Gesualdo Six, Austria's Gumpoldskirchner Spatzen Youth Choir, Vancouver Chamber Choir, Scotland's Voces Inauditae, and Chor Leoni Men's Choir have all brought her music to life.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ "About," *Gerda Blok-Wilson*, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://gerdablokwilson.ca/about/>.

¹¹⁷ "About," *Gerda Blok-Wilson*.

¹¹⁸ "About," *Gerda Blok-Wilson*.

¹¹⁹ "About," *Gerda Blok-Wilson*.

Contextual Analysis: “Dried Up River”

Blok-Wilson’s “Dried Up River” conveys the impact of climate change through an intricate SATB a cappella setting, using expressive vocal techniques and rhythmic textures to evoke the environmental devastation of a drying river. Drawing inspiration from Alice Oswald’s “A Poem for a Dried-Up River” in *Dunt*, the work incorporates body percussion, text painting, and wind-like sounds to create a textured musical narrative reflecting the desolation of a dry riverbed.¹²⁰

Blok-Wilson expressed a strong connection to rivers. Growing up in Prince George, British Columbia, at the confluence of the Nechako and Fraser Rivers, she spent her youth on canoe trips, witnessing the vibrant ecosystems these waterways supported. However, in recent years, she has observed alarming changes: “The Fraser River’s water levels have become so low—particularly in late spring, summer, and fall—that even a canoe would have difficulty navigating some stretches.”¹²¹ Blok-Wilson’s growing environmental concern, combined with the discovery of Oswald’s poem during the COVID-19 pandemic, served as the catalyst for the creation of “Dried Up River.” The poem resonated with her personal experiences and the increasing reports of rivers drying up across Canada, threatening ecosystems such as salmon runs.¹²² The composition itself mirrors the instability and fragility of a vanishing river. Blok-Wilson uses fragmented

¹²⁰ Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

¹²¹ Gerda Blok-Wilson, email message to author, February 2025.

¹²² Gerda Blok-Wilson, email message.

melodic lines to reflect uncertainty, while body percussion mimics the rhythmic pulse of water slowly disappearing. She intended to immerse singers in the physical and emotional weight of this crisis, allowing them to experience and communicate the urgency of the message through sound.¹²³

Since its creation, “Dried Up River” has gained recognition in the choral world.

Blok-Wilson states in a personal email:

In 2023, I had the opportunity to participate in the Vancouver Chamber Choir’s *Interplay* reading session for new compositions. After receiving insightful feedback, I revised the piece, and a demo was later recorded by the Rocky Mountain Chamber Choir. “Dried Up River” was subsequently published by Cypress Choral Music and was presented at an environmental session at the Canadian Choral Conference in Montreal in May 2024—so it’s still a relatively new work.¹²⁴

Blok-Wilson further explains “Dried Up River” has since been included in the UK’s Choirs for Climate initiative.¹²⁵ I argue that through this piece, Blok-Wilson not only expresses her deep concern for the environment but also demonstrates how choral music can serve as both art and advocacy, bringing attention to pressing ecological issues through sound and storytelling.

¹²³ Gerda Blok-Wilson, email message

¹²⁴ Gerda Blok-Wilson,” Cypress Choral Music, accessed February 9, 2025, <https://cypresschoral.com/composers/gerda-blok-wilson/>.

¹²⁵ Gerda Blok-Wilson, email message.

Textual Analysis: "Dried Up River"

The lyrics of this song paint a vivid and sorrowful picture of environmental decay, symbolized by the nearly dried-up river. The lyrics, written by Gerda Blok-Wilson, are as follows:

*A nearly dried up river,
Cracked and barren,
Once overflowing waters,
Reduced to a feeble trickle
Under the relentless sun.*

*Murmuring...
Murmur,
Murmur,
Murmuring...*

*No fish to the sea...
Na, na, na, ni-ah, ni-ah.
Dried up river,
A desolate bed of forsaken hopes.*

The title of the song is very clear about what the song is going to portray. The imagery of a "cracked and barren" riverbed that was once full of life but is now reduced to a "feeble trickle" offers a reflection of the harsh consequences of water depletion, possibly alluding to themes of drought and water scarcity. In my interpretation, these opening lyrics could signify the river, once abundant and life-sustaining, now stands as a desolate reminder of lost hope, echoing the emotional weight of environmental neglect.

The repetition of "murmuring" suggests a haunting, almost lifeless whisper, perhaps the last remnants of the once-vibrant flow of water, now fading away into silence. The rhythmic "Murmur, Murmur, Murmuring" adds to the somber mood,

invoking a sense of ongoing, unresolved struggle. The line "No fish to the sea" reinforces the theme of loss, indicating not only the depletion of the river but also its broader ecological impacts. The absence of fish symbolizes the collapse of a once-thriving ecosystem, a powerful metaphor for the far-reaching effects of environmental destruction. The last line, "A desolate bed of forsaken hopes," wraps up the piece with a deeply emotional statement, portraying the river as a place where dreams and possibilities have been abandoned, further cementing the despair over environmental degradation and the human toll it takes.

Musical Analysis: "Dried Up River"

"Dried Up River," Gerda Blok-Wilson uses a wide range of musical techniques to create a dynamic that I feel mirrors the decline of the river depicted in the text. The piece unfolds through multiple sections, each bringing new compositional elements that reflect the themes of the text. From the swirling, curving lines of wind notation in the opening to the use of dissonance and aleatoric passages later in the piece, Blok-Wilson's approach is rich in variety and expression. Throughout this analysis, the form of the piece will be explored, focusing on key moments and compositional strategies used to enhance the narrative.

Table 7: Form and Musical Elements, "Dried Up River" by Gerda Blok-Wilson

Section	A mm.1-12	B mm.13-33	C mm.34-45	D mm.46-55	E mm.56-67	F mm.68-93	G mm.94-98	H mm.101-End
Dynamics	p	mp p mp	f	mp p	mp mf	mf f ff	pp	mp p Whisper
Text		"nearly dried up "	"murmuring" "nearly dried river"	"murmuring"	"no fish"	"dried up river". "no fish"	"desolate"	"dried up"
Music elements	Blowing Air	Layored SATB Motives	2 Bar, 4 Bar, 2 Bar, 4 Bar Alternating Text Motives	Murmuring Motives	Fish Motives	Combined Motives	Aleatoric	Whispers

“Dried Up River” follows a through-composed structure, with each section adding new layers and motives. The A section introduces a parallel period based on a minor diatonic pentachord, setting a somber and reflective tone. In the B section, layered motives emerge, starting with a bass motive that is expanded by the tenors, sopranos, and altos, each contributing unique rhythmic and melodic elements to the text “nearly dried up.” The C section alternates between two distinct textual motifs. It begins with two bars depicting the word “murmuring,” which is expressed through new, contrasting motives. This is followed by a four-bar section centered on the text “nearly dried up river,” which is repeated twice. The D section introduces a descending bass line with a drone pedal from the tenors, accompanied by displaced eighth-note patterns from the altos and sopranos that emphasize both major and minor second intervals. The E section, in contrast to the previous somber sections, introduces a lively and spirited character. This is achieved through fast sixteenth-note figures that create a sense of movement and urgency. Section F combines motives from within the piece. The G section introduces an aleatoric passage, creating a sense of unpredictability, before the piece closes with the H section, where whispered eighth notes fade out, leaving a final, poignant impression.

Gerda Blok-Wilson effectively used swirling, curving lines in her score, as seen in Figure 18, to visually represent the fluid, dynamic movement of wind blowing, creating a graphic depiction of the sound's constant motion and unpredictability.







Figure 18: Wind Blowing Notation

Textual Motives

Gerda Blok-Wilson employs various motives for the text “Nearly dried up” (See Table 8). From measures 13 to 32, the basses sing “a nearly dried-up river” in a 5/8 meter, in a gentle rhythmic pedal tone ostinato as seen in Motive 1 (See Table 8). Blok-Wilson emphasizes “nearly” with a tenuto marking, reinforcing its significance. In Motive 2, The tenors augment the text, repeating “nearly dried up” in a layered, persistent line over the bass (See Table 8). In measure 26, the sopranos introduce an ascending minor tetrachord singing the same text in Motive 3 (See Table 8), adding a sense of tension and forward motion. In measure 27, the altos further amplify the rhythmic structure by introducing eighth notes articulated with a marcato and a staccato in Motive 4 (See Table 8), reinforcing the drive and emphasizing the passage's percussive energy.

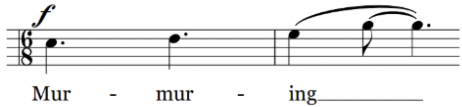
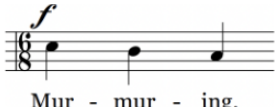
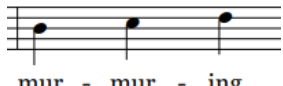


Table 8: “Nearly Dried Up” Motives

1	 <p style="text-align: center;">near - ly dried up riv - er, a near - ly dried up riv - er, a</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Bass, mm.13-32</p>
2	 <p style="text-align: center;">Near - ly _____ dried _____ up, _____</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tenor mm.15-18, 23-25</p>
3	 <p style="text-align: center;">Near - ly dried up</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Soprano mm.26-28 and 30-32</p>
4	 <p style="text-align: center;">Near-ly, dried up, : '</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Alto, mm 27-28, 30-31, and 32-33</p>

Murmuring motives

How Blok-Wilson sets the text murmuring is also varied throughout the piece. In measures 34-35 and 40-41, the soprano ascends from the tonic on a minor tetrachord moving in conjunct motion with a final syncopated leap of a third to the dominant scale degree as seen in Motive 6 (See Table 9). The altos cry out twice on “murmur” as seen in Motive 7 (See Table 9) as they descend from the tonic in stepwise motion and ascend back up to the supertonic both in measures 34-35 and 40-41. In Motive 8 and Motive 9 (See Table 9), the basses and tenors intensify the texture with syncopated, displaced accents on the word "murmur," adding striking contrast to the upper voices in measures 34-35 and 40-41(See Table 9). Motive 10 illustrates how the sopranos and altos express “murmur” together with the same rhythms as seen in Table 9.

Table 9: Murmuring Motives

 <p>Mur - mur - ing</p> <p>Soprano, mm.34-35 and 40-41</p>	
 <p>Mur - mur - ing,</p> <p>Alto, mm.34 and 40</p>	 <p>mur - mur - ing</p> <p>Alto, mm.35 and 41</p>
 <p>Mur-mur, mur mur, mur-mur!</p> <p>Tenor 34-35 and 40-41</p>	
 <p>Mur-mur, Mur-mur, Mur-mur, Mur-mur,</p> <p>Tenor 34-35 and 40-41</p>	

Tension and Dissonance

In measures 36 and 37, the altos and tenors alternate eighth notes in a back-and-forth motion, with the altos singing "nearly" and the tenors answering with "dried up" (See Figure 19). I argue that this interplay within the asymmetrical 5/8 meter creates a sense of instability and abruptness.

The figure shows three staves of music in 5/8 time. The top staff is for the Alto, with lyrics "Near - ly," and "Near - ly,". The middle staff is for the Tenor, with lyrics "dried up!" and "dried up!". The bottom staff is for the drum part, with the instruction "Pat brush pat brush" and dynamics *mp* and *mf*. The Alto part has accents (^) over the first notes of each phrase. The Tenor part has accents (^) over the first notes of each phrase. The drum part has accents (^) over the first notes of each phrase.

Figure 19: Alto and Tenor Call and Response, mm. 36-37¹²⁶

The sopranos divide and add dissonance in measures 42-45 as seen the climb upward to "river" in Figure 20 while the tenors fall on a harmonic minor tetrachord (See Figure 21). In measures 44 and 45 the clash between the sopranos creates an E minor ninth chord in first inversion. The clash with the tenor's B natural in measure 43 creates a C minor major seventh chord.

¹²⁶ Gerda Blok-Wilson, "Dried Up River" (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 4.



Figure 20: Soprano Dissonance, mm.42-45¹²⁷



Figure 21: Tenor Harmonic Minor Descent, mm.42-45¹²⁸

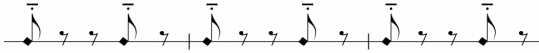
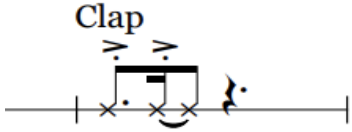
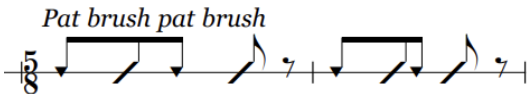

Body Percussion

Percussive body sounds are added throughout layering the harmonies with rhythmic vitality. The stomps start in measure 13. Blok-Wilson incorporates stomp, clap, brush and pat body percussion as seen in Table 10. In measure 38, the body percussion begins with the sopranos stomping, altos patting, and tenors brushing. Clapping does not begin until measure 57. Blok-Wilson. The clapping in measure 57 follows a fishlike motive in the altos (See Figure 22).

¹²⁷ Gerda Blok-Wilson, “Dried Up River” (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 5-6.

¹²⁸ Gerda Blok-Wilson, “Dried Up River” (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 5-6.

Table 10: Body Percussion

Stomp - diamond notehead	
Clap- X notehead	
Brush - Slash notehead	
Pat - Inverted triangle notehead	

In measure 38, the body percussion begins with the sopranos stomping, altos patting, and tenors brushing. Clapping does not begin until measure 57. Blok-Wilson. The clapping in measure 57 follows a fishlike motive in the altos (See Figure 22).

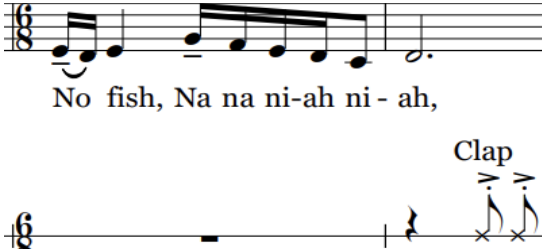


Figure 22: Clapping after Alto Motive, mm.56-58¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Gerda Blok-Wilson, “Dried Up River” (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 7.

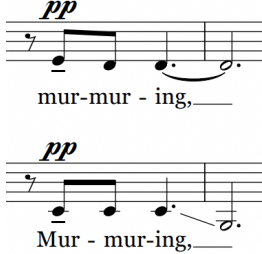
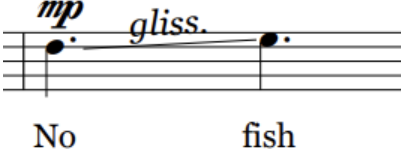
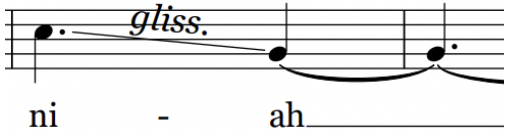
Compositional Devices

Blok-Wilson employs a variety of compositional devices throughout the piece to reflect and amplify the emotional tone of the text. She includes the use of unconventional harmonic structures, rhythmic contrasts, dynamic shifts, and extended vocal techniques. The following examples demonstrate how these devices work together to deepen the listener's connection to the narrative. Blok-Wilson carefully integrates these techniques to shape the flow of the music and highlight key moments in the text.

Glissandos

Blok-Wilson uses slides and glissandos to create transitions between pitches, enhancing the dissonance and instability in the music. Just before section E in measures 54 and 55, the altos slide down onto their final note (See Table 11), resolving a dissonant major second with the sopranos, settling on an open fifth. The lack of a clear tonal identity—neither major nor minor—could be intentional, creating an unresolved harmonic space that leaves the listener with an empty, uncertain feeling—adding to the weariness of the moment. The sliding effect becomes more prominent later in the piece. In measures 61, the bass and tenor pair up to sing "no fish to the sea," which is answered by the rising glissando in measures 62, 64, and 66.

Table 11: Glissandos

<p>Alto slide into open 5th, mm. 54-55</p>	
<p>Soprano rising glissando, mm. 62, 64, and 66</p>	
<p>Soprano falling glissando, mm.90</p>	

Fish Motive

In section E, at measure 56, the altos lead with a spirited new motive in the parallel major key, singing the text "No fish to the sea... Na, na, na, ni-ah, ni-ah," (See Figure 23). The alto's playful delivery is complemented by rhythmic claps exchanged between the basses and tenors, creating a dynamic, percussive texture, while the sopranos mimic wind sounds.



Figure 23: Alto Motive in Parallel Major, mm. 56-67¹³⁰

The altos continue a fishlike motive—characterized by its undulating contour and sixteenth-note pattern, which mimic the darting, splashing motion of a fish swimming through water—through measure 68. The sopranos suddenly take the alto’s fish motive up an octave singing, “No fish to the sea... Na, na, na, ni-ah, ni-ah,” repeated 4 times followed by a glissando fall in measure 90.

Aleatory

In section measure 28, Blok-Wilson uses an aleatoric device for altos, tenors, and basses as they sing “Desolate bed of forsaken hope.” Blok-Wilson's directions are as follows: “Individual singers enter randomly and the passage is sung slowly and freely creating a cluster until bar 105. Sopranos continue the wind sounds and enter after 14 - 16'.” By using this aleatoric compositional technique (See Figure 24), Blok-Wilson gives singers an opportunity to express their feelings of loss for the situation, a murmur of lost hope.

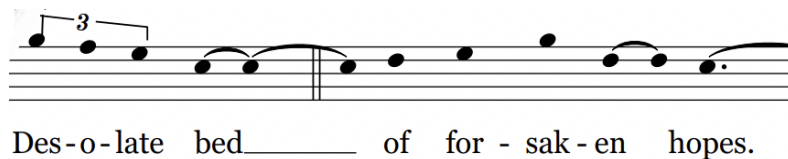


Figure 24: Aleatoric Motive, mm.94-100¹³¹

¹³⁰ Gerda Blok-Wilson, “Dried Up River” (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 7.

¹³¹ Gerda Blok-Wilson, “Dried Up River” (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 11.

In measure 27, the altos further amplify the rhythmic structure by introducing eighth notes articulated with a marcato and a staccato, reinforcing the drive and emphasizing the passage's percussive energy (See Figure 27).



Figure 27: Alto Articulation, mm. 27-33¹³⁴

In measures 36 and 37, the alto and tenors follow the same musical articulation of marcato and staccato alternating eighth notes in a back-and-forth motion (See Figure 28).

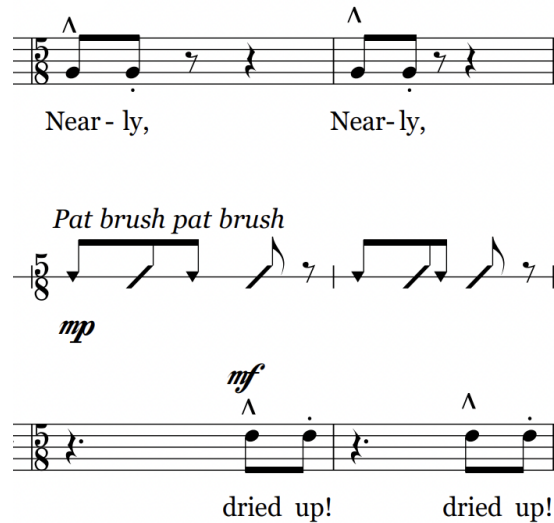


Figure 28: Alto and Tenor Call and Response, mm. 36-37¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Gerda Blok-Wilson, “Dried Up River” (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 3.

¹³⁵ Gerda Blok-Wilson, “Dried Up River” (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 4.

The basses and tenors intensify the texture with syncopated, displaced accents on the word "murmur," adding striking contrast to the upper voices (See Figure 29 and Figure 30).



Figure 29: Tenor accents, mm.34-35¹³⁶



Figure 30: Bass Accents, mm. 34-35

Whispers

In the final two measures, Blok-Wilson adds an eighth note motive of "Dried up river" (See Figure 31). From measure 101 to the end, the decrescendo and whispering effect emphasize the fading presence of the river, perhaps symbolizing the final, tragic stage of a once-thriving water source now lost to neglect.

¹³⁶ Gerda Blok-Wilson, "Dried Up River" (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 4.

Whispered. Dried up riv - er,

Whispered. Dried up riv - er,

Whispered. Dried up riv - er,

Whispered. Dried up riv - er,

Fading away with wind sounds.

Figure 31: Whispered Ending, mm.101-End¹³⁷

Gerda Blok-Wilson's use of diverse musical techniques—from rhythmic articulations and dissonant harmonic structures to body percussion and aleatoric passages—I believe effectively brings the text's themes to life. Each compositional device works together to highlight the text's emotional shifts, illustrating both the physical decay of the river and the internal turmoil it represents. By combining these techniques with detailed attention to vocal expression, Blok-Wilson creates a powerful and immersive musical experience that can deepen the listener's engagement with the piece.

I argue that the music in “Dried Up River” effectively captures the devastating effects of environmental neglect through rhythmic articulations and dissonant harmonic structures to body percussion and aleatoric passages. Each compositional device works together to highlight the text's emotional shifts, illustrating, I believe both the physical decay of the river and the internal turmoil it represents. As I have demonstrated above,

¹³⁷ Gerda Blok-Wilson, “Dried Up River” (Published by Cypress Choral Music, 2024), 12.

the compositional techniques that Blok-Wilson incorporates evoke a poignant, urgent sense of loss, highlighting the fragility of natural ecosystems. I believe that Blok-Wilson’s approach effectively transforms sound into a powerful statement on water sustainability, reminding us of the critical need to address the environmental crises threatening our natural water resources. Through these expressive musical choices, the work can serve as both a warning and a call to action.

“Famine Song” by Matthew Culloton¹³⁸ (2004) — Duration: 5:50

Matthew Culloton’s “Famine Song” was inspired by the a cappella group VIDA and its co-founder, Moira Smiley. Culloton noted that the song’s origins trace back to VIDA’s work, with Smiley’s influence shaping the piece.¹³⁹ Matthew Culloton adapted “Famine Song” from a quartet originally written for SSAA (Soprano, Soprano, Alto, Alto) voices by Moira Smiley’s ensemble VIDA. The original quartet was created for this unique arrangement, which blended folk and choral traditions to evoke the emotional and thematic weight of famine. VIDA is an ensemble known for its harmony-based and folk-inspired music which has provided a platform for Smiley’s composition.¹⁴⁰

In adapting the piece, Culloton transformed the intimate SSAA quartet into a larger choral composition. His version is tailored for a SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor,

¹³⁸ Matthew Culloton, “Famine Song” (Published by Santa Barbara Music Publishing, 2004)

¹³⁹ Matthew Culloton, “Famine Song”, SATB arrangement (Minneapolis: The Singers – Minnesota Choral Artists, 2005), program note.

¹⁴⁰ VIDA, “About VIDA,” accessed April 16, 2025, <https://moirasmiley.com/vida>.

Bass) choir. To fully understand the work, I will discuss the background of both composers.

Background on Composer: Moira Smiley (b.1976)

Moira Smiley is an American singer, composer, lyricist, and musician known for her versatility as a multi-instrumentalist, playing the banjo, accordion, piano, and performing body percussion.¹⁴¹ Drawing from a diverse range of musical influences, her work blends folk styles, shape-note singing, classical song, and jazz. Smiley's musical career includes collaborations with artists such as Billy Childs, Solas, Jayme Stone's *The Lomax Project*, choral composer Eric Whitacre, the Los Angeles Master Chorale, the New World Symphony, and the indie-pop group Tune-Yards, with whom she often tours.¹⁴² Smiley led immersive a cappella experiences with the Los Angeles Master Chorale in 2018 and 2019 during the BIG SING California event at Walt Disney Concert Hall.¹⁴³

Raised in rural New Haven, Vermont, Smiley began teaching at the Village Harmony Summer Camps as a teenager, and she was one of the nine composers represented on the 1996 *Endless Light* recording.¹⁴⁴ She pursued studies at Indiana

¹⁴¹ Brianna Goldberg, "Retracing the Steps of a Folk Pioneer: Toronto Musician Revisits Remarkable Field Recordings of Legendary Alan Lomax," *Toronto Star*, May 7, 2015, ProQuest.

¹⁴² Goldberg, "Retracing the Steps of a Folk Pioneer".

¹⁴³ " Moira Smiley Composer," *Los Angeles Master Chorale*, archived November 28, 2021, retrieved November 30, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211128005110/https://lmasterchorale.org/moira-smiley>.

¹⁴⁴ "Moira Smiley," *Voice of America News*, August 15, 2012.

University's Jacobs School of Music as a Wells Scholar, majoring in piano performance and earning a degree in Early Music Vocal Performance.¹⁴⁵ During her college years, Smiley also traveled to Eastern Europe to study folk music and multi-part harmonies, as well as Irish Sean Nós singing.¹⁴⁶

Background on Composer: Matthew Culloton (b.1976)

Matthew Culloton is the Founding Artistic Director of *The Singers – Minnesota Choral Artists* in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He holds a Bachelor of Music from Concordia College and both a Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Minnesota. Culloton is also the Choirmaster at House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, where he leads the church's choral programs.¹⁴⁷

Culloton's repertoire spans interpretations of early music to the premieres of contemporary works. As artistic director of Minneapolis/St. Paul-based The Singers, he has crafted innovative concert seasons that juxtapose the sacred sounds of Palestrina and Bach with modern compositions by artists such as Jocelyn Hagen and Damien Geter. Critics have noted his work with The Singers for its "pure and balanced vocal textures

¹⁴⁵ "Moira Smiley Composer," *Los Angeles Master Chorale*.

¹⁴⁶ Bradley Bambarger, "Breaking Away: Mysteries of Life, Vida, El Nino, Salaam Blossom in Bloomington," *Bloomington Voice*, May 4, 1996.

¹⁴⁷ "Matthew and Michael Culloton Choral Series," *Santa Barbara Music Publishing*, accessed March 4, 2025, <https://sbmp.com/ComposerPage.php?ComposerNum=265>

and pristine articulation,”¹⁴⁸ and for cultivating a “cool sweet, Scandinavian-style sound and endearing warmth of expression.”¹⁴⁹

Matthew Culloton has long been a champion of newly commissioned works. Not only has Culloton led the world premiere performances of over 100 works—including Timothy Takach’s *Helios* (2019), Craig Carnahan’s *Ghost Camp* (2015), Joshua Shank’s *He Was Singing* (2012), and Jocelyn Hagen’s *amass* (2012)—but he is also an active classical recording producer. Culloton’s production credits include collaborations with the Twin Cities Gay Men’s Chorus, the National Lutheran Choir, the Concordia Choir, and the Minnesota Beethoven Festival Chorale, as well as significant editorial work with the Dale Warland Singers on their final recordings.¹⁵⁰ Recordings made with The Singers, such as *Come to the Woods* (2022) and Lauridsen’s *Mid-Winter Songs* (2011), further attest to his innovative contributions to the choral field, as does his carol setting project, *On a Christmas Morn: Carols of Matthew Culloton* (2021).¹⁵¹

A dedicated composer in his own right, Culloton’s choral works have been commissioned by numerous ensembles and published by music publishers including MorningStar Music, E.C. Schirmer, and Santa Barbara Music Publishing. His editorial contributions extend to the Christmas with The Singers Choral Series and the

¹⁴⁸ Rob Hubbard, Pioneer Press review, as cited in Matthew Culloton’s biography.

¹⁴⁹ Lindsay Koob, American Record Guide review, as cited in Matthew Culloton’s biography.

¹⁵⁰ Matthew Culloton, "Bio & Contact," *Matthew Culloton*, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://matthewculloton.com/about/>.

¹⁵¹ Matthew Culloton, "Bio & Contact".

collaborative Matthew and Michael Culloton Choral Series, which serve to enrich the choral repertoire with fresh, innovative works.¹⁵²

An experienced music educator, Culloton began his teaching career in the Long Prairie–Grey Eagle School District in Long Prairie, Minnesota and later served as Director of Choirs at Hopkins High School in Minnetonka, Minnesota from 2000 to 2006. His commitment to connecting with singers of all ages is evident in both his work with The Singers and the many masterclasses he leads nationwide. His work in choral conducting has been recognized with awards such as the MN ACDA Outstanding Young Choral Conductor of the Year Award (2004) and the VocalEssence/ACDA of Minnesota Creative Programming Award (2003).¹⁵³ Prior to these roles, he was a member of The Dale Warland Singers from 1999 to 2004, where he served as Music Adviser, Assistant Conductor, and Bass Section Leader, collaborating closely with conductor Dale Warland on artistic programming and recordings.¹⁵⁴ Based in the Minneapolis area, and serving as Choirmaster at The House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul since 2010, Culloton holds advanced degrees from the University of Minnesota (M.M. in Choral Conducting; D.M.A. in Conducting) and a B.M. in Music Education from Concordia College, Moorhead. His career exemplifies a commitment to musical excellence, innovative programming, and the fostering of community through choral music.

¹⁵² Matthew Culloton, "Bio & Contact".

¹⁵³ Matthew Culloton, "Bio & Contact".

¹⁵⁴ Matthew Culloton, "Bio & Contact".

Contextual Analysis: “Famine Song”

“Famine Song,” originally composed by the vocal quartet VIDA and arranged by Matthew Culloton, is a haunting and deeply moving expression of desperation and hope, inspired by the stories of Sudanese basket weavers during the devastating famine of the 1980s. Moira Smiley, a member of VIDA, has continued to explore themes of water, struggle, and resilience in her compositions. Her more recent piece, “Stand at the River,” opens with the powerful line: “I went to the river and the river was dry”—a striking image that strongly echoes the themes of “Famine Song”. A pairing of these two pieces in performance could create a powerful narrative on survival and resilience, using water as a unifying metaphor. Moira Smiley said this about the song:

“Famine Song” was written by four young women. These young women (my vocal group, VIDA) were learning how women around the world, and throughout history, work and sing together to pull their families out of hunger and war. It's a song celebrating empathy, lament, and the power of singing to pull us together in times of need. Sarah Ferrell was so moved when she learned how the women of Somalia banded together to weave and sell beautiful baskets to feed their families during the catastrophic drought, that she wrote the initial text. Sarah brought the text to VIDA, and through improvisation and songwriting sessions, we discovered how the beautiful laments we were learning from war-torn Bosnia and Serbia seemed to call out an empathy for this Somali story of sorrow and strength

Moira's quote emphasizes the powerful connection between music, empathy, and collective action, showing how the song "Famine Song" was born from a shared understanding of women's resilience and the transformative power of song in times of hardship.

In personal communication with Culloton,¹⁵⁵ he shared information about the compositional process. For example, when asked about how long it took to compose, Culloton said,

“Famine Song” came together pretty quickly. It was composed by Moira Smiley and her colleagues in a women's quartet called Vida. I was teaching high school choir at Hopkins HS in the Twin Cities, and some of my students brought me Vida's recording, so I reached out and connected with Moira to ask if I could arrange the work for a larger, mixed choir setting, and she said yes.

When asked about his connections to the 1980s famine he said,

I wouldn't say "connection," but I learned of the African famine(s) in the 80s when I was a young kid through music, and especially through groups that tried to raise awareness of the famine and other struggles. I was pretty young, but was really captivated by "We Are the World," which was sung by a collection of pop music stars who came together as a choir to sing, and it raised millions of dollars to send help and relief to Africa.

When questioned about the deeper meaning of the piece, Culloton explained,

I can tell you that there is a secondary element of “Famine Song,” that connects one's creativity to being human. The whole "Weave your baskets" section deals with how the creation of baskets through weaving was both how creativity was expressed, and how the fruits of one's creativity became a tool for sustaining life. In this case, the baskets would transport food and water for miles and miles - so the creative element became crucial to survival. I've always believed that there is a larger metaphor here: as an artist myself, I know that somewhere in everyone is a creative element that needs to be expressed, and in so many cases, it is life-altering.

Culloton's remarks highlight the intrinsic link between creativity and survival in "Famine Song," particularly in the metaphor of basket weaving as both an artistic expression and a means of sustenance. His reflections about “Famine Song” underscore the broader

¹⁵⁵ Matthew Culloton, email message to author, February 25, 2025

significance of creative expression as a life-altering force, which can impact both individual and collective resilience.

I posit that “Famine Song” functions not only as a poignant expression of the human suffering caused by famine but also as a call to action and a symbol of resilience. To further understand the context surrounding the famine from 1984-1985, I have unpacked the cause and neglect that contributed to the devastating consequences that occurred. Scholars state the famine was a result of a complex interaction of drought, land degradation, ineffective policies, and insufficient governmental response¹⁵⁶. Tesfaye Teklu and colleagues note that the government’s lack of a permanent institution for famine preparedness and the absence of political will to intervene early contributed significantly to the disaster. Emergency food aid, arriving only after the famine had been officially recognized, was delayed due to logistical constraints, further exacerbating the crisis.¹⁵⁷ The delay in response, combined with macroeconomic policies that undermined the country’s capacity to handle drought crises, made Sudan particularly vulnerable.¹⁵⁸ Civil unrest and war further weakened the state’s ability to manage the situation effectively.¹⁵⁹ I argue that by performing "Famine Song," we can help raise awareness of the devastating consequences of neglect and mismanagement, serving as a reminder of

¹⁵⁶ Teklu Tesfaye, Joachim Von Braun, and Elsayed Zaki. "Drought and famine relationships in Sudan: Policy implications." *Food and Nutrition Bulletin* 14, no. 2 (1992): 1-3.

¹⁵⁷ Tesfaye et al., 1-3.

¹⁵⁸ Tesfaye et al., 1-3.

¹⁵⁹ Tesfaye et al., 1-3.

the importance of timely intervention and effective policy, so that we can learn from past mistakes and avoid repeating them in the future.

“Famine Song” provides a musical platform for the depiction of the famine’s psychological, emotional, and physical toll. While the lyrics articulate the direct human experiences of hunger, despair, and longing, I aim to show how the composition amplifies these feelings through its musical elements. The rhythmic patterns, harmonic choices, and vocal textures all contribute to a sense of urgency and emotional depth. Culloton’s use of repetition in the chorus (“Rain, rain, rain”) could be seen as mirroring the desperate, repetitive nature of hunger, while the overall structure of the piece helps to build tension, reinforcing the severity of the crisis and Sudanese famine of the 1980s, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands due to drought and political instability¹⁶⁰. Scholar Alex de Waal stated, “During the famine the crude death rate trebled to 40 per thousand.”¹⁶¹ The emotional urgency within the music parallels the slow response of the international community to the crisis, underscoring the song’s function as a call to action.¹⁶²

I believe that "Famine Song" exemplifies the power of the choral medium to convey a profound sense of unity and collective strength, using the voices of the choir to

¹⁶⁰ De Waal, Alex. "Famine mortality: a case study of Darfur, Sudan 1984–5." *Population Studies* 43, no. 1 (1989): 12.

¹⁶¹ De Waal, 12.

¹⁶² Alex de Waal, *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan, and the Search for Human Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

represent the resilience and shared struggle of communities enduring famine. The choral medium has the possibility to evoke a sense of community, solidarity, and shared struggle. The choir also can become a metaphor for the collective strength and resilience of those affected by famine—voices united in their plea for rain and survival.¹⁶³ “Famine Song” serves as both a tribute to the resilience of the Sudanese people during the famine of the 1980s and a broader commentary on the suffering faced by communities experiencing famine worldwide.

“Famine Song” portrays a communal outcry for rain, with a poignant duet representing a heartfelt plea for relief. On the final, urgent supplication for rain, the choir begins to gently snap, mimicking the first drops falling from the sky.¹⁶⁴ The snapping gradually spreads throughout the ensemble, building into a vivid soundscape that symbolizes the long-awaited rain—an answer to their desperate cry and a symbol of hope and renewal. This emotional journey from anguish to relief offers choirs a chance to connect with themes of survival and gratitude. The introduction of snapping near the final measures creates a powerful auditory metaphor for the transformation from drought to abundance, which may leave audiences with a lasting and meaningful impression.

Textual Analysis: “Famine Song”

I believe that the lyrics of “Famine Song” capture the universal human longing for relief, renewal, and survival. The calls for rain reference familial bonds, and a depiction

¹⁶³ World Health Organization, “The Impact of Famine on Children,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 66, no. 4 (1988): 577-578.

¹⁶⁴ Matthew Culloton, “Famine Song” (Published by Santa Barbara Music Publishing, 2004)

of environmental hardship aligns with the struggles of the Sudanese people. The text highlights the resilience, hope, and strength that define the human spirit even in the most dire of circumstances.

The lyrics written by Sarah Ferrell are as follows:

*Ease my spirit, ease my soul
Please free my hands from this barren soil.*

*Ease my mother, ease my child.
Earth and sky be reconciled.*

*Ease my spirit, ease my soul.
Please free my hands from this barren soil.
Ease my mother, ease my child.
Earth and sky be reconciled.*

*Rain, rain, rain
Rain, rain, rain*

*Weave, my mother, weave, my child.
Weave your baskets of rushes wild.*

*Weave, my mother, weave, my child.
Weave your baskets of rushes wild.*

*Out of heat, under sun
Comes the hunger to everyone*

*Famine's teeth, famine's claw
On the sands of Africa*

The opening lines, "Ease my spirit, ease my soul / Please free my hands from this barren soil," speak to the deep emotional and physical toll of famine. For the Sudanese people, the land was no longer a source of sustenance, but a harsh and unforgiving environment that contributed to their suffering. The phrase "barren soil" is particularly poignant, as it may evoke the landscape of the Sudanese countryside, where once-fertile

lands had turned to dust due to drought and agricultural collapse. This image reflects the heart-wrenching reality of a population trying to survive in an environment that no longer supported life. The 1980s famine, exacerbated by both natural and man-made factors, rendered much of Sudan's land unable to sustain its people, forcing millions into famine-stricken conditions.¹⁶⁵ The mention of "mother" and "child" in the song further underscores the familial and generational impact of the famine. "Ease my mother, ease my child" speaks to the vulnerability of women and children, who often bear the brunt of famine's toll. In Sudan, women and children were often the most affected by food insecurity, with women forced to care for their families under increasingly dire circumstances, and children facing the highest mortality rates due to malnutrition and disease.¹⁶⁶ The desire for the reconciliation of "Earth and sky" could allude to the need for the restoration of balance—both ecological and human—that could bring relief from suffering.

The recurring refrain of "Rain, rain, rain" in the chorus symbolizes the life-giving force of water, which was in short supply during the 1980s famine. For Sudanese communities, the arrival of rain was more than just a weather event; it was the key to survival, as it would bring the possibility of crops growing again and bring hope for the return of food. The desperation in the repeated plea for rain echoes the urgency of a people who faced the devastation of crop failure, the drying up of water sources, and the

¹⁶⁵ Waal, 78.

¹⁶⁶ World Health Organization, "The Impact of Famine on Children," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 66, no. 4 (1988): 577-578.

continuing threat of starvation.¹⁶⁷ The call for "Weave, my mother, weave, my child / Weave your baskets of rushes wild" evokes a sense of resilience and resourcefulness. Despite the harsh conditions, the Sudanese people were forced to rely on their resourcefulness to survive. Weaving baskets and other goods from available materials was a way for families to cope with scarcity, and it became a symbol of endurance and creativity in the face of overwhelming adversity.¹⁶⁸

In the last section, "Out of heat, under sun / Comes the hunger to everyone," the lyricist paints a vivid picture of the environmental conditions that exacerbated the famine. In Sudan, extreme heat, prolonged drought, and the harsh sun contributed to the loss of crops and the depletion of water supplies, making survival even more difficult. The phrase "Famine's teeth, famine's claw" personifies famine as a predatory force, capturing the terror and devastation it inflicted on people, stripping away their basic needs and humanity.¹⁶⁹ The mention of "the sands of Africa" grounds the song in the context of a specific region—the Horn of Africa, including Sudan—which was one of the areas hardest hit by the famine of the 1980s. The imagery of "*sands*" could be alluding to the vast, arid landscapes of the region, which were left barren and inhospitable due to drought and conflict.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Peter H. Gibbon, *Sudan: Drought, Famine and War* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 143.

¹⁶⁸ David Keen, *The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine and Relief in Southwestern Sudan, 1983–1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 167.

¹⁶⁹ United Nations, "Sudan: The 1980s Famine," *UN News*, accessed February 22, 2025, https://www.un.org/1980s_famine_sudan.

¹⁷⁰ Jenny Goldie, "Drought and Desertification in Africa," *Environmental Politics* 16, no. 4 (1985): 312.

Musical Analysis: “Famine Song”

Matthew Culloton’s arrangement of Moira Smiley’s original composition “Famine Song,” employs texture, dynamics, and rhythmic layering to evoke an individual and communal cry for help. The piece begins with a djembe-like bass pedal tone ostinato and moves into a solo or unison line. The opening phrase follows a parallel period structure, with an antecedent phrase answered by a consequent phrase. The melody, set in the Aeolian mode, weaves rhythmic elements throughout, establishing a sense of longing. Culloton develops this melody through various textures, first as a unison line, then as a soprano-alto duet, before reappearing in four-part homophonic texture at measures 26 and 62.

Dynamic shifts heighten the emotional intensity, ranging from soft, mournful phrases to fuller, more urgent climaxes. In the C section, Culloton creates an interplay between the soprano and alto soloists underscored by sustained whole notes in the choir. Rhythmic motives and voice crossing make this a powerful lamenting section. In the B section, Culloton employs a four-part homophonic texture featuring slow quarter notes with added dissonance, producing a prayer-like quality. The B section is, I believe, the heart of the work. Culloton allows the singers to move into a soft dissonant tension and release. Culloton employs the B section a total of 3 times, at measures 20, 56, and 73. Tables 12 and 13 show the overall form.

Table 12: Form and Musical Elements for “Famine Song,” mm.1-47

		A section			B Section		A Section		C Section	
mm	1	3	11	15	20	23	26	30	34	42
Dynamics	mp	mf	mf - Alto p-soprano		p	mp	f	decrescendo in mm.31	p	
Tempo	Freely 80-84				Slower, molto legato					
Texture	Unison	Unision or Solo w/ Bass pedal tone	Alto Duet w/ soprano unison and bass pedal tone	Tenors add	SATB Homophonic		SATB Homophonic		Two solists w/ Alto, Tenor and Bass-Treble voices move between unison and three-part treble	
Composition al Devices	Djembe imitation		Overtone desription of soprano sustained note		Contrasting motion between soprano and alto w/ whole note octaves and 5ths in the bass and tenor				"lamenting style" for soloist, Sustained whole notes on "Oh" SATB	
Rhythmic figure	Bass Whole Notes	Syncopation in Soprano/Pecussive drumlike pattern in bass		Tenors follow breaths with bass						Soloist: dotted rhythms/subdivision

Table 13: Form and Musical Elements for “Famine Song,” mm.48-End

D section					B section		A Section		B Section	
48	49	50	52	54	56	59	62	66	73	
					p	mp	mf	p		
					Slower, molto legato		Slower, molto legato			
Bass Solo overlapping bass pedal tone	Four part TTBB	Unision TB	Four-part SSAA	Unison SA	SATB Homophonic		SATB Homophonic		SATB	
					Contrasting motion between soprano and alto w/ whole note octaves and 5ths in the bass and tenor				Contrasting motion between soprano and alto w/ whole note octaves and 5ths in the bass and tenor	

In my analysis of “Famine Song,” I have explored the role of each individual vocal part in contributing to the overall emotional and musical expression. The treble voices bear the primary responsibility for conveying the lament, imbuing the piece with a sense of sorrow. The basses provide a rhythmic foundation, functioning alternately as percussive drums, heartbeats, or sustained pedal tones, which serve to unify the work. The tenors maintain long, unison notes that, at certain moments, are the sole element holding the piece together. The sopranos and altos, paired together, create rich harmonies that plead, "ease my spirit," or move in contrary motion, suggesting a more introspective

and individualized approach. It is evident that changes in texture play a crucial role in the development of the work. As demonstrated in the form, various textural combinations are employed to express different emotional elements. In the following discussion, I will analyze the shifts in texture and the subtler roles that each vocal part plays in supporting the overall narrative. I examine the textural structure of “Famine Song” referencing Table 14.

Table 14: Texture Changes

<p>Bass pedal tone mm. 1-4</p>	
<p>Solo or Unison with Bass percussive foundation</p>	<p>Alto divisi supported by soprano and tenor sustained notes underscored by bass pedal tone mm. 15-18</p>
<p>Two soloists with chorus sing whole note homophonic chord progression mm. 36-38</p>	<p>Independent Soloists crossing voices mm. 39-46</p>

 <p>Rain, rain, rain. Rain, rain, rain. Rain, rain, rain. Rain, rain, rain.</p> <p>Soprano and alto contrary motion with consonant octave, thirds, fifth intervals in tenor and bass Mm. 20-22</p>	 <p>26 Broadly ♩ = 88-92 <i>f</i> Weave, my moth-er, weave, my child, <i>f</i> Weave, my moth-er, weave, my child, <i>f</i> Weave, my moth-er, weave, my child, <i>f</i> Weave, my moth-er, weave, my child,</p> <p>4 part homophonic texture with octave doubling in bass</p>
 <p><i>tutti mf</i> un - der sun, comes the hun - ger to <i>tutti mf</i> un - der sun, comes the hun - ger to</p> <p>Four-part TTBB Divisi</p>	 <p><i>f</i> Fam - ine's teeth, Fam - ine's claw <i>f</i> Fam - ine's teeth, Fam - ine's claw</p> <p>Four-part SSAA Divisi</p>

The opening texture of “Famine Song” begins with a powerful, monophonic bass pedal tone, which establishes a sense of stability and continuity. The bass pedal serves as an anchor, creating a feeling of isolation and grounding the piece in its thematic concern with endurance and the persistence of famine. The bass line’s solitary, unyielding presence sets the tone for the rest of the texture and invites a sense of contemplation and gravity.

The first solo melodic phrase emerges in monophonic texture, introducing the thematic material and establishes the primary melodic content of the piece, supported by

the bass ostinato. Culloton, in his arrangement of “Famine Song” gives the option for the opening melody to be sung as either a solo or a unison line.

Table 15: Personal Reflection: Soloist vs. Unison/Staging

The opening melody and phrasing lend themselves well to a soloist, but given the way I stage the work, I normally prefer a unison sound from all altos. Having performed this piece multiple times with choirs, I like to spread the singers across the stage, giving them individual space to sing and fully express the emotion of the piece. I recently watched a video of Moira Smiley performing the opening solo of “Famine Song” with the Women’s Chorus of Dallas.¹⁷¹ The ethereal way in which Moira delivered the solo challenged my original perception of the piece, making me want to reconsider soloists in the future.

Starting in measure 11, Culloton allows the altos to enrich the texture by introducing dyads built on fourths (See Table 14, measures 15-17), adding more harmonic weight to the melody while all the sopranos sing a hollow unison “ooh” with a direction to sing “like an overtone” I see this textual transformation from a unison to a 2-part as a joining of forces, a rise to the cause in the community, reflecting the growing sense of collective strength and unity despite the initial isolation.

Through “Famine Song” the opening melody moves through a series of transformations, shifting from a soloist to a duet and then into a homophonic texture. The

¹⁷¹ Moira Smiley, “Famine Song” by VIDA performed with The Women's Chorus of Dallas, YouTube video, 5:30, posted June 10, 2015, <https://youtu.be/nqTBF5FSZuQ?si=N26YDqCrtvPVFbbr>.

A section appears three times, gradually increasing in textural thickness, with dynamics shifting from *mezzo-forte* the first time to *forte* the second, before returning to *mezzo-forte* in the final iteration. The gradual expansion of the texture from a single line to a duet to full chorus reflects the thematic arc of the piece—moving from isolation to a sense of communal involvement.

Culloton continues to employ a homophonic texture in the B Section that first appears starting in measure 21. The B section itself serves as a meditative plea for rain, with rhythm playing a vital role in shaping its expressive intent. Culloton places a tenuto marking on the final half note of "rain" for the altos, emphasizing the seventh of the major chord and adding a poignant dissonance. I further discuss the B section when I discuss the rhythm qualities found in the work.

In the lamenting C section, beginning in measure 34, Culloton features two soloists who cross and share individual cries for help while the rest of the chorus sustains staggered “oo” sounds in homophonic progressions. I feel that this homophony serves as a sonic manifestation of collective strength, allowing the soloists to voice their pleas while reinforcing a unified force in the face of adversity. The soloists enter together on an “ah,” described by Culloton as needing a "lamenting style" tone. As the C section progresses, the top soloist introduces a pleading lament with dotted rhythmic figures, while the bottom soloist sustains whole-note "oohs" alongside the choir. The bottom soloist then ascends into measure 37 with the top soloist to the root of a G major chord. The soloists gradually become more independent, interweaving and crossing voices, heightening the emotional complexity of the section. During this C section the soloist is

supported by a homophonic chord progression of sustained notes from the rest of the choir as seen in Table 14.

The choir functions as a harmonic backdrop in this C section, offering a continuous, steady foundation. The homophonic progression reinforces the isolation of the solo voice, while the sustaining harmony highlights the choir's role in providing support during moments of individual struggle. Table 16 charts the progression of the chorus starting in the C section at measure 35.

Table 16. Chord Chart, “Famine Song” mm. 34-46

Measure	Chord Progression
34	E minor 7th (second inversion)
35	A major
36	E minor (first inversion)
37	A major
38	G major (second inversion)
39	A major (first inversion)
40	E minor 7th (second inversion)
41	A major (first inversion)
42	G major 7th (first inversion)
43	A major (first inversion)
44	G major 7th
45	A major
46	Open fifth (E and A)

Table17: Personal Reflection on Soloist Work


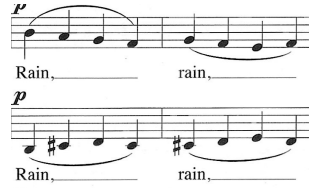


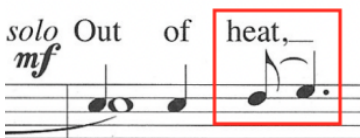
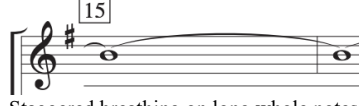
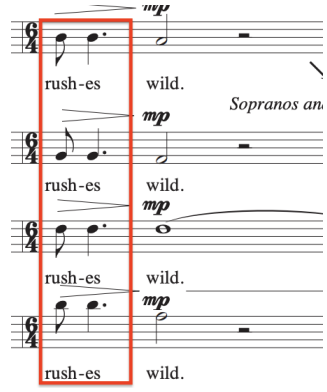
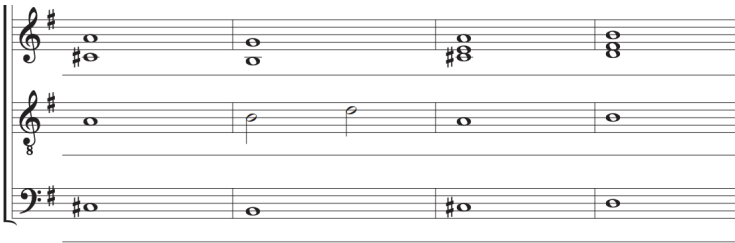
Performing the solo section can be a challenge, especially in finding an appropriate lamenting tone for the soloist. In measure 38, when both soloists ascend together, it feels almost as if the top soloist is gently pulling the bottom soloist up, encouraging them to join in. I have found that having the choir gradually shift from the 'ooh' vowel to an 'ah' vowel around measure 45 gives an interesting effect and that emphasizes the final chord in the D section.

Adding to the texture at the very end of the C, in measure 48, a bass enters with a solo, breaking away singing “Out of heat” leading into a completely new texture. In measure 49, Culloton transforms the texture abruptly into a new divisi section with the tenor and bass (TTBB), followed by a divisi in the soprano and alto (SSAA). Culloton, in his arrangement, becomes particularly precise with musical articulations on the text “under sun,” marking all three syllables with tenuto accents. Additionally, a "no breath" marking is given to tenor 1, baritone, and bass, followed by a legato marking in measure 50, suddenly shifting back to unison monophonic texture ending on the text “everyone.” The sopranos and altos join the crying motive in measures 52–54, singing “Famine’s Teeth” twice in four-part divisi with tenuto accents that, I argue, illustrate the individual pain and the collective gathering—a battle cry of communal support and unity.

Rhythm Analysis

I reference Table 18 in my discussion on how Matthew Culloton utilizes rhythm to convey the contextual undertones of “Famine Song”.

Table 18: Rhythm Figure in “Famine Song”

 <p>Syncopation and Legato eighth notes</p>	 <p>Quarter Notes contrary motion</p>	 <p>Lamenting dotted rhythms</p>
 <p>Ascending eighth notes crossing voices</p>	 <p>Syncopated Bass solo</p>	 <p>Staggered breathing on long whole notes</p>
 <p>Homophonic syncopation on text “rushes”</p>	 <p>Long supported chord phrases on whole notes</p>	

In "Famine Song," Culloton allows rhythm to play a crucial role in conveying both the lamenting urgency and search for hope. The rhythmic structure shifts frequently, offering a diverse array of figures that reflect the intensity and the stark nature of famine. The use of syncopated figures at the beginning of the piece sets up the lamenting undertones of the score. I believe these off-beat accents mirror the chaos and instability often associated with famine. The irregularity of the syncopation could convey a feeling of disrupted order, as if the world is out of sync with its natural rhythm. Contrasting these jagged, syncopated moments are long sustained notes with an overtone type quality that introduce a sense of stillness and hopelessness. The sustained pitches may evoke the unyielding passage of time during periods of hardship. Dotted rhythms are also employed in "Famine Song," adding a weighted, almost slow march-like quality to the music. The dotted quarter and eighth note combinations give the rhythm a sense of determination. I feel that this rhythmic tension is palpable, as if time itself is being stretched and broken under the weight of famine.

"Famine Song" begins with a bass pedal tone—an "hmm" on E3 (See Table 20), sustained in whole notes and separated by breath marks. Culloton, in his arrangement, marked these notes with tenuto, emphasizing weight and connection. These first two whole notes set the mood for the entire work. I imagine the basses imitating a djembe bass stroke, which produces a deep, resonant sound as seen in Table 20. The following two measures introduce a more percussive feel, with two eighth notes at the end of the measure, possibly resembling the djembe's tone stroke—a shorter, more articulated low sound (See Table 20). The percussive quality of the vocal lines provides a visceral sense of the physical toll that famine exacts on individuals and communities. These rhythmic

patterns drive the piece forward, amplifying the emotional weight of the narrative through their meditative and almost ritualistic energy.

In the B section that first appears in measures 21 through 26, Culloton incorporates legato quarter notes in contrary motion. The simplicity and purity of these patterns mixed with dissonance add a prayerful break from the syncopated lament. In Culloton's arrangement, he adds legato marking to the B section to further draw out the pause and change in the phrase.

Table 19: Personal Reflection on the A Section of "Famine Song"

The B section of "Famine Song" first caught my attention when I had the privilege of presenting the piece to the students that I was teaching in 2010. The pause in time, combined with the chordal dissonance of the moving quarter notes in the alto and soprano parts, underscored by the bass and tenor parts grounding the phrase with whole notes, deeply affected me. We all face challenges in life, but allowing myself and my students the opportunity to pause in that musical moment and reflect on the emotions evoked by famine in Africa offered an invaluable teaching experience for us to develop empathy for a very real global issue. This meditative moment further reinforced my thesis: choral music has the power to make a difference and inspire change, allowing us to pause, reflect, and connect.

Pedal Tone/Ostinatos

“Famine Song” begins with a bass pedal tone—an “hmm” on E3 (See Figure 32), sustained in whole notes and separated by breath marks. Culloton, in his arrangement, marked these notes with tenuto, emphasizing their weight and connection. These first two notes can set the mood for the entire work. The following two measures introduce a more percussive feel, with two eighth notes at the end of the measure, possibly resembling the djembe's tone stroke—a shorter, more articulated low sound.

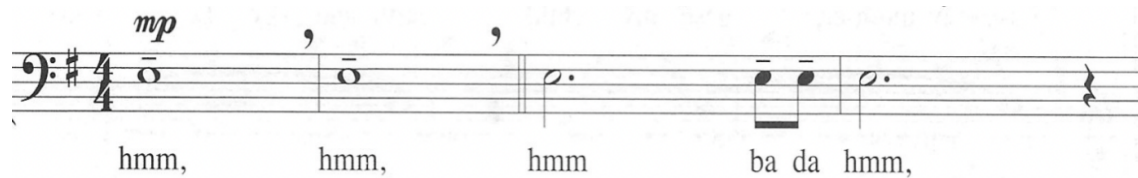


Figure 32: Bass Pedal Tone (Djembe Imitation)¹⁷²

Throughout “Famine Song”, Culloton added a bass part that evolves from the percussive djembe parts to long held notes grounding the song. Culloton, in his arrangement, has the bass double octaves as seen below in Table 20, ascending conjunctly in the aeolian mode on the first three scale degrees during each B section as seen in measures 21 through 25 in Table 20. Not every choir has lower voices that can sing these notes.

¹⁷² Matthew Culloton, “Famine Song” (Published by Santa Barbara Music Publishing, 2004), 5.

Table 20: Octave Doubling in Bass

Rain, rain, rain. Rain, rain, rain.

mm. 21-25

f Weave, my moth-er, weave, my child,

mm. 26

rain, rain. rain, rain. rain, rain.

mm. 59-61

The image displays three examples of octave doubling in a bass line. The first example (mm. 21-25) is in bass clef, 4/4 time, with the lyrics 'Rain, rain, rain. Rain, rain, rain.' The notes in measures 24 and 25 are boxed in red to show the octave doubling. The second example (mm. 26) is in treble clef with the lyrics 'Weave, my moth-er, weave, my child,'. The notes in measures 26 and 27 are boxed in red. The third example (mm. 59-61) shows a four-staff system in treble and bass clefs with the lyrics 'rain, rain. rain, rain. rain, rain.' The notes in measures 60 and 61 are boxed in red.

I argue that Culloton infuses the bass line with a subtle sense of hope through the ascending whole-note pattern in measures 21–25. The bass soloist’s call of "Out of heat" in measure 48 leads the ensemble out of the lamenting C section in measures 34 through 47, marking a pivotal moment in the piece (see Figure 33). I believe that the way Culloton depicts the presence of the bass part for foundation and support is purposeful.

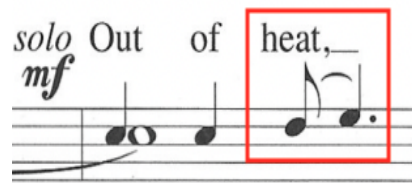


Figure 33: Bass Soloist/Syncopated Rhythm, m. 48¹⁷³

Intentional Staging

Staging could add a powerful additional element to a performance of “Famine Song”. Watching the Choral Project and a separate performance of Moira Smiley performing with the Women’s Chorus of Dallas helped to inform me of the various possibilities of staging. The Choral Project, which was founded in 1996 by artistic director and conductor Daniel D. Hughes, staged the performance in a traditional choir format on risers. They employed unified hand motions starting with both hands on heart followed by gestures upwards as they plead for rain in the B section.¹⁷⁴ In total, Hughes designed the performance to have 4 gestures.

¹⁷³ Matthew Culloton, “Famine Song” (Published by Santa Barbara Music Publishing, 2004), 6.

¹⁷⁴ The Choral Project. "Famine Song." YouTube video, 4:50. Posted by The Choral Project, March 4, 2016. <https://youtu.be/S6n-U2gsMBg>.

1. Hands on heart
2. Gesture upward to the sky
3. Gesture forward to the audience
4. Gesture downward to the floor

The soloists in The Choral Project individually lament showing their own pleaful hand gestures. At the end of the song when snapping starts to mimic the sounds of rain, the choir looks upwards and at their hand acting as if rain was falling on them.

In the performance of "Famine Song" by the Women's Chorus of Dallas, directed by Melinda Imthurn, the performance was staged with three chorus members kneeling and soloists standing off-center in front of the choir.¹⁷⁵ The conductor had the choir turn in different directions looking individually upward for rain as they sang the B Section. At the divisi section beginning in measure 49, the choir became more physically active with hand gestures on their face and heads acting out the heat and sweat of the drought. They end drastically with gestures of exhaustion by throwing their hands down aggressively to their sides as they accent the phrase "famine's teeth, famine's claw." At the end, when the snapping of rain enters, they mimic the rain following on their hands and faces (similar to The Choral Project,) but they add one more element by bringing their arms and hands to their body as if almost hugging.

¹⁷⁵ Moira Smiley, "Famine Song" by VIDA performed with The Women's Chorus of Dallas, YouTube video, 5:30, posted June 10, 2015, <https://youtu.be/nqTBF5FSZuQ?si=N26YDqCrtvPVFbbr>.

Table 21: Staging of “Famine Song”, B Section

In my various performances of “Famine Song”, I have had the choir spread out all over the stage giving the choir their own individual space to creatively express and connect with the song. During the B section in measure 20-25, I like to have the choir move into different directions, looking upward, which helps them turn this section into their own personal plea for rain. In my opinion, the physicality of turning their bodies and looking upward makes it feel more genuine. When the B Section returns to the A Section, I ask them to slowly turn back toward the conductor to create a smooth transition, drawing them back together as a cohesive unit preparing them for a sudden forte sound at measure 26. In an interview, Smiley said the following: “I believe singing is very visual, especially vulnerable and special in the visual rawness. Because we almost all have voices or bodies, the visual of a singer can have such a visceral, self-recognizing effect on us—maybe more than an instrumentalist.”¹⁷⁶

I believe that the music in “Famine Song” powerfully conveys themes of environmental and emotional devastation through rhythmic syncopation, dynamic vocal textures, and expressive harmonic shifts. Culloton’s use of the soloist’s “lamenting tone” heightens the piece’s emotional experience, effectively capturing the despair of famine and the longing for hope. I argue that these compositional techniques transform sound into a potent reflection on the human condition, using music to address both personal and

¹⁷⁶ Alma Cook, “Artist of the Month: Moira Smiley,” Braver Angels, September 1, 2021, <https://braverangels.org/aom-moira-smiley/>.

environmental loss. Through these choices, the work serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggles caused by neglect, urging a deeper connection to the climate challenges that we face.

"But a Flint Holds Fire" by Andrea Ramsey¹⁷⁷ (2016)

Background on Composer: Andrea Ramsey

Dr. Andrea Ramsey is an internationally recognized composer, conductor, scholar, and music educator. With over 13 years of experience working with children's, public school, and university choirs, she has held faculty positions in music education and conducting at The Ohio State University and the University of Colorado. At the University of Colorado, she served as Assistant Professor of Conducting and Associate Director of Choral Studies, working with undergraduate and graduate students in choral conducting, choral literature, and music education.¹⁷⁸

Ramsey earned her Ph.D. in music education from Michigan State University, where she was a University Distinguished Fellow, and her MM in choral conducting from the University of Kansas.¹⁷⁹ A dedicated advocate for new choral works, she has over 60 compositions published with major publishers, including Hal Leonard, Boosey &

¹⁷⁷ Andrea Ramsey, "But a Flint Holds Fire" (Published by G. Schirmer, Inc, 2016)

¹⁷⁸ "New Faculty: Andrea Ramsey, Assistant Professor of Conducting and Associate Director of Choral Studies," University of Colorado Boulder, April 29, 2014, colorado.edu.

¹⁷⁹ "About," Andrea Ramsey Official Website, andreamsey.com.

Hawkes, Alliance, Santa Barbara, Walton, Colla Voce, and Carl Fischer.¹⁸⁰ She also makes her works available through MusicSpoke, a digital sheet music marketplace.¹⁸¹

As a scholar, Ramsey has presented at national and international conferences, including the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) conventions, the 6th Annual Symposium on Sociology in Music Education, and The Phenomenon Singing Symposium in Newfoundland, Canada.³ She has co-authored research published in the *Choral Journal* and the *Journal of Research in Music Education*.¹⁸² In addition to her work as a composer and educator, Ramsey serves as composer-in-residence for the Allegro Choirs of Kansas City, where she has twice toured abroad with the ensembles to Italy, Austria, and the Czech Republic.¹⁸³ A native of Arkansas, Ramsey believes in music's power to build community, foster self-discovery, and deepen our understanding of humanity.¹⁸⁴

Contextual Analysis: "But a Flint Holds Fire"

Andrea Ramsey's "But a Flint Holds Fire" is based on a water crisis in Flint, Michigan. The Flint water crisis, which began in 2014, is a stark example of the consequences of poor governance, inadequate infrastructure, and a failure to heed early

¹⁸⁰ "About," Andrea Ramsey Official Website

¹⁸¹ "About," Andrea Ramsey Official Website

¹⁸² "About," Andrea Ramsey Official Website

¹⁸³ "About," Andrea Ramsey Official Website

¹⁸⁴ "About," Andrea Ramsey Official Website

warnings. In an attempt to save money, city officials decided to switch Flint's water supply from Detroit's Lake Huron system to the local Flint River¹⁸⁵. Despite these warnings, the water source was switched, and within weeks, residents began reporting discolored, foul-smelling water and experiencing health issues, including rashes. In the summer of 2014, violations related to E. coli and total coliforms led to multiple boil-water alerts¹⁸⁶. By 2015, lead levels in the drinking water began to rise, leading to a public health crisis. According to testing conducted by Virginia Tech researcher Marc Edwards, 20% of samples from Flint homes had lead levels exceeding the federal action level of 15 µg/L, and the 90th percentile lead concentration was significantly higher than the historical average¹⁸⁷. Pediatrician Mona Hanna-Attisha's study also showed a sharp increase in blood lead levels (BLLs) in children, further highlighting the extent of the contamination¹⁸⁸. The water source was switched back to Lake Huron in October 2015, but the legacy of the crisis, including ongoing health impacts and a loss of trust in government, has persisted. As noted by Rothstein, "Flint matters because the water utility industry can do better," emphasizing that while the crisis was tragic, it also presented an

¹⁸⁵ Susan J. Masten, Simon H. Davies, and Shawn P. McElmurry, "Flint Water Crisis: What Happened and Why?," *Journal-American Water Works Association* 108, no. 12 (2016): 22-34

¹⁸⁶ Amanda Emery, "EPA Concerned About 'Urgent' Situation With Chlorine Levels in Flint Water," *MLive*, June 4, 2016, www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2016/06/epa_expresses_concerns_of_chlo.html (accessed March 4, 2025).

¹⁸⁷ Caroline Nguyen, K. Stone, B. Clark, M. Edwards, G. Gagnon, and A. Knowles, *Impact of Chloride: Sulfate Mass Ratio (CSMR) Changes on Lead Leaching in Potable Water* (Denver, CO: Water Research Foundation, 2010).

¹⁸⁸ Mona Hanna-Attisha, Jennifer LaChance, Robert Sadler, and Andrew Schnepp, "Elevated Blood Lead Levels in Children Associated With the Flint Drinking Water Crisis: A Spatial Analysis of Risk and Public Health Response," *American Journal of Public Health* 106, no. 2 (2016): 283, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.303003>.

opportunity for systemic reform in water utility management and public health protection¹⁸⁹.

It is within this context of ongoing crisis and neglected accountability that Andrea Ramsey's "But a Flint Holds Fire" was born. Inspired by the unfolding humanitarian disaster, Ramsey, who had studied at Michigan State University from 2010 to 2013, found herself moved by the community's plight.¹⁹⁰ She recalled her personal connection to the area, having flown out of Flint's airport on multiple occasions, and felt compelled to compose a piece that would bring awareness to the crisis.¹⁹¹ As she observed the ongoing neglect of Flint's residents, Ramsey realized that she could use choral music to give voice to those affected and ensure that their experiences were not forgotten.¹⁹²

Ramsey discussed the origins of the piece in an interview with Ryan Warner on *Colorado Matters* from CPR News. She described how the crisis resonated with her, given her time in Michigan. “

I was a doc student at Michigan State University from 2010 to 2013, and after I left, the very next year was when the crisis began,” she explained. “I couldn't help it. I had flown out of the Flint airport sometimes, and I was thinking about this community of a hundred thousand plus without drinkable water.¹⁹³ And I kept

¹⁸⁹ Eric P. Rothstein, “Why Flint Matters,” *Journal of American Water Works Association* 108, no. 7 (2016): 36, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5942/jawwa.2016.108.0136>.

¹⁹⁰ Ryan Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis," *Colorado Matters*, CPR News, April 3, 2019, <https://www.cpr.org/show-segment/coloradan-composes-choral-music-about-flint-water-crisis/>.

¹⁹¹ Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis".

¹⁹² Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis".

¹⁹³ Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis".

waiting for something to happen, and nothing was happening. It was this huge humanitarian crisis that was completely being ignored.¹⁹⁴

Watching the continued lack of action, Ramsey felt compelled to write a piece that could reach a wide audience and to ensure that the crisis was not forgotten.

Beyond Rossetti's poem, the work incorporates spoken-word elements drawn directly from Flint's youth. In collaboration with Dr. Karen Salvador, who was then a music education professor at the University of Michigan-Flint, Ramsey gathered reflections from students in local choirs. Through written prompts, these students described their personal experiences with the crisis, detailing how their families unknowingly consumed contaminated water, suffered from lead poisoning, and struggled with the long-term consequences. One particularly haunting excerpt states: "During the time the news was telling people not to drink the water, my family didn't have cable or Internet, so we didn't know. We had no other choice but to drink the water."¹⁹⁵ Another student wrote, "My siblings and I were all tested for lead poisoning. A week passes, and my mom finds out that all four of her kids have lead poisoning, including the baby."¹⁹⁶ These raw and urgent testimonies became an essential component of the composition, reinforcing the gravity of the crisis while maintaining artistic and emotional integrity.

¹⁹⁴ Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis".

¹⁹⁵ Andrea Ramsey, "But a Flint Holds Fire" (Published by G. Schirmer, Inc, 2016)

¹⁹⁶ Andrea Ramsey, "But a Flint Holds Fire" (Published by G. Schirmer, Inc, 2016)

Ramsey described the process of reading these responses as deeply moving, recalling how one student urged her to “make this beautiful and artistic, but you need to tell the facts. Don’t sugarcoat this.”¹⁹⁷ She spoke about the weight of responsibility she felt in composing the piece, ensuring that it remained both an artistic expression and a vehicle for truth-telling. She explained to Warner that the students' words shaped the pacing and tone of the piece, stating, “I couldn’t just write something that was only sorrowful or only hopeful. It had to be both because that’s what I was hearing from them.”¹⁹⁸ This directive seemed to solidify Ramsey’s resolve to create a piece that balanced aesthetic beauty with an unflinching portrayal of the crisis. The result is a work that not only informs and educates but also fosters empathy among performers and audiences alike. Choirs across the country have performed “But a Flint Holds Fire,” with many ensembles including QR codes in their concert programs to encourage donations to Flint Rising, an organization dedicated to supporting the affected community.

Despite the devastation at the heart of the piece’s meaning, Ramsey infuses a message of hope. Alongside reflections on suffering and injustice, Flint’s youth also shared affirmations of resilience and community strength: “No matter how deep and dark the mud is, this is our home. The people in Flint hold true and bright. We are powerful. No one should feel alone in times like this.”¹⁹⁹ In blending these words with Rossetti’s poetry and evocative musical settings, “But a Flint Holds Fire” not only memorializes a

¹⁹⁷ Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis".

¹⁹⁸ Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis".

¹⁹⁹ Andrea Ramsey, “But a Flint Holds Fire” (Published by G. Schirmer, Inc, 2016).

crisis but also amplifies the voices of those fighting for justice. I believe that Ramsey's work stands as a testament to the power of choral music to engage with contemporary water issues, fostering awareness and action through the shared experience of song. Ramsey was asked by the ACDA Michigan Executive Board Webmaster/Editor, Jed Scott, about the following;

Scott: Beyond the piece, is there any message you want to send to the citizens of Flint?

Ramsey: I want them to know there are people who stand with them—to know that other people all over the U.S. care, and share in their frustration at how the government has failed them. I don't want them to feel alone.

Scott: Where can the piece be heard?

Ramsey: Twenty-one choirs across the US and Canada will hopefully perform it, but for Michiganders, there will be a couple of nearby opportunities to hear it.

Kyle Zeuch and the Michigan State University Children's Choir will perform it in January at the Michigan Music Conference, and Mandy Scott's Rockford High School Advanced Women's Ensemble will perform it at the ACDA-Michigan Fall Conference on October 28 (2016).

Ramsey's reflections on "But a Flint Holds Fire" further emphasize the piece's role in raising awareness and fostering solidarity. Her responses in an interview with ACDA Michigan Executive Board Webmaster/Editor Jed Scott provide insight into her intentions behind the work and her hopes for its impact. "But a Flint Holds Fire" has been

performed by both treble and mixed choirs and has been programmed at festivals and academic events in contexts emphasizing environmental justice and community resilience. The piece has been well-received by performers and audiences, recognized for its relevance and thoughtful construction. This is evident in the experience of the Michigan State University Children’s Choir, which performed the work in November of 2017 and again at a state music conference.²⁰⁰ Kyle Zeuch, the choir's director, noted that the piece resonated deeply with the students and community, stating, "This one seemed to hit closer to their hearts because these are kids that are their same age, living an hour away from them, so I feel like they were able to put themselves in the situation and it was a very sobering experience."²⁰¹ In the following section, Ramsey elaborates on the emotional urgency that compelled her to compose the piece, highlighting her deep connection to its message and the communities it represents. Ramsey's sentiment is echoed in her own written reflections at the end of the score, where she conveys the profound weight of composing "But a Flint Holds Fire" and the deep sense of responsibility she felt in telling this story through music.

A Note from the Composer

On the last page of her score in A Note from the Composer, Ramsey reflected on the weight of composing “But a Flint Holds Fire,” stating, "I have never felt so nervous,

²⁰⁰ "Composer pens song to highlight Flint water crisis," *The Washington Times*, February 11, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/11/composer-pens-song-to-highlight-flint-water-crisis/>.

²⁰¹ "Composer pens song to highlight Flint water crisis," *The Washington Times*, February 11, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/11/composer-pens-song-to-highlight-flint-water-crisis/>.

yet utterly compelled to write a piece of music as this one."²⁰² She described watching the crisis unfold from afar, feeling "sadness, anger, and frustration; but mostly, I felt like there was nothing I could do".²⁰³ While she acknowledged the political implications, she insisted that her composition was not a political statement but a call to action, urging people to help. Ramsey concluded with a powerful reflection on the role of choral music in fostering empathy, asking, "If this crisis was happening in your city, how would you feel? What would you do?" Through "But a Flint Holds Fire," she invites singers and audiences alike to engage with the crisis, ensuring that Flint's struggle is neither ignored nor forgotten.

Performance Context:

Andrea Ramsey provides a narrative summary, written by Dr. Mitchell Robinson from Michigan State University, of the events in Flint and encourages choirs to share this information with the audience before performing the piece to provide context. She explains how choirs are welcome to transform it into a visual presentation as well.

²⁰² Jed Scott, "“But a Flint Holds Fire’: Interview with Andrea Ramsey,” ACDA Michigan, September 19, 2016, <https://www.acdami.org/andreamsey/>.

²⁰³ Scott, "“But a Flint Holds Fire’: Interview with Andrea Ramsey”.

Table 22: Opening Contextual Narrative, “But a Flint Holds Fire”²⁰⁴

In music resides the power to move people. Moved people have the power to affect change. The music you are about to hear is sung with the hopes of affecting such change.

In March 2013, an Emergency Manager appointed by Michigan Governor, Rick Snyder, made the decision to switch the water source of Flint, Michigan from a supply in Detroit to the highly corrosive water of the Flint River as a cost-saving measure. Although the city's operating plan proposed corrosion control to treat the water from the Flint River, Department of Environmental Quality officials told the city it was not necessary.

Following the switch in April of 2014, there were immediate concerns from Flint residents about the taste and color of the city's new water. Unbeknownst to residents, the highly corrosive river water was tearing through the pipes, leaching harmful chemicals and lead into the water supply.

In October 2014, the General Motors plant in Flint deemed the water too corrosive for their manufacturing usage, and made the decision to switch to a different water source. Meanwhile, this water that was unsuitable for auto manufacturing was still flowing freely from the faucets of Flint citizens' homes. The Governor's attorneys recommended switching back to Detroit's water authority, and a state report linked Flint's water to a deadly outbreak of Legionnaires' disease—but nothing was done.

In January of 2015, the city announced that Flint's water was in violation of the Safe Drinking Water Act. Officials said residents with normal immune systems had nothing to worry about.

In February 2015, a manager at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency told Michigan Officials that because of the chemistry of the river water, contaminants from pipes--including lead, were being leached into the water system. The state worked to discredit him, stating publicly there was no lead problem.

In August 2015, Virginia Tech Professor Marc Edwards' tests revealed high lead levels in Flint's water. The state rejected his findings--and again, nothing was done.

In September 2015, Michigan State University Professor Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha held a press conference announcing elevated lead levels in children in Flint that could result in developmental delays, learning problems, and slowed growth--and still, nothing was done.

²⁰⁴ Mitchell Robinson, “Open Contextual Narration,” in *But a Flint Holds Fire*, by Andrea Ramsey (Michigan State University, 2016)

On October 2nd of 2015, almost one year after the water source was switched, state officials finally admitted that Flint's water had been poisoned. Schools, businesses, and residents of Flint were told not to drink the water they had been drinking for more than a year, with no additional timeline or solution presented.

In January 2016, the crisis expanded with another spike in Legionnaires' disease and 10 related deaths.

In March 2016, Governor Snyder hired a prominent criminal defense lawyer at the fee of \$540 per hour. Taxpayers are footing the bill for his legal tab of over 3 million dollars, and still not a single pipe had been replaced by the state.

The nightmare that began for Flint residents in April of 2014, we hope is ended soon. We sing to honor the lives lost, and the members of a community who have been largely ignored and left to clean up a problem they didn't create. We sing for the thousands of children and families impacted for life by the effects of lead poisoning. Water donations have been growing. Media attention has been waning. Yet, thousands of Flint families are still reliant on bottled water for cooking, cleaning, drinking, and bathing. The spoken phrases you will hear within this piece are the actual words of impacted students from Flint area schools. We sing this song for Flint in hopes that together, something can be done.

Beyond her composition, Andrea Ramsey continues to actively work to support the Flint water crisis. A QR code linking to Flint Rising is included in the score to encourage donations and support for the Flint community²⁰⁵. When asked by Jed Scott about what is the appropriate role of choral music in raising issues like this, Ramsey answered with the following:

Art has always and will always seek to highlight injustice. Of course, this often goes hand in hand with controversy. I wish I could say I dove into this fearlessly, but the early feelings were much more tremulous. My inner critic screamed at me, “What might happen if you do this?” and “How on earth do you think you are going to write an aesthetically pleasing piece of music about a water crisis?” I also worried people might think I was trying to be political, so in my notes in the front material of the score, I emphasize that the work is not intended as a political commentary, but as an honest artistic response to a humanitarian crisis. If we can't sing music for the benefit of humanity, what can we sing? I don't presume

²⁰⁵ Scott, “‘But a Flint Holds Fire’: Interview with Andrea Ramsey”.

to suggest that every composer needs to tackle such issues, but I can say that finishing this piece felt like one of the most meaningful things I've ever done. For me, it was the right issue to highlight through music.²⁰⁶

Andrea Ramsey has articulated the central argument of this paper, while also raising a critical point: not everyone will recognize water as a major concern. I believe directors should take the time to understand the communities they serve, as effectively framing difficult discussions is essential to a project's success. Ramsey's awareness of audience differences reinforces this idea, which may be why she offers the option of displaying the contextual narration for "But A Flint Holds Fire" on screen as an option.

Textual Analysis: "But A Flint Holds Fire"

The genesis of the text for "But a Flint Holds Fire" emerged from an unexpected poetic source. Ramsey initially sought to collaborate with a contemporary poet from Flint to capture the essence of the crisis. However, during her search, she explained how she repeatedly encountered the 19th-century poem *Flint* by Christina Rossetti.²⁰⁷

An emerald is as green as grass;

A ruby red as blood;

A sapphire shines as blue as heaven;

A flint lies in the mud.

A diamond is a brilliant stone,

To catch the world's desire;

²⁰⁶ Scott, "'But a Flint Holds Fire': Interview with Andrea Ramsey".

²⁰⁷ Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis"

An opal holds a fiery spark;

But a flint holds fire.

The poem, which contrasts the brilliance of gemstones with the resilience of flint, resonated deeply with Ramsey. The final line, “But a flint holds fire,” became not only the title of the work but also a metaphor for the strength and endurance of the Flint community. In her interview with Warner, Ramsey explained, “The idea of the flint being in the mud, of being overlooked, absolutely represents this situation, but then this is a vibrant community that is quite powerful and active right now in trying to get their voice heard.”²⁰⁸ She further reflected on how Rossetti’s words mirrored the dichotomy between suffering and resilience, reinforcing the community’s ongoing struggle and unwavering spirit”²⁰⁹

I believe that the juxtaposition of Christina Rossetti's poem "But a Flint Holds Fire" and the words of Flint students paints a powerful narrative of resilience, transformation, and struggle. Rossetti's poem uses the imagery of precious stones and minerals, including the flint, which, despite its unremarkable appearance, holds an intense, transformative energy. The line "A flint holds fire" symbolizes an understated strength, suggesting that even the most overlooked objects have the potential for change. In contrast, the words of Flint students reflect a reality where water, something meant to

²⁰⁸ Ryan Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis" *Colorado Matters*, CPR News, April 3, 2019, <https://www.cpr.org/show-segment/coloradan-composes-choral-music-about-flint-water-crisis/>.

²⁰⁹ Warner, "Coloradan Composes Choral Music About Flint Water Crisis".

be life-giving, becomes a symbol of destruction. The contamination of the city's water supply has left physical and emotional scars, as seen in statements like, "I started to break out every time I took a shower," and "We didn't know." These words are direct and charged with the frustration of those who were unaware of the scale of the crisis until it affected them personally. Brian Larkin, former associate director of Michigan's Governor's Office of Urban and Metropolitan Initiatives, foresaw the danger, expressing concern in a March 2014 email: "The expedited time-frame is less than ideal and could lead to some big potential disasters down the road."²¹⁰ Mike Glasgow, laboratory and water quality supervisor at the plant, warned in an April 2014 email to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality: "I do not anticipate giving the OK to begin sending water out anytime soon. If water is distributed from this plant in the next couple weeks, it will be against my direction."²¹¹ Larkin and Glasgow's warnings emphasize the mismanagement of the water supply, which, despite being an essential resource, became a source of harm when ignored.

The repeated refrain of "We didn't know" speaks to the collective shock and confusion felt by the people of Flint as they realized the catastrophic effects of the contaminated water. In parallel, the resilience echoed in Rossetti's poem *Flint* transforms here—not as a metaphor for abstract change, but as a powerful symbol of a community's urgent and shared call for transformation with a fire born of suffering, anger, and a need

²¹⁰ Susan J. Masten, Simon H. Davies, and Shawn P. McElmurry, "Flint Water Crisis: What Happened and Why?," *Journal-American Water Works Association* 108, no. 12 (2016): 22-34.

²¹¹ Masten et al., "Flint Water Crisis: What Happened and Why?," 22-34.

for justice. While Rossetti's fire may be a quiet, internal power, the fire invoked by the Flint students is a public cry for accountability.

Both texts engage with the elements of fire and water, but the symbolism differs. In Rossetti's poem, the fire is something hidden but powerful, as the flint holds an energy capable of igniting change. Water, conversely, which should bring life and purity, becomes an agent of harm in Flint. The "murky white color" and "orange little pieces" found in the students' water are visceral images that underscore the toxic nature of the resource, something that should nourish but instead contaminates and destroys. This contrast—the water that was once life-giving now causing damage—is amplified by the flint's fire, a symbol of hope and transformation.

The symbolism of both elements intertwines within the music of Ramsey's "A Flint Holds Fire". The piece captures the tension between these opposing forces—destructive water and transformative fire—through both musical structure and texture. The final line of the piece, "A Flint holds fire," becomes a turning point. Here, the fire, rather than symbolizing destruction, is transformed into a beacon of hope. The resilience of the people, the latent fire within them, shines through the music as the choir unites in a final, soaring declaration. The harmonies and melodies shift, offering a sense of transcendence and renewal. In this moment, fire becomes not just a destructive force but a symbol of the unyielding strength of those who have suffered.

The combination of Rossetti's symbolic fire and the immediate, personal anguish of the Flint students creates a layered emotional and intellectual experience. The music acts as a bridge between these two realities, amplifying the tension between the fire of

resilience and the water of devastation. In the end, it is this complex interplay of forces that makes the piece so compelling, with the final message resonating: even in the face of environmental destruction, the potential for renewal, transformation, and hope remains.

Musical Analysis: “But A Flint Holds Fire”

Andrea Ramsey structures “But a Flint Holds Fire” with a call and response ABCAD form with transitional material in the middle. Ramsey juxtaposes a diatonic melodic structure with dissonant chord clusters, accented and musically articulated, to bring to life the human story of what occurred in Flint. Throughout the piece, Ramsey employs compositional techniques like oscillating melodic lines, persistent triplet figures, defined melodic and harmonic piano accompaniment, and chordal dissonances that resolve, to reinforce the emotional weight of the text. The call and response emerges between spoken quotes from Flint students and the choir’s sung interpretation of Christina Rossetti’s poem, creating a dialogue that deepens the piece’s meaning (See Table 23).

Table 23: Call and Response Between Speaker and Chorus

Speaker text	Chorus lyrics
<p>The water started to change color. It was a murky white color....</p> <p>My water had orange little pieces in it...</p> <p>I started to break out every time I took a shower...other kids were losing their hair.</p> <p>In school, they shut off all the water fountains</p> <p>My siblings and I were all tested for lead poisoning. A week passed and my mom finds out that all four of her kids have lead poisoning, including the baby. My mom and dad were angry. I didn't want to believe it was true.</p> <p>There is no cure for lead poisoning.</p> <p>During the time the news was telling people not to drink the water, my family didn't have cable or internet, so we didn't know. We had no other choice but to drink the water.</p> <p>Flint is in a rocky place right now. We have to do everything with bottles and jugs of water. I constantly fear running out of water...</p> <p>This is our home...</p> <p>I still have faith in Flint. There are so many promising people here. There are respectful and wise people. There are beautiful neighborhoods</p> <p>People see us as a bad city, but Flint is not bad. Flint is not trash. We are often overlooked and underestimated, but we are powerful We have kind people who help each other</p>	<p>An emerald is as green as grass; A ruby red as blood; A sapphire shines as blue as heaven; A flint lies in the mud.</p> <p>The water was brown. It was a light yellow color</p> <p>The water</p> <p>We can't use the water</p> <p>We can't use the water anymore</p> <p>We all had to get tested</p> <p>We didn't know</p> <p>We didn't know</p> <p>A Flint lies in the mud.</p> <p>A diamond is a brilliant stone, To catch the world's desire; An opal holds a fiery spark; But a flint holds fire.</p> <p>A Flint holds fire</p>

Speaker text	Chorus Lyrics
We will not give up	We are powerful
No matter how deep and dark the mud is...	A Flint holds fire
The people in Flint hold true and bright...	We are stronger together
No one should feel alone in times like this.	This is our home
I still keep hope that Flint has a brighter future ahead of it.	We are powerful We are powerful
	A Flint holds fire

The following form of the piece is reflected in Table 24.

Table 24: Form, “But A Flint Holds Fire”

	A	B		C	Transitional material	A	D				
Section	A mm.1-12	mm.13-21	mm.22-26	mm.27-41	mm.42-46	mm.47-57	mm.58-68	mm.69-End			
Dynamics	mp	mp	f deces.	p	f deces.	mf	mp	mf	mf	f	ff
Tempo	Rubato-68	86		vamp	Rubato 68		86				
Speakers		2 speakers	2 speakers	3 speakers	1 speaker	1 speaker	2 speakers	6 speakers			

Two important musical elements that I will discuss in this section occur at the beginning. In measure 3, the treble voices enter with the first phrase: "As emerald is as green as grass, as ruby red as blood." The melody is simple, moving conjunctly, guided by a dotted rhythmic figure that oscillates between D and E, and another appoggiatura motive, almost responding to the piano (See Figure 34).



Figure 34: Oscillating Figure and Appoggiatura, mm. 3-4

Major Second Motion/Clusters Chords

Dr. Ramsey draws on major seconds both melodically and harmonically creating an atmosphere of instability and suspense throughout the piece. Melodically, she employs ascending major seconds that resolve upward to the ninth or eleventh of a chord. This motion contributes to an unsettled quality, as the resolution does not provide a traditional sense of closure, but instead extends the harmonic tension.


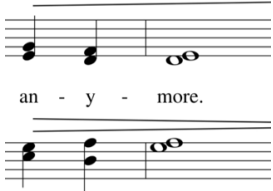



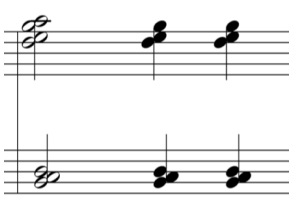

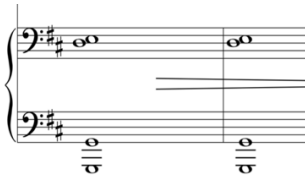

Table 25: Major Second Melodic Motion

<p>mm. 27-29</p>	<p><i>mis. mp</i> An eme - rald__ is as g mm. 3</p>
<p><i>poco</i> wa - ter <i>poco</i> mm. 12</p>	<p>mm. 1-4</p>

Harmonically, Ramsey incorporates major seconds within chord clusters, layering pitches in close proximity to generate dissonance (See Table 26). Each set of clusters further reinforces the sense of unpredictability, as they lack a definitive resolution. Rather than grounding the listener in a tonal center, the persistent use of chord clusters involving

major seconds keeps the music in a state of continuous motion—never fully settling.

Table 26: Cluster Chords

 <p>mm. 23</p>	 <p>mm. 26</p>	 <p>mm. 68</p>
 <p>mm. 74</p>	 <p>mm. 72</p>	 <p>mm. 69</p>
 <p>mm. 78-79</p>	 <p>mm. 81-82</p>	 <p>mm. 42-43</p>

In the final measure, Ramsey creates a major second cluster by layering a doubled octave D in the bass with a double octave A, displaced four octaves higher in the treble staff, as seen in Figure 35. By positioning the unresolved major second in the treble staff, she leaves the listener with a lingering sense of uncertainty—or perhaps hope—

depending on how the piece is perceived. Regardless, the major second plays a vital role in keeping the listener engaged in the story. I believe that this conversation on why Ramsey draws on major seconds and triplets could add another layer to the rehearsal process.

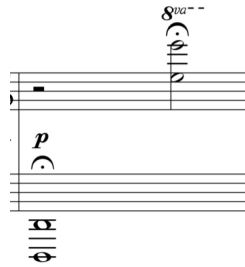



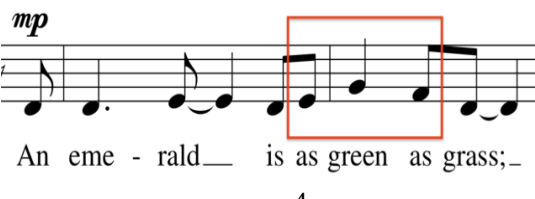


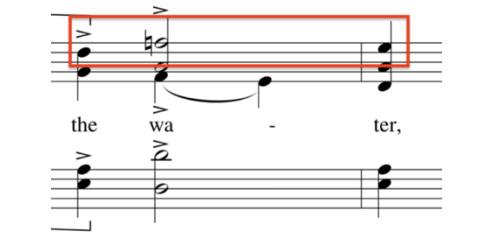

Figure 35: Final Major Second Chord Cluster²¹²

Appoggiatura Figures

Dr. Ramsey incorporates appoggiatura-like figures that progress into a leap-and-step pattern that land on a chord tone and fall to non-chord tones, extending the dissonance and intensifying harmonic tension. Conventional appoggiaturas leap to a non-chord tone and resolve to a chord tone. At times these appoggiatura-like moments interact harmonically with chord clusters and extended harmonies, further dissolving tonal clarity. Rather than guiding the listener toward resolution, I argue that these appoggiatura figures add a translucent quality to the overall sonority of these sections.

²¹² Andrea Ramsey, “But a Flint Holds Fire” (Published by G. Schirmer, Inc, 2016), 9.

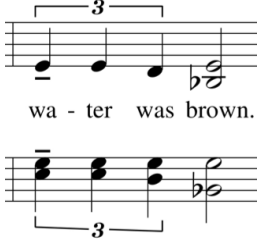





Table 27: Appoggiatura Figures

 <p>mm 1-2</p>	 <p><i>mp</i> An eme - rald__ is as green as grass; - mm. 4</p>
 <p>We are strong__ to -</p>	 <p><i>mf</i></p>
 <p>the wa - ter,</p>	

Triplet Figures

The composer utilizes triplets throughout “But a Flint Holds Fire,” shaping them with varied articulations, chordal structures, and word painting to convey different emotions and tonal colors. In this section I examine the triplet patterns outlined in Table 28, exploring how Ramsey manipulates harmony, rhythm, and texture to create expressive depth.

Table 28: Triplet Figures

 <p>wa - ter was brown.</p> <p>m.15</p>	 <p>It was a light yel - low</p> <p>m.16</p>
 <p>can't use the wa</p> <p>m.22</p>	 <p>We can't use the</p> <p>m.24</p>
 <p>We all had to get test -</p> <p>m.32</p>	 <p>We h who l</p> <p>We are pow - er - ful, _____</p> <p>mm.69, 77, and 78</p>
 <p>We are strong _____ to -</p> <p>m.73</p>	

In both measures 15 and 16, the triplet adds a sense of ambiguity within the context of E half diminished seventh tonality. I believe that this half-diminished seventh

adds a distinct harmonic color of tension and unresolved motion. In measure 22, Ramsey accents the triplet with inverted D minor eleventh chords, adding a feeling of displacement. In measure 24, Ramsey introduces heightened dissonance by using a Lydian tetrachord descending in oblique motion for the altos and basses, while the sopranos and tenors remain stationary on the same note. The resulting chord in measure 24, consisting of the pitches D, E, F, G, and A, forms a whole-tone cluster. In measure 32, Ramsey uses a pedal tone on E, with staccato eighth notes followed by triplets marked with tenutos and an accent on the word "tested. In measure 32, I feel that Ramsey's use of the pedal tone triplet here in measure 32, accompanied by the delicate juxtaposition of the piano motive from the beginning of the piece, paints fear and uncertainty. In contrast, Dr. Ramsey adds tenuto markings on the eighth notes and an accent on the first syllable of "powerful" beginning of the pedal tone triplets in measures 69, 77, and 78, giving, I believe, a greater sense of confidence, evoking a feeling of "we stand together" and "we can get through this". I feel that in rehearsals each musical articulation should be rehearsed with precision and clarity to honor the thoughtful word painting that Ramsey has designed.

Piano Accompaniment

One prevalent aspect of Dr. Ramsey's compositional style is how she uses the piano to vividly and sonically provide musical and emotional context to "But a Flint Holds Fire". I argue that Ramsey's piano accompaniment strongly establishes a foundation of mood and character for the singers. Just as a film score enhances each scene's atmosphere, Ramsey's piano writing shapes the emotional landscape of the piece.

In the first eight measures, Ramsey creates a translucent, ambiguous pattern that sets the tone for the piece as seen in measures 1-4 of Table 28. The use of a broken pentachord at the beginning establishes a delicate uncertainty that I believe draws in the listener. The repetitive trickling pattern underscores the opening melody from the sopranos and altos. In measures 13-14, Ramsey builds on a second inversion G minor chord, using an appoggiatura figure that leaps from Bb3 to G4, resolving to F5 and then moving from G4 to C5, resolving to Bb (See Table 28, mm.13-14). This harmonic movement is delicate yet unsettled, establishing a sense of instability.

Table 29: Rehearsal Suggestion, “But a Flint Holds Fire”

I find that the chord structure of measures 11 through 14 makes it difficult for the choir to center on their entrance into measure. I suggest isolating this moment in rehearsal. The ascension of the word "water," moving from G to A, further stretches the chord with the added ninth, pushing the harmonic tension even further. The dissonance lingers, emphasizing the unease and uncertainty surrounding the text, which portrays the fragility of water as a life source and its contamination.

In measures 16 through 18, Ramsey uses the piano accompaniment to deepen the sense of dissolution by transitioning from a Bb inverted chord into an E half-diminished chord. The left hand ascends, moving into contrary motion with the right hand, which further amplifies the unease. I argue that Ramsey uses the piano to portray a disoriented and confused feeling through the disjunct pattern in measures 16-18 (See Table 30, mm.16-18). The table below illustrates additional ways that Ramsey uses the piano to shape the tone, convey emotion, paint the text, and support the narrative.

Table 30: Musical Characteristics of Piano Accompaniment

 <p style="text-align: center;">mm. 1-4 Delicate uncertainty through a translucent pentachord setting the mood at the beginning</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">mm. 13-14 Inverted minor chords and unsettled dissonance evoke the water's shifting color.</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">mm. 16-18 Disoriented half-diminished chord reflects the water's yellow color.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">mm. 19-21 Descending half-diminished chord reflecting the speaker's distress as they break out in a rash.</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">mm. 27-29 Oscillating figure evoking emptiness as the Speaker recounts lead poisoning tests.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">mm. 36-37 Pensive clocklike ostinato pattern accompanying the speaker</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">mm. 46-47 Emergence out of "mud" through a G Minor ascent</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">mm. 60-61 Intensifying hope through I-IV7-V-I progression and driving bass ostinato, emerging from G Minor</p>

Dr. Ramsey infuses the piano accompaniment in "But a Flint Holds Fire" by shaping both the emotional and narrative arc of the piece. Through the use of harmonic tension, subtle dissonance, and careful rhythmic patterns, Ramsey establishes a rich sonic landscape that complements the choral elements. From the delicate uncertainty of the opening to the disorienting moments that reflect the fragility of water, I believe that

Ramsey uses the piano to highlight key phrases and underscore the central themes of vulnerability and resilience. The accompanying table further demonstrates how Ramsey meticulously crafts each piano gesture to enhance the mood and support the singers. I argue that Dr. Ramsey allows the piano to become a voice in itself, integral to the storytelling of "But a Flint Holds Fire."

Table 31: Personal Reflection About Discussions

Beyond musical elements, I believe that it is essential to engage choir members in discussions about the historical and social context surrounding the Flint water crisis, ensuring they understand the voices they are representing. While this can be difficult, especially when addressing such a complex and painful issue, it is a necessary step in ensuring that the performance is not only technically proficient but also deeply connected to the real-life experiences of the community. I feel it is important to honor the feelings of everyone in the room by approaching discussions about Flint with sensitivity, ensuring that choir members are both informed and emotionally present. Exploring themes of resilience, injustice, and community impact can shape a more informed and emotionally connected performance. Choirs can extend their engagement beyond the rehearsal space by fostering dialogue with their own communities—whether through outreach, discussions with local leaders, or connecting with organizations that address water justice issues. Conversational outreach can enhance the choir's understanding of the piece's message, making their performance not only musically compelling but also socially meaningful.

I argue that “But A Flint Holds Fire” poignantly captures the struggle of a community facing environmental injustice through its dynamic vocal interplay, rhythmic drive, and shifting harmonic landscapes. Ramsey’s compositional techniques, including call-and-response structures, crescendos, and carefully placed articulations, amplify the emotional weight of the text. The work not only highlights the devastating impact of the water crisis but also serves as a powerful testament to resilience and collective strength. Through these musical choices, Ramsey transforms the narrative into a compelling plea for justice, leaving the listener with a sense of urgency and hope.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION

In my paper, I sought to show that choral music is not just an artistic expression but a powerful force for raising awareness and inspiring action toward water sustainability. While choral music cannot directly solve the global water crisis, it can serve as a tool for initiating social and environmental engagement, offering a space for reflection and the fostering of collective responsibility. The significance of water in contemporary environmental discourse cannot be overstated. From the growing concerns of water scarcity in the southwest to the looming threat of rising sea levels, water issues continue to affect millions globally. Through this work, I have learned how composers, through the power of choral music, translate these urgent realities into an immersive conduit that calls for action and reflection. Choral music itself is not a solution to the climate crisis, but it can be a catalyst—creating space for emotional connection, dialogue, and social change.

Through a review of literature on music and activism, music festivals and campaigns, and commissioned choral works addressing environmentalism, I have gained a deeper understanding of how music, especially choral compositions, functions as a significant tool in raising awareness and promoting action for water conservation. I have come to understand that while human actions are the primary cause of environmental issues, they also hold the key to mitigating or reversing the damage. Through my review of music festivals and environmental campaigns, I discovered that there has been a

growing trend of using performances as platforms for social change and that music festivals and campaigns have been successfully inviting change.

I also have learned about the collaborative nature of choral music and how its community-building aspects can enhance the potential for collective action and social change. I believe that music's unifying power can reinforce collective efforts to tackle environmental challenges. Choral music can unite people to explore critical issues like water conservation, becoming a vessel for community awareness. Choral music's ability to evoke collective action, influence perceptions, and shape emotional responses allows it to become a bridge between environmental advocacy and the broader public. In examining choral works on water advocacy, I have learned that choral music can lay the groundwork for a shift in values, creating a foundation for broader societal change. This research underscores the notion that the true power of water-themed music lies in its ability to open our eyes, hearts, and minds to the pressing issues surrounding water sustainability.

At the heart of this document, I analyzed four significant choral works, immersing myself in the relationships between text, music, and performance. I explored the backgrounds of the composers and the contextual reasons behind each of their compositions on water issues. My analysis of the lyrics and text revealed how composers use motives, rhythms, sequences, and even innovative musical notation to represent water. I discovered how each composer advocates for water concerns through their music. Anders Edenroth's ability to build fluid phrases and motives that evoke the presence of water has shown me how music can inspire a sense of urgency about

conservation. His work reminds us of the beauty and calm of water, making the need to protect it all the more pressing. Gerda Blok-Wilson's newly published work "Dried Up River" tackles the challenge of raising awareness about water depletion. Through her music, she creates an intense, emotional soundscape warning of the consequences of water scarcity. Blok-Wilson's ability to transform the water crisis in her hometown into a powerful musical statement highlights the potential for individuals to inspire meaningful change. In "Famine Song," Matthew Culloton immerses the audience in the devastation of the 1980 famine in Sub-Saharan Africa, providing a fleeting yet powerful glimpse into the desperation and sorrow of those who endured it. "Famine Song" represents a powerful plea for rain, evoking deep empathy and urgency. I have witnessed the profound impact "Famine Song" has had on students and communities. The silence following a performance of such intensity speaks volumes about how "Famine Songs" impacted the audience. In "But a Flint Holds Fire," Andrea Ramsey did not shy away from confronting the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. She boldly presented the concern of Flint, Michigan, and the true story of what happened to its water for all to hear. The spoken text from the students in Flint forces the audience and performers to confront the harsh reality of the dire situation. The students' words—raw and unfiltered—bring the crisis to the forefront, making the emotional and social toll of the water contamination impossible to ignore. Ramsey's careful use of musical dissonance and sudden shifts in intensity mirrors the emotional turmoil of the Flint crisis, creating an atmosphere that fluctuates between tension and resolution. The compositional approach doesn't merely reflect the issue but demands attention and action, making the piece not only a work of art but a call to reflection and change. The works analyzed in my paper demonstrate that

choral music can serve as a powerful advocate for water sustainability, connecting people to the urgent need to protect this vital resource. My research underscores the importance of thoughtful programming and performance in harnessing the potential of music as a vehicle for social change, showing that choral music is not only a means of artistic expression but also a platform for activism that can make a tangible impact in the fight for environmental sustainability.

Further studies on the various water-themed choral songs could be a needed avenue to explore. Curating a choral database of water songs, along with programming ideas, would provide valuable resources for directors looking to integrate water sustainability themes into their performances. A well-thought-out program of water-themed pieces has the potential to not only engage audiences emotionally but also create powerful moments of reflection. Educational guides on how to connect with local leaders and engage in meaningful conversations with the community could be valuable tools needed for choral directors and activists alike. Step-by-step strategies for building relationships with policymakers, advocating for water sustainability initiatives, and facilitating discussions about the importance of preserving water resources would be powerful resources to have on hand.

My explorations in the paper have helped me argue that choral music has the potential to advocate for water sustainability. I intend to continue to program and promote choral pieces that emphasize the urgent need to protect our water resources. By utilizing the powerful medium of choral music, I aim to engage audiences and raise awareness about the critical importance of water conservation. Choral music has the

potential to foster a deeper connection to the land and the future of the Southwest's water supply, uniting communities in the shared responsibility of safeguarding this vital resource. I hope to contribute to a future where communities collaborate to protect the environment and ensure sustainable water resources for generations to come. When I began writing this paper, sustainability felt like a steadily advancing conversation—one with growing momentum and widespread engagement. I recognize that, recently, the world has shifted in ways that make this topic more complex and, at times, more difficult to discuss. Even so, I remain committed to making simple, intentional choices that keep sustainability present in my daily life. As Wendell Berry, an American poet, farmer, and environmental activist writes in *The Peace of Wild Things*, "When despair for the world grows in me, and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds."²¹³ Choral music, much like Berry's reflections, offers a chance to connect deeply with the world around us, advocating for its protection with a voice that communally resonates far beyond the performance space.

²¹³ Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things*, in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1999), 53.

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