

*Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston*  
by Jake Heggie:

A Performance Guide

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## Purpose

September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 was one of the worst days in American history. It was shocking, due to the 2,977<sup>1</sup> lives lost in just one day, and traumatic, as these deaths were the result of terrorists who hijacked four of our own planes to carry out the attack. As our country looked to recover and rebuild, many artists began creating works that reflected the height of emotions felt by those most impacted by the attacks. Composer Jake Heggie, along with frequent collaborator, librettist Gene Scheer, created a song cycle that both captures the catastrophic events on 9/11, while also offering “hope and the sense of redemption.”<sup>2</sup>

*Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston*, is a cycle of six songs commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera’s “Song of Houston” project to honor Houstonians who were directly affected by the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The songs in the cycle each describe different situations experienced on 9/11. In capturing a community’s response to an event, compositions for voice can be particularly effective not only because of the inclusion of text, but also because of the unique range of expression capable by the human voice. Scheer combined true stories from multiple interviews to create the text and character of each song. Heggie then set these texts, each, as Heggie states, with its own ‘personality,’<sup>3</sup> to a different style of music, creating a distinct ambience and strong dramatic effect. Beginning with an instrumental prelude in a modern classical style, the first song introduces themes from Bach’s *Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, BWV 1007* that are continued throughout the cycle. The different styles of the individual songs include western classical art song, musical theater, American folk song, rock ballads, and one with the feel of Middle Eastern rhythms and construction.

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<sup>1</sup> September 11<sup>th</sup> Terrorist Attacks. CNN.com CNN Editorial Research, accessed April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/07/27/us/september-11-anniversary-fast-facts/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Jake Heggie, *Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston*, (Bent Pen Music, Inc., 2011), Foreword.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Heggie sets the score for three singers with instrument(s): soprano, baritone, and young soprano (14-18). The use of three singers allows the different voices to take on various characters as well as being able to represent a family unit when singing together. There are two versions available: the original score was written to be accompanied by flute, guitar, violin and cello and there is also an arrangement for voice and piano. The purpose of this document is to supply a detailed performance guide for singers, teachers and coaches with the goal of assisting them to deliver a successful and meaningful performance through a thorough understanding of the historical significance, the individual stories of the characters, and the significance of chosen musical style.

### **Significance and State of Research**

When great tragedy occurs, people feel compelled to try to make sense of what happened, to recreate and remember the emotions felt, and to find a way to heal and move forward. Some composers of the music written for the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks have tried to recreate the sounds and feelings of the day. One example is *WTC 9/11* by Steve Reich, in which multiple string quartets combined with pre-recorded voices to manifest the sounds and emotions that may have been experienced by many in New York City.<sup>4</sup> In John Adams' Pulitzer Prize winning, *On the Transmigration of Souls*, Adams also uses pre-recorded tape to capture sounds such as car horns and people walking on the street paired with voices reading quotes from posted flyers for those that were missing.<sup>5</sup> Many other 9/11 composers use storytelling as a source of healing and fascination for both the teller and the listener. The award-winning musical *Come from Away* is a story of 38 planes that were rerouted to Gander, Newfoundland and how the small town took

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Reich, "WTC 9/11," recorded September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Kronos Quartet, Nonesuch Records.

<sup>5</sup> John Adams, "On the Transmigration of Souls," recorded September 19<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup>, 2002, Avery Fischer Hall, New York City with New York Philharmonic, Lorin Maazel, conductor, Nonesuch Records.

care of thousands of strangers.<sup>6</sup> A predominant factor throughout the storyline is that of hearing individual stories that captivate both the other characters on stage as well as the audience. Composers noted for their art song compositions also wrote music assimilating real stories from the September 11<sup>th</sup> terror attacks with the hope of relieving painful memories. Relevant compositions include Ned Rorem's *Aftermath, Sifting Through the Ruins* by Libby Larsen, and the subject of this research, *Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston* by Jake Heggie.

At the time of this commission, Jake Heggie had already established himself as a successful opera and art song composer and is renowned for his gift of theatrical storytelling.

Matthew Sigman from Opera News writes:

“Where Heggie’s operas succeed, ... from prelude to curtain, he draws you to the edge of your seat with a theater artist’s deft hand. Primary colors of love, death and valor shine bright, but they are well blended with subtle shades of morality and compassion. In true operatic tradition, he builds suspense through a wordless fusion of music and character.”<sup>7</sup>

Mr. Heggie’s success as an art song composer is related to the same skills that have made him a successful operatic composer. In a review of ‘The Faces of Love’, a collection of a few of Mr. Heggie’s song cycles, Judith Carman quotes the composer on his own work.

“For me, every song is a drama of its own, to be performed as seriously as a scene from a play or an opera. In each song I try to create a sense of the psychology and emotion behind the words in order to create a sense of character...”<sup>8</sup>

One example of Heggie’s dramatic storytelling methods occurs in the first song, of this cycle. While the subsequent texts are based on the Gene Scheer interviews, the first song, “Lauren,” uses direct quotes from the book “You Can Do It!”<sup>9</sup> authored by Lauren Catuzzi Grandcolas. Grandcolas had been writing this book when she died on

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<sup>6</sup> David Hein and Irene Sankoff, “Come from Away,” recorded 2017. The Musical Company.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Sigman, “Composing a Life,” *Opera News*, July 2015, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Carman, “Some New Offerings,” *Journal of Singing*, vol. 59, (November/December 2002); pp. 179-184.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Catuzzi Grandcolas, “*You Can Do It!*” (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005).

United-Flight 93. Published posthumously by her sisters, the cover describes it as “The Merit Badge Handbook for Grown-Up Girls”,<sup>10</sup> each chapter highlights a challenge to build self-confidence. Mr. Heggie chose to have the young soprano sing these various chapter titles while at the same time, the soprano and baritone voices describe who the author was and how through a change of plans, she came to be on the flight that ended up taking both her life and that of her unborn child.

from “Prelude/Lauren”:

**Young Soprano:**

Bake a pie.  
Draw the sky.  
Step into the boxing ring.

**Soprano and Baritone:**

She always took notes.  
She always made plans.  
A dreamscape of wishes for the  
children yet to come.<sup>11</sup>

One line of text that is sung together by all voices throughout this song, serves as both a summary of this story and the cycle as a whole. “What will you do with the moment right now?”<sup>12</sup>

At this time, there are no comprehensive scholarship resources on Heggie’s song compositions as a body or work. As of this date there are 43 song cycles composed by Jake Heggie, as listed on his website. I have found performance guides to eight of these cycles, but none for *Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston*. It may be that the subject matter in detail is too devastating or even unfamiliar to those who may discover it. Having been at the World Trade Center on the day of the attacks and having lived in New York City for many years after, I found this song cycle to be depictive of my experience and worthy of research and instruction.

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<sup>10</sup> Lauren Catuzzi Grandcolas, “*You Can Do It!*”. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Jake Heggie, *Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston*, (Bent Pen Music, Inc., 2011.)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

*Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston* was premiered on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011 at the Houston City Hall Reflection Pond and was repeated various times around Houston in the weeks following. In anticipation of this performance, Houston Grand Opera's Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers stated,

“We have a duty as artists to reflect on our world, but how does one respond with meaning on an event so momentous and young as the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks, a day of such universal heartbreak?...No work of art can heal a wound so profound, but we hope through this project to contribute to easing the pain of remembrance, and to provide a forum to celebrate the small moments of joy which become available when we do so.”<sup>13</sup>

In 2013, Mr. Heggie included this song cycle on his recording: *here/after songs of lost voices*. Soprano Talise Trevigne, baritone Nathan Gunn, and two young sopranos Ekaterina Gorlova and Ashley Traugher, flute Dawn Walker, violin Dawn Harms, guitar Marc Teicholz, and cello Emil Miland. In an American Record Guide review, Robert Moore calls the cycle “deeply moving” and “powerful.”<sup>14</sup>

“The entire program is deeply moving. Heggie's musical language is eclectic -a blend of classical, folk, rock, ethnic, and Broadway musical. It's direct and accessible music that would be worth hearing even if it weren't performed as well as it is here.”<sup>15</sup>

Another review of *here/after songs of lost voices* in Opera News magazine, highlights the stylistic variety of the cycle:

“...successful and lacking any classical pretension, is *Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston*,...Cultural misunderstanding characterizes ‘Lessons,’ in which a strumming guitar and clapping hands evoke the exotic, while accusations of “you people” are hastily hurled at a Muslim teacher “on that morning.”... ‘That Moment On,’ a pop ballad that overlays the familiar trope of personal items

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick Summers, “Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston”, Press Release. *Houston Grand Opera commissions*, June 20, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Moore, American Record Guide. Vol. 77, Iss. 2, March/April 2014: pp. 100-101.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

retrieved from Gound Zero with the sentiment “And we all belonged to each other/ From that moment on.””<sup>16</sup>

*Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston* is an important song cycle, from an established song composer, that has already found success in performance and recording and yet no scholarly source has been written. A performance guide is necessary for singers so they can create a sincere and informed performance from a thorough knowledge of both the historical events and stories of the characters, as well as an in-depth understanding of the various musical styles used. It is my hope that this study will create interest and authenticity for performers and insight and meaning for a wide audience.

## **Method**

The main portion of the research will focus on the six individual songs. In *Pieces of 9/11*, the assorted stories are wisely arranged in a ‘timeline’ that brings the listener from the attacks and their reactions, to experiencing the pain and finally to the acceptance of grief. Based on my interview with Gene Sheer, for each song, I will discuss the collected stories from his interviews that formed the text. As Sheer states in the forward to the cycle, “The songs Jake and I wrote are based on the stories, observations and heartfelt memories of the people I had the honor of interviewing.” Next, I will demonstrate how the characterizations of each song led Mr. Heggie to choose each particular style of music.

The first song, “Lauren,” the subject of which I mentioned earlier, is in a predominantly classical style and describes the hopes and dreams of a woman who died on United-Flight 93 after it was brought down by passengers who prevented the hijackers from reaching their

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Malafrente, review of “here/after: songs of lost voices”. CD. *Opera News*; May 2014; vol. 78, no. 11. Pg. 61. accessed April 18, 2020. <http://libproxy.library.unt.edu:2067/ehost/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=ca2109b0-45c2-4f23-a72b-71fc04fb6393%40pdc-v-sessmgr05&bdata=JnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=95586731&db=hft>

probable target of the United States Capitol. “Lessons,” the second song, takes on rhythmic clapping and the style of Middle Eastern music as it illustrates a racial attack on a Muslim-American woman who had not yet heard of the attacks. A great sense of uncertainty and fear is present in “Phone Calls,” in a music theater style, reminiscent of another great musical storyteller, Stephen Sondheim, that quotes the many last words heard by loved ones from those they lost. The fourth song, “That Moment On,” is an emotional narration, sung in a rock ballad style, by a relief worker who collected items from the ruins that he stores in a box: “And ev’rything belonged to somebody, to somebody gone. And we all belonged to each other from that moment on.”<sup>17</sup> In “Beyond,” the young soprano again sings the same classical melody from the opening song. The text for this fifth song reads: “For those of us who will never be born, For those who died on that tragic morn, Let go of what might have been, For if you don’t, those who did this will win.”<sup>18</sup> The cycle closes in a folk style, with “An Open Book,” which illustrates the sentiment that the pain does not go away and the memories will always remain, but we must find a way to heal and continue to live. Mr. Heggie’s use of these various styles demonstrates the character of each person’s story and highlights the text as a main focal point appealing to a wider audience than just that of Western classical music. I will discuss Mr. Heggie’s choice of orchestration and how it further strengthens the personality of each individual song.

While many compositions are written specifically for tragic events, there are also compositions associated with grieving even though that was not the original intention. In an interview on ‘All things considered’, host Guy Raz commented: “Some of the pieces we most associate with grieving weren’t written with that purpose in mind at all. For example, Samuel

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<sup>17</sup>Jake Heggie, *Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston*, (Bent Pen Music, Inc., 2011), Foreword.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



Barber's *Adagio for Strings*."<sup>19</sup> Throughout Pieces of 9/11, Heggie uses motives from Bach's *Cello Suite No. 1 In G Major, BWV 1007*. He did this because:

“that piece has always felt spiritually affirming to me: I've heard it played for dying friends, for memorials and at weddings. The short prelude to the set of songs is an invocation to reflection-something haunting, timeless, fragile, sad and beautiful all at once. Something that keeps returning, just as the losses of that day do.”<sup>20</sup>

Like Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, Bach's cello suite has a meditative quality that can be pensive and reflective, while at the same time uplifting. The familiarity of this piece is reassuring and gives the listener a continuity while all the different styles of the songs are presented. Finally, I will make suggestions for performance including the possible use of multi-media slides or videos from 9/11 to enhance the audience experience.

Every year there are numerous commemorations of 9/11 both at Ground Zero (the site of the collapsed World Trade Center where the largest number of lives were lost,) as well as around the country. The year 2021 will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, creating many opportunities for commemorative performances where this cycle could be performed. Some of the singers interested in this cycle may have been very young or perhaps not even been alive in 2001 and only know of it from what they have learned in history class or from stories passed down. Since these songs are based on real experiences, it is imperative that the performer is familiar with both the history of events and how they relate to the backstory to those interviewed. Mr. Heggie matched the character of the story each to a different style of music, so this discernment of style will also inform performance choices.

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<sup>19</sup> David Robertson, Interview by Guy Raz, “When great tragedy inspires Music,” *All Things Considered*, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, accessed March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2011/09/11/140382375/when-great-tragedy-inspires-music>.

<sup>20</sup>Jake Heggie, *Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston*, (Bent Pen Music, Inc., 2011), Foreword.

Included in my research will be interviews with Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer. I have communicated with them and have begun the IRB process. My interviews will include the following plus additional questions:

For Jake Heggie:

- 1) In 'Lauren' it is clear that the quotes are coming directly from her book.<sup>21</sup> Is there any other piece that is directly from one person's story or are the rest a culmination of different people?
- 2) For the recording, there are two different young sopranos who each perform separate movements. Was this intentional for dramatic purposes or were their individual voices more suited to one piece or the other?
- 3) The two young sopranos sing together in the final movement. This gives an eerie quality that could be heard as either ghost like or a group of young girls. Was this intentional?
- 4) This piece was written for the 10-year anniversary of the 2001 attacks. You wrote in the preface notes that "at last, I personally could find something meaningful to say about that day-from the perspective of an American who was outside New York". Did you try earlier, as many composers had, to write something for that occasion?
- 5) In the fourth song, 'An Open Book' the theme is how this tragedy still affects us even ten years later. With the twentieth anniversary approaching, would it be appropriate to change the words from 'ten years on' to 'twenty years on'?
- 6) Have there been any concerns with hearing the young soprano when all three voices are singing together? She is often the middle note of the chord and could easily be covered by a larger soprano voice.
- 7) At the end of song #3 'Phone Calls' there are some spoken quotes ending with "let's roll..." In the recording they sound like they have been recorded by the singers and played with an effect.
- 8) What would you think of including videos or photographs from 9/11 in the performance that may help depict the story?

For Gene Sheer:

- 1) How many people did interview in total?
- 2) Were all stories used in some fashion?

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<sup>21</sup> Lauren Catuzzi Grandcolas, *"You Can Do It!"*. Chronicle Books, San Francisco. 2005.

- 3) Did you already have Jake Heggie's input on voice types that would be used as you created the text?
- 4) What is unique about your frequent collaboration with Jake Heggie as compared to other composers?

For my lecture recital, I will discuss my findings as well as perform this cycle with baritone, young soprano, flute, violin, cello, and guitar in its entirety (approximately 30 minutes).

## Proposed Table of Contents

### I. Introduction

### II. Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston

*Discussion of the song cycle from conception to fruition, including information on the premier performance and the recording on which it is included, Here/After: Songs of Lost Voices.*

### III. Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston: THE STORIES

*This chapter will include details from the Gene Scheer interviews with the people whose true stories shaped the characters in each of the songs in the cycle.*

- 1) Prelude/Lauren
- 2) Lessons
- 3) Phone Calls
- 4) That Moment On
- 5) Beyond
- 6) An Open Book

### IV. Pieces of 9/11: Memories from Houston: THE MUSIC

*For each of the six songs in the cycle I will discuss the characterization that led to Mr. Heggie's choice of musical style, orchestration, musical analysis, and performance suggestions*

- 1) Prelude/Lauren
- 2) Lessons
- 3) Phone Calls
- 4) That Moment On
- 5) Beyond
- 6) An Open Book

### V. My Personal 9/11 Story

*I will include my personal 9/11 story here and how it relates to the individual songs in the cycle. I was not only in New York City on the day of the attacks, but was right at the World Trade Center site only minutes after the first plane struck the North Tower. I sheltered at Trinity Church, Wall Street, only blocks away until both towers collapsed and I joined thousands of other New Yorkers as we walked through the ash, sirens blaring, up the east river for miles in order to get home, seven hours later.*

### VI. Conclusion

#### Appendices

- A. Interview with Jake Heggie
- B. Interview with Gene Scheer
- C. Chronology of Jake Heggie's vocal works
- D. Timeline of events on 9/11.
- E. List of other significant 9/11 voice compositions by other composers

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