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# Judith Weir's King Harald's Saga: innovations of character and virtuosity in contemporary opera

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**JUDITH WEIR'S *KING HARALD'S SAGA*:  
INNOVATIONS OF CHARACTER AND VIRTUOSITY IN CONTEMPORARY OPERA**

A Written Document

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
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in

The School of Music

by  
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## ABSTRACT

In 1979, Scottish-born composer Judith Weir wrote *King Harald's Saga* for the soprano Jane Manning. Although an opera in three acts, the cast consists of one performer unaccompanied, interpreting various characters, including the protagonist, King Harald, two of his wives, and the entire Norwegian Army. The opera presented in its entirety is ten minutes in duration.

The scope of this paper is intended to assist the performer as well as those who are interested in contemporary opera. I have provided a brief overview of Weir's compositional style in opera, chamber opera and song. As *King Harald's Saga* was Weir's first opera, I have also observed ways in which it influenced these subsequent vocal works. After my interview with Weir, she provided two inspirations for *King Harald's Saga*: Grand Opera of Verdi and Wagner, and Icelandic Saga. Although disparate in nature, further investigations in my analysis show many striking similarities. Both evoke a detached aesthetic stance, as in telling a story, and both are filled with grandiose characterizations. This analysis also discusses how the format of the literature influenced the format of the operatic structure. Background information regarding Icelandic Saga is provided to clarify the explanations and observations of the composer.

In addition, I have also provided a thorough analysis of the musical score, including many musical examples to clarify my observations. As each character is given one movement or number in the score (except for Harald), the overall format of the analysis is organized by character. Issues of tonality are addressed with reference to the intentions of the composer, and information as to pitch center, meter, and vocal expression are derived solely from composer's notes and the vocal line itself.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1979 Judith Weir composed the chamber opera *King Harald's Saga* for the noted soprano, Jane Manning.<sup>1</sup> It was not only a showpiece for this interpreter of modern vocal music, but also began a unique approach by the Scottish-born composer to composing operas. This study will focus on the characteristics of *King Harald's Saga* and the elements that influenced its creation.

Weir's first opera, *King Harald's Saga*, has the unique feature of being composed for unaccompanied solo soprano. The singer must portray multiple characters: King Harald, the male protagonist, his two wives, Tostig, the antagonist, and the entire Norwegian Army. Weir employs standard operatic forms; the opera is in three acts and each act is comprised of arias, choruses, and duets. A performance of the opera lasts only ten minutes from start to finish. The opera represents the beginnings of Weir's operatic compositional language. It is decidedly non-sentimental in tone and concise in presentation, as will be discussed in further chapters of this document. The plot covers the deception of the Norwegian King Harald by the traitor, Tostig, who convinces him to send his armies to invade England. This invasion ultimately leads to his demise in the Battle at Stamford Bridge in 1066.

The libretto, written by Weir herself, was taken from Snorri Sturlson's saga *Heimskringla*. Judith Weir prefers fashioning her own libretti, an approach she initiated with

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<sup>1</sup>Jane Manning made her debut in a recording of a song cycle on a Japanese subject, *The Valley of Hatsu-Se*, by Elisabeth Lutyens. Since then she has premiered numerous works and gained an Honorary Doctorate at York University in 1988. "She has enjoyed particularly fruitful associations with other composers, including Alison Bauld, Justin Connolly and Anthony Gilbert; others who should be mentioned include Harrison Birtwistle, Oliver Knussen and Richard Rodney Bennett. All this, while advocating a wide range of earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century music, from Britten operas and Messiaen song cycles to her celebrated interpretation of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*." Bayan Northcott, excerpted from note to NMC recording NMC DO11, 1994.

*King Harald's Saga*. "I've ended up mostly writing librettos myself for operas. Which, I keep telling people, is not really out of admiration of my own literary gifts, but just that, in the end, it seemed the most convenient thing for me to do, in that I have quite strong ideas about musical drama."<sup>2</sup> Also indicative of Weir's style is her preference for having a single performer portray multiple characters. Regarding this practice, the composer states,

I find that making a singer play several characters draws out much more interesting work from them, and they begin to define their characters in much more scientific ways. In the classic operatic production there are stock characters and the singers have rather trivial, anecdotal ways of getting into them. So if a singer is suddenly plunged into *King Harald's Saga* where they have to be about nine characters, they have to think hard about making these characters different people.<sup>3</sup>

A singer who will portray all of Weir's characters must not only deal with the idioms of modern musical language, but must also define each through vocal color and stylization unique to each characterization.

The story of the saga of King Harald, as well as the battle of Hastings, is one of common knowledge in England. That its story inspired an operatic composition is not unusual. What is unusual and unexpected is the concise manner of presentation utilizing minimal forces. Barbara White, who has written her thesis and a published article based on Weir's *The Consolations of Scholarship*<sup>4</sup>, states that she felt it strange for Judith Weir to have selected a battle in which Harald was unsuccessful. He had, after all, been the successful war-mongering king of Norway

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<sup>2</sup>Neil Brand, "Judith Weir [interview]." in *Dramatic Notes, Foregrounding Music in the Dramatic Experience*, ed. Neil Brand, (Luton, Bedfordshire: University of Luton Press, 1998), 40-41.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Ford, "Seeing Both Sides, Judith Weir [interview]." in *Composer to Composer: Conversations About Contemporary Music*, ed. Andrew Ford, (St. Leonard's: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 111.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara White, "Music Drama on the Concert Stage: A Study of Judith Weir's 'Consolations of Scholarship' with 'Life in the Castle'," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1997), and Barbara White, "Music Drama on the Concert Stage: Voice, Character and Performance in Judith Weir's 'The Consolations of Scholarship,'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 12, no. 1 (2000).

for many years. However, it is precisely this element, the downfall of a mighty king, that provides a story with the drama and impact necessary for an operatic composition.

Before discussing the musical aspects of this work, it will be useful to elaborate on the disparate elements that influenced *King Harald's Saga*, as well as the rich literature from which it was derived.

## INFLUENCES FOR THE COMPOSITION OF *KING HARALD'S SAGA* – GRAND OPERA

Judith Weir specifically mentions two disparate inspirations for this composition, the tradition of Grand Opera and Icelandic Saga. Regarding the first influence, Grand Opera of Verdi and Wagner, it should be noted that the composer uses this phrase, “Grand Opera,” herself in the work’s title, its full title being “King Harald’s Saga: Grand Opera in Three Acts for Unaccompanied Solo Soprano Singing Eight Roles.”<sup>5</sup> It must be further qualified that Weir does not use any specific structural terminology in the examination of the score, but rather, uses broader and more general terminology. For example, *King Harald’s Saga* is presented in three acts, as are many grand operas. In addition, the arias, recitatives, choruses, and duets are numbered. Three part structures can be observed in many of the arias, however, aria cantabile and cabaletta, for example, are not specifically noted nor intended by the composer. The conciseness of this opera’s presentation, as well as Weir’s detached aesthetic stance, does not allow for such long-winded operatic wanderings. To this end, the composer feels that the influence of modern day elements in every-day society has changed how modern opera audiences perceive and enjoy live theater.

In the modern age we’re used to seeing very, very fast narrative in films and on TV. We’re used to a lot being understood, and jumping from scene to scene. The pace of 19<sup>th</sup> century opera is simply too slow for me, writing now. I love Verdi operas, but that kind of leisurely unfolding plot, to my mind, is too slow for the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this opera’s presentation by a single performer, the basic elemental structures of opera are still evident. Also, the grandness of the characters in such operas, in their mythic stature, renown, and exaggerated descriptive elements also provides inspiration to the composition of

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Weir, *King Harald's Saga*, (Borough Green: Novello, 1982), title page.

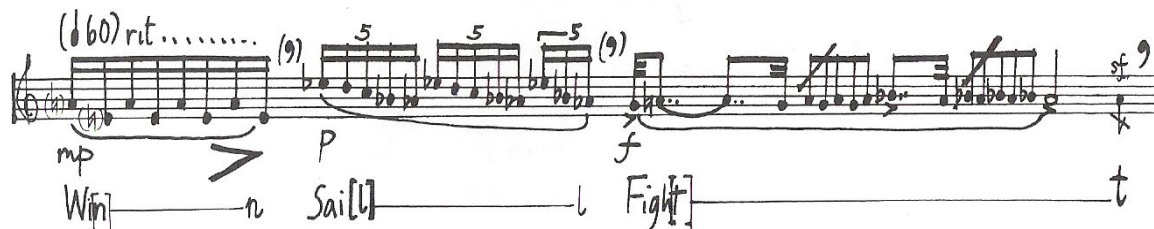
<sup>6</sup> Neil Brand, 35.



*King Harald's Saga*. Therefore, her reference to *King Harald's Saga* as “Grand Opera” is noted to be somewhat ironic.

The influence of grand opera I mention with both irony and sincerity – I am thinking of the overblown characters, the epic themes, the exaggerated staging, which *King Harald's Saga* refers to with some sense of the ridiculous. *Götterdämmerung* is a perfect example of a piece with sinister weather and scenery, knights and powerful women hanging around a castle contemplating malevolent acts, which is also the subject matter of *King Harald*.<sup>7</sup>

Musically speaking, the characters are delineated by status – those who are of higher social standing are generally granted more decorative musical settings, whereas those of lesser standing are depicted more simply. For example, the character of the antagonist, Tostig, is set in a highly melismatic fashion (See Figure 1). In contrast, the Messenger announces the oncoming army in a simpler, syllabic setting (See Figure 2).



**Figure 1** – *King Harald's Saga*, “Tostig,” p. 4



**Figure 2** – *King Harald's Saga*, “A Messenger,” p. 8

In addition to defining status, some character settings, such as that of The Norwegian

<sup>7</sup> Judith Weir, interview by Kelly Lynch, email 27 May 2006, 9:14 AM.

Army, serve to provide atmospheric background, as well as represent multiple characters acting simultaneously. Certainly, the malevolence commonly found in Grand Opera is seen here, in the manipulative nature of the traitor Tostig, as well as the destructive and power-hungry character of King Harald.

Also reflective of Grand Opera are the intricate familial interrelationships between characters in both Sturluson's *Heimskringla* and Wagner's *Ring*. Harald is betrayed by Tostig, who is the brother of Harold Godwinsson of England. Harald's wife Thora is the niece of the man who killed Harald's father. In Wagner's *Ring*, there is Siegfried, the grandson of Wotan, who marries Brünnhilde, one of Wotan's daughters, as well as Sigmund, who engages in an incestuous relationship with Sieglinde, his sister. The most direct comparison, however, is between King Harald and his need to conquer many kingdoms, and the intense lust of Alberich to obtain the ring and conquer the world.

There are direct literary connections between Wagner's compositions, specifically the *Ring*, and Icelandic literature. One of the sources for the *Ring*'s mythology was derived from the *Poetic Edda*, which is divided into two sections, the "Lays of the Gods" and the "Lays of the Heroes." It is the latter, among twenty-one poems describing the heroic stories of Teutonic figures, that reflects the storyline of the *Ring*.

There is, however, a kind of thematic unity evidenced throughout these lays, a unity achieved mostly by means of marriage or assumed blood-lines. The ballads of one of these groupings focus on Sigurð (Siegfried) the Volsungr (Volsung) of Rhineland and the Niflungas (Nibelungs).<sup>8</sup>

Also notable is the influence that *Heimskringla*, of which *King Harald's Saga* is a part, played on Wagner's depiction of his mythic world. The author, William O. Cord, in

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<sup>8</sup> William O. Cord, *An Introduction to Richard Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen: A Handbook*, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1983), 57.

his explorations of the influences of Wagner's *Ring*, finds references to this great Icelandic masterpiece.

Although the work (*Heimskringla*) clearly reflects the stamp of Christianity which had recently reached the North, it is nevertheless sprinkled throughout with indirect references as well as certain details of a mythological nature. At times there are vivid descriptions of non-Christian customs and traditions of earlier times.<sup>9</sup>

The author believes that Sturluson's masterpiece played a role in defining the atmosphere in which the *Ring* cycle exists - that of mythological heroes and the lust for power and glory.

Another Wagnerian influence evident in *King Harald's Saga* is the device of narrative storytelling. Barbara White has pointed out that "Weir's use of narration recalls the long episodes of storytelling in Wagner, particularly in the *Ring*."<sup>10</sup> She further mentions Wotan's monologue in Act II, scene 2 of *Die Walküre*, as well as Waltraute's narration in *Götterdämmerung*. In both cases, the individual nature of the characters recedes into the background for an extended length of time, their function on stage and in the drama momentarily relegated to the sole purpose of telling the story. Of course, what is markedly different in the case of *King Harald's Saga* is that only one person is present on stage, whereas in both Wagnerian scenarios the story is being relayed to another character. Also, in the case of the *Ring*, most of these lengthy narrations focus on relaying what has already happened, rather than being directly related to the unfolding of the plot. By having characters relate information rather than being emotionally tied to the situation, a detached manner of presentation becomes evident. Barbara White refers to this kind of performance as a "dislocation," which can make this work and many of Weir's works that follow seem "artificial." Regarding *The Consolations of*

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara White, "Music Drama on the Concert Stage: Voice, Character and Performance," 66.

*Scholarship*, White observes “the characters’ tendency to tell stories and to read and write texts, and their avoidance of direct communication with one another, results in a highly stylized type of action.”<sup>11</sup> In the case of *King Harald’s Saga*, as with many of Weir’s vocal compositions, this detached manner of vocal writing removes the listener from the emotional realm to a more intellectual one.

From opera’s inception, great theatrical moments have arisen from stories that are based on themes that are timeless and universal. Such themes are love won and lost, the quest for power, and of war. Such theatrical moments throughout history have provided moral situations for the audience to relate to; moments when heroes or heroines either prove themselves or meet their downfall. It is for precisely this reason that Weir provides an epilogue, sung by the character of An Icelandic Sage. The inclusion of this epilogue provides an opportunity for the listener to reflect on the music just heard, and to relate it to his or her own situation. Its final phrase, “I could have told them it would end like this,” provides the most succinct reflection upon history repeating itself and civilization’s refusal to heed the voice of history. It is similar to the epilogue of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, where a moral judgment is directly related to an audience. Here, after the Don’s descent into hell, the remaining characters and chorus reflect on his death and their own futures. The opera ends with this statement, “*Questo è il fin fa mal! E de’ perfidi la morte alla vita è sempre ugual.*”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>12</sup> (This is the evil-doer’s end! Sinners finally meet their just reward, and always will). Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Don Giovanni* libretto, Lionel Salter, English libretto translation, from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, Phillips CD 422541-2 (1959), 284.

## INFLUENCES FOR THE COMPOSITION OF *KING HARALD'S SAGA* – ICELANDIC SAGA

The second influence that Judith Weir mentions is that of the Icelandic Saga. The Icelandic Sagas are prose histories that describe events in Icelandic and Norwegian history during the tenth and eleventh centuries. They are divided into several genres, some of which are “the sagas of kings” (konunga sogur), “the sagas of Icelanders” (Islendinga sogur) and “family sagas” (fornaldar sogur).<sup>13</sup> Most sagas have been written down as a method of preserving oral tradition. Since the majority of Icelanders were farmers or commoners, and as paper and books were a luxury at that time, the only people who could afford to read and write were either members of the aristocracy or of the clergy. Among these literate citizens were those who took an interest in preserving Icelandic history. These scribes were most likely influenced by Latin, Greek, or other European styles of writing, and may have borrowed material from such foreign sources to enhance their writing. Not all of the literature was purely historical preservation, as fiction was also produced at this time in the form of short stories. Most notable of these is the *Prose Edda*, a collection of short stories and poems that each have a lesson or a moral to teach. From this sizable body of literature, one should not expect contemporary notions of authorship. Rather, what the sagas represent are “a continuous stream of variant versions and free adaptations of traditional motifs and legendary stories, usually chosen to suit the taste of the patron or audience.”<sup>14</sup> Many patrons were noblemen, and even kings. King Harald himself was said to have appreciated poetry, and was

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<sup>13</sup> Lars Lönnroth, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga Writing; An Essay Based on Previous Studies*, (Stockholm: Boktryckeri Aktiebolaget Thule, 1965), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 13.

surrounded with poetic storytellers. As another historian, Gabriel Turville-Petre noted, “No King of Norway was himself a better poet, and none showed a deeper appreciation of the art than Harald did.”<sup>15</sup>

Their original presentation would have been following an oral tradition handed down from tribesman to tribesman. The written nature of the sagas, with the complex alliterative structure of their poetic diction, cannot be a significant influence, as the source material Weir used is in English translation. This translation does not attempt to maintain the poetic structure, but merely provides a word-for-word translation from the original Icelandic. In addition, the libretto itself has been shortened and adapted to fit the needs of the composer, which further distances it from its original language. As stated by Weir, the manner in which the works were presented provides inspiration.

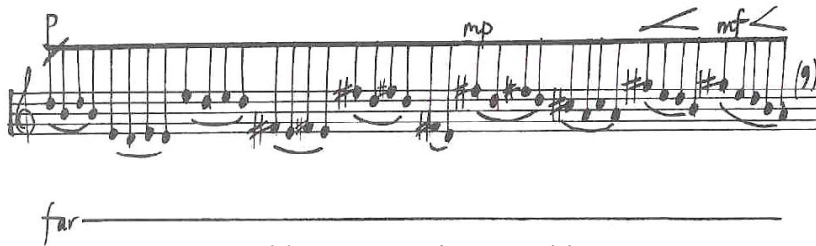
I’ve always been interested in the fact that the great poems of early history were all performed as musical events. Apparently the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and all of these Icelandic Sagas and so on were performed by musicians, live. So the question I’ve always asked myself is what were those performances like.<sup>16</sup>

Some specific musical elements are basic to the composition itself, that the music in many cases, depicts imagery. For instance, in Act 2 King Harald’s aria (See Figure 3) has very limited text, and many melismas. The melismas do obscure the meaning of the text. The vocal line itself, however, is descriptive of the rolling waves of the sea. By illustrating Harald’s journey oversea in this manner, the composer is utilizing musical idioms to tell a story, much as might have been done for centuries, using elements to entertain and mesmerize while relating historical events.

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<sup>15</sup> Kelly de Vries, *The Norwegian Invasion of England in 1066*, (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1999), 24-25.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Weir, interview by Kelly Lynch, tape recording, 4 April 2006.



**Figure 3** – *King Harald's Saga*, “King Harald,” p. 6

The presentation of sagas and its manner of character descriptiveness and musical delivery are key in discovering how Weir has chosen to compose this mini grand opera. Since Weir admits to not listening to Icelandic folk music, it can be ascertained that she takes her inspiration from the driving force behind their creation rather than from their actual structural and musical devices. As a Western composer, she employs the formal and structural devices of Verdi and Wagner more commonly as actual musical precedents. Her perceived manner of *Saga* presentation sheds light on how a single interpreter can capture the essence of multiple characters and relay historical information, as had been done for centuries in many cultures.

In addition to the presumed presentation of Icelandic Sagas by Weir, there are additional elements present in the sagas that would seem to have had an impact on the operatic composition of *King Harald's Saga*. One aspect of Icelandic Sagas that has found its way into this operatic saga is the nature of character depiction. Very often, Weir's depictions of characters and situations are from a detached point of view. Barbara White points out that many texts for Weir's vocal and operatic writing exemplify a detached aesthetic, set to music that is “cool and markedly unsentimental.”<sup>17</sup> In his research on the Icelandic Saga, Peter Hallberg remarks that “as a whole, the style of the sagas creates an impression of coolness and reserve. The narrator conceals his own presence, and this can create the impression that the story is relating itself.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara White, “Music Drama on the Concert Stage: A Study,” 33.

Epic objectivity is scrupulously observed.”<sup>18</sup> Consider this example from King Harald’s Saga, regarding the battle at Fulford, where the armies meet for the first time. No personal reflection or regard is given to lives lost in battle, nor are there many descriptions save those necessary to support the scene. The first is Sturluson’s depiction of the scene, and following are Sturluson’s quotations from the poet Stein Herdisarson.

When King Harald saw that the English flank was advancing down the dyke and was now opposite them, he sounded the attack and urged his men forward, with his banner, ‘Land-Waster’, carried in front. The Norwegian onslaught was so fierce that everything gave way before it, and a great number of the English were killed. The English army quickly broke into flight, some fleeing up the river, and others down the river; but most of them fled into the swamp, where the dead piled up so thickly that the Norwegians could cross the swamp dry-shod.

Earl Morcar lost his life there. In the words of the poet Stein Herdisarson:

*Many were lost in the water;  
The drowned sank to the bottom.  
Warriors lay thickly fallen  
Around the young Earl Morcar.  
Harold’s son, young Olaf,  
Pursued the fleeing English  
Running before King Harald.  
Praise the brave prince Olaf.*

This is from the poem which Stein Herdisarson composed in honor of King Harald’s son, Olaf, and it makes it clear that Olaf took part in the battle with his father. This is also mentioned in the *Harald’s Poem*:

*Waltheof’s warriors  
All lay fallen  
In the swampy water  
Gashed by weapons;  
And the hardy  
Men of Norway  
Could cross the marsh  
On a causeway of corpses.*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 71.

<sup>19</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *King Harald’s Saga; Harald Hardradi of Norway*, (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 144-145.



In this case, a most ghastly scene of soldiers fleeing for their very lives, falling and drowning, forming a bridge of corpses for the Norwegians to walk upon, is depicted by Sturluson in an impersonal way. He relays solely the informational content, describing the scene in prose format, without the character's personal connection to these events.

Icelandic sagas tend to avoid poetic descriptions of people and situations, save those that are necessary for the plot development. For example, the previous quotation uses the phrase "the Norwegian onslaught was so fierce," rather than saying the "fierce Norwegian onslaught." It seems that the author prefers to use descriptions that are comparatives, rather than directly connecting them to the objects themselves. Another example of this relates to the character of Harald himself. He has not been merely called a merciless and ruthless king, although those descriptions are surely applicable. Rather, more poetic descriptions are used, such as the "feeder of the raven/battle-starling," or the "promoter of battle."

Another example follows, which further illustrates the Sturluson's terse and concise delivery. More comparative descriptions follow regarding the eagle's talons "reddened with blood," as well as scavenger wolves who did not go hungry, feasting on those whom Harald conquered.

Harald spent several years on these campaigns, both in the Land of the Saracens and in Sicily. Then he went back to Constantinople with his troops and stayed there for a while before setting out on an expedition to the Holy Land. He left behind all the gold he had been paid by the Byzantine Emperor, as did all the Varangians<sup>20</sup> who went with him.

It is said in all these campaigns Harald had but fought eighteen battles. In the words of the poet Thjodolf:

*All men know that Harald*

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<sup>20</sup> The Varangians were Scandinavian warriors who were bodyguards to the Byzantine emperors.

*Fought eighteen savage battles;  
Wherever the warrior went,  
All hope of peace was shattered.  
The grey eagle's talons  
You reddened with blood, great king;  
On all of your expeditions  
The hungry wolves were feasted.*<sup>21</sup>

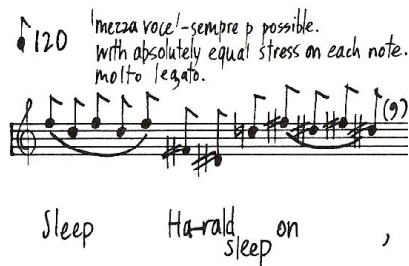
Such descriptive writing finds its way into the libretto. For example, Harald's dream, "I see the wolves' jaws red with blood. I see black ravens, birds of carrion fly to the west,"<sup>22</sup> provides a foreshadowing of the battle at Stamford Bridge.

Another aspect of Sturluson's saga telling that Weir has maintained is its overall format in relaying the information in a general manner, and then further elaborating on that information in a poetic manner. Sturluson first states the basic information necessary, and then illustrates with quotations from poets and scholars of the era (See above literary example). Weir does something similar in the format of the opera, *King Harald's Saga*; which through the use of the narrator, who relays the happenings within each act to his audience, and the characters who sing, relaying the same information in a more elaborate, poetic fashion (See Figure 4).

**Spoken:**

Act two. It is the middle of the night. King Harald is asleep. He dreams that he is in Trondheim, and meets his dead brother, St. Olaf, who warns him that his expedition to England is ill-fated. King Harald is not afraid of dreams: he leaps from his bed and orders his navy to make for England. The ships sail out of the fjord, into the open sea, and out of sight. Harald's two wives bid him farewell.

**St. Olaf**



**Figure 4** – *King Harald's Saga*, "King Harald," p. 5

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 58-9.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Weir, *King Harald's Saga*, " 5.

Therefore, the function of the narrator in Weir's *King Harald's Saga* is similar to that of the author and the function of the subsequent musical settings are similar to that of the poets.

The use of dialogues, although not present in *King Harald's Saga* (the opera), provides a modern and streamlined presentation. Dialogues between characters tend to be short, terse utterances. The result is an economy in presentation, with a minimal number of descriptions, both to keep interest as well as to be informative. Dialogue is not frequently used in *King Harald's Saga*, but an example follows. It relates the conversation between a farmer (Karl) and his wife, following a successful invasion of Denmark by King Harald. Also in the scene is Vandrad, a man wounded in battle.

It was beginning to grow light as they walked up to Karl's farm. They went into the living-room and found Karl there; he had just got up. The earl's men gave them their message. Karl said they must first have something to eat, and had a table laid for them and brought them a basin for washing.

Karl's wife then came into the room and said, 'How extraordinary! We couldn't sleep a wink all night for all that screaming and shouting!'

'Didn't you know that the kings have been fighting all night?' said Karl.

'And who won then?' she asked.

'The Norwegians won,' said Karl.

'Our king must have fled again as usual,' she said.

'No one knows whether he has fled or fallen,' said Karl.

'What a wretched king we have,' said the woman. 'He not only walks with a limp, but he's a coward as well.'

Then Vandrad said, 'I don't think the king is a coward; but he hasn't had much victory luck.'<sup>23</sup>

Peter Hallberg notes that some literary scholars compare this narrative style with modern day practice, such as that of Hemingway. Observable reactions are noted, rather than complex, psychological analyses. Of most importance is the depiction of observable facts. "Dialogue, preferably carried out in short utterances and cutting repartee, plays an important role. The

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<sup>23</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *King Harald's Saga*, 116-7.

objective attitude can create the impression of indifference or cynicism.”<sup>24</sup> Such a means of presentation seems an appropriate match for the compositional style of Judith Weir.

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Hallberg, 78.

## JUDITH WEIR'S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

Judith Weir's compositions for voice are often viewed as accessible to the listener.

Though Weir is not particularly fond of the term "accessible," it is used here to set it apart from the modernist movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Such composers as Berio, Cage, and Ligeti, who not only deconstructed the words into nonsensical syllables, but also pushed the limits of the vocal instrument beyond what is lyrical and practical, stand in stark contrast to Weir. Rather than compose around abstract concepts and sounds, the composer prefers clearly understood texts and historical events.

When I started to write music, it was very much at the age of high modernism, which I don't necessarily disapprove of, but abstraction was the thing that you were always talking about. That's what you were taught. So perversely, I began to do the opposite, which to me seemed to be stories and music attached to concrete events.<sup>25</sup>

Weir's structural implications and impetus in her vocal writing stem from the words themselves. This is emphasized by her choice of writing her own libretti, rather than collaborating with a librettist. Such works in which she has done so include *King Harald's Saga*, *A Night at the Chinese Opera*, and *The Black Spider*. In setting the libretti herself, the composer was freer to formulate structures based on language and character. This would suggest that the words are of great importance to the composer, and the texts settings in general support this. The text is almost always intelligible, "syllabic and... tends to avoid expressive and registral extremes."<sup>26</sup> Registral extremes are present primarily to distinguish characters. In *King Harald's Saga*, a shift in vocal register can help distinguish one character from another. The most radical shift occurs in Act 3, as the Messenger interrupts the character of the Norwegian Army (See Figure 5). The

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<sup>25</sup> Neil Brand, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara White, "Music Drama on the Concert Stage: A Study," 37.

Norwegian Army ranges roughly an octave, from the G<sub>3</sub> to G<sub>4</sub>. A Messenger enters *attacca*, at the top of the treble staff and finishes at C<sub>6</sub>.

(Recit.)  
With relish  
f  
First we beat them to the ground, and then we

a Messenger  
Rapt; shimmering  
(Recitative - moderate pace)  
freely  
subito  
mp  
O Sir! O Ha rald;

**Figure 5** – *King Harald's Saga*, p. 8

This radical shift not only aids in operatic structure and dramatic clarity, but is also descriptive of the imagery of the text “sparkled like a field of broken ice.” This phrase dramatically highlights this direct quotation from Sturluson’s writings. In another example, from Weir’s full-length opera, *A Night at the Chinese Opera*, Mrs. Chin’s Peroration also employs some extremes of vocal register. In general, the voice is placed in the middle register, where text is most intelligible. Where registral shifts are used and the singer’s voice rises above the *passagio*, a particular emphasis is placed on the text that follows. (See Figure 6) In this case, an emphasis is placed on “his wife, Little Moon,” and “his son, Chao-Lin,” two characters integral to the story’s plot. Also noted is the manner in which the character is relaying this information, as in telling a story, not as being directly emotionally involved.



**Figure 6,** Judith Weir: *A Night at the Chinese Opera*, “Mrs. Chin’s Peroration,” p. 28-9

Another textual element with definite structural implications is the use of spoken narration. In many of Judith Weir’s operatic works, spoken narration provides a framework that aids in defining the boundaries of specific acts or scenes. For example, *The Black Spider* is comprised of three acts, “framed by five spoken interludes.”<sup>27</sup> The interludes are present day accounts of a news report related to the storyline, which is derived from the novella *Die Schwarze Spinne*, by Jeremias Gotthelf. All the sung material is derived from the novella. These temporal shifts from present to past to present, from spoken narration to sung to spoken narration, form structural guideposts for the listener, defining one act from the next. Other examples that employ narration in this way are *The Consolations of Scholarship*, and as already noted, *King Harald’s Saga*.

<sup>27</sup> Judith Weir, *The Black Spider*, in “Story Notes,” (London: Novello, 1989).

There is also a predilection for presenting text in a straightforward manner. Barbara White has summed up Weir’s melodic writing as “deceptively simple: the vocal and instrumental lines often rely on stepwise motion in diatonic or quasi-diatonic patterns, but the nature of these patterns is quirky and inventive.”<sup>28</sup> This may be reflective of the composer’s desire for the text to be readily understood. Consider this example, from a song cycle titled *Songs from the Exotic*. A glance at the first in the cycle, “Sevdalino, My Little One,” (See Figure 7) reveals diatonic lines set in a vocal range where text is readily comprehensible. Melismas and textual distortion are not present.

**Figure 7** – Judith Weir: *Songs from the Exotic*, “Sevdalino, My Little One,” p. 4

This excerpt is also reflective of another key aspect in her vocal writing, the influence of folk music and folk traditions. In *Songs from the Exotic*, the composer is not writing in the folk idiom, but in her own style and manner of presentation. She uses traditional instruments (piano

<sup>28</sup> Barbara White, “Music Drama on the Concert Stage: A Study,” 102.



and voice) and original melodic materials. The text, however, is derived from vernacular poetry from different regions of the world— this example is from Serbia. These songs are her own “reinventions” of folk traditions, much like *King Harald’s Saga* is a “reinvention,” or Weir’s own interpretation, of Icelandic Sagas.

When analyzing the vocal works of Weir, it is notable that there is very little instance of textual repetition. When repetition is used, it is usually for comic effect. This is in effect, a manner that Weir is utilizing to streamline her compositions, the end result being plotlines and compositions that are remarkable for their conciseness. The composer feels that, influenced by modern society’s frame of reference, where the most prevalent form of art and story telling is television and movie plots, having a story line that begins and ends in one half hour’s time has become commonplace. Rather than 19<sup>th</sup> century operatic standards of stretching a simple story over hours and hours of musical material, the composer prefers the shortest and most direct way possible to relay plot information for any given situation. Many such examples pervade her work. Certainly, *King Harald’s Saga*, which was adapted from sixteen chapters of its original source to an opera 10 minutes in duration, might have been composed into a full-length opera by a 19<sup>th</sup> century composer or even a complete cycle, such as Wagner’s *Ring*. Christine’s Aria from Weir’s *The Black Spider*, might have become a mad scene (See Figure 8). Previous to the aria, she discovers a painful spot on her hand on her wedding day to her beloved Carl. As the moment approaches, a spider emerges from the spot that no one is able to kill. The spider, which later inhabits a guitar, is then buried in a secure tomb, the safest place the townspeople can find to keep it away. Her aria is set syllabically, with no text repeated.

266 CHRISTINA *f*  
In here an ev - il spi - rit lies and should the thing in-side es -

269 CHRISTINA *mp*  
cape then ev - 'ry hope will leave the world. *mf*

**Figure 8** – Judith Weir: *The Black Spider*, “Christine’s Aria, p. 78

For the majority of her vocal compositions, this economy of presentation is represented by short, syllabic vocal phrases. The concise musical representation of characters in her operatic writing therefore not only provides a clearly audible and easily accessible listening experience, but also provides a tableau for its detached manner of presentation.

Another notable dramatic aspect of Weir’s stage works is the use of one singer to perform multiple roles within the same work. This is not unique to Weir – this method has been employed as early as Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*. In close examination of the preface of the Schirmer edition, the same singer, Michael Kelly, was intended by Mozart to play both tenor roles, that of Don Basilio and Don Curzio. In addition, the same baritone, Francesco Bussani,

sang both Bartolo and Antonio in the opera's premiere.<sup>29</sup> Another example, more recent, is exemplified in the seven characters portrayed by the bass (these include Traveller, Elderly fop, Old gondolier, Hotel manager, Barber, Leading player, and Voice of Dionysus) in Britten's *Death in Venice*. What does seem to be unique is the peculiar gender-bending put unto play, mostly by having traditional male roles portrayed by women. This goes beyond the traditional manner in which a woman can portray a young "Cherubino" figure, rather, in Weir's works women portray ruthless kings and generals. Regarding her work on *The Consolations of Scholarship*, Barbara White continues to point out that "certain of the opera's artificial aspects – specifically, its use of a single female voice to portray a number of male characters, its isolation of those figures from one another, and its reliance upon storytelling – inhibit any identification with the characters."<sup>30</sup> Certainly *King Harald's Saga*, wherein the soprano plays multiple male and female characters, is demonstrative of this function. In *A Night at the Chinese Opera*, the military governor is portrayed by a countertenor, the ruthless General Han Chüeh by a mezzo soprano actor, and Chao by a soprano as well as a baritone. *The Vanishing Bridegroom* uses a more conservative approach on multiple role-playing. Here, the composer is using the concept of stock characterization to aid in role casting. For example, the soprano portrays the bride/wife/mother, the tenor the bride's lover/ husband's friend/preacher and the high baritone the bridegroom/ husband/ father. These are portioned out within the three acts, which are presented as three separate stories. Having singers play multiple roles not only makes the production of operas more feasible, but also allows singers to explore new ways of defining and presenting characters.

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<sup>29</sup> Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, (New York: Schirmer 1951), viii.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara White, "Music Drama on the Concert Stage: Voice, Character and Performance," 69.

## ***KING HARALD'S SAGA* – CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

Since this chamber opera was composed within such a minimal compositional framework, it is not only challenging to enact as a performer but also to analyze from a purely theoretical perspective. Further, *King Harald's Saga* differs from Weir's normal mode of composition with its use of long melismas (as exemplified in the characters of Tostig and Harald) and extreme registers (as exemplified by The Norwegian Army and A Messenger. It reveals a great deal of Weir's sense of humor and wit (as exemplified by the "duet" between Harald's wives). The composer admittedly states that since the opera was commissioned by Jane Manning, she felt a need to make light of previous compositions by other composers for Manning, by direct imitation and parody.

There was a slight feeling in my mind of parody of a whole lot of modern vocal music that I'd heard about that period. Nobody would ever set anything in a straight melodic way. You'd always have all this 'woo-oo-oo-oo-oo.' I decided to go a bit over the top with that. When I've written music in operas it has tended to be the opposite of that. It's quite linear and plain. Again, that's partly a gesture towards audibility. So it's quite unusual from that point of view. As for the narrative, it's clearly based on the saga. It has to be like that.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding *King Harald's Saga*, Barbara White suggests in her thesis that Weir is not only parodying modern composition, but also operatic convention. "In addition to differentiating the characters, the exploitation of melismatic writing may be heard as poking fun at the operatic convention of assigning highly ornamented music to sophisticated characters (Tostig is a traitor, and his text incites Harald to kill), or even at the predilection of contemporary composers for obscuring the text."<sup>32</sup> Another reason for this melismatic writing stems from the lack of accompaniment. Many of Weir's vocal works possess intricate and fast-moving

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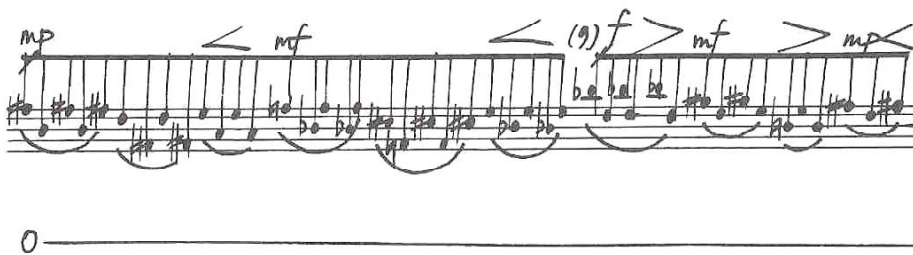
<sup>31</sup> Neil Brand, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara White, "Music Drama on the Concert Stage: A Study," 58.

accompanimental figures. In “Gypsy Laddie,” a song from the song cycle *Scotch Minstrelsy*, many figures in the piano accompaniment resemble those as sung in some melismatic passages of *King Harald’s Saga*. (See Figures 9 and 10)



**Figure 9** – Judith Weir: *Scotch Minstrelsy*, “Gypsy Laddie,” p. 18



**Figure 10** – Judith Weir: *King Harald’s Saga*, p. 6

Although there is a moderate resemblance, it can be observed that the melisma present in Figure 10 is attempting to provide a fuller sound, through the use of arpeggiated chord structures. Such structures are to be found in many piano accompaniments. Since Weir has been influenced by music of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is not surprising to find similarity here, present in the composer’s harmonic language.

The text setting for the remaining characters (Harald's Wives, A Soldier, and An Icelandic Sage) is non-melismatic, clear and more like her normal mode of composition. In addition, Weir makes use of spoken narration to provide clearly understood historic background for the listener.

The composer herself has given specific guidelines to the performer, and leaves clues for the analyst to derive the forms of each individual character's scena or scenas. In her Composer's Note included in the beginning of the score, she presents the movements as follows:

Act 1	Harald (aria) Fanfare Tostig (aria)
Act 2	St. Olaf (aria) Harald (aria) Harald's wives (duet)
Act 3	The Norwegian Army (chorus) Messenger (recit.) Soldier (aria)
Epilogue	Icelandic Sage (recit.)

From this it can be inferred that Weir is referring to classical forms as in 19<sup>th</sup> Century opera, and provides insight into how she has organized the textual material.

Challenging to its analysis is the lack of orchestral framework to provide essential background information for the listener's ears. Examples of such framework would be Puccini's colorful orchestration representing the atmosphere of the barge in his one act opera *Il tabarro*, or the plaintive foreshadowing of the solo violin in Verdi's prelude to the fourth act of *La traviata*. Instead, all musical and foreground information come solely from the vocal line and recitations by the narrator. This may explain why at times the vocal line is incredibly complex, rather than the plainer vocalisms representative of the composer's style. This study will examine each character from these points of view; that each movement has been given a specific form by the

composer, and that all information as to pitch center,<sup>33</sup> meter, and vocal expression is derived solely from composer's notes and the vocal line itself.

### Narrator

Opera, through the suspension of belief supplied by the sung voice, can have the effect of transporting listeners from their actual surroundings to an imagined, illusory world of another time and place. The use of the spoken voice in opera, however, can provide a potent dose of reality in this illusory world, such as Violetta's dying recitation of the letter in Act III of *La traviata*, or the spoken narrative for the character of Joan of Arc in Honegger's oratorio, *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher*. In *King Harald's Saga*, the role of the narrator functions not only to dramatic effect, but also provides the missing background information as to setting and time period that might have been derived from an orchestral prelude or overture.

In addition, Weir has provided the stage note, "to be spoken normally, at moderate pace and with an even delivery, [as in a radio announcement]." <sup>34</sup> Barbara White discusses briefly the use of the narrative in *King Harald's Saga* as being integral to its structure. "Hearing the performer alternate, not only between the narrative's characters, but also between the world of the narrative and the external world of the 'broadcaster,' makes it quite impossible for the listener to 'suspend disbelief' in any sense." <sup>35</sup> In this regard, the narrator functions to set up the

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<sup>33</sup> Judith Weir, interview by Kelly Lynch, tape recording, 4 April 2006. In this interview the composer states that her works are not tonal in function. These sections will be analyzed regarding pitch centers, not utilizing functional harmony. "The larger scale organization of those tonal centers is what I was thinking of and the sort of structure that it had. But within the movements, I think it would be a little bit of a waste of time to analyze them too much tonally, because after all there isn't a bass to start with, so in my opinion it could be harmonized in all sorts of ways. But for me, the significant thing is the kind of tone to which most of the phrases return and I think in many places in the piece that is very clear."

<sup>34</sup> Judith Weir, *King Harald's Saga*, " 1.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara White, "Music Drama on the Concert Stage: A Study," 59.

opera's overall objective "mood," one of statements of fact, recitations, or descriptions of events, rather than one of emotional sentiment. Following is the narrator's first recitation, illustrating its textual straightforwardness:

King's Harald's Saga, act one. It is the year 1066. In the royal palace at Oslo, King Harald of Norway recounts his previous triumphs on the field of battle. To a fanfare of trumpets, Earl Tostig arrives from England. Tostig is a traitor. He persuades King Harald to invade England.<sup>36</sup>

The narrator also functions to assist the audience in character names and situations. He states what each character in each act is expressing to further clarify the text. Since many characters, such as Harald and Tostig, have melismatic vocal lines, the audibility of words can become an issue. The narrator assists, by stating simply and directly what is to occur in each act, so that an audience can follow along.

### Harald

The title character of this opera has been given two arias, one in Act 1 and one in Act 2. Each serves a very different dramatic function. The first provides, in pompous fashion, necessary background information to Harald's character. The second, in highly ornamented fashion, illustrates Harald's journey to England by sea.

A structural analysis of Harald's first aria can be loosely derived from the textual content. It can be viewed as a rough ABA structure, with the second A section interrupted by the incoming "fanfare." In the first section Harald describes himself as a merciless fighter, with a transitional aside regarding his peace-loving brother, Olaf. The second section begins with the new tempo, when Harald recalls his younger days. Tempo 1 returns with section A, with Harald's previous declarations of his invincibility.

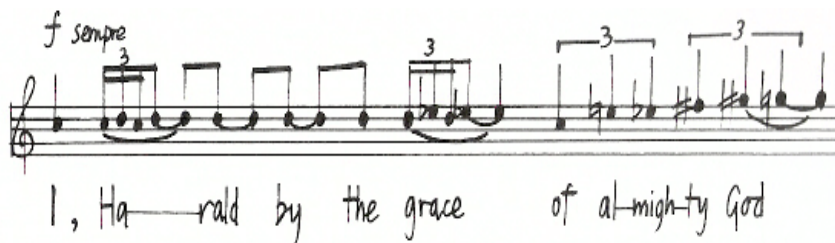
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<sup>36</sup> Judith Weir, *King Harald's Saga*, 1.

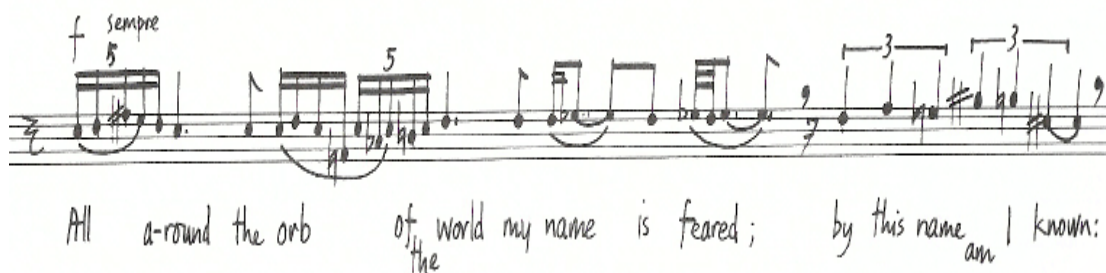


Section A	I, Harald by the grace of almighty God, King of all the northern lands Mightiest warrior that ever donned a coat of mail and held a sharp-edged sword, Strongest king that ever strode a long ship's prow and sailed the restless sea Most merciless fighter that ever killed a living man
Transition	Whereas my brother the blessed and holy man Olaf the saint said: Love thine enemies, I say: Sever their limbs until they cause no trouble.
Section B	When I was young I raided endless Russia, My ship sailed past Byzantium, I scourged the Saracen men in Sicily, I trod the holy ground of Palestine. They knew my justice on both banks of the Jordan; Wherever I went men, said: May his soul abide in Christ!
Section A	All around the orb of the world my name is feared; By this name am I known; Harald the merciless...

Indicators of pitch and key center also support this structural framework. Harald's first phrase starts on C<sub>5</sub>, which forms the pitch center of most of section A and its return (See Figure 11). At the return of section A, a phrase appears that greatly resembles the opening gesture, but ornamented (See Figure 12).



**Figure 11** – *King Harald's Saga*, "Harald," p. 1

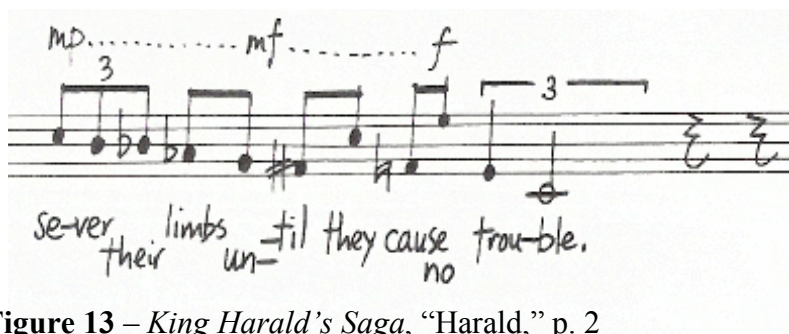


**Figure 12** – *King Harald's Saga*, "Harald," p. 3

The return of this sweeping upward gesture to G-sharp<sub>5</sub> and G<sub>5</sub> natural greatly enforces a sense of structure to the listener's ear, as it is not only the same tessitura, but the same rhythmic pattern of quarter note triplets.

A unifying rhythmic characteristic of Harald in both arias is the repeated use of the accented sixteenth note triplet. This occurs when he is referring to himself and his accomplishments, which he does quite frequently. At the transitional section when Harald speaks of his brother Olaf the Saint, the rhythm becomes even and the dynamic quieter. It can be implied that Harald is mocking his brother with such a change in rhythm and dynamic (and assumed vocal color). That implication is solidified in his response, "sever their limbs until they cause no trouble," with the return of triplet pattern and a violent, jagged melody (See Figure 13).

Section B centers around F, and again the repeated triplet patterns recur. In addition, fragments of a whole tone scale, from F-sharp to D-sharp are added, or its enharmonic use of E-flat, D-flat and so on. This is not a strict usage of the whole tone scale, but rather provides a contrast in color to the prevailing diatonic phrasing. As section B begins to shift back to the return of the original phrase of section A, a combination of the fragmented whole tone scales and the return of C occurs. This phrase recalls the jagged violent melody of Harald mocking his brother (See Figure 14).



**Figure 13** – *King Harald's Saga*, "Harald," p. 2



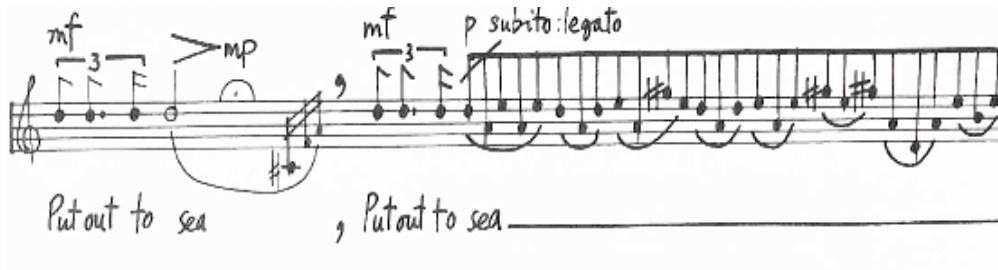
**Figure 14** – *King Harald's Saga*, "Harald," p. 3

Harald's second aria is in Act 2, after his prophetic dream. He is warned that his trip to invade England will end badly. Harald ignores the warning and immediately heads to sea. The movement begins on the pitch of D<sub>5</sub>, a whole step higher than in his first aria, which heightens his insistence to leave. Since there is neither piano nor orchestra to illustrate the journey by sea, the voice presents the journey through its melodic contours. As discussed earlier, this is an example where the composer uses the vocal line to represent the rolling waves of the ocean through this movement's continuously flowing melismas (See Figure 15).

In addition, Harald's triplet rhythm is again present, and dissipates into the representation of his long journey. Harmonically, most of the movement is based on the A major scale. This is an over simplification, however - the linear function of the melody does not act in a manner that is expected in tonal music. It is rather, an arpeggiation of a succession of dyads, of fourths, fifths

and thirds, that colorfully evoke the sun sparkling on the waves, the churning of the sea, and the painful consequences of a soldier's journey to war.

Further solidifying this illustration, the final line of this movement repeats the same interval of a fifth, diminishing to nothing, like a ship sailing beyond the horizon (See Figure 16).



**Figure 15** – *King Harald's Saga*, “Harald,” p. 6



**Figure 16** - *King Harald's Saga*, “Harald,” p. 6

### Fanfare

This is the only movement not given a specific structural function in the Composer's Note in the beginning of the score. It seems to function as a chorus, a fanfare that heralds the arrival of the traitor, Tostig. It resides solely on the pitch class of A-flat, with fast repeated text, increasing in speed with each phrase repetition (See Figure 17). The way the composer has notated this in the score sheds light on its function as a chorus. The words begin to overlap, and by the final phrase, become unintelligible, like many voices obscuring individual words.

Also notable is the dynamic instruction of “subito lontano” as given by the composer. The entirety of the movement is pianississimo, crescendoing slightly at the finish of the

movement, perhaps indicating that the crowd of admirers has arrived. This dynamic shift follows “attacca” from Harald’s first aria, and not only provides a clue that the performer is changing characters for the first time, but instructs the listener to pay attention to what Tostig will say.



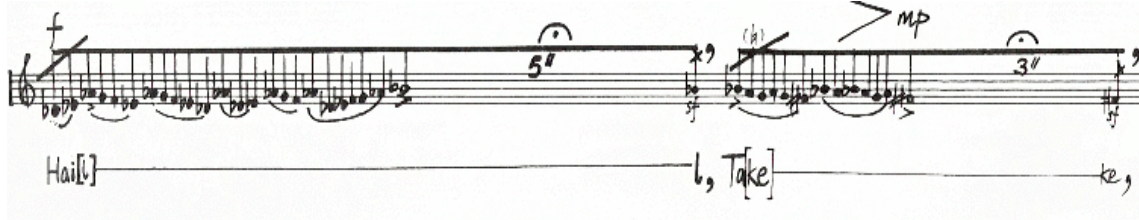
**Figure 17** – *King Harald’s Saga*, p. 3

### Tostig

In calculated, hierarchical tones, the traitor arrives on the scene. Another composer might have set him with a great deal of political doublespeak. Weir provides only the following text:

Hail  
Take  
Kill  
Win  
Sail  
Fight  
Go

Tostig may not be given much to say by Weir, but he says it very well. In a flurry of decorative intonations he casts his spell, to convince his admirers that the invasion of England is a good idea (See Figure 18). The composer shows his calculation in deception by providing calculated time lengths for the performer to hold each final cadence. An explosive use of final consonant is also indicated.

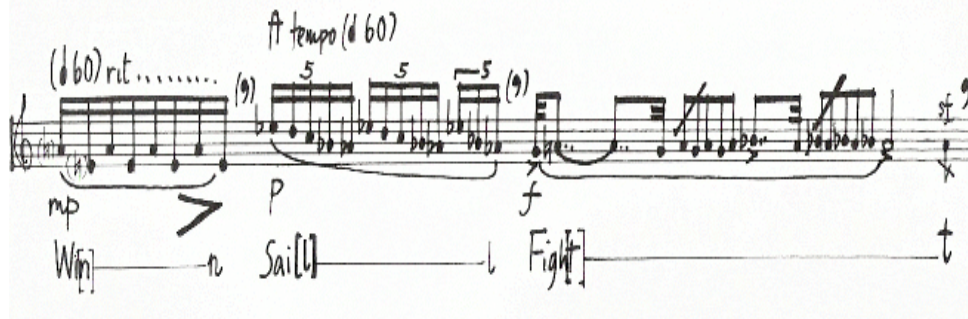


**Figure 18** – *King Harald’s Saga*, “Tostig,” p. 4

Instead of the composer providing a specific tempo, the notation suggests that the character sings the notes as fast as can be articulated.

Harmonically, this movement is characterized by the Lydian mode starting on D-flat, minus the seventh degree (See Figure 18). As much of Weir’s writing in this work has been largely diatonic, this modal “intrusion” represents the foreign nature of Tostig – he being the instigator of the attack of his own native England. The florid nature of the writing demonstrates not only his rank and stature, but also his ability to cloud the listener’s perceptions and convince them (i.e. King Harald) to assist in his revenge.

The composer has also provided two different notations for breath marks; the marks in parentheses indicate a quick breath, and the marks without parentheses, a substantial pause for breath (See Figure 19).



**Figure 19** – *King Harald’s Saga*, “Tostig,” p. 4

By having a quick breath in between the words “sail” and “fight,” for instance, a particular emphasis is given to the second word. There is also a shift in dynamic here, from *piano* to *forte*. The short breath indicated in between “win” and “sail,” however, seems to indicate a subtler effect – that of meshing the two words, as well as the clashing harmonies, together in the listener’s ears. It’s as if these two words, “win” and “sail” are almost subliminal, going by so quickly as if to be an “aside.”

Like many noblemen, even after he has made his point by singing the word “go,” Tostig continues on with his florid singing for a few more phrases, as if King Harald required more convincing. He increases in dynamic on each of three phrases, becoming more insistent. His final word, again repeating the word “go,” is sung *pianissimo*, providing a sharp contrast to the prior *forte* dynamic. This could indicate a change in tactics, a final “whisper in the ear” to achieve his goal, to finally get King Harald to invade.

### St. Olaf

While King Harald sleeps, his deceased brother, St. Olaf, warns him through a portentous dream of his impending doom in the upcoming battle. Musically, St. Olaf foreshadows the arrival of the Soldier in Act 3, who recounts the battle and Harald’s death in vivid detail by evoking violent, graphic imagery. The form of this movement is characterized as an aria, as is Harald’s aria from Act 1. It is organized into two phrase groups, a contrasting phrase, and a return to the original phrase, and, like Harald’s Act I aria, is interrupted by Harald’s awakening.

Group 1	Sleep Harald, sleep on, I fear that death awaits,
Group 1A	I hear the wolves cry in the mountains, I see the wolves’ jaws red with blood;



Contrast	I see black ravens, birds of carrion fly to the west.
Group 1	I died at home, a holy man; To my blessed mem'ry be true; trusty hero

Metrically, the composer has stated that each note be sung evenly, “with absolutely equal stress on each note.”<sup>37</sup> This minimizes the feeling of rhythmic stress that might have been implied by the groupings of notes that the composer has notated, as well as any structural implications that might have been provided by note groupings.

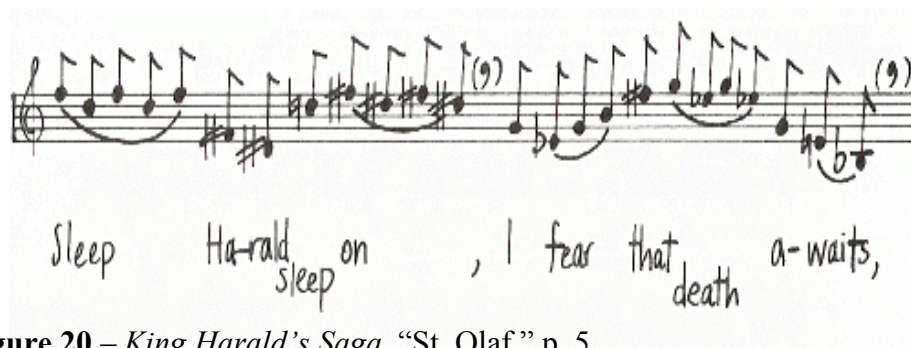
From a harmonic standpoint, this aria is framed by the interval of a minor third. It does not seem to center around any given pitch or pitch class, but rather, meanders from major to minor third, from a center of D, to D-sharp and to E (See Figure 20). The juxtaposition of these thirds, F to D-natural, followed by F-sharp to D-sharp can create a sense of the character losing his musical footing, of not being grounded in any one tonal center. Shifting from third to third, the first phrases of this movement provide a lulling, dreamlike state with its rocking motion, and at the same time, portending Harald’s doom.

The mood shifts dramatically, as Olaf describes what he sees; “black ravens, birds of carrion fly to the west,” (See Figure 21). The melismas depict the flight of dozens of birds. This is accomplished by increasing the use of melismas, and by decreasing the melodic interval to that of a second. This interval of a minor second begins to expand outward into the final upward arpeggio at the cadence of the phrase. The word painting is embellished further with a flourish to a high point of A-flat<sub>5</sub>, a further construction built almost exclusively upon Olaf’s interval of a third. This change in vocal color, tessitura, and movement adds dramatic importance to Olaf’s warning.

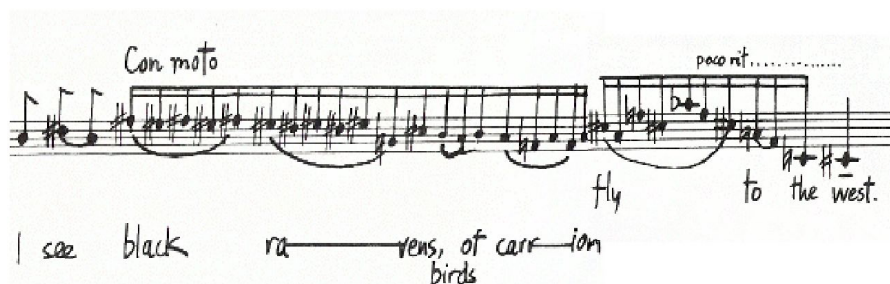
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<sup>37</sup> Judith Weir, *King Harald's Saga*,” 5.



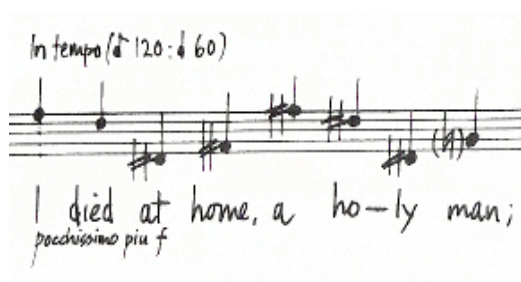


**Figure 20** – *King Harald's Saga*, “St. Olaf,” p. 5



**Figure 21** - *King Harald's Saga*, “St. Olaf,” p. 5

Structurally, the aria recapitulates itself by truncating the initial musical statement (See Figure 22). Although the notation changes from eighth notes to quarters, the composer indicates that the tempo remains constant. The reiteration of the opening pitches reinforces the tripartite structure of this aria, albeit the return is shortened by Harald's hasty awakening and sailing off to invade England. A comparison of Figure 20 with Figure 22 shows a similarity in pitches used, with longer note values (quarter notes instead of eighths) and a faster harmonic rhythm.



**Figure 22** - *King Harald's Saga*, “St. Olaf,” p. 5

## Harald's Wives

This movement is organized simply into three phrases each separated by a comma, and is approximately three to four “bars” in length. This is the first occasion where bar lines are encountered in this piece. The use of bar lines is not traditional in this case, as a time signature is never notated and the number of counts per bar is not consistent. It would seem that the bar lines serve as a means to assist the separation of the two characters, as well as to facilitate word and musical stress. The “well” of farewell, and the “Ha” of Harald tend to immediately follow a bar line (See Figure 23).

Labeled by the composer as a duet, this movement presents a challenge for the performer with its shifting registration. The two separate parts are clearly differentiated by the stemming of the notes. This duet provides a spotlight for the composer’s sense of comedy and wit, inviting the performer to differentiate between the two wives.



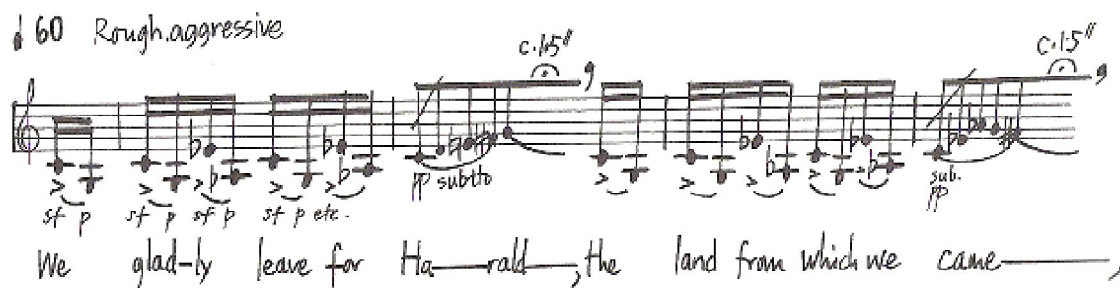
**Figure 23** – *King Harald's Saga*, “Harald’s Wives,” p. 6

Another manner by which to distinguish the two characters in this duet is to examine the intervals. Wife 1 is initially given a descending interval, and Wife 2 is given an ascending interval. Although this pattern does not remain consistent, the wives always mirror each other. While Wife 1’s descending interval is followed by Wife 2’s ascending interval, and then this is contrasted again, with an ascending interval and a descending interval. Notable also is the

manner in which the composer has chosen not to repeat the intervals. Firstly, the wives are given a minor sixth, then followed by a tritone, minor third, perfect fourth, minor ninth and finally minor second. Because the of the fermata at the end of each phrase group, Wife 2 always seems to have the last word.

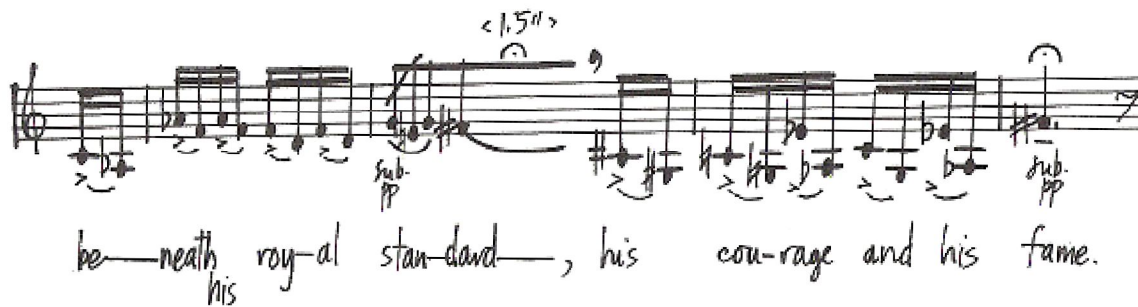
### The Norwegian Army

The intense, repetitive nature of this character serves as a chilling illustration of hundreds of soldiers, single-mindedly marching into battle. The entirety of the movement also has a limited range of pitches, from G<sub>3</sub> to A<sub>4</sub>, with the entire movement centering around C<sub>4</sub>. Use of accents and extreme dynamic contrasts (from a sforzando to piano within a sixteenth note) serve to promote the aggressive nature of this character (See Figure 24). The accents and dynamic shifts, as well as the nearly continuous sixteenth note patterning, also seem to provide a sense of multiple characters acting as one.



**Figure 24** – *King Harald's Saga*, “The Norwegian Army,” p. 7

Bar lines are present in this movement as well, and seem to serve the same function as in the previous movement, to assist with word stress. For instance, the phrase “beneath his royal standard” begins with the “be” of beneath on an upbeat, and the next bar line doesn’t occur until the “stan” of standard (See Figure 25).



**Figure 25** – *King Harald's Saga*, “The Norwegian Army,” p. 7

Breath marks and fermatas further serve to subdivide the text into phrases. Exact durations are given for each fermata, which would seem to indicate the calculated precision of an advancing army. An eighth rest is given, however, to delineate three separate sections, each beginning with the words “we gladly.” As each section begins, the tempo and notation change.

We gladly leave for Harald, The land from which we came, Beneath his royal standard, His courage and his fame.	Quarter = 60 (sixteenths)
We gladly fight for Harald, We plunder and we steal, Our warriors strength is famous, Our courage and our zeal.	Quarter = 63 (triplet sixteenths)
We gladly kill for Harald, We slaughter all our foes First we beat them to the ground and then we...	Quarter = 60 (Thirty-seconds)

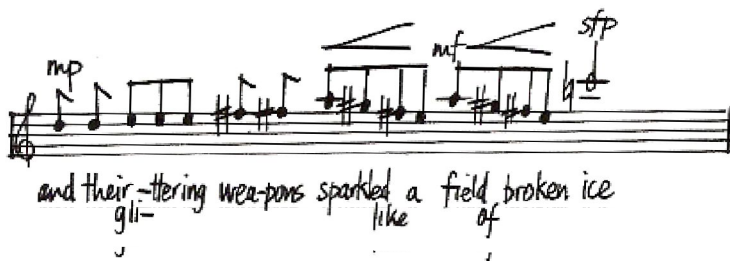
The increase in note divisions and acceleration in tempo illustrates an army that is advancing ever closer to the warring battle.

### A Messenger

The transition between the previous character and this one, A Messenger, demonstrates a dramatic shift in range, rhythm, and style. This is a climactic point of the piece, and within it are the highest notes written for the soprano interpreter. The majority of this role lies in the high

passaggio and above, ascending to C<sub>6</sub>, sung *sfp*; sforzando followed immediately by a piano dynamic. It is a shift from multiple personages in choral style to a single, young individual in recitative style, as well as a shift from mindless certainty to that of adrenaline-filled agitation.

The movement itself seems to imply the key of A. Whether this work is in A major or minor seems ambiguous – rather, what is observed is a diatonic grouping of notes with the home base of A. It is not appropriate here to analyze this as functional harmony per se, but rather to examine key centers that seem more prevalent. The preponderance of F-sharp and G-sharp in most scale passages seems to imply this. The altered note that is missing, C-sharp, is thoughtfully neglected, as all phrases sung begin above this pitch. When a C is finally achieved, it is not as the expected C-sharp, but as an unaltered C-natural, which is shocking to ears lulled temporarily into traditional Western harmony. This C-natural provides a startling color to the word “ice,” as well as leading the harmony back to its implied home base of C (See Figure 26).



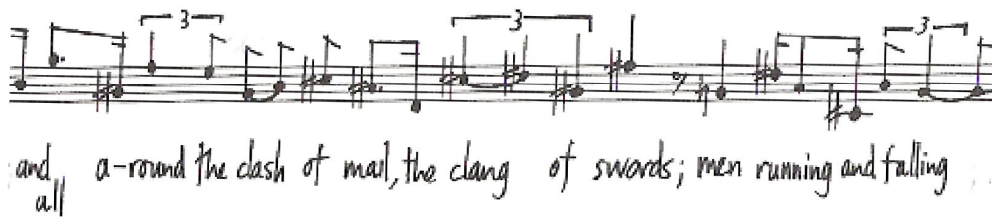
**Figure 26** – *King Harald’s Saga*, “A Messenger,” p. 8

It is also curious that the extreme pitch range in which this movement is set makes comprehension of the text difficult. Setting text in this soprano tessitura could seem like a mistake in judgment as far as intelligibility is concerned. In this situation, characterization is more important. The Messenger is not only unnerved by witnessing this spectacle of the approaching English army but also by addressing King Harald himself with such information. Consequently, the Messenger speaks at a high pitch that makes the words difficult to understand.

Also indicative are the composer's instructions at the beginning of the recitative – “rapt, shimmering.” The shimmering quality of this line is illustrating the sun's reflections on gleaming shields and “a cloud of dust, raised by the hooves of horses.” In this case, the color of the passagio register and above is metaphorically sparkling.

### A Soldier

The music given the soldier is the most removed from tonality in this entire opera. The setting is comprised of whole tone fragments that are broken and jagged. These are interspersed with tritones, minor seconds and major sevenths, which further removes them from tonal centers (See Figure 27).



**Figure 27** – *King Harald's Saga*, “A Soldier,” p. 9

These jagged patterns are clearly demonstrative of the nature of the battle and the vivid harshness of the text. In examining which pitches are most common, it is not surprising to see that the least utilized pitch (including enharmonics) is C-natural. C-natural is the pitch center that both begins and ends the opera, further separating this character from the rest of the characters.

Following is an illustration of how pitches are distributed in this movement. The pitch that most commonly occurs is F-natural, followed by C-sharp.

TABLE 1 – Pitch Classes in Order of Frequency

Occurrences	Pitches
32	F-natural
27	C-sharp
25	E-flat / D-sharp
23	E-natural, G-natural
22	F-sharp, D-sharp, D-natural
21	B-natural
20	B-flat / A-sharp
16	A-natural
16	A-flat / G-sharp
11	C-natural

The aria is in three sections, separated both by text and musical phrase shapes. The composer has also further defined the sections dynamically, with the first being *forte*, the second being *mezzo forte*, and the third, *mezzo piano*.

- Section 1 Side by side the armies fought  
Shoulder to shoulder their men attacked;  
The storm of arrows raged around the King;  
And all around the clash of mail, the clang of swords  
Men running and falling; the crack of blows,  
Bright weapons flying hewing flesh  
Grating, glinting, men flinching, jolting, flinging axes  
Breathless they gash and graze and grate.  
No room to move, tripping, falling,  
Horses rearing, a litter of corpses.  
They shove and stab and stab raining blows without purpose;  
The leaders cannot command.  
Their shouted orders unheard in the ripping and crashing.
- Section 2 Now Harald the Norwegian King felt anger and fury;  
Into the thickest knot of bodies he ran,  
Fighting two handed, swinging weapons aimlessly.  
Blood pouring, cramp and sweat,  
Shouting, roaring, cutting down, moving blindly.
- Section 3 Nearby, a man exhausted fallen in the mud cried:  
“Disaster has befallen us! We have been duped!  
There was no cause for Harald to bring his forces westward;  
We are all as good as dead!”

At this moment, King Harald was struck in the throat,  
And drew his last breath, his last gasp.

The first section begins with a dotted rhythm that jumps down, then leaps upward into a triplet rhythm (See Figure 27). This rhythmic pattern remains quite consistent until “grating, glinting, men flinching.” The pattern then changes to even eighth notes followed by a triplet pattern. The most noticeable rhythmic motive that strikes the ear in this section is the eighth rest followed by a large intervallic step, first appearing ascending on the words “flinching, kicking,” (See Figure 28) and then descending on “tripping, falling,” (See Figure 29). This is descriptive wordplay in action not only with the descending intervals on “tripping and falling,” but also with the use of the rest, which isolates each word, enabling the performer to enunciate consonants. In addition, the ascending interval on “flinching, kicking and jolting” provides a higher pitch on the unaccented syllable, which is disruptive to the ear as well as descriptive of the textual impetus. The reverse is true on the descending intervals, where the accented syllables are accented.

After the climactic high note (A<sub>5</sub>) at the end of Section 1, Section 2 is brought in a more even, driving rhythm. This even rhythm is also descriptive of Harald’s running straight into battle. The triplet pattern from the previous section recurs here, as a reference back to the battle.

Section 3 is more introverted, as reflected by the *mezzo piano* dynamic. Rhythmically, triplets are no longer found and are replaced by even rhythmic patterns of eighth and quarters. This has an effect of slowing the tempo. Textually, another voice is being quoted here – one of Harald’s soldiers at the end of his strength. Later in this section when the Soldier is no longer quoting the exhausted man, the dynamic marking shifts back to *mezzo forte*. He relates the dying moments of the King. Notably, although the last word “gasp” is given a longer note value,



there is no fermata given on the final note. This brings the movement to an abrupt end, and to its subject, King Harald.

#### Ascending



**Figure 28** – *King Harald's Saga*, “A Soldier,” p. 9

#### Descending



**Figure 29** – *King Harald's Saga*, “A Soldier,” p. 9

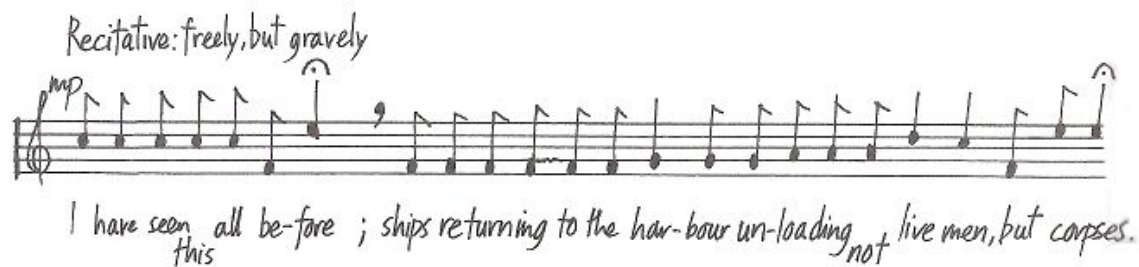
Textually, the movement is quite intense, with its depictions of battle scenes and “men running and falling; the crack of blows, bright weapons flying, hewing flesh.” With a tempo marking at a quarter note equals 96, the movement relentlessly pushes ahead, with little pause for breath. The brisk tempo, descriptive wordplay in the musical setting and the harmonic language all contribute to the intense impact of this movement.

#### An Icelandic Sage

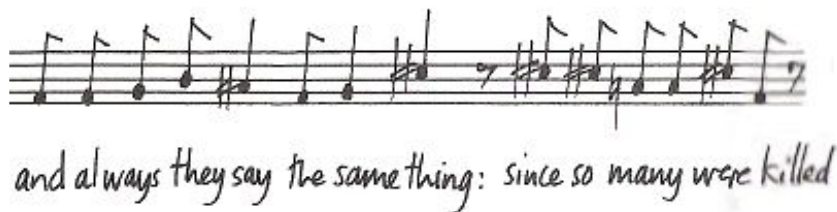
Neither this text nor this character is present in Sturluson's version. As stated at the outset of this paper, The Icelandic Sage provides a poignant overview to the events of this work, as well as a means for the composer to sum up with a parting message. The Sage is not

specifically named but rather kept ambiguous, an archetypal figure. He represents solitude and reflection; a personage that one journeys to for knowledge and advice.

Musically, the sage's music is simple and diatonic, non-melismatic and in free recitative style (See Figure 30). This setting is most effective for the delivery of the text, allowing the soprano ample room to project text with utmost clarity. No accent markings or bar lines provide any indication of word stress, leaving even further freedom for the performer. Harmonically it gravitates toward the pitches of C and F. In addition, much like the structure of the entire opera, it, too, begins and ends on the pitch of C.



**Figure 30** – *King Harald's Saga*, “An Icelandic Sage,” p. 11



**Figure 31** - *King Harald's Saga*, “An Icelandic Sage,” p. 11

The first five phrases continue in this same fashion, utilizing roughly the same pattern of pitches. The Sage is only distracted for a moment when talking about the others who express regret of their action, yet they do nothing to rectify their mistakes. Perhaps the Sage is alluding to the earlier harmonic disruptions from the previous battle scene of the Soldier (See Figure 31).

A small, comedic aside is added as “Why did Harald bother? He should have stayed at home and made the best of it.” Whether or not it was intended to be comic is debatable, however, these two phrases seem a bit out of place from the remainder of the movement due to their implied tone. The tone is one of everyday language, a phrase that the average person might use in everyday speech. In this context, that being reflection on the consequences of war, these phrases provide an assertive punch by belying the seriousness of the situation.

A further whimsical addition, the final phrase, “I could have told him it would end like this,” concludes the movement as well as the opera. It ends abruptly, without slowing or retardation of the tempo. Rather, it leaves the listener hanging, waiting for more profound words that are not delivered. This abruptness implies a feeling that war is ongoing, a certain continuity of events that repeat themselves, leading to the modern day. Silence follows, allowing the listener a few brief moments to contemplate the sage’s meaning.

## CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

Opera in the twilight of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century had to change in order to survive. Opera had no problem keeping everyone's attention in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, by the middle decades, the advent of commercialized music, movies, and television made it ever more difficult for it to survive as an art form. There is still, it seems, a need to continue to explore this changing genre of opera. Performance methods and means are changing – Works are being commissioned for television, such as Weir's *Scipio's Dream*; large-scale operas are being scaled down to chamber versions, such as Jonathan Dove's arrangement of Wagner's *Ring*; numerous score reductions are now available, from Bellini's *Norma* to Strauss's *Salome*; and operas are being more frequently translated into the English vernacular. All this enhances commercial viability, cutting expenses, and increases opera's appeal to an audience who, as Weir readily admits, is accustomed to digesting musical information in small sound bites. In her theatrical works, the influence of many comic elements tends to keep her work fresh and appealing. This, she feels, reflects an overall trend of comedy in popular entertainment in Britain, which is also certainly relevant, arguably less creative, in the United States.

What we would call comedy either in my work or in anything that's happening now is very different from what we would have called a comic opera, you know, of the eighteenth or nineteenth century. I mean, something like the Barber of Seville, I love that opera, but I think that today to write a piece which is so out and out comical would be a difficult thing to do. I think comedy is a very different matter nowadays, and I think in opera, your word "whimsical" is a good one for some of the things that happen in my work, or I think sometimes it has a kind of dry humor, I'm not expecting people to just laugh, and laugh out loud, but perhaps to derive some amusement, quiet amusement.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Judith Weir, interview by Kelly Lynch, tape recording, 4 April 2006.

*King Harald's Saga* marks the beginning of what was to become a productive genre of work for Weir, although she has not since written an opera for solo voice. When so many of the new operatic contributions that have made it into the “limelight” are based on serious literary classics such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or require huge singing forces such as *Satyagraha* or *The Ghosts of Versailles*, it is refreshing to see comedic elements used in original ways, without making the work itself seem trivial or ineffective. The sheer absurdity of having one soloist portray eight characters of such historical importance is reminiscent of the dry wit and non-sequiturs present in many British situation comedies. However, since this is a piece about war, battle, and conquest, it is something that seems likely to remain relevant to its listeners. The need to laugh about such events is simple human nature, as is the need to reflect and hope that such events need not come to pass again, and that humanity can someday learn from its misdeeds. Weir has a wonderful ability to comment with sincerity on situations that affect humanity, with an added touch of wittiness and the unexpected. This unsentimental approach to opera is quite unusual in comparison with other operas being composed:

I think that new operas nearly all times...(modern operas) are based on very serious happenings on stage, in a rather automatic way sometimes, I'm not sure that the seriousness is really being explored, and I think that makes opera rather out of kilter with the rest of the arts. I mean, here in Britain, comedy is a huge force in entertainment, and in the theater in film, and it seems to me an element of life is missing if it's not expressed in opera.<sup>39</sup>

Weir's unique approach to operatic composition, then, not only reflects her own personal tastes, but also reflects that of the society from which she hails. The final statement in *King Harald's* epilogue, illustrates this well, with its unexpected final phrase “I could have told him it would

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

end like this.” It adds a touch of the vernacular to soften the intent of its overall message, and drives its point home to the listener.

Judith Weir has used many disparate elements in her compositions, such as bagpipe music, Icelandic Sagas, and folk texts of Chinese, Arabic and Spanish cultures, to name just a few. What is unique is that these elements find themselves re-expressed and rearticulated in Weir’s own compositional style, not merely quoted. Weir’s uniqueness in the operatic world comes from her great gift to re-express these musical concepts and folk traditions in her own compositional language, without really losing the original spirit. Through her conceptions of what Icelandic Sagas might have been like, she has altered the perception of what opera actually is.

## APPENDIX A: *KING HARALD'S SAGA* – A SUMMARY

The first mention of King Harald actually occurs in *St. Olaf's Saga*. (Olaf is often referred to as Saint Olaf, because he converted Norway to Christianity without any religious wars.<sup>40</sup>) A reference is made to Harald as a child, playing with wood chips in a muddy creek. When King Harald of Westford, the current Norwegian King, approached him and inquired what the chips were, he replied that they were his warships. Thus was the first reference to this mighty warrior king. King Harald was the half brother of Olaf the Saint – they had the same mother, Queen Asta. Harald was the child from her second marriage to Sigurd Sow, and Olaf the child from her first marriage to King Harald of Westford. A birth date for Harald is not specifically given. *King Harald's Saga* begins with a description of the Battle of Stiklestad, where Saint Olaf, then King Olaf, was killed. The date of this battle is said to be 31 August 1030, during an eclipse of the sun.<sup>41</sup> Harald fought in the battle where his brother lost his life, and it has been said earlier in *Saint Olaf's Saga* that Harald was fifteen years of age at the time of that battle. This means he would have lived fifty-one years, and would give him the dates of 1015-1066.

After the death of King Olaf, the kingship went to his illegitimate son, Magnus. Harald soon after joined the army, and earned the favor of the Varangians there. Soon, this kinship would prove itself as Harald became leader of the Varangians,<sup>42</sup> unlike his commander, Georgios. He was viewed as being able to lead his men into victory, and his overbearing attitude

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<sup>40</sup> Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla, or The Lives of the Norse Kings*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), 257.

<sup>41</sup> Footnotes indicate that the date was actually on July 29, and that accounts of the eclipse were mistaken. Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla or The Lives of the Norse Kings*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), 453.

<sup>42</sup> The Varangians were Scandinavian warriors who were bodyguards to the Byzantine emperors.

and ability to motivate the soldiers became a threat to Georgios. Since the Varangians were no longer following his orders, Georgios asked Harald to leave. Soon, a splinter group comprised of Harald and the Varangian men were looting parts of Africa, Jerusalem, and Sicily.

Harald then formed an alliance with Svein Ulfsson of Denmark. Related through marriage, this bond of friendship gave Harald much renown and power. When Magnus (Harald's nephew) was elected King of Denmark (as well as King of Norway) in 1042, he made Svein an earl, and asked him to rule as his regent. Svein had wished the throne for himself, and he fought several battles with Magnus's forces, but lost. Svein truly wished for Harald to fight Magnus, and win Norway, but Harald had no wish to fight his nephew, which in turn put strains on his kinship with Svein. Suspecting treachery from Sveinn, Harald escaped in the night and met with his nephew in secret. Magnus had no desire for a family rift, nor did he believe his forces adequate to war with Harald. Magnus and Harald decided to share the crown, which they did for a year. After a revelatory dream about his father Saint Olaf, Magnus became very ill. Before his death, Magnus declared that Svein would rule Denmark, and Harald, Norway. Magnus died on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1047.

Upon Magnus's death, Harald wished to acquire Denmark as well, since he viewed himself as its lawful inheritor. Thereafter followed many battles and much animosity between the two leaders. The rivalry came to a head at the Battle of the Nissa, on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1062. Two years later a peace treaty was signed between Norway and Denmark to end the fighting.

Sturluson then takes us to England during the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066). King Edward was married to Queen Edith. The Queen's brothers were Earl Tostig, Earl Morcar, Earl Svein, and Harold. On January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1066, Edward the Confessor died. After this, the brothers were regarded as the most powerful men in England. Earl Tostig had command



over all of the armies in England, as well as over all the other earls. However, Harold, the youngest son was crowned King, a title bequeathed to him by his father on his deathbed. Earl Tostig was understandably upset and wished the kingship for himself, but was unable to garner enough support. When Harold discovered this, he removed Tostig from all positions of authority over the armies and over the earls in the kingdom. Tostig fled to Flanders.

After staying for a time in Flanders, Tostig went to Denmark to seek the favor of King Svein. Svein offered him earldom in his country, but Tostig was more interested in revenge. Tostig asked Svein for support of the Danish armies to invade England. Svein wished none of this. Tostig then went to Norway to meet with King Harald, to convince him of his scheme. He argued against the logic of trying to invade Denmark for fifteen years, when England was for the taking. With the armies of England under his command, Denmark would surely fall thereafter. After much discussion, they decided to invade England that summer. Tostig went to Flanders to ready the forces that had left with him from England, and Harald to Trondheim.

During this time of preparation, there were many omens in the form of dreams. King Harald himself dreamed his brother warned of impending doom. King Harald left for the invasion and declared his son Magnus king in his absence. He sailed first to Scotland and then down the coast of England and battled successfully in Scarborough, Holderness, and Fulford.

The final battle took place in the town of York, at Stamford Bridge. This bridge, a major crossing point, had great strategic advantage for taking the whole county. Harald advanced, with Tostig's reinforcements, on the town and met no resistance from the inhabitants there. All the people in the town gave allegiance to Harald. That evening, King Harald went back to his ships. He agreed to hold meetings the next day to appoint officials to rule the town. The same night, King Harold Godwinsson of England approached York from the south, and the townspeople

gave allegiance back to England. The roads were then blocked and the gates closed so no word of their arrival would reach the Norwegians.

The next morning, King Harald divided his forces so that some might guard the ships and others might return to York. In addition, the weather was so beautiful that the men left without wearing their armor. As they approached the town of York they saw the approaching English army. In order to prevent a disaster, Harald sent three men on horses back to the ships to alert the rest of the army, and bring them to assist. Determined to defend with the forces he had at his command, Harald formed a thin line. The fighting was fierce and brutal. King Harald was felled by an arrow to the throat. Rather than accept the terms offered them by King Harold of England, the remaining Norwegians and Tostig preferred to fight and die in the battle.

Following the death of Harald, the fighting began yet again, this time in “Orri’s Battle.” Eystein Orri was one of Harald’s liegemen who arrived from the ships. He had pushed the men so hard that they were collapsing of exhaustion. Many more Norwegians fell. The English victory was short-lived, for three days afterwards William of Normandy invaded England. The final battle between the two forces occurred at Hastings on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1066. William was crowned king of England.

## APPENDIX B: ABOUT THE AUTHOR, SNORRI STURLUSON

*King Harald's Saga* was written by Snorri Sturluson in the years spanning 1220-1235, and is a part of a larger body of work called *Heimskringla*, or “Orb of the World.” It contains the history of Norway from its prehistory to 1177, as told through sagas. These sagas provide the biographical information on the kings who occupied Norway’s throne, as well as provide details of important historic events. Of Sturluson’s writings, Magnus Magnusson writes, “Snorri Sturluson saw history as a continual flow of events which he explained in terms of individual personalities and their aspirations and achievements and failures.”<sup>43</sup> Some historians may debate as to whether Sturluson himself composed the sagas, or whether it was part of local oral tradition, or some combination of the two. One writer<sup>44</sup> suggests that Sturluson was merely a rich and powerful patron and chieftain who commissioned others to scribe earlier works, possibly from Latin. Be that as it may, his immense contribution to Icelandic literature in general and *Heimskringla* in particular is not disputed. The historical accuracy of *Heimskringla* is not what has made it memorable, “so much as the skill in which its individual characters are portrayed, and Sturluson’s greatest achievement, perhaps, was to have created such an immense gallery of brilliantly executed royal portraits from the past.”<sup>45</sup>

Sturluson himself led a life as colorful as those he chose to represent in his literature. Born in Hvamm in 1179 of a wealthy family, his background stems from both that of political power and literary interest. On his father’s side, his recent ancestry included Snorri the Priest, whose son fought with Harald Sigurdsson (another surname for Harald Hardradi, subject of

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<sup>43</sup> Magnus Magnusson, *Iceland Saga*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1987), 194.

<sup>44</sup> Lars Lönnroth, *European Sources*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, in “Introduction to Snorri Sturluson,” *King Harald’s Saga: Harald Hardradi of Norway*, (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 14.

Weir's opera), and Gudmund the Powerful, an Icelandic chieftain. His mother's side included the figures of Markus Skeggjason, poet and law speaker, and Viking poet Egil Skalla-Grimsson, the unsavory but colorful hero of *Egil's Saga*. At the tender age of two he began studies with Jon Loptsson (1124-1197), a chieftain who lived in Oddi. Jon Loptsson provided the artistic, historical, and political background that would color the rest of Sturluson's life. Here among the wealthy, he had access to historical documents (written documents were a luxury at the time) and to influences from members of the Scandinavian and Norwegian courts.

Upon the death of Jon Loptsson, Sturluson entered into many friendships, marriages and alliances to both acquire land and further his wealth and political position in Iceland. He began writing at this time, and his main mode of expression was through prose. It is no surprise that his first major literary contribution is the *Prose Edda*, a collection that preserved the legends of Norse mythology.

In 1218 Sturluson visited Scandinavia, staying at the court of King Hakon Hakonsson. While in Scandinavia he continued his quest for power and was held in high esteem in political circles and appointed a gentleman-in-waiting. It is this meeting with King Hakon that later proved to be Sturluson's downfall and led to his assassination thirty years later.

Back in Iceland, the political climate was reaching a boiling point. It is here that the Sturlung Age is coming to its end, the name "Sturlung" lent from Sturluson's own familial surname. This turbulent period has been described as "an age of flagrant lawlessness, of pledges broken and honor cynically ignored, of pitched battles between chieftains and their changing supporters, of cruelty and treachery and arson and murder."<sup>46</sup> Sturluson became ensnared in many feuds, some involving members of his own family. In 1230 his nephew, Sturla

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 18.

Sighvatsson, became infected with the desire for power and set out against his own uncle. Sturla was an agent of King Hakon, who by this time also wished the downfall of the Sturlungs. The fear for his own safety prompted Sturluson to leave the country. While abroad, Sturla was killed by another minion of King Hakon, Gissur Thorvaldsson, who gained control of the region.

Despite the decree of King Hakon that no Icelanders might leave Norway, Sturluson returned to Iceland in 1239, with no power and the empty title of “Earl.” Gissur was determined to destroy the remnants of the Sturlungs, and decreed that either he be sent to Norway or killed. Sturluson remained in Iceland. While in hiding, seventy men from Gissur’s clan ransacked Sturluson’s farm home, and broke through the stockade Sturluson had built. He was found hiding in the basement, struck down and killed at the age of sixty-two, on 23 September 1241.

## APPENDIX C: JUDITH WEIR - COMPOSITIONS FOR VOICE<sup>47</sup>

### WORKS FOR SOLO VOICE(S) AND UP TO 6 PLAYERS

*The Voice of Desire* (2003)

Mezzo soprano and Pianoforte

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Really?* (2002)

Soprano, Clarinet, Viola and Harp

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Ständchen* (1997)

Baritone and Pianoforte

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*The Alps* (1992)

Soprano and Clarinet / Viola

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Broken Branches* (1992)

Soprano, Pianoforte and Double bass

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*On Buying a Horse* (1991)

Medium Voice and Pianoforte

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Don't Let That Horse* (1990)

Soprano and Horn

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*The Romance Of Count Arnaldos* (1989)

Soprano

Orchestration: 2cl/va.vc.db

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*A Spanish Liederbooklet* (1988)

Soprano and Pianoforte

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

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<sup>47</sup> Compiled from website – Judith Weir, "Chester Novello Composers, Judith Weir."  
<[http://www.chesternovello.com/Default.aspx?TabId=2431&State\\_2905=2&composerId\\_2905=1689](http://www.chesternovello.com/Default.aspx?TabId=2431&State_2905=2&composerId_2905=1689)>. (5 November 2007)

*Songs from the Exotic* (1987)

Low voice and Pianoforte (alternate clarinet and piano)

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Scotch Minstrelsy* (1982)

Tenor [Soprano] and Pianoforte

Publisher: Novello & Co Ltd

*King Harald's Saga* (1979)

Soprano, singing 8 roles

Publisher: Novello & Co Ltd

## **OPERA AND MUSIC THEATER**

*Blond Eckbert (pocket version)* (2006)

Soloists: Baritone, Mezzo Soprano, Soprano, Tenor

Orchestration: Oboe, clarinet (bass clarinet), 2 horns, 2 violins, viola, 2 cellos, harp

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Armida* (2005)

Soloists: Baritone, 2 Basses, 2 Sopranos, 2 Tenors

Orchestration: 0.0.1(bcl).ssx.0/0010/perc/pf/str(1.1.0.2.1)

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*The Skriker* (1994)

Soloists

Orchestration: 3cl(bcl[3soprano sax])/keyboard

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Blond Eckbert* (1993)

Soloists: Baritone, Mezzo Soprano, Soprano, Tenor

Chorus: SATB

Orchestration: 2222/4330/timp/hp/str

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Scipio's Dream* (1991)

Soloists: Tenor or High Baritone, Bass, Mezzo Soprano, Soprano, Tenor

Chorus: SATB

Orchestration: 2cl/2tpt/hp.kbd/gtr/2vn.db

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*The Vanishing Bridegroom* (1990)

Soloists: 2 Baritones (high and low), 2 Baritones, Mezzo Soprano, Soprano, Tenor

Chorus: SSAATTBB (with a number of small roles)

Orchestration: 2222/4230/timp.perc/str

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*A Night at the Chinese Opera* (1987)

Soloists: boy (non-speaking), 2 Baritones, Bass, Countertenor, 2 Mezzo Sopranos, Soprano, 3 Tenors

Orchestration: 2222/4100/2perc/pf/str

Publisher: Novello & Co Ltd

## **MUSIC FOR YOUNG PERFORMERS**

*The Black Spider* (1984)

Soloists: 2 main solo singers

Chorus: SAB or SAA (with many small solo parts)

Orchestration: 3cl/2tpt [suitable wind/str alternatives].acoustic gtr.pf (doubling elec org)

Publisher: Novello & Co Ltd

## **SOLOIST(S) AND ORCHESTRA**

*woman.life.song* (2000)

Soprano and Orchestra

Orchestration: 3(afl.pic)03(bcl)0/3perc/hp.pf/gtr/str(2.0.2.2.1)

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Natural History* (1998)

Soprano and Orchestra

Orchestration: 3(pic,afl)333(cbn)/4301/timp.2perc/hp/str

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Ox Mountain Was Covered by Trees* (1990)

Soloists: Soprano, Countertenor, Baritone

Orchestration: 2222/2000/str

Alternate Soprano, Countertenor and Piano

Orchestration: str(min 2.2.2.2.1)

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

## **SOLOIST AND LARGE ENSEMBLE (7 OR MORE PLAYERS)**

*Horse d'Oeuvres* (1996)

Soloist: Mezzo soprano

Orchestration: 1.1(ca).1+bcl.1/1010/perc/pf/vc.db

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Waltraute's Narration* (1996)

Soloist: Mezzo soprano

Orchestration: 1.1(ca).1+bcl.1/1010/perc/pf/vc.db

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*The Consolations Of Scholarship* (1985)

Soloist: Soprano



Orchestration: 1(afl,pic)111/1000/perc/pf/str(1.0.0.1.0)  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Thread!* (1981)  
Soloist: narrator  
Orchestration: fl(pic,afl)cl(bcl)/perc/pf/str(2.0.1.1.0)  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

## **CHORAL**

*Vertue* (2005)  
Chorus: SATB  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*a blue true dream of sky* (2003)  
Chorus: SSATB, Soprano Solo  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*little tree* (2003)  
Chorus: SSA and Marimba  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*My Guardian Angel* (1999)  
Chorus: 6-part or 4-part + audience  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Love Bade Me Welcome* (1997)  
Chorus: SSATBB  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Two Human Hymns* (1995)  
Chorus: SATB and Organ  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Missa Del Cid* (1988)  
Chorus: SAAATTTBBB  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Illuminare Jerusalem (Jerusalem rejoices for joy)* (1985)  
Chorus: SATB and Organ  
Publisher: Novello & Co Ltd

*Drop Down, Ye Heavens, From Above* (1984)  
Chorus: SATB  
Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Ascending Into Heaven* (1983)

Chorus: SATB and Organ

Publisher: Novello & Co Ltd

### **CHORUS AND ORCHESTRA/ENSEMBLE**

*All The Ends Of The Earth* (1999)

Chorus: mixed chorus

Orchestration: 3 Percussion and Harp

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*We are shadows* (1999)

Chorus: Unison Children's Choir + SSATB

Orchestration: 3(pic)232+cbn/4.3.2+btbn.1/4perc.timp/hp/str

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Storm* (1997)

Chorus: Youth Choir

Orchestration: 3fl(2pic,afl)/3perc/3vc

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Moon and Star* (1995)

Chorus: SSAATTBB

Orchestration: 3(3pic).2+ca.3.3/4.3+Dtpt.3.1/3perc/pf/str

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Our Revels Now Are Ended* (1995)

Chorus: SAA

Orchestration: 3030/0330/timp

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*Sanctus* (1995)

Chorus: SATB

Orchestration: 3333/4331/timp/str

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

*HEAVEN ABLAZE in His Breast* (1989)

Chorus: SSATBB

2 Pianos, and 8 Dancers

Publisher: Chester Music Ltd

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## VITA

Kelly Fiona Lynch was born on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1969 in Erie, Pennsylvania. She is the daughter of Edward C. and Jeanette B. Lynch, the youngest of five children. After graduating with honors from Iroquois High School, she went on to receive a Bachelor of Music from Mercyhurst College, D'Angelo School of Music, in 1991.

Kelly then began five years of intense coaching with Igor Chichagov, the former opera conductor and accompanist to Rosa Ponselle. She also trained extensively in the martial arts, and received her blackbelt in Tae Kwon Do from Kim's Karate in Rockville, Maryland. Subsequently, she returned to the study of music, and received a Master of Music degree in vocal performance from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1998.

After completing her Master of Music degree, Kelly trained as a massage therapist, a trade in which she still excels and adds greatly to her skills as a vocal instructor and coach. In 2000, she began her studies at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. While at Louisiana State University, Kelly taught classes as well as private lessons. Upon completion of her coursework, Kelly held the position as Adjunct Professor at Mercyhurst College, where she taught diction, vocal techniques and private vocal instruction.

Kelly made professional appearances as vocal soloist with Pittsburgh Opera, Erie Opera Theater, the Erie Philharmonic, and the Johnstown Symphony. She has also premiered works by many Pittsburgh composers, including that of Barbara White, and enjoys performing modern and atonal works.

Kelly currently resides in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.