An introduction to the life and the songs of composer Chris DeBlasio, with special emphasis on his cycle All the Way Through Evening

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND THE SONGS
OF COMPOSER CHRIS DEBLASIO,
WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON HIS CYCLE
ALL THE WAY THROUGH EVENING

A Document
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts
in
The School of Music

By
Brian Bonin
B.M., Louisiana College, 2002
M.M., Louisiana State University, 2005
December 2009
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Special thanks are due to the mentors who opened my eyes to DeBlasio’s songs: Paul Sperry and Dr. Loraine Sims. In the early days of my musical studies, Mr. Sperry encouraged my interest in American art song and provided me with a photocopy of the then-unpublished score to All the Way Through Evening. That score might have languished indefinitely on a shelf if not for my master’s level voice teacher, Dr. Sims. A fellow fan of American song, and a supporter of gay causes, she assigned me “Walt Whitman in 1989” from The AIDS Quilt Songbook. I recognized the song as being from the cycle, pulled it off the shelf, and the rest is history.

Finally, I want to thank my doctoral committee for their commitment to my education at Louisiana State University and to this project. Professor Patricia O’Neill has been instrumental in nurturing my vocal and artistic development over the past four years, and more significantly, she has instilled in me a more holistic approach to life. Dr. Lori Bade and Prof. Dennis Jesse have both generously shared their vocal and artistic knowledge, somehow making time for me in spite of their already full teaching and performing duties. Dr. Alison McFarland has instilled in me an appreciation for the potential stumbling blocks when pursuing objectivity in research. Thank you to Professor Kelli Kelley for graciously serving as Dean’s Representative on short notice.
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ABSTRACT

For composer Chris DeBlasio, the omnipresence of HIV/AIDS during the final years of his life helped to channel his creative energies into a unique compositional voice. At a time when certain elements of the New York music scene rewarded atonality and musical experimentation, DeBlasio pursued a lyrically tonal, theatrically-informed style in the company of composers such as Jake Heggie and Ricky Ian Gordon. Unfortunately, his death in 1993 at age thirty-four limited the growing awareness of his compositions in the greater artistic community and robbed him of the success eventually experienced by his fellow tonal compatriots. Today, he is best known for a single song (“Walt Whitman in 1989”) published in *The AIDS Quilt Songbook*.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First of all, I explored the life of Chris DeBlasio, discovering elements of his personality, as well as specific life events, that contributed to his choices as a composer. To accomplish this first goal, I consulted a variety of documentary sources and interviewed several persons who had personal or professional relationships with DeBlasio. This exploration revealed an intense yet disciplined and pragmatic personality whose career was shaped by an abiding love of the theater, a close-knit circle of friends and the homosexual community of 1980s New York City. Secondly, I sought to define the basic characteristics of his art songs. I first analyzed the three sets of songs, defining DeBlasio’s execution of a number of elements such as rhythm, harmony and form. I then concluded with an in-depth analysis of his artistic response to AIDS and death – his song cycle *All the Way Through Evening*. These analyses demonstrate the three primary characteristics found in his songs: his use of musical techniques and poetry that favor accessible realism over esoteric
abstraction, his near-obsessive use of tone painting, and his skillful crafting of poetically and musically cohesive song cycles.

Appendices provide a listing of the published songs and the commercial discography of the songs, as well as a catalogue of the items held in the DeBlasio archives.
INTRODUCTION

For composer Chris DeBlasio, the omnipresence of HIV/AIDS during the final years of his life helped to channel his creative energies into a unique compositional voice. Prior to his AIDS diagnosis, DeBlasio focused the bulk of his compositional energy on theatrical works – primarily incidental music – and “pop songs.” It was not until he was confronted with imminent death that he turned with any seriousness to the composition of art music. He therefore created within that six-year AIDS period a small but significant body of art music in the areas of choral music, chamber music and art song.¹

At a time when certain elements of the New York music scene rewarded atonality and musical experimentation, DeBlasio turned to a lyrically tonal, theatrically-informed style in the company of composers such as Jake Heggie and Ricky Ian Gordon. Unfortunately, his death in 1993 at age thirty-four limited the growing awareness of his compositions in the greater artistic community and robbed him of the success eventually experienced by his fellow tonal compatriots. Today, he is best known for a single song (*Walt Whitman in 1989*) published in *The AIDS Quilt Songbook.*

The purpose of this study is to explore the motivations behind Chris DeBlasio’s choices as a composer and to define the basic characteristics of his art song compositions. I begin with a detailed overview of DeBlasio’s life, collecting information from a variety of documentary sources and from several persons who had personal or professional relationships with him. This chapter devoted to biographical background is only roughly chronological. Rather than delivering a chronological listing of events, I am attempting to address a variety

¹ Harry Huff, musical executor of Chris DeBlasio’s estate, phone interview by author, 15 June 2009, digital recording.
of “threads” that run through DeBlasio’s life and that help to define him as a person. This chapter addresses personality traits as well as various educational and career paths. Ultimately, this exploration of various “life threads” will demonstrate that an abiding love of the theater, a close-knit circle of friends and the homosexual community of 1980s New York City all contributed to the shape of his career.

Chapter two summarizes the basic poetic and musical characteristics of DeBlasio’s complete art song oeuvre. The chapter begins with an overview of the circumstances of composition for each of his three art song groups. I then summarize the basic characteristics of the songs by discussing his execution of the individual poetic and musical elements found in song: choice of poetry, formal concerns, extra-musical effects, harmony and texture, rhythm, the vocal line and text setting, and the piano part. These analyses will demonstrate the three primary characteristics found in the art songs of Chris DeBlasio: his use of musical techniques and poetry that favor accessible realism over esoteric abstraction, his near-obssessive use of tone painting, and his skillful crafting of poetically and musically cohesive song cycles.

Finally, I conclude this project with an in-depth analysis of the genesis and musical architecture of DeBlasio’s artistic response to AIDS and death – his song cycle All the Way Through Evening. In this third chapter I discuss the events that led to the creation of All the Way Through Evening and the cycle’s transmission into the public sphere. The chapter then provides a detailed analysis of both the overall structure of the cycle and the distinctive characteristics found in the individual songs.
CHAPTER ONE

BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Childhood

Parents / Family Background

Chris DeBlasio was born to Conrad DeBlasio and Dr. Margaret Daly DeBlasio of West Long Branch, New Jersey. Conrad was Italian-American, with an extended family centered in the Brooklyn, New York area. His family had a history, extending back to turn-of-the-century Italy, of working in the law profession. Margaret came to the U.S. directly from Scotland. Although of Irish-British ancestry, the Dalys lived in Scotland because Margaret’s father worked there as the headmaster of a school.

Margaret Daly travelled to the United States in 1955 to complete her medical studies, accepting a rotating internship and pediatric residency at Brooklyn Hospital. There she met Conrad DeBlasio, who visited Brooklyn often because of his relatives. The two married in 1958 and settled in West Long Branch, where DeBlasio and his brother Boniface (“Barney”) owned a business.

Both of Chris DeBlasio’s parents demonstrated intellectual aptitude and career success – personality traits their eldest son would inherit. After her three-year residency with Brooklyn Hospital, pediatrician Margaret Daly pursued a career in public health. She headed

---


3 Margaret (Daly DeBlasio) Gregory, phone interview by author, 3 May 2009, digital recording.

4 Ibid.
New Jersey’s maternal and child health program for roughly ten years, then worked with Medicaid for the remainder of her career.\textsuperscript{5}

Conrad DeBlasio designed electronic circuitry, securing six patents for his inventions.\textsuperscript{6}

With his brother serving as businessman, Conrad started a successful electronics firm, Electronic Measurements Company, Inc.\textsuperscript{7} Conrad DeBlasio developed a reputation for being a competent, highly intelligent man:

> I cannot claim to have inherited this genius, but there is genius that runs through the [DeBlasio] family…not me, but Chris and his father. And when I use that word genius, it’s not used lightly... Back in the days, before computers, when you were mathematically inclined, you did electronics. And he literally wrote the book – actually wrote THE book – on electronics at that time, the type of circuitry that was new in the late fifties.\textsuperscript{8}

> – Philip DeBlasio

In fact, even now – here, in Prescott, Arizona – I have met people who used to be in electronics, and they can remember working with power supplies, the electronic measurements made in Eatontown, New Jersey. They say those were good instruments. [Conrad] was a very, very clever person.\textsuperscript{9}

> – Margaret (DeBlasio) Gregory

Neither parent was musically inclined, although there was a history of amateur music making on both sides of the family. Dr. Gregory described her father as an incredibly skilled amateur pianist (“the best I ever heard”), while her mother had a “sweet, true” singing voice. Two of her brothers were also amateur musicians.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{5} Gregory, phone interview by author.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{7} Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author; Securities and Exchange Commission, \textit{Securities and Exchange Commission News Digest}, Issue No. 65-8-11 (16 August 1965).

\textsuperscript{8} Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.

\textsuperscript{9} Gregory, phone interview by author.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
Infancy / Early Childhood

Christopher George DeBlasio was born on February 22, 1959. His middle name acknowledged the fact that February 22\textsuperscript{nd} was also George Washington's birthday. Younger brother Philip followed three years later.\textsuperscript{11}

As an infant Chris DeBlasio already demonstrated a response to musical stimulus. His paternal grandmother would comfort him by singing “O sole mio.” Chris’ mother found that singing to him had similar benefits:

He just responded to music from as far as I can remember, just about from infancy. He used to suck his thumb, and when I sang to him, and I do not sing well, he would take his thumb out of his mouth and smile.\textsuperscript{12}

Tragedy struck the family in 1964: DeBlasio’s father Conrad died in his sleep from a perforated stomach ulcer.\textsuperscript{13} To provide for the children, DeBlasio’s uncle Barney established trust funds for both Chris and Philip from their father’s assets in the electronics company.\textsuperscript{14} For the next two years, Margaret raised the two children alone in West Long Branch.

In the midst of this tough period of emotional adjustment, young Chris DeBlasio demonstrated what was to become one of his trademark personality traits: his take-charge attitude. He and his brother Philip implored their mother to find them a new father. When she failed to respond to the children’s demands, Chris decided to take matters into his own hands:

And one day, Chris came home and he said, “Mom, I’ve solved all of our problems.” So I said, “How did you do that?” “Well,” he said, “I ran around the whole neighborhood and asked everybody if anyone knew of a good father that

\textsuperscript{11} Margaret Gregory to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

\textsuperscript{12} Gregory, phone interview by author.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author; \textit{Securities and Exchange Commission News Digest}. 
was interesting in getting married.” And he did it. I can envision him doing it. So I said, “Dear God, I’m going to have to leave town.” [Laughs] This was the sixties.15 – Margaret (DeBlasio) Gregory

Chris’ behavior did indirectly lead to a father for the children. Margaret DeBlasio shared the story of her son’s embarrassing antics with members of her exercise class, and a member of the class offered her brother as a potential “candidate.”16 Thus Margaret met and then in 1966 married Thomas Gregory. Within a year they had a son, whom they named Richard.17

A Ball of Energy

Chris was smarter than any of us and also fantastically talented. Also fantastically busy. Neither Tom nor I have any musical talent at all and we seemed to spend all of Chris's childhood trying to keep up with Chris's needs, buying instruments for him, getting music teachers for him, going to concerts and plays he was in, going to school prize-giving ceremonies where he won a lot of prizes etc. etc. etc. He seemed to achieve effortlessly, though he was one of the first children I knew to be diagnosed with ADHD before it even had that name. He needed medication during most of grade school.18

– Margaret Gregory

He was pretty hyper; he was just this ball of energy. He was one of these personalities that was just...I don’t know what the word would be…unstoppable. I think when he was like a freshmen or sophomore he had produced/written/directed these productions that we all of course had to go to… And he’d be singing and starring and directing and writing, and actually doing it well. I mean, really for a kid, you’d be like, “Holy toledo, this guy’s got talent.”19

– Philip DeBlasio

15 Gregory, phone interview by author.

16 Ibid. “…between pressure from Chris and Philip and pressure on [Tom] from his sisters, we didn’t have a chance… here we are forty years later, and we owe it all to Chris.”

17 Gregory to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

18 Ibid.

19 Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.
Chris DeBlasio began his childhood with vast stores of energy but limited ability to focus it. In his early school years, Chris had problems concentrating in class, and his poor grades reflected his inattention. At the time, a colleague of Chris’ mother was studying a new condition called “minimal brain damage” – the early term for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. After subjecting Chris to a detailed neurological exam, he diagnosed him with the disorder and prescribed medication. The medication sharpened Chris’ concentration, and his grades improved dramatically. He remained medicated for much of his grade school time.20

With his energy focused, he began to pursue a variety of music and theater endeavors. An insatiable artistic curiosity fueled these endeavors, resulting in his exploration of a wide variety of styles and genres. According to his family, his activities soon engulfed the Gregory/DeBlasio home. Chris’ tendency was to gather the people around him (willing or otherwise) into his work.

Chris’ parents brought him to a wide variety of musical events. His mother enjoyed opera and held a subscription to the Metropolitan Opera. Ballet was in the mix, as were musicals. Chris’ parents also brought him to then-progressive theatrical productions such as Hair, Godspell and Bernstein’s Mass. Chris absorbed it all: “He wanted to listen to everything, learn everything, assimilate it.”21

At the age of nine or ten, he was staging plays in the basement. He and his brother Philip fashioned a stage out of linoleum tiles, using a blanket for a curtain and reading lamps for stage lights. Chris would then recruit neighborhood children both to perform in the play and to serve as audience.22

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20 Gregory, phone interview by author.
21 Ibid.
Musical sound was a constant part of the household. Chris was often listening to music on the home stereo – musical soundtracks ranging from *The Sound of Music* and *Peter and the Wolf* to *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Popular music was also a consistent portion of the musical fabric – the work of artists like Joni Mitchell and Carol King. But Chris was not only listening to the music – he was always pulling his brother into the experience, pointing out various elements of the songs.\(^{23}\)

He was also constantly playing a variety of musical instruments:

> And we had gotten him an electric piano on the theory that, how big could it be, how much of an intrusion could it be? And we began to see that there was no way to live with Chris and a piano of any kind in the same room. The only child I know that had to be begged to stop practicing... So we took the Chrysler and sold it, and bought a Datsun, which was shorter, and at the end of the garage we made a little room, which we insulated heavily. I can still remember my husband pouring insulation into the walls. And we put shag carpeting on as much of the floor and walls as we could get it on. And we bought him a real piano, and our theory was that it wouldn’t be quite so intrusive... Well, sort of...it was pretty successful. It was better than having the piano in the living room.\(^{24}\)

> – Margaret Gregory

In his junior high years, Chris added composition to the mix of activities. He returned home from school one day with a stack of manuscript books. Having concluded the required class work, and having no interest in using the books again, his classmates had given their mostly-blank manuscript books to Chris. He excitedly proclaimed to his mother, “Now I can write my own music.” She recalled that he used every one of those books.\(^{25}\)

\(^{22}\) Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.

\(^{23}\) Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author. “I remember him just, ‘Phillip, you’ve gotta listen to this,’ and he would put this *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and it was just playing in our house on the little phonograph thing that we had, over and over and over again, so that I knew all of the songs from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and here I am, probably eight years old.”

\(^{24}\) Gregory, phone interview by author.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
Musical Activities

Chris DeBlasio benefitted during his formative years from the tutelage of prominent American music educators. Until the family moved to East Windsor, New Jersey in 1972, he studied guitar, percussion and perhaps clarinet with Dr. Henry Melnik, the musicologist and educator who published several band method books. DeBlasio also played with the Greater North Shore Concert band, formed by Dr. Melnik in 1967.

At some point during these West Long Branch years, DeBlasio attended the Appel Farm Summer Arts Camp in rural Salem County, New Jersey. DeBlasio’s mother had seen an advertisement for the camp in a Metropolitan Opera program and suggested it to her eldest son. He composed music that summer, including a waltz about Zelda Fitzgerald called “Crazy Zelda.” DeBlasio displayed his usual tendency to take charge of a situation, as evidenced by his brother Philip’s experience at the camp two years later:

I remember going there, and there were people that just, “Oh my God, are you Chris DeBlasio’s brother?” And there was this cachet that I had for weeks, that I had at this camp, because I was Chris DeBlasio’s brother. He ran that place, oh my God! I got to see pictures that people had taken of Chris, and there he is, sitting with a baton in his hand on a stool, with those big brown eyes of his and that long, wavy brown hair of his, and just directing people.

After the family moved to East Windsor in 1972, DeBlasio began studying composition and keyboard with Dr. David Kraehenbuehl, the American composer, theorist

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26 Gregory, phone interview by author; Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author. Philip DeBlasio remembers Chris practicing guitar and clarinet.


28 Gregory, phone interview by author.

29 Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.
and music educator.\textsuperscript{30} The DeBlasio/Gregory family had met Kraehenbuehl at the Catholic church they attended. DeBlasio eventually became the organist at the church.\textsuperscript{31}

During his high school years, at Hightstown High School, DeBlasio primarily focused on acting and singing in a variety of theatrical projects. Some of these projects took place at his high school, but not all. For instance, he performed in a few productions at an exclusive private school in the area, the Peddie School.\textsuperscript{32}

The artistic culmination of DeBlasio’s high school years was the musical \textit{Dear George!} DeBlasio was part of a group of students at Hightstown High School who in the fall of 1974 undertook the task of writing a musical based on historical events in New Jersey during the Revolutionary War. The musical was to be a celebration of the upcoming 1976 United States Bicentennial. The students wrote and revised the dialogue script four times, but by the end of the 1974-75 school year the project remained unfinished and already past its proposed performance date. The script was in draft form, and the lyrics and music were unwritten. The student group disbanded for the summer.\textsuperscript{33}

DeBlasio returned to school in the fall of 1975 and singlehandedly completed the final revision of the script, wrote the lyrics and composed the music. \textit{Dear George!}, with DeBlasio

\textsuperscript{30} Krahenbuhl, a former Yale professor who had founded \textit{The Journal of Music Theory}, moved to New Jersey in 1960 to pursue the revitalization of American music education. He also composed music for the American Roman Catholic Church’s new English liturgy. For further information, consult Charles Burkhart’s article “Meet David Kraehenbuehl: A Composer Worth Hearing” in the Sept. 10, 2004 issue of \textit{Commonweal}.

\textsuperscript{31} Gregory, phone interview by author.

\textsuperscript{32} Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author. “I know people that knew Chris, and they have memories of Chris at the Peddie School. How he got permission from a private school to do plays…I remember he was in \textit{Godspell} over there. They were the most professional drama and musical thing in the Hightstown area.”

\textsuperscript{33} Gregory to Brian Bonin, electronic mail. Dr. Gregory also mailed me a copy of the \textit{Dear George!} concert program.
as one of the singer/actors, premiered at Hightstown High School on February 6, 1976. The script received the New Jersey Historical Society’s “Jerseymen Award” for Bicentennial writing.\(^{34}\)

**From Acting to Composing**

Both Chris and I couldn’t wait to get to New York. It was just like Mecca. It was home – before we ever even lived there, it was home. We knew that’s where the arts were, and that’s where we had to be.\(^{35}\) – Philip DeBlasio

Chris DeBlasio enrolled in summer school in 1976 and was therefore able to complete his high school education within three academic years. As his mother and brother Philip have indicated, Chris was impatient to move from his small town to the thriving artistic hub of New York City.\(^{36}\) He subsequently enrolled at New York University in the fall of 1976.\(^{37}\)

The reader may be surprised at this point to learn that DeBlasio’s major at NYU was Acting, not Music or Composition.\(^{38}\) However, as his brother Philip indicated, Chris DeBlasio’s interests had always centered on the theatrical. He had loved contemporary musicals such as *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* and constantly listened to the soundtracks. Furthermore, a vein of theatrical performing ran through his entire childhood, from his impromptu plays in the family basement to *Dear George!* itself. Composing, and music in general, were simply tools to aid in performing and creating works of theater.\(^{39}\)

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\(^{34}\) The concert program for *Dear George!*

\(^{35}\) Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.

\(^{36}\) Ibid; Gregory, phone interview by author.

\(^{37}\) Jose M. Pineiro, Assistant Registrar of New York University, to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.
DeBlasio remained at New York University for one academic year, studying acting with Greek director Nikos Psacharopoulos through NYU’s consortium with the Circle in the Square Theatre School.\textsuperscript{40} Over the course of that year, DeBlasio apparently realized that acting itself was not his top priority:

He loved acting, and I think he loved Circle in the Square. He made very good friends, but he kept writing music for the plays that he was doing… He just said, “You know, I always come back to the music.” I remember him saying that, “I always come back to the music, and I find myself wanting to write music for all the plays I’m in.”\textsuperscript{41}

– Philip DeBlasio

Evidence of DeBlasio’s theatrical work at New York University supports the idea that he, with the tacit consent of his colleagues and teachers, increasingly defined himself as a musician/composer. In a 1983 resume that lists music and composition work, he cites two productions in 1977. Both productions occur at NYU, and in both cases he credits himself as “composer/musical director/accompanist.” He served in a similar capacity in two productions at NYU in 1978 – even though he was no longer a student at the university.\textsuperscript{42}

DeBlasio ended his studies at NYU after the spring of 1977, and in January 1978 he enrolled at the Manhattan School of Music as a composition major.\textsuperscript{43} While at the Manhattan School, he studied composition with Giampaolo Bracali and John

\textsuperscript{40} Pineiro to Brian Bonin, electronic mail; Chris DeBlasio, resume of music and composition work (1983); David Pleva, Admissions Officer at Circle in the Square Theatre School, to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

\textsuperscript{41} Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.

\textsuperscript{42} Chris DeBlasio, resume (1983).

\textsuperscript{43} John K. Blanchard, Director of Alumni Affairs at the Manhattan School of Music, to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.
Corigliano.\textsuperscript{44} He continued his theatrical collaborations, offering original music or his services as music director/accompanist for an array of plays, musicals and dance concerts in New York City and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{45} The career high point during his Manhattan School studies came in the summer of 1980, when he served as Composer-in-Residence for the Williamstown Theatre Festival’s Second Company. He composed incidental music and served as music director for four productions at the festival: \textit{As You Like It} (Shakespeare), \textit{Chekhov's Creatures} (four one act plays by Anton Chekhov), \textit{In the Jungle of Cities} (Bertolt Brecht) and \textit{The Water Engine} (David Mamet).\textsuperscript{46} This opportunity possibly came at the hands of his former acting teacher, Nikos Psacharopoulos, who was the artistic director of the festival.

Chris DeBlasio graduated from the Manhattan School of Music on May 17, 1981. At the graduation ceremony, the school awarded him the Jon Woolley Merit Award for “outstanding achievement in composition.”\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{The Salon Circle of Friends}

He had a huge social network; I was always surprised. He always had a big social network. For someone who could be so demanding and kind of critical and very difficult to deal with, it shocked me how many people loved him.\textsuperscript{48}

– Philip DeBlasio

Early in DeBlasio’s time at the Manhattan School, he took a position as a paid singer in the choir at Calvary Episcopal Church at Gramercy Park. During the 1970s and early


\textsuperscript{45} Chris DeBlasio, resume (1983).

\textsuperscript{46} Williamstown Theatre Festival website, \url{http://www.wtfestival.org} (accessed 4 June 2009).

\textsuperscript{47} Blanchard to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

\textsuperscript{48} Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.
1980s Calvary was a hub of music activity because of its music director, the organist and composer Calvin Hampton. One of the staples of the Calvary program was Hampton’s weekly “Fridays at Midnight” organ recital series, which by the late 1970s had achieved cult status. DeBlasio attended one of these concerts, and when Hampton announced that he needed basses for the choir, DeBlasio joined.49

As the remainder of this section will demonstrate, joining the Calvary Choir had a profound impact on the remainder of Chris DeBlasio’s life, both socially and artistically. The connections he made in that choir developed into an especially rich social circle and led to most of his music and composition activities.

The process began with developing friendships. DeBlasio and Calvin Hampton developed a close friendship and artistic exchange.50 When Harry Huff came to Calvary in 1979 as Hampton’s assistant, he and DeBlasio developed a close friendship and subsequently collaborated on a variety of musical projects.51 Huff’s friend Virginia Lowery, a professional singer and Juilliard graduate, eventually joined the Calvary Choir, and in short order she also became a close friend of DeBlasio.52

In the early 1980s these friendships developed into an especially fruitful roommate situation. In 1981 DeBlasio, Huff, and organists Marshall Foster and Scott George moved

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49 Harry Huff, musical executor of Chris DeBlasio’s estate, phone interview by author, 15 June 2009, digital recording. Huff learned of the details of DeBlasio joining the choir from a former choir member, Larry Long. Calvin Hampton made significant contributions to both the organ repertoire and the current hymnals of numerous Christian denominations. Further information concerning Calvin Hampton’s life and artistry is available at [http://www.artistswithaids.org/artforms/music/catalogue/hampton.html](http://www.artistswithaids.org/artforms/music/catalogue/hampton.html).

50 Huff, phone interview by author. “Chris obviously looked up to Calvin; but Chris had his own ideas, and they had very stimulating, heated discussions on a regular basis about music.”

51 Ibid.

52 Virginia Lowery, phone interview by author, 3 June 2009, digital recording.
into a spacious apartment at the intersection of Broadway Avenue and 102nd Street. Within a year, Lowery replaced Scott George as the fourth roommate, and the quartet was complete:\footnote{Lowery, phone interview by author.}

The first two or three years we lived together, it was just Camelot. It was the most wonderful family community situation...We were all poor, extremely poor. We ordered Chinese takeout every night and then lived on it the rest of the week, but we were happy. And we had parties all the time; we had parties at least once a week with over a hundred people, because we had this really huge apartment. We had musicales all the time – all of our friends were musicians, either opera singers or instrumentalists or cabaret singers...so it was a real salon, a sort of Bohemian salon.\footnote{Huff, phone interview by author.} – Harry Huff

The quartet of roommates began referring to themselves and their circle of close friends as “the family” or “immediate family.”\footnote{Lowery, phone interview by author.} The group cared for each other physically and emotionally, often spending the holidays together.\footnote{Ibid; Huff, phone interview by author; Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.} Humor and wit were constant elements in the social dynamic.

As the group consisted almost entirely of musicians, a key part of “the family” was the exchange of artistic energy. Members of the family often engaged in recreational artistic collaborations, musical or otherwise.\footnote{Lowery, phone interview by author.} The group hosted parties every week, and these parties often were either officially designated as “musicales” or quickly turned into impromptu performances:

Everybody would sing opera arias, Chris would play his new songs and sing, and we had cabaret singers that would do their numbers. Everybody would sort of do their own thing. And lots of food and lots of drink.\footnote{Huff, phone interview by author.} – Harry Huff
DeBlasio was also part of an artistic hub centering on the apartment of Clinton Smith and Eric Benson. Once again, the connection began at Calvary Church: Benson sang in the Calvary Choir, and Smith was a member of the congregation. DeBlasio was a stilt dancer who performed widely as part of the duo “Friends in High Places.” Eric Benson was a tenor but had so many pursuits that he was a sort of Renaissance man. Their apartment was a spacious loft on Second Avenue, between 9th and 10th Streets. The two often held salon-style evenings in which both hosts and guests would perform. Benson encouraged many living composers, including DeBlasio, to present their songs at these salon events.

These two sets of friend-organized, impromptu musical gatherings provided DeBlasio many opportunities to perform his music. His primary output during the early 1980s consisted of musical theater songs and songs written in a “pop” or cabaret style, both of which were ideally suited to these intimate venues. He would typically perform the works himself, both singing and playing the piano. Many friends and colleagues have commented on his engaging performing style:

I have a videotape of him doing a kind of one-man show of let’s say cabaret songs, but they were very dark and hateful and ugly and fabulous, in all different styles. He was an excellent performer. He knew exactly how everything should go – you know, the Lotte Lenya style—without necessarily always having the

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59 Huff, phone interview by author.

60 Mimi Stern-Wolfe to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

61 Stern-Wolfe to Brian Bonin, electronic mail; Huff, phone interview by author. As a singer, Benson made a hobby of studying with famous tenors such as John Alexander and Hugues Cuénod. His other pursuits included directing, writing poetry and pursuing the Buddhist and Quaker traditions.

62 Mimi Stern-Wolfe, phone interview by author, 8 June 2009, digital recording.
voice to sing it. But it was still always amazing, a very compelling performer, really smart. – William Berger

These two sets of artistic hubs also provided DeBlasio with personal connections that led to a variety of performance and composition opportunities. Thanks to roommate Harry Huff, he met the singer Michael Dash in the fall of 1993. Dash and DeBlasio developed a close friendship and often collaborated artistically. Most significantly, Michael Dash premiered both the piano and orchestral versions of DeBlasio’s song cycle All the Way Through Evening. Huff also helped DeBlasio to secure work as an orchestral arranger for cabaret singer Martha Schlamme.

DeBlasio’s friendship with Eric Benson yielded even more connections, both musical and theatrical. DeBlasio met Mimi Stern-Wolfe, the director of Downtown Music Productions, at one of Benson’s “salon” evenings. As a result of their acquaintance, Stern-Wolfe took advantage of DeBlasio’s varied talents in a 1986 Downtown Music double bill: he performed his Howard Moss song set A Swim Off the Rocks as part of a cabaret program on the first half of the concert, and then in the second half he portrayed the character of “Billy” in a performance of Weill’s Mahagonny Songspiel. Mimi Stern-Wolfe, in turn, introduced DeBlasio to Ilsa Gilbert, the poet who eventually contributed texts for the song set Villagers.

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64 Huff, phone interview by author. Huff met Michael Dash at the Aspen Music Festival in the summer of 1983 and, once both returned to New York, quickly introduced him to “the family.”

65 Perry Brass, “All the Way Through Evening,” liner notes to And Trouble Came: Musical Responses to AIDS (Composers Recordings, Inc. CD 729). Further information about Michael Dash appears in chapter three of this document, in the section titled The Creation of All the Way Through Evening.

66 Harry Huff to Brian Bonin, electronic mail. In this case, Huff was actually returning a favor. Through indirect means, DeBlasio suggested Huff in 1983 as an accompanist for Schlamme. Huff often brought Schlamme to their apartment, which eventually led to DeBlasio arranging Kurt Weill songs for Schlamme’s 1984 concert with Huff and the Aspen Wind Quintet.
and the comic scena *Whatever You Say, He Sings*. Downtown Music Productions has subsequently programmed many of DeBlasio’s art songs on its annual Benson AIDS Series concert, including the premiere of the piano version of *All the Way Through Evening*.67

Eric Benson likewise made an important theatrical connection for DeBlasio – the director Nicholas Deutsch. Deutsch used DeBlasio as pianist and/or composer for a number of theatrical projects during the 1980s. Deutsch in turn connected DeBlasio with three other artistically significant figures. He first suggested to DeBlasio the poetry of Howard Moss, from which DeBlasio created numerous songs. He then introduced DeBlasio to the lyricist Sharon Holland, who eventually wrote the book and lyrics for DeBlasio’s operetta *A Murder is Foretold*.68 Finally, he suggested that DeBlasio set the *Five Gay Jewish Prayers* of Perry Brass, which led to poet and composer collaborating on two other song projects.69

In the late 1980s, a new artistic influence emerged. As his relationship with his eventual partner William Berger deepened, DeBlasio increasingly turned to Berger for artistic guidance. Although not a professional musician, Berger had for years been an opera aficionado and was well acquainted with the general art music canon. He and DeBlasio often had long, sometimes heated discussions about a wide variety of composers and pieces of music. Berger disliked DeBlasio’s cursory dismissal of broad swatches of the art music canon, and over the course of their relationship, he continually encouraged DeBlasio to broaden his knowledge of art music repertoire. By the early 1990s, Berger was acting as a

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67 Stern-Wolfe, phone interview by author; Stern-Wolfe to Brian Bonin, electronic mail. The “Friends in High Places” stilt dancing duo (Clinton Smith and Coralie Romanyslyn) danced during a couple of songs in the performance of *A Swim Off the Rocks*. During a particularly long piano interlude, DeBlasio (without stilts) joined Clinton Smith (with stilts) in a dance routine.

68 Nicholas Deutsch, phone interview by author, 5 June 2009, digital recording.

69 Brass, interview by author. Deutsch suggested that DeBlasio set Brass’ poems for an AIDS benefit cabaret that Deutsch was organizing. For further information on Brass’ relationship with Chris DeBlasio, consult chapter three.
sounding board for DeBlasio’s compositions and was even helping DeBlasio find texts for his vocal works.  

**Personality**

He was emphatic…that is a good word for him. He was vivid. There was absolutely nothing bland about Chris at all, nothing laid back about him. He was intense.  

– Sandra Goodman

The main thing I remember is that wicked sense of humor. He could make me laugh like no anybody ever has. And it was just witty, so that I remember thinking when Chris died, that our gang of friends, we had lost our Oscar Wilde.  

– Virginia Lowery

When discussing DeBlasio’s personality, his family, friends and colleagues who contributed comments for this project delivered many of the same insights. The overall descriptions of DeBlasio as a person and an artist were highly positive, focusing on his prodigious talent and his magnetic personality. His high level of intelligence was a frequent topic of conversation, with people using terms such as “brilliant” and “witty.” Another common topic was his pragmatic approach to life and career.

Yet another common theme was DeBlasio’s dry, sarcastic sense of humor. Each of his friends recounted several instances in which DeBlasio delivered a humorous and often biting

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70 Berger, interview by author; Bill Bell, “He’ll Sing a Psalm for Victims of AIDS,” *New York Daily News*, 30 November 1992. Berger suggested the text for what would become DeBlasio’s choral work *Psalm 41*. William Berger is now a music host for WNYC radio in New York and has written several introductory guides to opera.

71 Sandra Goodman, contralto recitalist, phone interview by author, 1 June 2009, digital recording.

72 Lowery, phone interview by author.

73 The following persons interviewed for this project specifically discussed DeBlasio’s intelligence: Margaret Gregory, Philip DeBlasio, William Berger, Virginia Lowery, Harry Huff, Perry Brass and Sandra Goodman. Goodman stated that DeBlasio would always work on the *New York Times* crossword puzzle during the sermons at Trinity Wall Street Church and would usually finish most of it by the conclusion of the sermon. “Now that’s saying quite a bit, for the *New York Times* crossword puzzle, which is pretty damn hard.”

commentary on a situation or a person. For example, Harry Huff described an instance in which a rhythmically challenged violinist presented a rendition of “Blue Moon” at one of the “family’s” musicales. At the conclusion of the performance, DeBlasio commented, “What a novel approach, leaving out the necessary rests!”

From these interviews, one especially dominant personality trait emerges: intensity. A certain vigor seemed to underscore much of DeBlasio’s activities and heavily influenced his relationships with others. In some respects, especially in regards to finances and organization, it led to obsessive behavior. However, for the most part his intensity merely energized the events of his life.

This intensity manifested in a variety of guises. One such guise was a certain take-charge attitude. He had an uncanny ability to appraise a situation, determine what work needed to be done, and then accomplish the task. This can-do approach is evident in everything from the creation of Dear George! to his work with the AIDS advocacy organization “ACT-UP.” When the task involved assuming a leadership role and delegating responsibility, people typically followed DeBlasio’s lead. As his brother Philip explained, some element of his intensity translated into an inspiring magnetism:

I mean, everything he got into in his life was this kind of eye-opening experience for all of us. He was just cutting-edge. He really led us all. You just followed Chris. Anyone that knew him, all of his friends will tell you this, they all just kind of followed in his wake… He was just a force of nature. 

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75 Huff, phone interview by author. Huff concluded the story, “We all had to leave the room, it was just too much.”

76 Huff to Brian Bonin; electronic mail; Berger, “Chris DeBlasio,” 156.

77 Information about DeBlasio’s work with ACT-UP appears in the section titled Chris’ AIDS Crises.

78 Philip DeBlasio, phone interview by author.
Closely related to the take-charge attitude was self-discipline, especially in regards to his work as a composer. According to friends, DeBlasio was highly motivated to establish himself as a composer and thus both accepted an astonishing number of projects and pursued his own project ideas. William Berger’s description of DeBlasio’s daily routine provides an indication of this work ethic. When he and DeBlasio lived together in their two-bedroom apartment, DeBlasio used the second bedroom as an office. Each day, when Berger would go to work in the morning, DeBlasio would go into his office and work on his compositions for eight hours. If Berger complained about his workday, DeBlasio would respond, “Well, I was in the office all day, too.”

An interesting side effect of DeBlasio’s intense nature is that it often led to behavior in the polar extremes. He could be extremely kind and then scathingly cruel. He could be rigidly opinionated but also insatiably curious for new ideas and perspectives. His friends often described a negative behavior and then qualified it with a corresponding positive. Typical is the poet Perry Brass’ recollection of a situation in which he suggested to DeBlasio that they become a lyricist/composer team:

And he was very cruel about that. He said to me, “You are not a lyricist, you’re not going to become one, you’re nowhere near it…” Chris could be that way with people. That was one side of him. Then there was this other side of him where he was very protective of me. He made sure that the credit for the work was always shared – that I was always told about performances, that I was always included in the performances.

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79 William Berger, Virginia Lowery and Harry Huff each mentioned DeBlasio’s extreme work ethic.

80 Berger, interview by author.

81 Sandra Goodman perhaps summed it up best: “There was no halfway measure with Chris.”

82 Brass, interview by author.
DeBlasio’s reactions to people and events could be intensely negative or positive. If DeBlasio thought that someone had behaved wrongly, his verdicts could be blunt and cruel, causing the recipient hurt and embarrassment. When angry, he would often go to the piano and furiously bang out the bitonal, percussive chords found in Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* or go to the kitchen and bang pots and pans while he cooked spaghetti sauce. On the other hand, he could demonstrate extreme kindness and generosity to those about whom he cared:

He was very generous in keeping in touch with people. And like that long six months when I was over [singing] in Europe, I was very lonely and missing everybody. Chris is the one person that would write me these lovely long letters. He was great that way. – Virginia Lowery

So he was moody. But he was also incredibly giving and caring – he was such a good caretaker of me. I remember one time that I was deathly ill with the flu, and he stayed up with me all night, and I wasn’t getting better, and he went across town to get medicine for me at like 4AM. And stayed with me while I was sick. – Harry Huff

Another set of polar extremes related to his ability to change. Especially in his early adulthood, DeBlasio could be rigid and unyielding in terms of his patterns of behavior. He held incredibly strong opinions on a variety of topics, and he shared his views quite vocally when those topics were broached. Nonetheless, he retained from his childhood a certain receptivity to new experiences, especially in respect to music. This openness led to him gradually shedding layers of dogmatic ideology:

He was the kind, he would tell you if he thought you spoke out of turn, he would say, “Shut up, you’re an idiot.” But he would expect people to say the same to

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83 Huff, phone interview by author; Lowery, phone interview by author. Lowery said that the roommates referred to DeBlasio’s piano outbursts as “playing the Stravinsky chord.”

84 Lowery, phone interview by author.

85 Huff, phone interview by author.

86 Berger, “Chris DeBlasio,” 156.
him, when he spoke out of turn, and would always admit to it. “You’re right, I don’t know Boito well enough [to insult it]. I’m going to study it and let you know what I think.” And then he’d come back and say, “Wow, this is amazing.” He was a tough ass, but that’s what makes a tough ass tolerable, that they’re tough on themselves too. And the idea is, we all need to learn a lot.  

— William Berger

The Composer’s Roles

The Pop Song Composer

A significant element of DeBlasio’s compositional life, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were songs for voice and piano that his friends typically referred to as “pop songs.” Although musically more complex, these songs did share certain elements of style with “pop music” of the period. He typically composed them for himself and for his friends, with little or no intention of marketing them to the public. Several of these songs existed only in his memory, while for others he notated only the vocal melody with chord symbols.  

DeBlasio wrote both the lyrics and music for many of these pieces, and as the following titles indicate, events from his daily life often served as inspiration: “The Waiting Room,” “Letter from Barb,” and “To a Friendly Neighbor.”

A common assessment of DeBlasio’s more “serious” works is that they possess a unique lyrical quality. As part of the process of defining this lyric style, any analyst must acknowledge an element of influence that derives from DeBlasio’s enduring interest and creative exploration in the popular music sphere.

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87 Berger, interview by author.

88 Lowery, phone interview by author. A former boyfriend of DeBlasio, Alan Greenspan, owned a cassette recording from 1983 of DeBlasio playing and singing several of his songs. Lowery has since transferred the contents of the cassette to compact disc.

The Theater Composer

DeBlasio’s childhood love of the theater persisted even as he pursued a composition career. Throughout the 1980s he sought out work in the theater world – largely in New York City, and largely with small-budget theater companies – in a variety of capacities. He served as pianist, and sometimes music director, for several plays and musicals. He composed original incidental music for a number of plays. And twice in his post-university years he composed a work of genuine musical theater: Instant Lives, a musical based on poetry and prose of Howard Moss; and A Murder Is Foretold, based on an Oscar Wilde story. 90

Director Nicholas Deutsch described DeBlasio as a composer who was confident in a theater environment. He especially complimented DeBlasio’s ability to balance “strong ideas” in the creative realm with the ensemble collaboration necessary for a work of theater. Deutsch noted that DeBlasio was receptive to the director’s vision of the production, came to rehearsals to obtain accurate timings for musical cues, and developed incidental scores that complimented the interpretations of the specific performers in each production. As he concluded, “that shows a real theater person.” 91

Certain individuals familiar with DeBlasio’s work have asserted the presence of a theatrical quality even in his non-theater works. 92 His tendency toward poetry with certain dramatic qualities, his tendency toward rhythmic incisiveness, and his use of bold musical gestures all contribute toward a general sense of the theatrical in his music.

90 Chris DeBlasio, resume (1983); Chris DeBlasio, resume of composition work (1993). The Instant Lives project never materialized; all that remains are several songs based on Howard Moss verse. The Ten-Ten Theater produced a staged reading of A Murder Is Foretold in 1990.

91 Deutsch, phone interview by author.

92 Berger, interview by author; Stern-Wolfe to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.
The Gay Composer

Chris…it was important to him to be known as a gay composer. It was the totally opposite with Calvin [Hampton] – he did NOT want to be known as a gay composer, he wanted to be known as a composer. Chris really wanted to be openly gay through his music…

– Harry Huff

Any discussion of Chris DeBlasio’s life would be incomplete without acknowledging the role his homosexuality played in his work as a composer. Throughout his adult life, he consistently demonstrated an interest in projects with some relation to the gay community. Living in a major metropolitan area such as New York City afforded him many opportunities to pursue work that openly addressed the experience of the gay male. He collaborated with the director Nick Deutsch on a number of gay theater projects, from one act plays to full-length plays to AIDS cabarets. The most significant of these collaborations were three full-length gay male plays for which DeBlasio provided incidental scores: Stray Dog Story (Robert Chesley, 1983), Night Sweat (Robert Chesley, 1984) and Adam and the Experts (Victor Bumbalo, 1989).

DeBlasio also had a tendency to set texts by homosexual authors and to use texts with homosexual overtones. In his “pop,” theater and art songs, DeBlasio favored texts by a number of writers who were openly or questionably homosexual: William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, W.H. Auden, Oscar Wilde, Bertolt Brecht, Elizabeth Bishop, Howard Moss and Perry Brass. DeBlasio’s own “pop song” lyrics blatantlly refer to lovers as “he.” His song cycle to poetry by Perry Brass, All the Way Through Evening, addresses the experience of a

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93 Huff, phone interview by author

94 The Meridian Gay Theatre produced Stray Dog Story and Night Sweat, while the 3-Dollar Bill Theater produced Adam and the Experts. Night Sweat has the distinction of being the first full-length play about AIDS produced in the United States.
gay man dying of AIDS. Similarly, his choral work *The Best-Beloved* uses Jacobean poetry with homoerotic elements.

**The Tonal Composer**

[Chris and I, we were] two composers very much out of step with the musical establishment… Writing a tonal scale or a triad is still in many quarters considered the worst thing you could do. They don’t give up easily. Modernists have invested their whole lives in modernism, so what are they gonna do?95

– Lee Hoiby

The vast majority of Chris DeBlasio’s *oeuvre* employs a tonal harmonic structure. However, in his essay about DeBlasio, William Berger describes a composer who initially resisted his own tonal tendencies in the midst of pressures to compose avant-garde music.96 In the present day (2009), when composers of tonal vocal music such as Jake Heggie and Ricky Ian Gordon are finding great commercial success, it seems surprising that only two decades ago DeBlasio would have encountered resistance to the tonal idiom. However, evidence suggests that in the art music community a bias toward extreme musical experimentation persisted into the 1990s, especially in academic circles and in metropolitan areas such as New York City.97 Peter G. Davis’ review of the Chris DeBlasio memorial concert alludes to the change of viewpoints that occurred over the course of a decade:

Now that the new-music scene is no longer terrorized by ideological agendas and stylistic dogma, the fact that DeBlasio unashamedly wrote in a welcoming tonal

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95 Lee Hoiby, phone interview by author, 7 February 2009, digital recording.


97 Evidence of a bias toward experimentation, and the gradual easing of this prejudiced tendency, is widely available in the archives of newspapers and magazines of major metropolitan areas, as well as in academic music journals. For a sampling of this debate, please consult Roland Nadeau’s “Crisis of Tonality: What Is Avant-Garde?” in *Music Educators Journal* 67, no. 7 (March 1981): 36-41.
idiom, even liberally filling his scores with key signatures, hardly needs defending.\textsuperscript{98}

A further demonstration of this atonality-bias can be found in the artistic friendship between DeBlasio and American composer Lee Hoiby. Hoiby, who also wrote in a tonal, pop-influenced idiom, had for decades felt isolated from the art music establishment. Around 1990, DeBlasio was singing at Trinity-Wall Street Church in New York City. The choir often sang Hoiby’s anthems, which DeBlasio greatly admired. A mutual friend from the choir served as a point of connection for the two composers, allowing DeBlasio to send Hoiby copies of some of his own compositions. Hoiby was thrilled to find a kindred spirit in music and subsequently invited DeBlasio and William Berger to visit him and his partner Mark Shulgasser in upstate New York on a few occasions. The two composers “would sit at the piano all day,” enjoying each other’s music and company:\textsuperscript{99}

I had been looking all my life for a contemporary composer that I could really feel deeply about...When I first heard \textit{All the Way Through Evening} and one of his choral pieces, I just was struck with amazement at his talent. I consider it one of the deepest losses imaginable that he’s gone from us.\textsuperscript{100} – Lee Hoiby

Any analysis of DeBlasio’s music must consider this tonal/experimental struggle as part of his developing compositional style. The analyst should consider the influence of factors such as performers, performance venue, the intended audience and the date of composition when noting the harmonic status of a piece.


\textsuperscript{99} Berger, interview by author.

\textsuperscript{100} Hoiby, phone interview by author.
Lifestyle and Composition

During his adult life, DeBlasio survived almost entirely on the trust fund established when his father died. The dividends from this fund were not substantial, but DeBlasio lived within its financial limits so that he could devote himself full-time to composition. According to Harry Huff and William Berger, DeBlasio lived quite frugally and avoided many luxuries such as dining at restaurants.\(^{101}\)

DeBlasio’s music work for which he received compensation fell into two categories: theater and church. Both of these work areas provided opportunities that encouraged him to pursue three primary areas of composition: theater music, sacred music and art songs. Discussions of DeBlasio’s theater work appeared earlier in this chapter, so this section will focus primarily on his church work.

DeBlasio was a professional church choir singer, a baritone, for most of his adult life. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, he first sang at Calvary Episcopal Church with Calvin Hampton. When Hampton resigned after Pentecost Sunday 1983, many of his choir members, DeBlasio included, left as well. After withdrawing from the Calvary choir, DeBlasio obtained work with the professional choir at Trinity-Wall Street Episcopal Church, under the direction of Larry King. He remained at Trinity until the early 1990s, shortly after King’s death from stomach cancer.\(^{102}\)

DeBlasio’s friendship with Harry Huff, Hampton’s former assistant at Calvary, led to him composing three duets for organ and another instrument. In 1986 Huff became the Artist-in-Residence at Union Theological Seminary. As part of the Residency, each year

\(^{101}\) Berger, interview by author; Huff to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

\(^{102}\) Huff, phone interview by author.
Huff’s supervisor would commission a work for organ and an instrument not normally paired with the organ. In 1987 the supervisor suggested a duet for organ and classical guitar. Huff offered the commission to DeBlasio, who accepted it in part because of his childhood familiarity with the guitar. The success of the resulting work, *God Is Our Righteousness* (1987), led to DeBlasio composing two other duets for Huff independent of a commission: *Music for a Short Subject* (1989) for organ and soprano saxophone, and *Serenade* (1991) for organ and violin.  

DeBlasio’s presence in church choirs, with the resulting opportunities for professional connections, led to commissions for several primarily sacred choral works. His professional relationships with Calvin Hampton and Larry King provided opportunities to compose works for Calvary Church and Trinity-Wall Street. His collaborations with these men and Harry Huff led to two other significant sacred commissions. His most famous choral work is *The Best-Beloved* (1990), a setting of four Jacobean sacred poems. David Varnum, the Director of Concerts at Trinity Church, commissioned the work in honor of Larry King on the occasion of his retirement as Director of Music.

DeBlasio’s presence at Trinity-Wall Street also led indirectly to the composition of a major portion of his art song repertoire. DeBlasio sang in the Trinity Choir with contralto Sandra Goodman. When in 1988 the choir sang DeBlasio’s anthem *As Jesus Came to Jericho*, Goodman was impressed with the quality of the work and requested solo songs.

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103 Huff, phone interview by author.

104 James Simms, who had served as Larry King’s assistant at Trinity Church, offered DeBlasio a commission from the Presbyterian Church of Westfield, New Jersey. The result of that commission was *Love Came Down at Christmas* (1992) for SATB chorus and handbells. The Union Theological Seminary, in conjunction with Central Synagogue of New York City and the Friars of the Atonement, offered a commission for a piece (*Psalm 41*, 1992) to be premiered during an AIDS Service of Hope and Remembrance.

105 Huff, phone interview by author; program notes by Chris DeBlasio. Huff refers to *The Best-Beloved* as DeBlasio’s “magnum opus.”
DeBlasio subsequently composed for her the song set *Villagers* (1989) and the cycle *In Endless Assent* (1991).\(^{106}\)

**Chris’ AIDS Crises**

I remember visiting [Calvin Hampton] several times in the hospital, and it was horrible. All the hospital staff, they were scared to death of this new virus. Nobody knew for sure what caused it, nobody knew for sure how contagious it was or how it was spread. They didn’t know how to treat it. The medication that they gave Calvin, if I’m not mistaken, gave him horrible hallucinatory nightmares. It was a pretty miserable experience for him.\(^{107}\)

– Virginia Lowery

Chris DeBlasio tested HIV-positive in 1987. However, the presence of HIV/AIDS in the gay community exerted pressures on his life well before he himself contracted the virus. The protracted illness and subsequent death of his friend and compositional mentor, Calvin Hampton, in 1984 had a particularly strong influence. The following paragraphs serve as a reflection on the illness of these two men, specifically their differing reactions to the disease.

DeBlasio’s first AIDS crisis began with Calvin Hampton. Around Christmas 1982 Hampton contracted what appeared to be the flu, but weeks passed without his condition improving. A series of doctor’s visits, with mis-diagnoses such as Epstein-Barr virus, did little to improve his condition. In the summer of 1983 Hampton went into the hospital for a period of several months, nearly dying during his stay. It was during this extended hospital visit that the doctors finally diagnosed him with AIDS. By the time Hampton left the hospital, on Thanksgiving Eve 1982, Harry Huff had convinced the rest of his roommates to re-order their lives on Broadway and 102\(^{nd}\) so that Hampton could live with them. Hampton’s physical health never fully rebounded, so the roommates also served as his caregivers. He

\(^{106}\) Goodman, phone interview by author.

\(^{107}\) Lowery, phone interview by author.
spent the remaining seven months of his life in the bedroom adjacent to DeBlasio’s, feverishly composing on a portable electronic organ.108

When Calvin Hampton contracted the virus, it was still a fairly new and largely mysterious phenomenon. Physicians in Los Angeles and New York City had identified a few cases of this new condition only two years prior, in 1980 and 1981.109 By early 1983, medical professionals still did not know the root cause of the disease (i.e. HIV), were uncertain of how infected people spread it, and did not have a treatment regimen beyond managing the symptoms.110 The acronym AIDS had only emerged in the summer of 1982, after a string of slang terms such as “the gay cancer” and “GRID” (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency).111

Hampton was one of the first people in the circle of friends to receive a positive AIDS diagnosis.112 It is therefore little surprise that this fatal illness caught Hampton emotionally and artistically unprepared. According to Harry Huff, Hampton spent the final months of his life severely depressed and terrified of his impending death. He died with his musical estate in disarray, with very few of his compositions published or recorded, and with many pieces left only in sketch.113

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108 Huff, phone interview by author; Lowery, phone interview by author.


112 Huff, phone interview by author; Lowery, phone interview by author.

113 Huff, phone interview by author. Harry Huff is the musical executor for the estates of both Calvin Hampton and Chris DeBlasio.
Four years later, DeBlasio’s experience as an HIV-positive individual was subject to different circumstances. In some respects, mystery and fear had given way to more definite information. Medical researchers in France and the United States had identified the virus (HIV) that was the root cause of AIDS, private companies had developed more reliable HIV blood tests, and in March of 1987 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had approved the release of the first antiretroviral AIDS drug (AZT). However, in spite of the answered questions and potential for hope, DeBlasio encountered his own share of trials. Calvin Hampton’s relative isolation as an AIDS patient gave way to DeBlasio being one of numerous HIV positive men in his circle of friends and colleagues. DeBlasio therefore lived with the knowledge that AIDS would eventually decimate the social and artistic circles that had once served as a source of great joy and inspiration. Of the gay men mentioned in this document, Chris DeBlasio, Eric Benson, Clinton Smith and Michael Dash all died of AIDS within a period of seven years. Furthermore, by living with and serving as a caregiver for Hampton during the last months of Hampton’s life, DeBlasio had become intimately familiar with the torturous progression of the disease that would eventually take his own life.

In spite of the harrowing circumstances, he responded to the situation in much the same manner he did any task in his life. When Chris DeBlasio learned in 1987 that he had AIDS, he pragmatically surveyed the situation and then invested his characteristic take-charge


115 Huff, phone interview by author. According to Huff, sixteen members of the Calvary Choir during Hampton’s reign died of AIDS within a ten-year period.

intensity into maximizing the value of his remaining years.\textsuperscript{117} Within a week of his diagnosis, he began psychotherapy to address certain emotional issues. The core issue, which plagued both his personal and artistic selves, was a fear of emotional intimacy.\textsuperscript{118} One fruit of this psychological exploration was his eventual marriage to William Berger on January 11, 1992.\textsuperscript{119} Another fruit, according to Berger, was DeBlasio eventually composing music with emotional immediacy that wholly embraced his tonal inclinations:

In his last eight to ten pieces, I can tell you they are absolutely real, they are absolutely what he was feeling. He knew he was going to die, he knew that he would never get much reward out of these financially or otherwise, so he had nothing to lose. He wasn’t trying to get an impression to get a contract or anything like that. All of those issues were gone.\textsuperscript{120}

Another aspect of DeBlasio’s response to AIDS was his work with the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP). By the mid-1980s, many people affected by the AIDS pandemic were frustrated by the lack of a consistent and organized response from the federal government and from organizations involved in AIDS research and treatment. Therefore, when Larry Kramer, an author and gay rights activist, spoke in early March 1987 at a rotating speaker series at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Services Center in New York City, he used the opportunity to deliver an impassioned plea for action against AIDS discrimination. The result of that speech was ACT-UP, a direct action group that

\textsuperscript{117} William Berger, phone interview by author, 1 September 2009, digital recording. According to Berger, DeBlasio spoke regularly about the “ticking clock” and worked rigorously on a variety of projects during the last six years of his life.

\textsuperscript{118} Huff, phone interview by author; Berger, “Chris DeBlasio,” 157.

\textsuperscript{119} Berger, “Chris DeBlasio,” 162-3.

\textsuperscript{120} Berger, interview by author, 14 November 2008. In his interview with the author, Perry Brass also discussed DeBlasio’s tendency to be emotionally guarded and his ability to overcome it in the song cycle All the Way Through Evening.
executed highly-visible nonviolent protests for issues such as insufficient government funding for AIDS research and excessive AIDS drug prices.\textsuperscript{121}

Several individuals have noted that DeBlasio devoted himself to ACT-UP with “revolutionary fervor.”\textsuperscript{122} DeBlasio and friend Clinton Smith were among the founding members of the organization and participated in the first protest on March 24\textsuperscript{th} in front of the Food and Drug Administration building on Wall Street. As part of the Treatment and Data Committee of ACT-UP, DeBlasio quickly became an authority in the area of AIDS-related treatment and medications, writing and editing articles for the \textit{Treatment and Data Committee Newsletter}.\textsuperscript{123} In January 1992 DeBlasio and other members of the committee left ACT-UP and formed an independent non-profit organization, TAG (Treatment Action Network), that was dedicated to pressuring both world governments and private enterprises to develop better treatments for AIDS.\textsuperscript{124} DeBlasio served as the co-editor of that organization’s newsletter, \textit{TAGline}.\textsuperscript{125} His research for both ACT-UP and TAG reached influential audiences such as the United States Congress and the Eighth International Conference on AIDS in the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{126} William Berger was astounded at the level of medical knowledge that DeBlasio amassed:

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\textsuperscript{122} Berger, “Chris DeBlasio,” 158; Huff, phone interview by author; Brass, interview by author; Goodman, phone interview by author.

\textsuperscript{123} Berger, phone interview by author, 1 September 2009.

\textsuperscript{124} Treatment Action Group website, \url{http://www.treatmentactiongroup.org}.

\textsuperscript{125} “TAG at 10: The Year 1993,” \textit{TAGline} 9, no. 2 (March 2002): 3.
\end{flushright}
That was what was phenomenal to me, because what he didn’t know, he educated himself on FAST. He went full-time into that... here was a guy who had worked in the arts his whole life, and all of a sudden realized he had a huge learning curve to come up against, and he really applied himself.¹²⁷

In the midst of this intense AIDS activism, DeBlasio questioned the value of composing, when finding a cure for AIDS seemed like a more pressing concern:

There was a short break – we’re talking real brief periods of time – but there was a period when he was running around saying, “That’s it, I’m not composing music anymore, what’s the point, it doesn’t mean anything.” Now that I look back on it, that was probably three months that he was running around saying that. But he was saying it a lot, and I think that was part of continuing the process of, “How can I be an artist, and how can I be an artist right now, when I and everyone I know is dying?”¹²⁸

– William Berger

As Berger’s statement indicates, he was unsure of when exactly this period of questioning occurred. DeBlasio’s output does seem especially slim in the year after his AIDS diagnosis (1988) – the only work listed in his personal documents is an anthem he composed for the Trinity-Wall Street choir.¹²⁹ However, Perry Brass stated that DeBlasio was still questioning the value of composing when Brass first asked him to collaborate on a work about AIDS, sometime in 1989.¹³⁰ It therefore seems possible that DeBlasio’s process of sustaining a sense of purpose in the midst of fatal illness spanned more than year, during which he continued to accept composition work even as he intermittently questioned its value.

¹²⁶ DeBlasio was one of the editors of a report by Gregg Gonsalves and Mark Harrington, entitled “AIDS Research at the NIH: A Critical Review,” that was presented to the Eighth International Conference on AIDS in 1992.

¹²⁷ Berger, phone interview by author, 1 September 2009.

¹²⁸ Berger, interview by author, 14 November 2008. In his interview with the author, Perry Brass also discussed DeBlasio’s period of questioning.

¹²⁹ Chris DeBlasio, resume (1993); Chris DeBlasio, list of compositions (1993). The anthem was As Jesus Came to Jericho.

¹³⁰ Brass, interview by author. The eventual result of that request was the song cycle All the Way Through Evening.
Whenever this questioning occurred, its effect on his actual output seems to have faded with time. De Blasio produced musical works from 1989 until his death in 1993 with relative consistency, although his involvement in AIDS activism and other projects continued to limit his available time for composition.\footnote{Chris De Blasio, resume (1993). In interviews with the author, both Perry Brass and Lee Hoiby described instances in which they implored De Blasio to devote more of his remaining time to composition.}

Yet another layer of De Blasio’s response to his AIDS diagnosis was his shift toward composing art or concert music. Before contracting AIDS, the bulk of De Blasio’s compositions were either theater-related or the “pop songs.” After his diagnosis, art music gradually assumed a prominent position in his composition work.\footnote{Huff, phone interview by author.} In the years 1989 and 1990 art music and theater music obtained roughly an equal share of his time. However, from 1991 onward art music was his sole focus as a composer.\footnote{Chris De Blasio, resume (1993).}

William Berger has suggested that this transition to art music composition was the result of an evolving personality. Before his AIDS diagnosis, De Blasio held a compartmentalized view of the world and of the arts. According to his view, the art music establishment of New York City was old and formal, disconnected from the public at large. It was also a community that demanded musical experimentation and would reject an accessible tonal idiom. He therefore questioned the continuing viability of the art music realm, as well as his viability within it, and thus limited himself to an artistic community that seemed more connected with the plight of people living in the 1980s and more receptive of tonal music: the theater establishment. However, after his AIDS diagnosis, De Blasio began to shed both his compartmentalized views and his self-doubts. According to Berger, he no longer felt
pressed to limit himself to a particular artistic community or to conform to its perceived expectations. He instead embraced his own personal style and focused his energies on composing what he wanted.\footnote{Berger, phone interview by author, 1 September 2009.} The result was a tonal composer who worked in both the theater and the art music worlds.

DeBlasio’s final reaction to his AIDS diagnosis consisted of his efforts to organize the musical estates of Calvin Hampton and himself. According to Huff and Lowery, Hampton had always respected DeBlasio’s skills as an orchestrator and had asked DeBlasio to complete certain orchestrations in the event of his death. DeBlasio thus demonstrated his typical generosity by committing significant time to orchestrating Hampton’s Variations on “Amazing Grace” and the prologue to his opera The Man Who Could Work Miracles.\footnote{Huff, phone interview by author.} On the day he died, DeBlasio was working on the orchestration of Hampton’s Concerto for Two Violins.\footnote{Berger, interview by author, 14 November 2008; Huff, phone interview by author.  DeBlasio deciphered and edited Hampton’s manuscript, first creating a transcription for two violins and two pianos. At the time of his death, he had orchestrated the first movement and part of the second. Allison Sniffin, a composer and colleague of Harry Huff, completed the orchestration. Conductor Philip Brunelle, with violinists Brian Krinke and Michael Sutton, premiered the Concerto for Two Violins as part of the Plymouth Music Series at Minneapolis’ Orchestra Hall on November 6, 1993.}

In the case of his own musical estate, DeBlasio applied his characteristic pragmatic approach. He limited himself to compositions and commissions that he could conceivably complete before his death and used music notation software to prepare those compositions for eventual publication. He then secured Harry Huff as his musical executor and met with Huff to establish plans for his musical estate after his death.\footnote{Huff, phone interview by author.}
Cut Off In His Full Flowering

[DeBlasio] said, “I know I’ll always be associated with [All the Way Through Evening].” I said, “Well Chris, at least you have this shot, you’ve got this thing that no one’s going to forget.” I think it was a bitter feeling he had, like “Why wasn’t I going to go on further? This was where I was going to get to flower. But the full flowering was just cut off.”

Christopher George DeBlasio died on July 21, 1993 at St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York City. He was only thirty-four years old. A common sentiment among those interviewed is that DeBlasio died just as he was finding his unique compositional voice and finding greater commercial success. In his final years, as more people heard his mature works performed, DeBlasio began receiving commissions from a variety of sources. Tragically, he was forced to decline many of them because of his deteriorating health.

As a result, discussions of the great works he did compose inevitably turn to discussions of the works he might have composed. Nonetheless, William Berger admits that DeBlasio, and by extension his “family,” should be grateful that he flowered at all:

The supreme irony is that Chris might never have blossomed at all if it hadn’t been for AIDS. It was his diagnosis that spurred him into demon confrontation and therapy and activism and opened him to the dangers and thrills of human interaction and love and the joy of being alive…I would be betraying Chris if I didn’t acknowledge the role AIDS played in his development, in our relationship, and in his art.

DeBlasio’s supreme source of concern was that his artistic response to the AIDS crisis, the song cycle All the Way Through Evening, would be the only work for which he was known. The cycle became fairly popular during his lifetime, aided in part by the inclusion of

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138 Brass, interview by author.
140 Berger, “Chris DeBlasio,” 164; Brass, liner notes to And Trouble Came.
the last song (“Walt Whitman in 1989”) in The AIDS Quilt Songbook. He feared that “Walt Whitman in 1989” would become for him what “Send in the Clowns” has become for musical theater composer Stephen Sondheim – the “hit song” that overshadowed his other compositions.142

Nonetheless, certain other works of DeBlasio are finding enduring success. God Is Our Righteousness, his composition for guitar and organ, has entered the standard guitar repertory. Choruses around the country regularly perform The Best-Beloved, his four movement choral masterpiece.143 These works, as well as All the Way Through Evening, are available on commercial recordings and have been broadcast on national radio programs such as Pipedreams and St. Paul Sunday.144

The continuing advocacy of DeBlasio’s friends and colleagues serves as a testament to his enduring impression as a friend and as an artist. Harry Huff and Mimi Stern-Wolfe have performed and recorded, and continue to perform and record, many of DeBlasio’s art songs and instrumental works. Huff has published most of DeBlasio’s mature art music works and has indicated that he might publish some of the “pop songs.”145 And on August 10, 2008, Virginia Lowery organized a staged reading of DeBlasio’s operetta A Murder Is Foretold in New York City.146

142 Berger, phone interview by author, 1 September 2009. “Send in the Clowns” is a song from Sondheim’s musical A Little Night Music.

143 Huff, phone interview by author. I confirmed these statements by searching the Internet for performances of these two works.


145 Huff to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

146 Concert program for A Murder Is Foretold, Chelsea Studios Theatreforworks, 10 August 2008.
CHAPTER TWO

OVERVIEW OF DEBLASIO’S SONG OUTPUT AND STYLE

The Song Collections

This chapter addresses aspects of the three art song sets or cycles written for voice and piano: *Villagers* (1989), *All the Way Through Evening* (1990) and *In Endless Assent* (1991). Each of the three groups of songs is published by Classical Vocal Reprints. With DeBlasio’s permission, musical executor Harry Huff published high and low voice versions of *Villagers* and high, medium and low voice versions of *In Endless Assent*. *All the Way Through Evening* is only available in the baritone version, as DeBlasio composed the cycle specifically for that voice type.

DeBlasio composed *Villagers* and *In Endless Assent* for contralto Sandra Goodman. DeBlasio and Goodman met while singing in the professional choir at Trinity-Wall Street Episcopal Church in New York City. In 1988 the choir premiered DeBlasio’s anthem *As Jesus Came to Jericho*, and Goodman was impressed by the quality of the piece. She asked DeBlasio if he had any songs that she could sing, and he responded, “I don’t, but I’ll write

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147 [www.classicalvocalrep.com](http://www.classicalvocalrep.com)

148 Harry Huff to Brian Bonin, electronic mail; William Berger, interview by author, 14 November 2008, New York City, digital recording. In both cases, the low voice version is the original.

149 According to contralto Sandra Goodman, DeBlasio gave her permission to perform *All the Way Through Evening*, thus suggesting a possible performance tradition for low-voiced women. She concluded, “But I’ve never been able to do it…So far, every time I’ve tried to sing it, I’ve cried.”

150 Sandra Goodman is a regular performer on the New York City recital circuit, collaborating with renowned pianists such as Dalton Baldwin and Pierre Vallet. She has commissioned a number of songs by composers such as Arnold Rosner and James Bassi. Goodman currently serves as Cantor at Temple Beth Sholom in New York.
DeBlasio turned to Ilsa Gilbert and Perry Brass for poems, and each provided him with a sheaf of poems that they considered conducive to musical setting. The result was Villagers, a song set that used three poems by Ilsa Gilbert and two by Perry Brass. DeBlasio called the set Villagers because all the involved parties – poets, composer and singer – lived at the time in Greenwich Village in New York City. Goodman and pianist Timothy Smith premiered the set as part of a recital at Riverside Church in New York City. Sandra Goodman continued performing the songs of Villagers at a variety of venues, and she informed DeBlasio that she would be “ecstatically happy” to perform any other songs he composed. DeBlasio returned almost a year later with In Endless Assent, a cycle of four poems by Elizabeth Bishop. As he explained to Goodman, he wrote the cycle because he found a female poet whose work both inspired him and suited Goodman’s artistic temperament, and because he knew that Goodman would give the cycle public exposure by performing it many times. Goodman and pianist/composer James Bassi premiered the cycle.

Overall Song Style

As chapter one indicated, Chris DeBlasio’s personality and artistry contained interesting dualities that sometimes collaborated and sometimes conflicted with each other: kind and cruel, dogmatic and amenable, music and theater. A knowledge of these opposing elements helps to define his unique personality. Likewise, DeBlasio’s art songs possess two
seemingly disparate aspects that help to define their unique style. On the one hand, thesesongs possess a musical language that is accessible to the general American public.

DeBlasio’s choices in areas such as harmonic language and selection of poetry result in aproduct that the average listener can comprehend at a basic level on the first listening. On theother hand, the art songs also deploy a complex, multi-faceted musical architecture thatcoheres individual songs as well as entire cycles. DeBlasio’s multiple levels of organization—everything from small-scale word setting to large-scale relationships among the songs—provide a level of depth that can engage the musical scholar. The remainder of this chapterwill discuss these dual aspects (accessibility and complexity) as they appear in the variouselements of DeBlasio’s art songs.\footnote{Influence of Other Composers}

\begin{quote}
DeBlasio’s study and emulation of particular composers reinforces the idea of a
duality in his song style. The two song composers whom DeBlasio especially admired—Francis Poulenc and Stephen Sondheim—each pursued a style that blended elements of thepopular and the learned.\footnote{In interviews with the author, William Berger and Sandra Goodman mentioned DeBlasio’s interest in the songs of Poulenc. William Berger, Virginia Lowery and Harry Huff each discussed DeBlasio’s respect for the work of Sondheim. Huff indicated that DeBlasio had transcribed from a recording large portions of Sondheim’s \textit{Sunday in the Park With George} well before the printed score was available, and Berger stated that DeBlasio had ordered the complete works of Sondheim shortly before his death.} In regards to the popular, both composers incorporated into their songs elements of the popular song style of their respective countries and time periods. Both also favored simple homophonic textures consisting of a prominent vocal melody and

\footnote{As an independent topic, the reader might find it interesting to consider the possible influence of DeBlasio’s “pop songs” on the accessibility aspect of his art songs. Chris DeBlasio had been casually composing the “pop songs” for years before he penned his first art song set. It is therefore reasonable to wonder if some aspect of the American popular music style found in his “pop songs” transferred to the art songs, especially in terms of the shaping of the vocal line and the figures found in the piano part. Although I will not discuss that relationship here, my casual acquaintance with the “pop songs” suggests that there are certain similarities.}
repetitive figures in the piano/orchestra. Their use of harmony blended popular and learned: each used a tonic-centered harmonic vocabulary that nonetheless incorporated progressive elements such as chains of diatonically unrelated chords, additive harmony and seventh and ninth chords.

In terms of the learned, Poulenc and Sondheim pursued two different paths. A primary aspect of Poulenc’s songs is abrupt shifts of harmony, texture and dynamics to highlight shifts in the poetic mood. The hallmark of Sondheim’s musical theater compositions is the sharing among songs of recurring motives or figures that highlight common emotional or mental themes. These basic song characteristics of Poulenc and Sondheim find parallels in the art songs of Chris DeBlasio.\footnote{I arrived at these generalizations about Poulenc and Sondheim by consulting Carol Kimball’s \textit{Song: A Guide to Style and Literature}, Steve Swayne’s \textit{How Sondheim Found His Sound}, and various scores of Poulenc \textit{mélodies} and Sondheim musicals.}

\textbf{Poetry}

The four artists most familiar with DeBlasio’s songs specifically emphasized his respect for poetry and his skill in honoring the prosody of the original poem.\footnote{Perry Brass, Ilsa Gilbert, Sandra Goodman and Mimi Stern-Wolfe all pointed out these qualities in DeBlasio and his songs.} When selecting poetry, “he could pick up poems, and he knew right away if they spoke to him as a possible source material.”\footnote{Berger, interview by author.} Judging from the available evidence, I believe that he also tended to draw repeatedly from poets whose work he liked. During the mid 1980s, DeBlasio set numerous poems of Howard Moss. He also set the poems of Perry Brass on three separate occasions (\textit{Five Gay Jewish Prayers, Villagers} and \textit{All the Way Through Evening}) and had
plans to set at least one other.\textsuperscript{161} He set the poems of Ilsa Gilbert twice (\textit{Villagers} and \textit{Whatever You Say, He Sings}) and planned to set more.\textsuperscript{162} Finally, according to Sandra Goodman, at the time of his death DeBlasio was planning a second cycle based on the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop.\textsuperscript{163}

From Howard Moss to Perry Brass to Elizabeth Bishop, DeBlasio consistently displayed a commitment in his “pop songs,” theater songs and art songs to setting the poetry of gay and lesbian writers. Nevertheless, many of the poems set by DeBlasio give no indication of their creator’s sexuality. Instead, these poems typically express the range of human emotions through universally relatable means, often employing figures of anonymous gender and sexuality. Even the poems that do contain indications of homosexual behavior express it covertly. For example, “Letter to New York” (\textit{In Endless Assent}) contains oblique references to homosexual encounters in Central Park, but the reader would only recognize the references if he/she knew of Bishop’s sexuality and of Central Park’s reputation as a homosexual “cruising ground.”

Accessibility is a prominent similarity among the poems that DeBlasio set. I find it telling that the two poets I interviewed for this project both discussed accessibility when I asked them to describe their own poetry:

I always wanted to convey feelings and ideas to the audience – I didn’t want them to think my poems were too esoteric or too non-understandable. People seem to

\textsuperscript{161} Perry Brass, interview by author, 15 November 2008, New York City, digital recording. DeBlasio had accepted a commission from the New York Gay Men’s Chorus to set Brass’ “The Angel Voices of Men” for the chorus and countertenor Drew Mentor but died before he could fulfill the commission.

\textsuperscript{162} Gilbert, phone interview by author. According to Gilbert, DeBlasio had several of her poems in his possession and wanted to eventually set them. He stored them in what he jokingly called his “Ilsa Box.”

\textsuperscript{163} Goodman, phone interview by author. Approximately two weeks before DeBlasio’s death, Goodman and James Bassi had dinner with DeBlasio and his partner William Berger. At that time, DeBlasio informed Goodman that he had discovered more poems by Elizabeth Bishop that inspired him and was planning to create another Bishop cycle for her.
understand what I write and respond, and I’m glad about that… I’ve gone to millions of poetry readings, and I’ve read in millions of poetry readings, and I notice sometimes people write poems that people don’t understand very much, because they are deliberately in some way obscure. That is not what my intention is, although I love language, so I like to have fun with it sometimes.  

– Ilsa Gilbert

People often ask me, “What does this mean, what does that mean?” And I tell them, “Just read the poem.” Because it’s very concrete, there isn’t any subscript going on. I can tell you the stories around the poems, but there’s no, “I’m leaving something out, and you have to figure it out.”

– Perry Brass

Throughout his life, DeBlasio favored poetic realism over poetic abstraction. He set poetry that expressed universal human desires and experiences through universally relatable means. The poems that he set typically explore themes of broad appeal, such as the human desire for relationships. The texts of these poems are often narrative in nature and emulate a prose writing style, thus delivering a coherent chain of ideas with a widely-used means of expression. The following opening lines from two of Perry Brass’s poems demonstrate the straightforward, accessible nature of this prose style:

I wanted to kiss your wrist that night I said good-bye to you in public. (“Train Station”)  
The heart does not care. It breaks and leaves. (“The heart does not care”)  

For each of the three song sets, DeBlasio’s tendency was to set the poems as originally written, with neither word omission nor word repetition. There are two exceptions: “Lyric 4” from Villagers and “Sonnet (1928)” from In Endless Assent. In both of these cases, DeBlasio took a relatively short, two stanza poem and repeated the text and melody of the first stanza at the end to create a ternary structure (ABA’).

164 Gilbert, phone interview by author.  
165 Brass, interview by author.
The poems of Villagers have little relationship with each other, as the poems express a variety of perspectives and come from two poets with significantly different writing styles. However, in the two later cycles – All the Way Through Evening and In Endless Assent – DeBlasio purposely selected and arranged poems to establish a large-scale poetic structure. This large-scale structure is all the more astonishing because the poets originally wrote these poems as individual entities. For each cycle, DeBlasio selected from a single poet’s oeuvre poems that shared similar imagery. He then arranged those poems in an order that establishes a narrative progression from one poem to the next. As part of a larger context, the individual poems assume new layers of meaning. For instance, the transformation of the original poems of All the Way Through Evening surprised even the poet Perry Brass:

I think they fit beautifully. And I think they fit much better than I thought they would when I first thought about them…like the “Poussin” poem, I thought, “Why did Chris set that?” And then I realized WHY he set that! Because it is a manifesto of gay men of that period. All of their being, their intentions, in this very condensed, brief poem.166

DeBlasio’s selection and ordering of the four Elizabeth Bishop poems found in In Endless Assent demonstrate his skill at creating a large-scale poetic structure.167 The poems first relate to each other at a basic level through common imagery. In each of the poems, the time of day is a significant feature, and the sun and the moon are prominent images. Closely related to this daytime cycle are the concepts of energy and exhaustion. Music is a secondary concept.

The relationships of the four poems deepen in the context of DeBlasio’s ordering. The poems of In Endless Assent chart the course of a twenty-four hour period. “Anaphora” begins

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166 Brass, interview by author. A discussion of the relationships between the poems in All the Way Through Evening appears in chapter three.

167 The four poems, in order, are “Anaphora,” “Insomnia,” “Sonnet (1928)” and “Letter to New York.”
at daybreak, and “Letter to New York” ends with daybreak, thus implying a cyclic journey. The inner poems create nighttime vignettes that temporally link the outer poems.

Cross-relations between individual poems further strengthen the cohesion of the cycle. The outer poems of the cycle ascribe opposing times of day with the opposite expectations of energy: “Anaphora” describes a progression through the daytime hours with imagery expressing weariness, while “Letter to New York” describes a progression through the nighttime hours with pulsing energy. “Anaphora” is a tribute to the sun, while “Insomnia” is a tribute to the moon. “Anaphora” and “Sonnet (1928)” both characterize music as a source of human empowerment. And finally, “Insomnia” depicts an upside-down world as seen through a mirror or lake, while “Letter to New York” recounts the topsy-turvy experience of a wild night in New York City.

Form/Structure

In his art songs DeBlasio usually favored a through-composed form consisting of several distinct sections of varying length. DeBlasio used this form at least partly out of necessity, as the twentieth century poetry he was setting typically did not conform to regular musical structures. A free formal structure allowed him to closely track the irregularly-occurring shifts in the poetic mood or structure.

DeBlasio created unity within these through-composed songs by establishing recurring musical ideas that typically appeared in the piano part. In the shorter songs, he created a piano figure that would repeat from the beginning to the end. For example, DeBlasio repeated a simple rhythmic pattern in block chords to provide unity for “The heart does not care”

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168 The only exceptions from his three song sets/cycles are “Lyric 4” (Villagers) and “Sonnet (1928)” (In Endless Assent), which both have ternary forms.
(Villagers). He then honored shifts in the poetic mood with changes in the vocal line and in the harmonic context (Example 2.1).  

**Example 2.1** “The heart does not care” (Villagers) mm. 19-27

For the longer songs, DeBlasio favored a cyclic approach. The song begins with a particular piano figure, and after charting shifts in poetic mood with several other figures, returns at the end to the original figure. “Anaphora” (In Endless Assent) is a representative example: the song begins and ends with arpeggiated chords accompanying a recitativo line (Example 2.2). In between are a variety of figures that suggest the activity of the sun over the course of a day.  

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169 For this project, I consulted the high voice version of Villagers.

170 For this project, I consulted the medium voice version of In Endless Assent. Poetic excerpts from “Anaphora,” “Insomnia,” “Sonnet” (1928), and “Letter to New York” from THE COMPLETE POEMS
Example 2.2 “Anaphora” (In Endless Assent) mm. 1-3, 52-5

In his song cycles (All the Way Through Evening, In Endless Assent), DeBlasio used a variety of musical means to create large-scale cohesion. He structured both cycles according to a harmonic plan, assigning different tonal areas to specific poetic ideas or moods. He would also attach musical motives and figures to recurring themes in the poetry and then incorporate them into the overall texture of the songs. Chapter three of this paper identifies in detail the musical elements that unify the songs of All the Way Through Evening. The next few paragraphs will demonstrate a single element of unity from In Endless Assent.

The primary collective idea in the poems of *In Endless Assent* is the relationship between night and day. DeBlasio musically emphasized this relationship by assigning pitches to night (E) and day (F). He then deployed these pitches in a variety of ways throughout the songs.

In portions of the text that describe the transition between night and day, DeBlasio exploited the semitone relationship between E and F. The first song, “Anaphora,” provides two examples of this transition. “Anaphora” describes the plight of the sun, bringing life to the world every day in spite of enduring “our uses and abuses.” At the first triumphant arrival of the sun, DeBlasio wrote a soaring vocal line in which the E and F pitches are rhythmically prolonged on the word “appears.” These pitches are doubled in the piano as well (Example 2.3). At the end of the song, the narrator observes that the sun suffers this indignity every day “in endless endless assent.” DeBlasio followed this statement with a piano conclusion that alternates between F major and E major arpeggios, symbolizing the sun’s relentless cycle of day and night (Example 2.4).

**Example 2.3** “Anaphora” (*In Endless Assent*) mm. 16-7
DeBlasio also used the E and F pitch ideas individually to shade the harmonic landscape of particular songs, depending on whether the song contained day or night imagery. Because “Anaphora” describes a daytime event, he cast it in an overall F tonal area. For the two nighttime songs (“Insomnia” and “Letter to New York”), he integrated a repeating E tone into the piano texture. The more contemplative “Insomnia” carries a repeating quarter note E that persists throughout the entire song (Example 2.5). The frantic “Letter to New York” deploys the repeating E within a recurring eighth note figure (Example 2.6). In both songs the repeated E occurs in the same octave.

**Example 2.5 “Insomnia” (In Endless Assent) mm. 1-4**

![Example 2.5 “Insomnia” (In Endless Assent) mm. 1-4](image-url)
Example 2.6 “Letter to New York” (In Endless Assent) mm. 1-3

Extra-Musical Effects

DeBlasio’s background as a composer for the theater influenced his approach to art song composition. The art songs of Chris DeBlasio are never absolute musical exercises for voice and piano. Rather, every gesture used in the voice or piano is a dramatic expression of poetic content. He used a variety of musical effects to represent both concrete objects or actions (i.e. tone painting) and abstract moods or ideas. These effects pervade all levels of DeBlasio’s art song output, both large scale and small. DeBlasio’s attempts at creating in the music tangible representations of text ideas are yet another aspect that makes his music more immediately accessible, rather than obscure, to the average listener.

The cycle In Endless Assent provides numerous examples of piano tone painting. In “Anaphora,” a series of lines in the poem describe the indignities that the sun suffers as it sinks toward the horizon over the course of the day. DeBlasio unified this section (measure twenty-nine through forty-five) with a repeating arpeggio figure that gradually lowers by semitone from E major to C major (Example 2.7). The descending pitch of this piano figure suggests the sun’s continual descent.

171 The analysis of All the Way Through Evening in chapter three provides further study of how DeBlasio uses musical effects to dramatize extra-musical ideas found in the poetry.
Example 2.7 “Anaphora” (*In Endless Assent*) mm. 30-31

Example 2.8 “Letter to New York” (*In Endless Assent*) mm. 62-6

“Letter to New York” provides an example of a tone painting piano figure used only once to emphasize a particular text phrase. Bishop wrote the poem as a letter to a friend in New York City, and in it she speculates that her friend has unruly evenings in the big city. The piano part suggests the high energy of these wild evenings with eighth note patterns in alternating six-eight and three-four time signatures. However, at the moment when the poem describes a late night party “where everything seems to happen in waves,” DeBlasio wrote a series of block chords that are each two beats long (Example 2.8). This hemiola effect in a triple meter context suggests a series of waves.
DeBlasio also composed many tone-painting figures in the vocal line. In some songs the vocal tone painting becomes so prevalent that the melody seemingly depicts every word of text. William Berger recognized this tendency in DeBlasio’s songs and tried to discourage it:

I think sometimes Chris did that too much, and I would tell him that... “You’re wearing me out, you’re being pedantic, it’s like second-rate Sondheim. Tell me the idea, not the word, stop indicating.” [Chris] could be very, very literal…

“An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” (*All the Way Through Evening*) contains many of these back-to-back tone-painting figures in the voice part. In one passage, DeBlasio deployed three different rhythmic figures in rapid succession to represent the dying down of the wind, the “whispering” of the heart and the beating of the heart (Example 2.9). In another passage, he manipulated the rhythm and pitch of the vocal line to suggest “three stone stairs” and a “footbridge” (Example 2.10).

**Example 2.9** “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” (*All the Way Through Evening*)
mm. 18-23  (vocal line only)

![Example 2.9](image)

**Example 2.10** “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” (*All the Way Through Evening*)
mm. 41-2  (vocal line only)

![Example 2.10](image)

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172 Berger, interview by author.
DeBlasio addressed abstract concepts found in the poetry by creating musical figures with elements of the concrete. For instance, in the song “Butcher” (*Villagers*) DeBlasio exploited varying levels of musical organization to vividly express mental stability and instability in a school teacher who feels emotionally isolated from her composer husband. The teacher in the poem is eminently practical and does not understand why her husband chooses to work in a dead-end job and create highly dissonant music that “no one understands.” The composer husband neglects his wife and instead lavishes his attention on “a cheap and pretty clerk.” As the poem chronicles the teacher’s confusion about her husband’s motives, the piano plays a highly chromatic figure of sixteenth notes that suggests the dissonant music of the composer/husband but also represents the growing instability of his wife (Example 2.11). When the poem presents the ordered activities and thoughts of the teacher herself, the piano plays a predictable ostinato chord pattern in quarter notes (Example 2.12). The juxtaposition of harmonic disorder/rhythmic turbulence and then harmonic order/rhythmic calm helps to underscore the emotional divide within the teacher.

**Example 2.11** “Butcher” (*Villagers*) Figure representing mental instability

![Example 2.11 Figure]

**Example 2.12** “Butcher” (*Villagers*) Figure representing mental stability

![Example 2.12 Figure]
Harmony / Texture

DeBlasio’s approach to harmony blended a fairly accessible surface level of harmonic activity with an intricate large-scale harmonic architecture. The individual chords are usually based on triadic harmonies that collectively group the songs into a series of tonal areas. This tonal tendency lends an accessible quality to his songs, although some listeners will consider DeBlasio’s augmentation and manipulation of the triadic chords to be progressive. Meanwhile, especially in the song cycles, he establishes large-scale harmonic cohesion among the songs of a set by assigning specific tonal areas to recurring themes in the poetry. The recurring tonal areas in each song set relate to each other by step or by circle of fifths. This text-based approach to tonal planning leads to a harmonic architecture that is not immediately apparent, as related tonal areas are seldom in close proximity to each other.173

DeBlasio’s tonal vocabulary shares many similarities with harmonic language of the French composers of the early twentieth century.174 He seldom composed simple triads, instead favoring additive harmonies, seventh and ninth chords, and bitonal chords. It is typically the melodic and bass motion in his songs, rather than the actual chord progressions, that suggest tonal areas. The chord progressions themselves defy traditional Roman numeral analysis. He often composed chains of diatonically unrelated chords, using techniques such as harmonic planing.

DeBlasio typically favored homophonic textures in his songs, writing a variety of repetitive chord accompaniments in the piano part. The vocal line, with its delivery of the

173 The Musical Connections section of chapter three provides an in-depth analysis of the harmonic architecture of All the Way Through Evening. The Form/Structure portion of this chapter discusses some elements of harmonic architecture in In Endless Assent.

174 Berger, interview by author; Goodman, phone interview by author. Both Berger and Goodman noted that DeBlasio liked the music of early twentieth century French composers.
text, holds the dominant position. Of his three art song sets/cycles, *All the Way Through Evening* is the only one that contains actual melodies in the piano part. Of the three piano-based melodic events in that cycle, only the melody in “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” renders significant structural value in the song. The other two piano-based melodic events are brief and only serve to underscore a recurring poetic idea.\footnote{These melodic events occur in “Train Station,” “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” and “Walt Whitman in 1989.” For further clarification, consult chapter three for information on the human connection melody and the Paul Jacobs theme in relation to those songs.}

**Rhythm**

There was no halfway measure with Chris, and I think that actually you sort of hear it in his music. His music is very assertive; there’s nothing laid back about his music. Everything was very intense.\footnote{Goodman, phone interview by author.} – Sandra Goodman

Rhythm in DeBlasio’s vocal music is deceptively simple. Within the context of all twentieth century music, his rhythmic writing is not incredibly complex. However, his songs do contain certain rhythmic variegators that provide rhythmic interest and require performer diligence. For example, the songs typically use both mixed meter and polymeters. Also, the piano part regularly contains uncommon tuplet figures (Example 2.13).\footnote{The human connection motive of *All the Way Through Evening* contains tuplet figures. Consult chapter three.}
One of the hallmarks of a DeBlasio art song is rhythmic drive. DeBlasio composed repeating figures in the piano parts that provide a persistent forward motion and assert the song’s beat and meter. As the Sandra Goodman quote suggests, this relentless rhythmic drive was possibly a product of DeBlasio’s intense personality. Another possible influence is his earlier “pop songs,” which possess the driving rhythmic energy commonly found in American popular music. In his longer art songs, he produces greater rhythmic variety by alternating between these motoric rhythmic figures and static chords.

The primary element of rhythmic interest in DeBlasio’s songs is the interplay between voice and piano. DeBlasio incorporated into his vocal lines numerous rhythmic surprises that struggle against the unwavering pulse of the piano part. In Example 2.14 the vocal line confounds the relentless quarter note pulse of the piano in a variety of ways: phrases that begin and end in metrically weak positions, notes that sustain across beats or bar lines, and tuplet figures that alter the metric pattern.
Example 2.14 “Insomnia” (In Endless Assent) mm. 7-14

Polymeter is another source of rhythmic interplay between the voice and piano. In the first section of “Lyric 4” (Villagers), DeBlasio structures the vocal line in triple meter against the six-eight time signature of the piano (Example 2.15). The voice and piano then switch meters for the middle section of the song (Example 2.16).
Example 2.15 “Lyric 4” (Villagers) mm. 1-9

Example 2.16 “Lyric 4” (Villagers) mm. 68-75
Vocal Line / Text Setting

He loved to set words and his music was melodic but acerbic, full of surprises, dissonances and humorous passages—always conscious of the words he was setting... It seems like he could set words in his sleep, it came so easily. He wrote recitativo-like passages and then could break into full blown aria-like vocalisms.\(^{178}\) – Mimi Stern-Wolfe

DeBlasio’s vocal writing demonstrates his awareness of the abilities of the singing voice in the Western art music tradition. For years, a significant source of DeBlasio’s income came from professional choral singing positions at various churches in New York City. He also studied and sang for pleasure a number of standard works in the art song and operatic canons. He therefore not only did a great deal of singing but also became familiar with many styles of vocal writing. As a result, much of the vocal writing in his art songs follows the standard conventions of melodic writing in the Western tonal idiom. Additionally, his vocal writing attests to his understanding of the lyric pitch arch and of rhythmic pacing that many classically-trained singers find gratifying. This largely traditional approach to vocal melody provides yet another level of accessibility to his art songs.

Nonetheless, vocalists will find certain challenges in a DeBlasio art song. Virginia Lowery and William Berger both indicated that DeBlasio had an exceptionally wide singing range and often wrote vocal works with his own abilities in mind.\(^{179}\) As a result, the vocal line of individual songs typically covers a range of at least an octave and a half, with individual phrases sometimes traversing an octave or more. Additionally, it was not uncommon for him to write a melodic phrase that remained at one extreme of the vocal pitch range and then in the succeeding phrase to shift quickly to the opposite extreme (Example

\(^{178}\) Mimi Sterne-Wolfe to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

\(^{179}\) Virginia Lowery, phone interview by author, 3 June 2009, digital recording; Berger, interview by author.
2.17). He also occasionally wrote long phrases, including two lengthy melismas at the conclusions of “Lyric 4” (Villagers) and “Letter to New York” (In Endless Assent).

Example 2.17 “Letter to New York” (In Endless Assent) mm. 47-61 (vocal line only)

As the Mimi Stern-Wolfe quote suggests, DeBlasio employed a variety of styles in his vocal lines. He composed everything from recitative-like passages to expressive lyrical melodies, and often used multiple styles within a single song. DeBlasio’s execution of these various vocal styles underscores the dramatic qualities found in the poetic text. For instance, in the opening fifteen measures of “Anaphora” (In Endless Assent), he juxtaposes a recitative passage and a lyrical passage to great dramatic effect (see Example 2.2). In the opening lines of the poem, the narrator describes the “ceremony” of sounds and colors that herald the beginning of each day. DeBlasio underscores the proclamatory nature of these lines with recitative accompanied by stately chords in the piano. Then, at the moment when the narrator begins to seek out the cause of this explosion of energy (measure eleven), DeBlasio initiates a lyrical passage accompanied by a rhythmically active piano figure. The shift from relatively
static recitative to rhythmically-energized lyricism emphasizes the narrator’s growing wonderment at this transcendent daybreak experience.

As mentioned in the section devoted to poetry, several of DeBlasio’s colleagues complimented his ability to honor in his musical settings the prosody of the original poetic text. And to a certain degree, they are correct. As I surveyed the art songs, it was apparent that DeBlasio consistently manipulated both the rhythmic and pitch values in the vocal line to approximate the inflections found in the poetry. However, DeBlasio did not compose vocal lines that simply imitated the contours of the poetry in rote fashion. He always addressed poetic prosody within the context of multiple considerations: overall melodic contour, tone painting effects and interplay between the voice and piano.

The melody of “Sonnet (1928)” (In Endless Assent) demonstrates DeBlasio’s ability to effectively concede the prosody of the poetic text within the context of a melodic idea. In this song the rhythm of the vocal line honors the text rhythms, while the pitch gesture of each phrase suggests the act of music flowing over the speaker’s tense body (Example 2.18). DeBlasio used a basic quarter note rhythm in a two-two time signature to capture the “fluid” duplet patterns of text stress. Triplet figures acknowledge the chain of unstressed syllables that begin each phrase, while the rhythmic separation and off-beat placement of the words “deep” and “clear” in measures fourteen and fifteen pay tribute to the emphasis those words would receive in a spoken context. He acknowledges all of these text elements within the confines of a lyrical melody in a clear B major harmonic context.

By contrast, the opening measures of “Lyric 4” (Villagers) demonstrate how DeBlasio managed issues of prosody when musical effects took precedence (see Example 2.15). The primary musical interest in this song is the polymetrical interplay between the voice and
piano. DeBlasio perhaps created this metric tension in response to the sadist qualities found in Perry Brass’ poem. However, the vocal line’s quarter note pattern in triple meter does not accurately honor the varying patterns of stressed syllables in the text:

I will *keep* you *in* my *pocket* like the *pulse* *on* my *wrist*.

DeBlasio solved this dilemma by writing accent marks above the vocal line to indicate the correct text stresses. This compromise allowed him to maintain the metric tension between the vocal and piano parts while also preserving a semblance of the text rhythms. His approach also added a third level of rhythmic interest to the song: the surprise accents that result from honoring the poetic meter.

Example 2.18 “Sonnet (1928)” (In Endless Assent) mm. 1-16 (vocal line only)

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180 The underlining indicates the stressed syllables, while the asterisks divide the text into poetic feet. The first line is in trochaic tetrameter, while the second line is in amphimaci dimeter.
DeBlasio commonly wrote accents above the vocal line in those instances when a stressed poetic syllable occurred at a metrically weak position. In most of these cases, the accent serves merely as an affirmation of the performers natural instinct, as the rhythmic and pitch elements of the vocal line already indicate an emphasis. In “The heart does not care” (*Villagers*), DeBlasio set the stressed first syllables of a series of descriptive words in between musical beats (Example 2.19). However, for each of these stressed syllables he compensated for the metrically weak position by setting the syllable higher in pitch than the subsequent unstressed syllables. For the words “movement,” “heartlessly” and “artlessly” he also emphasized the first syllable by rhythmically elongating its note through the following beat.

**Example 2.19** “The heart does not care” (*Villagers*) mm. 14-7
Piano Part

The piano part in DeBlasio’s art songs creates a context for the vocal line: it provides rhythmic momentum and harmonic context and helps to establish mood. The part seldom contains any melodic interest. Instead, it typically consists of repeating patterns or figurations that outline the harmony. Rather than extensive preludes or postludes, the piano part presents short introductions and conclusions consisting of a pattern or figuration found in the body of the song.

Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to state that the piano part merely supports the vocal melody. Neither voice nor piano would be aurally satisfying without the other. The piano part does not contain enough musical interest and variety to stand on its own, and many of its extra-musical gestures lead to disjointed musical episodes that require the poetic text for cohesion. On the other hand, the vocal line’s rhythmic complexities lack presence and clarity without the piano’s metric framework, as do the vocal line’s many chromatic inflections without the piano’s harmonic framework.\footnote{Many musical examples in this document demonstrate the interdependence of the vocal and piano parts: 2.1, 2.2, 2.14 and 2.15.}

DeBlasio’s patterns and figurations in the piano part are usually rhythmically lively and almost always consist of block chords or arpeggios (Example 2.20). He often favors a sustained bass line in the left hand, with the rhythmic and harmonic activity in the right hand.

\textbf{Example 2.20} “Butcher” (\textit{Villagers}) mm. 1-2
CHAPTER THREE

ALL THE WAY THROUGH EVENING:
FIVE NOCTURNES FOR BARITONE AND PIANO

The Poet (Perry Brass)

Originally from Savannah, Georgia, Perry Brass has lived most of his adult life in New York City. As an early member of New York’s Gay Liberation Front (from 1969) and a co-founder of the Gay Men’s Health Project Clinic, he has continually advocated respect for the homosexual community, often using his literary works as a forum to explore and document the lifestyle and experience of the gay male.\(^{182}\) In addition to a substantial body of poetry, he has written novels in a variety of genres, self-help guides to the gay male, articles in journals and magazines devoted to gay and lesbian interests, reflections on spirituality, and plays devoted to the homosexual male experience.

Brass considers himself primarily a lyric poet. “I tell my friends that I’m actually a frustrated singer.”\(^{183}\) As testament to this lyrical quality, the composers Ricky Ian Gordon, Fred Hersch, Christopher Berg, Craig Carnahan and Paula Kimper have all created songs and/or choral settings from his poetry.

In his poetry, Brass strives for word usage that suggests tangible objects and events rather than abstract ones. Chris DeBlasio once asked him why, in the poem “Walt Whitman in 1989,” he used the word “flat” to describe the boats:

I wanted it to be specific – I wanted you to have a specific image of the boat in very, very few words, and I wanted the whole poem to be specific, so that

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\(^{182}\) Further information about Brass’ life and works can be found on his website, http://www.perrybrass.com.

\(^{183}\) Perry Brass, interview by author, 15 November 2008, New York City, digital recording.
it’s not just simply symbolic or it’s not just a fantasy, but the idea that you could actually feel this happening…

And Chris really understood that too, and he and I talked about that a lot. The idea that in a really great piece of art, it should be really concrete, that there shouldn’t be something that is idealized… And the AIDS crisis was a real situation. And too often people kept trying to turn that into more like a concept…184

The director Nicholas Deutsch served as a connection for Perry Brass and Chris De Blasio. In 1982-3 Deutsch was planning one of the first public AIDS events in New York City – an AIDS cabaret at the West Bank Café at Manhattan Plaza. Brass, who was living in New Orleans at the time, sent Deutsch a set of poems titled *Five Gay Jewish Prayers* for use in the program. Deutsch informed him that a composer named Chris De Blasio was interested in setting the poems as songs for voice and piano. De Blasio set the poems for the AIDS cabaret and sent a copy to Perry Brass. Brass in turn shared these songs with Jerry Zachary, then-director of the New Orleans Gay Men’s Chorus, who liked the pieces and commissioned a choral setting from De Blasio for performance by his chorus. This artistic cross-fertilization thus began Brass and De Blasio’s friendship and history of collaboration.185

Brass and De Blasio’s next collaboration was the song set *Villagers*. De Blasio set two of Brass’ poems (“The heart does not care” and “Lyric 4”) as part of the five-song set. Brass recalled,

[“Lyric 4”] just put [De Blasio] on the map… people wanted to do that song, they really did. And probably five or six singers did that song. It was premiered by this wonderful woman [Sandra Goodman]… she sang “Lyric 4” and the entire audience just popped to its feet and clapped. She brought Chris and me to the front, and it was just this huge moment. I mean, the entire audience was gathered into that song.186

184 Brass, interview by author.
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid.
From that success Brass envisioned a continuing collaboration as lyricist and songwriter. He therefore shared approximately forty or fifty of his poems with DeBlasio in the hopes of inspiring new projects. However, DeBlasio resisted a permanent partnership and gave a variety of artistic and logistical excuses for rejecting the projects that Brass suggested. Brass believed there were other concerns that fueled DeBlasio’s reticence:

And he said to me, “I’ve gotten more from you than from anybody else I’ve ever worked with.” And that bothered him, to a certain degree. It was just Chris’ terrible conflicts. I think he felt that the match sometimes was too good. He wanted something where he would screw up… [Also, if he would] engage with me, then it would become known that we had some sort of partnership going, and he wanted to work with other people, and set other stuff.

It was in this context of DeBlasio’s resistance to Brass’ project ideas that DeBlasio eventually created *All the Way Through Evening*.

**The Creation of *All the Way Through Evening***

“I think the best way to describe [the AIDS epidemic] was like living in a war.” In his interview with the author, Perry Brass related the emotionally-numbing loss of countless friends and professional colleagues to the disease in the 1980s. But to the disease-ridden and their family and friends, perhaps the most painful aspect of the AIDS epidemic was the social stigma associated with the disease, and its resulting delay in disease research and relief:

I think the hard part was the constant mixing of morality with disease, with this particular disease and morality. The feeling that a lot of straight people couldn’t possibly get it, which was not true, or that it only affected this very marginalized group of people. As long as they just kicked them under the rug and didn’t talk about it… It wasn’t until [the spread of the disease] really became too much—that

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187 Brass, interview by author.

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid. Brass recalled “I once made a list of the people I knew who had died of AIDS, and I stopped at thirty-eight.”
you couldn’t avoid it—that people could really deal with it, and finally separate
the morality from the disease.\textsuperscript{190}

In the midst of this “war,” Brass felt compelled to create a musical/poetic work that
would help to humanize those infected with HIV/AIDS. He therefore approached DeBlasio in
1989 with the idea of fashioning a cabaret-style evening consisting of a series of profiles of
HIV-positive individuals.\textsuperscript{191} However, DeBlasio, having tested positive for HIV in 1987, was
not emotionally ready to explore the subject at an artistic level. Brass explains:

And [DeBlasio] said, “I don’t want to touch this, my life is involved with this. I
don’t want to write about it, and I don’t even know if I should be writing—the
AIDS crisis doesn’t need more music.” And I [Brass] was very unequivocal
about that. I said, “This is what you’re here to do, you’re not here to do anything
else—someone else can do the ACT-UP stuff. You’re here to write music.” And
I wrote him a letter in which I said how grieved I was about this, and that he
needed to get back to what he was really about.\textsuperscript{192}

For the next several months, DeBlasio devoted much of his energy to the AIDS activist
group ACT-UP and to various composition projects.\textsuperscript{193} The two men did not discuss an AIDS
cabaret again; the prospect of an artistic response to AIDS seemed dead. However, in
hindsight, it appears that Brass’ entreaties did have an impact on DeBlasio. In the summer of
1990, when DeBlasio went on a summer retreat at the Taos artists’ colony in New Mexico, he
brought a sheaf of Brass’ poems with him.\textsuperscript{194} At the end of the summer, he returned to New
York City and called Perry Brass, informing him that he had set five of his poems: “You

\textsuperscript{190} Brass, interview by author.

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{193} Information about the group ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power), and DeBlasio’s
involvement in it, appears in chapter one.

\textsuperscript{194} William Berger, interview by author, 14 November 2008, New York City, digital recording.
asked me to do something about AIDS and this is it.”  

He also met with his eventual partner, William Berger, to unveil the composition to him. Berger recalled:

It was a perfect afternoon in September, the light streaming through the venetian blinds of his apartment on Thompson Street. He was boyishly excited as he rolled me a joint and planted me, once again, on the sofa facing his piano. With his back turned to me, so that he was playing as if privately and I were eavesdropping, he played and sang the piece he had written that summer…a handsome, thirty-one year old, overeducated gay man crying from the heart that life is, after all, precious and beautiful and painful to leave.

The piece DeBlasio composed that summer was *All the Way Through Evening*, a song cycle for baritone and piano. He arranged for his friend, the baritone Michael Dash – also infected with AIDS – to sing the premiere. DeBlasio then approached his colleague Mimi Sterne-Wolfe, the director of Downtown Music Productions of New York City, concerning a concert she had envisioned to promote the work of both living and deceased composers who had contracted HIV/AIDS. Dash and DeBlasio (as pianist) thus premiered *All the Way Through Evening* on December 2, 1990 at the first annual Benson AIDS Series concert.

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195 Perry Brass, “All the Way Through Evening,” liner notes to *And Trouble Came: Musical Responses to AIDS* (Composers Recordings, Inc. CD 729).


197 Brass, liner notes to *And Trouble Came*. Michael Dash first rose to prominence by singing the boy soprano part in the recording of George Crumb’s *Ancient Voices of Children*. As an adult, he pursued a career as a countertenor, singing Nireno in a 1988 production of *Giulio Cesare* at the Metropolitan Opera. In the late 1980s he switched to baritone repertoire. After DeBlasio’s death, Dash continued promoting the songs of DeBlasio until his own death on March 11, 1995 at age 36 of AIDS-related complications.

198 Mimi Stern-Wolfe to Brian Bonin, electronic mail. Ms. Stern-Wolfe presents the Benson AIDS Series concert annually on World AIDS Day, and she has programmed all of the art songs by DeBlasio in subsequent concerts. She named the series after Eric Benson (1946-1988), a good friend who championed the work of many living composers. He directed or performed in several musical theater projects presented by Downtown Music Productions and contributed his spacious loft for rehearsals. Further information about Eric Benson appears in the section of chapter one titled *The Salon Circle of Friends*.  

71
Transmission of the Cycle

*All the Way Through Evening* benefitted in its early years from performances by significant artists. Baritones who have performed the cycle in New York City include André Solomon Glover (Cathedral of St. John the Divine, 1992), Gilles Denizot (Swiss Institute and Alice Tully Hall, 1995), Larry Picard (Weil Recital Hall, 1996) and Randall Scarlata (Merkin Hall-Kaufman Center, 1997). Baritone Sanford Sylvan and pianist David Breitman, who performed “Walt Whitman in 1989” for the original *AIDS Quilt Songbook* concert, performed the cycle outside of New York City a number of times in the year after DeBlasio’s death.

A major factor in the dissemination of the cycle beyond New York City has been the inclusion of the final song, “Walt Whitman in 1989,” in the original version of *The AIDS Quilt Songbook*. The song interested the progenitor of the songbook, the baritone William Parker, after he attended a performance of *All the Way Through Evening* by baritone André Solomon Glover. After the recital, Parker approached Brass and DeBlasio to ask if he could include “Walt Whitman in 1989” in the songbook. Since the first performance of *The AIDS Quilt Songbook* in 1992, musicians have performed “Walt Whitman in 1989” over one

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199 Perry Brass to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.


201 American baritone William Parker conceived of a collection of songs, submitted by a variety of composers and lyricists, that commented directly on the AIDS epidemic – a musical version of the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* ([http://www.aidsquilt.org](http://www.aidsquilt.org)). Parker and three other baritones premiered *The AIDS Quilt Songbook* on June 4, 1992 in Alice Tully Hall in New York City. Boosey & Hawkes published the song collection, and Harmonia Mundi created a CD from the premiere performance. New versions of the songbook, with new songs by different composers, have since premiered in Minneapolis and Chicago. Parker died on March 29, 1993 of AIDS-related complications.
hundred times in concert. According to Perry Brass, the song has become one of the most popular pieces in the collection.\textsuperscript{202}

As \textit{All the Way Through Evening} found greater success, DeBlasio considered it important to complete before his death an orchestral version of the cycle. He began experiencing AIDS-related health issues in the fall of 1992 and thus declined commissions for new works in order to devote his remaining energy to the task. Purchasing orchestration textbooks for further study, he completed the orchestration early in 1993.\textsuperscript{203}

Meanwhile, DeBlasio and Michael Dash contacted the heads of various orchestras, attempting to find a group who would premiere the work. Finally, on the day of DeBlasio’s death, Dash visited the hospital to inform him that Michael Morgan, the conductor of the Cosmopolitan Symphony Orchestra of New York, had committed to a performance. Thus Michael Dash and The Cosmopolitan Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Michael Morgan, premiered the orchestral version of the cycle at one of the CSO’s regular season concerts on March 5, 1994 at 2:00PM in New York City’s Town Hall.\textsuperscript{204}

\textbf{Poetic Connections Within the Cycle}

Chris DeBlasio fashioned \textit{All the Way Through Evening} from five originally unrelated poems written by Perry Brass in 1983 and 1989.\textsuperscript{205} Nonetheless, in his selection and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{202} Brass to Brian Bonin, electronic mail. Perry Brass provided this figure based on his royalties statement from Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI). Considering that not all musicians may apply for a performance license, especially in non-profit and university settings, it is quite possible that the total number of performances is greater.
\item \textsuperscript{203} Perry Brass, liner notes to \textit{And Trouble Came}; William Berger, phone interview by author, 1 September 2009, digital recording.
\item \textsuperscript{204} Perry Brass, liner notes to \textit{And Trouble Came}. The author confirmed this information by obtaining a copy of the actual concert program and a non-commercial recording of the performance.
\item \textsuperscript{205} Ibid. Brass wrote the first four poems in 1983, while he wrote the final poem, “Walt Whitman in 1989,” in 1989.
\end{itemize}
arrangement of the poems DeBlasio created an astonishingly cohesive narrative, aided in part by the presence of imagery shared between the poems. The most common example of this shared imagery is Brass’ use of opposing concepts to symbolize life and death (e.g. warmth and cold, light and darkness). In each of the poems, Brass utilizes daytime to represent life, night to represent death, and evening to represent the in-between – waning life and impending death. Thus DeBlasio’s choice for the title of the cycle, taken from the final line of the last poem, encourages the listener to interpret the poems as a journey toward death in the midst of waning life. Likewise, the labeling of the songs as “nocturnes” in the subtitle reinforces the elements of evening and night that are so pervasive throughout the cycle.

In DeBlasio’s ordering, these once-individual poems chronicle a gay male narrator’s process of reaching out to an eternal gay male community – homosexuals past, present and future – in defiance of the despondency inflicted by his fatal disease. The first poem, “The Disappearance of Light,” is a reflection on sleep: the narrator contemplates his gradual loss of consciousness in a state of barely-contained fear and panic, struggling in vain to resist the arrival of “thought’s dead-end in tired night.” At the beginning of a cycle concerned with the AIDS crisis, the imagery present in the poem encourages the audience to view sleep (the temporary loss of consciousness) as a metaphor for death (the permanent loss of consciousness). The audience thus realizes over the course of the poem that the narrator is afraid of ceasing to exist. However, in the final lines of the poem, an undefined element of hope reaches out to the solitary narrator: “one last ray calls before the disappearance of light.”

In the next three poems, the narrator, empowered by this mysterious moment of connection, in turn reaches out to other gay men in an ever-widening circle. In “Train Station” the narrator, recognizing that he has few opportunities left for human connection,
seeks public intimacy with his lover in spite of potential judgment. “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” finds the narrator communing with and then unexpectedly losing an artist colleague to AIDS. Motivated by the abrupt loss of this cherished colleague, the narrator in “Poussin” explores the lives of other deceased gay men and discovers a powerful, continually evolving legacy that transcends “the troubles of our age.” By the arrival of the fifth and final poem, “Walt Whitman in 1989,” the narrator is prepared to face death, secure in the knowledge that his life force will persist as part of a greater scope of existence – the eternal gay male community. As this poem suggests, “How deeply flows the River that takes [Walt Whitman] and his friends this evening.”

In an e-mail to the author, the poet Perry Brass reflected on why DeBlasio chose a message of gay male unity in the face of AIDS:

I think what Chris wanted to assert was the importance of not being alone when so many people felt horrifically alone. The AIDS Crisis was a period of horrible isolation and pain for many people—many men I knew died alone of AIDS, some killing themselves when they realized there was no other way out except that… Chris had a tendency to isolate himself and to feel very cut off, even though he had scores of friends—he made friends easily, and drew people to him because of his talent, youth, and attractiveness.206

An image shared between the first and fifth poems – a figure boating through dark waters – deserves special mention. In “The Disappearance of Light,” a “thin, familiar dream” “cutting the dark waters with his silver oars” provides a final moment of hope “before the disappearance of light.” In the fifth poem, “Walt Whitman in 1989,” Perry Brass casts Whitman, the iconic gay American poet, as a quasi-Charon figure for gay men dying of AIDS-related complications: Whitman “takes a dying man in his arms,” places him on a “strong, flat” boat and sails on “the river of dusk and lamentation” “all the way through

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206 Brass to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.
The shared imagery establishes Whitman as a conduit between the narrator and the eternal gay male community. In the first song, Whitman is the “thin, familiar dream,” emerging from the depths of the eternal gay male community to comfort and inspire the dying narrator. The narrator at first does not recognize Whitman, but the poet’s act of reaching out nonetheless initiates the narrator’s pursuit of human connections. At the last song, when the narrator discovers the eternal gay male community, he finally recognizes Whitman and his role as guide to young gay men dying of AIDS.

**Musical Connections Within the Cycle**

DeBlasio entwined the songs of *All the Way Through Evening* with a wealth of musical devices, both large and small scale. These musical connections serve one of three purposes: to reinforce the obvious thematic connections among the poems, to imply thematic or narrative connections not sufficiently suggested by the poems themselves, or to simply provide greater musical cohesiveness.

DeBlasio first created large-scale cohesiveness through harmonic relationships among the songs. *All the Way Through Evening*, as with DeBlasio’s other song sets, functions with a set of tonal areas that often defy traditional Roman numeral analysis. DeBlasio seldom used straightforward melodic scales and triads, instead infusing his tonal areas with modality, additive harmony and polyharmony. However, DeBlasio did not use these harmonic tools purely for musical interest. Throughout this cycle, as in his other art song sets, he manipulated this expanded harmonic vocabulary to create poetry-inspired harmonic tendencies and patterns throughout the cycle.

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207 In Greek mythology, Charon was the old, ragged boatman who ferried the dead across the rivers that served as the boundary of Hades. Greek mythology typically described the principal among these rivers, the Styx, as having dark waters.
For instance, in *All the Way Through Evening* DeBlasio consistently exploits the Lydian mode for expressive effect. The defining feature of the Lydian mode is the raised fourth scale degree, and he uses this defining feature, with its evocation of aurally “reaching” for the fifth scale degree, to suggest yearning or exertion against a draining life force. He utilizes this raised fourth scale degree in two basic ways: as part of a melodic scale or arpeggio leading to the fifth scale degree (Example 3.1), or as part of a suspension over the tonic triad (Example 3.2).

**Example 3.1** “The Disappearance of Light” mm. 1-2
Lydian arpeggio in D♭

![Example 3.1](image)

**Example 3.2** “The Disappearance of Light” m. 22
Lydian suspension in E

![Example 3.2](image)
Another harmonic tendency that appears throughout the cycle is DeBlasio’s “shading” of the poetic text with sharp or flat accidentals. The text of the cycle creates certain moments in which the pull of death is a tangible reality, while at other times creating moments in which the act of living is the central focus. DeBlasio consistently sets text that suggests the pull of death to tonal areas or individual chords with flat accidentals, while he sets text that expresses the act of living to tonal areas or individual chords with sharp accidentals. Rapid shifts in poetic mood often inspire him to juxtapose chords with flat and sharp accidentals – in Example 3.3 DeBlasio distinguishes the concepts of “fatigue” and “dream” through the use of D♭ major and E major chords.

**Example 3.3** “The Disappearance of Light” mm. 32-35
Further study of DeBlasio’s use of flat and sharp accidentals, and their relationship to the poetic text, reveals a sophisticated set of key relationships. This study begins with three major mode tonal areas whose tonics are each a step apart: B♭ (two flats), C and D (two sharps). These three tonal areas each relate to a crucial text-based concept in the cycle.

DeBlasio uses the tonal area with flat accidentals (B♭) at the beginning and end of the cycle, to support the text in which the narrator himself experiences the pull of death. In the first song of the cycle (“The Disappearance of Light”), the narrator gradually succumbs to the loss of consciousness, while in the final song (“Walt Whitman in 1989”) the narrator bears witness as Whitman guides a dying man “all the way through evening.” DeBlasio further tracks shifts in mood within this B♭ context through his use of two prominent minor-mode chords. He aurally shades text that describes the weariness caused by death with the flatted mediant chord (D♭), while he shades text that expresses a purposeful reaction to the pull of death with the flatted submediant (G♭). Example 3.4 provides instances in which DeBlasio employs these two chords: a vocal phrase in D♭ Lydian with text describing “the drag of sleep” precedes a vocal phrase in G♭ Lydian expressing the narrator’s resistance “all the way to morning.”

DeBlasio uses the tonal area with sharp accidentals (D) at two critical moments within the cycle, to signify the narrator’s recognition of and connection with the eternal gay male community. In both instances, DeBlasio laces this D tonal area with Lydian mode G♯ pitches that embody the act of reaching out to other gay men. The first appearance of D Lydian, at the conclusion of “The Disappearance of Light,” coincides with the moment in which the mysterious figure boating through dark waters sparks a glimmer of recognition in the narrator.
In the final three measures of that song, DeBlasio writes an ascending four-and-a-half octave D Lydian arpeggio that musically suggests the “one last ray” of hope that “calls before the disappearance of light” (Example 3.5). This D Lydian arpeggio, which briefly interrupts the song’s final cadential passage in A minor, foreshadows the narrator’s eventual full recognition of an eternal gay community. The second appearance of D Lydian, in the song “Poussin,” is an extended eleven measure section that describes the glorious moment in which the narrator fully recognizes the eternal gay male community and its enduring life force: “there the clouds are meteoric, and the horses still chase on…” (Example 3.6).

Example 3.4 “The Disappearance of Light” mm. 14-17
Example 3.5 “The Disappearance of Light” mm. 48-50

Example 3.6 “Poussin” mm. 58-61

This piano pattern continues through m. 69.

At this point, it is important to note how the extra-musical ideas associated with B♭ and D relate to each other. Viewed from a slightly different perspective, these tonal areas represent the seemingly opposing desires often held by people facing death: the need to relinquish their hold on life, and the need to nevertheless establish a legacy that will persevere after death. The texts DeBlasio set with the B♭ tonal area – the texts in which the narrator
experiences the pull of death – describe the narrator as he wrestles with and attempts to make peace with his eventual demise. By the onset of the $B\flat$ section in “Walt Whitman in 1989,” the narrator is prepared to relinquish his life. On the other hand, the primary narrative of this cycle is the narrator’s process of reaching out to other gay men, attempting to propagate his life force. The D tonal area – the harmonic representation of the eternal gay male community – is the culmination of the narrator’s process. He eventually recognizes that just as the gay men who went before him influenced the shape of his life, his own life experiences – his relationships, his work and his advocacy for the gay community – will continue to exert an influence on future generations after he is gone and even forgotten.

The extra-musical significance of the C tonal area emerges in the context of its relationship to $B\flat$ and D. Two passages in *All the Way Through Evening* (Example 3.7, Example 3.8) demonstrate a blending of these three tonal areas: the left hand of the piano articulates a C major triad, while the piano right hand and the vocal line outline tones found in $B\flat$ major and D major triads. Both of these passages appear at locations in which the narrator obtains an insight about death. As $B\flat$ and D, appearing in the upper register of the piano, represent reactions to death, it seems likely that the C major triad appearing in the piano’s lower register represents death itself. DeBlasio perhaps uses C major as the tonal area of death because its absence of accidentals provides a symbol of nothingness. The whole step relationships between these three tonal areas provide further support for the theory of C as the

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208 In Example 3.6, the narrator realizes that eventually he will lose consciousness forever: “still comes the slack of things without dreams, and thought’s dead-end in tired night.” Example 3.7 occurs after the narrator discovers that the spirit of dead gay men endures.
tonal area of death: the tonal area pitched a whole step above C represents a resistance to death, while the tonal area pitched a whole step below represents a capitulation to death.²⁰⁹

Example 3.7 “The Disappearance of Light” mm. 24-25

Example 3.8 “Poussin” mm. 80-end

With these three tonal areas defined, a hierarchy of tonal areas binding the cycle emerges (Figure 3.1). The remaining prominent tonal areas in the cycle relate through the circle of fifths to B♭ and D. The tonal areas related to D (G and A) coincide with text that

²⁰⁹ A discussion of DeBlasio’s use of the relative minor of C major (Am) appears in the upcoming section devoted to “The Disappearance of Light.”

In any musical scale, the motion between pitches a semitone apart serves as a source of tension or energy. Therefore, DeBlasio perhaps chose the B♭ and D tonal areas because of the symbolic aural effect the pitch with an accidental in their tonic triads would have when inserted into a C major scale. B♭, as the flatted seventh in C, removes the leading tone motion toward the tonic. F♯, as the Lydian raised fourth scale degree in C, adds a leading tone motion toward the dominant. In other words, the tonal area signifying a capitulation to death removes a source of aural energy from C, while the tonal area signifying a resistance to death adds a source of aural energy to C.
demonstrates the process of connecting with the eternal gay community, while the tonal areas related to B♭ (F and E♭) coincide with text that represents a reaction to the pull of death.

The accompanying table (Figure 3.2) describes each tonal area and identifies its appearances in the cycle.

**Figure 3.1 Tonal plan of *All the Way Through Evening***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tonal Area</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Location in the cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C / Am</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>every song except “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bb (with Db, Gb)</td>
<td>pull of death</td>
<td>“The Disappearance of Light”, “Walt Whitman in 1989”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>tedium/hopelessness of remaining life</td>
<td>“Train Station”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eb</td>
<td>dead leaving messages behind</td>
<td>“An Elegy to Paul Jacobs”, “Poussin”, “Walt Whitman in 1989”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>connection with the universal gay community</td>
<td>“The Disappearance of Light”, “Poussin”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Paul Jacobs theme</td>
<td>“An Elegy to Paul Jacobs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>memory of Paul Jacobs</td>
<td>“An Elegy to Paul Jacobs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>universal gay community</td>
<td>“Poussin”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.2 Description of the major tonal areas**

DeBlasio next creates cohesion within the cycle by dispersing common motives or figures among the songs. For example, each of the five songs begins with a similar vocal line
In every song, the initial vocal phrase favors the dominant pitch, repeating this tone several times. Many of these phrases begin with the tonic pitch. Some of these initial phrases create an upper neighbor figure between the dominant and submediant pitches, while others descend by step from the dominant to the mediant pitch. Some of the phrases do both. In the case of “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” and “Walt Whitman in 1989,” these pitch tendencies also appear in vocal phrases within the songs.

Example 3.9 Similar vocal phrases at the beginnings of songs (in B♭ and A)

The most prevalent recurring figure within the cycle is a rocking figure in the piano part (Example 3.10). This figure appears in every song, although it is most prevalent in the first and fifth songs. DeBlasio, perhaps inspired by the texts describing a person boating through dark waters, created a figure that suggests the undulating currents of a river. The figure generally consists of a pair of alternating chords with the same rhythmic value in the right hand accompanied by a sustained bass line in the left hand. The rocking motion results from the alternating pitches of the two chords. The beauty of such a basic pattern is that DeBlasio can freely manipulate aspects of its pitch and rhythm to create a variety of moods. For example, when the alternating chords move from higher pitch to lower, they suggest the
lulling pull of death. Likewise, when the chords move from lower pitch to higher, they suggest a resistance or purposeful reaction to the pull of death.

**Example 3.10** Versions of the recurring rocking figure

Another figure that appears in the piano part throughout the cycle is a series of descending pitch arpeggios (Example 3.11). Each series consists of three or four arpeggios, and each arpeggio consists of five to seven notes played within the space of one beat. Each arpeggio begins on the downbeat of a measure, and either every note or only the last note of the arpeggio is sustained for the remainder of the measure. Most of these arpeggio series present a circle of fifths chord progression, although the chords outlined by each arpeggio typically contain added pitches. DeBlasio deploys this arpeggio series at places in which the narrator experiences a moment of human connection.  

In two instances, DeBlasio appends a melody to the descending arpeggio series (Example 3.11). DeBlasio uses this melody when the human connection is the most personal.

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210 This arpeggio series occurs four times in the cycle: “The Disappearance of Light,” highlighting “one last ray calls”; “Train Station,” when the narrator kisses his lover; at the beginning of “Walt Whitman in 1989,” suggesting the arrival of Walt Whitman; and later in “Walt Whitman in 1989,” underscoring the divide created when people attack each other using words with “the edge of poison.”
and tangible: when the narrator kisses his lover in “Train Station,” and when Walt Whitman arrives at the hospital at the beginning of “Walt Whitman in 1989.” This document will hereafter refer to the descending arpeggio series as the human connection motive and the accompanying melody as the human connection melody.

**Example 3.11 Human connection motive and melody**

As mentioned earlier, DeBlasio dispatches the raised fourth scale degree in Lydian mode, “reaching” for the fifth scale degree, to suggest exertion against the draining of life force. To suggest the actual draining of life force, he created a motive that is the antithesis of an ascending Lydian mode scale: a descending five-note minor mode scale with a flatted second scale degree (Example 3.12, hereafter referenced as the ω motive). He further
emphasizes the symbolic divide between opposing concepts by placing the Lydian scale patterns in the voice or the piano right hand and placing the \( \omega \) motive in the piano left hand. In two instances, when the text indicates an abrupt reaction against draining life, DeBlasio composes descending lines that begin as \( \omega \) motives but are either “interrupted” by a change in pitch direction or “frustrated” by a shift in tonal context. Figure 3.3 provides a listing of all \( \omega \) motive appearances.

**Example 3.12** The \( \omega \) motive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Harmonic Context</th>
<th>Location in the song</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The Disappearance of Light”</td>
<td>Cm</td>
<td>mm. 11-13, piano left hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dm</td>
<td>mm. 46-48, piano left hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Train Station”</td>
<td>Fm</td>
<td>mm. 24-27, piano left hand (frustrated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“An Elegy to Paul Jacobs”</td>
<td>E♭ m</td>
<td>mm. 58-60, voice (final E♭ appears in piano right hand)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Poussin”</td>
<td>Gm</td>
<td>mm. 28-39, piano left hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Walt Whitman in 1989”</td>
<td>E♭ m</td>
<td>mm. 29-33, piano left hand (interrupted)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.3** Appearances of the \( \omega \) motive in *All the Way Through Evening*

Finally, DeBlasio creates additional musical connections for the two songs with the most poetic connections: “The Disappearance of Light” and “Walt Whitman in 1989.” The presence of musical connections between these songs – in conjunction with the previously mentioned poetic connections – reinforces the cyclic nature of the narrator’s psychological
journey. One such connection is the B♭ tonal area shared by both songs. Another connection is a series of shared figures that appear in the piano parts of both songs. Figure 3.4 provides a listing of these figures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“The Disappearance of Light”</th>
<th>“Walt Whitman in 1989”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mm. 7-8, mm. 40-41</td>
<td>mm. 12-13, mm. 25-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 10-13</td>
<td>mm. 14-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 18-21</td>
<td>mm. 27-end</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.4** Piano figures shared between the first and last songs of the cycle

The final connection between the first and last songs occurs in their opening measures. The first eight measures of “The Disappearance of Light” outline three chords related to each other by the circle of fifths: D♭, G♭ and B (or C♭) (see Example 3.14). The human connection motive that occurs in the first four measures of “Walt Whitman in 1989” continues this circle of fifths pattern: E, A, D and G (see Example 3.11). Together, the beginnings of these two songs outline the tonal areas that appear, in this basic order, over the course of the cycle. Each of the tonal areas chronicles a step in the narrator’s personal journey: the three tonal areas outlined in the beginning of “The Disappearance of Light” represent the narrator’s reactions to impending death, while the four tonal areas outlined in “Walt Whitman in 1989” chronicle the narrator’s process of actively pursuing solutions to impending death.\(^\text{211}\)

\(^{211}\) The reader should note that Figures 3.1 and 3.2 describe each of the tonal areas listed in this paragraph, with the exception of B. A discussion of the function of the B tonal area appears in the upcoming sections devoted to “The Disappearance of Light” and “Train Station.”
Analyses of Individual Poems/Songs

The Disappearance of Light

This poem chronicles, during one evening and night, the narrator’s resistance to the loss of consciousness. At the heart of the poem is the increasing sense of hopelessness in resisting the inevitable. Only in the last few lines does Perry Brass introduce a brief glimmer of hope “before the disappearance of light.” At the beginning of a cycle focusing on AIDS and death, this poem demonstrates the narrator’s feelings about death (the permanent loss of consciousness) through his reactions to sleep (a temporary loss of consciousness).

DeBlasio musically symbolizes the inevitable loss of consciousness with a descending harmonic trajectory. He begins the song in a B♭ tonal area but ends it, after some harmonic meandering, a semitone lower (A minor). To emphasize this overall tonal descent, he executes in both tonal areas an almost identical cadential passage. The similarity of the two passages encourages the performers and audience to compare them and thus notice the change in pitch. The B♭ passage occurs at the entrance of the vocal line (measures five through thirteen), while the A minor passage coincides with the final vocal phrases (measures thirty-nine through forty-seven). DeBlasio further highlights the pitch descent by writing the A minor passage an octave lower than the B♭ passage. The only significant difference between the two passages is that the human connection motive interrupts the A minor passage, signifying the brief glimmer of hope before the loss of consciousness. The relationship between these two tonal areas is especially significant if one returns to the descriptions found

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212 The reader should note that the chord progression outlined by the arpeggios of the human connection motive (C/Am - F - B♭) is the same chord progression found in the preceding six measures (mm. 36-41). Perhaps DeBlasio was connecting the text ideas in those measures (a dream “cutting the dark waters” and “warmth before the cold”) to the “one last ray” described during the motive.
in Figure 3.2: the tonal area representing the pull of death eventually gives way to a tonal area representing death.

I believe it is important at this juncture to explain why I have labeled A minor a tonal area of death in conjunction with its relative major (C). Because the concluding section of this first song is the only place in the cycle in which DeBlasio asserts an A minor tonal area, the reader might conclude that A minor serves no purpose in the cycle other than to establish the aforementioned semitone harmonic descent. However, certain clues in the score imply a connection between A minor and the concept of death. First of all, DeBlasio introduces the A minor tonal area during the final lines of the poem, when the text describes the impending end of consciousness. As if to musically punctuate the connection between A minor and death, he executes an A minor authentic cadence during the very words that symbolize death (“disappearance of light”). Secondly, he creates an ambiguous A minor/C major harmony in portions of this A minor tonal area, thus implying a connection between the two. Example 3.13 provides a case in point. While the E major harmony in the measure before this excerpt suggests a dominant function, and the vocal line strongly outlines A minor, the piano part nonetheless implies C Lydian, especially the E-F♯-G motion in the left hand. Considering its function in this song, perhaps A minor represents a temporary loss of consciousness, while its relative major key (C) represents the permanent loss of consciousness (i.e. death).
Example 3.13 “The Disappearance of Light” mm. 36-38

Two elements provide the primary musical material for “The Disappearance of Light”: ascending melodic figures in the Lydian mode, and a variety of rocking figures. These figures create pitch and rhythmic tension as a corollary to the emotional tension described in the poem. First of all, DeBlasio imbues practically every harmony in the song with the characteristic Lydian raised fourth scale degree. He most commonly creates an ascending arpeggio or melodic figure, in either the voice or piano, that emphasizes the motion from the raised fourth scale degree to the fifth scale degree. The rising semitone conclusion of these figures provides an aural representation of struggling against the loss of consciousness.

The first seven measures of the song provide characteristic examples of the ascending Lydian figure (Example 3.14). Within an overall B b tonal area context, the piano introduction presents three Lydian mode harmonies in a circle of fifths sequence (D b , G b , B). For each of these harmonies DeBlasio emphasizes a stepwise third to fifth scale degree motion. In the D b Lydian and G b Lydian arpeggios, the concluding third, fourth and fifth scale degrees are fairly evident. Perhaps not so evident is the statement of the third, fourth and fifth scale degrees in B Lydian – note the arrows indicating the uppermost tones on the downbeats of measures five through seven. When chained together, the third, fourth and fifth...
scale degrees of each of these harmonies reach successively higher and higher, musically suggesting the narrator pushing against the “lowering darkness.”

Example 3.14 “The Disappearance of Light” mm. 1-7
Arrows indicate scale degrees 3-4-5 in B Lydian

DeBlasio employs a variety of rocking figures in almost half of the fifty measures of the song. The alternating chords of these rocking figures impress upon the listener a sense of struggle, as if a person were struggling against physical bonds. The most significant series of

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213 When listed one after the other, the third, raised fourth and fifth scale degrees of D♭, G♭ and B spell an F minor scale that overshoots the octave and arrives at the flatted second scale degree. In context the F♯/G♭ sounds as an upper neighbor of F and, in conjunction with the authentic cadential motion in F suggested by the bass pitches of measures five through eight, resolves to the localized tonic (F) in measure nine before the arrival of the overall tonic B♭ in measure ten.
rocking figures – a series DeBlasio designed to suggest increasing panic through a build-up of rhythmic energy – spans eighteen measures. The series begins in measure fourteen with an ascending rocking figure consisting of half note chords. These relatively calm figures accompany text describing the narrator’s attempts to resist “the drag of sleep.” Beginning with measure eighteen, as the text implies that the narrator is only resisting the inevitable, the rocking figure converts to a descending pattern with quarter note chords. As the text describes the narrator descending further and further into unconsciousness, and the narrator views his situation with increasing despair, the rhythmic length of the rocking figures successively shortens, and the tempo increases. At measure twenty-two, the rocking figure converts to eighth note chords with a faster tempo. From measure twenty-six through measure thirty-one the rocking figure converts to a sixteenth note pattern with the indication cresc. e acc. poco a poco. This crescendo/accelerando catapults the piece toward the abrupt rhythmic calm of a whole note chord in measure thirty-two, making palpable the sudden calming effect of the narrator’s realization that “through the tarnish of fatigue slips some thin, familiar dream.”

**Train Station**

Perry Brass penned the cryptic dedication “for H.W.” for the original 1983 poem “Train Station.” In an interview with the author, he described writing the poem as a present for a dear friend in New Orleans named Harvis Weekly.\(^\text{214}\) Brass used Weekly’s initials to spare him the potential embarrassment of having his name attached to a poem with intimate

\(^{214}\) Brass, interview by author. Brass described Weekly as an incredibly kind and generous man. Among other things, the two friends served as caretakers for a homeless man dying of AIDS in New Orleans. Harvis Weekly died of AIDS in the mid-1990s. Brass was pleased that he could finally explain the poem’s dedication: “I’m glad that I can give him some kind of remembrance. I don’t know how much remembrance Harvis will have.”
subject matter. Nonetheless, the poem does not describe actual events—Brass and Weekly never kissed in a train station. Brass explained that the significance was in sharing a treasured, intimate work with a friend:

I think that’s something that poets have a feeling for, to give someone a poem. Whereas in our very materialist world, someone says, “Couldn’t you give him something else?” [Laughs] But to me giving someone a poem, or being given a poem by somebody else, is just an exquisite gift, totally from the heart—to be given a piece of art.\(^{215}\)

“Train Station” chronicles the narrator’s farewell to his lover, who is preparing to board a train. The narrator is torn between his desire to share an intimate goodbye and his fear of a reprisal, from either his lover or the crowd in the train station. He therefore restrains himself until the final moment of departure. The realization that he may never see his lover again finally compels him to push past “those walls of decorum” and kiss him passionately.

DeBlasio mirrors the narrator’s conflicted state through his juxtaposition of rhythmic momentum and rhythmic repose in the piano part. He creates a pulsing rhythmic figure, reminiscent of the sounds of a moving train, during text expressing the narrator’s inhibition in reaction to the perceived expectations of others (Example 3.15, hereafter referenced as the train figure). The quarter notes in the left hand, especially the highly dissonant major seventh interval created by the E natural and sustained F natural on the downbeat of the first measure, suggest the clanging of the train wheels on the tracks, while the sixteenth note pattern in the right hand suggests the relentless, motoric motion of the train. The combination of rhythmic incisiveness and rhythmic motion in this figure seemingly traps the narrator in the rush of societal expectations.

\(^{215}\) Brass, interview by author.
DeBlasio then creates sections that are more rhythmically static during text that relates the narrator’s desire to express his love. Example 3.16 presents the first moment in which the train figure in the piano ceases. The sudden cessation of this relentless piano figure, in conjunction with the ascending vocal line, provides a tangible representation of the narrator attempting to push through the onslaught of hectic human life in order to forge a moment of connection, intimate and fully aware.
DeBlasio further charts the narrator’s psychological journey through the use of tonal areas and certain pitch relationships. In the first twenty-five measures, when the conflicted narrator contains himself within the dictates of acceptable public behavior, DeBlasio employs a C/F bitonality. As stated earlier, these tonal areas represent death and the tedium of remaining life (see Figure 3.2). DeBlasio is perhaps suggesting that societal expectations, which often curtail vital human endeavors and stifle intimacy, impose upon the narrator a hopeless existence that is tantamount to living death. He also limits himself in this opening section to the use of flat accidentals (the pull of death) – it is only in measure twenty-four,
when the narrator risks public intimacy, that he first places sharp accidentals (the act of living) in the score.

Also significant in “Train Station” is DeBlasio’s manipulation of the E♯ and D♭ pitches to represent extra-musical ideas. DeBlasio deploys these pitches both in the pulsing train figure in the piano and in textually significant locations in the voice part. These pitches assume an extra-musical significance when considered in conjunction with a passage from the previous song, “The Disappearance of Light.” In that passage DeBlasio uses D♭ and E♯ chords in succession to musically distinguish the “tarnish of fatigue” from a “thin, familiar dream” (see Example 3.3).

In “Train Station” the D♭ and E♯ pitches express similar extra-musical ideas through their relationships with the F/C bitonality of the song. Because of its semitone upper neighbor relationship to C, the D♭ pitch always produces a dissonance that asserts the need for a downward resolution to C. As C is the tonal area of death, D♭ therefore provides a tangible aural representation of the pull of fatigue/death. Conversely, the E♯ pitch has a leading tone relationship with the F tonal area and thus creates a dissonance that asserts the need for an upward resolution. It therefore provides a tangible aural representation of the striving or yearning for dreaming/life. By placing these upward and downward resolving pitches in succession, DeBlasio effectively expresses the narrator’s conflicted nature: should he capitulate to the ostensible futility of life, or should he persist in seeking value in life?

In Example 3.15, note the upper pitches in the piano left hand in measures one and two. The E/D♭ relationship first appears in the vocal line in measure nineteen (on the word “ever”).

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216 In Example 3.15, note the upper pitches in the piano left hand in measures one and two. The E/D♭ relationship first appears in the vocal line in measure nineteen (on the word “ever”).
In the final nine measures of the song, after the narrator has succeeded in “hungrily”
kissing his lover, DeBlasio re-orient these tonal and pitch ideas to represent the narrator’s
change of perspective. This new orientation creates a less dissonant, and thus less tense, tonal
scheme. After the narrator’s kiss, the piano’s train figure resumes at measure thirty-nine,
interrupting the serenity of the intimate moment with frantic societal expectations. This
revised piano figure, like its predecessor, continues to sound a sustained F in the bass line.
However, in this revised figure the C tonal area – the specter of death – is now absent.
DeBlasio now positions a D♭ major triad in the piano right hand, while sounding a
continuous stream of E quarter notes in the piano left hand (see Example 3.17). In the
original train figure, the C major triad and the F pitch created intense dissonance because of
the close proximity of E, F and G. The new orientation presents only one source of
dissonance: the pitches E and F. This relaxing of the dissonance tension suggests that the
frenetic pull of societal expectations no longer exerts excessive influence upon the narrator.
Likewise, the prominent and perpetual sounding of E♮ quarter notes, with the D♭ pitch
relegated to sixteenth notes in a metrically weak position, implies that yearning/life is now the
dominant mood over fatigue/death.217

Example 3.17 “Train Station” mm. 45-end

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217 The vocal line in measures forty-two to forty-four also demonstrates this shift of musical priorities. It sustains two lengthy E♭ pitches on the words “heat storm,” while D♭ only receives a brief sixteenth note.
The tonal activity during the actual moment in which the narrator kisses his lover deserves detailed attention. From measure twenty-four until measure thirty-five – the period during which the narrator kisses his lover, and time seems to stop – DeBlasio presents only major triads. Two piano passages in this section (mm. 24-26, mm. 31-35) consist of chains of major triads that create harmonic planing.

In measures twenty-four through twenty-six (Example 3.18), DeBlasio lays out a piano figure that suggests the narrator finally pushing through the last of his inhibitions. The piano right hand and left hand move in contrary pitch motion, each eventually arriving at D pitches that are four octaves apart. The piano right hand presents an ascending version of the cycle’s recurring rocking figure, consisting of major triads whose upper tones outline a whole tone scale. The piano left hand begins an ω motive in F, its weak-beat rhythm suggestive of the train beginning to move. However, the narrator’s desire for connection frustrates this ω motive in the second half of measure twenty-six, converting the half-note train rhythm to a quarter note rhythm and cascading beyond the F pitch goal to D.

See the section Musical Connections Within the Cycle for a discussion of the rocking figure that appears in many of the songs.
The arrival of the human connection motive in measure twenty-seven of the piano part highlights the moment when the narrator kisses his lover. The human connection motive begins as expected, presenting a circle of fifths progression: D, G, and then C. However, the final two arpeggios take a surprising turn, outlining $B_{\flat}$ and $A_{\flat}$ triads before leading into the human connection melody in measures thirty-one through thirty-five. The human connection melody itself is a curious entity, accompanied entirely by major triads. The overall context of this appearance of the human connection melody – the pitches in the vocal line in measures thirty-one through thirty-eight, the book-ending of the melody with B major triads, and the pitches of the melody itself – implies a B tonal area.
DeBlasio’s novel casting of the **human connection motive and melody** bears a striking harmonic resemblance to a portion of the piano introduction in “The Disappearance of Light.” In measures six through nine of that passage, oscillating B♭ and A♭ triads in the piano right hand lead to a B major descending figure before arriving at an F localized tonic. The same pattern happens in “Train Station”: in an overall F tonal area, DeBlasio articulates B♭ and A♭ triads that lead into a B tonal area before returning to the F tonal area in measure thirty-nine. DeBlasio furthers the connection between these two passages by employing similar cadential returns to the F tonal area. In measures seven and eight of “The Disappearance of Light,” DeBlasio sustains a dominant tone (C) in the piano left hand while implying a sustained semitone upper neighbor to the tonic (F♭) in the piano right hand. In measures thirty-seven and thirty-eight of “Train Station,” he simply reverses the layout of the same cadential plan: the sustained C dominant appears in the piano right hand, while the F♯ appears in the left hand.

DeBlasio perhaps created this harmonic connection to cast “The Disappearance of Light” passage as a musical foreshadowing of the eventual realization in “Train Station” of the narrator’s will to live. The narrator is searching in the first song for solutions that fulfill his wish to live in the face of death. In the nine measure piano introduction, the harmonic arrival of the B triad sounds as a brilliant achievement claimed through struggle. In the second song, the abrupt appearance of the **human connection melody** in B underscores a first milestone in this search for solutions: reaching out to another gay man. It is also significant that the B♯ pitch serves as the Lydian raised fourth scale degree for the F tonal area, further suggesting an act of striving against the desolation-inducing effects of death.

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219 The reader should consult Example 3.14 and the discussion of this passage on pages 93-4 for review.
An Elegy to Paul Jacobs

Paul Jacobs was an American pianist/harpsichordist and teacher who served as the official pianist (from 1962) and then harpsichordist (from 1974) for the New York Philharmonic. He specialized first in the twentieth century avant-garde repertoire and then later in Baroque performance practice. He developed collaborative relationships with living composers such as Aaron Copland and Elliot Carter, premiering and recording many of their works. His legacy includes an extensive series of recordings for Nonesuch Records of twentieth century solo and chamber piano repertoire by the likes of Debussy, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Carter and Virgil Thomson. The reference to Paul Jacobs “playing Busoni on the radio” in the opening line of the poem refers to three recordings Jacobs made in 1978, 1979 and 1983 of Ferruccio Busoni’s piano works. He was a fervent champion of Busoni, whom he described as “the great underrated master of the twentieth century.” Jacobs died on September 25, 1983 from AIDS-related complications.

The setting of this poem – a portion of New York City’s Central Park called the Ramble – assumes a significant role both in New York gay history and in Paul Jacob’s life. For much of the twentieth century, the relative isolation of the Ramble’s wooded areas

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222 Schonberg.

223 Teresa Sterne, liner notes to *Paul Jacobs: The legendary Busoni recordings & works by Bach, Bartók, Brahms, Messiaen, Stravinsky* (Arbiter Records 124).

224 Ibid.

225 The Ramble is thirty-eight acres of landscaped forest gardens, complete with walking paths and an artificial stream. For further information on the Ramble, consult the Central Park Conservancy website: [http://www.centralparknyc.org](http://www.centralparknyc.org).
afforded gay men an ideal nighttime location for covert sexual activity. During the 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of the burgeoning gay rights movement, gay men began using the Ramble as a daytime gathering place, as much for socialization as for sex.\textsuperscript{226} Perry Brass met and chatted with Paul Jacobs on several occasions at the Ramble. According to Brass, Jacobs was a regular at the Ramble and was a “fervid cruiser” who was “constantly looking around and seeing who was around there, who was doing what…where the action was.”\textsuperscript{227}

Brass explains why he wrote an elegy for Jacobs:

\begin{quote}
It’s interesting. In that period, in the seventies, you had this thing which you don’t have anymore…in New York, you had this huge mixture of what I would describe as high art and low sex, or sexuality and high art. There was a large population of gay men for whom the arts were their life-blood. They were into Balanchine and Maria Callas and Paul Jacobs, and you could go to piano recitals where the entire audience was gay. And afterwards, everyone would go out to bars, and some of them were sex bars.

So you had that going on, and Paul Jacobs was this perfect exponent of that… And then he was one of the first, I say, really famous people to die of AIDS, although he wasn’t that famous. But you see, he was famous in classical music circles.\textsuperscript{228}

The universal message of the poem “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” is that human beings often underestimate illness and death, even when it involves someone important to them.
\end{quote}

Brass casts this statement within the context of an allegorical visit to the Ramble, symbolizing the journey with various elements of nature and of the park. Paul Jacobs, a figure who is seemingly omnipresent in gay cultural and social/sexual circles, is simultaneously “playing

\textsuperscript{226} Doug Ireland, “Rendezvous in the Ramble,” \textit{New York Magazine} 24 July 1978, \url{http://nymag.com/news/features/47179/} (accessed 12 July 2009). Editor and publisher Chuck Ortleb, interviewed for the article, clarified: "The discrimination, the fear and hatred of homosexuals ingrained in the culture eliminate most of the opportunities for socialization that exist in the straight world. The [gay] bars are an extremely limited form of interaction…The openness of the park encourages openness among people. It's one of the few places in which this society allows us to meet each other."

\textsuperscript{227} Brass, interview by author.

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid.
Busoni on the radio and walking through the park on the way to the Rambles.” In the morning, the gay men at the park are unconcerned, as the day (life) seems “endless.” Even in the evening, because the air is still and the weather is mild, the men convince themselves that the night is “friendly.” Suddenly, the wind blows with full force, night (death) falls, and Paul Jacobs is gone. Before disappearing, Jacobs imparts a final piece of wisdom: prepare for the cold.

Why did DeBlasio place the harsh message of “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” at the center of the cycle? At the conclusion of “Train Station,” DeBlasio’s narrator achieved his first great success amidst the emotionally devastating pull of death: he discovered the value of connecting with other gay men. Why disrupt that success with a potentially debilitating setback – the loss of a dear friend? As “Paul Jacobs” explains, living with little or no thought of our inevitable death is both dangerous and unhealthy. If the narrator avoids that reality, he risks being emotionally unprepared for the rigors of living with HIV: recurring health issues, gradual physical diminishment and brushes with death. In the narrative structure of this cycle, the unexpected loss of Paul Jacobs snaps the narrator out of his preoccupation with living and teaches him that he must also learn how to die.

DeBlasio thus sets the poem using musical means that reinforce its overall tenor while also casting its message within the context of the entire cycle. He reinforces the overall tenor of the poem by dividing the song into three basic portions: one each for day, evening and night. He then employs rhythmic and harmonic means to increase the musical tension in each successive section, underscoring the audience’s growing angst as the men fail to prepare for the coming night.
The first section, which describes the day as being “very flat and endless” and the mind as being “empty of anxiety,” has a stately andante tempo. DeBlasio’s choice of rhythmic patterns with alternating shorter and longer note values gently emphasizes the triple meter of this opening section without creating any sense of rhythmic momentum. He unifies these first twenty measures by deploying a cyclic four-measure theme in the piano part, hereafter referenced as the Paul Jacobs theme (Example 3.19).\(^{229}\) This section is clearly in A major—the Lydian mode, whose raised fourth scale degree has provided musical tension for much of the cycle, is conspicuously absent. A transition with “bell-like” octaves in the piano leads to the second section.

**Example 3.19** “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” mm. 1-5 (Paul Jacobs theme)

The “evening” section, beginning in measure twenty-three, abounds with imagery foreshadowing the imminent arrival of night (death). This section also describes the men’s continued lack of concern for the approaching night. DeBlasio expresses through a tempo increase (*Piu mosso*) the anxiety associated with the waning evening hours. He further increases the rhythmic energy by introducing in the piano a repeating, motoric descending-pitch pattern, perhaps intended to represent the falling leaves described in the poetry.

\(^{229}\) The Paul Jacobs theme first appears at the end of “Train Station.” Note the final phrase of the vocal melody (measures forty through forty-four).
DeBlasio’s execution of this motoric descending-pitch pattern, which outlines the scale degrees 8-7-6-5, creates increasing harmonic tension over the course of this section (Example 3.20). The pattern appears simultaneously in the right and left hands, but the versions in each hand are offset by one beat. The patterns in both hands begin in F# major but eventually switch to unrelated tonal areas: the piano left hand switches to A major in measure thirty-one, while the right hand introduces broken augmented triads beginning in measure thirty-five. The overall effect gradually increases the amount of harmonic discord between the two patterns. This section concludes, in measures forty through forty-four, with undulating augmented triads accompanying text describing a portent of death – a footbridge that leads “out of the park.”

Example 3.20 “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” mm. 30-2 (piano only)
Excerpt from the descending-pitch pattern

The third and final section, beginning in measure forty-five, describes the sudden arrival of night and the departure of Paul Jacobs. DeBlasio once again increases the musical tension. First of all, he increases the rhythmic energy still further by indicating a faster tempo

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230 DeBlasio’s harmonic choices for the descending-pitch pattern relate to the poetic text. The left hand’s shift to A major, the key that underscores the worry-free mood of the first section, occurs when “the night is perceived as friendly.” The augmented triads in the right hand appear when the text describes the men having to “button all the way up our overcoats” in preparation for the coming cold. The fact that the augmented triads persist through the end of this section, accompanying the footbridge imagery, suggests that DeBlasio uses the triads to underscore signs of impending night. Thus the juxtaposition of A major and the augmented triads, in measures thirty-five through thirty-nine, musically represents the men’s continued lack of concern or preparation for the coming night, in spite of the signs that foreshadow its eventual arrival.
(Subito con moto) and by replacing the prior eighth note descending pattern in the piano part with a descending pattern of seven notes per beat (Example 3.21). This new rhythmic pattern also effectively suggests the wind described in the poetry. Secondly, he establishes greater harmonic tension by his manipulation of this section’s E♭ Lydian mode. DeBlasio creates dissonance by sustaining the raised fourth scale degree in the vocal line over the tonic arpeggios in the piano. After the sudden return of the Paul Jacobs theme in E♭, this final section concludes with a harmonically unexpected, lone monophonic statement of the Paul Jacobs theme in E major in the piano left hand. Considering that the Paul Jacobs theme first appeared in A major, this shift to the dominant key, combined with the textural and registral shift, implies that only the memory of Paul Jacobs remains.

Example 3.21 Frantic version of the human connection motive

DeBlasio employs certain musical techniques to cast this song within the context of the entire cycle. The first technique concerns his execution of flat and sharp accidentals. The preceding song, “Train Station,” began with the narrator in a state of hopelessness but concluded with him triumphantly establishing a human connection with his lover. DeBlasio highlighted that transition by beginning the song with flat accidentals and then introducing sharp accidentals when the narrator took definitive action. “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” traces the opposite path: the poem starts with the narrator in a contented state but ends with him
actually losing a connection to a gay man (Paul Jacobs). DeBlasio musically honors this reversal by beginning the song with only sharp accidentals and then introducing flat accidentals in measure thirty-five, at the moment when the poem precipitously tilts toward the impending loss of Paul Jacobs. This reversed distribution of pitch accidentals in the two songs reinforces their opposing messages: the importance of continuing to live in spite of approaching death (“Train Station”), and the importance of emotionally preparing for approaching death (“An Elegy to Paul Jacobs”).

DeBlasio further connects this song to the cycle through harmonic means. The two prominent tonal areas in this song, A and E♭, are part of the overall tonal plan of the cycle. Especially significant is his setting of the third section of the song in the E♭ tonal area. This first distinctive appearance of E♭ in the cycle highlights the first time that the narrator receives a message from the dead. As the wind separates the two men, the narrator hears Paul Jacob’s departing message: prepare for the coming cold.

Finally, DeBlasio connects this song to the rest of the cycle by executing in the piano part an altered version of the human connection motive already found in three of the other songs. In these three other songs, the human connection motive underpins a moment in which the narrator experiences a connection with the gay male community. By contrast, the altered version of the motive, appearing in the third section of this song, underpins the moment in which the human connection between the narrator and Paul Jacobs is abruptly destroyed. The reader will note that the pitch layout of this repeating E♭ arpeggio pattern, beginning in measure forty-five, bears striking resemblance to the arpeggios of the original human

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231 Consult Figures 3.1 and 3.2 for information concerning how these tonal areas fit into the tonal plan for the cycle.
connection motive (compare Examples 3.11 and 3.21). DeBlasio transforms the once-contemplative motive into a frantic version by repeating in ostinato fashion the same arpeggio on every beat, rather than introducing one arpeggio per measure in a circle of fifths sequence.

**Poussin**

Nicolas Poussin, nicknamed the “French Raphael,” was a seventeenth century French painter whose works depict events from Greek and Roman antiquity and the Bible. In his mature output he emulated the artistic ideology of classicism, favoring expression within the confines of clarity and geometric order. Reaction to moral crisis was a theme he repeatedly explored.\(^{232}\)

The poem “Poussin” figuratively recounts a proud history of gay men, a collective life force that perseveres even though the men themselves are dead. Perry Brass’ title for the poem – the name of a painter who embraced classicism – effectively imbues the men, and by extension their enduring legacy, with an element of timelessness. In other words, any reader familiar with Poussin’s work will instinctively conjure images of these men as they would appear in a Poussin painting: idealized, artfully posed, almost sculptural in their conception. Brass, who considers Poussin one of his favorite painters, says that this poem expresses themes common in Poussin paintings: “heroicism, and also individuality, and poignancy and pain.”\(^{233}\)

In the context of the cycle, this song serves as the narrator’s response to Paul Jacob’s advice to prepare for the evening. The narrator discovered in the earlier songs the life-affirming value of connecting with other gay men. In keeping with that theme, DeBlasio’s

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\(^{233}\) Brass, interview by author.
placement of “Poussin” after “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs” suggests that the narrator now prepares for his own death by seeking insights from the lives of gay men who have already died. The song culminates in the narrator’s most powerful realization: his life is part of a great gay male legacy, and even in death his mortal efforts will continue to exert an influence upon future generations of gay men.

DeBlasio infuses “Poussin” with a variety of musical devices that connect the song with the rest of the cycle. One of the most prominent devices in this song is a rocking figure. However, unlike the other examples of rocking figures in the cycle, which consist of two adjacent chords, the rocking figure in this song manifests itself as the alternation of two adjacent pitches within the context of a single chord. DeBlasio probably made this choice because of an early line in the poem, which describes primitive men playing songs “of one or two gaunt and shifting notes.”

Example 3.22 provides a representative example of the rocking figures in “Poussin.” The rocking figures are visually hidden in the rhythmically active figurations in the score, although in actual performance they emerge from the overall texture. The rocking figure aurally emerges from these busy figurations because its two notes always occur on the beat and are always the uppermost pitches in the piano right hand. In this example, the primary rocking figure consists of the F♯ and E pitches that occur on beats one and two of the piano right hand. The C♯ and D pitches in the piano left hand also create a rhythmically distinct secondary rocking figure.234

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234 In this example, the two piano staves have different time signatures. DeBlasio juxtaposes duple and triple meter throughout this song.
Another prominent musical device in “Poussin” that is found in other songs is the Lydian mode. Almost every tonal area in this song is infused with the characteristic raised-fourth scale degree. DeBlasio’s use of the Lydian mode in this song reinforces the overall triumphant mood of a poem that describes the life force of gay men persevering beyond their deaths.235

DeBlasio’s use of the E♭ tonal area, representing messages from the dead, helps to connect this song with the tonal plan of the entire cycle. E♭ assumes special significance in “Poussin,” as it highlights the enduring impact of gay men from the past. This tonality appears in two locations, both corresponding with text that describes the gay men leaving behind words or influence: measures twenty-two through twenty-seven, and measures seventy through seventy-five. DeBlasio further unifies these E♭ sections with a five note melodic motive – scale degrees 4-3-5(under)-2-1 – in the vocal line (Example 3.23). This motive also appears as a valedictory gesture at the very end of the song’s piano postlude, as if to evoke the final “innocent whispers of heroes” (note the final four measures of Example 3.8).

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235 Unlike the other songs, DeBlasio sometimes alters the Lydian mode in “Poussin” by adding a flatted seventh scale degree. DeBlasio perhaps deployed this mode mixture to represent the duality of these men, who are dead yet continue to exert influence upon the living.
Two musically interesting sections of “Poussin” warrant special attention. The first of these sections, beginning in measure twenty-seven, describes a simple scene not unlike the end of “An Elegy to Paul Jacobs”: the winds blow, and night falls. In other words, the men whom Brass so beautifully describes in the opening measures are now gone. Brass enriches this moment with evocative imagery, setting the winds “up above the Orient” and having the sun dissolve “like crimson clips from poppies in the surf.” The true musical interest in this section occurs in the piano. The right hand contains D and E pitches repeated simultaneously over a span of three octaves (Example 3.24). The spreading of this dissonant figure over several pitch registers creates an exotic soundscape suited to the poetic imagery. DeBlasio underscores the specter of death in this section by rhythmically prolonging a statement of the ω motive over twelve measures in the piano left hand.

Example 3.24 Poussin mm. 28-29 (piano only)
The other musically interesting section, beginning in measure forty-four, insists that in spite of the loss of so many gay men, “a certain pinkness” persists “up above the troubles of our age.” DeBlasio accompanies this section with a repeated cluster chord in the piano (Example 3.25). This cluster chord is best interpreted as a D half-diminished chord with an added E in the bass. This particular chord shares certain similarities with the train figure in “Train Station” – a D half-diminished chord appears in the third measure of the train figure, and the E♮ pitch is the most prominent pounding quarter note of the train figure (see Example 3.15). As with the train figure in “Train Station,” DeBlasio uses the cluster chord in “Poussin” to represent the tedium of life (“the troubles of our age”), and he reinforces this sense of tedium by writing the vocal line primarily in the baritone chest register. The persistence of this atmosphere of tedium through measure fifty-seven allows the arrival of D Lydian, with the vocal line now proclaiming “there the clouds are meteoric” in the baritone passaggio, to sound all the more transcendent.

Example 3.25 “Poussin” mm. 44–47 (piano only)

Walt Whitman in 1989

He is one of the thousands of our unknown American men in the ranks about whom there is no record or fame, no fuss made about their dying so unknown, but I find in them the real precious & royal ones of this land…

—Walt Whitman

\[236\] Roy Morris Jr., The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 130. This excerpt comes from a letter Whitman wrote to the parents of Erastus Haskell, a nineteen-year-old Union soldier who died of typhoid fever.
In December 1862 the American poet Walt Whitman, then in his early forties and living in Brooklyn, discovered from a casualty list in the *New York Tribune* that his brother George had been injured in the Battle of Fredericksburg. Whitman sped to Washington, D.C. to find his brother and then remained with him for a brief time in the Union camp.\(^{237}\)

Whitman’s witness to the appalling physical and psychological conditions endured by the soldiers prompted him to remain in Washington for the remainder of the Civil War, visiting the wounded and dying soldiers in the military hospitals. He brought the men small gifts of food and tobacco, pencil and paper, but mostly he shared his presence. His impact was such that several of the men maintained correspondence with Whitman, addressing him as “dear uncle” or “father.”\(^{238}\)

In “Walt Whitman in 1989,” the iconic gay poet visits a present-day hospital to comfort the young men ravished by the AIDS epidemic.\(^{239}\) Brass’ poem draws a connection between the Civil War era and the late 1980s gay male AIDS experience. Whitman wrote “many lines” during the Civil War, describing the brutalization of young men and the divisive nature of “hard tongues and closed minds.” Now, he witnesses gay men suffering under a similar brand of victimization. The poem concludes with Whitman embracing a dying man and promising to sail with him “all the way through evening.”

At the conclusion of “Poussin,” the narrator finally arrives at the nexus of his preparations for death – connection with the eternal gay male community. The narrator can now face death, comforted by the knowledge that his life is part of a great fabric.

\(^{237}\) Morris Jr., 46-7, 54-7.

\(^{238}\) Morris Jr., 126, 157.

\(^{239}\) Evidence suggesting Whitman’s homosexuality appears in much documentary evidence, not the least of which is his own writing. Further information about this aspect of the man can be found in Gary Schmidgall’s *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (Penguin Books).
“Walt Whitman” is then the personification of the community in turn enfolding the narrator into its ranks: a gay father figure emerges from the depths of history to hearten young men with AIDS as they die and to help them assume their rightful place within the community. DeBlasio strengthens the close connection between these two poems by indicating a “segue” in the score between “Poussin” and “Walt Whitman in 1989” – the only place in the cycle where he specifies continuity from one song to the next. This organic fusion of the piano postlude of “Poussin” and the human connection motive and melody that begin “Walt Whitman” tangibly suggests the ghost figure of Whitman emerging from that proud gay history and descending upon the hospital.240

DeBlasio divides “Walt Whitman in 1989” into two sections that correspond with the two basic events that occur in poem. The first section describes Whitman at the hospital, responding to and reflecting on the facets of this “crisis.” DeBlasio’s setting of this first section honors the rapid changes in poetic intent, resulting in a musically episodic structure. For example, the vocal line freely shifts between recitative-like passages, in which sustained piano chords allow for a degree of rhythmic freedom, and passages in which a more rhythmically active piano part calls for greater rhythmic precision in the voice. Likewise, the piano part undergoes numerous transformations in these opening twenty-six measures, cycling through a variety of accompaniment figures of differing register and tonality.241

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240 Page ninety of the Musical Connections Within the Cycle section of this chapter contains a harmonic analysis of this particular human connection motive and melody, with discussion of its relationship to the piano introduction of “The Disappearance of Light.”

241 As mentioned in the Musical Connections Within the Cycle portion of this chapter, some of these piano figures appeared previously in “The Disappearance of Light.” The final appearance of the human connection motive occurs in measures nineteen through twenty-two.
Nonetheless, DeBlasio uses two basic musical ideas to unify the disparate portions of this first section. First, he employs in both the vocal and piano parts a musical device already seen throughout the entire cycle – the rocking figure. The third line of the poem, in which Whitman “rocks back and forth in the crisis,” probably provided the inspiration. These figures, unlike the figures found in the rest of the cycle, achieve their rocking motion through alternating short and long rhythmic values (Example 3.26). Secondly, DeBlasio disperses a recurring vocal motive, consisting of the scale degrees 5-3-5-6-5, throughout this section. Figure 3.5 documents the locations of this motive.

**Example 3.26** Rocking figures used in the first half of “Walt Whitman in 1989”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Tonal area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 11</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 14-5</td>
<td>E♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 23-4</td>
<td>D♭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. 27</td>
<td>B♭</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.5** Vocal motive appearing in the first half of “Walt Whitman in 1989”

The second section of the song consists of Walt Whitman comforting the dying man with a description of the journey they will take down “the River of dusk and lamentation.” Unlike the first section of the poem, this section follows a single poetic intent: comfort the
young man on the final leg of his death journey. DeBlasio honors the singular intent of this second section by employing one basic musical language throughout. The piano part consists of a rocking figure, representing the undulating currents of the river, that persists from the beginning of this section (measure twenty-seven) to the end of the song. Above this rocking figure a single lyrical melody unites the final lines of the poem into a coherent whole.

In this second section of “Walt Whitman in 1989,” two prominent musical devices relate to devices found at the beginning of the first song, “The Disappearance of Light,” and thus suggest the conclusion of the cyclic event. More significantly, the differing executions of these similar devices highlight the narrator’s transformation over the course of the journey. By the final song, fear and avoidance of death, which were the primary motivations in the first song, have ceded to a tranquil yet deliberate capitulation to death.

The first musical aspect shared between this second section of “Walt Whitman” and the beginning of “The Disappearance of Light” is tonality. As already mentioned in the Musical Connections portion of this chapter, these sections of both songs share the B♭ tonality, heavily laced with flatted mediant (D♭) and flatted submediant (G♭) chords. The reader will also recall that B♭ represents the pull of death, while the secondary chords represent fatigue from the death-pull (D♭) or a purposeful reaction to the death-pull (G♭).242

In “The Disappearance of Light,” D♭ is the predominant secondary chord, as the narrator is weary and frantically attempting to fend off the pull of unconsciousness. By the arrival of “Walt Whitman in 1989,” the narrator has reversed his reaction to death: Whitman and his companion are facing death with deliberate intent, sailing toward their destinies as

242 For further information about this tonal relationship, consult pages 80-4 of the section Musical Connections Within the Cycle.
part of the eternal gay male community. DeBlasio therefore sets G\textsubscript{b} as the predominant secondary chord, using it to underscore moments in which Whitman states a clear and decisive action. He further emphasizes Whitman’s conviction during these G\textsubscript{b} harmonies by writing vocal phrases that execute a major ninth leap, rather than stepwise motion, to the Lydian raised-fourth scale degree (Example 3.27).

**Example 3.27** Execution of the G\textsubscript{b} Lydian harmony in “Walt Whitman in 1989”

The second musical aspect shared between these two songs is the rocking figure. In a common time signature, both songs employ a quarter note chordal rocking figure. However, the two sets of rocking figures unfold in different fashion. In “The Disappearance of Light,” the rocking figure charts a downward pitch trajectory, while the rhythmic value of the notes shortens over time.\textsuperscript{243} The downward trajectory suggests the pull of unconsciousness, while

\textsuperscript{243} For a more detailed description of this rhythmic phenomenon, consult pages 94-5 of the section devoted to “The Disappearance of Light.”
the ever-shortening rhythmic value expresses the narrator’s increasing panic. “Walt Whitman,” on the other hand, employs a rocking figure with an upward pitch trajectory, and the rhythmic value and tempo of the figure remains constant. This effect expresses deliberate action while maintaining a calm consistency. These distinct uses of the rocking figure bring into sharp relief the evolution of the narrator’s reaction to death.

The final five measures of “Walt Whitman” (mm. 48-52) deserve special mention. In the moments leading into these final measures, DeBlasio repeats the final line of the poem: “all the way through evening… all the way through evening… through evening.” At the final phrase “through evening,” the rocking figure cadences on the B♭ tonic. The rocking figure continues the B♭ tonic through the end of the song. However, DeBlasio does not limit himself to the tonic in this piano conclusion – he creates a bitonal context by placing two rolled C major triads in the upper register (Example 3.28).

Example 3.28 “Walt Whitman in 1989” mm. 50-end (piano only)

These textual and musical elements imply that the dying man passes away in the closing measures of the song. The text repetition suggests that Whitman is simultaneously consoling and encouraging the dying man as his consciousness gradually fades away. The conclusion of the piano part facilitates this perception by itself fading away: the rocking figure persists through the end of the song without a resolute concluding cadence or gesture.
The use of chords from the cycle’s tonal plan also implies the man’s death. The B♭ tonic represents the pull of death, while the rolled C major triads – the cycle’s tonal area of death – suggest the dispersal of the dying man’s life force. Fascinating is the fact that the E♮ pitch of the C major triad also functions as the Lydian raised-fourth scale degree in the concluding B♭ tonal area. Therefore, even in the moment of death DeBlasio implies an exertion, the human will to continue living.

DeBlasio’s partner William Berger has written that DeBlasio’s conclusion of “Walt Whitman in 1989” is a reference to the concluding measures of Richard Strauss’ *Vier letzte Lieder* (*Four Last Songs*, Example 3.29), which Berger describes as “romanticism’s final and supreme encapsulation of the moment of death.” The final song of that cycle, “Im Abendrot”, describes two weary travelers who question, amidst the solitude of a mountain perch at evening, whether they are experiencing death. The imagery shared between “Im Abendrot” and “Walt Whitman” – two figures journeying at evening and facing death – perhaps inspired DeBlasio to create the musical reference. In the orchestral postlude of “Im Abendrot,” Strauss composed a series of high-pitched trilled chord figures that appear after the sounding of sustained tonic chords in a lower register (Example 3.29). The rolled C major triads and tonic rocking figures of “Walt Whitman” follow a similar rhythmic and registral format.

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244 Berger, “Chris DeBlasio,” 159-60.
Example 3.29 Richard Strauss, “Im Abendrot” (*Vier letzte Lieder*)
GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

If alive today, Chris DeBlasio (b. 1959) would be roughly the same age as two American song composers currently experiencing commercial success: Ricky Ian Gordon (b. 1956) and Jake Heggie (b. 1961). Both of these composers, like DeBlasio, have developed unique idioms that have tonal tendencies and are influenced by elements of American popular music. Famous American singers such as Frederica von Stade, Renée Fleming and Audra McDonald have performed their songs in recital, and their songs are now readily available in published collections and discography. In the early years of the twenty-first century, both of these men have encountered commercial success for operatic works: opera companies around the world have mounted productions of Heggie’s Dead Men Walking (2000), and Gordon’s Grapes of Wrath (2007) has received critical acclaim.245

Considering the glimmers of success DeBlasio encountered in the final years of his life, and considering the eventual successes of his tonal compatriots, one cannot help but wonder what might have been. Would DeBlasio be receiving commissions from opera companies? Would famous singers program his latest songs on their recitals? For DeBlasio the composer, the greatest tragedy of his all-too-short life was the lack of a critical mass of music. He died just as the increasing curiosity about his work demanded new compositions both to sustain the curiosity and to provide a store from which performers could repeatedly draw. His untimely death stunted the potential for growing awareness of his compositions in the greater artistic community. It has therefore become our responsibility as performers and scholars to champion the existing legacy of this most promising young composer.

Song was a fundamental element of Chris DeBlasio’s compositional output. He was always composing “pop songs” for the enjoyment of he and his friends. He composed a number of songs for various plays and musicals. And in the last six years of his life, he finally turned to art song.

DeBlasio’s lighter forms of song composition established a style that would have much influence on his art songs. His more improvisational method of creating the “pop songs” helped over time to establish a facile and direct approach to melodic and harmonic writing. Therefore, when he turned to art song composition, an element of that facile and direct approach to writing remained, resulting in songs of a certain simplicity and emotional immediacy. The numerous examples of piano parts with simple chord patterns, found on the previous pages of this document, are testament to that simplicity.

Nonetheless, unlike his lighter forms of song, the art songs also contain a level of structural depth that betrays an analytical mind at its peak. Especially in the two song cycles, the numerous poetic, motivic and harmonic connections among the songs are a veritable treasure trove of study for the performer or analyst. DeBlasio’s manipulation of motives and harmonies throughout the cycles adds a whole new level of interpretation to the individual poems and thus casts them as part of a larger message.

As a result of this blending of the accessible and the learned, his art songs are satisfying on multiple levels. To the first-time listener, they have an immediate appeal and possess a delightfully contemporary musical language. To the returning scholar, they possess a satisfying level of complexity. His art songs are expressive works of craftsmanship that deserve to be a permanent presence on the recital circuit.
WORKS CITED

Published Sources


Documentary Evidence

DeBlasio, Chris, resume of music and composition work (1983).


Interviews / Electronic Correspondence


_______. Phone interview by author, 1 September 2009. Digital recording.
Blanchard, John K., Director of Alumni Affairs at the Manhattan School of Music, to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

Brass, Perry to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.


Deutsch, Nicholas. Phone interview by author, 5 June 2009. Digital recording.


Goodman, Sandra. Phone interview by author, 1 June 2009. Digital Recording.

Gregory, Margaret, mother of Chris DeBlasio, to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

______. Phone interview by author, 3 May 2009. Digital recording.


Huff, Harry, executor of Chris DeBlasio musical estate, to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

______. Phone interview by author, 15 June 2009. Digital Recording.

Lowery, Virginia. Phone interview by author, 3 June 2009. Digital recording.

Pineiro, Jose M., Assistant Registrar of New York University, to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

Pleva, David, Admissions Officer at Circle in the Square Theatre School, to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

Stern-Wolfe, Mimi to Brian Bonin, electronic mail.

______. Phone interview by author, 8 June 2009. Digital recording.
APPENDIX A

PUBLISHED SOLO VOCAL COMPOSITIONS

*Villagers* (1989)
voice and piano
- Paris (Ilsa Gilbert)
- The Heart Does Not Care (Perry Brass)
- Butcher (Ilsa Gilbert)
- Rushes (Ilsa Gilbert)
- Lyric 4 (Perry Brass)
publisher: Classical Vocal Reprints (*Low - CVR 3288, High - CVR 3289)

*All The Way Through Evening* (1990)
baritone and piano, or baritone and orchestra
poetry: Perry Brass
- The Disappearance of Light
- Train Station
- An Elegy to Paul Jacobs
- Poussin
- Walt Whitman in 1989
publisher: Classical Vocal Reprints (piano version – CVR 3284)
orchestral score and parts available by rental through Harry Huff (harry@oldsouth.org)

*Whatever You Say, He Sings* (1990)
Comic opera scena for soprano (high voice) and piano
poetry: Ilsa Gilbert
publisher: Classical Vocal Reprints (CVR3290)

*In Endless Assent* (1991)
voice and piano
poetry: Elizabeth Bishop
- Anaphora
- Insomnia
- Sonnet (1928)
- Letter to New York
publisher: Classical Vocal Reprints
(*Low – CVR3287, Medium – CVR3286, High – CVR 3285)

* Indicates the original key
APPENDIX B
COMMERCIAL DISCOGRAPHY OF THE ART SONGS

Villagers

“Butcher” (individual song)

All the Way Through Evening

*And Trouble Came: Musical Responses to AIDS.* Michael Dash, baritone; Chris DeBlasio, piano. 1996. CRI CD 729 (Composers Recordings, Inc.).

“All Walt Whitman in 1989” (individual song)
*Gay American Composers.* Michael Dash, baritone; Chris DeBlasio, piano. 1996. CRI CD 721 (Composers Recordings, Inc.).

In Endless Assent

“All Sonnet (1928)” (individual song)
APPENDIX C
CATALOGUE OF THE CHRIS DEBLASIO ARCHIVES

The archives are housed at the Memorial Church of Harvard University. For further information, contact Harry Huff (harry@oldsouth.org), the musical executor for the estate of Chris DeBlasio.

Special thanks are due to Virginia Lowery for creating this catalogue.

I have provided supplemental information when available (date of composition, lyricist, purpose of composition, venue).

This list only covers items in the archive that can be identified.

Incidental Music

*In the Jungle of Cities* (Bertolt Brecht) – composed for Williamstown Festival 1980

*Twelfth Night* (Shakespeare) – composed for a Ten-Ten Players production in 1989

Instrumental Concert Music

*Chester: A Polyfunctional Treatment* (1979) – orchestra

*Chester: Fantasia on a Theme by William Billings* (1980) – orchestra, four copies

*Dances for Clavichord*

*Dances for Clavichord* – manuscript of movements 3-5

*God Is Our Righteousness* – guitar and organ, manuscript

*Music for a Short Subject* – soprano saxophone and organ

*Suite: Three Short Pieces for Piano* (1978) – dedicated to Bill Bly, manuscript

*Tartuffe Overture*

*Trio* for flute, violin and cello – manuscript, including parts

Musicals / Operetta


*Dear George* (1975-6) – musical written and composed during high school years

*Jamming* (1977) – a musical revue performed at New York University

*Northern Lights and Loose Wires* (1977) – musical performed at New York University

*Seed Among Thorns* (1979) – a musical, only a ballet score remains

*Salford Road* (for Woodstock Opera House, Illinois) – manuscript and parts
Choral / Liturgical

*Five Prayers* (settings of *Gay Jewish Prayers* by Perry Brass) – baritone, men’s chorus
1. “The Shortened Life”
2. “When I’m Alone”
3. “When I Wondered”
4. “B’raeshees”
5. “Haverim”

“High O’er the Lonely Hills” (1982) – choral anthem for SATB and organ, manuscript

*Rite of Sprinkling* (Text 1) and *Baptism* (Text 1) – DeBlasio/Calvin Hampton, photocopy

“Christ and the Widow of Nain (Weep No More)” – choral anthem for solo, SATB and organ, manuscript

“As Jesus Came to Jericho” (1988) – choral anthem for SATB and organ, manuscript

“St. John the Baptist” – choral anthem for SATB a capella

Vocal (Art Songs, Voice and Instruments)

*All the Way Through Evening*

*All the Way Through Evening* – “Train Station” manuscript fragment of orchestra score

*In Endless Assent* – low, medium and high versions

“Wild Angels” (text by Ursula Le Guin) – soprano and piano, manuscript

Untitled baritone cycle with instruments (settings of Walt Whitman):

“To One Shortly to Die”
“A Clear Midnight”
“Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd”

*Cantata for Four Voices and Six Players* (1979, settings of Shakespeare, dedicated to Calvin Hampton) – oboe, clarinet, celesta, percussion, viola, cello

I. Witch’s Song from *MacBeth* – vocal triple fugue
II. Sonnet LXIV – tenor
III. “Hark, hark the lark” from *Cymbeline*

other movements as well

Popular/Theater Songs

*A Swim Off the Rocks* (poetry of Howard Moss) – printed score, manuscript photocopy

1. “Bores”
2. “Double Dactyls”
3. “The Skaters’ Waltz”
4. “Tourists”
5. “Horror Movie”

*Long Island Sound* (poetry of Howard Moss) – printed score, manuscript

1. “Geography”
2. “Small Elegy”
3. “Waltz: Down at the Docks”
5. “Cats and Dogs”
6. “Pavane: The East Side”
7. “Song for Two Assistants”
8. “Adolescent’s Song”

Howard Moss settings – manuscripts
1. “A Problem in Morals”
2. “Companies”
3. “Circle” – photocopy of original manuscript
4. “A Rented Sail” – photocopy of original manuscript
5. “A Ship Going Down”

Shakespeare settings (for Williamstown Festival, Ten-Ten Players and others)
1. “Blow, Blow Thou Winter Wind” (1982, As You Like It)
2. “Farewell, Dear Heart” (Twelfth Night)
3. “Hold Thy Peace” (Twelfth Night)
4. “Come Away, Death” (Twelfth Night)
5. “Hey Robin, Jolly Robin” (Twelfth Night)
6. “I Am Gone Sir” (Twelfth Night)
7. “O Mistress Mine” (Twelfth Night)
8. “When That I Was and a Little Tiny Boy” (Twelfth Night)

“A June Day”
“Maybe We’ll Make It” (poem by Judith Viorst) – for Martha Schlamme
“Under the Greenwood Tree” (SAB arrangement)
“You’ve Been On My Mind” (lyrics by DeBlasio)
“The Waiting Room” (lyrics by DeBlasio)
“Do Me the Do” (lyrics by DeBlasio)
“A Man Like You” (1982, lyrics by DeBlasio)
“Mary’s Song” (1982, lyrics by Gregory R. Boyd, after W.H. Auden poem “Johnny”)
“Stay With Me”
“Hiding”
“Catch Me If You Can”
“I’ll Survive” (1977)
“I Don’t Mind Waiting” (1981, lyrics by DeBlasio)
“The Visitor”
“Indecision” (1978)
“No You Don’t”
“You Make Me Ill” (1977)
“George Wishu” (1980, lyrics by Bertolt Brecht)
“The Sounds of Sunday” (1977, lyrics by Jeff Farber)
“By the River” (lyrics by DeBlasio)
“Beside You, On My Own” (lyrics by DeBlasio)
“To a Friendly Neighbor” (lyrics by DeBlasio)
“I Saw in Louisiana a Live Oak” (poetry by Whitman)
“Song” (John Donne) – manuscript
“Coronemus nos” (Thomas Jordan) – manuscript
“Sketch for A.D.”
“The Girl in the Boat”
“The Old Whore’s Song” (lyrics by Sharon Holland)

Orchestrations / Arrangements / Transcriptions

Concerto for Two Violins and Orchestra by Calvin Hampton – orchestration by DeBlasio, manuscript and copy of first movement
Sunday in the Park With George by Stephen Sondheim – transcribed by DeBlasio
   “Everybody Loves Louis”
   “Sunday in the Park With George”
The Man Who Could Work Miracles (an opera) by Calvin Hampton – only the prologue to the opera; manuscript of DeBlasio unfinished orchestration, photocopy of Hampton vocal/piano score
Variations on Amazing Grace by Calvin Hampton – manuscript of DeBlasio orchestration and photocopy of Hampton original score
Kurt Weill songs – arranged by DeBlasio for Martha Schlamme and the Aspen Wind Quintet

Paperwork

Adam Baby (rock musical) – cast list
AIDS Quilt Songbook (1992) – media packet from John Gingrich Management
Biographies, notes, catalogue – folders made by Chris
BMI business folder
Reviews, articles, Playbills, resumes, biography, etc. – two large envelopes
Tax/financial items
The Toys of Princes (Ghislain de Diesbach) – scene, cast breakdown, copy of short story

Reel-to-Reel Tapes

   “Monolog” [sic], “Suicide”
Unlabeled tape – dated June 3, 1987
Refractions (Calvin Hampton)
Night Sweat – Tapes I, II, III
APPENDIX D

LETTER OF PERMISSION

from     Harry <harry@oldsouth.org>
reply-to   harry@oldsouth.org
to        Brian Bonin <bbonin2@tigers.lsu.edu>
date      Thu, Feb 19, 2009 at 12:21 PM
subject   RE:

Hi, Brian

I just realized I never answered your question about permission to use musical examples from the DeBlasio vocal works. I still hold the copyright on all those works, and you hereby have my permission to use any examples from those specific works.

Best,

Harry

Harry L. Huff, Musical executor for the estate of Chris DeBlasio

________________________________________

From: Brian Bonin [mailto:bbonin2@tigers.lsu.edu]
Sent: Friday, February 13, 2009 3:23 PM
To: harry@oldsouth.org
Subject: Re:

Harry,

Thank you so much for your insights, and especially for all of the contact info for Chris' family and friends. I feel as if I gain a new facet of Chris' personality/identity every time I hear from someone new.

One more question...I had asked earlier about obtaining a letter of permission to have musical examples from Chris' vocal works. Should this letter come from you, as musical executor, or from Classical Vocal Reprints?

Thanks so much for all your time. Good luck catching up on work and staying healthy!

Brian
APPENDIX E

LETTER OF PERMISSION

from  Perry Brass <belhuepress@earthlink.net>
to    Brian Bonin <bbonin2@tigers.lsu.edu>
date  Fri, Jun 5, 2009 at 9:39 AM
subject Re: hello

I hereby give Brian Bonin the right to publish and/or quote from my texts for the song cycle "All the Way Through Evening," as well as my contribution to the cycle "Villagers" (namely: "The Heart Does Not Care," and "Lyric 4"), all of which were set to music by the composer Chris DeBlasio. I request that I be fully credited as poet of these texts.

Perry Brass
Belhue Press
June 5, 2009
9 November, 2009

Brian P. Bonin
1478 South Peck Drive
Baton Rouge, LA 70810

RE: Permissions request to reprint excerpts (as specified) from “Anaphora,” “Insomnia,” “Sonnet” (1928), and “Letter to N.Y.” from THE COMPLETE POEMS 1927-1979 as they appear in the musical composition entitled “In Endless Assent” by Chris DeBlasio

Dear Brian P. Bonin,

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC hereby grants Brian P. Bonin permission to include excerpts from “Anaphora,” “Insomnia,” “Sonnet” (1928), and “Letter to N.Y.” from THE COMPLETE POEMS 1927-1979 as musical examples in your dissertation entitled AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND THE SONGS OF COMPOSER CHRIS DEBLASIO, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON HIS CYCLE ALL THE WAY THROUGH EVENING.

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Should you have any questions, or concerns, please feel free to contact me at the address below.

Best wishes,

Victoria Fox, Manager
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Telephone 212-741-6900 ext. 6356 | Fax 212-633-9385 | E-Mail: vfox@fsgbooks.com
VITA

Brian Bonin, a native of Pineville, Louisiana, earned a Bachelor of Music degree in vocal performance at Louisiana College. After studying voice for one year with the vocal pedagogue Dr. Stephen Austin, he then earned the Master of Music degree in vocal performance at Louisiana State University. While pursuing his doctorate at Louisiana State University, he has been an instructor of record for Music Appreciation and Applied Voice courses. He has performed with New Orleans Opera, Opera in the Ozarks, the Aspen Opera Theater Center and Lyric Opera Studio of Weimar. His opera credits include Count Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Don Alfonso and Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte*, Schaunard in *La bohème*, Junius in *The Rape of Lucretia*, Johann in *Werther*, Voltaire/Pangloss/Cacambo/Martin in *Candide*, and several roles in Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. An avid recitalist, his most recent recital work included a tour of Schubert’s song cycle *Winterreise* in central and southwest Louisiana and a duo recital of songs about animals.