A Performer's Guide to "No Man In His Right Mind," "Letter," and "Mirror Mirror" from the opera, Dog Days

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A PERFORMER’S GUIDE TO “NO MAN IN HIS RIGHT MIND,”
“LETTER,” AND “MIRROR MIRROR”
FROM THE OPERA,

DOG DAYS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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in

The School of Music

by

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ABSTRACT

_Dog Days_ is a modern, American opera based in a war-torn, post-apocalyptic United States of America. Written by internationally acclaimed composer David T. Little and internationally acclaimed librettist Royce Vavrek, _Dog Days_ is told through the eyes of a 13-year old girl, named Lisa. This project serves as a performer’s guide to Lisa’s three arias. Chapter one provides a biographical sketch of the composer, David T. Little. Chapter two briefly describes the life events of Royce Vavrek, leading to the development of _Dog Days_. Chapter three provides the detailed process of how the opera was created, specifically the development of Lisa’s character. Chapter four provides music and textual analysis along with performance suggestions for Lisa’s first aria, “No Man In His Right Mind.” Within chapter five, analysis of the music is provided alongside specific performance practices regarding Lisa’s second aria, “Letter.” Chapter six provides a performer’s guide for Lisa’s final and most difficult aria, “Mirror Mirror.” With the use of amplification and alternate vocal mechanisms, Lisa’s arias differ from the normality of vocal, classical repertoire. It is the hope of the author that this document will provide information to help the success of performers while encouraging the emergence of Lisa’s arias within classical vocal repertoire.
INTRODUCTION

Premiered in 2012, Dog Days is an opera based on the tragedy of a family surviving in the post-apocalyptic, war-torn United States of America. The soprano role of the daughter named Lisa befriends a mute, deranged man in a dog suit who wanders to the family home, portraying himself as a dog. Much of the plot of Dog Days is seen through Lisa’s perspective, the perspective of a young, 13-year old girl. Lisa seeks companionship with the dogman in her first aria, “No Man In His Right Mind.” As the opera progresses, the societal dynamic of Lisa’s family deteriorates. Lisa reveals her emotional turmoil and longing for her past life as she hums a beautiful melody in her second aria, “Letter”. By the end of the opera, the family is struck by severe starvation. Lisa compares herself to a model, as she peers at her bony figure in the aria “Mirror Mirror.” The role of Lisa is challenging to perform musically, physically, and emotionally. The purpose of this document is to familiarize readers and prospective performers with the character of Lisa, encouraging the emergence of her arias within standard, classical vocal repertoire. The purpose of this research project is to provide a performer’s guide for prospective performers of “No Man In His Right Mind,” “Letter,” and “Mirror Mirror.”

Chapter one presents biographical information on the composer, David T. Little. This information will come from his personal website and from the personal interview that was conducted by the author. Special attention will be given to life events that lead to Little developing his unique compositional style.

Chapter two addresses biographical information on the librettist, Royce Vavrek. Developments within his life that led to the writing of the libretto for Dog Days are discussed.

Chapter three acts as an introduction to the historical background of Dog Days. Information presented will include data from interviewing David T. Little. Little’s process of
composing *Dog Days* and his collaboration with Royce Vavrek in developing the dynamic character of Lisa will be addressed. Performing forces, both for recital and stage production, will be discussed with specific attention to electronic amplification of the voice and instruments.

Chapter four provides a performer’s guide to Lisa’s aria, “No Man In His Right Mind.” The relationship between text and music will be presented as it serves to showcase Lisa’s emotions and character development. Emotional interpretation for performance will be addressed when analyzing the text and music. Such interpretation is made easier with specific direction implicated in the score.

Chapter five serves as a performer’s guide to “Letter.” Vocal technique is of special consideration within this chapter due to the utilization of the alternate vocal technique of humming. Analysis of the projected text of Lisa’s letter alongside analysis of the music is provided. Performance practice is discussed to enhance both recital and operatic performances. Specific staging notated in the score is discussed for operatic performances.

Chapter six provides a performer’s guide to Lisa’s final aria, “Mirror Mirror.” Analysis of text and music is discussed. The final aria is difficult mentally, emotionally, and physically. Thus, the harsh subject material is addressed to prepare the singer. The final aria is the climactic point in which Lisa loses her childhood innocence. Each aria is sung in a different way, thus understanding the arch of Lisa’s character within the opera is of great importance. Lisa stands for hope when society and her family are lost in the face of tragedy. While the world crumbles around her, she maintains her humanity within her compassion for the dogman. The purpose of this document is to supply future performers with a deeper understanding of Lisa. After reading, it is my hope that many singers will dive into the magnificent music and text of Lisa’s arias, presenting her story for more to hear.
CHAPTER 1. THE COMPOSER

David T. Little is considered “one of the most imaginative young composers” of today and is known for having “a knack for overturning musical conventions.”¹ Little’s music is widely acclaimed and has been performed in venues across the world.² His compositional style within the opera Dog Days fuses elements of American folk-song, musical theater, heavy metal rock, and classical music. This chapter will discuss Little’s life and events that led to the development of his unique compositional style.

Born on October 25, 1978, Little was raised in Blairstown, a small farm town in western New Jersey.³ Little’s father enjoyed playing guitar and drums as a hobby, and his mother danced.⁴ Little’s parents met in their collegiate production of West Side Story.⁵ From an early age, Little cultivated a love of music theater that would be a driving force throughout his career. As early as age six, Little began attending Broadway shows, both locally and in New York City.⁶ Seeing the Broadway hit Cats at age six was a turning point for Little; from then on, he was an avid musical theater fan.⁷ Because his family lived close enough to New York City, Little was


² Ibid.


⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ David T. Little, Skype interview by author, November 15, 2019.

⁷ Ibid.
able to attend many Broadway hits of the 1980’s including Rent and Miss Saigon. Not only did Little enjoy watching the shows, he also yearned to be on stage. When his local high school began auditioning elementary students for the role of Winthrop in their production of The Music Man, Little auditioned with high hopes of snagging his stage debut. To his great dismay as a child, he wasn’t cast because he was too tall. His friend, Nick Seidel, got the role in his stead. Later in life, Seidel would join the army, which would serve as a connection to Little’s acclaimed composition, Soldier Songs.

At age eight, Little began drum lessons. Playing an instrument began his development of practicing and performing. Little joined a local drums corps, where he learned repertoire of the Revolutionary and Civil War. In middle school, Little joined his school’s symphonic band and was allowed to improvise his own parts. Little’s talent combined with creative opportunity eventually led to Little arranging music for his band’s entire drumline. And thus, the road to becoming an internationally acclaimed composer began. Improvised driven compositions at an early age laid the foundation of the composer’s unique compositional style. Little had never thought of composing as a career until age 15 when he saw the Tim Burton film, “The Nightmare
before Christmas” with music by Danny Elfman.\textsuperscript{16} Little describes the experience, “that film brought two worlds together in a way that made sense to me… it was a musical, but it was pretty dark and sort of strange…that was the first I realized that being a composer was a thing that you could do.”\textsuperscript{17} His love for Danny Elfman’s film compositions grew as he realized Elfman had composed for other movies including \textit{Batman}, \textit{Beetlejuice}, \textit{Tales of the Crypt}, and others. A major turning point for the young musician occurred when Little heard Stravinsky’s \textit{Rite of Spring}.\textsuperscript{18} Little describes this moment as a “massive shift” of interest toward classical music.\textsuperscript{19} Little describes his experience:

> A lot of film music was being pulled from the \textit{Rite of Spring} and there was something so visceral and so violent, connecting the industrial music energies to this big orchestra, so it made me realize that you didn’t need film to tell a story. That’s when I was really hooked on classical music.\textsuperscript{20}

After High School, Little majored in percussion at Susquehanna University in Harrisburg, PA.\textsuperscript{21} Much of his life as a performer from this point on would support his development as a composer. While in undergrad, Little composed theater pieces for narrator and ensemble. One particular piece titled, “The State of Our Union Is,” portrays conspiracy theories framed as a state of the union address.\textsuperscript{22} Little described the experience as forty actors “sort of coming in at

\textsuperscript{16} Little, interview.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Pellegrinelli, “Composer Portraits: David T. Little.”

\textsuperscript{22} Little, interview.
one point… screaming at the audience… But I got to put on a show, and that really hooked me.”

Around this time, Little also started a new music ensemble. Performances of the ensemble were staged, theatrical events often involving a lighting designer. The new idea of a concert as a theatrical performance set a precedence within his compositional development. With this newfound interest in staged concerts, he began following the works of the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble around the year, 2000. This interest would eventually lead to his debut as a composer of vocal music.

After graduating from Susquehanna University in 2001, Little went on to obtain his Master of Music degree in composition at the University of Michigan where he would mostly compose orchestral and chamber music. During this time, Little founded Newspeak, a trio ensemble that was based on free improvisation. Little served as the drummer for this ensemble that promoted unhindered improvisation. The group would be re-vamped later on to have eight members including Little’s future wife, Eileen Mack, as co-director.

Little studied with William Bolcom and Michael Daugherty while at the University of Michigan. Bolcom’s opera, A View from the Bridge was debuted at the MET in 2002, and Michael Daugherty’s opera, Jackie O, would have its French premiere at the Opéra de Metz.

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23 Little, interview.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Pellegrinelli, “Composer Portraits: David T. Little.”

27 Ibid.

28 Little, interview.
within the same year. With both of his mentors composing operas, Little decided he wanted to better understand operatic repertoire. Thus, he signed up for a survey of opera class with Naomi André, author of “Black Opera” and “Voicing Genders.” While early operas were not Little’s favorite, he fell in love with Peter Grimes and Wozzeck. He stated, “these are the pieces for me that I feel like I’m seeing the things that I’ve always been interested in expressed... the language resonates.. it’s connected to Stravinsky and to heavy metal.” Little expressed that witnessing the dark, dramatically compelling performance of Wozzeck was a monumental moment for him as a composer, empowering a shift in focus to vocal music. After graduating from the University of Michigan in 2002, Little moved to Boston and began studying with Osvaldo Golijov. Little wrote a song cycle called “Songs of Love, Death, Friends, and Government,” and brought it to his lesson. Golijov remarked that the songs were “like little studies for operas.” Little was surprised by the comment having intended for them to fall in the tradition of Ned Rorem, whom Little had met the summer before. At the time of finishing his song cycle, Little was dating a singer; thus, he was attending many opera scenes programs. Specifically, he attended an opera scenes program at New England Conservatory in 2003 where he witnessed the performance of

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29 Little, interview.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
“If I loved You” from *Carousel*. Little was enamored with how Richard Rogers cultivated the suspension of time with a brilliant setting of text and music. He remarked that the music resonated with him as “beautiful and sweet and human and revealing, and it was really immensely inspiring.” At this point in his life, Little decided to pursue composing vocal music more seriously. After beginning his doctoral studies in composition at Princeton University, he submitted his work to the Harvey Gaul Competition of the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble. Little won the competition in 2004.

After winning the competition, Little asked for more than a feature on the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble concert. Little was granted the entire concert, meaning he would be responsible for writing 55 minutes of music. Because Little took a leap of faith, he was given an opportunity that would jump start his compositional career. For the concert, Little had an idea for a piece regarding “how we as a country make our soldiers.” At the time, Timothy Jones was singing with the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble and, according to Little, had a voice that bordered between opera and music theater in sound. Little composed *Soldier Songs* for his voice.

Initially, Little never considered *Soldier Songs* to be operatic. He considered the performance a “staged song cycle” that incorporated video design, lighting, and special sound effects. One of the movements from the cycle entitled “Steal Rain” involved a recording of

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36 Little, interview.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
Little pouring 10,000 BB’s through rain gutters. This created a “terrifying, metallic clang” that was aggressively dramatic for that moment within the movement.\(^{42}\) After the premiere of Soldier Songs in 2006, Little returned to Princeton and started a composer collective with Missy Mazzoli and Judd Greenstein. The three composers decided upon writing an opera together and contacted producer Beth Morrison in hopes of funding.\(^{43}\) While the idea never came to fruition due to lack of funding at the time, Little reached out to Morrison. After sending her a copy of Soldier Songs, Morrison enthusiastically wanted to produce a performance that would take place at Le Poisson Rouge in 2008.\(^{44}\) At this performance, David T. Little first met librettist, Royce Vavrek. Later in 2008, Little attended the recital of the America Lyric Theatre Composer Librettist Development Program and heard Vavrek’s work for the first time.\(^{45}\) Little witnessed Vavrek’s piece called “Nora at the Alter Rail” and was incredibly moved.\(^{46}\) When Little was asked to compose for the Osvaldo Golijov-Dawn Upshaw Young Artist Workshop for composers and singers at Carnegie Hall, Little reached out to Vavrek, who agreed to the collaboration.\(^{47}\) The two set out to create what would eventually become the worldly acclaimed opera, Dog Days.

While his compositional career was taking off, Little graduated from Princeton University in 2011 with a PhD on the intersection of music and politics. Little’s dissertation

\(^{42}\) Little, Interview.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.
discusses music and politics, specifically “looking at various approaches both in theory and in practice to music and politics from 1917 to 2011.” Little developed his own ideologies where music and politics are concerned. Such ideas are prevalent in many of his works, including *Dog Days* and *JFK*. While studying with William Bolcom at the University of Michigan, Little recalls Bolcom stating that one doesn’t “need a piece of music to tell him that war is bad.” Bolcom encouraged Little to “get into the experience and to examine it... in such a way that it becomes about something bigger.” Little’s operatic compositions go beyond the surface as they search for what happens to the core of man at the dissolution of civilization.

Little and Vavrek have collaborated on two other operas, *Vinkensport* and *JFK*. Little is a dynamic composer, writing various kinds of music including instrumental, chamber, and other vocal works. His compositional style for *Dog Days* is dramatically and rhythmically driven; and yet, moments of beautiful, poignant melodies suspend time. While serving as program chair of the composition faculty at Mannes-The New School in New York City, he continues to have a busy schedule of composing. Little’s work has been commissioned by The Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center Theater, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and Carnegie Hall, just to name a few. His music is published by Boosey & Hawkes, and he is currently composing a monodrama based on Garth Greenwell’s novel, *What Belongs to You*. The work

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49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Little, “About.”

52 Ibid.
will feature Grammy award winning tenor, Karim Sulayman.\textsuperscript{53} In collaboration with Royce Vavrek, Little is also composing a new work commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera/ Lincoln Center Theater New Works Program.\textsuperscript{54} While it is hard for one to put the music of David T. Little into words, his mentor Osvaldo Golijov states it best:

I think the kind of pieces he’s doing are much more real than what most of young composers are doing. He’s not an ivory tower kind of guy or a polite guy when it comes to music, even though he’s a very nice guy… What comes through in every single piece is the dramatic instinct, the incredible sense of pacing, of the shift of gears. On one hand, there is something very modern about him, but on the other hand, he has this knack for theater and drama that Verdi had and the great operatic composers had.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} Little, “About.”

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Little, “Quotes.”
CHAPTER 2. THE LIBRETTIST

Based in Brooklyn, New York, Royce Vavrek is currently one of the most sought-after librettists in world. Vavrek maintains his successful career writing American-English libretto for current opera and song compositions. Vavrek has collaborated with a variety of famous composers including David T. Little, Missy Mazzoli, Ricky Ian Gordon, and Paola Prestini.

Though born and raised in Canada, Vavrek’s libretti paint the English language through the veil of American dialects. His writing holds a unique blending of cultures, bringing forth the musical aspects of American English. Much like the melting pot of America, Vavrek’s work is versatile and dynamic, allowing modern composers to bring forth stories in a new, exciting way within opera and American art song. This chapter will discuss the life of Royce Vavrek and events that led to his development as a librettist.

Vavrek was born and raised in the Grande Prairie of Alberta, Canada. From an early age, Vavrek was exposed to the arts through his parents. His father played piano and even had a band with his siblings while in high school. Vavrek’s family would often go to the community theater in Grande Prairie where he saw shows such as *Marvin’s Room* and *Steel Magnolias*. Vavrek remembers attending *Anne of Green Gables the Musical* when he was five years old at the local theater, and at ten years old, he made his stage debuts in *Oliver, Joseph and the*...
Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat and The Wizard of Oz. Vavrek credits his parents for instilling within him a love for the arts. As a child he participated in choir, piano lessons, singing lessons, and theory lessons. His childhood voice teacher, Ellyn Otterson, introduced him to the works of Mussorgsky, Vaughan Williams, Wolfe, Copland, Porter, and Sondheim. Such composers would influence Vavrek for the duration of his career.

Growing up on a grain farm had its entertainment limitations; thus, Vavrek was an avid reader. He also watched as many movies as he could, allowing movies, books, and music to be his window into the outside world. He describes himself as a “boy of the musical theater,” and enjoyed cast albums of 1776, Sunday in the Park with George, and The Wild Party. Vavrek became interested in composing music while in high school, so he began composition lessons. As a teenager, Vavrek fell in love with American independent cinema and foreign film. Because he was based in Alberta, the local cinema rarely showed such spectacles. Vavrek would read about the films being released in bigger cinemas and became inspired by movies such as Neil LaBut’s In the Company of Men, Larry Clark’s Kids, Todd Solondz’s Happiness, and Lars

59 Oteri, “Royce Vavrek.”
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
63 Stein, “Interview: Royce Vavrek.”
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves*. Vavrek’s love for film led him to writing his own plays. Paulette Long, his drama teacher, encouraged and helped him produce seventeen original plays for his high school festival circuit. Vavrek recalls writing a comedy entitled *Small Sad Saccharine Sins* involving a man being beaten to death by a nun in New York City. Vavrek’s story about a murderous nun portrays Vavrek’s creative audacity at a young age, especially when considering Vavrek attended a catholic high school. Vavrek was encouraged as a young artist to make bold, creative choices. When in the 11th grade, Vavrek’s English teacher, Donna De Bruin, was the first to critique his writing. “She gave me some tough love and encouraged me to elevate the quality of my prose,” states Vavrek. Consequently, Vavrek nurtured his creative thinking and writing skills, ultimately laying the foundation for the acclaimed librettist to come. Vavrek has held onto many sources of inspiration including the Canadian singer and songwriter, Kathleen Edwards. Vavrek acknowledges writers Richard Ford, Miriam Toews, Karen Russell, Alice Munro, and Larry McMurtry as writers who continuously inspire him to improve his own writing.

Because Vavrek was so inspired by international and American independent cinema of the 90’s, he aspired to major in filmmaking. After high school, Vavrek attended Concordia

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66 Stein, “Interview: Royce Vavrek.”
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
University’s Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema in Montreal, where he attained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Filmmaking and Creative Writing. Eventually, his love of writing would provoke the addition of creative writing as his second major. Vavrek submerges himself within the art of storytelling, and he himself is a gifted storyteller. “Telling stories has always been this innate thing that I’ve been participating in,” states Vavrek, “Even when I was three years old, I remember my mom would take dictation; she would write down stories that I told her.” While in college, Vavrek’s professor Carole Zucker encouraged him to study New German Cinema and the work of Neil Jordan. Vavrek’s combined interest of theater, writing, and music led to his graduate studies in Musical Theater writing. Vavrek attended his first Broadway show in New York when he was 20 years old. He was hooked and knew he wanted to be in New York City; thus, he enrolled in the Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program at New York University. While at NYU, Vavrek learned how to collaborate with his colleagues. Vavrek recalls:

> During the first year, I collaborated with most of my classmates on one- or two-week assignments. I dealt with lots of different artistic temperaments. Some pieces were failures, some were transcendent. It taught not only how to compromise but how to stand up for what you thought was important — how to pick your battles and how to meld.

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72 Oteri, “Royce Vavrek.”

73 Ibid.

74 Stein, “Interview: Royce Vavrek.”

75 Oteri, “Royce Vavrek.”

76 Ibid.

While in graduate school, Vavrek perfected his skills as a librettist, and he would go on to expand within the realm of opera. Vavrek was inspired by his teachers Mel Marvin and Mindi Dickstein, who had written for a variety of genres including musical theater and opera.\(^\text{78}\)

Vavrek was first introduced to opera at age 18 when he saw a double bill performance of Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci performed by Opera de Montreal.\(^\text{79}\) Pagliacci struck a chord in the heart of the young artist, and while Vavrek wasn’t versed on the tradition of opera libretto, he became interested. After he graduated from NYU, he was chosen by Larry Edelson to join the first group of artists to begin the American Lyric Theater’s Composer Librettist Development Program.\(^\text{80}\) Because of the program, Vavrek met Mark Adamo, a composer and librettist of modern, American opera. Adamo helped Vavrek establish his own style as a librettist. Not knowing the exact form of opera libretti worked in Vavrek’s favor, giving his writing a unique quality.\(^\text{81}\) Vavrek’s opera libretti is known for its blend of musical theater and opera prose, ultimately achieving moments of gripping, enthralling drama through Vavrek’s unique style of writing.

David T. Little heard Vavrek’s work at the American Lyric Theater’s Composer Librettist Development program’s recital.\(^\text{82}\) Being impressed with Vavrek’s work, Little asked him to collaborate on a 20 minute opera scene that was commissioned by Dawn Upshaw and

\(^{78}\) Oteri, “Royce Vavrek.”

\(^{79}\) Ibid.

\(^{80}\) Stein, “Interview: Royce Vavrek.”

\(^{81}\) Ibid.

\(^{82}\) Little, interview.
Osvaldo Golijov for a performance at Carnegie Hall. Vavrek and Little would go on to complete the opera Dog Days, which premiered in 2012. While Dog Days was Vavrek’s first professional venture within operatic literature, it was far from his last. At the performance at Carnegie Hall, Missy Mazzoli heard the scene from Dog Days and reached out to Vavrek. She invited Vavrek to come see her composition, Song from the Uproar, and Vavrek would go on to help her complete the libretto for the opera, which premiered in 2012. Vavrek credits Beth Morrison for helping him begin his career, and because of her support, works such as Dog Days and Song from the Uproar were produced. Vavrek’s second opera written with Mazzoli would be Breaking the Waves, which premiered in 2016 at Opera Philadelphia; the opera was nominated for “Best World Premiere” at the 2017 International Opera Awards. Also, in 2017, Vavrek and composer Du Yun’s opera Angel’s Bone received the Pulitzer Prize for music.

Since his debut as an operatic librettist, Vavrek has worked with a number of prolific composers of American opera and song literature including Ricky Ian Gordon. Vavrek and Gordon created the opera, 27, which premiered at the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2014. The duo would later adapt Gail Rock’s The House Without a Christmas Tree for Houston Grand

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83 Little, interview.

84 Oteri, “Royce Vavrek.”

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 “About,” Royce Vavrek.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.
Opera, which premiered with great success.\textsuperscript{90} Vavrek stays busy creating libretti for American art song, specifically for composer Paola Prestini.

The collaboration of David T. Little and Royce Vavrek holds a special place within American opera repertoire. Consisting of the operas \textit{Dog Days}, \textit{Vikensport} (or The Finch Opera), and \textit{JFK}, the duo cover a vast span of American opera within the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. Their first grand opera, \textit{JFK}, was premiered at Fort Worth Opera in April of 2016.\textsuperscript{91} Opera News deemed the new work “ravishing,” and the opera earned a ten-star review in Opera Now Magazine.\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Dog Days} and \textit{JFK} are considered two of his greatest works, representing dark, gripping plots surrounding the effects of political uproar amongst civilization. Vavrek acknowledges that he and Little come from similar backgrounds in that they both began with a love of musical theater. Vavrek states,

I think that we’re using the best things about musical theater and the best things about opera and creating a middle ground. I also think that we’re extremely excited about the drama, about the theater of opera, so we are really trying to create dynamic works that feel alive, trying to define what opera in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century is and what it’s going to be. I think that that’s a great opportunity for this community of artists that I work in. We get to put a flag in the ground and say this is what we want opera and musical theater to be going forward.\textsuperscript{93}

He revels in the American-English language and the many “juicy words” he uses to paint deeper narratives.\textsuperscript{94} In regard to his writing method, Vavrek creates prose that provoke music; not necessarily the other way around.\textsuperscript{95} Vavrek never writes words with specific music in mind;

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{90} “About,” Royce Vavrek.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Oteri, “Royce Vavrek.”
\item \textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
however, his flexibility and willing to tweak his words to promote the artistic development of the composer is an asset that sets him apart. Vavrek describes this process as:

My words, when I write them, do not have a musical idea attached to them, or at least very, very, very rarely. The musical idea will be more general, like I feel like this is a sad song or this a happy song or this is a song that accomplishes this narratively. I would never say that the music is wrong. I don’t even know what that means. If there is music that I just don’t connect with, that’s a bigger problem, but I haven’t ever come across that. I can’t even think of an example of a composer who’s let me down, or who has completely derailed my narrative ideas. I always find that my words are a container and the music is always additive. Or it always has been…

Vavrek is currently working on a variety of commissioned works in collaboration with composers Matt Marks, Julian Wachner, Marisa Michelson, and Guillaume Coté, just to name a few. Vavrek is also co-Artistic Director of The Coterie, an opera-theater company founded with Lauren Worsham, who was cast in the Dog Days world premiere as Lisa. Vavrek has been called the “Metastasio of the downtown opera scene” “who has shaken up the timid, backward-looking business of American opera.” Vavrek’s gift of story-telling has pushed the envelope within American opera, enrapturing audiences until the final curtain. Works such as Dog Days whisk American opera repertoire in a new direction by means of questioning our humanity, demanding thoughts on the role of civilization, and pervading memories long after the curtain has fallen.

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96 Oteri, “Royce Vavrek.

97 “About,” Royce Vavrek.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

The Creation of the Opera, *Dog Days*

The opera *Dog Days* stems from the film by Ellie Lee. The film and opera are both based on the short story, *Dog Days*, by Judy Budnitz. This chapter will discuss the creation of the opera *Dog Days* with specific attention to the development of the operatic character, Lisa.

David T. Little’s fascination of the short film *Dog Days* by Ellie Lee began in 2003. While at the University of Michigan, Little had a daily compositional ritual. Before composing, he would briefly watch TV in the mornings, usually the previous night’s *Daily Show*. When he was ready to begin composing, he would change the channel to the IFC channel, and mute the TV. One day in 2003 while he was composing, he caught a glimpse of the film, *Dog Days*, by Ellie Lee. Interested in what was going on, Little unmuted the TV, and became enthralled with the story. Little could not look away from the film, and this was the first time he became really interested in the plot of *Dog Days*. He wrote down the name, and a year later while in Boston, Little composed the song, “After a Film by Ellie Lee.” Inspired by the film, the song is set for soprano, violin, and clarinet. “After a Film by Ellie Lee” explores the apocalyptic atmosphere within the film, *Dog Days*. Little discovered that Ellie Lee lived in Boston at the same time he did, so Little reached out to her in hopes to meet the artist behind the

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100 Little, interview.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.
film he loved. Lee and Little met for coffee, and Lee ultimately connected Little to Judy Budnitz.\textsuperscript{104}

Five years later, Little and Vavrek were commissioned to write a 20-minute piece for the Osvaldo Golijov-Dawn Upshaw Young Artist Workshop for composers and singers at Carnegie Hall. The development program required Little and Vavrek to write a 20-minute piece for five singers, who had already been cast. Little and Vavrek began brainstorming, and Little recalled the film, \textit{Dog Days}. When Little asked Vavrek his opinion of the idea, Vavrek replied in an email, “YES! LET’S DO IT!”\textsuperscript{105} Thus, the opera, \textit{Dog Days} began.

Vavrek and Little began working on the piece, and in October of 2008, Little had his first workshop at Bard College with Osvaldo Golijov and Dawn Upshaw. Little credits Golijov and Upshaw with helping him understand dramatic pacing and how to best write for individual voices.\textsuperscript{106} The two sopranos participating in the development program had similar voices; thus, Upshaw stressed to Little that the vocal lines of Mother and Lisa had to differ musically in order to set the two characters apart.\textsuperscript{107} Consequently, much of Lisa’s vocal music is shorter and driven by speech patterns, childlike in presentation. Mother’s vocal lines are longer and lyrical, more mature in presentation. In 2009, the 25-minute scene debuted at Carnegie Hall. Producer, Beth Morrison was astounded at the dress rehearsal along with Alan Pearson, who conducted the

\textsuperscript{104} Little, interview.


\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{107} Little, interview.
scene for Carnegie Hall. Pearson brought it to Jed Wheeler at Peak Performances of Montclair in New Jersey, who eventually commissioned the completion of the opera. Wheeler contacted the acclaimed director Robert Woodruff, who agreed to direct the new opera. The opera *Dog Days* began with three key components: the composer David T. Little, the librettist Royce Vavrek, and the director Robert Woodruff. With the commission of the new opera, the creative team decided older singers were needed for the professional premier. Soprano, Lauren Worsham, who knew Vavrek from NYU, was brought in to premiere the aria, “Mirror Mirror,” for the American Opera Projects at Galapagos Arts Space in Brooklyn. The role of Lisa was specifically written for Worsham’s voice.

The initial process of writing *Dog Days* was tedious. Little recalls moments in his office with Woodruff pacing, having difficulty with the piece. Royce would bring in drafts of the libretto for all to read and would then make adjustments. Following this, Little would then compose the music. Woodruff held an important role in the creative process by helping Little and Vavrek understand what could be left up to him as the director. Vavrek recalls Woodruff instructing him to cut lines that could be accomplished through staging. Much of Vavrek’s libretti are written with staging in mind; thus, there are many specific staging directions within the score of *Dog Days*. Once the cast of professional singers, including Lauren Worsham, were

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108 Little, interview.

109 Smith, “Conversation: David T. Little and Royce Vavrek on *Dog Days*.”

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.
hired, the team of composer, librettist, and director worked closely with the singers during the rehearsal period. This created a strong bond; thus, the premiere of *Dog Days* was a special moment for all involved.

The premiere at Peak Performances was conducted by Alan Pierson, and the nine-member orchestra was filled by Little’s New Music Ensemble, Newspeak. The premier of *Dog Days* occurred September 29 through October 7 in 2012. The opera would later be performed at Fort Worth Opera and Los Angeles Opera, with the same cast. The performance in Los Angeles was recorded live, and the album went on to be named “Best 50 Albums of 2016” by NPR Music. *Dog Days* received its New York City premiere at the Skirball Center for the Performing arts in 2016 and held its European premiere in February of 2016 at Bielefeld Opera in Germany. *Dog Days* was named a standout opera of recent decades by *The New York Times*.

**The Development of the Character, Lisa**

Lisa was originally created by Judy Budnitz within her short story, *Dog Days*. Lisa is a 13-year old girl both in the story, film, and in the opera, *Dog Days*. The role of Lisa was specifically catered to Lauren Worsham’s soprano voice. With a clear and bright soprano voice, Worsham has won awards with Drama Desk and has been nominated for a Tony Award for her performance of Phoebe in *A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder*. She originated the role of Phoebe in *A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder* and has sung other roles including but not

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114 Smith, “Conversation: David T. Little and Royce Vavrek on *Dog Days*.”

115 Ibid.

116 Little, “About.”
limited to Cunegonde in *Candide*, Magnolia in *Show Boat*, and Flora in *Turn of the Screw*. Because the role of Lisa was written specifically for her voice, there are mixed elements of musical theater and opera within Lisa’s arias. Because Worsham is a phenomenal actress, the role of Lisa is dynamically dramatic, calling for emotions and physicality that exceed normal expectations.

The arch of Lisa’s character develops substantially within her arias. The soprano portraying Lisa must always take into mind that Lisa is young. While the role of the mother is also a soprano, there is a very different vocal presentation involved. While writing the opera, Little was encouraged by Dawn Upshaw to set Lisa apart from Mother; thus, Lisa’s vocal lines are much shorter, declamatory in style. The rhythms are challenging and speech-like. The text within Lisa’s arias are full of imagery that is tailored to American culture. Words such as “cheez whiz jars,” “katydids,” tadpoles,” and “old dugout” are nostalgic, harkening to a childhood within American suburbia. At the beginning of the opera, Lisa is presented as a normal, young, teenage girl. She argues with her mother regarding food, and she fights with her older brothers. Musically, her lines are short, declamatory, and somewhat harsh. When first meeting the dogman in her first aria, Lisa shows signs of kindness, with hopes of befriending the dogman. She also is mean, stating that the dogman’s wife must have stopped loving him, because he became a dogman. Little and Vavrek wanted to make Lisa as human as possible, thus, evil and good coexist within her. As the opera progresses, Little and Vavrek create moments within her arias that signal emotional and physical changes. Her second aria, “Letter,” consists of Lisa humming while words are projected describing her lost friend, Marjorie, whom she misses. Within the aria,

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118 Little, interview.
it is noted that Lisa understands the world around her is not safe. Her third and final aria, “Mirror Mirror,” brings forth elements of physical change. Lisa is starving, and she likens herself to a model as her bony body appears in the mirror. The hopelessness of Lisa’s starvation coupled with the sadness in her societal affirmation of being thin is overwhelming. The final aria symbolizes Lisa’s loss of innocence. The harshness of starvation is forcing her to grow up; and with growing up, comes more interest in her physical appearance. The arch of Lisa’s first aria to her last shows a development that results in the loss of her innocence and childhood.

It is important to note that much of Lisa’s character holds vocal nuances that are not heard without the use of a microphone. As instructed by Little in the score, all characters in the opera, Dog Days, are individually amplified. Little remarks that this is not to serve the purpose of balance or volume; however, Little wanted the singers to have a filtered sound that suggests mechanic industrialism. The orchestra, including an electric guitar, are also amplified. The opera holds musical elements of metal and rock music while promoting the visceral presence of an apocalypse. Little accomplishes this in sound by electronically filtering all music, vocal and instrumental, through amplification. Because Lisa is amplified through a microphone, it is important to understand that the goal of projection is no longer a priority. Instead, focus must lean toward inflection of the text, enhancing emotional expression. Because of the amplification, moments such as humming the “Letter” aria are able to occur and be heard over the orchestra. Lisa’s humming portrays her as a child, and through Lisa’s child-like perspective, the audience grasps the demise of her family when both her innocence and the civilization around her is lost.
CHAPTER 4. A PERFORMER’S GUIDE TO “NO MAN IN HIS RIGHT MIND”

This chapter will serve as a performer’s guide to the aria, “No Man In His Right Mind,” sung by Lisa in the opera *Dog Days*. This chapter aids singers who are preparing the role of Lisa for performances within the opera and within recital settings. It is important to note that the music is rhythmically and harmonically challenging to the singer. The piano reduction for recital performances is also very difficult; thus, ample time is needed to cultivate collaboration between all performers involved. This chapter will provide textual and harmonic analyses to enhance the vocal, physical, and emotional performance of the aria. Acting and specific stage directions will also be discussed.

**The Text**

Before the aria begins, Lisa has removed potato wedges from her pocket, offering them in hopes to attract the starving dogman. The man in a dog suit has wandered up to Lisa’s home, and it is evident by his crawling and lack of speaking that he has placed himself in an altered reality where he is a dog. The beginning text of the aria juxtaposes the insanity of the dogman with Lisa’s treatment of him as a human. Lisa recognizes that the dogman is still a human and offers him food. The irony exists in her first line of text, “No man in his right mind could pass up wedges.” Lisa acknowledges that the deranged man is still human through his need to eat. The text of this aria should be sung with an American dialect. Words such as “old dug-out” paint pictures of little league baseball, and words such as “Cheez Whiz jar” harken to food many Americans of today grew up eating. Vavrek paints vivid images with the text, and it is important for the singer to stress consonants and correct vowels so that every word can be understood. While the microphone helps in amplifying the voice, the singer must still do due diligence in bringing out the text.
The aria, “No Man In His Right Mind,” is textually divided into three different points of view. The first point of view involves Lisa’s view of her reality, and during this point of view she often sings directly to the dogman. The second point of view presents Lisa’s memories, an escape from her reality. Often within her memories, she recalls her lost friend, Marjorie. The third point of view is Lisa’s fantasy. She imaginatively derives stories that are completely separate from her reality and memories; the imaginings are child-like and far-fetched from reality. Within these three points of view is an array of beautiful text that takes listeners through Lisa’s train of thought as she wrestles with the world around her.

The Music

“No Man In His Right Mind” is over 10 minutes in duration and presents a vocal range of C₄ to A₅. The aria begins with accompaniment consisting of repeated, fast rhythmic patterns that create a sense of excitement and anticipation; however, the key of C minor creates a subconscious idea that something is amiss. Within the opera, the repeated rhythm occurs with an amplified vibraphone, which is the first use of electronic instrumentation in the aria. The overall sound of the aria holds a rock essence in that the instruments and singer are amplified. With the addition of instruments such as the vibraphone, there is a metallic texture to the piece within operatic performances. Within recital performances, the piano accompaniment must maintain strict rhythmic presentation to mimic the mechanical sounds. In measure 472, a motif is presented in a high tessitura. The motif is played by glockenspiel within the opera and is played by the piano within recital settings. The high tessitura of the motif brings the melody out of the overall texture, hearkening to Lisa. David T. Little refers to the melody as the Lisa motif. The motif was composed early on in the development of the opera and is heard in all three of Lisa’s arias. The glockenspiel line pictured in Example 4.1 can be referred to as the Lisa motif:

The melody within the Lisa *motif* is a foreshadowing to the melodic material that will eventually occur in Lisa’s final aria, “Mirror Mirror.” Within the aria, “No Man In His Right Mind,” the *motif* juxtaposes major and minor relations; the *motif* sounds a B♭ against Lisa’s B. This contrast of major and minor symbolizes the innocence of Lisa against something not quite right with the dogman. The rhythm of Lisa’s opening text is speech-like, and the composer puts emphasis on words pertaining to the dogman’s mind. For instance, in measure 476 “right mind” is *staccato*, which brings it out of the linear texture of the vocal line. This happens again in measure 480 with the words “his retarded mind.” The composer stretches certain text with quintuplet groupings over two beats. This adds more attention to the text and is very speech-like in vocal presentation. The *staccati* over the word, “retarded” symbolize Lisa’s awkward nature as she tries to make sense of the dogman. Lisa is uncomfortable as she begins talking to the dogman, and inappropriate word choices show her efforts to maintain a sense of normalcy as she
deflects her own loneliness. The quintuplet, *staccato* feature over the words, “retarded mind” is presented in Example 4.2.

*Example 4.2.* David T. Little, “No Man In His Right Mind,” *Dog Days*, mm. 480.

As the aria progresses, Lisa stresses that no man in his right mind would pass up food, especially when he is starving. The important point is that she is referring to the dogman as a man. The narrative presents Lisa’s thoughts in the present as she describes the dogman, and in measure 485 she sings to the dogman directly, proposing the idea of friendship. The key is still C minor, and there is an undertone of unstableness, representing Lisa’s struggle with understanding the dogman. Specifically, when Lisa sings, “We could be friends if you want,” the word “friends” falls on a descending half-step, which interrupts the G major triad. This is shown in Example 4.3 and represents a melodic contour that re-occurs throughout her arias, showing Lisa’s uncertainty. The melody begins with a triplet creating a stretched, broad vocal line. Yet, the word “friends” is taken out of the melodic linear line, and this is to show Lisa’s doubt. It is important for the singer to bring out such melodic moments, leaning into the harmonic dissonances within the vocal lines. See Example 4.3.
The triplet rhythm over two beats, as presented in Example 4.3, is a re-occurring rhythm when Lisa speaks directly to the dogman. Creating a meter of three over four quarter beats actively suspends time. This suspension of time represents Lisa’s nature in addressing the dogman with compassion and also curiosity. She knows something is wrong with the man; thus, when she speaks to him, she slows her speech. In measure 486, Lisa continues to state that she and the dogman could be friends “even though you’re not normal.” The phrase “even though you’re not normal” is important both textually and musically. First, it represents her initial recognition that the dogman is not normal. Musically, every time the word “normal” is presented, it is done so in C major. The sharp transition from minor to major creates an abrupt aural contrast, reminding listeners what normal sounds like. Also, the triplet feature re-appears, creating an interesting lilt to the word “normal.” At exactly the time she verbally states the dogman is not normal, the accompaniment changes abruptly, and the vibraphone is added back into the musical texture. This abrupt change in texture foreshadows a change in perspective. As the texture of the accompaniment becomes denser, Lisa develops her thoughts. The change in accompaniment texture is shown in Example 4.4.

In measure 499, the piano is added to play the Lisa *motif*. The *poco rit* in measures 499 through 507 represents a shift in thought. The *motif* represents Lisa as she reflects on her past when life was normal. In measure 507, the clarinet is introduced with a sweeping, upward scalar motion. The clarinet represents Lisa’s transition in thought to her memories.

In measure 508, Lisa brings forth how she remembers what her normal used to be. Diving into her memories is represented within the text and music. The audience is able to glimpse through her mind what normal was as she describes her childhood happiness. The elongated rhythmic texture of the vocal line permeates this section with triplets over two beats and quintuplets over two beats. The rhythms and melodic material seem to pull against the 4/4 meter, suspending the melody gracefully and lyrically. Rhythmically difficult, the vocal line still must be sung with ease and legato. The melodic material is beautiful above variations of the Lisa motif in the piano. See Example 4.5.
The text used to represent her memories is strikingly American with words such as “snapdragons, aquariums, and Cheez Whiz jars” being sung. Special attention to annunciation is encouraged. Audience members who are familiar with culture of the United States will connect to such terms, possibly with memories from their own childhood. Most importantly, this section of the aria introduces a key figure in Lisa’s memories: her childhood friend, Marjorie. In measure 514, Lisa sings the Marjorie motif. The eerie yet beautiful melody suspends time, emanating Lisa’s loss. The mystery of Marjorie throughout the opera is morbidly sweet and quite foreboding. Example 4.6 shows the first variation of the Marjorie motif, a falling melodic line accompanied by the Lisa motif in the piano. It is also important to note the decrescendo marking above “Marjorie,” which re-occurs throughout the opera. The audience can feel Lisa’s longing for her friend, Marjorie, with the softer tone of singing. The relationship between the text “Marjorie” and the Lisa motif is important in that it represents the memory of Lisa’s lost loved one.
Beginning in measure 519, Lisa begins to proclaim, “nothing’s normal anymore,” and the Lisa motif stops. Lisa is breaking out of her memory and returning to reality with the dogman present. The rhythm of the accompaniment repeats, and there is a small ritard in measure 529, which is important when performing. Measures 524 through 529 evoke an aural transition with thin, simpler texture in the accompaniment and vocal line. The vocal line is composed of half notes, and the accompaniment changes to suspended whole and half notes. Time slows as Lisa transitions back to reality. The measures in the transition section change back and forth between major and minor, suggesting feelings of agitation and confusion before Lisa addresses the dogman in measure 534.

Beginning in measure 530 the tempo is increased, and the Lisa motif reappears. The shift in tempo allows listeners to understand there is a shift in thought. Lisa is no longer in her memories and is now addressing the dogman directly, and the music reflects this. Also, the accompaniment features a new rhythmic pattern of staccato and syncopation. The rhythmic feature is no longer about Lisa; however, it is now featuring the movement of the dogman as he
crawls on the ground. The rhythm changes once Lisa begins to sing in measure 534. The vocal line is short, *staccato*, and presented in a low tessitura. This is speech-like in rhythmic capacity and melodic contour. The dynamic marking is *forte*, and the score states to sing the line, “Ya got a fam’ly” awkwardly. Lisa is uncomfortable with such a personal question, and this tentativeness should be evident in the voice and acting. The text is Americanized with dropped vowels, and the rhythm reflects how one might speak the line with correct stresses. See Example 4.7.

**Example 4.7.** David T. Little, “No Man In His Right Mind,” *Dog Days*, mm. 534

Lisa is trying to learn about the dogman as she asks if he has a family. In measure 540, she asks if he has “a litter of puppies.” This question is a joke but leads into a part of the aria where Lisa becomes aggressive toward the dogman. She states, “Little ones that were yanked from your doghouse and handed out to families on farms on the outskirts of town?” This is not a nice sentiment, and the introduction of the electric guitar brings forth a new, dissonant harmonic texture. When singing such text, agitation must appear in the voice and physicality of the singer. This new texture allows the audience to recognize that Lisa’s mindset is changing to a new, complicated emotion. Kindness and meanness coexist within her. In measure 556 there is a “*drop*
"rit," which the composer specifically directs as a dramatic change to a slower tempo. This signals a change in Lisa’s point of view.

In measure 578, Lisa asks the dogman if he has a wife, a person who loved him at some point in his life. The triplet features in the accompaniment are beautiful and lilting, with the directions to “keep triplets to the fore” in measure 557. This part of the aria is lyrical in nature, almost romantic, harkening to Lisa growing up. While Lisa is speaking to the dogman, she is possibly within her own dream of falling in love one day. Word painting is brought forth when Lisa asks, “Does she know that you’re… does she know you’re messed up?” The melodic line of the text is syncopated showing Lisa is unsure about how to ask such a question. The text, “messed up” is *staccato* with quarter notes on beats one and two. This is a stark contrast to the rest of the vocal line. This emphasis of the text, “messed up,” allows everyone to understand Lisa knows the dogman is not in his right mind; she knows he’s a struggling human, and yet she wants to be his friend because maybe everyone is a little messed up.

Measures 567 through 581 represent what the score notates as “romance novel fantasy.” Lisa compares the dogman to men on afternoon talk shows who “go crazy and beg for forgiveness.” The word “beg” is written over a series of *appoggiaturas* in two sets of quintuplets over four beats. This compositional technique evokes the desperate nature of begging, and Little notes in the score that the singer should sing the phrase in a pleading nature while placing emphasis on the top note of the two-note grouping. In measure 575, Lisa sings, “Maybe she fell in love with a character from her drug store romance.” The melodic and rhythmic shift is thicker in texture, and it is shown that Lisa is “dreaming of falling in love someday,” which is notated in measure 575. This idea is represented by the unstable sounds of accompaniment and vocal line, and yet there is a linear melody occurring. Example 4.8 presents the texture from the score.
**Example 4.8.** David T. Little, “No Man In His Right Mind,” *Dog Days*, mm. 573-580.

In measure 582 there is a dramatic change in the accompaniment and vocal line. The score notates “dropping the romance novel fantasy: this is real life, maybe.” The clarinet and vibraphone are added into the texture with the direction to sound “like northern lights.” The rhythmic structure of the strings is static yet moving; and the vocal line is *pianissimo* with humming on the “m” of maybe. See Example 4.9.
Example 4.9. David T. Little, “No Man In His Right Mind,” *Dog Days*, mm. 581-585

This is the first introduction of Lisa’s humming. Humming within Lisa’s arias symbolizes her childhood. Within this moment, time stands still. The melody of the vocal line is beautiful and, when coupled with the accompaniment, evokes sadness for Lisa and for the dogman. The relationship of the text and music allows the audience to feel empathetic toward the loneliness experienced by the dogman and Lisa. The repetitive rhythms of the accompaniment are steady, like a heartbeat. In measure 587, Lisa returns to the idea of the dogman’s wife. Lisa sings, “maybe she didn’t want to love a dog, maybe she doesn’t want to love a dog.” It is important to note that Lisa alters from past to present. The score notates for Lisa to feel, “bad, was that too harsh?” The singer must show in voice and body such changes in emotion from accusation to remorse. The music of the electric guitar drops two octaves, which represents the dogman being hurt. After all, he is human. The purpose of the accompaniment is vital in that it shows the feelings of the dogman, a character who never speaks. In a way, the music of the electric guitar becomes the voice of the dogman, conversing with Lisa.
Measure 612 begins with a sudden pianissimo. Lisa sings softly, “You want to know a secret?” This moment shows Lisa has reached a level of familiarity with the dogman. Lisa wants to interest the dog, so a sense of purpose must be present within the pianissimo singing. The tessitura of the vocal line lies low, suggesting Lisa does not want anyone else to hear; she is now confiding in her new friend. Lisa paints the image of her father crying in his sleep. The low range of her vocal line is a contrast to the piano accompaniment, which is much higher in registration. This is shown in Example 4.10.

**Example 4.10.** David T. Little, “No Man In His Right Mind,” *Dog Days*, mm. 616-619

The texture of the accompaniment is denser with alternating rhythms. This alternating of rhythms represents the vast emotions expressed as Lisa describes the demise of her parents. Before Lisa describes her mother, the tempo begins to increase in measure 624. The piano figure presents fast, triplet figures. The triplet figures represent chaos. In measure 628, the vibraphone is added to the texture as Lisa states that her mother “sleeps through everything so she doesn’t notice, but I do.” On the text, “I do” in measure 636, the music changes dramatically. Tempo is much faster with a thinner accompaniment texture. The vibraphone stops, and the accompaniment is no longer syncopated. Lisa’s vocal line is composed of whole notes in a low
tessitura. When Lisa admits that she notices something is wrong, the music represents her feelings of static fear. Example 4.11 presents the example from the score.

Example 4.11. David T. Little, “No Man In His Right Mind,” Dog Days, mm. 635-638.

In measure 644, the audience is able to feel the angst Lisa has toward her father. The texture evokes feelings of fear and anger with syncopation and repeated, staccato rhythms. The electric guitar and clarinet are added within the full score, creating a rock-influenced element to the music. Lisa’s vocal line becomes frantic with many triplets over two beats. The text is quickly sung; thus, articulation has to be a priority. The images of her father are strong as she sings:

Gone are the nights he’d spend in front of the T.V. Hours and hours and hours when the plant closed down. Mom nagged: “Gonna get off the couch?” but he knew it was no use. So he sat staring off into space, a wall of beer cans piling up at his feet.

The texture becomes more and more chaotic with the addition of rhythmic variances, as shown in Example 4.12.
Lisa allows the audience to see her family as she does. She is presented very human and helpless as she recalls the struggling downfall of her parents. The text along with the music provokes strong emotions of loss, fear, and loneliness.

The final part of the aria begins on measure 674. Lisa snaps back into reality, as notated in the score. The addition of the amplified violincello within the full score creates an electronic sound that is new. The violincello acts as a “machine running itself to death.” This symbolizes not only reality but is also a foreshadowing of the destitute family when food runs out. When performing in the recital setting, the piano must act as the machine. The compositional technique depicts a machine with repeated rhythms. See Example 4.13.


The following figures depict the addition of electronic sounds within the full score. While it might be difficult to incorporate such additions within a recital setting, it is important for the performer to understand the change in sound intended. In measure 678, the china cymbal, Tom, and Kick instruments are added to the texture. This creates a more mechanical, industrial sound. See Example 4.14.

Example 4.15. David T. Little, “No Man In His Right Mind,” Dog Days, mm. 686-688.

In measure, 688, the guitarist cues a curfew siren from his laptop. This use of technology allows the audience to feel an element of fear in Lisa’s reality. If there is a curfew signaled by a siren, there are major problems with the society presented. The reality becomes more real with the addition of more technology in the instrumentation.

The technology used in the final scene of “No Man In His Right Mind” is significant because it represents a scary reality in which Lisa lives. The sounds of machines and sirens
symbolize the destruction of a peaceful society. With the dissolution of the society around her, Lisa maintains compassion for the dogman. Out of her own loneliness, she seeks a friend in the man who has lost his mind.

In measure 683, Lisa regains her confidence after being vulnerable. She now puts on a stern face before she addresses petting the dog. In the midst of electronic, fearful sounds of reality, she is wanting to touch the dog, to connect to the dog. She openly states, “I think we’ll be friends” in measure 700, and even touches him. The final section of the aria holds an important theme of the opera. The moment of touching the dogman is a turning point. A young girl is humanizing a man in a dog suit, painting a beautiful picture of innocent friendship against the ugly backdrop of a dismal reality. This is represented by her vocal line proclaiming friendship against the electronic, mechanical, and non-melodic sounds of the accompaniment. “No Man In His Right Mind” holds a purpose in building the character of Lisa through music and text. Listeners understand her memories and what made her happy in her past while also understanding the dismal ambiguity of her future in a post-apocalyptic America. This is accomplished through the Americanized text coupled with the music that is both melodic and mechanic. The relationship between the music and text is important because the music represents emotions taking place that are not represented by the text. The purpose of this chapter is to guide the singer toward performing the music vocally and physically to the best of one’s ability. It is important for the singer to show with their voice and acting that Lisa presents a humanized wish for friendship among the trials of starvation, societal desolation, the demise of her family, and the presence of a mute dogman.
CHAPTER 5. A PERFORMER’S GUIDE TO “LETTER”

The “Letter” aria is Lisa’s second aria presented in the opera, *Dog Days*. As Lisa writes a letter, she hums a beautiful melody while the text of her letter is projected for the audience to read. The melody being hummed comes from the old English folksong, “Three Ravens.” This chapter will serve as a performer’s guide to Lisa’s aria, “Letter.”

“Letter” is the final scene in Act I, and Vavrek writes specific staging directions regarding Lisa’s bedroom. The aria takes place in Lisa’s bedroom, which Vavrek describes to be very “pink, very daddy’s little princess.” Singing the aria in Lisa’s bedroom evokes a sense of intimacy. Her bedroom has become her place of solitude away from the world. Within the aria, Lisa composes a letter to her friend, Marjorie. Marjorie was briefly mentioned in the first aria, “No Man In His Right Mind;” and while her whereabouts are unknown, there is a sense of loss when Lisa sings her name. By this time in the opera, Lisa understands that reality is becoming bleaker, and this letter written to Marjorie bridges Lisa’s past, present, and future preservation of friendships.

**The Text**

Because the vocal line of “Letter” is hummed, the text Lisa is writing in her letter must be projected for audience members to see at the time indicated in the score. Even in recital settings, it is important for the singer to know that the melodic phrasing is connected to the words written within the score. The text of the letter is simple in presentation, evidently written by a child. Lisa begins her letter with “Dear Marjorie.” Addressing the letter to Marjorie heightens interest; one wonders if Marjorie is still alive. Initially the text of the letter is descriptive, painting a new picture of the dogman. Within her letter, Lisa begins to describe the dogman as a “lunatic” who is “revolting” but “kinda cute.” Describing the dog man to Marjorie symbolizes how much her
new friendship means to Lisa. Lisa explains to Marjorie that the dogman listens while his eye
twitches. Royce Vavrek’s text paints vivid imagery of the dogman while consequently portraying
a new side of Lisa. Through Lisa’s specific descriptions, her cognitive awareness regarding the
dogman becomes evident. She describes that the dogman has “smoker’s fingers and grey in his
beard.” Within the letter, Lisa presents herself realistically seeing and describing the man.

The text within “Letter” paints the idea that Lisa is connecting her past to her present
through Marjorie and the dogman. The juxtaposition of Marjorie and the dogman allows
audiences to understand the bleak circumstances within Lisa’s life. The dissolution of
civilization is present through the juxtaposing of Marjorie, Lisa’s lost childhood friend, and the
dogman, Lisa’s current friend; who happens to be a grown man who has lost his mind. Through
it all, Lisa is preserving her childhood through seeking friendship. The last page of text paints the
picture of the world around her. Lisa describes to Marjorie how every day becomes quieter with
“no crickets” and “no katydids.” The brevity of the phrases mirrors the lack of sound being
described. In the world around her, Lisa recognizes the loss of sound and living. Lisa’s child-like
nature is present as she signs the letter “xoxoxoxoxo.” The final line of text states “P.S. Too bad
you’ll never read this letter.” The final phrase of text is heart-wrenching in that it shows Lisa’s
friend Marjorie is gone, and Lisa knows it. While the text is not sung, it is important for the
singer to know the text and when the text appears above the hummed melody. The melody must
be sung genuinely, as if the singer is writing and reading the letter for the first time. The
humming of the melody should be done as though a child were humming.

Humming is an alternate vocal mechanism; thus, one’s normal vocal technique can be
altered to promote humming that is audible, clear, and comfortable. One likely way to
accomplish humming is by singing on the consonant cluster “ng” known by its IPA symbol as
This promotes a lowered soft palate, sending one’s phonation through their nasal passage. It is important to note that this might comfortably elevate one’s larynx, especially when humming the highest note of the aria, B₅. Producing a hum that is best for the individual singer is important.

The Music

Lisa’s aria, “Letter,” is approximately three minutes in length. It is important to note that for both recital and stage performances, the singer must convey the action of a child writing a letter. The melody of the aria comes from the English folksong, “Three Ravens.” Historically, the folksong is thought to have been composed in 1611 for a children’s songbook. A later version developed in the 18th century with a darker ending. The use of the “Three Ravens” melody within Lisa’s “Letter” aria is quite symbolic. The original story of the folksong involves three ravens that are deciding whether to eat a slain knight. The fallen knight is eventually saved by his lover. A later version of the story holds a darker ending where the lover has moved on, and the ravens eat the slain knight. The use of this particular folk story as the melodic material for “Letter” foreshadows the killing of the dogman at the end of the opera. The three ravens symbolize Lisa’s father and two brothers; the slain knight symbolizes the dogman; and the lover symbolizes Lisa. The melody foreshadows how the men in Lisa’s life will eventually eat the dogman, and unlike the lover in the folkstory, Lisa cannot save him.

The children’s folksong melody symbolizes Lisa’s innocence and childhood which is also shown in her use of humming. Composer David T. Little specifically wanted to portray Lisa as a child in “Letter;” thus, he dictates in the score for the melodic line to be hummed. The vocal mechanism of humming suggests how a child might act as they write a letter. Little and Vavrek wanted the audience to read the contents of the Letter as Lisa hums to invoke a deeper emotion;
thus, the text is projected for audiences to read as Lisa writes the letter. Each line of text has a specific time for it to be projected, corelating with the music. The element of reading the text while hearing the humming of the beautiful “Three Ravens” melody establishes a deeper emotional connection between the text and music.

“Letter” begins with the piano sounding block chords in the key of D♭ major. Within the score, Little calls for the texture to be “warm and full,” and in operatic performances, the vibraphone enters in measure 1048. The use of the vibraphone evokes sounds of a lullaby, and Little calls for rubato as the vibraphone enters. The vibraphone begins a variation of the “Three Ravens” melody, and in recital performances, this can be presented within the piano. As the vibraphone enters, the first line of text is projected stating “Dear Marjorie.” In this moment, the audience knows Lisa is writing the letter to her lost friend.  See Example 5.1.


In measure 1051, the Lisa *motif* returns within the piano accompaniment as the text “I made a friend today” is projected. The use of the Lisa *motif* as she describes her new friend is important;
thus, the piano must emphasize the melody within the texture. The use of the Lisa motif symbolizes Lisa’s journey as it nostalgically references her first aria. See Example 5.2.

**Example 5.2.** David T. Little, “Letter,” *Dog Days*, mm 1051-1053.

Also shown in Example 5.2, Lisa depicts the dogman as a “lunatic,” but “cute.” She is presenting the co-existence of being revolted by the dogman while she desires his companionship. In measure 1054, Lisa begins humming the melody of “The Three Ravens,” accompanied by the Lisa motif in the piano. The clarinet beautifully doubles Lisa’s vocal line down an octave. The clarinet could be included within recital settings; however, it is encouraged that the singer be amplified. The humming within the score is notated to be pianissimo; thus, a microphone helps Lisa be heard while giving her voice the mechanically filtered sound needed. Emotional inflection of the text exists within the presentation of the melodic line. Adequate support is also needed as the range of the vocal line extends to B♭5. As Lisa begins humming, she describes the dogman. See Example 5.3.
The melodic arch of the vocal line rises with the emotion of the text. In measure 1056, the texture of the piano and vibraphone ascend in *tessitura* as Lisa describes the dogman more clearly. As Lisa writes that the dogman has “smoker’s fingers” and “grey in his beard,” the melody extends to G♭ and develops the semi-tone relationship between G♭ and F. Emphasizing the neighboring tones of G♭ and F musically portrays Lisa’s curiosity regarding the man’s past life. This shift in higher tessitura and modal centers is shown in Example 5.4.

**Example 5.4.** David T. Little, “Letter,” *Dog Days*, mm. 1056-1058.

The vocal line along with the Lisa *motif* in the accompaniment continue to rise in tessitura. For the first time in the aria, the vocal line is suspended as Lisa holds an extended F5 over six beats.
while the text “Tell him you’re my best friend” is projected. This moment of melodic suspension suggests that Lisa longs for her best friend. As Lisa writes the text “You’re still my best friend, right?” her humming stops. This symbolizes her fear of the unknown and the sadness in losing her best friend. See Example 5.5.

**Example 5.5.** David T. Little, “Letter,” *Dog Days*, mm. 1062-1064.

![Example 5.5](image)

Lisa hums her highest pitch within the opera, *Dog Days*, in measure 1063, shown in Example 5.5. Lisa hums the high B♭ as she writes that she misses “having a girlfriend.” The tessitura of the vocal line shows how strongly Lisa misses her friend and the normal life she had with Marjorie. This moment within the aria is climactic within the relationship between text and music. The vocal line has continued to rise to this moment, and now the melodic line will fall, symbolizing Lisa’s loss of Marjorie and normal life. In measure 1065, Lisa describes how every day becomes quieter. This moment is foreboding in text and music; in measure 1068, the melody shifts to B♭ minor for one measure as Lisa writes “No crickets, no katydids.” The shift in minor presents an aural representation of Lisa’s worry regarding the quietness around her. The melody returns to D♭ major in measure 1069 as Lisa writes, “Not anymore,” which will be the last text set to her humming. The stopping of her humming as she writes the text, “Not anymore,”
symbolizes the disappearance of her previous life. In this moment, Lisa continues to drift further from her childhood innocence. This moment in time foreshadows the loss of her childhood innocence that ultimately occurs in her final aria. Measure 1069 is shown in Example 5.6.

**Example 5.6.** David T. Little, “Letter,” *Dog Days*, mm. 1065-1072.

After Lisa’s vocal line ends, the text “No crickets. No katydids” appears on the stage. Word painting is evident within this presentation of text. The lack of humming and the brevity of the phrases “No crickets. No katydids.” evoke eerie silence. As the piano plays the Lisa *motif*, the audience can sense an essence of foreboding. In measure 1073, a *ritardando* begins, and the meter changes to 9/8 time. With the slowing of tempo and the change in meter, a lilting motion develops within the Lisa *motif*. Lisa closes her letter with “xoxoxoxoxo, Lisa.” The repeated use
of “xo” harkens to Lisa’s youth and innocence; she is a young, 13-year old girl. This evidence of child-like innocence abruptly changes as the motif stops. After the final chord is sustained, Lisa writes “P.S. Too bad you’ll never read this letter.” This moment portrays that Lisa is aware that Marjorie is gone. With knowledge and acceptance, Lisa begins to step away from seeing the world around her through the eyes of a child. See Example 5.7.


With the last phrase of text projected for the audience, the musical texture is bare, symbolizing Lisa’s friend is gone along with hope. It is important for the singer to understand that the existence of emotional expression exists within the humming. After the humming stops, the singer still has to portray the action of writing. Employing the alternate vocal mechanism of humming in combination with audience members reading the text allows for audience members to develop their own interpretation of the text. “Letter” serves as a beautiful aria and as an intricate piece in the development of Lisa’s character within the opera, *Dog Days.*
CHAPTER 6. A PERFORMER’S GUIDE TO “MIRROR MIRROR”

Lisa’s final aria within the opera, Dog Days, was the first of her three arias to be composed by David T. Little. With difficult rhythms and quick changes of meter, the aria is challenging to learn and perform. The Lisa motif previously heard in “No Man In His Right Mind” and in “Letter” serves as the melodic material for “Mirror Mirror.” The tempo of the aria is faster than the previous arias, and the text is harsher with somewhat uncomfortable imagery. Within “Mirror Mirror,” Lisa breaks away from childhood innocence. Due to starvation, her body is emaciated, and Lisa experiences crazed joy over her thin appearance. This joy co-exists with Lisa’s sadness; she did not choose starvation. Lisa’s body is deteriorating, and her final aria shows how her mind has adapted by creating a fantasy in which Lisa tries to find normalcy. Lisa’s previous arias lead to the pinnacle moment of “Mirror Mirror,” and this chapter presents a performer’s guide to “Mirror Mirror.” Before the aria takes place, her incredible hunger drives Lisa to eat the only food she has saved: a handful of Flintstone vitamins. After she eats the vitamins, she returns to her bedroom and gazes at her reflection in the mirror. For operatic performances, the score calls for Lisa to remove her outer clothing to reveal “her training bra and a pair of boyish boxers.” For recital settings, singers should wear what is most comfortable for them to be successful. The aria is intended to be amplified just as the other arias are amplified. Lisa is singing while looking at herself in a mirror. This chapter will provide text and music analysis while also discussing the metaphorical instances of Lisa singing to herself “on the other side.”
The Text

Vavrek and Little wrote “Mirror Mirror” in the beginning process of creating *Dog Days*, and it was the first of Lisa’s three arias to be composed. The text differs from the previous arias in its harshness of tone and word-choice. Phrases such as “skin stretched around a bony frame” and “angles, shapes, and corners revealed under baby fat” paint the gruesome image of a Lisa’s starving body. Most importantly, the words are brought out of the musical texture through rhythmic gestures. Syllabification of words are enhanced as words are separated with eighth rests, presented in syncopated rhythm. For example, the text “corrugated cardboard” receives notes for each syllable, separated by eighth rests. This action intensifies the words while also acting as word painting. The act of breaking up “cor-ru-ga-ted” presents imagery of the ridges in both corrugated cardboard and Lisa’s ribs. Vavrek’s specific use of words brings imagery to the forefront of Lisa’s final aria. Much of the beginning text is painfully descriptive. The text paints vivid images of “skeleton fingers,” “collarbone necklace,” and “legs like stilts.” The text is modern and Americanized, so American vowels must be used. Specifically, the American “r” should be employed. Subjects such as “cutting carbs,” and “the old two-fingers-down-the-throat trick” bring forth issues relating to present-day phenomena. At least 30 million people, of all ages and genders, have suffered from eating disorders at some point in their life in the U.S. Within Lisa’s aria, Vavrek harkens to the sadness of an eating disorder while juxtaposing it against Lisa’s unintentional starvation. Within her aria, Lisa exemplifies two points of view: she is sad and scared as her body deteriorates; and yet, there is a morbid, crazed joy at the fact that she is so thin. These concepts within the same moment showcase the terrible nature of Lisa’s starvation. Vavrek stresses the word “beautiful” within his libretto. The word is usually followed by remembrances of Marjorie. When Lisa thinks of being beautiful, she thinks of her lost friend
and eventually her new friend, the dogman she named Prince. Throughout “Mirror Mirror,” are instances of alliteration. For example, phrases such as “corrugated cardboard” and “no cutting carbs, no counting points” use alliteration for emphasis of rhythmic consonants. More so than the previous arias, consonants play a major role in driving the rhythmic nature of Lisa’s final aria. The melodic material shifts between legato lyricism and sharp, short rhythmic driven phrases. Vowels in instances such as measure 1607 are dropped; Vavrek drops a vowel in the word “desp’rate” to emphasize how the word is actually pronounced. Consequently, the dropped vowel showcases the consonants while painting the emotion of desperation. Vavrek closes the aria with text that connects to the children’s story, Alice Through the Looking Glass. Vavrek’s use of text involving imagery from Alice Through the Looking Glass symbolizes Lisa’s state of fantasy in order to escape her reality. Through this text, we see that Lisa knows her reality leads to death, and she is thinking of what passing to the other side entails. She sings, “I wonder if I’ve already passed through,” followed by asking “Are the Jabberwockies waiting?” The somewhat dark side of the jabberwockies symbolizes Lisa’s fear of crossing over. Varek’s powerful use of text comes to a climactic end as Lisa calls to herself in the mirror asking if she’s “only beautiful on the other side.”

The Music

The aria begins with the Lisa motif sounded in both the vocal line and the right hand of the piano accompaniment. Rhythmically driven, Lisa’s vocal lines are short with many eighth rests separating words within phrases. As the aria begins, there is a Basso ostinato in the left hand of the piano. This compositional technique comes from the baroque period of music and presents a strong sense of tonality with melodic variations occurring in the vocal line. The tonality of G minor remains strong due to the bass line, as the vocal line employs enharmonic
pitches symbolizing Lisa’s state of instability. Lisa is in a dream-like state, realistically resulting from lack of nutrients. Within this state, she fantasizes. The Basso ostinato is presented in Example 6.1 and is repeated until measure 1538.


As the aria begins, the phrase, “A sad uncomfortable joy (in fantasy),” is presented for the singer to understand Lisa’s state of mind. Lisa is pleased with how starving makes her look so thin; and yet, she is saddened by her bleak circumstances as she and her family are starving to death. As shown in Example 6.1, the word “beautiful,” is elongated through the use of dotted rhythms to symbolize Lisa’s image of herself. The use of the word beautiful within the aria is evidence of irony. “Beautiful” has positive and negative connotations in that Lisa sees her body as beautiful, however starvation is not beautiful at all. The word “beautiful” is continuously stressed within the aria both melodically and rhythmically. Also shown in Example 6.1 is the use of rapidly changing meters within the aria. Lisa is shifting from different mindsets, from fantasy to reality; from uncomfortable joy to hopelessness. These shifts are presented in the music with changes in meter, rhythm, and tonal centers. As shown in Example 6.1, the meter changes twice within the first three measures. In measure 1528, there is use of word painting and alliteration.
with the phrase, “Skin stretched around a bony frame.” The meter switches to common time giving the words “Skin stretched” quarter note values. The elongated note values mirror the motion of stretching. See Example 6.2.

**Example 6.2.** David T. Little, “Mirror Mirror,” *Dog Days*, mm. 1527-1529.

In measure 1527 of Example 6.2, the triplet on beat five in the accompaniment leads into the change in meter and melody within the next measure. David T. Little often provides this figuration in the accompaniment when meter and melodic material rapidly change. Such moments are helpful to the singer as they give aural signals of what is coming in the music. In measure 1528 there is syncopation before the rhythmic feature of triplet over two beats. This lilting rhythm of 3 over 2 beats will re-occur throughout the aria, “Mirror Mirror,” and was first presented in Lisa’s first aria, “No Man In His Right Mind.” Syncopated rhythms create a sense of instability, symbolizing Lisa’s state of mind. While one might hear random rhythms, they are deliberate; thus, it is important for the rhythms to be learned and performed accurately. Steady tempo with deliberate rhythms can enhance the overall performance of “Mirror Mirror.” After Lisa proclaims that she has finally gained the face she always wanted, there is a shift in tonality, and the repeated bass line is dropped. The tonal center of G minor is lost as Lisa describes her face. See Example 6.3, measure 1538.

As seen in Example 6.3, Little employs rhythms to inflect the sharpness of the text. To portray sharp, jutting cheekbones, the syllables of each word are separated, emanating the image of sharp cheek bones. This is another moment of word painting. With the phrase “like boulders from a white sand beach” Lisa transitions back to speaking to herself while looking in the mirror. With this shift in point of view also comes a shift in tonality and meter. Another example of elongating the word “beautiful” is seen in Example 6.4.

As the word “beautiful” is suspended over two measures and a change in meter, the accompaniment becomes denser in harmonic and rhythmic texture. In measure 1553 Lisa reverts to describing her reflection. The tonal center returns to G minor, and for the first time in the aria, the meter changes to 6/8 as Lisa describes her ribs. The piano accompaniment of the right hand is *staccato*, and the vocal line is also short with rests between each word in the phrase. The brevity of sound paints the image of “ribs like an antique washboard.” See Example 6.5.


The same vocal melody in Example 6.5 reappears in measure 1564 with the text, “Like corrugated cardboard.” With eighth rests after each syllable in the word “corrugated,” word painting is evident. See Example 6.6.

The text is rhythmic and percussive in nature. Sounding the consonants while maintaining accurate rhythms provides magnificent musical textures that are often painting specific imagery. Beginning in measure 1571, Lisa’s emotion is heightened as she describes the cardboard her Dad has saved to burn during the winter. Lisa sings, “waiting to be burned in the dead of winter when nothing’s left but our shivers.” This moment in the aria shows Lisa’s fear for her family’s future. Her angst and fear are shown with the infiltration of chromaticism as the tessitura of the vocal line becomes higher. In measure 1572, the piano accompaniment rhythmically sounds triplets for every beat. This establishes a thick texture portraying the peril of winter to come. See Example 6.7.


In measure 1573, as seen in Example 6.7, The meter and texture of music changes, presenting a variation of the Lisa motif. This moment signals that Lisa has shifted her mind back to her image in the mirror as she sings, “Hello there, beautiful.” It is important for the singer to realize Lisa is comforting herself. The musical texture is sweeter yet stained with sadness. The chromaticism continues to develop, and in measure 1581, Lisa’s vocal line begins to rise chromatically and in tessitura. As she describes her starving body, she uses the uncomfortable imagery of “collar bone necklace” and “skeleton fingers for dainty rings.” Likening her visible bone structure to jewelry
is powerful, and the musical texture hints that emotion is building. Such use of text suggests Lisa is glamorizing the effects of starvation. Lisa’s vocal line loses its tonal center as she repeats the text “collarbone necklace, legs like stilts, skeleton fingers for dainty rings.” The tessitura continues to rise and the meter shifts with every measure. See Example 6.8.


As seen in Example 6.8, there is a crescendo until the end of the phrase, which is marked with fortissimo and a fermata. Lisa has reached an epiphany as shown in her vocal line and in the accompaniment. The singer must convey excitement as they whisper the following text “It’s happened, it’s happened.” Little states in the score for the text to be “spoken, an ecstatic whisper.” In measure 1598, Lisa proclaims, “You look just like a model, Lisa!” The music has returned to G minor, symbolizing Lisa’s state of fantasy. Little notes in the score for the singer to not sound “too Broadway.” It is important for the singer to know that while Lisa appears to be happy as her thinness is likened to a model, she is starving, and there is always an undertone of sadness. The negative undertone of starvation is ever present. See Example 6.9.

The entrance of Lisa’s vocal line in measure 1598 can be difficult. It might help for the singer to purposefully hear the F being sounded in the accompaniment during the spoken phrases. When the singer begins the phrase “You look just like a model, Lisa,” it is important to be deliberately rhythmic as there is no support from accompaniment. After proclaiming she looks like a model, Lisa presents elements of becoming a teenager as she fantasizes about what people might say regarding her appearance. Lisa is presenting the words of someone else as she sings, “Look just like a model, you say. You flatter me! I say.” Lisa presents that she’s being asked how she achieved her level of thinness. There is dark humor developing as she builds toward proclaiming her method. In measure 1611, the tonal center of G minor is lost, and chromaticism takes over. Lisa describes American elements of weight loss including “No twelve-step programs, cutting carbs, no counting points, no cigarettes.” Vavrek employs specific phrases that many Americans are unfortunately familiar with regarding weight loss. Lisa’s text turns darker as she sings “no dope” and “not even the old two-fingers-down-the-throat trick.” The final phrase halts time. The mention of an eating disorder is made important by rhythmic and melodic gesture. See Example 6.10.

Little calls for the Lisa to sing the phrase “Not even the old two-fingers-down-the-throat trick” freely as if it were a cadenza. This is ironic in that the text paints a gruesome image. The irony exists in Lisa juxtaposing the act of choosing starvation against her act of not choosing starvation. The chords, shown in Example 6.10, measure 1619, suspend time. This moment presents the emotion of “uncomfortable joy” mentioned earlier in the score. The singer must understand the level of crazed joy experienced by Lisa. The final phrase, while it can appear to be a joking matter, might be sung in a way to emote the undertone of sadness.

Lisa’s emotion of sadness becomes more evident in measure 1622 as she sings “Pain is beauty they say, hunger is beauty I say.” The tonal center of G minor returns, symbolizing Lisa’s more stable emotions. Lisa is slowly regaining her reality, and in measure 1629, she makes the surprising realization that hunger made her. Lisa sings “Hunger made me” with a *crescendo* and “*poco rit.*” notated in the score. This moment is realization that Lisa did not chose hunger. In measure 1631, Lisa begins to describe herself realistically for the first time. The rhythm and melody harken to when Lisa compared herself to jewelry; however, she now vividly describes
her appearance. She begins with singing, “But my hair has lost its color and shine.” See Example 6.11.

**Example 6.11.** David T. Little, “Mirror Mirror,” *Dog Days*, mm. 1630-1634.

![Musical notation](image)

At this moment, the singer can convey realistic sadness and fear as Lisa sees her reflection. With lack of nutrients, her hair no longer shines, her skin is dry, and her freckles are fading. Lisa defies her reality when she sings “But I’m beautiful.” This moment within the score shows Lisa’s strength and unwillingness to give in to starvation. The word, “beautiful,” in measure 1641 is held on the pitch, \( A_5 \), for over two measures and symbolizes Lisa’s fight against her reality. An abrupt, beautiful change in music occurs with Little’s notation of “Sweetly,” in measure 1642. See Example 6.12.

The music beginning in measure 1642 is a variation of the opening accompaniment, and the bass line is a transposition of the opening *Basso ostinato*. Lisa transitions to a new state of mind; she sees the reality around her and is overwhelmed with grief. Her grief develops into the beautiful phrase “Marjorie,” which is an inversion of the Marjorie *motif* heard in her first aria. See Example 6.13.

At this point in the aria, Lisa remembers and misses Marjorie. There is pain and longing as she sings the name of her lost friend. Beginning in measure 1663, Lisa sings the phrase, “If I squint hard enough, I can see you, Marjorie, deep in the mirror, sitting there on my bed.” The melody is a variation of the melody set to “ribs like an antique washboard” and “like corrugated cardboard.” The melody is changed in contour and rhythmic stress in both the vocal line and accompaniment. Lisa is now seeing her past as she looks in the mirror. She misses her friend and the past life associated with Marjorie. The stress of the text is shown in the melodic line. For instance, the words “hard” and “enough” are elongated, just as one would present them in speech. As Lisa states, “I can see you, Marjorie, deep in the mirror, sitting there on my bed,” the rhythm of the vocal line becomes syncopated and unregular. With the text, “sitting there on my bed,” the rhythm consists of a quintuplet over four beats. The melody is chromatic, losing sense of any tonality. This action of obscurity symbolizes the morbid idea of Lisa seeing the ghostly image of her friend sitting on her bed. The quintuplet figure is shown in Example 6.14.


The vocal line as Lisa continues to describe seeing Marjorie is very different from the accompaniment. The accompaniment and vocal line are rhythmically contrasting, which can be difficult for the singer. It helps to learn the rhythm of the vocal line with the arch of the spoken, textual phrase in mind. Composer, David T. Little matches the stress of the text with rhythmic
stresses. Knowing this can help the singer with rhythmic accuracy. The stress of the text coinciding with the stress of rhythmic phrases can be seen in Example 6.15. The duration of notes on the words “throb,” “see,” and “silhouette” mirror the stress of the words in regular speech.


The tempo accelerates in 1693 as Lisa reminisces on her memories of Marjorie. She sings that she misses their “grass blade duets” and “hanging like baby possums from the Martingales’ oak tree.” The melodic phrase builds to the moment Lisa describes the branch onto which she and Marjorie carved their names. With the phrase, “on the fourth tallest branch,” the final word, “branch” is suspended over ten beats. This moment suspends time. Suspending time in the music symbolizes Lisa’s attempt to escape mortality by writing names on the branch. Marjorie is gone, and Lisa is afraid of what might happen to her and Prince; thus, carving their names on the branch provides a sense of immortality. They may pass, but their names will remain on that branch. The suspension of “branch” is seen in Example 6.16.
By carving Prince’s name, he becomes a member of her friend group. Lisa repeats the phrase, “I’ll carve Prince’s name, too!” three times. The number three is important as it connects to the “Three Ravens” heard in the “Letter” aria. The melodic line set to the text is suspended, which contrasts to the majority of her vocal line within the aria. In measure 1721, the aria shifts, and the piano accompaniment sounds variations of the Lisa *motif*. Lisa returns her attention to her reflection in the mirror before she sings, “Hello there beautiful.” She repeats herself stating, “Hello hello hello hello in there.” See Example 6.17.
Shown in Example 6.16, the repetition of the phrase, “Hello,hello,hello,hello” brings forth emotions of desperation. Lisa is adamant as she calls to her reflection. The tempo marking *poco rit. Al fine* shows that the tempo will continue to slow until the end of the aria. The accompaniment will sound variations of the Lisa *motif* until measure 1732. As Lisa calls out to the mirror, her vocal line ascends on a quintuplet over two beats. This awkward stretching of two beats shows the uncomfortable circumstances of Lisa calling to her reflection. In measure 1733, the piano accompaniment changes abruptly to block chords. In measure 1739, the block chords alternate to falling on the quarter beats within common time. The regular rhythmic gesture feels foreign compared to the previous material in the aria. See Figure 6.18.
Within measure 1740, the final beat in the accompaniment holds an ascending, quintuplet figure leading to the next measure. This ascent of pitches is useful for the singer as it signals the entrance of the vocal line in measure 1741. Lisa begins to contemplate her life after death. She states, “I wonder if I’ve already passed through… are the Jabberwockies waiting?” Lisa is distant from reality as she sinks into her thoughts of life after death. The vocal line takes on strong syncopation, and it is important to deliberately sing syncopation against the straight accompaniment. The contrast of the two rhythmic presentations allows for Lisa to sound as though she is losing stability, which is true in both vocal line and emotion. The quintuplet figure in the accompaniment continues to repeat, signaling the first beat of the next measure. This helps the singer know when to come in, as the accompaniment repeats the same chords. Lisa closes the aria with singing, “What if I’m only beautiful on the other side?” This phrase shows her desolation. She is losing herself as she thinks of passing over to the other side. Her vocal line rises in tessitura and reaches the highest note on the phrase, “only beautiful on the other side.” See Example 6.19.

The final note of Lisa’s vocal line falls on the word “side” and is held for twelve beats. The resolution of the aria is melancholy with lack of hope for Lisa. She questions if there is only good on the other side. One can assess that she has permanently changed, which is shown musically in that the aria did not end within the same key it began. This symbolizes Lisa has left childhood innocence behind her. Starvation has robbed her physical normalcy; thus, she turns to holding onto her friendship with the dogman. Singing her final aria requires concrete knowledge of the rhythms and vocal phrases. The phrases are often short with abrupt changes in meter and tonal centers. The quick changes symbolize Lisa’s mind; thus, emoting the text will require quick shifts of inflection. It does not matter what the singer looks like, as starvation can have many different physical forms. What matters is emotional inflection of the text being sung. The aria can be emotionally taxing as it deals with subjects of starvation, loss, and death. Giving one’s self enough time to comfortably and thoroughly prepare the aria can help in all capacities. I would advise singers to learn “Mirror Mirror” first of the three arias, as it is most difficult. Once one learns “Mirror Mirror,” one might assume that learning anything is possible.
CONCLUSION

The dynamic character of Lisa changes as the opera progresses; thus, each of her arias is sung in a different manner of emotional and vocal presentation. With her first aria, “No Man In His Right Mind,” Lisa awkwardly seeks friendship with the dogman. Lisa is still a child, innocent of the harsh world around her. In a world where tragedy has struck, Lisa still maintains her humanity as she befriends a man with an apparent mental illness. As the opera progresses, conditions worsen, food is scarce. Within “Letter,” we see how much Lisa’s lost friend, Marjorie, means to her. Lisa presents her fears and begins to move away from childhood innocence as she understands that her family is deteriorating. Her child-like nature is preserved through the alternate vocal mechanism of humming as she writes her letter. As “Letter” closes, we see that Lisa has lost her child-like obliviousness. She knows and fears what is to come. Lisa’s final aria is the acumination of her first two arias. Within “Mirror Mirror” Lisa has reached a breaking point, her childhood is gone. She experiences crazed joy with an ever-present undertone of sadness as she sees her reflection in the mirror. She likens her thinness to a model; and yet, she does not want to starve to death. The final aria closes with Lisa questioning if she is only beautiful on the other side. In the final phrase, one can interpret that Lisa has hope in whatever the other side entails. While the dogman perishes within the opera, Lisa remains alive and leaves her home. Lisa maintains her humanity as her world deteriorates. It is important to understand the arch of Lisa in the grand scope of Dog Days. It is the hope of the author that this performer’s guide will help prospective performers of Lisa’s music gain better understanding from the mind of someone who has performed the role in its entirety. The author hopes readers will grasp the beauty of Lisa’s character and enjoy performing the role of Lisa as much as she did.
APPENDIX A. TRANSCRIPT OF SKYPE INTERVIEW WITH DAVID T. LITTLE

Grace McCrary: Thank you so much for doing this. I can’t say thank you enough.

David T. Little: Of course! Thank you for your interest in the project, the role, and the piece.

Grace McCrary: I love it. It’s by far my favorite. I loved singing it, I love talking about it. It’s awesome. So, thank you! Ok, so, let’s get started. These are the same questions that I sent to you. I wanted to ask: I know that you are a percussionist and I remember at the time you came to LSU you were also still playing in a band. What led you to composing operas?

D: Well, its kind of a big question. In part, I think it was…so I started playing drums when I was eight; that is where I really first started practicing an instrument and learning, you know, but I was always very interested in shows. I was going to Broadway musicals from a very young age – from around the age of probably 6 or 7. I think I saw Cats when I was six or seven, and then was pretty regularly going to see shows, both regional theatre and then in New York, you know, throughout my childhood and up through high school. And I always wanted to be in those shows and I remember going to…even just seeing the musicals at the high school in my town, going to see a musical version of “A Christmas Carol” that the choir director there had written, I was really…like I wanted to be in those shows and from a very young age I was really excited to be in those performances. And so, I know when I was, I forget what grade I was in, but they were doing “The Music Man” and so they were auditioning for Winthrop from the elementary schools and I auditioned and I didn’t get it and was really sad because I was too tall or something. I was one of the older kids auditioning, and interestingly my friend Nick Seidel who later went on to join the army…so he and I have now been sort of connected because of my piece, “Soldier Songs”, …

G: Yes. Wow!

D: So, it’s this sort of fun, interesting full circle thing that happened. I was always really into music. I was always really into musicals, I was really into theatre, and I also loved metal and industrial music and really heavy kind of dark stuff, and so these two worlds came together for me, initially when I…I guess I was 15… and I saw “The Nightmare before Christmas”, a Tim Burton film with music by Danny Elfman. That film brought two worlds together in a way that made sense to me. It was a musical, but it was pretty dark and sort of strange and you know, and that was the first I realized that being a composer was a thing that you could do because in school I learned all about these composers who were all dead, you know, as I think we often do. Even then, I mean we did learn about Bernstein and Copland but by that point they were…I don’t know if they had both died yet…by the time I saw “Nightmare” they had, but I guess in elementary school they were still living, but you know, Copland was quite old. And so, that it was a job to write music is something that I had never considered and that pretty quickly changed my focus from playing music and performing in theatrical contexts to writing music and being really interested in studying composition in a pretty serious way. And this was early in the days of the internet so it was still very slow, very dial-up based and you know that magical modem sound connecting to the internet, so it was hard to find information about what (being a
composer) meant, so my entry point was through film music. I realized that Danny Elfman had written “The Nightmare Before Christmas”, but I then realized that I knew a lot of his other music already. I knew “Batman”, I knew “Beetlejuice”, I knew “Tales from the Crypt”, I knew “Peewee’s Big Adventure”, and I was like, oh and this is...and this is sort of how I put it all together...that this was his job. In pursuit of what it meant to be a composer, at that age, I ended up trying to find any information I could (online) and I kept seeing mention of this piece, “The Rite of Spring” and so then I listened to “The Rite of Spring” and that was a moment that was another massive shift for me...and I was like...oh, okay this is a whole other kind of world from the film music world I knew. It was definitely...a lot of film music was being pulled from “The Rite of Spring” and there was something so visceral and so violent, and so...also kind of connecting the industrial music energies to this big orchestra, so it made me realized that you didn’t need film to tell a story, you know. And so, that’s when I was really hooked on classical music and that just kept going through school.

My relationship with opera was a little complicated, even once I got to that point, because I had a lot of trouble...I don’t know what exactly...I think part of it was the style of singing was very...I was not used to it, so it felt very foreign to me. I was used to Broadway singing or metal...yeah. And so operatic, bel canto singing felt very like an alienating thing to me; it didn’t feel like I connected to it. In college, I started writing theatre pieces that were definitely...I was writing songs, but I don’t think I wrote any dramatic vocal music...well everything was a song and some of the songs had dramatic impulses, but I didn’t write any scenas or anything in college. But I wrote these theatre pieces for narrator and ensemble, all of which are totally withdrawn now and no one can ever see them! (laughter), but I got to put on shows...each of these pieces...I had one piece... it’s called “The State of Our Union Is...”...it’s all about conspiracy theories and it was framed as a state of the union address, and it was like...there was like a lighting designer and we had thirty, forty actors sort of coming in at one point in the aisles and screaming at the audience; it was like this sort of happening / performance art kind of thing. But I got to put on a show, and that really hooked me. It was like, oh...this...you know. And around the same time in college I started a new music ensemble and every time we did a concert, there was a lighting designer and we thought of it as a whole theatrical event, so this idea of a concert as theatre or a performance as theatre was always very much on my mind even though I hadn’t quite put it together at that point with an operatic composition. So I remember that this interest in stage concerts put on my radar the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, who at that time – and this would be probably around 2000, so almost twenty years ago – they were doing these fully-staged, fully-designed / lit concerts; they were playing contemporary chamber music, but, you know there’s a lighting designer and I got really excited about the idea. And they started calling it...I think by this time they had already started using this idea...Theatre of Music, and so I was always keeping an eye on what they were doing and saw that they had a competition – this was a couples of years later. This would now be around 2002 – so they had this competition, the Harvey Gaul Prize and I entered it and I won, which was a wonderful, totally unexpected thing. And at that point I knew...I’m trying to think what I had written up to that point...so this is 2003...so, okay, I had written more vocal music by this point. So in 2003, I wrote a big song cycle (pause)...ok I’ve skipped some stuff. Sorry! This is a totally scattered story...

G: No, no, no. This is great. Thank you. Yeah...This is awesome!
D: Okay. So I went to the University of Michigan, focused a lot on writing orchestral music and chamber music, so…

G: Is that where you studied with Michael Daugherty?

D: Yeah, so, I worked with Michael and with Bill Bolcom who was still on faculty there. And that was when “A View from the Bridge” went up at the MET, so that was an exciting time to be there…a lot of opera in the air. “Jackie O” was happening, Bright Sheng was writing I think “Madame Mao” at the time for Santa Fe, so there was a lot of opera happening among the faculty. And I took a class with Naomi André, who just put out this great new book; an opera survey class. Because I knew that opera was the sort of Gemankunstwerk. I knew that I was drawn to it and I knew that in classical music, if you wanted to write…even if you were going to do something along the lines of like a Robert Ashley kind of world, you had to sort of…you know, everything in that genre, we called it opera. You know, Robert Ashley’s theatre pieces used to be referred to, I think, as operas and the early Philip Glass pieces and there was very little singing in it…

G: Yes.

D: Right? But it’s an opera…

G: It’s an opera. Yeah. The genre is a blanket. You kind of…

D: Yeah. And so, I felt like I needed to get into that a little more and understand the repertoire, so I took this class, and it was a hard class for me because I found myself not really responding to so much of the work…you know, like, aspects of “Lucia…” I found exciting, but “Lucia” itself, I was like…ugh. You know…Mozart pieces…like a lot of the early rep pieces I just couldn’t, at that time, get into. I was really struggling with it. And then I hit “Wozzeck” and “Peter Grimes”…we got to the end of the class and then I was like, oh…these are the pieces for me that I feel like I’m seeing the things that I’ve always been interested in expressed…the language resonates…it’s connected to the Stravinsky and to the heavy metal. It all kind of came together. Especially, I mean I love “Peter Grimes”, but especially with “Wozzeck”. With “Wozzeck” I was just jaw droppingly, I mean, just amazed by. So then…that’s 2001 to 2002…I moved to Boston, I’m studying with Osvaldo Golijov and I write a song cycle called “Songs of Love, Death, Friends, and Government” and I bring it into a lesson with him and he says, “oh these are really nice songs…they are like little studies for operas”, and I was like…“huh…that’s interesting, I didn’t think of it like that at all”. I was thinking of them more or less as the Rorem tradition. And I had met Rorem that summer in 2001 at Tanglewood and so songs were kind of on my mind. I was also dating a singer, so I was hanging out with singers a lot and going to opera scenes. One of the major things that happened when I went to an opera scenes program at NEC – this would probably be 2003 – and one of the pieces on the program was “You’re a Queer One Julie Jordan” and “If I Loved You” from Carousel, and that scene…I don’t remember who performed it at this point and I didn’t know it before this point, but the way that Richard Rodgers manages time in that piece was just astonishing to me. It was totally… and not just time, but the way that the text, the book, the libretto was sort of interspersed. So you have lyrics and then spoken words and you move in and out of it so seamlessly, and it just, time just sort of stops and
you’re in this world with them and so much is revealed and I said, ok, there is a magic in that I need to...I want that, you know? And also, “If I loved you” is...the music is incredibly beautiful, but also the whole framing of it so clever. Like...If I loved you, but I don’t, but if I did... Like that whole thing was just so beautiful and sweet and human and revealing, and it was really immensely inspiring...probably on par with the Stravinsky and the Elfman moment where a direction kind of opened up...

G: An epiphany.

D: Yeah. And I said, oh ok. And so on the heels of that, I win the Harvey Gaul Prize...2002, 2003 I guess...no, sorry 2004, I’d just started at Princeton, I win this prize, and I say to the artistic director, “this is super exciting, can I write the whole concert instead of just writing one piece on the concert?” -- expecting him fully to say no, you know? And he thought about it and said “Yeah, you know if you feel like you can get us to 55 minutes’ worth...” He had like a minimum time that he needed – he said, “…sure, go for it”. I was like...wow. That’s really exciting. I said “I have this idea for the piece about how we as a country make our soldiers” and I told him about it and he was on board, and so they have a baritone, I don’t know if he’s still singing with them, but at the time it was Timothy Jones, who is in Texas and what was great is that Timothy’s voice is, you know...he walks this great line between opera singer and musical theatre singer. He has great straight tone, he has a beautiful high extension, falsetto and so he had an instrument that I felt like, I was like I can...because I still wasn’t in love with the operatic sound, right? I was still kind of like, resistant, but his sound was...

G: It was a good mix of both worlds.

D: Yeah. And so...so I wrote “Soldier Songs” for him...

G: That’s amazing.

D: which premiered in 2006. And one thing I’ve said, and I tell people this in the opera industry, that, you know, that all came out of an opportunity because someone was willing to take a risk. I mean, I was 23, 24 when we were having this conversation, maybe...

G: That’s amazing.

D: ...maybe a little older...24, 25. I mean, I had no track record, I just had ...I mean I guess I had won like student composer award stuff, but I had never really done anything professional and they were like, “Yeah, sure. Let’s do it!” and I was like, great! So then, I wrote “Soldier Songs” and that still wasn’t in my mind, an opera. It was a staged song cycle and it was accessing that way of thinking from college, where as I go...we’re putting on a show, right? So it’s like...there will be lighting...and in that case I did, for the first outing I did the video design, I had some of the set design elements, I specified...

G: Oh wow. You did all of that?!
D: Yeah. And in this movement, “Steel Rain” we rigged up these rain gutters from the grid and we poured, I think we got like 10,000 BB’s and we poured them through the rain gutters so it had this terrifying, metallic clang and it was really aggressive and really loud at this one dramatic moment in the movement and that’s now pre-recorded. But that idea that there would be this great rain gutter that BB’s would go through, that was all part of the composition at the time, and so still thinking of the staging. So through that piece…so that premiered in July or August of 2006 and that following Fall going back to Princeton, I, through a composer collective I had at the time with Missy Mazzoli and Judd Greenstein. We had a little presenting company together for 3 or 4 years around then (called Free Speech Zone) and we were really interested in co-writing an opera collaboratively…and so we met with Beth Morrison to see if she would be interested in presenting or producing this piece, and Beth had just started her company at the time and I remember her reaction was, “yeah, this sounds really cool, but I don’t have any money to commission it so why don’t you write it and then we’ll…show it to me, and then we’ll talk and we can try to produce it” And this is not what the 3 of us wanted to hear, we were like…we were hoping she would have commission money! Again, because we were all in our early 20’s at the time and hadn’t really done anything yet and so, that project ended up never happening, but because of that meeting and then followed up and was like, “Beth, it was so great to meet you. By the way, I have this piece “Soldier Songs” that just premiered 2 months ago and I would love to share it with you…just because you don’t really know my music and I would love for you to…know about his piece” and of course I hoped to continue to build a relationship with this person who I had just met. I remember sending it to her and maybe…it was very quick after I sent it…like I wasn’t expecting to hear back from her for like months, if ever, you know, and she called me and said, “I love this piece. We have to do it. I want to produce it. We have to figure out how to try to…” and she said, “I don’t have any money, I don’t know how we’re going to do it, my company is brand new, but if you’ll work with me, we’ll do it, we’ll make it happen.” And so I was like…oh. That was totally not the call I was expecting, and I was really excited and I was like, yeah that sounds great, so that it how Beth Morrison and I started working together. And we worked…this would’ve been September/October 2006, and then we did “Soldier Songs” in 2008 in a workshop at LPR on the opening weekend of Le Poisson Rouge. And then that production ultimately had its full world premiere…I should also say that this was David Adam Moore singing the role for the first time in the 2008 production and then we did the full world premiere in 2011, and that piece since then has just been traveling around. All along this path to get to a moment… I was talking to Beth Morrison and I forget the context exactly, but she said, well you know you wrote an opera? You know “Soldier Songs” is totally an opera?” And I was like, “what? No, it’s a song cycle that you stage.” And she’s like, “no. Here’s why”. And she laid out these reasons, like these are the pacing, the arch, the you know…and I was like, “Wow. Okay. I wrote an opera. Wow. You know?” And I think it had to happen that way because I think if I had…I still had so many hang-ups about opera and ***recording blips*** And David actually helped me, David Adam Moore, helped me move the piece more toward opera because he a more traditionally operatic baritone voice compared to Timothy. So writing it for Timothy and then moving it into David’s voice…he doesn’t sit quite as low as Timothy does and so I did some reconfiguring of things, and he’s also…he had a moment where he was like I can sing (the note you wrote) and it’s going to sound (fine), but I think (singing this other higher note) here, at the climax of “Two Marines” would be really great. “Two Marines” by the way was one of the songs in “Songs of Love, Death, Friends, and Government”…
G: Awesome! Ok!

D: So there’s the version for soprano that predates “Soldier Songs” and then I re-worked it for baritone in “Soldier Songs”. There’s also in that song cycle, in “Songs of Love, Death, Friends, and Government”, a song called “After a Film by Ellie Lee” which is about the film version of “Dog Days” that I first encountered…and it’s about the kind of…world…it’s sort of talking about the dying animals and this sort of smoky environment. Osvaldo was actually very right in a way, I hadn’t realized at the time that literally 2 of the songs from the 7-song cycle are now operas. So then I was like…talking to Beth…like, oh, I’m an opera composer, I guess! Ok…and then I started thinking about what that meant, and what that meant to me and then that was the sort of beginning of how that came about. So, that was a really long answer, I know this was only question 1…40 minutes later!

G: No! This was so much more. I’m so thankful for this. This is just amazing! You know, I actually had to teach…I teach foreign language diction at LSU and everyone covers English diction for soon-to-be opera and musical theatre students, but it’s London, English diction, it’s not American and so…I had to create…and I used “Soldier Songs” in class and we watched all of it…

D: Oh, cool!...

G: …and they got to see, you know, this is what Americanized…and I showed a little of “Dog Days” too, but it’s just amazing!

D: I’m really happy to hear that because, actually, the language things I really big for me. I mean, I don’t…I never want to be “nationalistic” about it, right? But the idea that there is an American identity that should be expressed in American stories and there is something unique in its regional, of course, but I mean, growing up in the Northeast, I was very…I had a lot of dialects very close to me, you know, so my step-father is Jersey City, my step-mother is from Newark, my mother is from West Orange, my father grew up in Newark, but lived in Pennsylvania for a while so he’s got a little…and so, everyone in just my immediate family very…

G: Different…

D: Yeah…and I thought about that a lot in “Dog Days” – how things should be said, and I even think there’s a note about what the preferred pronunciation (of “caragana”) is, so I think about that stuff a lot and part of it is coming out of, I think, just musical theatre and being in “Guys and Dolls” and being in a world where there’s that kind of dialect, which is kind of over-the-top in that context, but it’s also not so over the top in some ways, but then also (there was another point that I’m forgetting)…I don’t know…sorry!

G: That’s ok. If you think of it, just interrupt me and say it…
D: We were talking about why dialects? Oh! And then later, like Marc Blitzstein becomes very important for me, and my dissertation was partially on “The Cradle Will Rock” and his text setting is so...he cares about language so much, you know...

G: Yeah. That’s one of the reasons why I chose… you know, I’ve sung Lisa so I’m really familiar with the music, but it’s the language in the opera entirely, you know…it’s American…not only is it text-wise, but culturally, it’s all very…there’s a strong union…you can’t have one without the other and it’s just, it’s amazing…

D: Which is funny, because Royce is Canadian!

G: Canadian…I know! That leads me to my next question…so, how did you and Royce meet? How did that collaboration come about?

D: So I met Royce just about…I think about 11 or 12 year ago now, and a friend of mine was involved in the American Lyric Theatre Composer Librettist Development Program…someone I had gone to school with, Jeff Myers…composer. He just sent out an email and said, “Hey, I’m doing this program and we have our final concert next week. You should come!” And this is when I’m starting to think…I forget what year this was exactly…It was after “Soldier Songs”, but this is maybe post-Beth Morrison conversation about being an opera composer…because I thought…like yeah…let me go and see some…because I never went to opera at this point, except for “A View from the Bridge”. And so I went and Royce was a librettist in that class, so I first heard his work there. He tells me – I think I’m remembering correctly – that we had met once before because he attended “Soldier Songs” in 2008 at LPR. I would have to look up the dates…I always forget. He had seen “Soldier Songs” and I have saw this piece of his at Symphony Space and I thought his piece was really beautiful. It was a piece called “Nora at the Alter Rail” and it was a re-working of (the poem by) Thomas Hardy, and I think partially because I was…I was in the middle of really bad break-up at the time and I feel like something about that piece really…I really connected with it and so I was like “you see inside my soul!” (Laughter). So after that, Larry Edelson, who runs ALT, introduced us formally and we sort of just hung out and chatted and I was like, “cool, good to meet you.” It’s always good to know a librettist. “Soldier Song” I wrote my own libretto, but I was happy to meet someone who was interested in new work. Sometime not so long after that I got a call from Carnegie Hall asking me if I would like to participate in the Osvaldo Golijov-Dawn Upshaw Young Artist Workshop for composers and singers…I forget the formal name…but, it was a workshop through the music institute that they were doing and they were basically going to commission works that we would workshop in the following Fall at Bard and then we would have a premiere at Zankel Hall in May. So that was May 2009, so then October 2008..ok so we must’ve met the previous Winter, so probably like 2007, 2008, and I must’ve known that Spring that this was happening, and the “Soldier Songs” happened so we were already, maybe working together when he came to see “Soldier Songs”. But, so they reached out and they asked me if I would like to write…and I don’t know and I wonder if Osvaldo had something to do with this given our previous conversation…but they wanted me to write a scena for 5 singers and they were assigning the singers…they had already been chosen because it was this group from Bard…you know about 20 minutes worth of music and would I be interested and I was like, “yes, absolutely!” So, then, I reached out to Royce and said, “Hey I have this opportunity. We’ve never worked together,
we’ve kind of just met, but maybe this a good time to try out a collaboration” because I didn’t feel that my skills as a librettist… I wasn’t adept enough to write characters who would interact. “Soldier Songs” is just a single character and that character pivots from different perspectives, but people interacting, I was like, I have no idea how to do that. So I was interested in working with someone else, and like I said, I had just met him and we had hit it off so I said “Do you want to do this with me?” and he said “Yeah, let’s look for a story”. We looked around…and I had known the short film version of “Dog Days” by Ellie Lee – I first saw that, I guess, in 2003 and living in Ann Arbor. I used to start composing in the morning and I would put on… to kind of transition in to work… I would put on the previous night’s Daily Show in the background and have coffee and then that would end and I would switch over to IFC that had a shorts program and then I would mute the t.v. and starting working…and I remember at point looking and thinking, “What the hell is this? There’s this guy in a dog suit and this family and… ok… I have to unmute this” And I was so rapt by the whole thing, I couldn’t look away and I remember writing down the name of the story. This is a little out of order…but when I lived in Boston when I was writing the Ellie Lee song and during the sort of epiphany, I realized that Ellie Lee actually lived in Boston and so I reached out to her and said “hey, I’ve written a song about your film. I would love to meet you” And we got together for lunch and she is the person that originally put me in touch with Judy Budnitz, the author of the short story…

G: How awesome!

D: So that’s how I initially got connected with Judy. Back to 2008, Royce and I are talking about sort of, “what’s the story? What are we doing to do?” and I said, “you know, there’s this crazy story that I know and I wonder if it would work? I wonder if it would be interesting?” And we looked at the number of characters knowing that we would just do some excerpts of it. And I said, alright, so there are five members of the family, the 2 brothers, Lisa, the parents, and we have five singers. So what if the dog just doesn’t sing? We just don’t worry about the dog right now and they sing at the dog, but the dog, you know… we wouldn’t have to cast anybody… that gives us 5. So, we were like, that could work. Actually, initially, 1 baritone, 2 tenors, 2 lyric sopranos, and a mezzo and so the mezzo become Pat… Pat (Tania Rodriguez) was really a pants role just because of who we had… did I just say too many singers? I said too many singers. I think we had 2 tenors, so Dad (Sung Eun Lee) was originally kind of a more dramatic tenor and Elliot (Patrick Cook) was actually originally…and I want to double-check to make sure I have all the names, but I’ll send the names of everybody who was in this initial… because they’re all out there doing great things. But Elliot had this… partially because I wrote… had this kind of Heldentenor quality and it was a very funny…. (can’t understand c. 37.21) and then Lisa (Megan Taylor) and Mother (Mary Bonhag) were two beautiful sopranos with very similar qualities – very kind of light lyric qualities and so that is who I was writing for, I was writing for this collection of singers. So we were in touch with Judy and asked her if she’d be open to and she was like “Yeah! That sounds interesting.” She was totally supportive the whole time and we worked out an option agreement with her agent and all that and then we started working. So we workshop the piece in the Fall and premiered it… it actually ended up being 25-ish minutes…in May of 2009 at Carnegie. And then from that we basically had a demo that we could basically shop around. Beth Morrison came to the dress rehearsal and was like “Oh my God, this is great! We have to do something with it.” Alan Pierson who was the conductor for the Carnegie workshop, he really took to it and brought it to Jed Wheeler at Peak Performances @
Montclair, a theatre in New Jersey. Now Jed is this sort of wonderful provocateur, presenter, and producer and so he got excited about it and I remember that I went in and had a meeting with Alan and Jed, and Jed said, “we want to commission the rest of this. We’ll produce it. We need to get you a director” And so they connected me with Robert Woodruff, who I think at the time knew his name…it didn’t hit me who he was when Jed mentioned him, and then I looked him up and was like “oh right! I was just reading an article about this guy. He sounds so amazing!” And this is a great illustration of how I was someone who was very clueless of you know…because Robert premiered all of the earliest Sam Shepard pieces and was a really major, major force.

D: He did a production of Edward Bond…I forget the piece, but it’s pretty brutal. I mean, it’s very difficult material and very few people have the stomach to do it, you know? And so, seeing that Robert was one of those people, I was like, “oh, he’s my guy!” I was so excited to work with him! Because Bond was something that I was very interested in. So, I had a meeting with Robert and we hit it off and then next thing I know Robert, Royce, and I are meeting regularly at Royce’s office at the Public sort of doing ongoing libretto workshops, and the three of us really…I mean Royce wrote the libretto, for sure…but the three of us really pulled it apart and put it back together. And then also as I was writing – and this is often the case when I’m writing – there will be things that pop up and I’ll say, “oh, I’m wondering about this line – is there a way we can work this in?” so you know, once the libretto is finished, what he calls the “composing draft,” and when the score is actually being written it continues to evolve – always in consultation (and) collaboration…that’s a spot where it might get a little more…there might be a line here or there that’s…

G: …altered or fit…

D: Yeah. Or just, you know, I think the good thing about collaboration is that you can see different things in the same moment–You know, one example maybe of this is Mother’s “My Legs won’t Walk me” -- that wasn’t in the original draft of the libretto and there was another scene that began Act III that was ultimately cut. As I was composing, I wrote up to the end of “Friends” and I said, “oh, I think Mother needs something here…” And then we got on the phone and said … “could she have a premonition moment? Or can she sense something but can’t articulate it? Maybe she can’t get into bed or something, or I don’t know?” You know, we’re just sort of brainstorming, throwing out ideas and then, Royce said, “ok let me do some work” and then sent me back this beautiful text, which then became that aria. But the dead dear aria, the next one, there was another moment where I think I said, “well now I think we need something for dad…maybe we need a similar…” and so I said “here’s a story.” So when I was a kid, I was maybe 5 or 6 years old, this deer died outside my window in Winter. So, it was this freezing cold night and this deer…I woke up in the middle of the night and it was screaming, like crying and then…

G: Oh my gosh!

D: very traumatic kind of thing for a 6 year old…

G: Yeah!
D: But for me it was this moment where it was kind of my first encounter with death of any kind. I remember coming home from school the next day and looking out my window and looking at this deer. And so, in that moment with both mother and father, we were thinking, “well this is a moment of some kind of reckoning for them.” And so, for father I said, well what if there’s a moment where he finds a deer in the woods and it’s already dead so it’s not something that they can eat, right? It’s of questionable quality as food, but it’s an engagement mechanism…or he has to come to terms or face or whatever mortality and death for the first time. So that’s an example partially of how we collaborate and how we, you know…a lot of it is…it’s always in service of what the best choices…

G: Yeah. You know, this is completely off topic, but, the way that you talk…you know, Da Ponte moved to New York after working with Mozart and Salieri and he wrote the memoir about his relationship with Mozart and he talked about how they, just like you just said, they worked line-by-line and Mozart would come back and say…like in Susanna’s aria… “hey, I need this…” and he would write it…this is just fascinating to me. It’s just amazing.

D: And Royce will often say that his job – and this is a bad paraphrase… he would say it much better as a word smith – his job is to excite the composer to do their best work, you know. And so, as a collaborator, I think he’s kind of a shape shifter. He writes differently for every one of his collaborators because he’s such an astute observer of people that he knows each of us and what we need in a certain way. It’s very interesting.

G: Yes. That’s awesome. So, for the sake of time – I know that you’re probably super busy…

D: And I’m sorry I’m talking a lot!

G: No, this is absolutely amazing! This is just really great stuff. I can’t wait to get this on paper. It’s really awesome. I want to jump to the character of Lisa and maybe start looking into to some musical aspects, and if we…

D: I’m seeing that we answered question 3 already…we just go right into it…cool…

G: Yes! This is perfect. And we’ve done the second one, so that’s really good. Okay, I’m going to go through this and if we go out of order or don’t touch on something, it’s totally fine because all of this is just great info that I can include and develop. The biggest thing about this opera that I love – and we’ve already talked about – there are elements of, like you said, this metal, electronic influence that not only harkens to music theatre, but it’s very cinematic. I remember when LSU staged it…I remember thinking, (I was watching another scene), “This looks like a movie!” It’s just really cool how that plays out, but it’s in the music too. What led to your choice of, first-off, amplification because we all were mic’d, which is not normally done but it had to be because of the orchestra. I know it’s…that’s where you started…what made you choose to incorporate that into “Dog Days”?

D: I think there’s a misconception that it’s just about it being louder, that “ok, so we’re going to amplify it so it’s more like rock n’ roll…” and that’s not actually what I was going for. There is
a degree to which there is something of that in the choice, but it’s more nuanced than that. So I would say just starting just from the ensemble there’s a certain sonic sound world that amplification enables, and it stems back to as a composer growing up and hearing a lot of pieces that, for example...will have a piece for a chamber ensemble that has a drum set playing a rock beat in it in a concert hall – that particular gesture – the drum set – and maybe it’s because I’m a drummer that I was extra sensitive to it, but I always found that it never really felt right to me, that it never felt like the drum set that I knew and that it always felt like there was something missing for me. What I realized is that the thing that was missing was a kind of mediation that the drum set that I knew most intimately was the recorded drum set, even though I was playing the instrument, but as a listener it’s a mediated instrument that sounds different when you’re hearing a snare drum that’s being recorded by a close mic or is in hall through a close mic in a PA system...it's a different thing than in an acoustic environment. And I think the same is true for electric guitar. And so the choice to have electric guitar in the orchestra, which I felt was important for a couple kind of poetic reasons... that kind of pushed in one direction, not so much because of balance... I mean, that’s not true...partially because of balance, but not to make it louder, but because to get the sound that is “the sound”, you know what I mean? It has to be at a certain point otherwise it feels like an imitation or a copy of something--not the real thing--and so that means that then, “OK things have to balance to that” So yes, it's because things have to be louder, but they're not louder just to be louder they're louder because of this deeper aesthetic purpose, right? So that’s one thing. The second thing -- which I think pertains both to the voice and to the instruments – there are sounds that are made possible by the introduction of a microphone that without a microphone you cannot use. For example the letter aria, which I think it's probably the biggest example, you could probably fake that in a kind of way, acoustically, but I don't think it would have the vulnerability that it does if it had to be partially opened (mouth) to an [oe] vowel to allow some spin or projection, whereas the hum is such a personal, enclosed private thing that I think communicates something so important for that moment dramatically. Also in the hunger chorus at the end some of the mouth sounds that I think are really...that we have a visceral subconscious reaction to... it's like you hear...you know, Trevor Wishart is a sound artist who does some stuff like this and you know there is stuff where you hear the sound of someone choking, and we know that sound that sound tells us something, that sound tells us that there's danger. So in kind of a pursuit of maybe a psychological...

G: ...a natural emotional response to sounds...

D: Yeah. That having access to those sounds is important.

G: And I think that makes the piece special. That's great.

D: And the same is also true for the ensemble – that you can have the strings play very, very quietly and you'll get a certain sound that you wouldn't necessarily hear...and that’s especially useful in Act 3 because it makes it sound very cold...it makes the ensemble feel very cold and that was also important.

G: I'm so glad you said that because most of the time people, they see “mic”, and they think that the purpose is “loud” and in this case it wasn't the only purpose and wasn't the most important purpose.
D: I wouldn't say that it's even any of the purpose outside of the logistics of the instrumentation. It's not like, “let's crank it”, it's not that kind of a thing. That being said, the end the score specifies a decibel level that you have to reach by the end of that arc, and you can't do that with nine players without amplification. So, I suppose the volume is part of it, but I think it's a very nuanced pursuit that's ultimately interested in the expression -- for musical expression and for dramatic expression.

G: That’s awesome. So, we kind of already talked about this, but I'm just going to say it for the record: The elements of drama that permeate the score, specifically in her 3 pieces, like you just said, it's heightened by this use of mics and this use of amplification -- it’s almost a tonal color that when you put the a sound through the resonating filter of amplification, there's a new color. Also, I don't sing the same when I was amplified as when I don't have a mic because I can bring it back, I can be more vulnerable, and that in turn -- and many people said this after our performance at LSU -- they felt like they were right here with the singer. They weren't watching it... and I think you've said this before about another work... they felt involved in the story, and I think that's what makes “Dog Days” special as a piece, which is amazing.

D: But I think you have to go to that place with it, you know.

G: Okay, so I am going to go straight into the music. The only thing I am going to focus on with in my written document our Lisa’s two arias and then the letter, so I'm going to go in order and if we run out of time then maybe we can find another time, but I only have specific points that I want to talk about. So, this is the beginning of the aria measure 472, and it’s page 64...so the Glockenspiel comes on this…the melodic content that permeates all 3 pieces and it's this beautiful melody that I remember the first time I heard it I was like” wow that's so interesting,” and I started thinking about what does this stand for? Does it stand for something different within each piece because I think Lisa as a character, she…she develops. In this song she just meets the dog, she hasn't named him, so she has this initial of “I want connections so bad,” and even with this person that is not fully there, and so then she starts tiptoeing… she's in a new reality she's in an alternate reality, in a fantasy as you quote in the score, but what does this particular melody…what did you create it to stand for, if anything?

D: The Glock melody?

G: Yes.

D: Well, so, this is interesting, which gets into the question of the development of the piece. This is the “Mirror Mirror” material, right? “Mirror Mirror” was…after the first 25 minutes for Carnegie, we then wrote “Mirror Mirror” as a separate…that was the next thing that was written so it was written relatively early in the process, and we wrote it for Lauren (Worsham), and we did it in an American Opera Projects show at Galapagos. So then when I went back and was...so I had that 35 minutes written when we got the green light to write the rest of it. So, I already knew that this was going to be Lisa's main moment, that we were heading towards that main moment, that this is the moment where she is really revealed to us and also in a way to herself,
right? I think it's just it's kind of meant as foreshadowing. I do think it's interesting that it is very square here, right? It's very straight 4/4…

G: It’s very…bare is not the right word… but it's in its own tessitura, especially the Glock, and you hear it completely, not separate, but on its own plane and also, time stands still in the opera because nothing is being done vocally and the tension is all in the dog because he's just eaten and it's just really awesome in this first piece and I totally see how it's foreshadowing to her major moment in “Mirror Mirror.”

D: Yeah and so here there's a kind of innocence. She's just trying to figure out this guy and she's saying these kind of inappropriate things that… you shouldn't say, “no man in his retarded mind” …you shouldn’t really say that, but she’s a kid so it’s meant to be like, “you are a child and the world is very strange place and you’re trying to make sense of it”.

G: Right. And I like how in measure 480 you put staccati over “his retarded mind” and I remember seeing this… you bring it out of the context and so I it forces a different, a nuanced technique to this word.

D: Yeah. And also that it’s a quintuplet. In a way, that’s not natural prosody, [sung rhythmic demonstration]. It's already her…it’s her trying to… she's wrestling with all of this stuff in real time, you know? And I think trying to show she is well meaning, but awkward and lonely and we get to the lonely part soon, but this is kind of the deflection of the loneliness in a kind of playful energy.

G: Awesome. Harmonically, and this is specifically measure 485, I love this use of different, I guess, tonal centers depending on what line she is singing, and you have this triad out of “we could be friends” and then you add the F# and it kind of creates, along with the orchestral accompaniment, it creates this feeling of, she's confident but there's this undertone of, “Ooh, maybe not”, you know what I mean? And it happens more than once, and I was hoping maybe you could talk about this appearance of accidentals to show emotion.

D: Yeah, I think…one, I should say that this was written a long time ago, so at this point it's going to be a little hard to say very specifically…I mean, what stands out to me here is the major/minor juxtaposition. The Glockenspiel still has the B-flat and very close to it Lisa has the B-natural. I think looking at it, it feels to me…and this is something my teacher at Princeton, Paul Lansky would talk about with “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”…that it fills in the octave. So we have the arpeggio up from G to G and then some chromatic-ish alterations – the E-flat to the B-flat, then in 487 down, back to the G. So part of it, I wonder, is it…you know, there's always a degree that you're thinking, “how do you make a solid melody that is expressive of what's happening”, and I think it's those 2 things are always…you go back and forth between them. Also, in 487 to 488, we still have that G…for her the G going to the A flat to match the orchestra…sorry the A-flat leading us to the G in beat 1 to the A-natural. So, you can look at it as almost always triangulating target notes, looking at the upper/lower neighbor perspective. I think a lot of the actual character-based stuff is just feeling it in the moment and trusting instinct and what feels like the right choice. Like the mother’s aria, I think, is very similar. It sneaks around a lot of chromatic moments and he's singing about snakes and maybe I thought that… that makes
sense to make it serpentine in some way. So for you that F# feels…well it undermines…it’s…the question she's asking well… “we could be friends?” …but it's also are you say it [sung demonstration].

G: It’s very speech-like. And that was my next comment -this is so speech driven…even when you add the quintuplets and the triplets over different beats, it's very difficult especially amateur singers to learn because we’re not used to, you know? We’re used to…[hand gesture denoting straight, metric rhythm] …but, this type of writing is more common in contemporary music of today, of course Stravinsky, and it's just awesome. We need it. That's one reason why I'm so excited about this because I want this to be sung more. It needs to be.

D: Right. And it’s funny you mention Stravinsky. I do think that looking at “Rakes Progress”, the text setting is definitely a text setting that is more of the present and future than of say, Puccini. Also, if you’re doing Puccini…like from an ensemble and conductor perspective…time is unwavering (here) whereas in Puccini

G: …it’s rubato…

D: …what you see on the page is never what you're going to actually hear – there’s that whole practice…and there’s that communication between the singer and the conductor, and the conductor knows to wait…and then…so it’s a whole different kind of ballgame in a way. And that allows, I think, that kind of regularly of the supporting musical material allows for that kind of vocal precision that is then ultimately extremely expressive of … things like that staccato quintuplet…of awkwardness and uncertainty.

G: Yes the expression exists in the true form of this music. You don't need to add anything, you just need to do what the score calls for, and it's there as long as you have emotional, you know…

D: Right. But I also don't want to be a dictator about it. I also want there to be expressiveness and I want the singer…and this, I think, is also something that looking back to my earlier resistance to the operatic … I think it's something that has evolved for me and I think something I learned through the “Dog Days” process about working with the same singers for 5 years and getting to really trust them and have conversations with them where they would say, “ what if I hold this a little longer?” and I’d say, “yeah, try it…oh, that's beautiful! Do that!” So, I had to learn to be trusting of the cast and the singers, you know? Which now, with a piece like “JFK”, I entered into it with a much more open perspective in certain ways. Maybe the JFK cast would say differently [laughter], but I think I was more like, “Yes, let's make it beautiful. Let's make it communicate”, you know?

G: Awesome. Yes. Let’s move to…and this is is page 68, measure 508…and I don't have a ton to say about this other than she changes perspective. She goes back to her memories and so there's this beautiful sweeping motion within the phrasing that is so evident and it's just stunning…it's absolutely beautiful. What would you say to a singer who's developing this part of this aria?

D: Who's developing it?...
G: Someone who is maybe absolutely beginning the process and it’s... the music is so different here than it was from the beginning and even from anything that was previously heard in the opera.

D: So this is an interesting thing that gets us to something that Dawn Upshaw told me in the very first workshop which is a really very insightful and really valuable little comment that shaped a lot about how I thought about Lisa and Mother. So I mentioned earlier that we had two beautiful light lyric sopranos singing Mother and Lisa in the first workshop performance... the Carnegie performance... they both had very similar instruments and when they sang together... and it was specifically... actually I remember it was the “Go get a Plate” [sings excerpt]... it was that... and “Sure is quiet...” it was actually... that was the spot it was most evident. So Dawn said, “...well look, you have these two singers who are very similar (in voice type). You need to clarify them in their characters. You need to write into the score how are they different so that we don't have to be looking, but can hear who is who...” Even if they were sung by the same singer, multitracked, we would know. And so at that moment Lisa – you can see in bar 62 – Lisa becomes much more staccato, so she has a more staccato approach as much as possible, and Mother, “…mountain of beetle carnage...” is much more lugubrious and longer, so she has these longer lines and Lisa has these shorter lines all throughout... “no crickets. No katydids,” right? So this, I wonder – and this may not have been conscious, this may have been subconscious as I was thinking about it – but here I feel like this is a moment where Lisa starts to grow up a little more because I feel like she becomes aware of things in this aria we see her start to understand... because we progressed from the inappropriate. “Hey dog man... no man in his retarded mind” stuff... to “…what's normal?” which is big question... and then, you know, a kind of more nostalgic, “…Normal was fishing out mosquito larvae’s with Marjorie from the old dugout...”. Still the staccato... ” from the old dugout...” We still have that youthful quality but it's changing. We see her evolve, “…you got a family...” -- short. You have, “...litter of puppies...” [sung]. Okay, so now we're introducing motherhood... introducing her mother... longer notes... more adult subject. “…outskirts of town...” [sung]. And so... I’m sorry. I know I’m jumping way ahead.

G: No, this is great. And she talks about his wife....

D: Yeah, this is interesting, So “you gotta wife, dog man...” this is on page 123, bar 5...63... “Does she know that you're...” ...staccato... “…does she know that you’re messed up?” [emphasizing “messed up”]. So that's a kind of more youthful... you know, ‘you’re messed up’ is kind of kid-like, so that staccato, “…like those guys on afternoon talk shows...” [continues singing lightly] To be totally honest with you to some degree to which I’m like, “I’m going to write some beautiful music here and I’m just going to enjoy writing it”, you know what I mean? [laughter]. Like the “beg”, I was like, “Oh, what would that...it's just...what would that sound like...what is that kind of gesture?” But then, “So you wanna know a secret...my dad cries in his sleep...” This is no staccato here, right? So this her most mature thought even she doesn't quite know what she's talking about or why this is, she is having this insight into the difficulty of adulthood and the seriousness of adulthood that maybe she can understand but she has access to. And then I feel like, “…Gone are the nights spent in front of the t.v...” that’s much more...just because of how fast it’s going “gotta”…it has to...you know. The staccatos there, like “…get off the couch...”...
G: And you say in the score, “Nagging”. I love that. You know, you want this element of that nag sound… it's already there and it's so easy to sing because the text fits perfectly and the *staccato*, the rhythm… it's awesome.

D: I think it is also presenting a misconception of marriage and a very stereotypical like, “Oh, nagging wife” is a stereotype that…you know…and I'm also trying to paint…and this is also, I mean, these are Royce’s words…I'm not saying I'm…but we're painting a picture of this family indirectly as she's describing these things. You know, “…the pile of beer cans…” and “…my mom mother sleeps through everything…” Those are very telling lines and so, you have a little bit of this “from the mouth of babes” type of thing. The children see this stuff and they can't put it all together necessarily but she's…but we can in the audience. She can tell us and we can be like, “Oh man. OK.” And then “…big and red and lost and afraid…eyes like two lost polka dots…” are the longest in a way…

G: Yeah. And time stands still right before you move into this…it’s almost instantaneous back to her reality that we see…

D: Right. And the curfew and the industrial soundscape… the milk frother (on the China cymbal)…[laughter]

G: And then you move into this is after the 3rd line…it’s 684… and it's her text, “I'm going to pet you, but if I get a rash tomorrow… curfew… you're a good listener…” All of these words that you bring out with different rhythmic mechanism and also tessitura it's so, again, it's very much like speech, but it also showcases emotion because usually when you have an upward extending melodic line it's leading towards a positive note or a conviction; she's very confident. And then when she descends down, it's either something negative like, “…get a rash tomorrow…” and then, “…listener… dog man…crazy probably…” you know, she descends but then she goes back up with, “…but you listen…”, and it's emotionally…it's all laid out and it's so easy to portray because it's there within the music. I'm going to write about that in addition to all that you told me before this. This is really good stuff, thank you.

D: Oh, good. Yeah. Absolutely.

G: Also, I just want to let you know I'm going to focus too on your direction in the score it’s so…it’s specific but in a wonderful way that guides the singer and also the orchestra into understanding the persona that you want in this piece and I'm going to talk about specifics that you say in the score and bring up examples like, “Patting his head. Less afraid now” …that’s 700. And then specific stage directions of, “Lisa turns away, going inside the house, stopping at the door. The man and the dog who runs behind bushes hiding for the evening” It paints this picture of where she is and body movements that show emotion, show fear, show the want to be away from something… and so… it's just fascinating and I’m definitely going to talk about that.

D: Cool! And just to clarify, some of these would be Royce's directions, so 701 is probably from the libretto. So probably anywhere where there are character names mentioned, those would be stage directions that were either from the initial libretto or that he and I worked on together for
the final score. And there were a lot of situations where things would’ve come up in staging rehearsal and then we would say, “do we want to include that or no…”, and some things were like, “well that’s kind of Robert’s things so let’s leave it out…” because we don’t want to take his idea and make it like it’s our own or something; we wanted to respect his creativity. But then something like 686, 687…that probably was more me… there were a couple of others that are maybe even more abstract…I’m seeing if I can find them real quick…

G: What about the One in 674, “like a machine running itself to death…”

D: …yeah, that's me. Where is that?

G: It's measure 674 right before…

D: Oh yeah! [Laughter] Anything that’s in the ensemble parts is definitely… would be me and things like, “getting up the nerve… regaining control of herself… a little bully-like…” at the start of the scene…anything that's really directly affecting the delivery of text, I would say, is 95%...would most likely be my additions. Things that are like, “Lisa goes in the house for the evening…”, those are the stage directions. It's a little unclear in the score… they're kind of in the same place, so it can be a little hard to …

G: I understand the difference, though. “Acting tough, but quite nervous…ignoring him…” And then there's like a specific direction, “she moved towards him, hand extended…” That's a little bit of a different nature. The ones I'm going to focus on are mainly the emotional intent because you don't see that a lot in opera scores and that’s what I love about this, is that you still let singers bring to the table what they can individually, but you allow for us to go further because we have a more stolid starting point, so I'm going to definitely talk about that.

D: Cool. I think that's also partially because one of the things we're playing around with especially in “Mirror, Mirror” was meaning in contradiction to the words. So we're saying, Hello there, beautiful. You look so great,” and you’re like, “actually, your skeletal” so there's a grotesqueness to that or a grotesquerie and I think adding these lines was to help…

G: …clarify that…

D: Yeah, in some cases. But also, there's something to the degree of…I think it's Mark Adamo who says that when you're writing an opera you also need to direct it in your head. You need to know, “Okay, this character moves from here to here and that needs this much time…,” so I wonder if some of this is also that.

G: Awesome. OK, let's skip to…this is page 123. This is the letter. I just listened to the Three Ravens, the actual 1611 piece and it's so awesome how you incorporate the two. The Three Ravens… that melody…

D: I’m sorry are you looking at the piano vocal score or the full score?

G: This is the piano vocal, sorry…
D: OK, what's the measure number?

G: It is measure 1047.

D: OK cool, got it.

G: It amazes me how you have this previously written melody from 1611 – so [?] a long, long time ago – and it's also the story that the Three Ravens is based on has this, like you said, there's mortality and there's also starvation, but there's this kind of hopefulness to the poetry that is within this actual piece, so I definitely want to talk about that with you -- why you chose the Three Raven melody, but also I noticed this selection is not named an aria, but it's completely her and it's separate. Did you purposefully not term it an aria because there were no actual words or…?

D: No. I think it's just because it's I don't know actually that's a good question. I’m looking at… I mean some of these…the naming of these were things that we tried to figure out later. I feel like it says “Aria: No Man In His Right Mind”, right? But that's inside of the scene called “Friends”. And so I think it was because it was, you know, her singing was the whole scene…maybe it would have just felt redundant to say, “Scene 5: Letter Aria Letter”. It may have just been an editorial thing also with the publisher.

G: Yeah. That makes sense. Ok. Awesome. So why did you choose the Three Ravens melody? What led to this?

D: And I know it was probably a long time ago yeah it's an interesting so this is a song that I knew as a kid. I'm realizing the deer and then there's this song there's a lot of my childhood in this piece and so it's just a song that I knew and I think it was actually when I got to the scene I just didn't want to do the opera thing that where she's writing a letter and singing what she's writing… I just didn't want to do that so I thought what if she's writing and we're projecting it and we have this very quiet moment what if she's humming something to herself…what would she hum? And I think for me I think I first heard this song on a Peter Paul and Mary record that my father had, so I was imagining what records, “what records would Howard or Mother have around that would’ve been played as a…?” Maybe they would have played “Puff the Magic Dragon” for her, but then the next song is “The Three Ravens” and that’s the one that stuck… I don't know. It was really like… I want something that will felt like something that she would maybe know and that felt…because… it kind of has a nursery rhyme quality to it in a strange way. It's simple and it's very beautiful and I was like, “I wonder if that would work…” and I started playing around with it as I was composing and then I was like, “well wait a minute, let me think about what this song is actually about…” So we have a knight and we have these three ravens and we have this “fair maiden”, right? And I said. “Oh, this is the same story in a way.” You have these three men who are in the end going to try to eat this “prince”… so we have a prince as a knight, and we have this medieval thing going, you know?

G: Juxtaposition…
D: What’s that?

G: It's a juxtaposition of past and present and….

D: Yeah. And it tells us so much…if we know the song it adds a whole new layer. And so, I was like, “that's really kind of perfect”, so I just went with it. It really just kind of happened and I was like, “Oh, wow. It works really beautifully.” And then the incorporation of that melody throughout the piece was then in the Captain scene – the melody comes back when she’s singing about, “…there's hope, Howard… You get me…” I think it's the violin is playing the “Three Ravens” melody…and then the clarinet in the epilogue – all the pitches that the clarinet is playing are all the pitches from the melody from the “Three Ravens” and of course, then that’s called the “Three Ravens” – the title of the epilogue. So, a lot of this piece -- I think a lot of any operatic thing – is very much a tapestry where you have all of these things that you are weaving together trying to convey…trying to use all of the threads to illustrate the precise points you want clear for the audience. And then once I heard it and then when I also realized that it worked well with the “Mirror Mirror” material…comes in at 1051… I was like, “Oh my God, it's all just right there.”

G: It's beautifully woven together and then you have the element of the medieval story and then she's talking about her friend Marjorie, which we really don't know what happened to Marjorie, but we know that there is an undertone of “not good” and yet she is still… it's just it's so poignant how this comes across, especially to audiences.

D: Yeah. And the Marjorie thing is so interesting because I feel like in a certain way when you’re a kid… “Oh, your best friend moved away” That's really sad, you know? And the thing is that many of those experiences as a young kid…. “Oh, Billy moved away” And so, I love that with the Marjorie thread, that that's basically, in a certain way she's reacting no differently…

G: Right. It's a child's reaction to…

D: Until the last line…until the …”P.S. Too bad you'll never read this letter.” I think there's something so powerful about reading that. It's not as powerful if you hear it… seeing that last card come up on the projection surface, you’re like… “Ugh, so devastating!”

G: I'll never forget, I looked out and half the audience was crying, and this was, you know, there are no words. It's just this melody and, like you said, the projection, and it's just amazing because this has never been done before in opera where there's humming and there are words that you read at the same time and it’s so strong…

D: Although, I just saw Butterfly last night and the end of act 2 has the humming chorus. There are no projections, but it was the staging at the MET…the Anthony Minghella production… and you know, you just see the three of them sitting and waiting and it's devastating. It's funny, I was like, “Oh, wow, there is a similar effect.” I mean, they're very different scenes, but the way he makes us wait with them – both Puccini and in the staging – it transforms the experience in a really powerful way.
G: That's awesome. That's all I wanted to talk about. So with this one, I'm really going to focus on performance practices; specifically, the humming into the mic, which that's another reason why the microphones are so wonderful in this opera so that you can do, like you said, alternative methods of music that I wouldn't be able to do if I were on stage and it was a massive orchestra in front of me without any amplification…

D: And also, I just wanted to point out, because I feel like sometimes people will say, “Oh, well, you just added the amplification so you don't have to think about balance”, right? The balance in that scene is very… it's still aware that you're humming and everything else is balanced to that. Because the secret is, actually amplification just makes balance sometimes harder. You have to be just as on top of the orchestral balance…

G: …which I didn’t know until I sang this

D: Yeah, and I think you also have the sound person who's part of your team, right, and that becomes a different experience too. So it's not just the conductor dealing with balance, it's the person in the front of house. It's an interesting world!

G: OK. So last piece I'm jumping to “Mirror Mirror” and this is measure 1524… so this is… I would say, between this one and the other two, this is the one most performed…not the whole opera, but if you were to pick one from Lisa's repertoire, I hear and see this the most, whether it's on YouTube or you know, people being assigned this piece at LSU…

D: Oh, cool!...

G:…and it's very difficult rhythmically…

D: Very difficult! Yes, it is…

G: And I love it! The great thing about it is once you learn it, it's here forever because you have to be so specific. What led you to this picture…this painting with this music? Because there's this evidence of, “Hello there beautiful… skin stretched around a bony frame…” This is so important for today's culture because eating disorders are rampant right now because of social media and this portrayal of what women, specifically, need to look like and here's this aria of a young adolescent, you know pre-woman… young woman…girl talking about it in a positive way even though she can't control it, and yet, like you said, there's this blanket of pity and sadness because she's starving.

D: Yeah, so I believe that this…and this is an interesting illustration of adaptation… I think there is a half of a sentence in the short story that talks about Lisa looking in the mirror and how she’s so thin now, she looks like a model, and Royce seized on that and thought, “well, that's a moment,” and we talked about that and we said, “what if it's this sort of moment where she's starving so she's delirious…” I think at this point, the sanity of everyone in the show…all of the characters are kind of crossing over to a less healthy place in general…you know, what would happen if we really played into the irony of it and made it just…grotesque, in a way, but
energetic and positive, but the context making it just horrific in a way. We found that really compelling dramatically, and it was really, really fun to write.

G: It's amazing rhythmically and then also the melodic material that just comes out of nowhere and creates these beautiful lines that you don't expect because there's this...[sings rhythm]...offbeat type of...and it's this pulling in different directions. And then, of course, when she sings, "beautiful" starting in 1547, that's an example of these lines that are legato and very lyric and when you sing them, they need to be lyric because it just calls for it. But then underneath you still have the staccato balance issue...it's just really awesome. If you were to tell a singer what to bring out in this piece vocally, what would be your number one thing about this?

D: What to bring out?

G: What to do vocally to make this the best presentation as possible?

D: That's a hard question. I mean, I think there's a lot of different stuff...

G: ...and you can say more than one [laughter]...

D: The first thing that comes to mind is actually to trust the text because I think if you can...I think the text setting to me feels very natural, even the things that are hopping around a lot in terms of meter. There's only one moment...where is it... that it's always a little bit... I'm always like, "I wish I had another 8th in there..." because there's not quite enough time. I forget where it is. I think you have to understand the state that she's in at this point so I think it's not so much a vocal thing. I think the vocal instincts or the vocal performance comes out of where she is and I think there's a jitteriness to it, which is both excitement and exhaustion and the confusion of which is which, you know? So she's so tired, she's not eaten, but there's this energy and it's unstable in a way, and so, I think, that's why it's always crooked. There's an unevenness to it...it's off kilter...and I think the first part is really... there's something kind of hyperactive about it...even like [sings portion of the score]...it's kind of crazy. And then in 1598 I think is like playtime, in a way. You’re imitating...like I imagine, there's a mink and sunglasses or something, it's like Hollywood star [sings/demonstrates excerpt]. And so there's this kind of manic thing going on and then when you get to 1631, so these moments are the more like, "Oh right, but, my hair has lost its color... my skin is dry..." But there's something wrong with me...I feel like I'm beautiful... my body is thin like it's "supposed to be" but something's wrong...something's not right...and that all kind of collapses almost in exhaustion. It’s this whole like...energy and energy and all of this has gone on, on, on, and there’s you’re just like [sound of relaxation or exhaustion]. And it's sort of like with “Friends”, you know, there’s the moment where she starts talking about her father, “...you wanna know a secret...,” and well, it says in reality, this is a similar kind of thing where you know, it’s like...this juxtaposition...And I like in this, you know it’s called “Mirror Mirror” and the piece is in two halves, right? So you’re sort of on one side and then you’re on the other side. This passage if I squint hard enough it really gets me every time because it kind of comes out of nowhere and then there’s the one line where is it 1686, “from the side of my bed in your hand-me-down running shoes...” that's some good stuff right there! It's so specific and tells you so much, you know...and the bass clarinet...
solo that happens there…. that everything that happens there disappears and there’s these two… I like it so much.

G: I do too. This whole section is so gripping…you can never forget it… I can just hear it right now, and I haven't heard it you know… I mean, I'm listening to it a lot right now, but I hear it and 2 months later it's still there. And then also the pictures that it paints as Americans, and really anywhere, but especially here, we can see all of this. We see hand-me-down down running shoes on the side of our bed – this is so culturally relevant. This whole piece is.

D: …Culturally what? I’m sorry, you cut out…

G: Culturally relevant.

D: Oh, yeah…

G: I think that's what makes it so touching to audience members, and also towards her character because in most operas the younger girl is one or the other – she’s light, she's devious, or she's, “Oh, she can't help herself. Feel pity for her.” Lisa is a different level, and she develops the whole time – musically, dramatically, text…everything, and it all, like you said, comes to fruition in this piece.

D: Well, and the moment just before this where she's eating the vitamins…I think that's such an important moment and it’s easy to miss because it's a small physical gesture, and I suppose a director could decide not to do it, because there's no libretto lines that make you “have” to do it, but the idea that she is also hiding nourishment from her family, I think, is really important because no one is innocent in the piece. Mother is maybe innocent…she is maybe the only one… and actually father, in a way, too, but the kids are all hiding food of some kind. Part of that makes me feel, you know, thinking about Lisa… as a character, I love Lisa so much, and there's part of me that's like, Uh! when you're a kid and you shoplift and your older sibling or your parents say, “No, we don't do that.” It's like she's having one of those moments where she’s like, “oh, but, I have these vitamins here…I’m gonna eat them…I’m gonna eat them…” And I think it also says something that she knows already, maybe subconsciously, how far gone everything is so it could be a survival… I don't know, but…

G: She talks about Prince and you see this evolving...this evolvement… of what Prince means to her when she talks about putting his name with Marjorie’s on the branch…and that to me is a big moment in the score – I think it's 1713 – when she says Prince’s name.. the melody is so… this whole section is beautiful but there are certain things that come out of the score that are even more memorable and that’s a moment for me. And then, of course, in…

D: …but she says it three times also…

G: Right, in three ravens! You now, and there's this element of three…

D: Right.
G: And then, of course, she goes into the state of what I would consider almost manic when she starts talking about, “….hello, hello, hello in there… mirror, mirror…hello…” There's this building of emotion and then you get the last section where she's talking about the other side… and that, to me…I had a hard time trying to understand…was she talking about dying? Was she talking about her state of mind? Was she talking about the level her family is on, because I feel like she's a different level, mind wise, than the rest of her family at this point…it's fascinating!

D: Yeah! And I definitely welcome the multiple interpretations of that line and I think we wanted to keep it kind of… because theirs is also, you know, every character in this show has a moment of reckoning with death. So for mother it’s “my legs won’t walk me,” for father it's, the deer, for the brothers it's, “a mile deep into their eyes…” during the deer aria…we're implying that they're sneaking out and visiting dead bodies, which is then confirmed by the captain…and this I think might be Lisa’s moment where she is having that, and it just touches on it…it's not as intense as the others because she survives, and they don't. Even if they live, they don't survive, right?

G: Right. That’s so, so awesome….

D: And it’s a question…that she asked the question. It’s not a statement. I think that's also significant.

G: Absolutely. And of course, this whole last section is so speech driven…the way that you would speak the line…it's laid out in the score and it's so awesome I can't wait to…

D: …In the second half of “Mirror, Mirror?” you mean?

G: Yes. And this is the final page of the aria where she’s, “…only beautiful…on the other side …” Even though it's longer in duration, the stress of the words…where it falls melodically is…I really like that and I think it's important…because as a soprano it would be easy to just belt out “only” because it's so high, but it doesn't necessarily call for that. And then, of course, in the bottom staff, you have specifically piano marking…I just thought I think that's interesting.

D: So that piano in the PV, that’s for this repeated note that’s sort of swelling. The chords are mezzo piano there, but I think with “only”, we've established that we're emphasizing “beautiful”, right? So from 1752, “…if I'm only… 1754, “…beautiful… only beautiful…” -- the A-flat is always sort of de facto in service of the downbeat, so you have to shape it to the, you know…

G: This is all so awesome. I can’t say thank you enough for your time! Yay! Well, I'm trying to think of anything else I need to… specifics, but I think I got everything! Thank you so much!
APPENDIX B. LETTER OF PERMISSION

Hi Grace,

Thanks so much for your deep exploration of *Dog Days*, and for including the transcript of the skype interview in the appendix of your document. I can't wait to read it all! I've attached a copy below which I proofread for small spelling things for names, and clarity etc. Please consider this email as official permission to include it as part of your document.

All best, and congratulations!

David

=========
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APPENDIX C. LETTER OF PERMISSION BY BOOSEY & HAWKES

January 30, 2020
Grace McCrary
Louisiana State University
RE: “No Man in His Right Mind” “Letter”, “Mirror, Mirror” by David T Little & Royce Vavrek

Dear Grace:

We hereby grant you gratis permission to include excerpts from the above referenced work in your dissertation for Louisiana State University.

We do require that you include the following copyright notice immediately following the excerpts for which it pertains:

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Erin Dickenson
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VITA

Coloratura soprano, Grace Claire McCrary was born and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi. She received her Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance and her Bachelor of Music Education from the University of Southern Mississippi. After obtaining her Master of Music in Vocal Performance at Louisiana State University in 2017, she continued her doctoral studies at Louisiana State University and was a graduate teaching assistant. Grace Claire performed the role of Lisa in the collegiate premier of *Dog Days* at the Turner-Fischer Center for Opera at Louisiana State University in 2019. The performance went on to achieve national awards within the National Opera Association. Grace Claire resides in New Orleans with her husband, Taylor. After graduation she plans to further her career in performance and teaching.