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MUSIC TEXT RELATIONSHIP IN THE CHORAL  
MUSIC OF JENNIFER HIGDON:  
COMPOSITIONAL ASPECTS ARE UNIVERSALLY  
SPAWNED BY THE TEXT

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**Music Text Relationship in The Choral Music of Jennifer Higdon: Compositional Aspects are Universally Spawned by the Text**

**Synopsis:**

Jennifer Higdon is an internationally renowned composer, most notably for orchestral works and the remarkable success of her opera *Cold Mountain*, based on the novel by Charles Frazier with a libretto by Gene Scheer. It was commissioned by the Santa Fe Opera, the Minnesota Opera and the Philadelphia Opera, and premiered at Santa Fe, NM in 2015. It was so well received that every performance was sold out, adding a performance that also sold out. Santa Fe produced a recording of it (the only opera they have recorded in 21 years). This opera also received the International Award for Best World Premier, and was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2016.

# Music-Text Relationship in the Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon As Represented In Her Large Form Choral Work, *The Singing Rooms* William Skoog

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Mention the name Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962) to most musicians and there is near universal recognition and acclaim for her work, essentially for her instrumental works. In opera circles, she is hailed as a rising star in contemporary opera due to the enormous success of *Cold Mountain* and a current operatic commission underway. However, to most choral musicians, there appears to be little awareness of her accomplishments as a composer or that she has written a substantial quantity of quality choral music.

Higdon's choral works are prolific and profound; varied, rich in colors and highly acclaimed by those who know them. By her own admission, her instrumental works and opera have largely overshadowed the choral works. The analytical book, *Jennifer Higdon Composing in Color* by Christina L. Reitz of her instrumental works, has greatly expanded the awareness of her instrumental works, whereas a similar reference is not yet available for her choral music.

This article hopes to bring Higdon's choral works to light, exploring the works with respect to their implicit relationship of music to text. As an analytical paper, it will reveal the intrinsic nature of that connection from a compositional standpoint and will also analyze its immediate and demonstrable connection of the creation of musical elements drawn directly from the text. This is a deduction that she wholeheartedly embraces.

A thorough analysis of her compositions demonstrates convincingly that the construction and musical choices are substantially inspired by the text. Structure, melody, harmony, counterpoint, rhythm, meter, textures, accompaniment (when present), give clear evidence all elements are intimately linked to the poetry. Often, several musical elements combine and conspire to augment elements of text.

Given the close relationship between music and text in these works, particularly regarding construction, it is tempting to refer to her as a "Neo-Renaissance composer," as each line of text seems to create a new musical thought or region of construction. However, that description, while perhaps appropriate in some ways, would be a disservice in defining her overall, highly complex, compositional style.

Attempting to summarize any composer's overall style and theoretical tendencies is something of slippery slope, as interpretive

elements of music linked to text will no doubt be threaded with a degree of subjectivity. This study will offer representative stylistic characteristics found in her choral pieces, honing in on various elements of composition and how Higdon uniquely connects them to the words. Higdon is prolific in this genre, and the compositional fabrics woven are so varied and complex an analysis of all these works would be beyond the scope of a single article: a detailed analysis of her entire opus of choral music would result in a monograph to approach comprehensiveness. Examples from her larger choral work, *The Singing Rooms*, will be cited to illustrate analytical points, to detail specific techniques employed, and will serve to represent materials for the overall discussion of her works in this study.

Her primary compositional tendencies and trends relating music to text will be articulated here; these trends and tendencies are seen in her small form choral works as well. (A list of Higdon's choral works is provided at the end of this article.) It is hoped that this study may inspire additional analytical studies and performances of her contributions to the choral world.

As Jennifer Higdon is not as well known in the choral community, a brief introduction to her seems appropriate. Higdon has won numerous awards and received an abundance of commissions from prestigious musical organizations for orchestral works, operas, and choral compositions—large and small. Most notably, her *Viola Concerto* won a Grammy for *Best Contemporary Classical Composition* in 2017, her *Percussion Concerto* won a Grammy Award in the same category in 2010, and in the same year she received the Pulitzer Prize in Music for her *Violin Concerto*, with the committee citing Higdon's work as "a deeply engaging piece that combines flowing lyricism with dazzling virtuosity."

A summary of her achievements from her website ([www.jenniferhigdon.com](http://www.jenniferhigdon.com)) follows:

*Higdon has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy of Arts & Letters (two awards), the Koussevitzky Foundation, the Pew Fellowship in the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Higdon received the prestigious 2018 Nemmers Prize from Northwestern University which is awarded to composers of exceptional*

achievement who have significantly influenced the field of composition.

*She has become one of America's most acclaimed and most frequently performed living composers, and has become a major figure in contemporary classical music through commissions that represent a wide range of genres, including orchestral, chamber, choral, vocal, opera, and wind ensemble.*

*Hailed by the Washington Post as "a savvy, sensitive composer with a keen ear, an innate sense of form and a generous dash of pure esprit," her works have been performed throughout the world, and are enjoyed by audiences at several hundred performances a year and on over sixty CDs. Higdon's orchestral work, blue cathedral, is one of the most performed contemporary orchestral compositions by a living American with more than 600 performances worldwide since its premiere in 2000.*

*One of Higdon's most current projects was an opera based on the best-selling novel, Cold Mountain, by Charles Frazier. It was co-commissioned by Santa Fe Opera, Opera Philadelphia and Minnesota Opera in collaboration with North Carolina Opera. Higdon recently won the International Opera Award for Best World Premiere for this opera.*

*The Singing Rooms, her largest choral-orchestral work to date, was commissioned by the Atlanta Symphony and Chorus, the Minnesota Orchestra and the Philadelphia Orchestra. On the Death of the Righteous, another large choral-orchestral work was commissioned by The Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia.*

Higdon's choral works have been overshadowed by those of other genres, but this is changing, as evidenced in the growing number of prestigious choral organizations performing her works, as well as the substantial and numerous commissions being requested. This serves as evidence of their worthiness of attention and critical scrutiny, bringing them to a level similar to her other genres.

Jennifer Higdon's overall style in these works employs sophisticated forms

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essentially based in traditional constructions, decidedly tonal, yet unique and new in tonal and harmonic colors, refreshing in their distinctive sounds. She normally utilizes relatively short motivic ideas, developing them, expanding them, altering them into high-level fabrics of contrapuntal ideas while employing interesting and complex rhythmic and harmonic notions that align with the text structure, enunciation and delivery. Thorough analysis reveals that Higdon gives careful, implicit attention to the text in every musical element available to her in crafting these compositions. Her works, as articulated to this author by singers and audience members alike, tend to create “atmospheres;” affects, as it were, which at first blush give the impression of being somewhat transparent; seemingly accessible. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the inner complexities of her compositional processes that created these “affects” inform the performer that the complexities present are far more challenging than may have first appeared.

There is not one succinct list of stylistic characteristics that define Higdon’s choral music. Rather, each piece (and each movement within a larger work) is individually crafted with a particular, unique personality. In a sense, she creates musical vignettes; each piece (or movement) is distinguished by certain musical choices connected to the words—directly or indirectly. Each work is further distinguished by a uniqueness of the text itself, and, as the music is inspired by that text, it makes sense that each work would carry a unique presence, rather than offering one overarching, distinctive stylistic flavor that colors all of her choral works.

There are, however, some conclusions that can be drawn in this regard. Each piece represents something of a musical mosaic; specific musical elements and combinations of musical elements are utilized to create form, used to balance unity with variety within each piece (or movement). Musical choices that might brand a given piece are largely unique to that piece (or movement), but are consistently bent to creating an individual, artistic impression—sometimes a very particular impression—that Higdon chooses in which to express the poetry.

This author has had the privilege of conducting a number of Jennifer Higdon’s choral works in live performances with the composer present. This conductor finds her works to be challenging, intriguing, highly effective and inspirational in

rehearsals and performance. Singers, instrumentalists and audience members receive her work with tremendous enthusiasm and appreciation. It is with gratitude to Jennifer Higdon that she has given strong support for this study.

### Higdon’s Choral Works

Higdon’s choral works are abundant, musically diverse and complex. They exist as large form works combined with orchestra, and as small form works performed either a *cappella* or with chamber instruments. The focus of this paper will be to illustrate Higdon’s methods of articulating text by and through various musical elements.

Higdon’s secular works are set in English, but Latin is used in some sacred pieces, *O Magnum Mysterium* and *Sanctus*. Her attention to ensure text comprehension is seen by setting them in English as well as in Latin, eliminating a language barrier for the singer and listener.

Her large form choral works are extensive in illustrating musical elements relating to the text. The large form choral work, *The Singing Rooms*, will be used in this article to display mainstream techniques and provide examples to illuminate stylistic techniques. The work identifies her compositional tendencies and main compositional traits—representative trends and tendencies that will be found in most of her choral compositions. An analysis of any composer’s works in an empirical form of music-text relationship brings with it a degree of subjectivity and interpretation.

The scholar brings his or her expertise to the empirical form, deducing elements of such connection with as keen an eye as s/he is able. To quote Keith C. Burris in his book on Robert Shaw (*Deep River*), in such a work:

“ he discovers how much he does not know, and can never know, about it. He discovers that he cannot, finally, “get to the bottom” of the subject’s nature, though his job is to try. He knows he must be wary of broad claims and generalizations.” “So, (he) creates a portrait. He can only paint from his own perspective and his portrait cannot be other than subjective. For no two people see another in the same way.”<sup>1</sup>

Burris is discussing a biography on Shaw, but his words resonate to this author

as it relates to this empirical analytical discussion.

### Large Form Choral Works

*The Singing Rooms* (2007) is the largest choral work in Jennifer Higdon’s opus. It is a powerful, musical-poetic work, coupling six (6) lyrical poems by Jeanne Minahan into a series of art songs for chorus and orchestra. A tour-de-force violin solo dances throughout the work as a connecting thread: it is, essentially a violin concerto for chorus and orchestra. Higdon’s propensity for music serving the text is evident with the use of the solo violin to personify one’s soul moving through various rooms during one’s “day” seeking its meaning, and metaphorically, the meaning of life. This work is set in seven contiguous movements and in each movement weaving Minahan’s poems, uniquely crafting them to suit each poem. The movements are unified by the violin solo and orchestral interludes, a thematic unity serves to introduce poems or offer reflection upon them.

This is Higdon’s most extensive choral work to date and will serve to illustrate techniques and devices that distinguish her choral writing with respect to its music-text relationship. While this work is abundant in stylistic compositional methods and devices that are essentially consistent throughout Higdon’s choral works, it serves *only as a representation* of her comprehensive techniques.

### Conclusions

Higdon’s complex compositional style does not lend itself to be reduced succinctly. It is hoped that this representative analysis will intrigue the reader, inspiring them to delve further into Higdon’s significant contributions to the choral repertoire and will be of assistance in assessing and approaching her compositions. Higdon continues to add to her work, which is already voluminous, complex, creative, and deep in its offerings to this genre. As she continues to compose in this genre, an analysis of her future works will be eagerly awaited. The music world will be well rewarded by the growing awareness to her choral works and presentation in concert.

A comprehensive listing of her choral works to date is at the end of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Burris, Keith C. *The Life and Music of Robert Shaw*, GIA Publications, Chicago, IL, 2013, p.xi and xii.

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### *The Singing Rooms*

(2007) 37 minutes  
Full Orchestra, Chorus, Violin Solo  
22\*22 43\*31 Timp +2 Hp; Strings  
Poetry: Jeanne Minahan,  
secular

*The Singing Rooms* (2007) was composed in seven contiguous movements, seamlessly constructed, set to six poems by Jeanne Minahan. These poems were carefully selected by the composer from the large collection of poems by Minahan. In her own words, "When I was asked by the Philadelphia Orchestra to write a concerto for violin that would include a choral part, I immediately started searching through all sorts of poetry...the poetry would need to speak to me in order for me to be able to set it to music...the words would need to "invite" setting (her quotation marks)...To create the best form for the piece, I needed a group of poems that would not be too long (because I wanted to create different moods within this large work), and that would fit together somehow thematically... I found what I was looking for...a series of poems that resonated with me and would provide different emotional stings, as if they were lessons in life arranged like different rooms within a house."

Higdon's text selection and anticipated setting in *The Singing Rooms* was paramount in consideration of this work, bearing in mind it was to be set specifically as a violin concerto with orchestra and chorus.

The movements with the distinctive poems are connected by orchestral interludes that are often substantial and complex. These interludes, without exception, foreshadow or reflect the dramatic essence of each poem. As designed as one complete and organic work, no movement from this work can be extrapolated and performed separately. Distinctive musical elements characterize each movement, highlighting a particular poem and personalizing a given movement. Most movements are not, by invention, directly unified or connected to one another by thematic ideas, though the first and last movements, which use the same poem, are sung twice to frame the work (*Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day*). Those movements are varied from one another musically in consort with the poetry—two varied movements representing "two versions of the day," with two settings of that poem.

### Movement 1:

#### *Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day – 3'*

Higdon's dedication to text-mood in music is instantly evident as the orchestral introduction creates an ethereal atmosphere for the mystery of one's day and "rooms in one's life." Decidedly transparent, the introduction creates an affect through ambient percussion, including crotales mounted on timpani played while "pedaling freely," and vibes that are "bowed." Harmonics and 'other-worldly sounds' are plentiful here; many stacked seconds, and lilting, seemingly unmeasured free rhythms are set in counterpoint, representing the mystery of time. The violin solo, prevalent throughout this work, represents an individual—one's soul—traveling from room to room in search of "the day's" meaning.

This movement is characterized by secundal harmony, quintal writing, and the presence of Lydian mode, especially in the solo violin part. Lydian mode is found frequently in Higdon's choral works, usually for moments of uplift, or especially ethereal passages—as in this introduction. The opening choral section is built on open fifths—that are actually the tuning notes of the violin, G-D-A-E—representing the spaciousness of the rooms, the expansiveness of the soul, and directly linking the chorus to the violin. See Figure 1.

The image shows a musical score for the introduction and first choral entrance of 'Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day' from 'The Singing Rooms' by Jennifer Higdon. The score is written for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and Piano. The lyrics are: 'Three win - dows... of - fer two ver - sions... of the day...'. The piano part features a complex, rhythmic accompaniment with many stacked seconds and lilting rhythms.

**Figure 1.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 7-12, intro and first choral entrance  
Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].  
Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan

Higdon frequently constructs distinct sections of music coupled to specific sections of text; musical form closely aligned with poetic form. Music-for-music's-sake per se, is almost non-existent in her choral works, even when significant contrapuntal development is employed. Phrases of text are stated, sometimes succinctly, and then expanded simultaneously with musical motives and

contrapuntal development. There are a number of such sections in *Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day*, with intervening instrumental interludes that reflect upon the text just sung.

One tendency of Higdon's overall style is found here—short sections of music, constructed on motives that expand, evolve, develop and

grow to a peak which then repose in a cadential formula. In this fashion, her music is essentially through composed, unified by musical elements, identifiable harmonic choices, rhythmic motives, and the like, and almost always framed with musical ideas connected to text meaning. She is inherently sensitive to structure and the need for thematic unification and structural balance, never losing sight of the text in the process of

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musical creation of a section, or an entire work (small forms).

Attention to clarity of text in her choral offerings is ever-present. Orchestral density and complexities most often occur at times when the chorus is not singing; and then instrumentation thins out when the chorus enters. There are also a number of sections of chordal writing for the

chorus, considered “choral chant” or “choral recitative,” where a portion of text is enunciated without much melodic variance, and rhythms align with natural scansion and syllabic inflection. This type of choral setting is a hallmark of many of her choral pieces.

Higdon often utilizes parallel harmonic motion (planing) heightening the affect of approaching

cadences. The following section of “choral chant” demonstrates her use of parallel harmonic motion in a descending section, as she references the closing of the window’s “blinds,” one can visualize the blinds closing as the lines descend. See Figure 2.

The musical score for Figure 2 shows four vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and an orchestral accompaniment. The lyrics are: "the sec-ond bright heat bare-ly held back by the ve - ne - tian blind." The music is in 3/4 time and features parallel harmonic motion in the vocal lines, with dynamics ranging from *mp* to *p*. The orchestral part includes complex textures with dynamics from *mp* to *f*.

**Figure 2.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 18-22  
Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].  
Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan

A variation of choral chant or choral recitative is often found in these works to deliver text transparently. Higdon also crafts choral sections that are narrow in contour, somewhat in the style of an art song with lines that are lyric and expressive, where rhythm, text and modest melodic motion are intimately bound for sensitive poetic expression.

In the following excerpt, Figure 3, the text “the couch, the desk, bookshelves,” is set in such a fashion. The voices are almost completely subservient to the poetry, sung in constant parallel thirds, with rhythms that clearly articulate the scansion of the poetry with natural text inflections. Musically, it is set simplistically describing the setting of the room. Harmonically, there is a whole tone scale—Lydian mode based on G—that

depicts the peacefulness of the room and the sunlit setting. Again, the descending thirds seem to indicate the “thin cloths of light, lingering and sliding,” indicated in the poetry. In this moment harmony, rhythm, melody, mode, and transparency of orchestration are subservient to the poem. This is very typical of Higdon’s musical crafting in the poem.

The musical score for Figure 3 shows a Soprano vocal part and an orchestral accompaniment. The lyrics are: "The couch, the desk, book - shelves, the bed, they sub - mit each morn - ing to the thin cloths of light that drape, lin - ger and slide a -". The music is in 3/4 time and features constant parallel thirds in the vocal line, with dynamics ranging from *p* to *mp*. The orchestral part includes complex textures with dynamics from *mp* to *f*.

**Figure 3.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 33-38  
Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].  
Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan

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In the following excerpt (Figure 4), another simple, yet effective Higdon-esque device is seen, as homophony gives way to lyric, woven lines of descending counterpoint. It is most often the bass voice that serves in this “rogue” function, but in the following case, the staggered entrances are from both of the men’s voices, depicting

a “day” that is transpiring. In this case, the tenors (imitating the soprano line a half beat later) hand the voice off to the basses, who resolve ultimately to the root of the harmony, characterizing the decaying evolution of ‘time’ on this day. This technique of chordal sections of music consists essentially when one or two rogue

voices weave through an otherwise homophonic texture. This helps to demonstrate one method of mood-coloring present in her writing as one can almost “see” the light diminishing, as the lines descend.

**Figure 4.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 44-46  
Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].  
Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan

Rhythm, meter and text are commonly woven together in an intimate web of musicality using choral-chant with attention to the text and its natural inflection and stresses. Often, sections using choral-chant are begun with short motives, and then to heighten emphasis and drama, are expanded by adding more words or syllables, repeating words and adding lines of poetry. When mixed meter or asymmetrical meter is used during choral portions, it brings new meaning to specific text or by altering the text to bring heightened attention. She often employs “rhythmic metamorphosis” in developing motivic statements, using one rhythmic figure then adjusting it in a way that objectifies the text. One type of altered

meter was seen in Figure 2. MM 18-22, when the meter is changed from 3/4 to 4/4 with descending voices indicating the light blocked by the partially closed “blinds.”

Another instance of rhythm and meter to objectify the text is found in her treatment of the word “blue,” symbolic for light coming through the windows at the break of day as this movement builds to its peak. Construction coupled with motivic development and altered textures and rhythms approaching a peak is a common trait in Higdon’s works. Figure 5 also demonstrates her rare but effective use of root movements by tritones. In MM 53, 54 and 56, the roots go from B to F, for the word ‘blue’ in MM55, from B Major to G

Major (root of a third) for an essence of comfort, which is more common in her choral works.

Figure 5 also illustrates the highpoint of this movement, and Higdon uses altered rhythmic entrances and meter to help accomplish this affect. Note that here also, the voices are in homophony, with harmonic alterations (B Major to F Major) repeatedly, roots of a tritone, then B Major to G Major, roots of a third, much more “consonant” and peaceful, returning, however, to the tritone movement to end this section. This emphasizes the volatility of life, and translucence of light.

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**As Represented In Her Large Form Choral Work, *The Singing Rooms***

**Figure 5.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 53-58, *Blue*  
 Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].  
 Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan

The first movement is constructed in seven short sections, the longest of which is eight measures with interludes spliced together by orchestra and violin solo. The sections are essentially chordal, homophonic, with brief iterations of counterpoint that occur at the end of phrases during final words (or syllables) that illuminate the meaning of a particular word. There are six succinct lines of poetry with the opening line repeated at the end, framing the movement. This symmetry (unity and balance) is found almost without exception in Higdon's choral pieces (or movements within pieces).

Short segments of text set to short motives of music abound, clearly articulating the poetry in natural text inflection without interference or complex musical development of the vocal parts. The longest sections are recitative-like, delivering a large amount of text quickly and transparently. This movement features open fifths and stacked seconds placed on certain syllables for color and choral chant and homophonic writing, with parallelism at key moments. One will find the use of parallelism/planing is also found in orchestral portions of music underneath the chorus.

The composer often varies textures by techniques such as voice exchange or a varied coupling of voices which augment specific portions text when repeated. These devices are normally found at the culmination of homophonic sections of

music, varying the music while accentuating certain words. In this movement, the repeated verse is found in the penultimate section of music, rather than at the very end.

*Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day* concludes with a tense orchestral bridge highlighting the dramatic mystery of the "windows" present within the rooms. This segues quickly into a single, repeated note, rhythmically varied in the solo violin and is expanded through considerable rhythmic metamorphosis segueing into the next movement indicating the soul's anxiousness of the journey, the next room to seek out.

**Movement 2:**  
***Things Aren't Always – 3'***

The introduction to this movement is lengthy, with motivic development lasting 79 measures. The chorus enters, with a succinct motive that defines this movement—a two-note, half-step motive, incessantly altered rhythmically. This motive revolves around one note "E," rising subtly and falling... It is clear, that "always" in the poem is identified by that note "E." As things are not always predicable or consistent in life, it is likewise represented by the incessant alterations and adjustments around that note, yet return to it in time. See Figure 6. MM 80-81.

**Figure 6.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*,  
 MM 80-81  
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The poetry is such that, in Higdon's words, "...things in life are always changing, always moving... not at all what they seem." The chorus again is in choral chant mode—moving in parallel motion, in parallel chords. The violin's E-F note alteration motive becomes the alternating chords of e minor and F Major in the chorus at the onset. The chorus never utters a complete, continuous phrase of text or musical theme rather, they articulate a splice of poetry, "Things aren't always," as the inference of that text is musically articulated in the orchestral writing.

In this movement, short poetic phrases are set to very short sections of music: the phrases are then bridged by a few orchestral measures. Subtle harmonic variations occur, clearly coupled with text meaning. The poetic phrase, "not every newborn cries in hunger," is distinctly set from the previous phrase, alternating by thirds, e minor and G Major, carefully set to these triads and in parallel motion. The word "cries" is set to an F Major triad—a

moment of relative harmonic reprieve, then the music quickly returns to the e minor norm that governs this movement. Such sections of parallelism define this particular movement, as do broken phrases. See Figure 7. MM 85-86.

Even tonality for sections of choral writing reflect this—the first section ends in e minor on the word "hunger," while the next section is set to the text, "Not every dog barks," starts in F Major portraying the dogs that do "not bark." Sections of choral writing are incessantly alternating with orchestral commentary, yet the choral sections are connected in poetic thought, overarching continuity and musical motives. The incessant motion of the solo violin represents unsettled life amidst constant changes, and the chorus breaks the rhythm matching the text, "break our heart." See Figure 8. MM 103-106.

**Figure 7.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*,  
MM 85-86  
Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].  
Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan

**Figure 8.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 103-106  
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Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan

Concluding this movement is a protracted, developmental interlude, referencing the dominating motive, while escalating rhythmic energies that intensify the unpredictability in life builds to a peak, then transitions directly into the introduction of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Consistent in Higdon's work, each movement carries a unique character defining that section. The next movement has a very different melodic motive written for its very different text. With a sudden shift in dynamics, tempo, and orchestration, an atmosphere of an eerie, dream-like aura is created to connect movements 2 and 3 by use of the half-step motive referencing the previous movement, over-laced with the

violin in Lydian mode. In this fashion, structure is all-important in Higdon's writing—there is organic continuity within movements, connecting them, and also in an over-arching fashion for a composition. In her methods of musical construction, text and text meaning is not forfeited in the process..

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### Movement 3: *The Interpretation of Dreams – 6'*

In this movement, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the poetry indicates a dream-like atmosphere that Higdon orchestrates in an ethereal, other-worldly aura, with ambient percussion sounds. The melodic theme is akin to other motives in the work, as it begins with a short statement, expanding to an evolving melody. However, it contrasts with previous movements as it is a longer, more legato and lyric line, using wider intervals, ascending to a major sixth, melodically describing the elevation of a dream. In Higdon's words, she set the underlay of this "with a gentle, boat rocking sensation." She states this short poem three times because of its brevity, and symbolically, in her words "because it is the third poem in the set." This melody begins in a pentatonic motive, adding tones later, using a subliminal harmonic device of

Lydian mode based on F in the orchestration. This is consistent with her use of Lydian mode associated with certain kinds of texts. However, as the melody evolves, it evolves to Mixolydian based on F (Octatonicism is present as she mixes modes), (finding B flat and E flat, in the scale) set to the text "a new laugh, an old hush." "Old" and "new" then, are set in a mode other than was first found in the melodic scale. The word "hush" ends the phrase on open fifths (D/A); the "hush" is musically delivered via that spacious interval. The longer, more lyric motive, the use of mixed modes and open fifths, typifies this particular movement and colors the "dream."

What is customary about this in Higdon's overall style is that she starts out with a short motive, then expands it, develops it and alters it (the mode and corresponding melodic and harmonic material) as she simultaneously expands text. It is also

common to find her octatonic scale combining tones from the Lydian and Mixolydian modes in the same scale. This motive begins with unison sopranos then adds the alto line for texture (in unison, as a color choice), then adds the male voices in open fifths as the "hush" takes on gravitas. Her use of descending parallel chords in the orchestra—descending chromatically from F to D (in open fifths) at the cadence, enhances the essence of the dream expressed via the women's voices. This use of textures and texture combinations is evidence of the way she enhances textual colors within a poetic line. While underneath the final "hush," the orchestration moves in roots by thirds—D-F-A flat, a propensity of Higdon's during moments of peace, repose, consonance. Figure 9. MM 174-181.

**Figure 9.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 174-181  
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The second iteration of this poem repeats the main melodic motive, now with sopranos and tenors in octaves. Texture choices here create the variety and enhance color in the motive and in this iteration, the vocal line is now in Lydian mode based on F—the B natural distinguishes and characterizes the dream-like state. To further diffuse harmonic

predictability, this Lydian mode is short-lived, descending on tones foreign to that mode, finding an E flat on the word "cello." Now a 7-tone melody, octatonic in nature, the specific number of tones Higdon favors in her extended melodies.

The orchestra meanwhile consists of descending, parallel chords, starting on

beat 3 of MM 191, progressing as follows: B flat-A7-G-F-E flat-D flat-BM-A flat, beneath the F Lydian mode, diffusing the two modes while enhancing a morphine-like state. This descending, parallel progression is stepwise until the final two chords, which is a third-Higdon's preferred root movements for conveying an essence of serenity. See Figure 10.

## Music-Text Relationship in the Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon As Represented In Her Large Form Choral Work, *The Singing Rooms*

Figure 10 shows a musical score for measures 188-193 of Jennifer Higdon's *The Singing Rooms*. It features vocal parts for Soprano (S) and Tenor (T) and an Orchestral (Orch) accompaniment. The lyrics are: "If I told you my dream (the one on a boat); if I told you how I read your dream, your dream with a cel - lo: a". The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *mp*, and *mf*.

**Figure 10.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 188-193  
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In a lengthy orchestral section, developing materials from the previous section, parallelism in chords is found in the upper "voices," while the boat-rocking essence is heard in the violin and trumpet solos, enhancing and contributing to this dream-like state of the poem in Lydian mode. See Figure 11. MM 204-206. This kind of underscoring in the orchestra, reinforcing the poetry, permeates this entire work. Underscoring can be seen in Higdon's accompanied small form choral works as well, and musical bridges frequently appear in chamber instruments (solo flutes, for example in *O Magnum Mysterium*) between main sections of poetry and musical ideas where they often use the ideas that preceded that interlude, referencing its dramatic mood.

Higdon again constructs this movement to a highpoint then settles into repose. However, an unusual trait of her work is found here. The peak of this movement occurs during the dream itself—during the orchestral interlude—rather than in the choral section and then reposes into the third iteration of the poem.

The third iteration of the poem has expanded into three-voice counterpoint, intertwining the soprano, alto and tenor voices. We witness here another device that distinguishes Higdon's work, now the primary motive is set in alternating voices—a form of voice-exchange (she will sometimes do this with words or syllables alternated in different voices, in a quasi-pointillistic fashion). The main motive is

exchanged between the sopranos and tenors, the altos entering to enhance color. In this case, the sopranos begin; the tenors take it from them then return it to the sopranos. See Figure 12. MM 211-215.

Structurally another idiosyncratic trait of Higdon's writing emerges, as changing textures align with form. Here, counterpoint segues into homophony for the cadence, culminating in open fourths. A codetta follows in the orchestra, using materials taken from the interlude, then segues and evolves seamlessly into the fourth movement, *Confession*. The principle theme for this is shown above in Figure 10, while relevant to this article, the lengthy end of this movement is more than can be shown. The author refers the reader to the score itself.

Figure 11 shows an orchestral score for measures 204-206 of Jennifer Higdon's *The Singing Rooms*. The score is for the Orchestral (Orch) part and includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *loco*.

**Figure 11.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 204-206  
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Figure 12 shows a musical score for measures 211-215 of Jennifer Higdon's *The Singing Rooms*. It features vocal parts for Soprano (S), Alto (A), and Tenor (T) and an Orchestral (Orch) accompaniment. The lyrics are: "If I told you my dream if I told you how I read your dream with a cel - lo: a new your dream with a cel - lo: a new (the one on a boat); your dream with a cel - lo: a new". The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *mf*, and *pp*.

**Figure 12.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 211-215  
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## Music-Text Relationship in the Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon As Represented In Her Large Form Choral Work, *The Singing Rooms*

### Movement 4: *Confession – 6'40"*

Movements 3 and 4 are linked directly by poetic ideas; the former referencing a dream-like euphoria, the latter beginning in a dream-state of a very different nature, "Once I slept all night without dreaming." Before the poem is introduced, the orchestra puts us on notice to be prepared for a very different emotional state, a "dreamless" one. Higdon chose these two poems to be closely connected with one another for this work.

As in the segue from movements 2 to 3, the segue from movement 3 to 4 is instantaneous. *Confession* commences with a rhythmic, agitated, animated violin solo, which begins on a two-note motive (E and F natural) much like the second movement. Using rapid 16th note patterns, it quickly expands to include another note, then two more, and so on, culminating in a

frenzied melodic and emotional state. This embodies the angst one might experience approaching and anticipating one's "confession." Musical complexities in the orchestration instantly and increasingly heighten and evolve, intensifying the mood. Higdon offers her basis for this movement's setting, stating: "the fragility of handing over a confession to another is sometimes anxiety producing." Represented in this 37-measure preamble, includes dramatic counterpoint, repeated and multiplied stacked seconds and octatonic writing, all driven by incessant, agitated rhythms.

In anticipation of the entrance of the chorus and the first line of this poem, "Once I slept all night without dreaming," this dramatic interlude thins out and relaxes, as if sleeping "within a small, summer flower." Two Higdon-esque things occur here—the motive begins on a single note, expanding and adding voices, developing the melodic motive via expanded intervals almost

literally demonstrating the opening of a flower. (Figure 13. MM 266-267). She uses the imitative entrances of male voices followed by women's voices to indicate the flower "opening up," by the ascending vocal additions. In this way, she is using the expanded interval technique coupled with the texture of voice interchange and counterpoint to create a visual-aural poetic image, and even motion (this is a common device in her works, crafted to specific moments like this). In the descent of the same phrase, the flower "encircles her," and the voices now "fold" downward, women to men, descending and ending on the word "warmth." Musically, this "flower" embraces and folds around one warmly. An orchestral interlude ensues, returning to the 16th note driving rhythms in lower orchestration, set now in Lydian mode based on B flat, reminding us we are in "confession." See Figure 13 MM 264-272.

**Figure 13.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 264-272  
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In the next poetic phrase, "And I've taken tears from an earthen bowl," Higdon's harmonic technique of stacked seconds predominate and distinguishes this movement. She continues this technique into the next phrase, starting in added seconds, descending now in added tones (seconds) to the text "a basin born of rib and hip. I drank, and stand in sweet drunkenness." Here, she uses parallelism at the conclusion of a section, with resolution to a triad – "as I drank in sweet drunkenness." The tight harmonies (chords) descend in parallel motion, indicating the "sweet" stupor of one's condition, cadencing on a B flat Major triad, resolving in consonance to a triad follows the more dense writing that is stylistically indicative of her writing.

The incessant 16th notes again present themselves in an extended orchestral interlude. This harmonic device is seen now in women's voices to the text "Once I dressed in luminous dust," in descending, seconds, yielding to added note chords. When the text, "and set myself spinning in the Pleiades," appears, she sets this to a 6-note melody. In Higdon's own words, regarding this constellation: "An interesting note, "Pleiades" is mentioned in the 3rd stanza...its meaning: an open star cluster in the constellation Taurus, which consists of several hundred stars, only 6 visible to the human eye. I found this particular tidbit fascinating mostly because, before reading the definition, I had written a 6-note figure for the violin that occurs repeatedly within this movement." The chorus also has a 6-note motive set in Lydian mode on F, then moving to

Lydian mode on E flat. Higdon's use of modal exchange is common, octatonic in nature, creating colorful cross relations and textural effects in the music, here representing the delirium of the "spinning" in the text up to the constellation.

One sees in the example below, careful selection of voices as the individual is set "spinning," breathless, uttering in imitative entrances "just to be seen," arriving in homophony on the text "among the seen." This confession comes to peace on a G Major triad. In many of Higdon's works, there is a "home" chord; a place of repose used often—in *The Singing Rooms*, that home chord is often G Major, appearing in the midst of and at the culmination of dense musical complexities, counterpoint, harmonic dissonances and the like. See Figure 14. MM 301-306.



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An involved section of orchestral restlessness ensues, containing numerous seconds, complex, driving rhythmic figures, and parallelism in harmonic structures. Whereas in movement 3, the orchestral portion contained the peak, in movement 4, the peak here is in the chorus, as discussed above, as they sing the text: "I admit I've listened to the whistling of God." See Figure 16. MM320.

Higdon is constantly conscious of form and continuity in her works, often framing a movement (and an entire work) with similar material-musical bookends, if you will—providing unity and continuity. Regardless of the development that ensued within the movement, she will start and finish a movement with linked musical ideas, music

320

S  
I ad-mit I've lis-tened to the

A  
I ad-mit I've lis-tened to the

T  
I ad-mit I've lis-tened to the

B  
I ad-mit I've lis-tened to the

Orch.

**Figure 16.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*,  
MM 320-321  
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that reflects the implicit nature of the poetry. Such is the case here, the violin begins *Confession* with the rhythmic motive of angst associated with confession, used in the interlude, appearing again at the end of this section. This maintains an essence of energy and unsettledness that defines this particular portion of the work and this poem. The violin line is rhythmically augmented, relaxing, yet culminating into the same minor second motives that began the movement that connected it to movement 3, yet bridges it to movement 5. These are almost leitmotifs in this work. Figure 17. MM 223-225 and MM 398-402 shows the violin motive at the beginning of movement 4, and at the end.

"Confession"

223 ♩=108

Orch.

398

Orch.

**Figure 17.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 223-225 and MM 398-402  
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### **Movement 5: *History Lesson – 3'***

This is the shortest movement in the work, lasting but three minutes. From Higdon's comments, it may well be inferred this was intentional, as historical memory seems to be so very short, rendering one hesitant to learn lessons from the past, and we are, therefore, doomed to repeat such lessons.

A field drum articulating an undulating rhythm offers a bit of musical trepidation from the start. Again the use of a single, repeated note (E) is set it rhythmic motives in the percussion, subsequently uttered in a rhythmically staggered choral line in the

tenors, connected musically to previous movements. The use of that tone, in varied rhythmic and melodic motives, is one unifying principle in this work. This single-note motive is offered on staggered, shifting beats in the tenor line that defy predictability—they are not symmetrical nor predictable—the utterances of tones and rests continually vary, as does the unpredictable progression of history.

Meanwhile in the orchestral strings, quintal and secundal writing occur in separate rhythmic motives distinct from what is given to the singers, as an unsettling, cross-rhythmic underlay. This enhances an element of uncertainty in

support of the text. In the instance of *History Lesson*, it appears that there is a high degree of instability present, given unpredictable rhythms in a single note motive, with the orchestral overlay punctuating and coloring one, single repeated word "How" for the chorus. Higdon often couples quintal and secundal writing to characterize a movement or a composition, which is the case here. It takes 18 measures of such iterations before a second word of text is even present. This opening is seen below, in Figure 18.

## Music-Text Relationship in the Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon As Represented In Her Large Form Choral Work, *The Singing Rooms*

403  $\text{♩} = 108$  "History Lesson" (possibly add B1) *p*

**Figure 18.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 403-408, Opening of Movement 5  
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The complete opening line of text, once utilized, “How brief the pause between despair and comfort,” here brief pauses are ingeniously represented by the intermittent use of rests, and the repetitions of the single word –“how”– demonstrates hesitations throughout history. Once it progresses, this fragmented motive is a narrow interval of only a major second (D natural to E natural) anticipating the next section of poetry. Higdon uses textural changes, alternating fragmented rhythmic motives with a succession of parallel

chords in a comparatively lyric moment. For example, for the text “how eternal,” a four-part male chorus sings E minor to F Major triads, expressing the “eternal.” The next motive returns to the use of the D natural to E natural for the phrase, “How small the space between window and frame.” Set in alternating notes a major second apart broken with rhythmic interruptions, it musically illustrates the metaphor of the narrow space between the window and frame. See Figure 19. MM 421-424.

Once again, musical devices are employed to affect a few words. For the text, “How cold the wind,” altos are added to the voicing, rhythmic values are augmented, chordal, parallel writing are used to characterize the bitter, blowing chill of the wind. Here, textures, harmony, and rhythmic augmentation are combined to emphasis small portions of poetry. See Figure 19. MM 425-431.

**Figure 19.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 421-424 and MM 425-431  
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## Music-Text Relationship in the Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon As Represented In Her Large Form Choral Work, *The Singing Rooms*

One of the more riveting moments of her writing, and a peak of this movement, is when B Major and C Major chords are set for the chorus to express the text, “Teach me which of the stars have shifted,” physically shifting the stars in harmonically alternating motions as seen in Figure 20, and is a musically and a poetically stunning moment in the work. This demonstrates just how detailed her work is in this regard, ultimately delivering text in an intrinsically powerful, descriptive manner. Short motives placed within a brief movement, in Higdon’s own words, was done in such a manner as “an intentional decision to reflect on how we seem to remember the lessons of history for such short moments of time.

Sometimes, a moment of choral chant delivers a large amount of text quickly (in recitative-like fashion), choral chant is used to deliver the phrase “Show me the overlooked weed, infection, accounting mistake. Adjust my glasses, hearing, fingertips.” rapidly articulated in parallel, relatively static harmonic motion seen below in Figure 21.

**Figure 20.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 434-435  
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**Figure 21.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 442-444  
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Higdon then moves to a broader, augmented, homophonic moment, to a sub-peak in this movement. Somewhat indicative of her compositional tendencies, in this short movement, it is built in two sections that ascend to two separate peaks: the first peak moment contains root movements by thirds. This is followed by a parallel chordal progression to the text, “Point me to” (roots by thirds) “the abandoned faith” (descending, parallel motion), the parallel chords that descend on “abandoned faith” is quite literal text painting, harmonically and melodically.

After another orchestral reflection, we return to a reference of the opening motive set in the altos, a staggered, unpredictable broken rhythm, on an F natural. This lasts for four (4) measures, as the word “when” (Figure 22. MM 456-457) replaces the word “how” that opened the movement. This is a frustrated urging,

querying “when” lessons will be learned, in a brilliant use of texture for word depiction, women’s voices are used to raise the question of “when” warfare will terminate, as males (who earlier asked the question, “how,”) historically are more likely to wage war. The movement ensues, as “Rising gestures and falling gestures” (Higdon’s words) are seen here in short articulations set in female voices for the text, “...and when the day dims, light the largest fire, cliff high.” The treble voices ascend in parallel motion with the arched contour of this phrase graphically indicating the rising flames of a warning fire. The intensity and urgency of that flame is heard in added seconds, found on specific words or short phrases. See Figure 22. MM 461-462.

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**Figure 22.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 456-457 and MM 461-462  
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The “history lesson” continues when the female voices offer, “And when they tell the story of these sad times, Remember,” the chorus implores us to “remember,” in unison (not octaves, but unison), set in alto and tenor parts asking us to learn from history. We return then to the two-note, whole tone phrase set in broken irregular rhythms in a section of quick choral recitative, to spare the other ships these treacherous rocks.

The first section was set on the word “how,” the second section, “when,” and in

the third and final we are urged to learn lessons of history “to spare others” the calamities endured. The incessant, driving, broken rhythms in the music indicate that these lessons are ongoing, unresolved, as yet, unlearned and unstable. The orchestration underscores all of this by augmenting, relaxing and concluding in musical resignation and a cadential section that descends and ends with tritones in the melody—which is fairly unusual for Higdon—an unstable interval heard here for the unresolved lessons.

This moves us instantly into the 6th movement, *A Word with God*. The end of the 5th movement and the beginning of the 6th are the most self-reflective, internally gazing moments of the work, as personified in the orchestra. Here we are we progressing from confession through unlearned lessons of history, into a conversation with our maker, as indicated in the title. See Figure 23.

**Figure 23.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 485-490  
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## Music-Text Relationship in the Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon As Represented In Her Large Form Choral Work, *The Singing Rooms*

### Movement 6: *A Word With God – 9'05"*

This is the most extensive movement of the work, which begins with one of the quietest, most transparent moments in the work, a ballet-like, free flowing conversation between solo violin and English horn. This extended duet, threading two lines of counterpoint together lasting 24 measures in an extremely slow, free flowing tempo is an intimate, personal conversation between an individual (the violin) and God (English

horn). As expressed by Higdon, "For a composer, it is intimidating to think of how one sets into music such a thing as speaking to God...But I love the idea of staring it as an intimate conversation, so I wrote a duet between the English Horn and solo violin, which eventually evolves into a series of emotions and conversations, adding voices and varying degrees of urgency." (Note that Higdon references the construction of this movement entirely by the sense of the poetry—not referencing her

musical idioms or ideas—but in terms of the text and "characters.")

This soulful duet is the introduction to the return of the chorus, orchestra and final poem. Starting in the soprano line, subsequently adding altos, tenors and basses to the text "And finally, we ask ourselves, where did we spend our days." a profound poetic question that we indeed ask ourselves and ponder with whom, or what, we perceive God to be. See Figure 24.

The image shows a musical score for measures 511 and 512. It includes four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and an orchestral staff. The lyrics are "And, fi - nal - ly, we". The tempo is marked "And" and the dynamics are "p" (piano). The music is in a slow, free-flowing tempo.

**Figure 24.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 511-512  
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The mystical nature of the *Three Windows: Two Versions of a Day* recurs here in musical devices (leitmotifs) now associated with this poem. The technique of descending voice assignments and counterpoint is a device we have seen throughout this work, bringing attention to certain words or phrases. In this case, the singers are soul-searching, breathing—sighing—as the motives initially ascend then descend, evolving imitatively from higher to lower voices. The texture and contours here seem to indicate that we have come to the end of our desperate, futile attempts; perhaps we are near the end of human understanding and striving, searching for wisdom, (knowledge) grace, and internal peace. The descending motives, set in Lydian mode based on F, cascading voices from top to bottom, perhaps serving as an

aural effect of one's resignation, acceptance, or search for a degree of tranquility.

A large, developmental peak serves as the "peak movement" for the entire 40-minute work, this section is decidedly more complex, extended, expanded and dense than ever before. A poly-tonal section appears (the only time we find such writing it in this work). Here, women's voices are set to harmonies in direct tonal contrast to those set for the men. This peak portion of the work begins with the statement, "Standing on a far shore, uncertain of the hour or day..." with the women articulating a G-7 chord, against D-minor 9 in the male voices, moving to F-Major 7th against B flat, then D7 with G Major underneath. The separation of one "standing on a far shore,"

removed from home, family, familiarity, safety and security, is musically represented by polytonality, and the separation further enhanced by the gender-specific voicing. See Figure 25.

A staggered, imbalanced rhythmic device again appears, similar in effect to the one found in *History Lesson*. The text, "In a quiet, not quiet," is uttered a number of times in off-beat, staggered rhythmic fragments, indicating restlessness, one's search for peace and inner quiet that is elusive in our quest for that still, "quiet" voice. The composer sets this to varying rhythmic fragments in upper voices, on parallel chords adding gravitas as we approach the peak for this section of music. See Figure 26. MM 529-532.



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Amidst an already dense, intense, evolving, almost unraveling section of music, the peak section occurs as the chorus emerges from this wild orchestral passage on the text, "Wild One, your magnetic love draws me, polar eclipse and warm. You are the paradox towards which I tend. You are the ache, I don't need to speak, you are the name of all names." Lydian mode on D is dominant here, for an uplifting, exhilarating section of music.

Showing the center of this profound, cataclysmic section of music, in one sees parallel ascending chords in arched contour uplifting referencing to God, set in homophony, Figure 28. MM 578-580 shows the ending of the section, where Higdon once again employs voice separation and counterpoint at the culmination of the line in descending voices, representing the gravity for the name of all names, culminating on a D Major triad. Higdon

again uses the male voices in descending in counterpoint from the women voices, as they evolve downward indicating the gravity of "God," as the "name among all names." This is a weighty, profound section of music and text, and without question, serves as the ultimate peak of this entire work; where orchestral and choral forces are gathered together. Figure 28. MM 570-580.

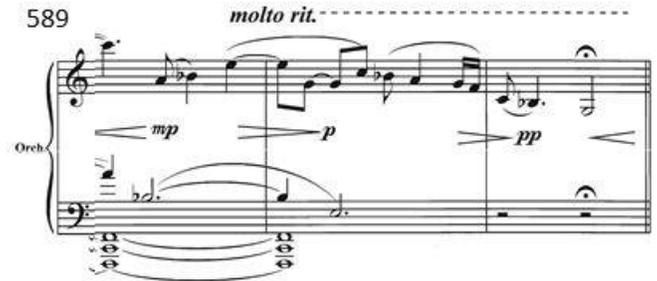
**Figure 28.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 570-580  
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The ensuing orchestral interlude and violin solo is a repeated motive recurring throughout the work, dance-like, celebrative arpeggio-like motive, taking us to the end of this movement. The violin solo, Figure 29. MM 582, emerges from the fray, first representing the overwhelming essence of this moment, then moving to a more personal sense of resolve, ends in a descending, octatonic motive see Figure 30. MM 589-591. This kind of quasi-leitmotivic development, instrumental writing to underscore particular poetic essence coupled with musical ideas that unify the work, is a hallmark of Higdon's choral music.



**Figure 29.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 582-583  
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**Figure 30.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 589-291  
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This segues into a poly-tonal section in parallel chords for the orchestra, while altos articulate the text in an octatonic melody borrowed from the violin's motive (see Figure 30. MM 593-604), set to the Irish proverb, "Your feet will bring you to where your heart is."

According to the composer, "I wanted to carry the listener back to the original room of three windows, now with a new view of the day...at its end...and inevitably, your feet *will* bring you to where your heart is." (punctuation, italicization Higdon's). Her musical

intention is clear: it is on the poetry, its inherent meaning, brought to light and enhanced through her music.

The section begins with a unison alto line and voices are subsequently added to 3-part women, and then male voices join the texture. There are three iterations of this line of text, adding voices in mid-phrase which underscores particular syllables of text, culminating peacefully with a G Major triad, on "where the heart is." See Figure 31. MM 604.



**Figure 31.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 593-604  
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### **Movement 7: Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day – 4'37"**

There is a momentary pause, a silent repose, at this point, the only time prolonged silence occurs throughout this work.

The chorus re-enters, singing again on the open fifths of the violin tuning once more, *Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day*, the second version, contrasting rhythmically and

metrically from the first movement now set in 4/4 instead of 3/4 time, and quarter notes augment the original setting, which was originally set in eighth notes. Some things immediately reminding us of the opening section of the work: the exact text, for example—but there are "two versions of the day," and now, two "versions" of music, as well. In Higdon's words, "The second setting of this poem presents the second version of the day: a view at the

close in the day of life...a return to the original poem, but with wisdom gained and all seen in a new light." The following example (Figure 32) shows the presence of descending, contrapuntal lines in the alto and bass lines that offer variety and change, when compared to the first movement. Our perception of the day has changed, at the close of this "day."

More variations occur throughout this final section; tenors and altos enter into

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a contrapuntal dance to the text, "Inside, the blue falls across the small kitchen," compared to the first section, these were unison lines. The text, "And angles into the living room," is now set for sopranos and tenors, instead of a unison tenor line: more voices have been added, entering into voice

exchange and interplay. The musical textures create an impression of growth, of change, of maturation within the individual during the progression of this "day." The peak of this movement—and it is an understated peak—arrives in homophony, "both are here, though you cannot be," this time without imitation as

found in the first movement. We have now entered the room together in spirit and this poetry is now set in parallel chordal structure, something we have seen before in cadential sections of her music. See Figure 33.

**"Three Windows: Two Versions of the Day"**

605

S *p* *mp*  
Three win - dows of - fer two ver - sions of the

A *p* *mp*  
Three win - dows of - fer two ver - sions of the day,

T *p* *mp*  
Three win - dows of - fer two ver - sions of the day,

B *p* *mp*  
Three win - dows of - fer two ver - sions of the day,

Choir:  
*p* *mp* *p*

Orch. *p* *mp* *p*

**Figure 32.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 605-609  
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636 *mf* *mp* *pp* *mp* *pp*

S shape. Both are here, though you can - not be:

A Both are here, though you can - not be:

T Both are here, though you can - not be:

B Both are here, though you can - not be:

Orch. *mf* *mp* *mf* *mp*

**Figure 33.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 636-639  
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## Music-Text Relationship in the Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon As Represented In Her Large Form Choral Work, *The Singing Rooms*

Higdon is ever-mindful of symmetry in her works, and this multi-sectional composition concludes much as it begins. Simple, choral lines begin this final section, in transparent voice layering, a hint of voice exchange of tenors to altos appear for the final text of the poetry: “that heat, that long shade of blue.” The reader will recall the word “blue” occurring early in this work at a climatic point, representing light and life: now it is the final word, at the final moment of the “day,” now set quietly, in unison tones, reflective, unifying.

After all of the complexities of this work, a single line of text is extended, through voice exchange, melting into the orchestral fabric: the sopranos, finally joined by basses, then altos and tenors, subtly, on the vowel “ooo” from the word “blue,” the unison “oo” vowel and unison tone musically representing pure color and unification of light. The voices disappear, evaporate, melt into the serene tones of the violin and percussion as the light of this day fades out, as this day draws to a close. The final statement is in the violin on harmonics

with solo percussion (crotales on the timpani again), in a moving, haunting, ethereal closing to an otherwise complex, complicated work of poetry and music.

While the chorus delivers the poetry for the work, it is the orchestra that has the first and last say to the piece, offering a prelude and a postlude for Minahan’s words. These orchestral “bookends” anticipate and then reflect upon the essence of the poetry. The orchestration once again thins out, returning to the violin solo and ambient percussion to close the piece. See Figure 34.

The musical score for measures 642-649 of Jennifer Higdon's *The Singing Rooms* is presented. It features four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and an orchestral staff. The lyrics are: "that heat, that long shade of blue." The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *mp*, *pp*, and *niente*. Performance instructions include "(1/2 fade)", "(solo vln.)", and "(sounding 15va to the end)". The music concludes with a final unison "ooo" sound.

**Figure 34.** Jennifer Higdon, *The Singing Rooms*, MM 642-end  
Music Copyright © 2007 by Jennifer Higdon [ASCAP].  
Poems Copyright by Jeanne Minahan

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### Summary of *The Singing Rooms*

*The Singing Rooms* is a powerful, profound, dramatic work of music and poetry, representing the perception of spirituality in a given day; a metaphor for the progression of the journey of life. It is an involved, dense, complex musical composition, revealing some aspects of the mystery of life and spirit, what some perceive as an essence of one's time on earth and perhaps, beyond. The poetry by Minahan was judiciously selected by Higdon for this transcendent journey.

The music is at times purposefully amorphous, haunting, and mysterious. Other times, it is more dramatic, disturbing, demanding and powerful; often it is a mixture of these elements. Distinct utterance and clarity of the text is quintessential to the overall impact of the work, and is entirely supported by a complex coordination and convergence of various musical elements; elements that are crafted and woven in ways that underscore the evasive topic of the poems. This work, a musical-poetic drama, scored for large choral-orchestral forces combined with a virtuosic violin solo, delivered in a hugely dramatic yet intimately soulful way. From experiencing this composition and her choral works at large, the question emerges: what is it that gives them such profound impact? What is it that makes them "speak," what makes them "new," unusual, unique and effective? The answer lies somewhere in the complex, intricate web of techniques she employs and coordinates, how she crafts and combines musical elements in her own, individual way, all of which are bent to interpret and reveal aspects of the poems.

The poetry speaks profoundly by itself, yet Higdon's representation of the poems through her music, communicates something of greater depth, of intense meaning that performers and audience resonate with, identify with, and are subsequently deeply moved by. Taken individually, no single musical technique with a bent towards text-painting would individuate this work or make Higdon's choral music necessarily special. It is when the methods are perceived in consort with one another, in combinations and collectively, that the impact is experienced. It is the body of work, the unique combination of musical methods as they are constructed in consort with one another, and as crafted to text that the overall impact is sensed.

It is when melody, harmony, rhythm, meter, structure, textures, counterpoint, development, and instrumentation individually and collectively underscore, color, and highlight meaningful poetry, that the magic that is Jennifer Higdon is felt and appreciated. While stylistic tendencies can be deduced by critical analyses such as is presented here, the overriding conclusion deduced by this author is that each musical element, and diverse combinations of them, consistently and convincingly convey the text and its meaning, creating an unique and profound impact for the listener. In short, consistent with her instrumental writing, Jennifer Higdon's choral music speaks. In this case, the poetry of Jeanne Minahan also speaks, in unique and profound ways through Higdon's music.

### STYLISTIC COMPOSITIONAL ASPECTS

#### Structure:

Structure in Higdon's choral works is the one aspect most closely linked with Motet style of the Renaissance period in music, where a new line of text almost certainly spawns a new section of music, crafted for that text. The creation of musical material parallels the adapting of text when words are altered by this composer: adapted, repeated, and developed. Repetitions of text are frequently coupled with quasi-repetitions of music; quasi, because Higdon, without exception, varies the musical material—sometimes radically—in the repetition of text (or portions of text). Yet the musical devices employed clearly recall the earlier section of music with the repetition of text usually a "leitmotivic" reference.

Sections of music, or movements within a work, are individually crafted, given their own musical personalities using musical elements to characterize those pieces or movements. In some works, it might be the motivic craftsmanship and melodic development that is central to this, in another, it might be rhythmic motives, or quasi-ostinati that distinguishes the section. Again, a Higdon-esque trait, these are customarily "quasi-ostinati" because she, without exception, sets it up in what appears to be a repetitive manner, only to vary it, creating at least one rogue voice, or altering rhythms enough to keep everyone on their rhythmic toes, somewhat off balance. In still others, particular intervals—4ths, 2nds, or root movements by thirds or tritones—might be a central aural characteristic used.

Counterpoint and development work together in sections of structure. Short motives are crafted, often expanding over several measures, developed to a peak, relaxed to a cadential section, and then begun again. In almost every case, a lengthier developmental section will evolve over some time to an extended peak (this is usually the high point of a work or movement), which subsequently winds down in a cadential formula. This structural element is seen in much of her music, yet is uniquely crafted in each piece. There is not a "one-size-fits-all" pattern to this structural element.

#### Melody:

Customarily, Higdon crafts short melodic fragments (motives) set to similarly short poetic phrases, or even single words or syllables. These develop and expand—often with expanded interval technique that begins in one voice, then adds vocal parts as text and melodic motives correspondingly expand. Chordal writing and choral chant is commonplace in these works giving the clarity to the text, advancing it clearly.

Lovely, lyric melodies are created for texts that are likewise lyric (calm, serene, floating and soaring) in nature. These are not as common as the shorter motives with contrapuntal development, or appear as frequently as the choral chant/chordal writing mentioned above. Therefore, when they appear, their affect is one of loveliness and contrast to the others.

There are a number of melodic motives in her works that are built primarily on seconds or, at times, 4ths, for example. These motives distinguish certain movements, and couple melodic colors (and modest melodic contours) coupled with text. Octatonicism is commonly found, or implied. She often crafts melodic motives that use but 6 or 7 tones, but she does not sets them in any kind of strict whole-note half-note alteration, rather, she uses tones that might reference a mixing of two modes. Lydian mode occurs most often as a clear modal choice, especially with texts that are uplifting, ethereal, and spiritual. Mixolydian is found often as well; a very common scale for Higdon is to find Lydian mode to a certain point in the phrase, then it switches to Mixolydian: we find the raised 4th scale degree, soon after followed by a lowered 7th scale degree. This is distinctly colorful, momentarily altering the anticipation of a given mode.

## Music-Text Relationship in the Choral Works of Jennifer Higdon As Represented In Her Large Form Choral Work, *The Singing Rooms*

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### Harmony:

Harmony is linked closely with the discussion of melody, especially in modal configurations. Higdon's thorniest, densest harmonic writing is normally reserved for the instruments. However, there is an abundance of secundal writing (stacked or added seconds), to paint a mood over a phrase or entire section of music. A static harmonic rhythm is found frequently, in an almost Debussy-an quality, when there is an essence of the ethereal, or supernatural in the mix.

It is fair to say (and accurate) that Higdon uses harmonic colors to paint a rather large area of mood to create an atmosphere that surrounds large sections of music. Melodic motives are crafted sometimes in a quasi-pan-diatonic setting over normally short sections of music to create effects. She varies homophonic and polyphonic textures directly connected with sections of text; homophony or chordal writing, or chordal chant, alternate with counterpoint (polyphony) that distinguish sections of music with text.

Higdon uses planing (harmonic parallelism) in chords with the chorus AND the orchestra—not always in sync with one another—particularly as approaching a peak of a phrase (for a short duration), or at the end of a section of music (for a longer duration). This technique heightens tension in the music arriving at a peak, and she also uses parallelism in the instrumental passages to underscore the voices. Sometimes, these harmonic progressions are rather extended, covering up to eight (8) distinct chords underneath a relatively sustained chorus.

Quartal chords exist sparsely, used to color certain words within phrases. Polychord writing exists—rarely in the small form works— it is found in a fairly extended period in *The Singing Rooms*. It is found far more often in her instrumental writing than in the choral parts.

### Rhythm/Meter:

Asymmetrical and changing meters are used frequently, setting the scansion of the poetry and accentuation of syllables, or to elongate or shorten the duration of certain words or syllables. Text appears to govern meter choices. When a large amount of text is to be delivered—much like recitative in an opera—choral chant or choral-recitative appear in such phrases. It is not common to find changing meter for the sake of changing meter of a primarily musical accord, rather, it is found to articulate and emphasize the poetry.

Often, melodic motives are governed by the rhythms of natural speech inflection, and are crafted with grace and lyric ease aligned with poetic choices: the choral lines here are purified to an Art Song style. The enunciation of text and the shaping of the poetic line are joined rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically in such moments.

### Counterpoint/Development:

Higdon is a master of counterpoint. Her works are at times, dense with complex contrapuntal development, lines are intertwined, evolved, woven in a web, but are also contrasted with homophonic, chordal, or chant-like sections of music. Normally, homophony and chordal writing dominate, rendering the texts extremely clear. Counterpoint is used as a technique for variety and evolving of music with expanding text, creating new affects accompanying the text, enhancing its meaning. Polyphony is most commonly found developing short motives to a peak, but peaks are then always found in homophonic writing, emphasizing the culmination of a line of poetry in such a texture.

Higdon's works are deceptively complex in their characteristics. Even in sections dominated by homophony or chordal writing, one will perceive one or two "rogue voices" carrying on independently, creating interest and intrigue. This often occurs when one perceives a section has concluded, when we realize that there is something yet to be said. The composer often uses the techniques of adding or reducing voices, especially at the beginning and ending of sections. This texturing is often seen in the middle of a syllable word, where one voice is added or subtracted for coloration.

### Textures:

Textures and changing textures are also used closely linked with harmonic, melodic, and structural development. Often set to portions of texts for their unique indigenous qualities present, women's voices and men's voices combine with poetry or moods. To discuss textures in Higdon's work, the counterpoint, homophony, chordal writing, melodic motives begun in one voice and expanded by adding others (later retracting others), connected to elements of structure all are pertinent here, and have been substantially described above.

Jennifer Higdon is a proven, highly acclaimed composer of instrumental and operatic works. In *The Singing Rooms* and other choral works that utilize instrumental accompaniment, her skills and knowledge seen in her instrumental and operatic compositions are immediately apparent. As she is an opera composer of renown, it makes sense that her instrumental writing in choral works would be similarly linked closely to the text; to the drama inherent in the lyrics. The instrumental writing does not appear as "music-for-music's-sake" in *The Singing Rooms*, rather, it is crafted to create an overriding atmosphere, a personality, an aura, that surrounds, pervades, reflects, embraces and even enhances the poetry.

A very important note for any choral conductor: Higdon writes carefully and intelligently for voices with instruments, the; instrumental writing is at its densest, most complex, when voices are not, for the most part, employed. In this regard, the crafting of these works is so very kind and supportive to the singers, to the poet, and to the audience—they should rarely have to strive to understand the singers or the words. This is not only intelligent writing; this demonstrates the attitude of this composer, one of respect for and appreciation of the words, their clarity, their meaning, and their dramatic effect.

## Alphabetical List of Jennifer Higdon's Choral Works

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<b>Title</b>	<b>Scoring</b>	<b>Text by</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Sacred/Secular</b>
<b><i>A Quiet Moment</i></b> 1999	<i>Set for:</i> <i>Version A:</i> TTBB Chorus <i>Version B:</i> SSAA Chorus <i>Version C:</i> SATB Chorus <i>a cappella</i>	Jennifer Higdon "In memory of Andrew Blue Higdon"	3 minutes	Spiritual
<b><i>Alleluia</i></b> 2016	SATB Chorus <i>a cappella</i>	Jennifer Higdon	4 minutes	Secular
<b><i>Deep in the Night</i></b> 1997	SATB Chorus <i>a cappella</i>	Jennifer Higdon	6 minutes	Spiritual/Christmas
<b><i>Hear My Voice</i></b>	3-Part Mixed Chorus Piano	Jennifer Higdon	4 minutes	Secular Publisher: Hal Leonard
<b><i>Invitation to Love</i></b> 2016	SATB Chorus <i>a cappella</i>	Paul Laurence Dunbar, for Ann Meier Baker	4 minutes	Secular
<b><i>Love Came Down</i></b> 2015	Solo Soprano SATB Chorus Harp	Christina Rossetti	4 minutes	Sacred/Christmas
<b><i>O Magnum Mysterium</i></b>	<i>Version A:</i> SATB Chorus 2 flutes, 2 crystal glasses, chimes <i>Version B:</i> SATB Chorus Organ <i>Version C:</i> SATB chorus <i>a cappella</i>	Sacred text	6 minutes	Sacred/Christmas
<b><i>On the Death of the Righteous</i></b> 2008	SATB Chorus Orchestra: 3 (3rd also picc), 2, 2, 4,4, 5, 3 picc trpt., 3, 3, 1, timp, 1 perc, strings	John Donne	12 minutes	Secular
<b><i>Our Beautiful Country</i></b> 2015 (from the opera, <b><u>Cold Mountain</u></b> , Act II)	TTBB Chorus	Gene Scheer	3 minutes 30 seconds	Secular/patriotic
<b><i>Ruminations</i></b> 2017	SATB Choir Chamber ensemble (total of 12 players) 1,1 (doubling bass clarinet), 1,1,1, hp, 1 perc, 2 violins, 1 viola, 1 cello, 1 contrabass	Rumi, Translation by Coleman Barks	17 minutes	Spiritual
<b><i>Sanctus</i></b> 2001	SSAATTBB Chorus <i>a cappella</i> ,	English and Latin	4 minutes	Sacred
<b><i>Sing, Sing</i></b> 1999	SATB Chorus <i>a cappella</i>	Jennifer Higdon	3 minutes	Spiritual/Christmas (universal)
<b><i>somewhere i have never traveled, gladly beyond</i></b> 2006	SATB Chorus Piano, Vibraphone	e.e. cummings	5 minutes	Secular

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<b>Title</b>	<b>Scoring</b>	<b>Text by</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Sacred/Secular</b>
<b>Southern Grace</b> 1998	SATB, SSAA, and TTBB Chorus Solo quartet <i>a cappella</i>	Collection/cycle of 8 songs, can be done individually.	24 minutes	Mostly secular, one sacred
<b>Fiddlin'</b>		solfeggio text	2 minutes	Secular
<b>Wildwood Flower</b>	SATB Chorus,		3 minutes	Secular
<b>Swing</b>	SATB Chorus <i>a cappella</i>		2 minutes	Secular
<b>My True Love's Hair</b>	SSAA		3 minute	Secular
<b>The Fox</b>			1 minute 42 seconds	Secular
<b>Riddle Song</b>	SSAATTBB Chorus <i>a cappella</i> ,	Folk song: "I gave my love a cherry."	2-3 minutes	Secular
<b>Sourwood Mountain</b>	<i>Version A:</i> SATB Chorus <i>Version B:</i> TTBB		2 minutes	Secular
<b>Amazing Grace</b>	SATB and TTBB	Hymn	7 minutes	Sacred
<b>Telegram</b> 2014	SATB Chorus <i>a cappella</i>	Jeanne Minahan	6 minutes	Secular
<b>The Singing Rooms</b> 2007	Solo Violin SATB Chorus Orchestra: 2, 2 (2nd also Eng. hn) 2, 2, 4, 3 (1st also picc. tpt) 3, 1 hp timp, 2 perc strings	Jeanne Minahan	37 minutes	Secular/Spiritual
<b>Voice of the Bard</b> 2005	TTBB <i>a cappella</i>	William Blake	4 minutes	Secular
<b>What Was His Name?</b> 2015 (from the opera, <b>Cold Mountain, Act I</b> )	<i>Two Versions:</i> 1. TTBB & Piano 2. Solo Soprano Solo Alto TTBB	Gene Scheer	2 .5-3 minutes	Secular/patriotic

### Ordering information:

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 Website: [www.jenniferhigdon.com](http://www.jenniferhigdon.com)