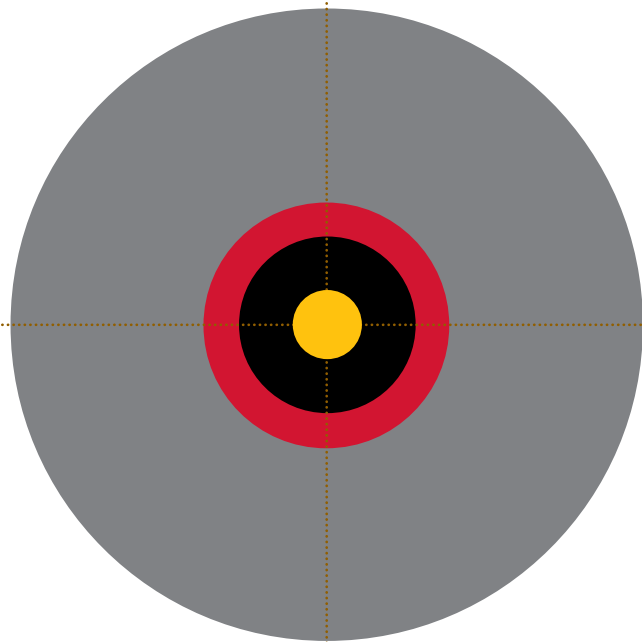


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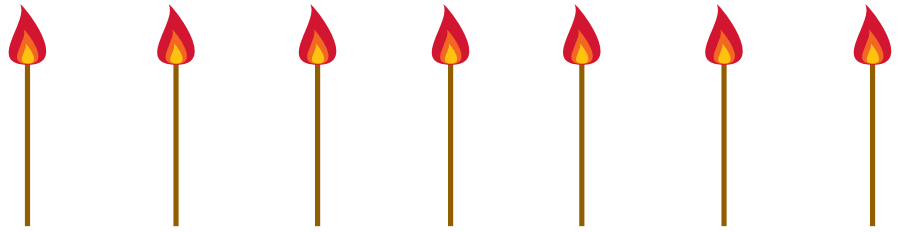
the little match girl passion

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David Lang's *the little match girl passion* is an unusual piece on many levels. Lang (b. 1957) combines the story of Christ's crucifixion—based on Bach's treatment thereof in his *St. Matthew Passion* (1727)—with the story of “The Little Match Girl,” a fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen that tells the harrowing tale of a little girl who freezes to death on a cold New Year's Eve in Denmark. The music for *the little match girl passion* is equally unusual. Lang's use of minimalist cells, expanded over fifteen movements, is unlike any other standard piece in the choral repertoire. The composition, while tricky at first sight, effortlessly weaves these cells into an approachable and relatable idiom for singers and audiences alike. Amateur, university, and professional choirs have performed *the little match girl passion* all over the United States since its world premiere in 2007. It was originally written for four soloists, but the composer created an SATB

chorus version in 2008, published by Red Poppy Music and available for rent from G. Schirmer Inc. It is most suitable for professional choirs and more experienced university and community groups.

The passion genre is a genre that extends back more than seven centuries, and Lang reworks this format into a vehicle that allows the audience to not only witness the slow demise of the innocent girl but more importantly to feel as if they were somehow part of this injustice. It is this sense of complicity that has largely contributed to the work's universal success. Reactions have been astounding: on a critical level it has been lauded since its premiere and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2008; both critics and audiences have been affected by its stark, relentless narrative and otherworldly music. Reporting on these performances tend toward utter praise and astonishment at the impact of such an ambitious work of art.

Critics have lauded the piece for its originality, innovation, and “raw emotionality.”¹ American choral composer Joshua Shank accurately states: “[W]hat is interesting to note is that, despite the somewhat robotic way in which Lang sets the text... the reception of this work is almost universally spoken about in viscerally emotional terms... [T]he work has obviously made a tremendous impact on its audience.”² In music reviews, Jayson Green calls it “breathhtakingly spare...icily gorgeous...a haunting and evocative hall of echoes”³; Molly



Sheridan claims that “even reading just the poetry of the libretto...is chilling”⁴; while Reed Johnson mentions the work’s “sublime austerity.”⁵ Los Angeles Master Chorale Conductor Grant Gershon confirms: “When I listen to the recording, it’s impossible to get through the piece without weeping.”⁶ The emotional impact of the piece was largely responsible for its Pulitzer win, as confirmed by juror Tim Page: “I don’t think I’ve ever been so moved by a new, and largely unheralded, composition as I was by David Lang’s *the little match girl passion*, which is unlike any music I know.”⁷

The composition is a welcome addition to the choral repertoire that is bound to move those who perform and listen to its unique sound and grapple with its unusual protagonist and narrative. With a vast array of recent and upcoming performances by ensembles such as the Latvian Radio Choir, Netherlands Chamber Choir, Virginia Chorale, The Crossing, PSU Choirs, and Seattle Pro Musica, this increasingly popular piece may well become a standard in the choral canon for years to come. This conductor’s guide, designed to assist the conductor’s preparation, investigates *the little match girl passion*’s textual content, musical content, and contextualization of the passion genre and includes suggestions by the composer related to interpretation, rehearsal, and performance.

Context

Lang’s work received its world premiere in 2007 at Carnegie Hall by the vocal quartet Theatre of Voices, conducted by Paul Hillier. The National Chamber Choir of Ireland, again conducted by Hillier, premiered the choral version one year later. David Lang had won several awards previously, but in the words of *The New Yorker*, it was “with his winning of the Pulitzer Prize ... [that] Lang, once a post-minimalist *enfant terrible*...solidified his standing as an American master.”⁸

Lang was drawn to the passion genre because it allowed for interpolation from texts outside of the narrative. The texts serve as “guideposts for our own responses to the story,”⁹ elevating the audience from spectator to participant. The passion genre thus represents multiple layers of performer, participant, and meaning. Traditionally, the passion narrative, that of the inevitable death of Christ, places the audience in the middle of its development and

forms a metaphysical commentary on their role in the protagonist’s demise. The format of the passion furthermore encourages and facilitates retrospection and a call-to-action to learn from these events and apply it in daily life.

Lang is not the first composer to contextualize the passion genre in this way. Recent projects have highlighted the adaptability of the passion genre, such as the *compASSION* project by Conspirare (2014), with passions by John Muehleisen, Robert Kyr, and the Balliett brothers; and Helmuth Rilling’s *Passion Project 2000* (2000), a commission that tasked Tan Dun, Sofia Gubaidulina, Ernst Rihm, and Osvaldo Golijov to compose passions reflecting on currently relevant social issues.

Lang’s composition consists of recitative-like movements that advance the plot and chorale-like movements that engage audiences into the narrative while providing a moment to reflect on its events. The combination of these two kinds of movements tells the story “while simultaneously commenting upon it.”¹⁰ It has the effect of “placing us in the middle of the action, and it gives the narrative a powerful inevitability.”¹¹ Although Lang places the emphasis on the death of a fragile little girl instead of the expected figure of Christ, the girl’s own experienced suffering and rejection resonates strongly with the martyred messianic figure of Christ. In an interview with the composer, he reflected on his choice of the passion: “The reason the story works is because I was looking for something that would allow me to be an observer of what the passion is traditionally, so I was looking for something that would highlight what to me seemed to be the paradox of the passion, which is that you are supposed to notice the suffering of Jesus. But you know, we live in New York—people are suffering all over the place—we live in a world where if we actually noticed everyone’s suffering it would be impossible to live.”¹²

Analysis

As is to be expected, the main reason for the piece’s emotional impact on audiences lies in the use of “The Little Match Girl” narrative. Lang concurs: “My loyalty lies completely with the text... and if I have a choice between telling the story better and making a beautiful sound, I’m always going to choose telling the story better.”¹³ It follows that closer inspection of the text could

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elucidate some of the reasons for this reaction and the piece's international popularity. Furthermore, Lang features a secular, disenfranchised protagonist, instantly relating the work to a wide audience while referencing the concepts familiar to Christian audiences and those familiar with other works in the passion genre. The even-numbered movements feature Andersen's prose, while free translations of Picander's poetry are employed in the odd-numbered movements.

The little match girl passion is scored for SATB chorus with soloists playing percussion instruments, including a brake drum, sleigh bells, crotales, glockenspiel, bass drum, and tubular bells. The piece is approximately thirty-five minutes long. Some choirs have opted to have an SATB quartet sing the recitative-like movements, with the entire choir joining in on the chorale movements. Lang achieves coherency throughout the piece through the intentional use of tonal centers and consistency in tempo (quarter note = 72), form (alternating recitative and chorale movements), and unifying musical motives and harmonic relations.

Lang was adamant that he wanted to create a continuous piece from start to end. He was inspired by fellow minimalist composer Arvo Pärt's *Passio*, a continuous seventy-five-minute passion setting: "Now THAT is a courageous composer, one who says that I don't want you dropping in; I don't want you thinking which parts are your favorite. The point is not to make a series of movements that could be extracted, or a series of movements that had their individual values, but to make something that goes from start to finish without stop."¹⁴ This relentless forward motion combined with the dark subject matter of its narrative might well explain the helplessness audiences and critics experience when listening to *the little match girl passion*: "helpless at metaphorically watching this little girl freeze to death...and not being able to do a thing about it."¹⁵

The form of *the little match girl passion* centers on alternating chorale-like and recitative-like movements. Recitative movements see the alto as storyteller (Evangelist in the traditional passion) with other voice groups singing some of the text, often interrupted mid-word in repeated rhythmic patterns. The recitatives are divided into two types: real-world recitatives consisting of six pitches and imagined-world recitatives with an added seventh pitch.

The chorale movements contrast the recitatives and are more lyrical in nature. The first and last movements are unified through the use of the "Daughters of Zion" imagery and the use of a similar musical motif.

Movement I

The first movement of Lang's passion setting is a play on the very first line of text in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, "Come ye daughters of Zion."

Come, daughter
Help me, daughter
Help me cry
Look, daughter
Where, daughter
What, daughter
Who, daughter
Why, daughter
Guiltless daughter
Patient daughter
Patient daughter
Gone

Whereas the Picander text asks the daughters of Zion to behold the central figure—Jesus, also called bridegroom or lamb—Lang's adaptation omits those references. Bach's *cori spezzati* call-and-response passages ("see, who?"—the bridegroom; "see, how?"—as a lamb) turn into "look," "where," "what," "who," and "why" followed by the single word "daughter." At first glance, these utterances are without object, as it is not specified what the daughter should look at or ponder about, turning her into both the subject and the object and compelling the listener to look at and ponder the "daughter," the "guiltless one," the "patient" one, one who will soon be "gone."

The first movement introduces one of the unifying figures used throughout the piece: the so-called "shivering motif" that portrays the sense of urgency and desperation that characterizes the passion from start to end. (Figure 1)

As could be expected from a minimalist composer, Lang uses a simple germinal cell consisting of four notes as the basis for his melodic writing. (Figure 2) The germinal cell is first stated in the opening measures, albeit in lower transposition by a whole step. (Figure 3)

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Movement II

In the second movement, the germinal cell (this time in F minor) is adapted to include a fourth and fifth pitch—most notably in the recurring motif set to the text “so the little girl went on”—another device that is used throughout to propel and unify the piece. This germinal cell is used in different modulations and permutations throughout the piece, most notably in the soprano line but also in augmentation in the male voices. (Figure 4)

This second movement, the first recitative, describes the utter poverty of the little match girl, a figure of relative social insignificance in relation to her surroundings.

It was terribly cold and nearly dark on the last evening of the old year, and the snow was falling fast. In the cold and darkness, a poor little girl,

with bare head and naked feet, roamed through the streets. It is true she had on a pair of slippers when she left home, but they were not of much use. They were very large, so large, indeed, that they had belonged to her mother, and the poor little creature had lost them in running across the street to avoid two carriages that were rolling along at a terrible rate. One of the slippers she could not find, and a boy seized upon the other and ran away with it, saying that he could use it as a cradle, when he had children of his own. So the little girl went on with her little naked feet, which were quite red and blue with the cold.

The word *little* is repeated, reinforcing the concept of timidity and insignificance in her “title”—the little

5 breathe as needed - sing as long as you can and exaggerate slightly
the struggle for air when you run out and re-enter

T

8 come, come, come... (etcetera)

Figure 1. David Lang, *the little match girl passion*, Movement 1, mm. 5 – 6. “Shivering Motif”, Tenor

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Figure 2. David Lang, *the little match girl passion* Germinal Cell

5

S

come daugh-ter come daugh-ter

A

come daugh-ter

Figure 3. David Lang, *the little match girl passion*, Movement 1, mm. 5 – 6. Soprano and Alto

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match girl. The recitatives from this movement onward depict the narrative in a very non-emotional, subjective way, reminiscent of the neutral spitting out of news on a telegraph machine. The second movement introduces the concept of injustice that prevails through the piece and that will ultimately lead to the protagonist's death. The first event describing this injustice is the theft of her left shoe. The repeated words "so the little girl went on" draw the audience further along in the narrative.

Movement III

The third movement features a play on words from Bach's chorale *Herzliebster Jesu*, literally translated "heart-dearest Jesus," becoming "Dearest heart."

Dearest heart
Dearest heart
What did you do that was so wrong?
What was so wrong?
Dearest heart
Dearest heart
Why is your sentence so hard?

The repetition of the word *dearest* establishes affection and empathy toward the protagonist. Lang further plays with the succeeding text from the chorale, turning "what have you done wrong" (already in the informal "du" case in the original German) into "what have you done *that was so wrong?*" implying the unspoken sentiment "that you deserved to die for it?" The text is ambiguous in terms of whom it is addressed to; "heart" could either be an endearing term for the little girl or a reference to the lis-

tener's own "heart" or sense of conscience and morality, a concept that develops throughout the piece. This concept derives from the function of the chorale in the traditional passion as an opportunity for reflection on humankind's own complicit part in the events and serving as a kind of "time warp" into the present time to draw the audience into the narrative as active participants.

Movement IV

The fourth movement, the second recitative, continues the depiction of the cycle of poverty and injustice that has defined the girl's life to this point.

In an old apron she carried a number of matches, and had a bundle of them in her hands. No one had bought anything of her the whole day, nor had any one given her even a penny. Shivering with cold and hunger, she crept along; poor little child, she looked the picture of misery. The snowflakes fell on her long, fair hair, which hung in curls on her shoulders, but she regarded them not.

Her earnest attempts at making a living remain unrewarded, and she is largely ignored. The falling snow signifies a dramatic shift: the audience experiences the dramatic irony of knowing that the girl will perish (as indicated by the word *gone* at the end of the first movement and the fact that protagonists in the passion narrative inevitably die at the end); the vehicle for her forthcoming death is introduced in the form of falling snowflakes.

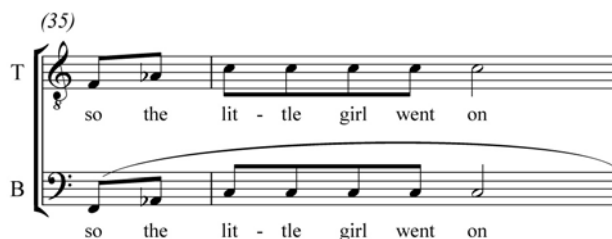


Figure 4. David Lang, *the little match girl passion*, Movement 2, mm. 34 – 35.

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Movement V

The fifth movement's chorale, "Penance and remorse," implicitly states the listener's own role and guilt over the events in the narrative, as evidenced by the use of the pronoun "my."

Penance and remorse
Tear my sinful heart in two
My teardrops
May they fall like rain down upon your poor face
May they fall down like rain
My teardrops

Here, daughter, here I am
I should be bound as you were bound
All that I deserve is
What you have endured

Penance and remorse
Tear my sinful heart in two
My penance
My remorse
My penance

The imagery of falling snow from the previous movement is extended, and as the snow starts falling on the little girl, the observer's tears start falling, linking the two settings together. The second stanza is a play on Christian ideology, also evident in Bach's setting, wherein the observer, moved by compassion and remorse, wishes to take the place of martyred one. The vulnerability of the girl also resonates with the Catholic intention in the *Stabat Mater*, in which the speaker wishes to take the place of the weeping mother of the crucified Jesus. Lang expresses this in simple yet effective words: "All that I deserve is what you have endured." Any remaining question as to the guilt of the observer is eradicated in the final lines: "my penance, my remorse, my penance."

Movement VI

The theme of injustice returns in the sixth movement.

Lights were shining from every window, and

there was a savory smell of roast goose, for it was new year's eve—yes, she remembered that. In a corner, between two houses, one of which projected beyond the other, she sank down and huddled herself together. She had drawn her little feet under her, but she could not keep off the cold; and she dared not go home, for she had sold no matches, and could not take home even a penny of money. Her father would certainly beat her; besides, it was almost as cold at home as here, for they had only the roof to cover them, through which the wind howled, although the largest holes had been stopped up with straw and rags.

Her little hands were almost frozen with the cold.
Her little hands were almost frozen with the cold.

The recitative focuses on the differences in prosperity and opportunity between the freezing, hard-working girl and the seemingly effortless, love-filled lives of those with enough money for such relative luxuries as heat and food. She finds herself in a predicament, as she cannot return home without the fear of punishment for not having sold enough matches. It is clear that the nature of this punishment is severe enough that the little girl prefers the pain and discomfort of the cold outside. Dramatic irony returns in the words "her little hands were almost frozen with the cold." The audience knows they will soon be completely frozen, yet she does not.

Movement VII

The discomfort of watching the little girl's demise is highlighted by the uncomfortable silence of the seventh movement titled "Patience." While it feels reminiscent of John Cage's *4'33'* with its ultimate statement on the nature of silence, the two repeated utterances of the word patience brings the worlds of the little girl and the audience together. In a sense the audience is told to be patient in waiting for the little girl to die—an uncomfortable and incongruous feeling as the audience members are made aware of their desire to hasten through this uncomfortable process.

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Movement VIII

A flicker of hope is presented in the eighth movement, the first of the three “imagined world recitatives.” In these recitatives, the girl sees fantastical visions and is eventually introduced to the afterlife.

Ah! Perhaps a burning match might be some good, if she could draw it from the bundle and strike it against the wall, just to warm her fingers. She drew one out—“scratch!” how it sputtered as it burnt! It gave a warm, bright light, like a little candle, as she held her hand over it. It was really a wonderful light. It seemed to the little girl that she was sitting by a large iron stove, with polished brass feet and a brass ornament. How the fire burned! And seemed so beautifully warm that the child stretched out her feet as if to warm them, when, lo! The flame of the match went out, the stove vanished, and she had only the remains of the half-burnt match in her hand. She rubbed another match on the wall. It burst into flame, and where its light fell upon the wall it became as transparent as a veil and she could see into the room. The table was covered with a snowy white tablecloth, on which stood a splendid dinner service, and a steaming roast goose, stuffed with apples and dried plums. And what was still more wonderful, the goose jumped down from the dish and across the floor, with a knife and fork in its breast, to the little girl. Then the match went out, and there remained nothing but the thick, damp, cold wall before her.

In the first of these, the desire for comfort is combined with a humorous depiction only conceivable by the imagination of a child. The observer sees a glimpse inside the imagination and memory world of the protagonist for the first time and experiences empathy for a little girl who is using her imagination to dream up better alternatives than what reality is offering her.

Movement IX

The ninth movement could arguably be seen as the

most emotional and moving moment of the passion. The movement's excruciatingly sad text is emphasized by the musical setting of the repeated lulling “God have mercy” motif with the anguished “see my tears” countermelody, all the while continuing the metaphorical imagery of the never-ending falling of snow and tears.

Have mercy, my God.
Look here, my God.
See my tears fall. See my tears fall.
Have mercy, my God. Have mercy.
My eyes are crying.
My heart is crying, my God.
See my tears fall.
See my tears fall, my God.

The concept of begging for mercy is familiar to choral audiences, e.g., the *Kyrie Eleison* movement in the liturgical mass. “Have mercy, My God” focuses on the observer's own admission of guilt and participation, with the word “my” repeated throughout for emphasis.

Movement X

The return in the tenth movement to the lighter, more whimsical imagination of the girl is a welcome one. The second imagined world recitative contains imagery of aesthetically pleasing things such as toys, expectations, and the illusion of hope, in stark contrast to the sadness of the preceding movement.

She lighted another match, and then she found herself sitting under a beautiful Christmas tree. It was larger and more beautifully decorated than the one which she had seen through the glass door at the rich merchant's. Thousands of tapers were burning upon the green branches, and colored pictures, like those she had seen in the show-windows, looked down upon it all. The little one stretched out her hand towards them, and the match went out. The Christmas lights rose higher and higher, till they looked to her like the stars in the sky. Then she saw a star fall, leaving behind it a bright streak of fire. “Some

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one is dying,” thought the little girl, for her old grandmother, the only one who had ever loved her, and who was now dead, had told her that when a star falls, a soul was going up to God.

Her deceased grandmother arrives at the end of the movement, and the girl unknowingly experiences a premonition of her own death, yet another instance of dramatic irony: she understands that the shooting star signals someone’s death but does not realize it is referring to her own.

An interesting musical relationship exists between the tenth and eleventh movements. As the narrative starts its relentless acceleration to an unhappy end, musical motives from the two respective movements are combined to create a larger five-note pattern—Ab-Bb-C in movement ten, expanding to D and Eb in movement eleven. (Figures 5 and 6)

Movement XI

The eleventh movement is connected to the seventh, as it also features spoken text: “In the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour she cried out: Eli, eli.” As the soprano sings “Eli, eli,” the spoken text immediately creates the expectation of something dramatic and different to follow.

The imagery of the sixth hour from the traditional passion narrative signals the inevitable impending death, and the soprano’s vulnerable cry of “Eli, eli,” the Hebrew word for “God,” immediately evokes the completed thought from Jesus’s last words on the cross: “Why have you forsaken me?” In this moment the girl is forsaken by the world, those who were meant to love and protect her; she is about to transcend into the afterlife, and the audience is powerless to prevent it.

Movement XII

The twelfth movement sees the girl’s final return to her imagined world, and she finally meets death and transcends into the light.

She again rubbed a match on the wall, and the light shone round her; in the brightness stood her old grandmother, clear and shining, yet mild and loving in her appearance. “Grandmother,” cried the little one, “O take me with you; I know you will go away when the match burns out; you will vanish like the warm stove, the roast goose, and the large, glorious Christmas-tree.” And she made haste to light the whole bundle of matches, for she wished to keep her grandmother there. And the matches glowed with a light



Figure 5. David Lang, *the little match girl passion*, Movement 10, mm. 2 – 5.

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Figure 6. David Lang, *the little match girl passion*, Movement 11, mm. 1 – 3.

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that was brighter than the noon-day, and her grandmother had never appeared so large or so beautiful. She took the little girl in her arms, and they both flew upwards in brightness and joy far above the earth, where there was neither cold nor hunger nor pain, for they were with God.

In her final moments, she obtains apotheosis, becoming godlike with the imagery of surrounding haloes and ascends to be “with God.”

Movement XIII

The thirteenth movement expresses the sense of loss and death with the innovative use of juxtaposing ideas.

When it is time for me to go
Don't go from me
When it is time for me to leave
Don't leave me
When it is time for me to die
Stay with me
When I am most scared
Stay with me

In this movement, the observer is lamenting the protagonist's death and expressing the helpless vulnerability experienced thereafter.

Movement XIV

The passion returns to the real world in the fourteenth movement, a recitative that announces the girl's death in a very informal way.

In the dawn of morning there lay the poor little one, with pale cheeks and smiling mouth, leaning against the wall; she had been frozen to death on the last evening of the year; and the new-year's sun rose and shone upon a little corpse! The child still sat, in the stiffness of death, holding the matches in her hand, one bundle of which was burnt. “She tried to warm herself,” said some. No one imagined what beautiful things she had seen, nor into what glory she had entered with

her grandmother, on new-year's day.

This feels similar to the way news is divulged after the fact in tragic works for the stage, such as the closing monologue from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The narrative also comments on humankind's inability at large to recognize the full extent of the value of the protagonist's experiences and her contribution to the world.

Movement XV

While the fourteenth movement shows that the people in the little girl's world might not fully understand the value of what has happened, the observer responds with clear, shell-shocked sadness in the fifteenth movement. The imagery of the daughters of Zion returns (similar to Bach) and brings the composition “full circle.”

We sit and cry
And call to you
Rest soft, daughter, rest soft
Where is your grave, daughter?
Where is your tomb?
Where is your resting place?
Rest soft, daughter, rest soft
Rest soft
Rest soft
Rest soft
Rest soft
Rest soft
You closed your eyes.
I closed my eyes.
Rest soft

Picander's original text “here we sit with tears” becomes “we sit and cry.” The phrase “rest soft” is repeated and serves as a universal phrase, devoid of religious or social connotation. Similarly, the little girl does not have a final resting place: she could be anywhere, even, metaphorically, in the listener's own world. The universalized connection between the little girl and the listener is achieved in the phrase “you closed your eyes... I closed my eyes,” which could either imply that the listener refused to see the events and chose ignorance instead or that the listener is finally able to fully empathize with her

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and experience her pain with her—all differences have been eliminated and assimilation has been achieved. On a musical level the “full circle” is achieved in two different ways. First, the germinal cell is presented once more in its most basic form, tying the first and last movements together as a whole. (Figure 7)

Lang comments: “It seemed that at the end we are back to observing her, she’s dead and her purification is over, so that’s why I went back to the beginning, the same way Bach did.”¹⁶ The musical units of the two last movements are also combined to create another expanded five-note unit—similar to that in the tenth and eleventh movements—with F-G-Ab-Bb in movement fourteen continuing into Bb and C in movement fifteen. (Figures 8 and 9)

More than a mere musical unifying device, the sense of connection between the last two movements on a musical level signifies a much deeper connection between the modern audience and the onlookers’ ambivalence in the fourteenth movement. This amplifies Lang’s ultimate statement: that we are the same as these spectators staring at the little girl and also complicit in allowing and accepting indifference to the plight of those classes of people she represents.

At the conclusion of this investigation of *the little match girl*, another genial aspect of the piece’s macrostructure becomes apparent. While the first movement sets off in the tonal area of E, the piece actually centers on a tonal center of F, which expands through an ascending aeolian scale by an octave over the course of the successive movements. Two possible contours for tonal development can thus be suggested. (Figure 10)

The second contour, with a “false start” on E before settling on F in the second movement, was unintentional on the composer’s part: “I’m sure I tried to start it in the ‘right’ key, and ended up transposing it to keep it in a better range, depending on what it was I needed.”¹⁷ The scale continues its upward expansion to Db (movement six), Eb (movement eight), and finally, after straining throughout the tenth movement to resolve to a high F, resolves in movement eleven. The tension built by this ascending scale is finally released in a rapidly descending F minor scale in movement fifteen, m. 25. The final moments of the passion consist of the fading of the vocal parts, with the original germinal cell played by the percussionists: “Just the skeletons of their voices... a kind of ghostly abstracted community... which I found a really beautiful idea.”¹⁸

The figure displays a musical score for Movement 11, measures 1-2. It features four staves: Alto, Crotales, Tenor, and Glockenspiel. The Alto and Tenor parts are vocal lines with lyrics "we sit and cry" and are marked with *pp*. The Crotales part is a percussion line for a med. hard rubber mallet, marked with *pp* and a triplet of eighth notes. The Glockenspiel part is a percussion line, also marked with *pp*. The music is in 4/4 time and features a melodic line in the vocal parts and a rhythmic accompaniment in the percussion parts.

Figure 7. David Lang, *the little match girl passion*, Movement 11, mm. 1 – 2.

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Conclusion

By investigating the text of *the little match girl passion*, it becomes apparent why audiences have been moved to such an extent by the narrative. First, the tale of the little match girl and the depiction of her vulnerability—and the sneak peeks into her mind and its deepest wishes for a better life—build empathy and connection between the listener and the protagonist. Secondly, the interpolation of reflecting chorales—where the words have been manipulated to imply the listener's own participation and guilt—truly bring home this message and highlight the sadness and injustice of the events. Finally, the forward propulsion of the narrative to its inevitable, sad climax is

enhanced by the use of dramatic irony and metaphorical imagery, effectively linking the listener's world to that of the protagonist.

Musically, *the little match girl passion* is an organic marriage of several components, all of which serve to provide a unique and harrowing investigation of one relatively insignificant and overlooked figure's apotheosis and passing from this world. The timbre of the piece is cold and austere and unforgiving with short, interrupted, and deconstructed motives accompanied by sparse instrumentation—"cold and bleak" by the composer's own admission.¹⁹ The expansion upward of an octave from F to F musically depicts this journey and transfiguration while



Figure 8. David Lang, *the little match girl passion*, Movement 14, mm. 1 – 2.

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Figure 9. David Lang, *the little match girl passion*, Movement 15, mm. 1 – 2.

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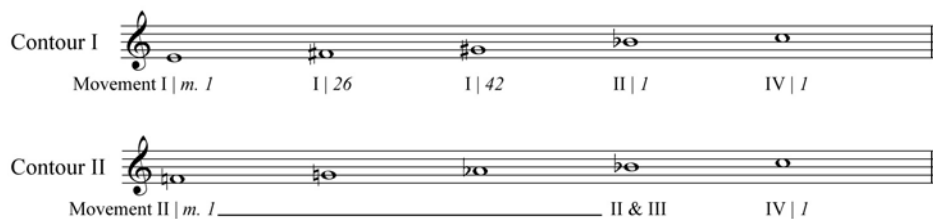


Figure 10. David Lang, *the little match girl passion*,
Tonal Contours

building dramatic tension before a final resolution back to the lower F. The use of tempo and of these tonal centers to achieve coherency is largely successful, and Lang creates a linear narrative that is relentless in its forward progression. His use of the germinal cell in the recitative movements further serves to create this coherency and suggest a sense of timelessness.

In the chorales, Lang's adaptation of Picander's texts effectively draws the listener into the narrative while stripping away the religiously specific terminology of the Christian faith. If Brahms strove to deliver a "Human Requiem," Lang strives to deliver a "Human Passion" like so many others before him. The response from audiences and critics the world over would suggest that he has succeeded in this task.

Lang's work most importantly confronts audiences with difficult themes in a compelling way that renders them impossible to look away. In the current societal and political climate with its renewed emphasis on issues of inequality, inclusivity, and social justice, *the little match girl passion* stands apart as a choral composition that effectively addresses these issues in a thoughtful way. It might further inspire conductors to seek other ways to engage singers and audiences with these important themes, be it through intentional pairing decisions with Lang's composition or other unrelated programming choices. Furthermore, *the little match girl passion* has a proven track record of moving those who encounter it—across various demographics—with its unique message. The increasing amount of performances of *the little match girl passion*, nearly a decade after its premiere, might be an indication of its potential for prosperity and inclusion in the hallowed choral canon in future years. In the meantime, it should certainly be recognized and celebrated as one of the twenty-first century's foremost choral works. ■

NOTES

- ¹ Lawrence Schenbeck, "Innovative new American sacred works: David Lang, the little match girl passion; Phil Kline, John the Revelator; Kile Smith, Vespers," *Choral Journal* 50, no. 7 (February 2010): 76.
- ² Joshua Shank, "David Lang's *the little match girl passion*: Reportage and Emotionality" (paper presented at Contemporary Styles and Techniques Class, University of Texas, 2012).
- ³ Jayson Green, "David Lang—Little Match Girl Passion," *Pitchfork* (January 15, 2010). Accessed October 28, 2014. <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/13775-the-little-match-girl-passion/>
- ⁴ Molly Sheridan, "Sounds Heard: David Lang—The Little Match Girl Passion," *New Music Box* (June 8, 2009). Accessed October 28, 2014. <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/Sounds-Heard-David-Lang-the-little-match-girl-passion/>
- ⁵ Reed Johnson, "David Lang's Divine Pursuit: 'The Little Match Girl Passion,'" *Los Angeles Times* (January 16, 2011). Accessed October 28, 2014. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jan/16/entertainment/la-ca-little-match-girl-20110116/>
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Tom Huizenga, "David Lang wins Music Pulitzer," NPR Music (April 7, 2008). Accessed October 28, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2011/01/24/89442735/david-lang-wins-music-pulitzer/>
- ⁸ David Lang Music. Official website. Accessed October 28, 2014. <http://davidlangmusic.com/about/bio/>.
- ⁹ David Lang, "program note: the little match girl passion (for chorus)," (2008). Accessed October 28, 2014. <http://davidlangmusic.com/music/little-match-girl-passion-for-chorus/>
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ David Lang, CD liner notes, *the little match girl passion*, Harmonia Mundi, HMU 807496, 2009.
- ¹² David Lang, interview with the author, SoHo, New York City, NY, March 18, 2014.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Joshua Shank, "David Lang's *the little match girl passion*: Reportage and Emotionality," 5.
- ¹⁶ David Lang, "program note."
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ David Lang, CD liner note.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.