

I would like to thank the faculty of Houghton College and the Greatbatch School of Music for a fruitful three years of study, support and growth.

I would like to particularly thank Dr. Carrie Magin for the composition training I've received from her; Dean Armenio Suzano for his continual encouragement; Professor Kelly Van Kirk for giving me opportunities to perform arrangements.

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I would especially like to thank all of my singers and performers who gave hours of their time, and without whom a composer can only imagine what his works would sound like.

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Thanks to my awesome family for driving hours and hours from North Carolina and other places to support my work. I love you all!

Thanks to friends who have helped to relieve stress by scanning me in at the dining hall, giving random back rubs, making multiple trips to the grocery store, leaving notes of encouragement, making me laugh and offering to pray for me.

I also want to thank the Houghton Singers and the Mercy Seat Cabinet for making my last year at Houghton special and memorable.

The Greatbatch School of Music would like to thank the Houghton College administration for its faithful support.

Shirley A. Mullen, President

Jack Connell, Provost and Dean of the Faculty

Vincent Morris, Chief Financial Officer

Greatbatch School of Music Faculty, Staff, and Administration

As a courtesy to the performer and your fellow audience members, please be certain that all cell phones, watch alarms, and pagers are either turned off or set for silent operation. Flash photography can be very disconcerting to performers and is not permitted during the performance. Thanks for your cooperation.

HOUGHTON COLLEGE

GREATBATCH SCHOOL OF MUSIC

presents

Joseph Richard Gessler
(Ricky)

Composition
Graduate Recital

Recital Hall

Center for the Arts

Wednesday, April 5, 2017

8:00PM

Sesame Street Theme

Arr. Ricky Gessler

The Houghton Singers
Directed by Kelly Van Kirk

Suite for Light Metals

Ricky Gessler (b. 1980)

Kira Browning, Viola
Ian Riley, Vibraphone
Seth Wright, Celeste
Chantalle Falconer, Piano

Intermission

Psalm 23 A Benediction

Seth Wright, Conductor
Chantalle Falconer, Piano

Go and Build

The Houghton Singers
Chantalle Falconer, Piano

Moses

Austen Kewin, Baritone
Daniel Zambrano, Cello

Death Angel

Austen Kewin, Baritone
Ronald McEntire, Piano

Angels After Midnight

Hannah Hijleh, Violin
Cassie Harrison, Violin
Anna Philbrick, Viola
Daniel Zambrano, Cello

Singers:

Michaela Aliperti
Danielle Joy Bees
Kevin Blondolillo
Aaron Campbell
Michael Carpenter
Orvis Collins
Michel Cox
Andrea Crickard
Jonathan Denham
Ricky Gessler
Hunter Gregory
Elizabeth Marie Ibarra
Hannah Jager
Austen Kewin
Angela Matson
Sheridan McAlister
Ellen McCutcheon
Brandon Mellerski
Hannah Messerschmidt
Aaron Moore
Vera Motley
Victoria Pitre
Rachel Schaarschmidt
Evan Stern
Ellenore Tarr
Ruthanna Wantz
Andrew Welch
Kelly Van Kirk

About Ricky

Ricky is a native of North Carolina and the second oldest of twelve children. Born and raised around the rock and contemporary worship music traditions, Ricky's first career was as a house painter until he began studying classical music at the age of 28. He has since earned his B.M. in music composition and education from Nyack College, where he recieved his initial certification as a New York State general music teacher. Today's recital partially satisfies the requirement for an M.M. in composition at the Greatbatch School of Music at Houghton College, which Ricky will receive in May. Ricky values music primarily for what it contributes to relationships between people and communities.

Sesame Street Theme

Since the vocal ensembles *Glad* and *Take 6* had fallen into the past, I hadn't given thought to a *capella* music (as a not-really-fan of pop music, Pentatonix was not on my radar either). Since joining the Houghton Singers, I've come to hear every pop song for its potential a *capella* arrangement.

As one of the few TV shows I watched as a kid, Sesame Street can still take me back to sitting on the floor eating popcorn with my cousins and laughing ourselves silly over Cookie Monster (this was before Elmo, kids).

Suite for Light Metals

The outstanding characteristic of *Suite for Light Metals* is its unusual color. With a warm viola, bright vibraphone, brighter piano and still brighter celeste, the instrumentation is a challenge for a composer.

The first movement was adapted from an earlier programmatic work I never finished. It is somewhat minimalist at times. A cell (a short, repeatable idea) is introduced in the vibraphone and gradually spreads to all instruments. The B section, in contrast, is more melodic and traditional in its structure.

Of particular interest is the second movement. (If you're not a nerd, please skip to the next paragraph). It takes the traditional place of a waltz or a scherzo, and includes elements of both. The composition employs only eight pitch classes, B-C-D-E-F-F#-G#-A#, or pcs (0124678T), or two sets of (0124) related by T₆. The goal was to find some structure and beauty in a context that does not allow traditional harmonic motion. But at the end of the day I could not resist relying heavily on major and minor triads within this scale. The result is a mostly tonal work with some surprising harmonic transformations.

The themes in the third movement are "light," of a very tonal and cheerful nature (someone has suggested that it should have a Christmas title).

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is a simple and pleasant setting of the famous text. This was written at the recommendation of my friend Jamal at Nyack College, who conducted it in Montvale, NJ with the Lakeside Choraliers in the summer of 2014.

A Benediction

The word "Benediction" can be transliterated as "good speak," a spoken blessing. In Luke 1:67-79 the old priest Zacharias, at the birth of his son John, blesses the God of Israel for keeping His promises: "To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days."

A *Benediction* has a modal character, mostly in Eb Dorian. It reflects the influence of Benjamin Britten as well as the composer's recent exposure to the ensemble *Cammina Slovenica*. It was further inspired by a performance of the Houghton College Women's Choir in December 2015.

Go and Build

Professor William Vollinger was my composition teacher at my Alma Mater. Since graduation he has remained a good friend and mentor. In 2014, Mr. Vollinger commissioned me to write a piece for Church of the Savior in Paramus, NJ, where he serves as the music ministry coordinator. The request was to write a three-part choral work based on Haggai 2:9: "'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,' says the Lord of hosts, 'and in this place I will give peace,' declares the Lord of hosts."

Moses

Moses is an art song for baritone and cello, a setting of a text by Ellenore Tarr. The text focuses on Moses' sense of inadequacy. He looks back over his history and doesn't see any reason that God would trust him with the task of freeing His people. At the same time, he expresses doubt and anger over the fact that God has waited so long to do anything about the suffering of His people. God responds to Moses with assurance of His promise and plan, but also with an answer as profound and seemingly dissatisfying as the answers given to Job; when it comes down to it, God usually doesn't answer for His actions.

The text is reminiscent of Exodus 5:22-23: "Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did You ever send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all.'"

Moses:

*I'm a hesitant rebel, rejected, convicted of crimes
That I'm guilty of causing and running to leave behind proof
That the pain of your people cuts deep to the core of my longing and praying*

*I killed a man, thinking that I could make everything better
But nothing's accomplished by my reckless actions
So leaving was all I could do just to rid them of this irresponsible zealot*

*And, standing here, how can I know that I hear you right?
How can I rescue a people from bonds to a nation that's killing them
Just for the names of their fathers?
Did you plan this? God, I can't see you*

*I want to contain all the pain that I've seen
My people — your people — beat down just for living
Is that your will? God, how can you just sit back and
See all of the suffering and not raise your hand?*

*Can't be guilty of pride if I won't even lift up my eyes
From the ways that I'm failing you, God
So if you want a leader who'll speak for your people
Then find someone else who'll say something worth hearing.*

*My hands which have murdered, my feet which have fled
Are the hands that are open and feet that are bared
By the light of your fire and sound of your voice
They are ready so use them — I've tried, Lord, and failed*

God:

*Be still. I will fight for you.
Weary shepherd, your groaning soul and hasty hands hold the world
Weary shepherd, fire cannot be held
Chosen one, My loving heart and mighty arm will uphold you*

Death Angel

I began writing this song over four years ago. It describes the weeks after my father's sudden death. I finished the song in February, almost exactly 11 years after his passing. It's amazing how many different ways a person processes grief over the years. I tried to allow the song to express the raw emotions that I felt then, rather than reflecting the way I feel today when I think of him, after time and healing. To this day, I wonder if my father had some unspoken knowledge that his time was coming to an end; and if so, I don't know whether it gave him fear or comfort.

Note: the death angel in Exodus was actually the tenth plague, not the seventh (as the song implies), but the seventh plague or seal in the book of Revelation is equally horrific. I took some artistic license here. I'm fascinated with the idea that Death is not God's accomplice; he is an enemy. Yet Death, too, is a servant of Christ, who is Lord of all (N.T. Wright's book, *Surprised by Hope*, was very helpful to me in gaining a biblical understanding of eternity).

*I could not sleep the night you died
I wrestled with the angel that haunted me
I half believed you met him too
Like Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane*

*We were there for you
Tried to comfort you
Nothing we could do
You died alone*

*I was proud of you
I was angry too
I kept thinking soon
You would come home*

*Death is not a friend
Death is not a lie
It's a violation*

*The sudden, subtle specter
The seventh plague
I was not afraid to look him in the eyes*

*When death came in, he did not speak
He sat down at the table across from me*

*Final enemy
You have robbed me
Yet I see submission in your eyes*

*We will meet again
As will every man
When and only when my Lord decides*

*A game of cards; the smell of burning pine
And Old Man Winter finds me remembering
The stallion tamed; the rebel won
The careful years of loving and laboring*

*I have heard it said that a godly man
Knows exactly when his time has come
And though you did depart
With a broken heart
Did you know you would be going home?*

*Death, where is thy sting?
Where is thy victory?
Until that Day, the sting remains*

Angels After Midnight

One would think, based on the titles, that I'm a bit obsessed with angels. I actually don't think about angels very often. Nonetheless, it seemed a fitting title for this piece. I imagine angels to be much more like gladiators than lacy pillows, and I imagine most of their work happens at night when the dark side of the earth is most vulnerable (emphasis on "imagine;" I don't have a clue).

Angels After Midnight is a single-movement work written for the Bravada String Quartet. It was inspired by the first movement of Claude Debussy's *String Quartet in G minor* (though not strictly modeled after it), and is also influenced by the cerebral style of Béla Bartók. The composition opens with a series of homorhythmic seventh and ninth chords with roots descending by a major third. The chords are repeated in the closing section, with the addition of a raised 4th scale degree to facilitate smooth voice leading between chords. Nearly everything in between is extracted from the ending collection of chords, creating a unique melodic palette and multiple opportunities for dissonant augmented harmonies.