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*Unrest* is a twenty-one minute long piece written for chamber ensemble. Inspiration for the piece is drawn from the struggles that Black Americans face with regard to police brutality and social injustices, with extensive references to the Black Lives Matter movement. The two outer movements, Prologue and Epilogue provide an introduction and closure to the piece, while the inner four movements provide snapshots of scenes where innocent Black lives were taken; namely: Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Tamir Rice.

When I began planning this piece, I wanted to make sure that the strong messages of the Black Lives Matter movement translated to the music I composed. I wanted to create something that was meaningful and powerful. I did this by making references to songs relevant to the community. I reference "Going Up Yonder" by Tramaine Hawkins in the Prologue and Epilogue movements and "Beef" by Lil' Durk in Jordan. "Going Up Yonder" is often sung at funerals in the Black community and "Beef" was the song that played in the car when Jordan Davis was shot and killed. These songs already had connections to situations related to the Black Lives Matter movement, thus making it easier make connections in the music.

The four inner movements seek to take on the scene where the individual was killed and convey the scene musically. This is achieved by mimicking the sounds of the crowd in the YouTube video that contains footage recorded at the shooting death of Eric Garner, referencing the melody from "Going Up Yonder" in the Prologue and Epilogue movements, and using rhythmic and harmonic content from "Beef" in Jordan. For the movements for which there was no musical reference, I used the background story to created unique soundscapes that depicted the characters and their emotions.

*Unrest* is a piece that draws on the strength of the Black Lives Matter movement and forces the listener to deal with the issues associated with it. It is a piece that addresses current social issues in the United States of America in an evocative and meaningful way.

This thesis will also include an overview of music in social and political movements and an explanation of how the piece was constructed.

UNREST

by

Am're Ford

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Music

> Greensboro 2016

> > Approved by

Committee Chair

## APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by AM'RE FORD has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

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## CHAPTER I

## OVERVIEW OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 after George Zimmerman's acquittal in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Alicia Garza, a community organizer, was grief stricken after hearing the news and immediately began to write a love letter to the Black community. This letter was meant to empower and affirm Black people and to let the rest of the world know that our lives matter, #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>1</sup> The original posting didn't include the hashtag, but after a colleague added it, #BlackLivesMatter became a trending topic on social media.

Members of the Black Lives Matter movement, in conjunction with other organizations, have led a number of non-violent protest held in the cities where Black lives have been taken. Some of the more well known demonstrations were held in Cleveland, Ohio for Tamir Rice, New York City for Eric Garner, Houston, Texas for Sandra Bland, Ferguson, Missouri for Michael Brown, Sanford, California for Trayvon Martin and Baltimore, Maryland for Freddie Gray.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/03/04/alicia-garza-black-livesmatter/24341593/

http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/

#### CHAPTER II

## MUSIC IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

Using music to make a political statement is a well-established tradition and as a young Black man, I felt it was my duty to contribute to this movement by bringing awareness to this subject area. Being a composer, music was an obvious platform to do so.

In *Different Trains*, Steve Reich sought to bring awareness to the Holocaust, more specifically the trains that were used to transport the Jews to concentration camps. Steve Reich is Jewish and frequently rode the train in the United States at the same time that Jews were being killed in Europe. This was his motivation.

Other individuals who have written music about political or social circumstances include: John Adams, who wrote operas about President Nixon visiting communist China and the atomic bomb project, Carlos Simon, who wrote a string quartet in memory of Black men wrongfully murdered, N.W.A. who wrote "Fuck tha Police" to address the harassment of Black individuals in their community, and Joel Thompson who wrote *The Last Words of The Seven Unarmed* to address the killing of unarmed Black men. Each work was handled in a way that the composers felt would best convey their thoughts and ideas. I chose to recreate the scenes of death by referencing the song played when Jordan

Davis was killed, using sounds and timbres that portray rain and struggle in Trayvon Martin's movement, and making reference to a popular song sang for the funerals of African Americans. These techniques and others will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER III

## CONSTRUCTION OF THE PIECE

Table 1. Outline of Piece

Movement Name	Materials Used		
Prologue	Going Up Yonder reference, Black Lives Matter motif		
Oscar Grant	Live audio from train station		
Trayvon Martin	Soundscapes of rain and struggle		
Jordan Davis	Reference to rap song "Beef"		
Tamir Rice	Playground scenes		
Epilogue	Going Up Yonder reference, Black Lives Matter motif		

The song "Going Up Yonder<sup>2</sup>," is often sung or played at funerals for the processional, recessional or even during the service as a musical selection. References to this piece are found in both the Prologue and Epilogue movements. I included this

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Tramaine Hawkins, "Going Up Yonder", accessed October 18, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04KcopeY2Og

because it's an important part of the culture of Black Americans and this piece, in many ways, serves as a musical memorial for the four individuals. Below you will find a musical example of melody notated in addition to an excerpt from the Prologue movement that displays my interpretation of the melody.



Figure 1. Going Up Yonder - Original Melody



Figure 2. Going Up Yonder – Prologue

Also found in the two movements is a motif I named the #BlackLivesMatter motif. I created the motif by transcribing the rhythm of the phrase "Blacks Lives Matter". The motif is always pitched as an augmented chord so as to "stick out" of the texture from the rest of the harmonies.



Figure 3. Black Lives Matter Motif

The way that the motif "sticks out" is a direct reflection of the Black Lives Matter movement. Members of this movement have often disrupted the normal flow of life by having "die-ins" at malls, standing across highways and interrupting parades. It was important for me to draw in this parallel and to make it part of the fabric of the piece.

The second movement is about Oscar Grant, who was shot on January 1, 2009 on the platform of the BART train station in Oakland, California. There were a probably around one hundred people present who were presumably traveling home from celebrating the New Year and there are at least two video recordings of the events leading up to the shooting of Oscar Grant. I used one of the videos<sup>3</sup> and isolated the audio. I then transcribed the shouts from the crowd for instruments in the ensemble so that the instruments would mimic the voice timbres, pitches and rhythms exactly. This audio track plays through the duration of the movement and the ensemble score is synchronized with the recording so that the instrumental interpretations of shouts happen at the same time as those on the recording. When not portraying a shout or discernable conversation from the recording, the other instruments take turns providing background noise, representative of the sound of a large crowd.



Figure 4. Oscar Excerpt – Shout



Figure 5. Oscar Excerpt - Background

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> California Beat, "New Footage of Oscar Grant Shooting" accessed October 12, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0P8TSP2YJU

After Oscar Grant is shot, the crowd was nearly uncontrollable and the police eventually forced the crowd back onto the train to go to the next stop. The gunshot, mayhem and train departure are all reflected in the ending of the piece.

The third movement is about Trayvon Martin. On the night that Trayvon Martin was killed, he was walking home alone in the rain when he began to be followed by George Zimmerman. There was reportedly a struggle of sorts before Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by George Zimmerman. This movement begins with the trumpet playing a melodic motif unaccompanied by any other instruments. This motif is repeated several times throughout the movement.



Figure 6. Trayvon Excerpt – Motif

About two-thirds of the way through the movement at letter E, the motif returns in the alto saxophone with the trumpet harmonizing. This time, the alto saxophone trails the trumpet by a sixteenth note. The two voices eventually synchronize and the tempo begins to accelerate while the meter becomes irregular. This represents the struggle between Martin and Zimmerman.

The fourth movement is about Jordan Davis. When Jordan Davis was shot, he was listening to the song "Beef<sup>4</sup>," a rap song recorded by Lil' Reese featuring Lil' Durk and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Lil' Reese, "Beef" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDh0FcJ1atA

Fredo Santana. <sup>5</sup> I made this song the basis for the movement by including rhythms from the drum track and rhythms of the opening speech/chant, and sound effects and the bass line from the original song. The structure of the movement is also modeled after that of a rap song. Below is a table details the structure of the movement. Although there are two and four bar phrases present, they ultimately make equal eight bar phrases with a two bars that end the piece.

Table 2. Jordan Outline

		Letter A		Letter B	Letter C
4 measures	4 measures	4 measures	2+2 bars	4 bars	2+2+4 bars
Letter D	Letter E	Letter F			
4+2 bars	4+2 bars	2 bars	2 bars	2 bars	2 bars

The fifth movement is about Tamir Rice, who was killed while playing on the playground. He had a toy gun that a resident reported to the police. When the police arrived they shot him almost immediately. The movement begins with the violin sliding up and down on various pitches to imitate a playground swing. I used melodies from nursery rhymes as well as original melodies to bring a sense of innocence to the movement. Each instrument acts as a soloist and plays these melodies or motifs that help to portray different personalities of children playing on a playground. At the end of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> First Coast News,

http://legacy.firstcoastnews.com/story/news/crime/2014/02/08/beef-lil-reese-jordan-davis-song-michael-dunn/5314323/

piece, the organ plays "Mary Had A Little Lamb" and before finishing is abruptly interrupted by the percussion imitating a gunshot. An electronic track with children playing on a playground accompanies the entire movement.

The epilogue begins in much the same way as the prologue. The exception is that there is an incorporation of figures that represent screams; screams of mothers, family members and even victims. Sometimes a single instrument plays these figures and sometimes they are played by groups of instruments.



Figure 7. Epilogue Screams I



Figure 8. Epilogue Screams II

#### CHAPTER IV

#### CONCLUSION

When I started work composing this piece I knew that I wanted it to be powerful and meaningful. This topic is controversial in some circles, but it's one that is important to me and one that I hold dear to my heart. I began writing the piece with the intention of it being about half the length that it ultimately became. There was an enormous amount of content available and it took some time to sift through everything before I found what I would use for this piece.

Initially, dealing with the subject matter was quite difficult. In addition to reading articles about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Black men, I also watched video footage that dealt with the matter. Processing this information on a regular basis brought on a great deal of emotions, which I used to inspire the piece.

After the piece was completed, I was afraid that it wouldn't be effective. Although the subject matter is very powerful, the music itself is quite simple and I felt that I might not have written something that conveyed the message I wanted to. After a few rehearsals and getting feedback from the performers, it was clear that I had indeed achieved my goal.

The piece is powerful and impactful and provides an opportunity for the listener to experience the lives of four young men who were tragically killed. The prologue and

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epilogue help to provide context and closure not only to the piece and the lives being honored, but also for the listener.

It is my hope that this piece resonates with people and that they are able to feel the emotions that I, and so many others, feel when they think about the senseless killings that are taking place in America every day. I've had discussions with two different conductors about programming the piece and I think with performances by the right groups of people and with good recordings, *Unrest* will find its place in the repertoire.

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# APPENDIX A

# SCORE OF UNREST





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Score

# Unrest



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\*The x noteheads are used to denote approximate pitches; these "notes" are found in passages that imitate the human voice.

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Score

## Unrest Trayvon

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## Unrest Jordan

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with great sorrow



Score

## Unrest Tamir

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## Unrest Epilogue

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