

## Teacher Resource Guide: A Solemn Place, Wayne Oquin (b. 1977)

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### **Abstract:**

American composer Wayne Oquin's music has been performed on five continents, in nineteen countries, and in forty states. A native of Houston, TX, Oquin is chair of the Ear Training Department at The Juilliard School, where he has worked since 2008. He holds a bachelor of music from Texas State University as well as a master of music and a doctor of musical arts from The Juilliard School.

While a student at Juilliard, Oquin studied composition with Milton Babbitt and Samuel Adler, and served as a teaching fellow for Mary Anthony Cox. He won the Richard F. French Prize for best doctoral dissertation, The Juilliard Inner-Arts Award, the Palmer Dixon Prize, and was the first recipient of the Arthur Friedman Award for his orchestral composition *An Unbroken Chain to Infinity*.

In addition to *A Solemn Place*, Oquin has contributed significant music to wind literature, including *Tower Ascending* (Oquin's tribute to the rebuilding of Ground Zero) and *Affirmation* (the winner of the National Band Association's 2014 William D. Revelli Award). The United States Air Force Band, who presented Oquin with the Commander's Medal of Excellence, has recorded both compositions. In addition to The United States Air Force Band, The United States Army Field Band, The West Point Military Academy Band, and many high school and university programs have performed his wind music.

**Keywords:** music education | teaching resources | music composition | American composer

### **Article:**

#### **Unit 1: Composer**

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## **Unit 2: Composition**

In 2013, Oquin composed what has since become one of his most well known and widely performed pieces, *O magnum mysterium*, for a cappella choir. Written for the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Chamber Singers (Robert Gehrenbeck, conductor), Oquin began work on *O magnum mysterium* on January 1, 2013, and completed it only eight days later. However, as Oquin does with many of his compositions, he kept finetuning it for months after, even saying, "I wrote it in eight days and revised it in ninety." The largest percentage of his revisions were focused on the last six measures.

Shortly after the composition of *O magnum mysterium*, Oquin was visited by his longtime friend and advocate John Lynch. Lynch, former director of bands at the University of Georgia and current artistic director of the Sydney Conservatorium's Wind Symphony, listened to the piece over headphones in a restaurant and immediately asked Oquin to transcribe the piece for band, even going so far as to offer orchestration suggestions. Oquin agreed and completed the transcription in two months-just in time for Lynch's audition concert at the Sydney Conservatorium. In fact, the parts were finished a mere three hours before the first rehearsal! So as not to invite comparisons between H. Robert Reynold's well-known arrangement of Morten Lauridsen's *O magnum mysterium*, Oquin renamed the transcription *A Solemn Place*. Since its premiere, *A Solemn Place* has been performed by six All-State Bands and numerous high school and college ensembles.<sup>2</sup>

The bridging of these two worlds, choir and band, seemed natural to Oquin.

For as long as I can remember, I've been involved in choral music. As a young student I spent countless hours singing, rehearsing, accompanying, and conducting choirs. The lasting impact this had on my music cannot be overstated; so much of the way I compose is from the vantage point of the singer.

Equally important to my musical upbringing, particularly in high school and in my early college years, is the time I spent immersed with wind ensembles. Some of my earliest compositions were written for my high school band.

The result is that I internalized a significant portion of the choral and band literature from a young age. In many ways, A



FIGURE 1. OPENING OF CHANT VERSION OF “O MAGNUM MYSTERIUM.”

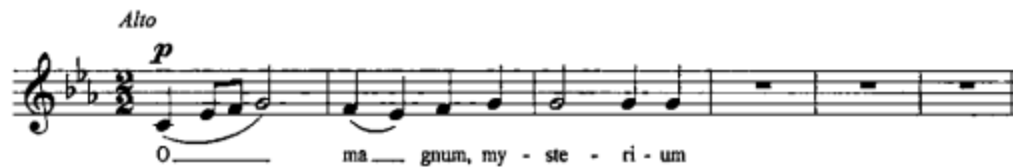


FIGURE 2. ALTO VOICE OF O MAGNUM MYSTERIUM (MM. 1–2).

Note the motion between C and G in both openings (inverted between the Gregorian chant and Oquin's version) as well as the prominent use of semitones over the word "magnum." Given this, it seems that Oquin's setting was initially inspired or even perhaps *fortspinnung* (i.e., spun out) from the original Gregorian chant.

#### Unit 4: Technical Considerations

A Solemn Place is scored for a wind ensemble (one performer per part) and includes English horn, contrabass clarinet, contrabassoon, soprano saxophone, and double bass. The percussion needs are few and include timpani, chimes, crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, and bass drum. There are short solos for English horn, bassoon, soprano saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and euphonium. While there are two separate parts for both euphonium and tuba, *divisi* only appears at the end of the piece and requires minimal independence from the performers.

The conductor should note that the score is a C score rather than a transposed score (older versions of the score do not have this indication). Among other things, this makes the alto saxophone and horn parts seem much lower than they actually appear in the ensemble parts. Standard clefs are used for all instruments; however, the trombone 1 and bassoon 1 parts are asked to read in tenor clef at various points. While the low reed parts and horn 3 and 4 parts sometimes appear in bass clef in the score, their performance parts are all written in treble clef.

The keys of C minor and E-flat Major are the primary keys of the piece. However, there is emphasis on B Major harmony and an eventual resolution to E Major in the last six measures of the piece. Familiarity and comfort with tonal movement between these two key areas is critical since this motion tends to happen quite suddenly within the composition.

The range demands are not great for the woodwinds, but the flute 2 part can be quite low at times. The greatest range demands are found in the brass section, where the trumpet 1, horn 1, and trombone 1 parts play towards the top of their registers with varying levels of frequency.

The percussion parts do not present any specific problems. The timpani part is the most difficult and requires some tuning adjustments over the course of the composition.

#### Unit 5: Stylistic Considerations

While A Solemn Place presents few technical challenges (with the notable exception of the instrumentation), the stylistic and musical challenges are significant. Due to the subtlety and nuance required from the performers, conductors are encouraged to program this piece with their most mature players since these musical hurdles can be demanding.

Regarding stylistic considerations in A Solemn Place, Oquin writes:

As with much of my music, a seamless quality permeates the work. Though the harmony alternates between passages of tonal stability and those of transition, there is no pause, no complete cadence, for the four minutes of the piece. While the music begins mysteriously and ends triumphant, it is the exploration between these two destinations that I find compelling. To experience this piece is to be continuously in the moment, not completely aware of what lies ahead or where the piece may lead, until the final chord."

The "seamless" quality Oquin refers to is the primary stylistic challenge for a band performing *A Solemn Place*. These challenges manifest themselves in the way the ensemble breathes, produces elision, and shapes phrases.

Because *A Solemn Place* is an arrangement of a choral work, the conductor and ensemble must consider how choral ensembles interpret breathing and rubato. In fact, much of the phrase structure requires the same attention to breathing and rubato that would be required from a choral ensemble. In choral music, breathing is carefully defined for all members of the ensemble and can be taken with or without rubato. Throughout *A Solemn Place*, the conductor and ensemble should work together to determine and outline breathing strategies that do not detract from the overall "seamless" of the composition.

To achieve a "seamless" quality, ensemble members must also pay careful attention to how accompanimental and melodic voices elide with one another. Musical ideas that have been divided through orchestration must be connected so timbral shifts are produced rather than orchestrational "bumps." Use of the choral score within the band rehearsal might help illustrate and make vivid these issues. In Figure 3, note how the tenor voice in the choral original has been orchestrated and split between five voices in the band version which, if not carefully addressed with regards to elision, may produce an undesirable phrase shape.

**Mysterioso** ♩ = 66

The musical score is for the piece "Mysterioso" in 4/4 time with a tempo of 66 beats per minute. It features four staves: Tenor, Clarinet 2/Bassoon 1, Clarinet 3/Bassoon 2, and Alto Saxophone. The Tenor part has the lyrics "O ma - gnum, O ma - gnum my - ste - ri - um. O". The other instruments play a melodic line with a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo). The score shows the elision of the phrase "Magnum Mysterium" across the instruments.

FIGURE 3. ELISION OF MAGNUM MYSTERIUM AND A SOLEMN PLACE (mm. 1-5).

The "seamless" stylistic quality Oquin references also presents specific challenges with regards to phrasing. Note in Figure 4, the length of the phrase, the overall legato quality, and the wide skips.



FIGURE 4. FLUTE 1 MELODY OF A SOLEMN PLACE (MM. 11-14).

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The challenges presented in Figure 4 require careful attention to breath control and true legato playing from the ensemble. While there are slurs marked, there are also several articulated notes, many of them repeated. Given this articulation, the band must maintain a legato articulation through the articulated notes and bar lines to prevent disruption of the overall legato line. The ensemble must also take care to move through the repeated notes dynamically either with a crescendo or decrescendo so as to not let the line stagnate. Further, because of the large skips under slur markings, the ensemble must use a steady airstream to create a smooth line through the large intervals rather than simply relying on the absence of the tongue to create a slur. This will also help prevent registral accents, or notes that sound louder simply because of the register in which they appear, which will further disrupt the overall shape of the phrase.

While this legato, choral style of writing is not uncommon for winds, it is also not always idiomatic. Therefore, it is imperative that the performers consider how best to breathe, produce elision, and shape phrases much in the way a choir would. This attention to detail should go a long way towards creating the "seamless" style Oquin references.

### Unit 6: Musical Elements

There are very few differences between the choral and band versions of the piece save for some expansion of register/tessitura, slight changes in dynamics, and some textural reductions and expansions (e.g., Figure 4). Conductors are encouraged, then, to incorporate use of the choral score into ensemble rehearsals as a way of illustrating some of these musical elements.

#### MELODY:

The melody in *A Solemn Place* makes frequent use of accented non-harmonic tones as well as small note values that lead to larger goals. Note the example in Figure 5.



FIGURE 5. ENGLISH HORN MELODY OF A SOLEMN PLACE(mm. 1–2).

Figure 5 (a re-orchestration of Figure 2) is the opening English horn solo in A Solemn Place and takes place over C minor harmony. The two Fs that appear in m. 2 are accented non-harmonic tones (both passing tones). As non-harmonic tones, they must be slightly emphasized by the English horn player to provide proper shape to the melodic line. The opening three notes (C, E-flat, and F) must crescendo and lead into the G on beat 3. This pattern, small note values leading to larger ones, is typical in A Solemn Place. However, while this example is marked with a crescendo, that is not always the case. Throughout A Solemn Place, the conductor and ensemble must pay careful attention to how non-harmonic tones and smaller note values can be used to shape melodic lines.

#### HARMONY:

Harmony in A Solemn Place is primarily diatonic with few chromatic alterations. Notable exceptions can be found in transitions and in key changes. For the ensemble, these changes can be made more difficult by common tones that change function across bar lines. Note the example in Figure 6.

FIGURE 6. REDUCTION OF BRASS HARMONY IN A SOLEMN PLACE (MM. 54-55).

In Figure 6, the trumpet 2, horn 2, and trombone 3 parts all sustain a common tone (B-flat or A-sharp) across the bar line. However, from one measure to the next, the pitch's function changes

from being the fifth of an E-flat Major chord (B-flat) to the third of an F-sharp Major chord (A-sharp). This shift means the performers must adjust the intonation of the pitch even though it appears to be the same. To adjust from equal temperament to just intonation, the B-flat (fifth in the E-flat Major chord) is raised 2 cents, while the A-sharp (third in the F-sharp Major chord) is lowered 13 cents. This overall change of 15 cents, or 15 percent of a half step, is certainly not insignificant and requires attention from the members of the ensemble and conductor.

#### RHYTHM:

The rhythms in *A Solemn Place* do not pose any technical challenges. The time signature is 4/4 throughout (as opposed to *alla breve* 2/2 in the choral version). However, as noted earlier, ensembles will need to consider breathing and rubato, which will have rhythmic implications.

#### TIMBRE:

There are six short solo passages for English horn, bassoon, soprano saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and euphonium. The piece is mostly written for tutti ensemble with short sequences for brass and woodwind choir.

Because *A Solemn Place* is based on a piece for choir, ensembles must pay particular attention to balance and blend. While the piece is largely orchestrated for tutti ensemble, the tubas and double bass are not always the lowest voice. Ensemble members must be careful to identify and balance to the lowest sounding voice to produce a balanced and in-tune ensemble sound.

There are no differences in key between the choral and band versions. While choirs can easily navigate changes in key without allowing these changes to significantly affect the overall timbre, that is much more difficult with a band. Conductors and ensembles must work to ensure that key changes, particularly movement to E Major harmony, do not allow the ensemble's sound to be negatively affected.

### **Unit 7: Form and Structure**

Form in *A Solemn Place* is primarily defined by key area. Like many compositions that begin in minor keys, the harmonic goal of *A Solemn Place* is eventual resolution into a Major key.

The harmonically stable sections are defined by the three-flat key signature tonalities of C minor and E-flat Major, with a gradual shift between the two taking place over the course of the piece. However, even within these stable areas, there is a great deal of fluidity between tonal centers. Oquin credits his post-tonal composition work with Milton Babbitt for this flexibility." Much in the same way as a post-tonal composer, Oquin frequently explores tonality as a collection of pitches a kind of quasi, twelve-tone set. This approach can create a sense of tonal fluidity in his music since pitches do not always have the same firmly defined roles found in traditional tonal music. However, since the pitches all belong to the same tonal collection, his music can still sound consonant and quite tonal.

The transition sections of *A Solemn Place* emphasize B Major harmony (V in the key of E Major) to foreshadow the piece's eventual resolution in E Major. There is also gradual development and exploration of Lydian pitch collections over the three transitional areas. As the piece develops, each subsequent transition uses Lydian modes in greater measure the highest number of Lydian pitch collections can be found in the final transition.



SECTION	MEASURE	EVENT AND SCORING
Stability	1-18	Stable C minor tonality; melodic material is initially presented in solo voices (English horn, soprano saxophone, and horn) within a woodwind choir setting; the full ensemble gradually enters in mm. 11-18 resulting in an orchestrational crescendo into m. 19.
Transition	19-24	B Major harmony (V of E Major) eventually transitions back to C minor; B Lydian pitch collection is hinted at in m. 19 through an E-sharp passing tone; orchestration is primarily brass choir and saxophones with upper woodwind coloring.
Stability	25-38	Stable three-flat key signature tonality with C minor and E-flat Major pitch centers explored; orchestration is primarily full ensemble with a gradual dynamic build into m. 39.
Transition	39-47	Re-appearance of B Major harmony (V of E Major) that eventually transitions back to E-flat Major; B Lydian collection explored in mm. 40-42; dynamic climax (ff) reached in m. 39; orchestration begins with full ensemble, but reduces to a woodwind choir as the dynamic decreases into m. 48.
Stability	48-54	Stable E-flat Major tonality; solo material in trombone, euphonium, and trumpet within tutti ensemble.
Transition	55-60	Lydian collections explored in greatest detail (F-sharp Lydian in m. 55, A Lydian in m. 56, D Lydian in m. 57, and F Lydian in mm. 58-59), which leads to a forte E Major chord in the final measure.

## Unit 8: Suggested Listening

William Byrd:

O magnum mysterium. Once, as I remember..... The Monteverdi Choir, John Eliot Gardiner, conductor. Philips, 462050, 1998.

Giovanni Gabrieli:

O magnum mysterium. Venice Preserved. His Majesties Sagbutts and Cornetts and Gentlemen of the Chappell, Peter Bassano, conductor. Academy Sound and Vision, 122, 1990.

Morten Lauridsen:

O magnum mysterium. Collaborations. Arranged by H. Robert Reynolds. University of Michigan Symphony Band, Michael Haithcock, conductor. Equilibrium, 66, 2004.

O magnum mysterium. Lauridsen: Lux Aeterna. Los Angeles Master Chorale, Paul Salamunovich, conductor. Rubedo Canis Musica, 19705, 1998.

Wayne Oquin:

A Solemn Place [Live]. Wayne Oquin Live. University of Georgia Wind Ensemble, John Lynch, conductor. Wayne Oquin, 2016.

A Solemn Place. The Sun Will Rise Again. Messiah College Wind Ensemble, Bradley Genevro, conductor. Klavier, 11208, 2016. Affirmation. Departures. The United States Air Force Band, Colonel Larry H. Lang, conductor. Klavier, 11204, 2014.

O magnum mysterium. Soft Blink of Amber Light. Houston Chamber Choir, Robert Simpson, conductor. MSR Classics, 1499, 2015.

Tower Ascending. American Voices. The United States Air Force Band, Colonel Larry H. Lang, conductor. Klavier, 11210, 2016.

Tomás Luis de Victoria:

O magnum mysterium. O magnum mysterium. Robert Shaw Festival Singers, Robert Shaw, conductor. Telarc, 80531, 2000.

## Unit 9: Additional References and Resources

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Composer's Website:

[www.wayneoquin.com](http://www.wayneoquin.com)

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Notes

1 Wayne Oquin, telephone interview with author (April 30, 2017).

2 Ibid.

3 Wayne Oquin, *A Solemn Place* (New York: Wayne Oquin, 2013), [n.p.].

4 Ibid., [n.p.].

5 Wayne Oquin, telephone interview with author (April 30, 2017).

6 Wayne Oquin, *A Solemn Place* (New York: Wayne Oquin, 2013), [n.p.].

7 Wayne Oquin, telephone interview with author (May 1, 2017).