

Teacher Resource Guide: Song for Silent Voices, Wayne Oquin (b. 1977)

By: Jonathan Caldwell

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Abstract:

A native of Houston, TX, Wayne Oquin is chair of ear training/musicianship at the Juilliard School, where he has worked since 2008. He holds a bachelor of music from Texas State University and a master of music and 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 also 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*.

The Danish National Symphony, the Munich Philharmonic, the Pacific Symphony, the King's Singers, and Marc-Andre Hamelin have all commissioned and performed Oquin's music. In the 2017-2018 season, the Philadelphia Orchestra (Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor, and Paul Jacobs, organ) performed his quasi-organ concerto *Resilience* six times, including on their season-opening performance and on tour in Europe. Other projects include an orchestral version of *Tower Ascending*, commissioned by the Pacific Symphony (Carl St. Clair, conductor) and *Horizon*, a twenty-minute piece for band, commissioned by Texas State University (Caroline Beatty, conductor).

In addition to *Song for Silent Voices*, Oquin has contributed significant music to wind literature, including *Flashback*, *A Solemn Place*, *Tower Ascending*, and *Affirmation*. He has won the National Band Association's William D. Revelli Award twice for *Affirmation* (2014) and *Song for Silent Voices* (2018). In 2016, the United States Air Force awarded him the Commander's Medal of Excellence.

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Article:

Unit 1: Composer

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Unit 2: Composition

Oquin's a cappella choral work, "Alleluia," is the basis of *Song for Silent Voices*. The text setting, based on the single word "alleluia," presented a unique challenge: "Rather than venture to create one rendering of a multifaceted lyric, I set a single word hundreds of ways, each repetition attempting to portray some new element of this ancient, sacred expression."¹

"Alleluia" is dedicated to Mary Jo Loyd and in memory of Oquin's lifelong friend, Dr. Herbert M. Loyd, about whom he writes: "It is impossible to overstate what a good friend Herb Loyd was to me and to my family. He and his wife Mary Jo-with whom I remain close were among my earliest supporters, from the time I was still in middle school."² The Wisconsin Chamber Choir (Robert Gehrenbeck, conductor) premiered "Alleluia" on May 1, 2018.

During the composition of "Alleluia," Oquin knew immediately he wanted to transcribe the piece for band. The band version, retitled as *Song for Silent Voices*, is his second choral piece transformed in this manner (*A Solemn Place* is a transcription of his choral composition, "O magnum mysterium"). Regarding the natural connection he feels between choir and band music, Oquin writes: "In many ways, [band transcriptions of choral music] represent the intersection of these two worlds at their most common denominator: breath."³

Michael Butler, director of bands at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, organized the commissioning consortium for *Song for Silent Voices*. Butler also suggested that Alex Kaminsky, band director at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, program the piece for the band's 2018 performance at the Midwest Clinic.⁴ The performance occurred just ten months after a gunman opened fire at the school, killing seventeen people and injuring seventeen more. It is the deadliest mass shooting at a secondary school in the history of the United States.

While connected to this tragedy, *Song for Silent Voices* is not a political statement or a call to action.⁵ Instead, *Song for Silent Voices*, like "Alleluia," is a piece written in memoriam.

Continually I'm drawn to music's power to connect, its gift of going beyond words. To enter music, this seemingly separate world of pitches, harmonies, rhythms, and textures, is to plunge more deeply into life itself. How true of the current work: unresolved dissonances speaking to our collective humanity in all its beauty and many imperfections; frequent modulations reflecting a world of constant change; a single solo voice signifying childlike innocence; the final diminuendo depicting life's brevity. Words alone would be inadequate.

What an honor to have my work premiered by the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Wind Symphony. These brave young musicians, having been through unspeakable tragedy, are an inspiration to all. My hope is that this music somehow merges grief and gratitude; the quiet void from a life lost and the thankfulness for times shared."⁶

Song for Silent Voices is dedicated to the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (Alex Kaminsky, band director). The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Wind Symphony (Gary Green, conductor) premiered *Song for Silent Voices* on December 20, 2018, at the Midwest Clinic. *Song for Silent Voices* received the National Band Association's 2018 William D. Revelli Award.

Oquin has revised *Song for Silent Voices* since its initial publication in 2018. Since he self-publishes and often makes slight revisions to his music, conductors should visit his website (<http://www.wayneoquin.com/>) or email him directly to ensure they are performing the latest version of any of his pieces.

Unit 3: Historical Perspective

"Alleluia" is a Latin variant spelling of the Hebrew word "hallelujah," meaning "Praise the Lord." Several psalms in the Hebrew Bible include the word, indicating its likely use as a response to the psalm. Much like the term itself, early Christians preserved the responsorial nature of "alleluia." By the fourth century, Catholic Mass included "alleluia" as a response to most psalms, even ones that did not originally contain the word. By the seventh and eighth centuries, the Mass expanded the term into a stand-alone chant performed in the Fore-Mass following the Gradual.

The Alleluia chant is in two parts: a cantor performs the "alleluia" alone, and on the repeat, the choir joins the cantor while adding a melisma on the final [a] vowel, called the jubilus (see Figure 1):



FIGURE 1. ALLELUIA FOR THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD AT TERCE.

In Gregorian chant, "alleluia" also appears as a portion of a larger chant (see Figure 2). In this example, note the repetition of "alleluia," which allows for a more syllabic setting as opposed to the melismatic setting found in Figure 1.



FIGURE 2. EXCERPT FROM ANTIPHON FOLLOWING THE MAGNIFICAT FOR THE THIRD DAY WITHIN THE OCTAVE OF THE EPIPHANY.

While there are many different settings and variants of settings of the word "alleluia" in Oquin's "Alleluia," the settings take on the two basic forms found in Gregorian chant: melismatic (see Figure 3) and syllabic (see Figure 4).⁸ In Figure 3, note the chant-like use of D-sharp as a reciting tone as opposed to the more modern and open setting in Figure 4:



FIGURE 3. ALLELUIA, MM. 1-7.

FIGURE 4. ALLELUIA, MM. 18-33.

Unit 4: Technical Considerations

Song for Silent Voices, in addition to its standard band instrumentation, includes English horn, contrabass clarinet, contrabassoon, soprano saxophone, and double bass. The score calls for three percussion instruments: timpani, vibraphone, and marimba. There are short solos for flute, clarinet, English horn, bassoon, alto saxophone, trumpet, horn, trombone, euphonium, and tuba. The score uses standard clefs for all instruments.

Key signatures with five sharps, six sharps, and two flats play prominent roles in Song for Silent Voices. There are also important arrivals and transitions through F-sharp major harmony. Familiarity and comfort with tonal movement between multiple key areas and harmonic structures is critical since harmonic motion and shifts tend to happen quite suddenly.

The range demands are not extreme for the woodwinds. However, trumpet 1, trombone 1, and euphonium 1 play towards the top of their registers with varying levels of frequency.

The percussion parts do not present any specific issues. The timpani part is the most difficult and requires various tuning adjustments. Oquin requests that larger bands performing in more resonant spaces double the vibraphone and marimba parts and place the doubled parts antiphonally on the opposite side of the ensemble.

There are few differences between the original choral and the band version. The most notable difference is a *più mosso* in the band version at m. 38 and a corresponding *Tempo I* in m. 47. In addition, articulations and dynamics are significantly different in the wind band version to facilitate performance and ensemble balance.

Unit 5: Stylistic Considerations

While Song for Silent Voices presents few technical challenges, the stylistic and musical challenges are significant. Due to the subtlety and nuance required from the performers, conductors should program this piece with their most mature players since these musical hurdles can be demanding.

As a choral piece transcribed for band, Song for Silent Voices is similar to Oquin's 2013 composition, A Solemn Place, particularly with regards to style. 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 triumphantly, it is the exploration between these two destinations that I find compelling. To experience this piece is to be continuously in the moment, unaware 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 *Song for Silent Voices*. These challenges manifest themselves in the way the ensemble breathes, produces elision, shapes phrases, and articulates.

Because *Song for Silent Voices* is a version of a choral work, the conductor and ensemble must consider how the phrase structure demands the same attention to breathing and rubato required of a choral ensemble. In choral music, conductors generally define breathing and rubato for all members of the choir. Throughout *Song for Silent Voices*, the conductor and ensemble should work together to determine and outline breathing strategies that do not detract from the overall "seamless" quality of the composition.

Ensemble members must also pay careful attention to how voices elide with one another. Relative to the choral version, the band version often divides complete musical ideas between various voices and instruments. Performers must connect these divisions to create timbral shifts rather than orchestrational "bumps." Use of the choral score within the band rehearsal might help illustrate and make these issues vivid.

In Figure 5, note how the band version orchestrates the original alto and tenor voices (included in the two lower staves for reference) and splits them between six instrumental voices. If elision is not carefully addressed, it may be easy to produce an undesirable phrase shape.

prevent disruption of the overall legato line. The ensemble must also move through repeated notes dynamically with a crescendo or decrescendo so the phrase does not stagnate.

Interpretation of the choral text can also help ensembles conceptualize articulation. In *Song for Silent Voices*, the band has the advantage of having to interpret a single word: "alleluia." Since the only consonant in alleluia is [l], a soft consonant, encourage players to "get to the vowel quicker" through a soft, quick articulation leading to an open vowel. Using this imagery should help adjust both their articulation and timbre.¹⁰

While this legato, choral style of writing is not uncommon for winds, it is also not always idiomatic. It is imperative that players consider how best to breathe, produce elision, shape phrases, and articulate 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

Since there are few differences between the original "Alleluia" and *Song for Silent Voices*, conductors should incorporate the choral score into ensemble rehearsals to illustrate these musical elements.

MELODY:

The melodies in *Song for Silent Voices* make frequent use of accented non-harmonic tones and small note values that serve as anacrusis to those non-harmonic tones. In Figure 7 (a trumpet 1 melody in concert pitch), circles mark non-harmonic tones with harmony indicated under the staff. Dashed slurs show the direction of the phrase from smaller note values towards the non-harmonic goal pitches.



FIGURE 7. TRUMPET 1 (CONCERT PITCH), MM. 34–38.

Throughout *Song for Silent Voices*, performers must anticipate these musical issues and provide slight emphasis on each non-harmonic tone and a crescendo through the anacrusis to give the melodic line proper shape.

HARMONY:

Harmony in *Song for Silent Voices* is primarily diatonic, with frequent added ninths and elevenths (often serving as suspensions). Transitions and key changes pose greater challenges for the ensemble, especially in instances when common tones change function across barlines (see Figure 8). In this example, dashed lines indicate common tones between harmonies.

The image shows a piano reduction of ensemble harmony for measures 60 and 61. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The score includes various chords and melodic lines. Annotations include 'P11 (-2 cents)', 'M3 (-14 cents)', 'P1 (0 cents)', and 'M7 (-12 cents)'. Below the staves, the chords are identified as Cb, Ab (V/C#), and A. The score includes triplets and a barline.

FIGURE 8. REDUCTION OF ENSEMBLE HARMONY, MM. 60-61.

In Figure 8, the soprano, alto, and tenor voices sustain common tones across the barline: D-flat/C-sharp or A-flat/G-sharp. Even though the pitches appear enharmonically equivalent, their harmonic function changes across the barline based on the surrounding harmony. Relative to just intonation, performers of both pitches must anticipate the needed adjustment and lower their pitch by twelve cents (i.e., 12% of a semitone) across the barline. These intonation issues are not insignificant, and while ensemble members must anticipate and make these adjustments, conductors must also understand these issues and help the ensemble navigate these concerns.

RHYTHM:

Rhythm in *Song for Silent Voices* does not pose many technical challenges. The greatest challenges are quarter-note triplets and a mixture of duple and triple subdivisions within the same phrase. In both instances, performers must subdivide and anticipate the challenges posed by the rhythm.

TIMBRE:

Song for Silent Voices has a relatively sparse texture that often includes multiple, short solo passages for various instruments. In fact, the full wind section only plays tutti in mm. 47-65, constituting approximately one-fourth of the piece. Because of the sparse texture, bass instruments (e.g., tuba and double bass) often do not constitute the foundation of the ensemble sound. To produce a balanced and in-tune ensemble sound, then, ensemble members must be careful to identify and balance to the lowest sounding voice.

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 overall timbre, this can be more difficult with a band. Conductors and ensembles must work to ensure that key changes, particularly movement to keys and harmonies with sharps, do not negatively affect the ensemble's sound.

Unit 7: Form and Structure

Song for Silent Voices primarily delineates form through sections of harmonic stability and transition. In harmonically stable sections, pitch material oscillates between major or minor collections and a corresponding Lydian collection. Oquin moves between collections by taking advantage of shared tones in the tonic harmonies (see Figure 9).

D#		
B	–	B
G#	–	G#
		E

FIGURE 9. SHARED TONES BETWEEN G-SHARP MINOR AND E LYDIAN COLLECTIONS, MM. 1–17.

Oquin credits his work with Milton Babbitt for the flexibility and fluidity between tonal centers in his music.¹¹ Similar to post-tonal composers, Oquin explores tonality as a collection of pitches—a kind of quasi twelve-tone set. This approach creates a sense of tonal fluidity in his music since pitches do not always have the firmly defined roles found in traditional tonal music. However, since the pitches all belong to the same key signature collection, his music still sounds consonant and tonal. The oscillation between two tonics, a "double-tonic complex," may also be attributable to Oquin's work with Robert Bailey and the music of Richard Wagner.¹²

The transition sections of *Song for Silent Voices* all begin in and emphasize F-sharp major harmony—the "correct" Lydian collection corresponding to the piece's resolution key of C-sharp major.

SECTION	MEASURES	EVENT AND SCORING
Stability	1-17	Stable "five-sharp key signature" with oscillation between G-sharp minor and E Lydian pitch collections; note that G-sharp is "V" of C-sharp major, which ends the piece; first appearance of F-sharp major harmony in m. 11; a pandiatonic chord ends the section with both G-sharp minor and E major tonalities in the bass voices.
Stability	18-33	Stable "two-flat key signature" with oscillation between B-flat major and E-flat Lydian pitch collections.
Transition	34-46	Reappearance of F-sharp major harmony (compare to m. 11) with accelerating harmonic rhythm; notable appearances of E-flat minor harmony in mm. 41 and 43 (compare E-flat Lydian in previous section); the <i>più mosso</i> in m. 38 leads to an orchestrational crescendo with slight <i>ritardando</i> into m. 47.

Stability	47-54	Stable "two-flat key signature" but more firmly in E-flat Lydian than in mm. 18–33; A5 appears in the soprano voice for the first time in m. 51—as the leading tone in B-flat major and the defining pitch of E-flat Lydian, its absence to this point adds to the expressive effect of the moment.
Transition	55-66	Reappearance of F-sharp major harmony with accelerating harmonic rhythm in final measures of section; V of C-sharp major in m. 60 creates a moment of anticipated stability that proves false through a move to A Lydian (see Figure 8); oscillation between A Lydian and C-sharp major in mm. 61-66, even though F-sharp Lydian is the "correct" corresponding collection; V' of A Lydian in mm. 65-66 leads to C-sharp major, the expected but denied arrival from m. 60.
Stability	67-70	C-sharp major to end; augmentation of tenor motive from m. 64 appears in m. 69 to highlight the false cadential connection from the previous section.

Unit 8: Suggested Listening

Johann Sebastian Bach:

"Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme" from *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, BWV 140. The English Baroque Soloists and the Monteverdi Choir / John Eliot Gardiner. Recorded 1992. Bach: Cantatas. Archiv Produktion 431809, compact disc.

George Frideric Handel:

"Hallelujah" from *Messiah*, HWV 56. The English Baroque Soloists and the Monteverdi Choir / John Eliot Gardiner. Recorded 1982. Reissue 2003. Handel: *Messiah*. Phillips 434297, compact disc.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart:

"Alleluia" from *Exsultate, jubilate*, K. 165. The English Baroque Soloists and the Monteverdi Choir / John Eliot Gardiner. Recorded 1992. *Exsultate, jubilate: Works by Handel and Mozart*. Philips 4349202, compact disc.

Wayne Oquin:

"Alleluia." Wisconsin Chamber Choir / Robert Gehrenbeck. Recorded live April 13, 2018. Online recording, 5:54.

<https://www.wisconsinchamberchoir.org/recordings/2018-2019-recordings>

"O magnum mysterium." Houston Chamber Choir / Robert Simpson. Recorded 2015. *Soft Blink of Amber Light*. MSR Classics 1499, compact disc.

Song for Silent Voices. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Wind Symphony / Gary Green. Recorded live December 20, 2018. 2018 Midwest Clinic: Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Wind Symphony. Mark Custom 54462- MCD, compact disc. Teaching Music through Performance in Band: Volume 12 TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDES

Song for Silent Voices. Sydney Conservatorium of Music Wind Symphony / John Lynch. Recorded live November 8, 2019. YouTube video, 6:14. <https://youtu.be/nayMNS8nVTY> YouTube. "Wayne Oquin Channel." Accessed March 27, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/wayneoquin>

Unit 9: Additional References and Resources

Caldwell, Jonathan. "Teacher Resource Guide: A Solemn Place by Wayne Oquin." In Teaching Music through Performance in Band, Vol. 11, edited by Richard Miles, 303-314. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2018.

Oquin, Wayne. "Alleluia." New York: Watersong Press, 2018.
Song for Silent Voices. New York: Watersong Press, 2018.

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Notes

1. Wayne Oquin, Alleluia (New York: Watersong Press, 2018), [n.p.].
2. Oquin, email correspondence with the author, April 9, 2020.
3. Oquin, A Solemn Place (New York: Watersong Press, 2013), [n.p.].
4. Oquin, telephone interview with the author, March 26, 2020. 5. Ibid.
6. Oquin, Song for Silent Voices (New York: Watersong Press, 2018), [n.p.].
7. Psalms 105-106, 111-113, 115-117, 135, and 146-150 all include "hallelujah" as part of the psalm.
8. See "Suggested Listening" for more settings of "Alleluia" by Bach, Handel, and Mozart.
9. Oquin, A Solemn Place, [n.p.].
10. For more on pronunciation of Latin in sacred music, see Ron Jeffers, Sacred Latin Texts, Vol. 1 of Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire (Corvallis, OR: Cascade Printing Company, 1988), 36-43.
11. Oquin, telephone interview with author, May 1, 2017.
12. Oquin, telephone interview with author, April 30, 2017. For more on Robert Bailey's analysis of Wagner's music, including the double-tonic complex, the equality of major and minor modes, and an implied tonic through the V', see Richard Wagner, "Prelude and

Transfiguration" from *Tristan and Isolde*, ed. Robert Bailey, Norton Critical Scores, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 113–146.