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The purpose of this project is to present composer Seth Colaner's compositional process, as well as his personal motivation for creating an opera. This project will also establish criteria for his vision in the conception of opera composition as they relate to his work and compositional voice.

The thesis includes an informal description of the process of conceiving a specific work, the dramatic and musical properties of the completed work, and the process of producing the opera for a public performance. The informal use of language stems from the nature of the thesis, which is a commentary on the experiences of Seth Colaner as he conceived, wrote, and produced *He Cried Uncle*.

*He Cried Uncle* is a one-act opera scored for six voices, saxophone quartet, and percussion, and electronic media. The percussion parts consist of crotales, temple blocks (5), brake drums (2), cymbal, snare, conga, and bass drum. The electronic media consists of eight-channel computer playback. *He Cried Uncle* is divided into five scenes, each preceded by incidental music that accompanies a pantomime. The plot follows a young man's attempt to gain control over his life, his business, and his own mind.

The thesis also includes the musical score and a DVD documenting the thirty-minute premier performance.

***HE CRIED UNCLE; AN OPERA IN ONE ACT***

by

Seth W. Colaner

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Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **The Problem**

My initial attraction to opera as a teenager came from an unlikely source: a television commercial for a popular soft drink. The music for the commercial was meant to sound “extreme”, and it was scored for a very loud, angry punk rock band with an opera singer as the vocalist. I was immediately struck with how natural these two seemingly disparate genres blended together to create such a powerful sound. I saw them as related in that rock and roll is largely driven by raw energy and teenage angst, whereas opera is driven by the disciplined power of the voice and the overwhelming pain of adult tragedy; I saw opera as a more mature version of rock and roll. All of this suddenly occurred to me as I watched the thirty-second commercial. Already an avid fan of rock and roll music, I instantly fell in love with the sound of the opera singer’s voice.

As I began to attend operas and listen to opera recordings, I began to understand the immense musical and dramatic possibilities afforded to the composer by the genre of opera; I began to develop a sense for myself of what I thought I could contribute to this rich genre. I saw power, but not necessarily beauty, in the operatic voice; it is not beautiful as a lovely woman or a cute child; it is beautiful as a running stallion or a great, crashing river. It has the capability to induce terror or to force the listener to feel the pain the character is enduring.

I also felt that the musical possibilities afforded by opera could be exploited further by the use of instrumentation other than orchestra or chamber orchestra. The use of additional instruments in operas such as synthesizers and saxophones in Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* or John Adams' *Nixon in China* was inspiring to me. Why not score an opera using guitars, electronic instruments, or non-Western instruments? Why not score an opera for wind ensemble or band? Why not score an opera for a smaller ensemble, such as string quartet or saxophone quartet?

As I studied opera more as a music student, I found that I had many ideas about how I could structure a drama in music, different ways of orchestrating, and new sounds that an opera could produce. As I imagined what I would do in an opera, I realized that I could write my own. I had something to say, and I wrote an opera in order to say it.

### **The Ideal**

When faced with the task of actually composing my own opera, I was forced to decide what exactly constituted a good opera in my eyes; it is easy to criticize others, but it is difficult to construct something good yourself. I listed for myself the things I wanted in an opera if I was the one going to see it.

Brevity was important; I did not see a need to spend excess amounts of time dwelling on one idea or event for longer than absolutely necessary. Perhaps I am a product of late twentieth century media, where camera angles change every few seconds, several thirty-second films punctuate every act of a television program, and a person's entire life story is told in a two-hour film; in any case, I wanted my scenes to move expeditiously—not fast, but appropriately swift.

I did not want to write a love story. The central part of any love story can essentially only end in one of two ways: either the lovers stay together or they do not. This type of story is un motivating to me as a writer, and I wanted my story to be about something less predictable.

The music needed to have a driving groove frequently throughout the piece, but it also needed contrasting music. After deciding on the story of *He Cried Uncle*, I found that contrasting the musical textures of the incidental pieces and scenes accomplished this goal.

I wanted to hear new and interesting sounds coming from the orchestra; I wanted to make sounds that I had never heard in an opera before. Once I had the story in mind, I knew that I would need instruments that could be extremely loud and harsh at times but also soft and gentle. They also needed to be percussive in nature so I could write pulsing, driving music, but they also needed to be melodic.

Most importantly, I wanted to be moved emotionally by the piece. Opera is of course a dramatic medium, and I could not imagine a reason for writing an opera that did not move people to experience pathos.

Once I had an idea of what sort of materials I would work with, I was ready to construct the libretto and music.

CHAPTER II  
WRITING *HE CRIED UNCLE*

**The Story**

The story for *He Cried Uncle* simply came to me one day, and I wrote it down: a young man, Timothy, attempting to escape from his unfulfilling job, purchases and renovates an old, large house, intending to turn it into a bed and breakfast. His endeavors are hampered by the persistent criticisms of his old Uncle Virgil, an unpleasant elderly man who lives in the house. As their relationship continues to deteriorate, they are befriended by a quirky neighbor, Angela. She is a friendly and compassionate soul who takes a special interest in Virgil. Timothy and Virgil's relationship comes to a heated end when Timothy, enraged, kills the old man with a blow to the head. Angela comes to visit Timothy where he is incarcerated where she reveals to him that she is a psychologist and that Uncle Virgil never existed—he was an imaginary figure in Timothy's mind. Angela failed to help Timothy overcome his inner demons, and Timothy is left wondering what will happen to him; he feels guilty of murder even though he technically killed nobody.

I quickly realized that rather than a short story or something similar, *He Cried Uncle* would be best written as a one-act opera. I set about writing a libretto in the fall of 2005, shaping the story into five scenes. Because the story was fast-paced, I knew there would be changes necessary between virtually all of the scenes. To facilitate these changes, I wrote brief incidental music to be performed during each one.

## **The Characters**

It was quite simple to decide on the principle characters for the opera. Timothy would be a baritone, strong-voiced but prone to violent (and powerful) outbursts; Uncle Virgil would be a vocal counterpart to Timothy, a tenor that was simultaneously frail and shrill; Angela, a strong woman with an important career, would be an authoritative yet sympathetic mezzo-soprano.

The smaller roles were more difficult to develop. Early on, I knew I wanted a women's trio (two sopranos and a mezzo-soprano) to sing during the incidental pieces. Because I firmly believe that the forces required for any piece should appropriately reflect the length of a work (e.g., it is unwise to have a large cast for a short opera), I did not want to have three additional vocalists do nothing but sing between scenes. To solve this problem, I decided to use the women's trio as characters throughout the opera. The mezzo-soprano was easy to utilize; the vocalist who sang Angela would sing the mezzo-soprano part in the trio. I decided to use the two sopranos as guests at Timothy's bed and breakfast in various scenes, as well as one of the psychiatric ward guards in the final scene. This left me with a slightly lopsided cast of three women and two men. To balance it out a bit as well as to bring in an additional voice I could incorporate, I added a tenor who would function as a guest at the bed and breakfast, accompanying the women in their respective scenes. Thus, I had a cast of six, with four of the cast members serving in multiple roles.

## **The Sounds**

When deciding how to score the opera, I knew that I needed instruments that were versatile but quite powerful when called upon to be so. However, the sound of an orchestra or chamber orchestra would not serve the drama of *He Cried Uncle* well. In studying the instrumentation of many opera scores, I had noticed an almost omnipresence of high woodwind instruments, and I consciously avoided them so as to sonically distance myself as much as possible from the sounds one typically expects from an opera.

The music for *He Cried Uncle* had to range from nearly inaudibly soft to dangerously loud and cover a wide range of emotions, nearly all of which would be very strong; Timothy is not a stable character, but he is powerful. I eventually decided to score the opera for saxophone quartet and two percussionists.

The saxophones suited my purposes perfectly. Practically, a saxophone quartet is an easy choice because there exist a great many saxophone quartets that rehearse and perform together on a regular basis. Therefore, not only would it be easier to engage an already-established group to play for the opera, it would be a group of musicians that already function well as a unit.

A battery of percussion, the components of which were decided upon after a lengthy session with a percussionist and a room full of equipment, was added to complete the ensemble. I chose crotales, which are almost always bowed in the opera, five temple blocks, and two brake drums for one player, and a sort of modified drum set comprised of a suspended cymbal, snare drum, conga, and bass drum for the second player.

Initially I was going to score the second percussion part for a standard drum kit, but I quickly realized that a combination of that nature would protrude from the ensemble like a pop singer at an opera. That is to say, it has a certain type of sound that is too closely tied to forms such as jazz and rock-and-roll to be useful for my purposes. I still wanted a “drum set” of sorts, to provide locomotion to the music. Therefore I modified the standard drum set with the aforementioned instruments which enabled me to avoid the cliché of the drum set while utilizing the rhythmic properties a drum set provides.

Still, my instrumentation was not complete. Dramatically, I wanted the audience to experience the events of the opera as Timothy did; I wanted them to see and hear the things he did, to in a sense live inside his head, so that they would be caught up in his rage against Virgil and, like Timothy, would be virtually blind to the startling reality that much of what appears to happen actually takes place in Timothy’s mind. In my conception, part of the tragedy of Timothy’s mental illness is that even though he manages to kill off the voice of Virgil, there would be other voices that would remain, rendering his life a never-ending struggle against his inner demons. These imaginary voices needed their own outlet. It took little time for me to come up with how I would solve this problem: the last component of instrumentation would be electronics. Specifically, I used eight channels of audio that would emanate from speakers positioned equidistantly throughout the performance space (two in the back, four on the sides, and two on the wings of the stage).

I recorded myself whispering short discouraging phrases that would represent Timothy’s voices. Distributing them liberally throughout the incidental pieces and

extremely conservatively throughout the scenes, I was able to achieve the missing element to the musical palette of *He Cried Uncle*.

## **The Scenes**

### *Prologue*

The opera begins here, with a stage that is almost entirely dark. In front of the stage, the ensemble comprised of saxophone quartet and percussion begins. The saxophones play slap tongues interspersed among long, slowly developing tones while the crotales are bowed, the bass drum occasionally interrupting with an ominous thumb roll.

The whispering begins almost immediately, deftly moving among the eight speakers that have been placed around the room. Shortly thereafter, the trio of women's voices enters. The women are backstage, behind the set, but as they sing against the back wall, the sound of their voices bounce off of it, off the ceiling, and cascades down on the audience from above.

Between the saxophones and percussion producing sounds towards the audience from the front of the stage, the women's voices cascading down from above, and the whispers that emanate from all sides, the atmosphere becomes disoriented and disturbed, setting the tone for the entire opera.

A pantomime occurs approximately forty-five seconds into the *Prologue*. The lights come up to reveal Timothy having an argument with his boss which ends with Timothy angrily removing his tie and throwing down on the boss's desk. He stalks off,

intent on other plans. The lights go down and the music continues for approximately forty-five seconds, much as it did before.

To give the chorus a disorienting, ethereal feel, each vocalist has her own twelve-tone row to perform. Each row occurs only once in each voice. When heard together, the vocal lines occasionally make a consonant sonority, but they will quickly move again, producing intervals that clash harshly.

Because clashing dodecaphonic parts are extremely difficult for vocalists to perform, I used the saxophones and bowed crotales to provide harmonic support. The saxophones alternate between pitched slap tongues and long, slow, solo tones while the crotales plays long, slow, bowed pitches. The percussionists add sparse thumb rolls on the bass drum. The overall effect is that the voices and each of the instrument groups sound independent from one another, but in reality they share the same pitch content.

The *Prologue* and the four other incidental pieces were essentially written as one long piece that is broken up by the scenes. Taken together, the five incidental pieces form a palindrome that finds its pivot point in the exact middle *Incidental No.2*. Therefore, the two halves of *Incidental No.2* mirror one another, *Incidental No.1* and *Incidental No.3* mirror one another, and the *Prologue* and *Incidental No.4* mirror one another. This provides an added layer of structure to the whole of the opera.

All five pieces share the same features of dodecaphonic vocal lines, pitch support from the saxophone and crotales, and eight-channel whispers throughout.

*Scene 1: Welcome to the Neighborhood*

*Scene 1* is the first meeting of Angela and Timothy. Timothy, still wearing the clothes he had on when he quit his job, is busying himself with fixing up an old house. Angela, appearing as a friendly neighbor, approaches him with a gift of muffins and a warm welcome to the neighborhood. They strike up a conversation where Timothy reveals his plans to fix up the old house and turn it into a bed and breakfast, his hope that this endeavor will finally give him a place of rest and solitude (a metaphor for the restoration of his own sanity), and the fact that his crazy, lonely old Uncle Virgil lives with him.

Angela's interest is piqued at this last statement. She has, she reveals, a soft spot for the crazy and lonely and would be glad to come and visit the old man. Timothy welcomes her to do so but warns that she should do so at her own risk, for Virgil is a mean man.

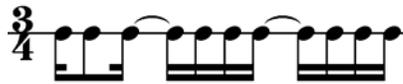
They part company, and as Timothy enters the house, Virgil appears and sits down in a chair. Shortly, they begin to quarrel; Virgil criticizes what Timothy is doing, and Timothy angrily suggests the old man help out if he does not like how he does things. Virgil is offended at such a suggestion.

Conceptually, I wanted the music in *Scene 1* to feel as though it emerged organically from the text. I assigned pitches and rhythms according to the inflections of the text as I spoke it aloud. To give the pitches some organization and additional musical structure, I assigned each character a pitch set.

Angela's pitches are all alternately derived from the A major and Ab major scales. These are familiar, predictable scales in Western music, and they gave her character a sense of balance and stability. Timothy's character is not so balanced, so I wanted to give him music with a lot of leaps, avoiding a large amount of melodic, step-wise motion. His music is from alternating C and C# blues scales. The gaps in the blues scale, the chromaticism provided by the "blue" note (the tritone), and the frequent shifting between the C and C# scales gave Timothy the sense that he was always struggling for control, as if he was attempting to find one pitch area to settle into and find stability. Virgil, like the chorus in the incidental pieces, is not real. He is perceived to be angry, mean, and upsetting. It followed that he should have dodecaphonic music, which ties him in a subtle way to the surreal world of the incidental music.

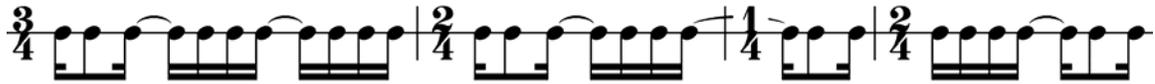
To contrast with the irregular phrasing of the vocal and saxophone parts, the scenes are built on rhythmic figures, all of which are derivatives of Figure 1.

(Figure 1: Basic Rhythmic Figure)



In *Scene 1*, the percussion section has this material. The measures are grouped in a regular 3/4-2/4-1/4-2/4 pattern, with the rhythmic figure appearing as a palindrome over the course of the pattern as shown in Figure 2.

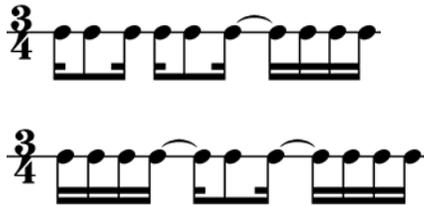
(Figure 2: Metric Pattern in *Scene 1*)



Such a repeating figure can become overbearing and intrude upon the rest of the music. To avoid this, the percussion fades in and out, giving the rest of the music room to breathe.

The basic one-measure pattern has a number of derivations that appear throughout *Scene 1* as shown in Figure 3.

(Figure 3: Rhythmic Derivatives in *Scene 1*)



The change in pattern is subtle; each derivative is still comprised of a pattern of sixteenth and eighth notes. Still, even these slight changes are aimed at renewing or maintaining interest in the music.

The vocal lines are written as natural extensions of the text, and the four saxophones are primarily written as a natural extension of the vocal lines. In some instances the saxophones foreshadow what will occur vocally, in some they follow, elaborating on the vocal parts, and in some instances they simply play the vocal part as it is being sung, often spinning off in a different direction after the vocal phrase is finished.

Their other function is to provide harmonic support by playing thick chords underneath certain vocal lines. Practically, this aids the singers in pitch reinforcement and provides a nice textural contrast to the running vocal and sax lines and the steady percussion *ostinati*.

### *Incidental No.1*

Like all the incidental pieces, *Incidental No.1* begins in darkness. It is accompanied by a pantomime. After several seconds, the lights come up to reveal Timothy busy about his work. Angela arrives to visit with Uncle Virgil for the first time. Timothy gestures to the two chairs across the room, indicating that she should sit down. She does so as Timothy retreats back into the kitchen, but she wonders where Uncle Virgil is. Timothy promptly returns, and as he does, Virgil appears from the other side of the room and sits next to Angela. She does not notice. Timothy introduces them and continues his work. Angela and Virgil sit awkwardly together as the lights go down. After several more seconds of darkness, the scene ends.

This pantomime was by far the most difficult to stage. It had to establish that Angela came to visit Virgil as she promised, that Timothy fully believed that Virgil was real, and that Angela recognized that Virgil did not exist but decided to play along with Timothy's fantasy anyway to see if she could help him, all without revealing to the audience that Virgil was not a real person.

This was accomplished using the subtle meanings of body language. When Timothy first gestures towards the chair across the room, he could be indicating that Angela should sit and wait for Virgil or that the chair was where Virgil was located.

After she sits and he returns, he notices that she has apparently not noticed the old man; he therefore gestures again, which could either be an introduction or an indication that she did not even notice his presence. Because Virgil's body language is emphatically antisocial, the awkwardness between him and Angela could be construed as being derived from this antisocial behavior or the fact that Timothy has just introduced Angela to a person that does not exist. My hope was that the audience would simply assume the social awkwardness of an angry old man caused the strange staging.

*Scene 2: The B&B is Running Smoothly*

*Scene 2* is essentially an extended aria for Timothy wherein he nervously repeats to himself that his newly opened bed and breakfast is running smoothly. He is apparently doing well, and it seems that his dream is becoming a reality. Though far from celebratory, he is cautiously optimistic about his future.

Angela, now a regular visitor, comes to see Uncle Virgil. She is wholeheartedly playing this game with Timothy, even testing him by asking if Virgil would like some coffee after Timothy offers her a cup. Timothy responds that Virgil hates his coffee, which, as an evasive maneuver, demonstrates how fully he has convinced himself that Virgil exists; he has to make up a story to cover the fact that there is no Uncle Virgil to give coffee to, and he does so subconsciously.

The music in *Scene 2* had to sound both upbeat and tense; while Timothy is pleased with the success his business is having, he knows that his grasp on his own mind is fragile and weak. If he loses control, he will be ruined.

The music for this scene was the first music I wrote for the opera. I simply pictured a nervously pacing Timothy reciting the text, “The B & B is running smoothly” and heard the pitches and rhythms that accompanied it. The music in the rest of the scene is based on that one idea.

I wanted to create a rhythmic contrast between Timothy’s vocal line and the nearly overpowering saxophones; this is where I first sketched out the rhythmic figure that first appears in *Scene 1* and develops throughout the whole opera. The figure appears in *Scene 2* as it appeared in *Scene 1*, but here the metric shifts occur more sporadically and fiercely, as when the 3/4 moves occasionally to 4/4 and right back again, or when it moves suddenly for one measure each to 12/16, then 6/16, then 1/4, then just as suddenly back again to 3/4.

(Example 1: Alto Saxophone, mm.31-35, illustrating metrical changes in *Scene 2*)



These rhythms contrast with Timothy’s sung rhythms throughout most of the scene (Example 2), occasionally coming together in rhythmic unison before breaking away as before. Both rhythms are heavily syncopated, but they accent different parts of the measure. As it is quite difficult for a vocalist to sing this way against such a dominant force as the four saxophones, the percussion doubles Timothy’s rhythms.

(Example 2: Voice and Baritone Saxophone, mm. 15-16, illustrating contrasting vocal and saxophone rhythms in *Scene 2*)

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is for the voice, starting with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The lyrics are: "The B & B is run - ning smooth - ly." The bottom staff is for the baritone saxophone, showing a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes.

Generally the saxophones are playing chords, with a descant in the soprano saxophone, underneath the vocal part, which provides solid harmonic support for the vocalist. The pitches for the saxophones are derived from the pitches from the vocal part.

### *Incidental No.2*

When the lights come up, Uncle Virgil is sitting front and center on the stage, glaring at the audience. This is an important moment, for it magnifies Virgil's presence in the opera—up to this point he has mostly been seething in the background—and gives him an opportunity to project his anger directly at the audience, breaking the fourth wall and causing discomfort in the crowd.

### *Scene 3: Montage*

*Scene 3* is a montage illustrating the deteriorating relationship between Timothy and Virgil as well as to show the passage of time. In the first vignette, Timothy is unsuccessfully attempting to fix a wall outlet, much to the delight of Virgil; in the next, Timothy is serving breakfast to two guests while trying to silence Virgil's loud and crude tirade on the poor quality of the food; in the next, Virgil mocks Timothy's cleaning abilities and claims that the house is filthy and may lead to the old man catching a

horrible disease; in the last vignette, two guests are paying their bill while Virgil casts aspersions on the quality of the house as well as Timothy's abilities as a host.

This is too much for Timothy, and after the guests exit he angrily confronts Uncle Virgil. Timothy claims ownership over the house, again a metaphor for his mind, but Virgil claims the house/mind will be his "until the day I die"; Timothy angrily suggests that he "hurry up and die!"

Musically, *Scene 3* is similar to *Scene 1* in the way the saxophones play off the voices and the role that the percussion plays in the scene. They differ mainly in two ways: first, obviously that the text and therefore the vocal and saxophone lines are different than in *Scene 1*, and secondly that the metrical organization is different. In *Scene 3*, the measures maintain a 12/8-5/8 pattern during each part of the montage with steady 5/8 measures between the vignettes.

(Example 3: Baritone and Saxophones, mm.11-12, illustrating alternating meters in *Scene 3*)

(sarcastically) *f*

Thank you for tel-ling me.

slp

*mf*

slp

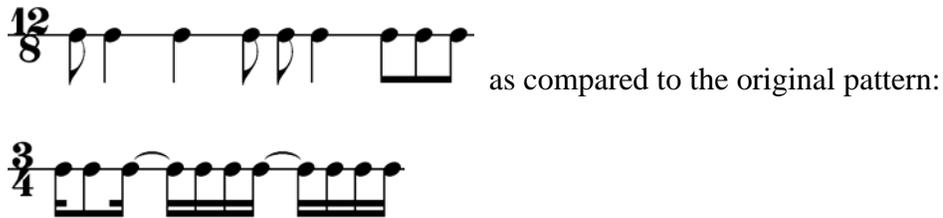
*mf*

*mf*

*f*

I chose to use different meters in *Scene 1* and *Scene 3* because the voices and instruments all play virtually the same role in both and there needed to be something to differentiate them. Also, this allows the initial rhythmic figure from *Scene 1* to continue to develop within the new meter. The 12/8 version initially appears in the first measure of *Scene 3* (Figure 4), and is similar in feel to the original. Here the eighth- and sixteenth-note groupings of four are transformed into eighth- and quarter-note groupings of three; essentially, the feel of three sixteenths in the original equal three eighths in the *Scene 3* version.

(Figure 4: 12/8 Version of the Basic Rhythmic Figure)



Throughout the scene, the pattern continues to develop. Its different permutations are shown in Example 3.

(Figure 5: Derivatives of the 12/8 Version of the Rhythmic Figure)



*Incidental No.3*

Timothy enters to find that the meal he prepared and set out for Virgil has been untouched. Growing weary of his efforts to care for the old man being scorned, Timothy's patience with Uncle Virgil is running dangerously thin.

*Scene 4: Snap*

Timothy, Virgil, Angela, and two guests are seated around the table enjoying a meal. As usual, Timothy asks his guests how they are enjoying each element of the meal, to which they respond politely in the positive and Virgil responds to decidedly in the

negative. Timothy shortly pulls Virgil aside and demands that he behave himself. Rarely has he been this firmly assertive with the old man; usually he simply yells at him. This is a good sign that perhaps Timothy is finally taking control of his mind.

However, Virgil continues to push Timothy's buttons as they sit and eat. At Virgil's final words of criticism, "You can't handle this house", Timothy snaps. He jumps up, throwing plates and silverware at the old man, shouting that he is in control. Virgil's derisive laughter enrages Timothy further, and as the guests and Angela flee the violent scene, he strikes Uncle Virgil mightily with a chair, killing him instantly.

The music in *Scene 4* is similar to that of *Scene 2*. (This similarity provides a nice symmetry when paired with the similarities between *Scene 1* and *Scene 3*.) This music differs from *Scene 2* in two primary ways: first, instead of the unpredictable meter shifts of *Scene 2*, there is a steady 3/4-3/4-5/8 pattern (Example 9). When counted in paired eighths notes, the pulse remains the same until the end of the pattern, when an extra eighth note appears at the end of the last beat, which gives the music a sort of hitch that prevents it from sliding into too deep of a groove.

(Example 4: Percussion 2, mm.16-18, illustrating the metrical scheme of *Scene 4*)



Second, there is a sudden shift towards the beginning of the scene when Timothy angrily pulls Virgil aside to demand his best behavior. The tempo increases, and the beat is kept only by the quick lines on the soprano saxophone, occasionally punctuated by tutti

chord strikes by the other saxophones and percussion and the occasional appearance of the baritone saxophone to support the vocal lines. This section is brief and returns to the original tempo and meter in the middle of the scene.

The end of *Scene 4* is different as well; it is the climax of the opera. Despite Timothy's warnings, threats, and protests, Virgil once again speaks against him in front of Timothy's guests. At this moment the music suddenly drops out, leaving only high, lingering pitches in the soprano and alto saxophones and crotales. Timothy waits just a brief, seething moment after Virgil speaks his hate-filled words before violently erupting in anger. At this moment, the instruments are instructed to make the most heinous sound possible on their respective instruments. This continues for several seconds before Timothy strikes the fatal blow to Virgil, at which time all of the music ceases instantly.

#### *Incidental No.4*

The lights stay down in *Incidental No.4*. Because this is the longest and most complicated scene change, requiring nearly all the furniture on stage to be removed, and because I wanted to give the audience a chance to ruminate on the tragedy that has just occurred, there is no pantomime.

Musically, *Incidental No.4* completes the palindrome.

#### *Scene 5: The Bitter Truth*

The goal of this scene was to provide a stark contrast to the previous scenes, essentially portraying the difference between living inside Timothy's head and living in reality. It takes place in a psychiatric ward in a hospital instead of the bed and breakfast, and the text is spoken rather than sung.

Timothy is alone in a room, bare save for a table and two chairs. Angela enters. She reveals that she is a psychologist that all the times she visited Uncle Virgil, she was in actuality there to observe Timothy. Timothy is confused, because to him, Virgil was very real and very disturbed. She reveals that Virgil never existed, that he was a fictitious character in Timothy's imagination. She realized this the first day she visited (in *Incidental No.1*) and ever since had been attempting to help Timothy overcome his delusion.

Timothy is confused and shattered, but he wonders aloud why he is being held as a prisoner. If Virgil never existed, then he had committed no crime. Indeed he had not, but Angela states that in his soul he is guilty of murder and is therefore a dangerous, unstable man. He must remain imprisoned in the psychiatric ward. Angela, guilt-ridden, apologizes to Timothy for failing him and exits. As she leaves, Timothy shouts after her, wondering who he killed.

Because this scene is Timothy's reality instead of his fantasy, I omitted nearly all music entirely. The singers speak their lines only, and the instruments are silent save for extremely high, quiet tones that alternate between the soprano and alto saxophones that begin just over a minute into the scene. In the last few moments of the *Scene 5*, all the instruments, including the eight-channel whispers, fade in quickly and loudly in a thick tone cluster that suddenly ends when Timothy yells out his final line.

CHAPTER III  
PRODUCING *HE CRIED UNCLE*

**The Workshop**

A piece of music is not complete until it has been performed and people have heard it. With this in mind, I was not satisfied with merely writing this opera; I wanted to hear it.

Staging an opera is expensive and a tremendous amount of work in any case; in my case it was a new opera, which multiplies the level of difficulty many times over, and I had to do it with no money and without access to the venue in which it was to be performed until the day of the performance. The entire production would have to be done with volunteers.

Fortunately, on the invitation of David Holley, opera director at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I had the great privilege of workshopping *He Cried Uncle* there several months before the scheduled performance. This workshop was part of a class he taught called “Opera Performance Techniques”. There were approximately thirty opera students in the class, and they were all required to participate in the preparation of selected opera scenes. There were three scenes in total, directed by Mr. Holley, another student, and me, respectively. The students auditioned, and I selected my cast. I was given a rehearsal accompanist to work with and scheduled rehearsals during the time the class met.

What was truly helpful in this endeavor was that my cast was required to attend workshop rehearsals as part of the class; as such, I benefited from their consistent attendance, and they benefited by receiving course credit for their work.

We met twice weekly for close to three months, during which time the students and I in collaboration developed the characters, giving them back stories, interests, and depth. As the cast members learned the music, I edited it where I felt it dragged, needed better notation, or needed better harmonic support. I was pleasantly surprised to find that most of the music was satisfactory as it was and needed little work.

The most difficult part was fitting the blocking to the music. For example, I initially had the mezzo-soprano who sang the role of Angela singing in the chorus in all of the incidental scenes; when we staged the pantomime for *Incidental No.1*, it suddenly occurred to me that I had her both on stage acting out a scene and singing backstage with the rest of the chorus. The solution was simply to cut her singing part from the scene and then, to maintain the symmetry of the incidental pieces, I also cut her singing part in *Incidental No.3*, the mirror of *Incidental No.1*. There were other instances of the blocking creating a problem for the music, but in general they were minor and easily fixed. Still, without the benefit of the workshop process, these minor flaws in my score would have cost precious rehearsal time later on when we were preparing the actual production.

The workshop was an incredibly valuable experience for me as a composer, conductor, and director as I saw where my strengths and weaknesses lie in all those disciplines. Practically, it helped me finely craft the music further and solve problems

that would have been more difficult to fix during a production. This was a rare opportunity for me as a young opera composer, and I was extremely grateful for the chance to do it.

### **The Production**

The next step in the process of producing *He Cried Uncle* was to secure the workshop cast for the actual production. I thought this would be difficult because while they were all required by the “Opera Performance Techniques” class to participate in the workshop, there was virtually no incentive for them to spend two months rehearsing for one performance of the opera. Although I wanted everyone from the workshop cast for the production, I made it abundantly clear to all of them that they were not required to continue after the workshop was over. I was surprised and grateful when five of the six cast members readily agreed to return. The sixth, the tenor who sang the role of Uncle Virgil, was not able to return because of his difficult performing and scholastic schedule, so I only had to recast that one character.

Unfortunately, that proved more difficult than I expected. It took me until a month before the performance of *He Cried Uncle* to find another tenor. I had asked all of the qualified tenors I knew in the School of Music and even went through all the baritones as well. Nobody I knew personally could or would sing the role of Uncle Virgil. I was ready to start sheepishly asking vocal faculty to consider the role when a cast member suggested a new student I did not know. Much to my delight, the student readily accepted the role and did a fantastic job despite being given only a few weeks to learn his part.

In recruiting the instrumentalists, I was fortunate to befriend a stellar student saxophone quartet who happened to be looking for a project during the exact time frame of *He Cried Uncle*'s production. A fellow student composer who also happened to be a trained percussionist volunteered to play one of the percussion parts, which left me with only one percussion part to fill. Unfortunately, finding that one performer proved immensely difficult. In all, I asked nearly all of the capable student percussionists at UNCG over two months, finally finding a talented jazz drummer who was willing to play the part. By the time I finally had a complete cast and instrumental ensemble, the date of the performance was only three weeks away.

While I was working on finding a second percussionist, I rehearsed the saxophone quartet. I was confident that the percussion parts would not need a great deal of revision, but I was concerned about the saxophone parts. I had never written for saxophones before, and the music required a variety of extended techniques, including multiphonics, slap tongues, and some difficult playing in the altissimo register. When after rehearsing with the quartet, it became clear that with a few minor exceptions the music would not have to be changed at all, I considered it a personal victory as a composer. By the time the percussionists were added to the ensemble, the saxophonists had already learned their parts and played them smoothly and confidently.

Despite the brief rehearsal time I had with the percussionists, they learned their parts quickly, aided by my meticulously edited score. Again, I considered the fact that the parts needed almost no revision as a personal compositional victory.

The cast was accustomed to full-length opera productions that went up in two or three months, and after twice that time working on *He Cried Uncle*, I could tell that most of the cast had grown weary of working on it. This was especially true of the minor parts. They had learned their music months before and spent much of our rehearsal time sitting and waiting to go on. This was an obstacle that I had never before considered, and I did not have a good solution for the problem; the best idea I had was to more carefully consider exactly when I would need each singer and ask them to appear only when I needed them. This seemed to help, for at least I clearly demonstrated to them that I valued their time. Towards the end of the rehearsal process, I even cancelled two rehearsals that I felt we could do without, which also seemed to refresh them.

I had no access to props or to sets, which was also a difficult problem to solve as I had no budget for the production. Thankfully, I was able to borrow all of the props I needed from the UNCG Theater Department, but I still had no set. I solved this problem in the most direct way possible: I spent my own money to purchase building materials, designed a set, and built it myself. It took me three days from start to finish.

All that remained was to ensure that the cast could see me as I conducted. This was difficult because the hall where the performance was held did not have an orchestra pit, which meant that the instrumentalists and I had to squeeze ourselves into one corner of the auditorium; I conducted from the third row of seats. Because I was so far to one side of the stage, when the singers were on the other side of the stage they could not see me at all. What was worse, the chorus was placed behind the walls of the set, completely blocking me from view.

Our solution was to have two closed-circuit cameras trained on me, one feeding to a backstage monitor for the chorus, and the other feeding to a television that I incorporated into the set on the side of the stage farthest from me. While perhaps comical that there were three different views of me conducting, all three—the two monitors and of course my presence in the makeshift pit—were necessary for the production.

### **The Performance**

The performance went well; each cast member delivered their best effort, and all of the electronic elements—the monitors, computer playback of the whispers, and the eight-channel speakers—functioned as they were intended. All of the musical elements as I had written them came together for the first time in the performance; for example, no one in the cast or ensemble had heard the whispers in eight channels before. I believe this level of surprise contributed to the outstanding effort given by all involved. The result was a fine performance of *He Cried Uncle*, the elusive event I had been working toward for so many months.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

One of the aspects of opera that I find most appealing is that it requires so many artistic disciplines to come together to make one complete work; there is a librettist, a composer, a conductor, a stage director, a set designer, a costumer, instrumentalists, and vocalists. In certain works there is also a choreographer and dancers. The downside to having such a large number of people involved is of course that producing an opera is therefore expensive and time-consuming.

Out of necessity for the production of *He Cried Uncle*, I filled most of those roles myself. I enjoyed filling those roles, but I recognize the need to delegate responsibilities in the future, allowing more experienced conductors, directors, and set designers to do their work spectacularly while I pour all of my creative energy into the writing of the opera.

Writing an opera is an enormously difficult musical endeavor for a composer. I spent approximately a year and half developing *He Cried Uncle* into an opera that was performed. I am proud of the effort I put forth, and I believe I succeeded in meeting my aesthetic goals in *He Cried Uncle*. The experience of writing and producing this opera will no doubt be incredibly valuable to me as continue to develop as a composer.

APPENDIX A. SCORE: *HE CRIED UNCLE*

The score of *He Cried Uncle* is included as a supplemental file.

APPENDIX B. DVD: VIDEO/AUDIO RECORDING OF PREMIER PERFORMANCE

The DVD recording is a supplemental file.