



The *Here, Bullet* Consortium: A Guide to Creating, Promoting, and Performing a New 21st Century Song Cycle

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ABSTRACT

Here, Bullet is a song cycle composed by Kurt Erickson with poetry by Brian Turner from a book of the same name. The cycle was completed in August 2019 and has and will be performed around the world by different baritones due to a consortium of performers started by Erickson. This guide follows the steps Erickson took to create the consortium and the creative process of composition and artist collaboration for the cycle. Additional aspects of the promotional process involving interviews and social media and a performer's interpretation of the cycle are represented as well.

THE *HERE, BULLET* CYCLE

Here, Bullet is a four-piece song cycle using poetry from Turner's time as an American soldier in the Iraq War. A review of Turner's *Here, Bullet* said, "... Turner has sent back a dispatch from a place arguably more incomprehensible than the moon—the war in Iraq—and deserves our thanks..." (*New York Times* Book Review). The contemporary poetry is made manifest through the intimacy and vulnerability of art song's performing forces, in this case a pianist and a baritone. As a newly completed cycle, the outreach through social and traditional media is highlighted as an effective way to garner performances and create discussion in communities of civilians and veterans. Each setting creates a visceral tonescape that effectively shows the horrors of war from a soldier's perspective on taking life, war induced suicide, the foreign customs of Iraq, and normalizing the abnormal. The ideas are interspersed throughout "Here, Bullet," "Eulogy," "A Soldier's Arabic," and "Curfew."



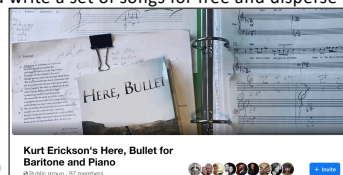
Brian Turner

CREATING THE CYCLE

Erickson's first experience of Turner's poetry came through his wife who had heard about Turner on NPR. The poetry struck Erickson with its directness and insight on the war. For years, Erickson had been a composer-in-residence with several organizations in the San Francisco Bay area, notably LIEDER ALIVE!. In this time, he had typically embarked on new compositions through the standard commissioning process of an organization paying an upfront fee to the composer for new pieces. He was commissioned by organizations like the Sacramento Symphony Orchestra and the Berkeley Community Chorus and Orchestra. Despite the multitude of commissions, Erickson wanted his next pieces to be more ubiquitous in scope. The creation of the consortium and the collection of enthusiastic performers through Facebook started a journey that has spanned further than Erickson could have imagined.

THE CONSORTIUM

Erickson called the nature of standard commissioning a "fundamentally an insufficient process." Consortiums have existed in many aspects of society from schools to angel funding groups, but this style of organization is unique in the art song community. A consortium is "an agreement, combination, or group (as of companies) formed to undertake an enterprise beyond the resources of any one member." Using the Facebook platform and different groups such as "The NEW New Forum for Classical Singers Group," Erickson presented his concept. He would write a set of songs for free and disperse it to whomever wanted them if they agreed to perform the pieces in the upcoming season. He posted to the groups in August 2018, collected willing singers, and created his own group, which as of May 19, 2020 had 97 members. The pieces were completed in August 2019 and the first performances occurred in fall 2019.



Erickson's Facebook Group

[listing of performances that have already taken place and some that had already been planned]

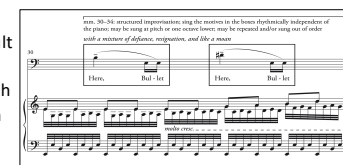
PROMOTION, PRESS, AND RECEPTION

The cycle gathered momentum through social and traditional media. Each performer provided different events and their own promotion which was further shared by Erickson and others. With the great poetry and nuanced setting of the songs, the cycle began to gather acclaim and press because of its premise and the wide scope of performances. The consortium created not only a plethora of performances, but a longer time frame for attention as the pieces were performed around the country. The attention garnered Erickson interviews and articles from *Classical Singer*, *San Francisco Classical Voice*, and The Lied Society Podcast. The song cycle has been analyzed and performed in a Lecture Recital and Dissertation at Louisiana State University, and Erickson's *Here, Bullet* won the 2020 NATS Art Song Composition Award.

THE MUSIC

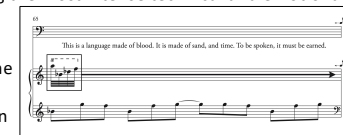
Erickson created a cycle for every baritone. None of the pieces possess a particularly strenuous range or tessitura, and the cycle allows the singer to put their own stamp on the set through structured improvisatory sections, *ossia* notes, and spoken text.

"Here, Bullet" is the most difficult piece through its dramatic and technical demands. It begins with a *quasi-recitativo*, and closes with a structured improvisation. The song has the largest range which can be increased through *ossia* from E2 to G4.



"Here, Bullet" mm. 30

"Eulogy" takes the bullet from the first piece and uses it for devastating effect in the suicide of Private Miller. Erickson uses the keys of D \flat Major and e minor in interchange to represent nature and suicide, respectively. The final climb to the climax uses a chromatic ascending line into and/or through the *secondo passaggio* providing the most intense technical and emotional moment for the singer.



"A Soldier's Arabic" mm. 65

"A Soldier's Arabic" plays with the culture clash inherent in war on foreign soil. Erickson puts spoken Arabic and a full recitation of the poetry at the end of the song.

Because of the back movement from sung to spoken, the singer needs to use resonant voice techniques to keep the two within the same world of sound.

"Curfew" finishes the cycle referring to earlier pieces and themes. Word painting is used throughout and the song has a muted feeling overall. Because it comes as an *attacca*, the singer must be able to distinctly connect the character and emotion through a transition and change in style. It is as much an acting lesson as it is a singing one.

REFERENCES

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- Erickson, Kurt. E-mail interview by the author. October 8, 2019.
- Turner, Brian. "Books – Poetry." Accessed December 28, 2019. <http://www.brianturner.org/poetry/>.