

PREFACE

The singer-songwriter pianist Tori Amos, one of my greatest influences, talks about her songs like they are her children. While Amos' reputation for eccentricity is well known, she is not alone in comparing the creative process to childbirth. Some works are easy, emerging fully formed from the ether with minimal effort or need for shaping. Others require a long and painfully laborious process, after which an artist collapses in relief that the whole tortuous ordeal is finally over. *No Exit* has been the latter of these births for me.

When I began this project, I expected it could be completed in a few short months over a summer. Instead, it stretched into the better part of two years. There was a point at which I considered myself essentially finished with a “mere” five or seven minutes left to write; it turned out to be closer to twenty. Originally, I had wanted to limit this piece to half an hour in length with only piano accompaniment. But, to paraphrase the poet Kahlil Gibran, our children do not belong to us, and art has a way of taking on a life of its own. I was ultimately forced to reckon with the full heft this work required and deserved. The decision to add a chamber orchestration soon followed after a proof-of-concept work-up of the Overture. What I'd intended to be only thirty minutes of music now approaches fifty.

I have written some pieces where the music flowed freely onto the page. With others, it was a more meticulous process where, bit by bit, the passages and gestures were notated, revised, and the full piece emerged over time. With this

composition, it felt like everything—each note, every single piece of minutiae—needed to be painstakingly extracted from nothingness into reality. It was a very frustrating way to write a long work.

No Exit is generally minimalist in character. Small melodic and rhythmic motives are repeated in subtle variations and permutations throughout. The music occasionally evokes familiar harmonic movement and structures; sometimes it is chaotic, frenetically atonal. These changes occur intentionally to aurally emphasize what is taking place between the characters. An opera is a dramatic work, and I believe its music should support the drama, help to move the story forward, and inform the audience emotionally in the same way many films scores do.

I've made a number of programmatic compositional choices. The accompaniment for Estelle's aria about her infanticide is simple, Satie-like, evoking a child's music box lullaby. Garcin and Inès share their aria, a musical choice that reflects how their damnation is the result of the way they treated their significant others in life. Toward the end of the opera, Inès drives Garcin and Estelle apart with a harmonic inversion of the music from her and Estelle's earlier duet. Similarly, during the fight trio, the lies Garcin and Estelle tell are extrapolations of later material when they reveal the truth about their damnation.

In the orchestration, each character has a companion instrument that rises in prominence with them. For Garcin, it is the cello. The clarinet accompanies Inès. To reflect her deep denial and

how closed off she is as a character, Estelle has two: the flute at first, which is then replaced over time by the violin as she becomes more vulnerable and open.

During rehearsals for a presentation of selections from this opera, the performers expressed curiosity about sections where they expected the music to be darker or more esoteric. To explain, I told them about one of Tori Amos' writing techniques where she will juxtapose dark subject matter with unexpectedly beautiful musical material. For Amos, this is a kind of counterpoint—only instead of instruments, the contrast is between the music and the text.¹ I use her technique here in *No Exit* because I feel it throws the truth of the characters' dark sins into sharp relief.

My choice to author this libretto myself has met some skepticism—it is unusual for the composer to write their own. Still, I have written original text for many of my art songs and song cycles. In my non-classical endeavors, I have written both music and lyrics as a singer-songwriter; I have written and performed spoken word poetry, even recording a full-length album of it. And while I was on hiatus from music in the early 2000's, I focused on literary works like short stories and novels, taking my creative needs and channeling them there. In short, I am no stranger to the written word.

The time I've spent on this project has been sufficient enough for me to witness change in both my own life and the world around me. I continue to forge ahead at creating a career for myself in music. I became an adjunct professor while writing this work. My engraving business continues to expand, due in no small part to the well-deserved success of my clients. There have been difficult times, too; relations with my family have been deteriorating ever since my mother's passing in 2014. I remain distressed at their inability to understand the depth of skill, knowledge, and sheer hard work involved in being an arts professional. Thankfully, I have found friends and colleagues who do understand what it is like to lead this type of life and how it feels to not be understood outside it.

Current events are unusually intense right now. Musicians and artists throughout California were already struggling this year with a new law that severely hampered everyone's ability to function as independent working individuals, but it was nothing compared to the ruinous devastation wrought by the pandemic. Months worth of gigs were cancelled as organizations responded to the moratorium on public gatherings and government recommendations to shelter-in-place. Arts organizations and festivals have collapsed like toppled dominoes from the resulting lack of income. Like other professors across the county, I did my best to migrate to online a class that was never intended to be. I've found a renewed gratitude, though, that I live close to the American River; walks in the parkway's wooded spaces have done much to help me stave off the cabin fever of quarantine and reduce the anxiety-inducing stress of these trying times.

There are so many people to thank. Timothy Morningstar, who originally invited me to compose my first attempt at a *No Exit* adaptation all those years ago. David Sims and Caroline Jou Armitage who performed in the original concert presentation with the now-late pianist Richard Mercier accompanying. Harriet March Page and everyone at Goat Hall Productions who not only put on three performances of my original attempt but premiered selections from this new version. An extra special thank you to Meghan Dibble who has performed the Inès role in literally every performance to date and been a resolute encourager of my composing since we were undergrad classmates. Omari Tau, Carrie Hennessy, and especially Jennifer Reason who have been so gracious with their time and workshopping comments. And of course, my wife and partner, Erin, who has lived with this work and with me as I have created it; your unwavering support has not gone unnoticed, my love. I humbly thank you all. This piece is what it is because of you.

Zachary M. Watkins, Spring 2020

1. Tori Amos, "Tori! Tori! Tori!" interview by Greg Rule, *Keyboard Magazine*, September 1992.