

## Engaging the LGBTQ+ Community, Elective

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I'd like to speak to you about an experience I had developing a new opera with the Juventas New Music Ensemble, where the main character's journey, that of a transgender Afghan immigrant, is not one that I embody, and what steps we took to ensure that the communities we sought to engage through art were a part of the conversation and not just the subject of it.

Much of my knowledge about music came at a time in my life when I was also learning about what it means to me to be a part of the LGBTQ community. I began seeking out representation of the community in the art that I was studying as a Classical Composition major at UNC School of the Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and I found, especially in opera, that there wasn't much representation at all. If I couldn't find what I wanted, I was going to make it.

I explored LGBTQ source material and came across a myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with a transgender main character and a positive ending. Now, I don't know if you've read *Metamorphoses*, but nearly *all* of the stories end in some sort of punishment, so to find a myth that encouraged instead warned against felt special. I do not identify as transgender, but I was eager to explore and learn what I could through the process of creation.

The myth is of Iphis, and it's about a girl whose mother is forced to raise them as a boy, in order to survive a hyper-patriarchal society; and whose wish to be truly transformed into a man is granted by the gods.

There were two major sticking points I had with this story, and I needed to resolve them before committing to creating the work. First, this story presents gender identity as something with external catalysts; the story can be interpreted in such a way where Iphis's desire to transform into a man is due to social constructs. The myth also conflates sexual orientation with gender identity, and is not how we, in America, understand these two separate aspects of a person's identity. The second point was to simply update the time period. I wanted to put these characters in our world, making them much more immediate.

After 3 years of research and tinkering with the story by myself, I was unable to satisfactorily achieve either of these, so I set the project aside. It wasn't until I was approached by Lidiya Yankovskaya, the then artistic director of Juventas New Music Ensemble of Boston, MA, did things really step into high gear. During their season, they often premiere a new opera, and they chose my proposal of what would become *The Body Politic* set to premiere in Spring 2015. My conversations with Lidiya also coincided with a breakthrough in the story; I discovered that there is a tradition in Afghanistan where sometimes young girls are forced to be raised as boys, in order for the family to survive a hyper-patriarchal society; some of these girls continue to present as transmen into adulthood. This tradition is known in Dari as *bacha posh* and translates to "dress as a boy". The *bacha posh* became increasingly more widespread during the Taliban rule, when many men in the country had perished from the constant conflict, and subjugation of women was at its worst.

Once Lidiya and I agreed to this new direction, we were both very clear that we wanted to bring in artists and creatives from the LGBTQ community, as well as immigrants and people of color. This was in addition to finding advisors from the communities so that they could inform the creative process.

When the librettist, Charles Osborne, and I began our work on this new scenario, we made a hard and fast rule that every word on the stage or theme used in the music was something we had learned by listening to the respective identities. For six months, we did not write a single thing. I was studying the folk music of Afghanistan, particularly in the region around Kabul, as well as the political and social history of music in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Charles immersed himself in the poetry of Afghan women, books on the politics and history of the region, trans activist speeches, blogs, video diaries, and poetry, and the experiences of parents of trans youth.

Where we expected to see differences in communities, we saw reflections. The story wasn't about the other, it was about America and what's happening here. So, we asked a question: what if our main character, a Trans Afghan man, had the chance to come to the deeply purple state of North Carolina at the height of the Afghan War? What would our audiences learn about themselves? That's when we began creating characters that lived in both worlds that we hoped our audiences could identify with or learn from, a college educated Afghan war widow, a North Carolinian conservative war widow and her son, a sassy southern drag queen and at the center of it all, Iphis, a transman trying to find somewhere to belong. Putting these diverse voices in the same family unit became an allegory for America today. We have a brilliant level of diversity in this country, and we all want to do "what's best" for our home, but with that diversity it sometimes becomes impossible for everyone to agree, and the breakdown of the definition of what constitutes "home" is what fuels the climactic scene in our opera.

Controversy has become nearly synonymous with politics and identity, the central themes of our piece, but our intention was never to be controversial. We were more focused on *not* making a statement, but beginning a conversation and revealing certain truths. Lidiya Yankovskaya and Juventas New Music Ensemble organized several open forums and private meetings with various members of the trans, refugee and Afghan communities. This was to ensure that what we had put on the page still honored the original vision. Much of the feedback was positive, and all of it was constructive. People were very eager to offer up their opinions and stories, and whenever a question or criticism arose, we made clarification in the libretto and music. One comment that stood out to us as creators happened during our talkback with members of the Butterfly Music Transgender Chorus, where a transwoman stated, "I wanted to hate the conservative mother character so much, but I couldn't because the things she says are the things my family said to me, and I love my family, and so I loved her." That's when we knew we were honing in on the right angle for the story. We were only ever after revealing the truth.

Only three weeks before we were set to open at the Boston Center for the Arts, North Carolina's House Bill 2, better known as the "Bathroom Bill" was signed into existence. This was a devastating setback for a community that was directly represented in our piece of music theatre. Iphis evens sings an aria about the alienation he feels in North Carolina entitled "Chapel Hill Gets Lonely". We knew that if we wanted to engage with these communities artistically, we also needed to be willing to support them when the time came, and that time had come. After a discussion with Lidiya, we canceled plans for a subsequent performance in New York City and rerouted efforts to take a concert production of the work to the place that needed it most; the State Assembly of North Carolina. Three days after the bathroom

bill had passed we received special permission to perform our opera at the North Carolina State House a few weeks after the premiere and personally invited every state senator and representative.

The premiere of *The Body Politic* in Boston was met with great enthusiasm and the performances went on without a hitch. I must commend at this point the high level of musicianship of the Juventas New Music Ensemble and the singers with Lidiya at the helm. They, along with Giselle Ty, our stage director, and her creative team transformed the work into a thrilling message of understanding. Lidiya, Giselle, Charles and I were a part of talkbacks to continue the conversation with audience members who so desired.

We were so happy with how it all turned out, and used that excitement to fuel our journey to Raleigh, North Carolina. The set up was smaller, piano and the five singers, but the important element was the words and music. We were able to successfully spread our message, and afterwards spent over an hour talking to members of the LGBTQ community as well as the Democratic Whip, **Representative Verla Insko**. The event was covered in the Associated Press and showed up in news outlets around the country and the world. To our knowledge, it was the first musical or opera in history to be performed at a US State House, and was cited by Representative Insko as the reason she voted to repeal the “bathroom bill”. Her quote reads:

*"I knew nothing about people who identified as transgender... mainly I learned what I know through trial and error and sitting through a performance of THE BODY POLITIC... I recently heard Melvin Williams say 'The arc of the moral universe is long; but it bends toward justice. It's just that we have to do the bending.' That's what THE BODY POLITIC did for me. I believe it can have the same impact on others." - NC Rep. Verla Insko*

What started out as a need to see more LGBTQ characters and themes in classical art ended with an opportunity to help protect the rights of our trans family in North Carolina, and that would not have been possible without Lidiya and Juventas. They fostered an environment where safety and honesty were paramount, took great efforts to make certain the communities represented in *The Body Politic* were also a part of the creation, and chose to stand with the trans community when they needed it.

Thank you.