A Silence Haunts Me
JAKE RUNESTAD

An Introduction to the Composer, Interview, and Preview of the 2019 Raymond W. Brock Commission, *A Silence Haunts Me*

by Jonathan Talberg

Jake Runestad (b. 1986) sat relaxed and comfortable in a red leather, art-deco rocking chair in my living room for the interview I recorded on October 6, 2018. A tall, lean man who wears glasses and a close-cropped beard, he is perpetually well dressed—unless he’s camping or enjoying the myriad of outdoor activities he adores. That afternoon, he was wearing skinny jeans and a fitted dark grey t-shirt, sitting cross-legged and staring out at the sea. He had just finished *Rivers of Air*, a symphonic band commission for a consortium of seventeen American universities; he was definitely decompressing.

We met at the ACDA Regional Conference in Santa Barbara in 2014, but we became friends after Edith Copley and I commissioned him to write a piece in memory of Germán Aguilar, a California CCDA Board Member, choral conductor, and my fiancée, who had passed away suddenly during a summer concert tour in Italy. That work, *And So I Go On*, completely encapsulated the grief I had experienced and shook me, Edie, singers, and audiences who heard it to the core. Through the process of commissioning and workshopping the piece, Jake and I became dear friends. In the years since, we have had the opportunity to hike in Yosemite, camp in Joshua Tree National Park, kayak in Minnesota, and take a road trip (with poet and Runestad’s frequent collaborator Todd Boss) through the Catalan countryside after attending the IFCM World Symposium on Choral Music in Barcelona. I share this background because I have some special insight into this year’s Brock commissioned composer: having spent many weeks together, I have been witness to his almost super-human work ethic, his unbounded curiosity, and his deep love of culture, of the human voice, and of his fellow humans. Jake is never without music, and he is at his best when he’s near friends or family.
He sings constantly. He makes up rhythms and improvises. And, if there’s a piano nearby, he will sit and play—frequently through his own catalogue (which he has, conveniently, memorized). He definitely listens to choral and classical music, but he is also an avid fan of pop music, classic rock ‘n’ roll, folk, musical theater, and jazz. He’s a devotee—like so many pianists—of Elton John, Billy Joel and Ben Folds, but he also loves Dave Matthews, Paul Simon, and Joni Mitchell. He is most passionate about music with a great melody. That being said, if he’s listening to pop music, he almost never sings the melody; I’ve heard some of the most creative harmonies of my life traveling and spending time with Jake Runestad.

Jake is as vibrant and emotionally honest as his music would indicate. He’s well read and thoughtful. Though I teach choral repertoire and constantly seek out new composers, he has introduced me to more contemporary music than I have to him. He stays abreast of developments in our field, and his knowledge—especially of living composers—is deep.

As would be expected, he has a voracious appetite for poetry and literature, and he’s constantly on the hunt for suitable material to set to music. His net is cast wide: poets include canonic figures like Rumi, Shakespeare, Helen Keller, and King David, and contemporary writers such as Todd Boss, Brian Turner, and Warda Mohammed—the Somali refugee who wrote the majority of the text for Runestad’s We Can Mend the Sky.

He’s also one of the youngest successful full-time composers in the country, which means he takes his work very seriously and is constantly writing. As long as I’ve known him, there has been a ceaseless stream of commissions simmering on the front, rear, and side burners. He juggles the requirement to be present for premieres, his love of—and excellence at—teaching, and his need, as a composer, for the solitude that allows for the creation of new art.

Jake is a musical craftsman; he can write quickly when he needs to, but he prefers to take his time, to delve deeply into texts, to study the lives of the poets he sets, and to consider the historical, philosophical, humanistic, and artistic impact of what it is he’s setting. He writes both on paper and on the computer, and—unless he’s approaching a deadline—he’s very much a morning person. When he’s coming up against a due date, however, all bets are off. On the aforementioned Spanish road trip, there were several days where he was in a rented apartment until dinner because he just had to get notes on the page. He was equipped with a pint-sized electric keyboard, a large pad of staff paper, and a laptop.

Runestad grew up in what would appear to be your average, middle-class, Midwestern home. He went to a Lutheran Church and was extremely active in youth group. His parents, recently retired, are still together. He’s close to them and to his sister and brother-in-law. His circle of close friends would attest that he’s an extraordinarily thoughtful, kind, and gentle human being. He has a wicked sense of humor. He’s also the kind of guy who drops you a text on concert day to wish you well. He helps his friends move, puts together IKEA furniture, and paints. He mixes a great cocktail, and he’s an excellent cook. He relieves stress by hiking, kayaking, cross-country skiing, and generally getting outdoors. He’s an introvert with a serious extraverted streak, and after a long day of writing, he wants to be with friends or family, talking, cooking, or going out.

I believe that his deep humanity is apparent in his music. There are Runestad choral pieces about love, war, spiritual journeys, nature, and nonsense. He’s set tweets about suicide and commissioned new poetry about the ocean. He and I have joked that to be a “Runestad appropriate” text, poetry must have words like “light, love, glorious, beauty, spirit and dream.” And, while that’s not universally true, he’s clearly pulled in the direction of hope as inspiration for his music. I believe his general artistic philosophy can be deduced from two of his titles: Let My Love Be Heard and We Can Mend The Sky. There’s no doubt that Runestad believes choral music is a force for good in a broken world, and he has said so on many occasions.

The Interview

Talberg: Tell me a little bit about where you were born, how you grew up, and your musical background.

Runestad: I was born and raised in Rockford, Illinois, to musical parents, in a very musical family.
Talberg: When you say they were musical, what does that mean?

Runestad: Both of my parents have participated in music making most of their lives. My mom did a lot of musical theater; she was Sandy in *Grease* and Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* at community theater, and she played violin in the orchestra at school. My dad sang in folk groups, played guitar—there was always music around the house—and both of them have sung in choirs.

Talberg: Tell me about your grandfather. You played some of his music for me.

Runestad: Howie Lindstrom was a beautiful tenor—“the Svenska Sinatra” people called him. He was a Shriner and performed in a big band called the “Shrinanigans.” He was asked to be a regular on the Laurence Welk show, but his mom didn’t want him to leave home. He was a very creative, clever guy with a beautiful voice. He couldn’t read music very well—he was untrained—but he had natural talent.

Talberg: Who was the first music teacher you remember?

Runestad: Ms. Bacon! She was my first elementary school music teacher. She was enthusiastic and engaging and made music fun! She’d let us improvise and I loved that. Once, when a substitute was filling in for her, I got in trouble playing the recorder out of turn (due to boredom!), “Hot Cross Buns? I already got that!” But, I started on piano.

Talberg: How old were you?

Runestad: I don’t know, quite little.

Talberg: And did you stay with piano? Did you study piano?

Runestad: I took lessons when I was really young with a teacher who was not a good fit, because I wanted to improvise and I wanted to explore, and he was strict. Then, I had a teacher in third grade and we’d sing in her classroom every day; it was awesome. I took piano lessons from her for a year, but I hated taking lessons because I just wanted to do my own thing. She was good with improvisation, but I hated practicing what I had to, and I wanted to just create my own music, so I quit (to my mother’s dismay). But I still wanted to play piano, and I have played piano ever since.

Talberg: In high school or middle school, did you play in ensembles? Did you sing?

Runestad: In middle school I played saxophone in the band. Throughout high school, I played a lot of jazz as well. I was in the band and I was in a couple rock bands outside of school. I wrote a lot of pop songs; I did a lot of multi-track recording, which is how I learned to orchestrate. Senior year, I wrote a piece for the wind ensemble—the first time I wrote something that other people performed—and I was hooked.

Talberg: How big was the ensemble?

Runestad: A big group! 60-70 people.

Talberg: Have you ever gone back and looked at it?

Runestad: Oh yeah…

Talberg: Have you thought about revisiting it?

Runestad: No! I mean there’s some decent stuff, but yeah it’s such an early piece…

Talberg: You had a pretty unconventional undergraduate experience. Tell me about the two colleges you went to.

Runestad: Freshman year I went to Eastern Illinois University, and I played sax and studied instrumental music education. I had a great performance experience there; they had a fantastic wind ensemble, and second semester I played second alto in the top jazz band, during which I learned a great deal. The school’s culture wasn’t a good fit for me, so I transferred to Winona State University, still majoring in music education.
Talberg: Did you think you were going to be a teacher?

Runestad: Yep, a high school band director. I got to Winona, and I got conned into joining the choir because I was a bass and I could read music. I loved singing—loved choir! I had never been in a mixed choir before. I was in some children’s choirs when I was young, but I had never been in a mixed ensemble. So, I loved that! I started writing choral music, started my own choir outside of school, kept writing for band, and had several works performed. And then my last year, Libby Larsen came to my college—she was commissioned to write a piece for the orchestra, and the conductor knew I was a composer. He asked if I wanted to meet with her, and of course, I freaked out and said, “YES!” At the end of our time, she said, “Jake, I’d like for you to study with me,” so I drove up to her house in Minneapolis and had some lessons with her. She encouraged me to think about a career as a composer and to further my studies in graduate school.

Talberg: So, do you think of Libby as your first mentor as a composer?

Runestad: Yes, the first major one.

Talberg: Who else do you think of as your mentors as a composer?

Runestad: I had a mentor in college—Donald Fraser—who is a wonderful composer and has a well-known choral piece called This Christmastide, among other works. Early on, I had a few lessons with him. Later, Libby was a strong impetus for me to pursue composition as a career saying, “This is possible.” I never thought it was possible.

Talberg: You never really thought you could make a living?

Runestad: As a composer? No. I was going to be a teacher. Mr. Holland’s Opus was my future.

Talberg: Deep down, did you want to be a composer?

Runestad: I didn’t know! I wanted to write (and never stopped writing), but I didn’t know it could be a career path.

Talberg: Who are other mentors in your life?

Runestad: Kevin Puts, my teacher for my master’s at the Peabody Conservatory, and, of course, Dominick Argento.

Talberg: You’ve spoken before about Dominick being your greatest influence or favorite composer—

Runestad: —one of them!

Talberg: How did Dominick’s music affect you?

Runestad: Well, Walden Pond is one of my favorite pieces, so I can speak to that. There is this understanding of musical line, beautiful lines, beautiful gestures, and a complexity that makes the piece difficult to perform, but it’s deeply engaging and approachable. It’s not so cerebral that it’s unattainable. It overflows with passion and musicality and color. It captures the text extremely well.
Talberg: It seems to me that you’ve shied away from the really difficult harmonic language of Argento for a more simplified, direct approach. Can you talk a little bit about your love of tonality and what it is about the music in major, minor, and Lydian modes that really attracts you?

Runestad: I think it’s my background. I wasn’t exposed to extremely dissonant music until college, so my genetic musical makeup is folk music, popular music, jazz, the Beatles, James Taylor, and that’s really what speaks to me, so that’s why I use the languages I do.

Talberg: Do you think that has something to do with your natural expression of text stress as well?

Runestad: I think so. When I was growing up, Disney songs were at the forefront of my musical life…

Talberg: …and Alan Menken, who has a strong gift for setting text and finding beautiful, natural melodies.

Runestad: …and Alan Menken, who has a strong gift for setting text and finding beautiful, natural melodies.

Talberg: Who are the composers that you come back to over and over again?

Runestad: Argento and Barber.

Talberg: I feel like a lot of us don’t know Barber except for Sure On This Shining Night. If there were a piece that you’d recommend to your colleagues, what would it be?

Runestad: The Lovers—the chamber version.

Talberg: Personally, I love Prayers of Kierkegaard. I come back to that a lot. It’s a little denser, but I love it. Anyone else besides Argento and Barber?

Runestad: There are pieces here and there, but those two composers are at the top for vocal music.

Talberg: Jake, you’ve written pieces about love, about the value of each person, about letting your love be heard, and staying when you don’t think you’re worth it. What’s your next interest? What do you want to write about?

Runestad: I think everything that I write is somehow influenced by what we’re experiencing in our lives, in our culture, and in our world. Right now, we have an important social movement around gender equality and empowering women. It’s a complex time to be a male, but I want to be an ally and find ways to speak to this in a meaningful and helpful manner. I think music can be a really powerful way to do that.

Talberg: You have only a couple of pieces on religious texts. Is there a reason for that?

Runestad: I don’t consider myself a religious person. I’m deeply spiritual, and I find great meaning in the earth, in human relationships, in art… But I don’t affiliate with a specific religious tradition.

Talberg: When you say you’re deeply spiritual, what does that mean?

Runestad: I think I’m keen to the energies and connections among things, people, trees, water, and it fills me in a very deep way. I search for those experiences to connect with the world around me.

Talberg: Do you think that’s one of the reasons why you come back to the words of Rumi and John Muir?

Runestad: Yeah, absolutely.

Talberg: What scares you as a composer?

Runestad: What scares me? Sometimes when I start a new piece, I feel as if I have no idea what I’m doing.

Talberg: Like you have imposter’s syndrome?

Runestad: It’s intimidating and I think, “I don’t know how to do this. I mean, I’ve done it before, but have I forgotten now? Have I lost my muse?”
Talberg: Do you think success has helped, hurt, or changed that at all? You know you’re successful, right?

Runestad: Of course, but still, there’s that thing inside of us as humans… Sometimes we doubt. We DO have that imposter’s syndrome.

Talberg: What advice do you have for choral conductors approaching your music, specifically for the first time?

Runestad: You have to engage deeply with the text first. Before you even look at the music, really understand who wrote the text. What is it saying? When was it written? Why was it written? What was the meaning at the time it was written, but also today? How does it play into your life experiences? Musically, why have I chosen to set it the way I have? What are the musical motives that change and progress throughout?

Talberg: Is there anything you would want a choral professional or a singer to know about you when they sit down and look at your music for the first time?

Runestad: I hope they know how much care I take with the texts, and—subsequently—the music. I hope they pay close attention to each and every phrase and its shape, and to bringing out the important words, which I’ll always put on the downbeat or on a strong beat…

Talberg: Frequently with a tenuto under them to be sure we get it.

Runestad: (Laughing) Right. I hope they know that they don’t need to add any breath marks in the music—that I’ve put them all in.

Talberg: And, if there’s not a breath, you have the expectation that they’re going to sing through the phrase?

Runestad: Yes… There are layers of meaning to find, and I think it’s their duty to search for them. Whether it’s a specific key or a specific dissonance or a specific interval that might recur—what does it mean?

Talberg: Other twenty-first-century composers have specific hallmarks to their music. If we think of Lauridsen, we think of inverted chords with lots of sevenths and ninths; if we think Eric Whitacre, we think of some sort of cluster; if we think of Ola Gjello, we think of a certain cinematic scope where maybe the text is less important than the musical gesture. What is your defining characteristic?

Runestad: That’s always hard for a composer to answer. I would hope a deep attention to text and a sense that each piece is different because I’m really trying to illuminate the text and not force my music on it. The text should sing freely in the way that will allow it to speak in the strongest, clearest, and most meaningful way.

A Silence Haunts Me —

The Raymond W. Brock Commission for 2019

In 2017, Runestad travelled to Leipzig to be present at the premiere of Into the Light, an extended work for chorus and orchestra commissioned by Valparaiso University to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Luther nailing his Ninety-Seven Theses to a door in Wittenberg, thereby kicking off the Reformation. While traveling after the concert, Runestad found himself in the Haus der Musik Museum in Vienna, where he encountered a facsimile of Ludwig van Beethoven’s Heiligenstadt Testament.1 It was the first time he had read the famous text, which is almost equal parts medical history (including Beethoven’s first admission to his brothers that he was going deaf), last will and testament, suicide note,2 letter of forgiveness, and prayer of hope. Runestad was flabbergasted and found himself thinking about Beethoven, about loss, and about the tragedy of one of the greatest musicians of all time losing his hearing.3 Beethoven put it this way, “Ah, how could I possibly admit an infirmity in the one sense which ought to be more perfect in me than others, a sense which I once possessed in the highest perfection, a perfection such as few in my profession enjoy or ever have enjoyed.”

When the Raymond W. Brock Commission was offered to Runestad for the 2019 ACDA National Conference, he took many months to settle on a topic, finally deciding on setting Beethoven’s words. While research-
ing Beethoven's output around the time of the letter, Runestad discovered that Beethoven wrote a ballet, Creatures of Prometheus, just a year before penning his testament. “Beethoven must have put himself into Prometheus’ mindset to embody the story,” Runestad noted. “Just as Prometheus gifted humankind with fire and was punished for eternity, so did Beethoven gift the fire of his music while fighting his deafness, an impending silence. What an absolutely devastating yet inspiring account of the power of the human spirit. In the moment of his loss—when he wrote the Heiligenstadt Testament—he had no idea how profound his legacy would be” (“legacy” being one of the themes of this year’s anniversary conference).

Because of the length of the letter, a verbatim setting was impractical; Runestad once again turned to his friend, poet/librettist Todd Boss, to help. Boss writes:

This loose adaptation of Ludwig van Beethoven’s famous Heiligenstadt Testament was unusually difficult to write. Jake suggested the subject matter in a phone call while I was traveling Europe, and it literally haunted me for days afterward, waking me in the middle of the night. I wrote the words “Hear me” and “A silence comes for me” in London between the hours of 2am and 4am. A few days later, I spent the entire seven-hour span of a transatlantic flight writing and rewriting, developing the poem’s unusual shape and format. I finished it several weeks later while in Vienna, and a visit to Heiligenstadt became part of my journey with the piece. I was often in tears during the process. I myself was traveling alone, and so the process was uniquely intense. I was six years into the loss of everything I held most dear, and so I swear I inhabited Beethoven’s state of mind bodily, muscles quaking, unsettled for hours after each of the poem’s twelve major revisions.
Boss’s poem, titled *A Silence Haunts Me*—after Beethoven’s *Heiligenstadt Testament*—creates a scena, a monologue in Beethoven’s voice for choir. The poem, reprinted below, is both familiar and intimate. Boss has taken the fundamentals of Beethoven’s letter and spun it into a libretto that places the reader/listener into the same small, rented room as one of the most towering figures of the Romantic Era. Explaining the non-traditional notation of the poem, Boss notes:

The poem is set in italics to mimic handwriting and arranged against ragged margins to look like a letter. I’ve isolated the letter ‘i’ wherever it appears, and further isolated nouns that refer to people (I, You, me, brothers, etc.) with nine spaces on either side to isolate them, in recognition of Beethoven’s isolation from himself and others, and in honor of his nine completed symphonies. No punctuation is utilized. All these odd typographical choices force the reader to read the poem with a halting brokenness, just as one might read very old handwriting, but they also attempt to relay the halting and broken frame of mind Beethoven must have been in when he wrote his very sad letter to his brothers.

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*A Silence Haunts Me*

*after Beethoven’s *Heiligenstadt Testament* by Todd Boss*

Hear me brothers I have a confession I on pa i nful to make Six years I have endured a curse that deepens every day They say that soon I ’ll cease to hear the very mus i c of my soul What should be the sense most perfect in me fails me shames me taunts me

A silence haunts me They ask me Do you hear the shepherd singing far off soft They ask me Do you hear a d i stant flut ing danc ing joyously aloft No I think so No I th ink so No God am I Prometheus ex i led i n cha i ns for g i ft i ng humank i nd my f i re Take my feel i ng Take my sight Take my wings mid i ght but let me hear the searing roar of air before I score the ground Why Silence is God’s reply and so I beg me take my life when lo I hear a grace and feel a r i ng i ng

in me after all So now as leaves of autumn fall I make my mark and sign my name and turn again to touch my flame of mus i c to the world a broken man as best I can As ever Faithfully Yours A bell A bell

Hear me and be well
To those words, Runestad has brought his full array of dramatic understanding and compositional skill; *A Silence Haunts Me* sounds more like a self-contained monologue from an opera than a traditional choral piece. Runestad, who has published three short operas to date, shows his flair for melding music with text even more dramatically than in familiar settings like *Let My Love Be Heard* and *Please Stay*. He sets the poetry with an intense, emotional directness and uses some of Beethoven’s own musical ideas to provide context. Stitched into the work are hints at familiar themes from the *Moonlight Sonata*, the 3rd, 6th, and 9th Symphonies, and *Creatures of Prometheus*; but they are, in Runestad’s words, “filtered through a hazy, frustrated, and defeated state of being.”

In wrestling with Beethoven, with legacy, and with loss, Runestad has done what he does best: written a score where the poetry creates the form, where the text drives the rhythm, where the melody supports the emotional content, and where the natural sounding vocal lines, arresting harmony, and idiomatic accompaniment—in this case, piano in honor of Beethoven—come together to offer the audience an original, engaging, thoughtful, and passionate work of choral art.

Jake Runestad’s *A Silence Haunts Me* is voiced for SATB choir with divisi and will be performed in Kansas City for ACDA’s 2019 National Conference. Each year, the Executive Committee commissions a “recognized composer to write a choral composition in an effort to perpetuate quality choral repertoire.” The commission fee is paid from the Raymond W. Brock Memorial Endowment, a fund established in 1991 to honor the life and contributions of Raymond Brock, who previously served as administrative assistant for ACDA. The Brock is one of the foremost commissions available to composers of choral music. The piece will premiere at the conference for both gold and blue tracks on Friday night, March 1, performed by Capital University Chapel Choir and conducted by Lynda R. Hasseler.

**NOTES**

2. As is well known, Beethoven did not take actually take his own life; he died more than twenty years later in Vienna. The *Heiligenstadt Testament* was found in his belongings—probably unread by anyone but the author—after his death.
4. Ibid.
5. Note from the inside cover of the score of *A Silence Haunts Me*. JakeRunestad.com