

matthew peterson and jason zencka

VOIR DIRE

a courtroom opera



“Not every story gets justice.

Some stories just end.

**You mop the blood from the floor
and the next day there’s more.”**

“Of course I wish we could repair.

I think we’d all like to repair...”



VOIR DIRE

A COURTROOM OPERA

2010, revised 2016

music by Matthew Peterson

libretto by Jason Jencka

FOR THE LIBRETTO, PLEASE VISIT:

www.matthew-peterson.com/voirdirelibretto

Voir Dire:

Norman French for "to speak the truth"

The process through which potential jurors from the venire are questioned by either the judge or a lawyer to determine their suitability for jury service.

Voir Dire is based on and adapted from Jason Zencka's experiences in the Portage County Courthouse in Stevens Point, Wisconsin as a beat reporter for the *Stevens Point Journal*.

VOIR DIRE - the libretto

I once told a novelist I admired how much I loved his first published novel and he laughed. "When I wrote that book," he said, "I was as ignorant as a sewer rat." I might have been offended. Then again...

AT TWENTY-TWO, FRESH OUT OF COLLEGE, I WAS WORKING AS A BEAT REPORTER AT A TINY WISCONSIN DAILY NEWSPAPER when Matthew Peterson drove to my house from Indiana for a coffee. I had been Matt's librettist for a chamber opera called *The Binding of Isaac* in college. Now, he wanted to do another project. He came to me in search of a subject.

"So," he asked. "What's on your mind?" I thought of an email to an old religion professor I'd recently penned. *If the eternal drama of Genesis is played out, over and over, like some Nietzschean can-can, I'd breathlessly typed, its contemporary mise-en-scene is undoubtedly the county courtroom. Every homicide takes a page from Cain and Abel, every small business owner who committed some zoning violation and finds himself struck down by a thunderbolt of legalese shares a burden with builders at Babel, every shoplifter or trespasser or 14-year-old dead of an overdose after sneaking painkillers from his grandparents' medicine cabinet is a chip off the oldest block, lunging after that same forbidden fruit as if he and Eve shared a rib.*

YEAH, SO I LIKED THE COURTHOUSE BEAT. Or rather, I was transfixed by it. I was spending a good chunk of my work week propped in the back row of a county criminal courtroom. Every day, I saw the raw pulp of life pressed messily through the ironworks of the judicial system. I watched a young woman unsuccessfully petition a judge to let her stay in jail so she could escape the blistering Wisconsin winter. I saw a woman asked to detail her sexual assault for a crowd while her attacker watched, bored, from across the room.

I saw smalltown lawyers salve these and other open wounds with CostCo-sized tubs of grandiloquence. Every day the human spirit seemed to flit about the courtroom, and every day I saw the legal profession stumble arthritically after it. I felt like I was in a butterfly sanctuary built by a brutalist architect. The machinery of justice was leaden and unwieldy, even if there were often decent people manning the levers. These contradictions fascinated and distressed me, and it occurred to me **OPERA MIGHT BE A WAY TO, IF NOT RESOLVE THEM, AT LEAST DRAMATIZE THEM.** The opera and the courtroom were, I reasoned, a good fit. Both settings were stage-y. Opera, like a scenery-chewing defense lawyer, wore its artifice on its sleeve. Both the opera house and the courthouse were home to spectacles that teetered between tragic and tawdry. I trusted Matt's gifts as a composer to bring the necessary heft and delicacy to the human suffering I was seeing. (And I, per the above email, could bring the grandiloquence.)

"HOW ABOUT A COURTHOUSE OPERA?"

I said to Matt. "We could call it *Voir Dire*," I added, after the courthouse term that meant "to speak the truth." I might have called it "Diaries of a Sewer Rat". I had no trouble getting started. (I will still occasionally find a discarded scene for the opera in my files, a dust-covered memory strangely transposed into verse.) My problem was formal - I had no way to end it. We had framed the opera as a gallery work, a kind of community portrait like Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* or Toomer's *Cane*. **BUT THE COMMUNITY DRAMA THAT PLAYED OUT IN ANY GIVEN CRIMINAL COURTROOM NEVER ENDED.** There were no periods, only ellipses. Verdicts gave way to sentencing, which became appeals or parole hearings. Grief endured. Ghosts lingered. Every week there was another intake court. And in my own life, I had wandered deeper into the criminal justice labyrinth, taking a job as an investigator for the Public Defender Service in D.C. Year by year I had more experience and fewer answers.

I revised. Matt revised. Matt and I argued. The poet Shenandoah Sowash provided crucial assistance on the Jeffrey storyline. And then, umpteen rewrites in, I met that novelist, who then became my mentor, and I adopted many of his mantras as my own. One of my favorites was, "If you have a problem with your story, make it a problem in your story." **JUSTICE MAY HAVE - OR MAY IN FACT BE - AN ENDING, BUT THE AMERICAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM HAS NO ENDING.**

It is an endless rondo, a system of alternately high-minded and misguided rules we put down on unruly conflicts, some between people and their society, some between humans and their humanity. It is, in many ways, a document of our unfolding failures. Matt and I revisited the ending unburdened of the need to provide answers. Our responsibility would be to reflect critically and generously on what I had seen in a central Wisconsin courthouse in 2007, and to make art that honored our questions.

One of my last arguments with Matt was about the opera's title. I worried it was presumptuous. What claim did a criminal courthouse, let alone Matt and I as artists, have on the truth of the situations we were describing? But of course, when anyone in a courthouse says "voir dire" they aren't referring to the words' literal meaning, but to the process of vetting potential jurors before a trial. A voir dire is the series of questions asked to determine whether a community member is capable of viewing a case fairly, not as a judge or a prosecutor or an advocate, but as a peer. In the months and eventually years Matt and I spent on this opera, **I THINK THE VOIR DIRE WAS ULTIMATELY OURS, A TEST OF WHETHER WE WERE FIT TO LISTEN AND TO SEE,** to view things that passed through a particular room in a particular time and place with scrutiny, generosity, and honesty.

I HOPE WE PASSED.

JASON ZENCKA June 2, 2020, Whitney Lake, PA

the librettist **JASON ZENCKA**

Writer Jason Zencka grew up in the Midwest. He has worked as a newspaper reporter in central Wisconsin, a criminal defense investigator in Washington, D.C., and a high school teacher in south Minneapolis and Syracuse, New York.

He and Matthew Peterson wrote their first opera, *The Binding of Isaac*, as students at St. Olaf College. Starring a young Laura Wilde as Sarai, *Isaac* was runner-up in the National Opera Association's chamber opera contest and received a BMI student composer award.

Jason Zencka's short stories have been published in *One Story*, *Image Journal*, and *StoryQuarterly*, and his story "Catacombs" opens the 2018 *Puschart Prize XLII: Best of the Small Presses Anthology*. He lives in Syracuse, NY with his wife, Florencia, and son, Tomás.



**“I’ve never been so cold before
As in this jailhouse corridor
Remember I’m from Florida”**



VOIR DIRE - the music

I CAN'T REMEMBER WHAT I COMPOSED FIRST.

It was August 2008. I was a 2008-2009 Fulbright Scholar to Sweden beginning my residence at the Gotland Composer School in the medieval town of Visby on the island Gotland. The school, housed in a former government building on the town's harbor, wouldn't open for another couple weeks. I had the practice rooms all to myself and I started work on scenes for an opera. **THAT OPERA, VOIR DIRE, WOULDN'T BE PERFORMED UNTIL NINE YEARS LATER.**

I might have started with Professor Milton's plea scene. Or the raucous opening bond hearing. Jason had completed and sent both by that time. Whatever scene it was, **I BEGAN BY SKETCHING OUT THE MUSIC ON LARGE SHEETS OF NOTEPAPER.** By the end of my Fulbright year I had a whole stack of sketches over an inch thick, which would move with me from Visby, to North Dakota (where I completed the piano-vocal score in October 2009), to Essex, England, to Gothenburg, Danderyd, and Åmål, Sweden, and finally to a farmhouse ten miles from Rimbo in Sweden's Roslagen region, where I would finish the first version of the opera in May 2010. By that time, the original June 2010 production in Gothenburg had been cancelled and I was looking forward to a collaboration with the University College of Opera in Stockholm, which would also be cancelled, as would the January 2012 production with Opera Vista in Houston. **ARTISTIC DIFFERENCES, INSTITUTIONAL TURNOVER AND DISSOLUTION DASHED OUR EARLY HOPES TO SEE IT ON THE STAGE.**

From August 2008 until August 2009, Jason emailed me the libretto piecemeal as he completed it. I have most of those emails still saved on my computer. Looking back I can see that on September 17th Jason sent me the Kalcek trial scene, and I can read the cringeworthy enthusiastic replies from my 24-year-old self. At first we didn't know how the scenes would fit together, which we intensely discussed in many emails.

I PARTICULARLY REMEMBER ONE EMAIL FROM

NOVEMBER 2009. It was an aria to follow the bond hearing scene, typed in verse in the body of the email. As I read the song, a sort of jailhouse ballad, I was taken in from the first slant-rhyming triplet: *"I've never been so cold before / as in this jailhouse corridor / remember I'm from Florida"*

I CAN'T OVERSTATE THE IMPORTANCE OF THAT PARTICULAR ARIA IN MY DEVELOPMENT AS A

COMPOSER. Composing that song gave me the courage to leave the composition student behind. It impressed upon me that simplicity - banality even - can be brave, and sometimes artifice is the cowardly choice. Not to say that Voir Dire isn't complex. It is a musically and dramatically eclectic opera, channel-surfing between different court-cases: madcap zaniness, in a custody dispute over a macaw; magical-realism, in the confession of a dead mother's ghost; and pathos, as conflicting accounts of a rape within a marriage take the form a duet between husband and wife. To do justice to the truth of the subject matter, **VOIR DIRE NEEDED TO BE TRUE,** and pulling that off musically required both directness and circumspection.

I was walking a knife's edge, to **PULL NO PUNCHES IN COMPOSING UNCOMPROMISING MUSIC, YET STILL MANAGE TO GET UNDER THE LISTENER'S GUARD.** I don't know what this says about me as an artist, but I didn't want anyone to have a choice in the matter. I needed any and every audience member, however jaded and cynical, however naive or ignorant, to be struck by the opera; to see, hear, and feel.

As Jason starting putting the pieces together, arriving at a through-line for our courtroom ballad opera - and a title, *Voir Dire* - my music coalesced around a single tetrachord of four descending notes: C B A, and G#/G. This tetrachord formed the basis for the music, in different ways for each scene: the Bond Hearing's machinery-of-the-courtroom bassline, the melodies of Alycia Simpson's devastating ballad, Judge Dodsworth's beat-poet meets lounge-lizard monologues, the twisted nursery-rhyme ickiness of a fugue that describes images of child pornography, Professor Milton's convoluted chromatic progressions climbing downwards like Jacob's ladder in reverse, the Mother's Ghost with her unearthly vocal harmonies and spectral ostinati. **THOSE FOUR NOTES ARE A TORTURED CHACONNE**, as if the sounding notes of humanity have been pressed, ill-fitting, into the strict formal framework of the courtroom.

In 2014, three years after any excerpt of the opera had been performed, *Voir Dire* was one of eight operas presented at the Fort Worth Frontiers showcase for new opera, which lead to a pianovocal workshop at Seagle Music Colony in upstate New York, and a subsequent revision in advance of the world premiere production at Fort Worth Opera in spring of 2017. By the time Jason got around to finishing the libretto revision, complete with a new beginning, new ending, and a completely new character in Judge Dodsworth, it was early 2016. For the remainder of spring and into the summer, **I WAS A 32-YEAR-OLD COLLABORATING WITH MY 24-YEAR-OLD SELF**. And I saw that the younger me, despite being pretty raw, was so inventive, so gutsy and uncompromising that I came to doubt that my elder persona was the "better" composer. The setbacks of *Voir Dire* had changed my voice as well as my course as a composer. Although I had heard the aforementioned Alycia Simpson aria performed several times, the cancelled productions robbed me of the ability to fully evaluate the single result of nearly 18-months of work, all during arguably my most dynamic

development as a composer. So after *Voir Dire* I moved away from opera and away from the harmonically-diverse eclecticism of *Voir Dire*, towards a more diatonic and sonically-consistent mode of expression in orchestral, choral, and chamber works. **FOR YEARS, VOIR DIRE WAS AN UNSOLVED CASE WITH NO LEADS**, consigned to a folder way back in an electronic filing cabinet.

I have to admit that the opera probably played better in Texas in 2017 than it would have in Gothenburg in 2010. But the subject matter would have been more timely in 2010. Since 2007 the recession and Occupy movement exposed the greed and carelessness atop the US economy and the precariousness below. The opioid crisis brought attention to the decline and suffering of working-class, small-town America. Black Lives Matter brought witness to the injustice and institutional rot at the core of the criminal justice system. **WHAT JASON SAW IN A SMALL MIDWESTERN COUNTY COURTROOM PROVED, AT LEAST TO ME, TO BE PROPHETIC**. At the premiere of the opera, I couldn't help but watch the reaction of the audience. While some were palpably moved by the plight of, for example, Alycia Simpson - a character based on two real people - there were others who smirked or laughed inappropriately. Given the contemporary division of the US along different political, racial and socioeconomic lines, I was not surprised. But at the post-performance discussion with Jason and myself, some of those same patrons were genuinely provoked by the opera. **I GUESS WE GOT UNDER THEIR GUARD**.

MATTHEW PETERSON

June 5, 2020, Smedjebacken, Sweden

the composer MATTHEW PETERSON

"Darkly brilliant," "truly beautiful," "startlingly immediate" ...

From his cabin-studio in rural Dalarna, Sweden, Matthew Peterson (b. 1984 in North Dakota) composes music that, like his life and person, defies easy categorization. Actively pursuing diverse opportunities and exciting collaborations while living a daily life close to nature- hunting, fishing gardening and gathering- he moves dynamically between new operas on urgent contemporary themes, inventively beautiful sacred choral works, vast orchestral soundscapes, and virtuosically playful music for solo instruments.

Peterson began his training studying composing under Mary Ellen Childs at St. Olaf College (Minnesota), after which he pursued a masters degree at Indiana University, learning from the late, great Sven-David Sandstrom. Peterson was awarded a Fullbright grant to study at the Gotland School of Music Composition in Visby, Sweden, during which time he composed *Voir Dire*. After teaching at Gotland he moved to Stockholm and later to Dalarna, where he now lives with his partner Sara and daughter Alma.

His fresh and unique musical vision has received honors including the 2014 Uppsala Composer Prize for best orchestral score, the 2014 Fort Worth Frontiers award for new opera, the 2014 ASCAP Rudolf Nissim Award, a John F Kennedy Commission for Washington National Opera's American Opera Initiative, and the 2018 Washington Prize in composition. Peterson has received funding from the Swedish Composers Association (FST), Swedish Arts Council (Kulturrådet), Helge Ax:son Johnson Foundation, Långmanska Kulturfond, the Wallenberg Foundation, and others.

His works have been commissioned and performed by leading musicians and ensembles such as the Stockholm Saxophone Quartet, Minnesota Orchestra, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Sofia Vokalensemble, Washington National Opera, The St. Olaf Choir, organist Bengt Tribukait, Gustav Sjökvists Chamber Choir, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and guitarist Märten Falk, as well as at festivals and venues around the world, including Carnegie Hall, Oslo Operahus, The Kennedy Center, Purpur Festival in South Africa, Lund Choral Festival, Karuizawa International Choral Festival, St Olaf Christmas Fest, Stockholms Konserthus, Nidaros Cathedral, and Tokyo Shibuya Sakura Concert Hall.

Peterson's choral works are published by Gehrman's Musikförlag; his remaining catalogue including *Voir Dire* is available from Svensk Musik/ Swedish Music Information Center (svenskmusik.org) and at www.matthew-peterson.com.



**“I find myself in a special hell
reserved for those who cannot
help themselves”**



WORLD PREMIERE

Fort Worth Opera
April 23 - May 8 2017
McDavid Studio, Bass Hall, Fort Worth, Texas

DIRECTION

stage director: David Gately
music director: Viswa Subbaraman
repetiteur: Stephen Carey
lighting: Samantha Greene

ORIGINAL CAST

Christina Pecce, soprano
Anna Laurenzo, mezzo
Andrew Surrena, tenor
Trevor Martin, baritone
Nate Mattingly, bass-baritone

RECORDING

Maud Moon Weyerhauser Studios
Minnesota Public Radio, St Paul, Minnesota
June 13-14 2017

Recording technician: John Miller

MUSICIANS

Lauren McNee, flutes
Pat O'Keefe, clarinets
Erik Barsness, percussion
Dave Hagedorn, percussion
Seulgee Lee Nelson, piano
Emilia Mettenbrink, violin
Matthew Mindeman, viola
Greg Byers, cello
Rolf Erdahl, bass
Viswa Subbaraman, conductor

ALBUM PRODUCTION

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Graphic design: Michael Peterson
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Digital distribution: ALOADED

PRODUCERS

Matthew Peterson
Per Eglund
Michael Matsuura
Carl Schroeder
Viswa Subbaraman

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to Hans Gefors, Per Mårtensson and Henrik Strindberg for their guidance,

and to Viswa Subbaraman and Darren Woods for never giving up.

THE SINGERS

With “*lovely tone and convincing dramatic arc*” mezzo **ANNA LAURENZO** has extensive experience in a diverse range of repertoire. Fall 2020 she will make her Off-Broadway debut understudying the role of Mrs. Van Buren and singing in the ensemble of the world premiere of *Intimate Apparel* (Lincoln Center Theater) by Ricky Ian Gordon and Lynn Nottage. She recently joined Chicago Opera Theater as Mary Weathers in the Chicago premiere of Jody Talbot’s *Everest* and covering the role of Brother in Stefan Weisman’s critically-acclaimed *The Scarlet Ibis*. Laurenzo recently made her Carnegie Hall debut with MidAmerica Productions as the Mezzo Soloist in Vivaldi’s Gloria and Haydn’s *Mariazelller Mass*.



TREVOR MARTIN is a versatile actor, singer, and musician based in NYC. A “classically-trained baritone, perfect for the Golden Age of musical theater” he has performed with opera and theater companies including Houston Grand Opera, Fort Worth Opera, De Moines Metro Opera, Center for Contemporary Opera, Beth Morrison Projects, and Ensemble Échappe. Martin is a staunch advocate of new works and has premiered roles including The Muse in *When Adonis Calls* (Asheville lyric Opera), Mark Twain in *TESLA* (SoBe Arts), John F Kennedy in *JFK* (cover, Fort Worth Opera), Victor in *Buried Alive* (cover, Fort Worth Opera) and Paul in *Amelia* (Moore’s Opera Center).



With his acute musicianship, powerful stage presence, and beautiful vocal production, bass-baritone **NATE MATTINGLY** is making his mark in new opera and music theater. He has recently performed in the world-premieres of Evan Mack’s *A Little More Perfect*, Roque Cordero’s *Cantata para la Paz* (Texas Christian University), and Matthew Peterson’s *Voir Dire* (Fort Worth Opera), where he received national critical-acclaim for his role as Judge Dodsworth.



With her “astounding vocal expressivity”, soprano **CHRISTINA PECCE** is a singing-actress who crosses over the genres of opera, musical theatre, jazz, and performance art, with Chicago Lyric Opera (*Earth To Kenzie, Jesus Christ Superstar*), Chicago Fringe Opera (*The Great God Pan, Woyzeck*), Out Of The Box Opera (*Diva Cage Match*), Fort Worth Opera (*Carmen, Voir Dire*), Boston Opera Collaborative (*To Hell And Back, Rinaldo*), The Company Theatre (*Legally Blonde, Mary Poppins*), NextDoor Theater (*A Little Night Music*), and the U.S. premiere of Lee Mingwei’s performance art piece *Sonic Blossom*. Pecce’s has performed her solo show *Witches, Bitches, and Divas!* in NYC, Boston and Chicago: www.christinapecce.com



“A tenor whose voice is rich and full, yet balanced with lyricism,” **ANDREW SURRENA** can be heard singing operas, concerts, and new works across the United States. Recent performances include Sarasota Opera (*Romeo*, in Gounod’s *Romeo et Juliette*, Tamino in *Die Zauberflöte*, Alfredo in *La Traviata*, Nando in d’Albert’s *Tiefland*), Opera in the Heights (*Ferrando in Così fan tutte*), Tri-Cities Opera (*Don Jose in Carmen*) and Fort Worth Opera (*Carmen*, Matthew Peterson’s *Voir Dire*).



conductor VISWA SUBBARAMAN

is internationally-acclaimed as an interpreter of new repertoire, having led the world premieres of Daniel Bernard Roumain’s *We Shall Not Be Moved* with Opera Philadelphia and Matthew Peterson’s *Voir Dire* at Fort Worth Opera, and the American Premiere of Glass’ *The Witches of Venice* with Opera Saratoga. His innovative planning as artistic director of Skylight Music Theatre included Ades’ *Powder Her Face*, Glass’ *Hydrogen Jukebox*, and the premiere of Somtow Sucharitkul’s *Snow Dragon*. Subbaraman founded Opera Vista in Houston, a company dedicated to premieres, including Line Tjørnhøj’s *Anorexia Sacra*, James Norman’s *Wake...*, and Sucharitkul’s *The Silent Prince*.



VOIR DIRE - a courtroom opera

CD 1

41'43"

SCENE 1

7'40"

1. Judge's Chambers

3'38"

2. A 911 Call

2'45"

3. *Beating Music*

1'17"

SCENE 2: A BOND HEARING

14'44"

4. "Let me take a moment to explain the routine here"

2'29"

5. "Officers Zenner and Grant were dispatched to 106 Adams Boulevard"

2'50"

6. "Who's next?"

2'40"

7. "I've never been so cold before"

6'21"

8. *Pavane for a Dead Infant*

2'24"

SCENE 3: THE PRELIMINARY HEARING

6'09"

9. The Preliminary Hearing

5'18"

10. *Chasing Music*

0'51"

SCENE 4: A CUSTODY DEBATE

5'57"

11. "How dare you talk to me like that?"

2'44"

12. "I give you...your bird."

3'13"

SCENE 5: THE WITNESS

7'13"

13. Justice

2'14"

14. The Witness

3'19"

15. *Poison Music*

1'40"

Matthew Peterson & Jason Zencka

CD 2	42'28"
SCENE 6: A PLEA	18'54"
1. "Guilty!"	2'33"
2. "Illegal images found on the hard drive of a computer owned by Dr. Henry Milton"	3'10"
3. "You know, there was a time when I maligned myself"	3'42"
4. "So this is the child pornographer"	3'55"
5. "So fucking what?"	2'42"
6. "You are a pain in my ass"	0'54"
7. <i>Death Music</i>	1'58"
SCENE 7: THE CONFESSION	4'18"
8. The Confession	3'24"
9. <i>Brutal Music</i>	0'54"
SCENE 8: A TRIAL	6'50"
9. "You see, I'm not too good with words"	2'17"
10. A Trial	3'27"
11. <i>Burning Music</i>	1'06"
SCENE 9: THE VOIR DIRE	12'26"
12. "Four forty-five, almost through another day"	2'29"
13. "What do I want to offer?"	3'33"
14. "Jeffrey's mine"	2'21"
15. "Speak the truth"	4'03"



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