

Send the Carriage Through

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: January 14, 2023, Kentucky Center, Louisville, KY. Commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra for the 2022-23 Creators Corps
Duration: 12-14' (variable)
Instrumentation: 3323; 4321; timpani + 2; strings; piano (played by conductor)

I set out to compose this piece knowing it would be premiered alongside two of the best-loved works by Beethoven, history's most celebrated composer. As it turned out, I spent that morning watching the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II, one of history's most celebrated monarchs. She had in fact "composed" the whole pageant herself, down to every detail – and there she was, at the center of it all, yet absent from it. As I watched the astounding choreography of the procession, I ruminated: what does the way we enshrine people who are gone, especially great leaders, say about us? The mystique of great musical leaders crumbles somewhat when one takes a closer look. In Beethoven's time, the leadership paradigm for the orchestra was in great flux. Composers usually led their own works, sometimes from the keyboard or from the concertmaster's chair. When they did not also play, they conducted facing the audience, sometimes banging a stick on the ground. (Beethoven was a notoriously poor leader, especially as his hearing loss became more advanced. He yelled during loud passages and crouched out of sight during pianissimos. His musicians learned to ignore him in order to stay together.) The word "conductor" did not appear in print until 1820, years after his Fifth Symphony and Emperor Concerto were composed. I began to imagine a piece in which we could take a ride through this colorful history of musical leadership. How many different forms can (musical) leadership take?

I watched the Queen's slow, solemn progress. No one person was "conducting" the epic spectacle. From different locations at different moments, the rhythmic commands rang out – "Bearer party – slow march," "remove headdress," and, most poetic of all, "Send the carriage through." I began transcribing the rhythms of these commands and the patterned groove of the drums (at exactly 75 beats a minute, presumably as specified by the Queen herself in her role as composer) as they ricocheted off of the buildings along the route. But what began as a rumination on greatness and mortality took on more and more playfulness and joy as the weeks and months went by, and my relationship with Louisville – the city, its Orchestra, its audience and community – became more and more colorful and engaged. I began to celebrate the exhilaration of music-making as a team sport, a kind of relay race in which one could literally "pass the baton," sometimes leading, sometimes following. Six players start the piece in the balcony, sometimes leading and sometimes following. The role of conductor/leader multiplies, splits and flows. Eventually we find ourselves in a game featuring

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orchestra members in smaller groups, passing the baton until their balcony friends retake their chairs onstage. Meanwhile the conductor effectively holds the carriage until the whole team is together again, then sends it through, into the unknown.

Send the Carriage Through is at its core a gift of gratitude to the players of the LO and a celebration of Teddy's own open-hearted vision of leadership as connection and invitation.

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