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Into the Wilderness: A Profile of Composer Stephen Lias and Examination of *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue*

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David Roush

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Abstract

Into the Wilderness: A Profile of Composer Stephen Lias

and Examination of *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue*

The author of this document was initially exposed to the music of self-styled "adventurer composer" Stephen Lias in 2021 through a performance of his piece for saxophone quartet and percussion ensemble entitled *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue*.[1] The experience of preparing and performing Lias's work prompted further exploration of his life and career, an interview with the composer, and ultimately the decision to make him the focus of this project. The overall goal of this document is two-fold. First, it aims to introduce readers to Stephen Lias both as a composer and as a person through exploration of his musical upbringing, education, and career. The author outlines Lias's compositional influences, style, and process, as well as the unique attachment to nature which inspires a significant portion of his catalog. Secondly, this document guides readers through a detailed examination of *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue*. The author first recounts the true events that serve as the inspiration for the piece. Previously unpublished perspectives are included from the survivor of the incident and from Lias regarding the composition of the piece. The author also provides a close musical exploration of the work, highlighting the introduction and development of programmatic themes. The author hopes to spread awareness of Stephen Lias's body of work and encourages readers to explore Lias's music for themselves.

[1] Stephen Lias, "About," accessed December 16, 2023, https://www.stephenlias.com/#about.

Acknowledgements

With the completion of this project and the conclusion of my Doctor of Musical Arts degree, a decade-long journey comes to a close and a new one begins. I am so thankful to so many for their support throughout this long process, without which this achievement would not have been possible. I am incredibly fortunate to have such a wonderful group of family, friends, colleagues, and mentors in my life.

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Purpose of Study

This project is borne out of the author's experience over the course of four years with the music of Stephen Lias and a desire to raise awareness of his work. The author was first exposed to Lias's music in the Fall of 2020. At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, wind ensembles all over the country were in search of chamber repertoire that allowed music-making to continue when congregating in large groups was not possible. A particular challenge during this time was discovering chamber repertoire that included saxophone and percussion. As a graduate assistant at the University of Minnesota, the author conducted Lias's piece for saxophone quartet and percussion ensemble entitled *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue*. The work's powerful depiction of true events surrounding a harrowing climbing accident, as well as the ensuing rescue effort, was compelling. Its musical reflections of the accident itself, recitative-like "phone calls," haunting nights on the mountain, marching rescue teams, rhythmic helicopter blades, and profound expressions of grief created a powerful experience for both performers and audience members. After preparing and performing this work, Stephen Lias was cemented in the author's mind as a composer to watch and explore further in the future.

In the Spring of 2023, the author had an opportunity to take a more in-depth look at Stephen Lias and his body of work as a graduate assistant at Northwestern University. In preparing a presentation for the wind conducting seminar at Northwestern, the author explored Lias's life and body of work more broadly and learned more about the genesis of *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue*. Topics included Lias's passion for the outdoors and his life as an "adventurer-composer," his love for America's national parks, and his many engagements as a composer-in-residence for the National Park Service.[2] The author also learned of Lias's

[2] Stephen Lias, "About," accessed December 16, 2023, https://www.stephenlias.com/#about.

workshop for composers, Composing in the Wilderness, where he accompanies composers on excursions into the national parks in hopes of finding inspiration in nature. After speaking with Lias for almost 2 hours and hearing the composer's story first-hand, the author is able to provide the composer's own words and thoughts to the reader.

The author's aim with this project is two-fold. First, the author hopes to introduce readers to Stephen Lias as a person and as a composer, giving an overview of his life and work. Secondly, the author aims to introduce readers to *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue*, highlighting the previously unpublished backstory of the tragic incident it depicts as well as examining the music itself. Through this exploration of both the composer and the composition, the author hopes to encourage readers to explore the work of Stephen Lias for themselves and spread awareness of the compelling music he creates.

Stephen Lias – A Profile

I. Background and Biographical Information

Musical Upbringing

Stephen Lias was born in 1966 and became interested in music from an early age. He grew up in a musical household, where his mother played the piano and both of his parents frequently listened to records. In a 2012 interview with Whitney O'Neal, he conveys that the music of the great orchestral masters was the "soundtrack of his childhood."[3] He recalls dancing and creating "spooky ghost plays" with his sister to *Danse macabre* by Saint-Saëns on the record player, and being lulled to sleep at night by his mother playing the music of Debussy, Ravel, or Beethoven.[4]

When it comes to composition, Lias states that he cannot recall a time when he did not compose. As a boy, it was his mother who helped him learn musical notation so that he could write down the music he was constantly making up. O'Neal relays that Lias compares his early composition experience to the way children think about coloring, in that it came naturally to him without any thought of it becoming a calling or career.[5] He started piano lessons and credits those lessons as the catalyst for the melodies that he now composes. He began by creating familiar melodies through experimentation at the piano, but eventually the process became one in which he would create his own melodies and attempt to realize them at the keyboard.[6] Today, the piano continues to be a critical tool in his creative process, but Lias considers himself only a "mediocre" pianist.[7] He enjoys playing jazz piano in social settings and can play the classics well

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[3] Whitney Farris O'Neal, "The Flute Music of Stephen Lias: His Musical Inspiration and Compositional Process" (DMA diss., University of Alabama, 2012), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

enough to demonstrate how music is constructed to his composition students; he maintains that he would never want to perform a solo recital.[8]

Formal Education and Primary Teachers

As Lias got older, it became clear to him that music was what he wanted to do with his life. The idea of music as a career first entered Lias's mind in high school. In his words:

> I was in a music program in high school, and I was not good at anything else. And so that tends to help define what you're going to do with your life. I wasn't athletically inclined, I'm a small guy, but I was good at music, I had a great ear. I kind of did the high school actor, conductor, performer, musician, kind of everything. [...] I decided that that would be the focus of my music degree.[9]

Lias attended Messiah College (now Messiah University) in Pennsylvania for his undergraduate studies, graduating in 1988 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Music Education (vocal). However, he quickly realized that teaching was not the right career path for him. He pursued graduate study, graduating from Stephen F. Austin State University with a Master of Arts in Music degree in 1991. During this time, he studied composition with prominent composer and jazz musician Darrell Holt, as well as Dan Beaty. It was during this graduate study that Lias's identity as a composer solidified in his eyes. He states:

> [...] I got an undergraduate degree in music education actually with an emphasis in voice, and did some student teaching and things, and then decided that teaching in public school wasn't going to be my thing. But I was composing right from the start. And then it was in my master's degree that I really started feeling like I was not just a musician who composed, but maybe I was composer, and that was my main thing.[10]

Following his time at Stephen F. Austin State University as a graduate student, Lias spent time teaching community college until beginning his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in composition at Louisiana State University. He studied with Dinos Constantinides and Stephen

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[8] Whitney Farris O'Neal, "The Flute Music of Stephen Lias: His Musical Inspiration and Compositional Process" (DMA diss., University of Alabama, 2012), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

[9] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

[10] Ibid.

David Beck, graduating in 1997. Looking back on his education, specifically his primary teachers, Lias notes that "[...] those people were wildly different from one another, all four of them, and so I got a really good grounding in lots of different approaches to composition."[11]

After the completion of his doctorate, Dan Beaty retired from Stephen F. Austin State University, and Darrell Holt encouraged Lias to apply for the open position. Lias now serves as Professor of Composition at Stephen F. Austin State University.

Connection to Samuel Barber

Lias makes special mention of a somewhat synchronicitous connection between his life and composer Samuel Barber. He describes the connection this way:

> I was walking sort of in this weird set of footsteps of Samuel Barber, oddly. I was going to the high school that Samuel Barber had gone to, and I was going to the church that Samuel Barber had been kicked out of for not holding a fermata properly. And I then subsequently became friends with Samuel Barber's nephew through a completely other set of weird coincidences. And after I got my bachelor's degree and decided I didn't want to teach public school, I actually moved to Texas (where I now live) to work for Samuel Barber's nephew. And so [it was] an odd set of coincidences...And I've often wondered...I don't know...when I was in high school, that didn't play any present role in my thinking about being a composer, but it may have had a subliminal effect on the idea that, 'Hey, somebody who when to my high school became a famous composer.' That was in my head. Maybe that was something that started a thread that I've been following. I don't know for sure, but it's an interesting sidenote.[12]

Compositional Influences

When asked about his major compositional influences, the name that first comes to mind for Lias is John Williams. In his words:

> You always have to bear in mind that I am in my mid-fifties, which means that I was 12 years old when Star Wars came out. So that's not a trivial matter. The first orchestral music that entered my consciousness was John Williams. And so that's a legacy that I've sort of had my whole life, that I was very influenced by the music of my youth.[13]

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[11] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

When Star Wars: a New Hope was taking the world by storm in 1977, a young Stephen Lias soaked up everything he could from the score. He reports having seen the movie twelve times in the theater alone.[14] When his parents purchased the two-album soundtrack, it became the first symphonic music to capture his attention on a deeper level. It inspired him not only to listen but also to deconstruct the music. As he listened, he would decipher how the music was put together, how it was scored, and how it functioned both musically and dramatically. Lias respects Williams's ability to accompany and add to the drama of a film, remarking that "Williams is brilliant at finding the right music for that dramatic moment."[15]

His affinity for music as a backdrop for drama continued into his collegiate study and eventually led him to the music of Leonard Bernstein. On this, Lias explains:

> [...] in my college years, I think I was most influenced by Leonard Bernstein. I ended up writing my doctoral dissertation on Leonard Bernstein. And I worked for over ten years at the Texas Shakespeare Festival, both as their composer and their music director. And so I've got a long history in musical theater as well as traditional chamber and concert music, and Leonard Bernstein was a big part of that.[16]

This connection to film and theater music over the course of his career is noteworthy. Since 1989, he has composed incidental music for over thirty professional theater productions. When asked if would like to write movie music, he states that while he teaches film scoring, his own work on films is negligible. Given an opportunity, he states that he would love to do so, but on the condition that he "would require a great collaborator."[17] In a final summary of his musical influences, Lias states that he sees himself as "equal parts John Williams and Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, and then a whole panoply of chamber and concert music composers

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[14] Whitney Farris O'Neal, "The Flute Music of Stephen Lias: His Musical Inspiration and Compositional Process" (DMA diss., University of Alabama, 2012), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

[17] Whitney Farris O'Neal, "The Flute Music of Stephen Lias: His Musical Inspiration and Compositional Process" (DMA diss., University of Alabama, 2012), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

from the last 30 years."[18] This cinematic and theatrical influence is an overarching characteristic in Lias's body of work.

II. Attachment to Nature and Composing in the Wilderness

Although Stephen Lias was not always the avid outdoorsman that he is today, he has formed such a connection to nature that it is crucial to understanding him both as a person and as a composer. It was not until Lias was in his thirties that he discovered a love for outdoor activity that he had assumed he did not have. He explains further:

> As I said earlier, I wasn't very athletic in high school, and so I thought of myself as being sort of inept in that respect. And then it was in college that I discovered skiing, which was not a team sport and was not competitive. And I was great at it. And I was like, "Oh my goodness, I might enjoy outdoor activities as long as I don't have a coach yelling at me." And so that sort of started me down a different way of thinking.[19]

Lias discovered a latent proclivity for the outdoors and began exploring activities such as hiking, backpacking, and camping. However, he did not connect this passion to his musical activities until around 2009. It was at this time that Lias applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship, and as he was brainstorming potential projects to submit, the idea came to him that he could serve as a composer-in-residence for the National Park Service. While he did not get the Guggenheim Fellowship, he realized that this did not prevent him from writing music about the national parks. He began to apply to artist-in-residence programs at national parks and got his first opportunity as the artist-in-residence at Rocky Mountain National Park in 2010. Another opportunity followed in 2011 when he served as artist-in-residence at Denali National Park. He continued to write grants and seek out chances to keep doing work associated with the national parks. He considers 2016 as a peak in this work due the centennial of the National Park Service. Commissions and invitations continue to come, and Lias continues to answer by saying, "[...]

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[18] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.
[19] Ibid.

I'm still in the business of writing national park pieces, and I'll continue to enjoy doing that as long as the opportunities continue to present themselves."[20]

Lias's association with the national parks also led to his biggest ongoing passion project, the Composing in the Wilderness workshop. While serving in Denali National Park, both the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival and Alaska Geographic approached Lias with a proposal for a new project. These two organizations had reached the conclusion that he could fill a unique gap in their collective offerings. In his words:

> Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival has this long history of being this sprawling wonderful arts thing, where you can go to play oboe in the orchestra or take classes in mime, or Indonesian cooking, or photography, or folk guitar, or whatever, Irish dancing. It's a big, big organization, but they had nothing for composers. Then, Alaska Geographic is a partner organization to the Alaska national parks. They have been running educational wilderness programs where they take people, students, teachers, into the wilderness for four or five days at a time, with scientists and naturalists and guides. But they had nothing related to musicians.[21]

Both organizations approached Lias as a bridge between their two programs, and he realized that he had a clear idea of what he could do for them. He immediately noted that there are numerous summer programs for composers where they "go to various places, and work with various famous people, and workshop pieces, and maybe get them rehearsed or performed."[22] He also noted that there were many organizations offering high-end wilderness experiences, but they had nothing to do with music and were in essence just vacations. He resolved to provide an experience that would marry these two disconnected worlds. He set out to provide an experience in which composers would venture into the wilderness to find inspiration and return to write music about their shared experience.

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[20] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

Now in its twelfth year, Composing in the Wilderness has grown larger, offering multiple experiences at several of America's national parks with varying levels of difficulty. The standard offering, the "Denali Adventure," involves a stay at Alaska Geographic's field camp. Lias says that this expedition, while not luxurious, is "pretty 'cush' as far as back country living goes."[23] Following this, the composers spend 3 days in a secluded location and compose pieces based on the experience. Upon their return to Fairbanks, the pieces are rehearsed and performed by Corvus, the resident contemporary music ensemble associated with the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival. In recent years, Composing in the Wilderness has also begun offering more immersive and intensive trips for composers desiring to push their limits and maximize their exposure to the wild. This additional program has involved composers venturing into the Arctic Circle, Prince William Sound, the Chugach Mountains, and Lake Clark National Park. In consideration of the added cost and level of risk involved with this trip, the experience comes with a modified performance. Participating composers are given three months to compose their pieces that are then premiered at a performance held at Federal Hall National Memorial in New York City.[24]

III. Compositional Style and Process

Overview

When asked, Stephen Lias finds it difficult to describe his work in general terms. He states:

> No composer is good at answering that question, for one really important reason...and I will answer your question, but the disclaimer has to come first. Every composer fancies themself [sic] a very multi-faceted creator. And when I think about my output, I think of them (the spectrum of pieces I've written) as wildly diverse. Maybe other people don't think of them in that way, and that's fine. But as the artist, I think all of us as artists like to think that we're not just recycling our stuff and writing in one channel. That [with]

[23] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.
[24] Ibid.

> each new piece, we're exploring a new channel or a new direction, or we're stretching ourselves in a new direction.[25]

Lias explains some general characteristics of his music, along with his overall philosophy of composition. Lias states the ultimate goal of his work is communicating with an audience. He describes this focus as "a central facet" of how he frames his work.[26] He recognizes that on some level this sets him apart from his contemporary counterparts, saying:

> There are great, great composers who I admire, who were writing music as a form of personal self-expression, not as a form of communication with an audience. They wrote great music that *does* communicate with audiences, but to them, they were writing something that they needed to get on paper rather than something that they needed to say to an audience. I'm always thinking about the person in the dark, in the red velvet chair. I'm always thinking about what experience they will have, what they will take away from the piece. It's okay with me if many different people have many different experiences with my piece, but I do feel like I'm communicating. That's my goal, is to communicate something to an audience member.[27]

The composer's affinity for cinematic, theatrical, and incidental music and his desire to communicate with audiences prompts him to write music that is at least partially programmatic. In his words, his music is "not always about something, but it often is."[28] In pursuit of this goal of communicating to an audience, the elements of music (melody, rhythm, and harmony) serve to embody a specific image or dramatic idea. Many of his melodies are "singable" and memorable. His treatment of rhythm supports the generative idea of the piece: It can be highly active to depict a similarly active idea or tense situation, it can serve alongside harmony to create a scenic backdrop, or it can be static to direct focus on the other elements. His treatment of harmony is rarely "functional," but does create specific musical atmospheres and a sense of flow from one idea to the next.

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[25] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

Compositional Process and Musical Elements

Describing his compositional process, Lias states that he does not take a single approach to each new piece. Instead, he has a range of processes that he can draw upon, and the decision of which one to utilize is dictated by the piece itself:

> [...] each piece dictates a new process for me. I do not always start in a certain way or progress in a certain way. I can tell you the range of them, though. Some pieces start as pure music, some pieces start as a programmatic idea like *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* did. [...] Then sometimes it starts with a pencil and paper, sometimes it starts in notation software. Sometimes it starts in a DAW [Digital Audio Workstation], like in Logic or something [...].[29]

Lias indicates that he lets his process grow organically out of the idea which gave birth to the piece. If a piece starts with a programmatic idea, he first researches the people, places, or ideas which he aims to depict in his music. Often, pieces flow out of "playing with sound" and worrying about notation after he has settled on something he likes.[30] He may also start by drawing shapes, symbols, and lines on paper and allowing sounds to flow from that. In the case of large ensemble pieces, he may start with a condensed score and expand from that, or he may go straight to the full score from the beginning.[31]

Melody

Lias notes that he often links melody and melodic phrasing with written and spoken language. In some pieces, this approach is overt and literal, whereas in other pieces one might never know about the connection. In the composer's words:

> I have some techniques that I've found will often get me out of a rut. And with regards to phrasing and melody, and rhythm and melody, the interrelationship between those factors and language, spoken language, has become really fascinating to me. [...] I'll be writing a purely instrumental piece, and I'll feel like I'm falling into the trap of writing regular four bar phrases, which sound really dull and hackneyed to me. [...] And I'll language it.[32]

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[29] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

An example of this approach can be seen in Figure 1, excerpted from *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue*.[33] In the piece, phone calls between an emergency operator and an accident victim are depicted by a recitative-like dialogue between the alto and tenor saxophone. The text and articulations have been added by Lias in order to convey specific ideas to the performer and the audience.

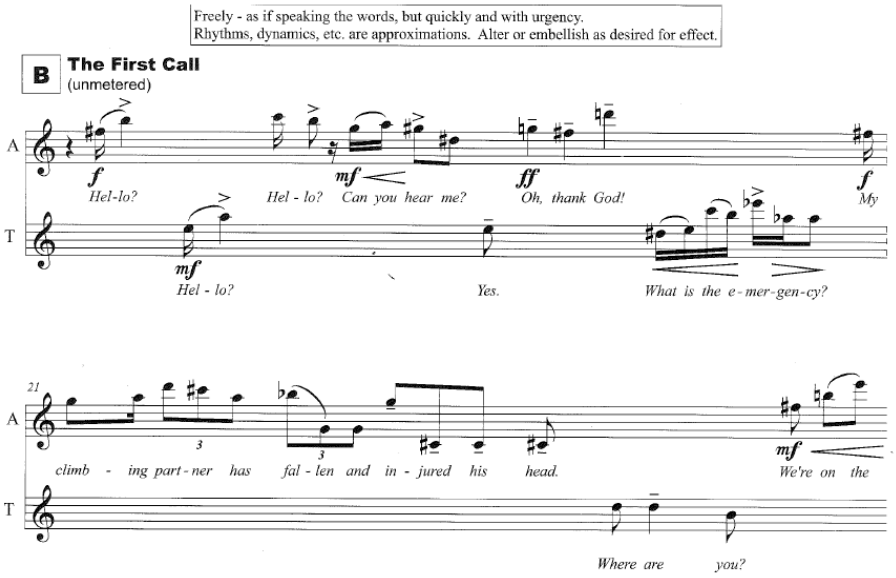


Figure 1 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 20

In addition to this language-based approach to melody, Lias takes thematic or motivic approaches to his compositions. Like his compositional heroes John Williams and Leonard Bernstein, the melodies in Lias's pieces are usually organized into themes that are presented once and then return, intermingle with one another, and evolve throughout the work. They typically represent some idea or image and serve Lias's core ideal of communicating with the audience. The two-part theme in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 represents the rescue teams dispatched to scale the mountain and aid the injured climber.

[33] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

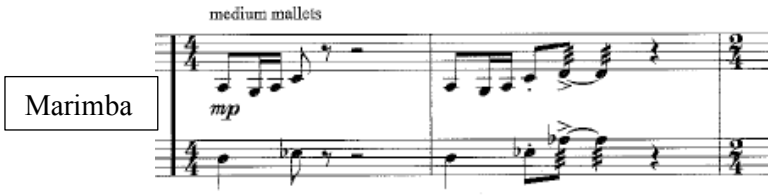


Figure 2.1 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 25

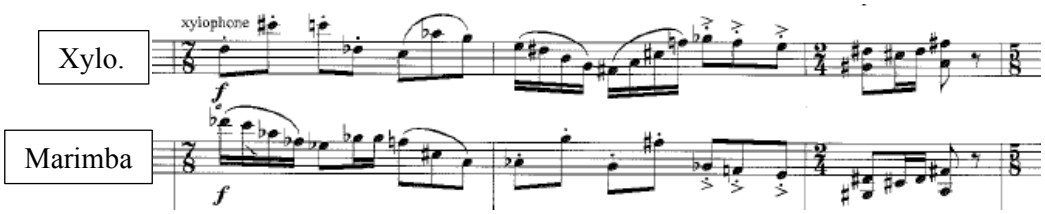


Figure 2.2 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 36

The opening measures of *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* also contain a notable motive which represents the initial shock of the accident. The motive returns at key moments throughout the piece, most notably near the end of the work where it represents a different kind of shock resulting from the death of a friend. The initial appearance of this motive is shown below in Figure 3.[34]

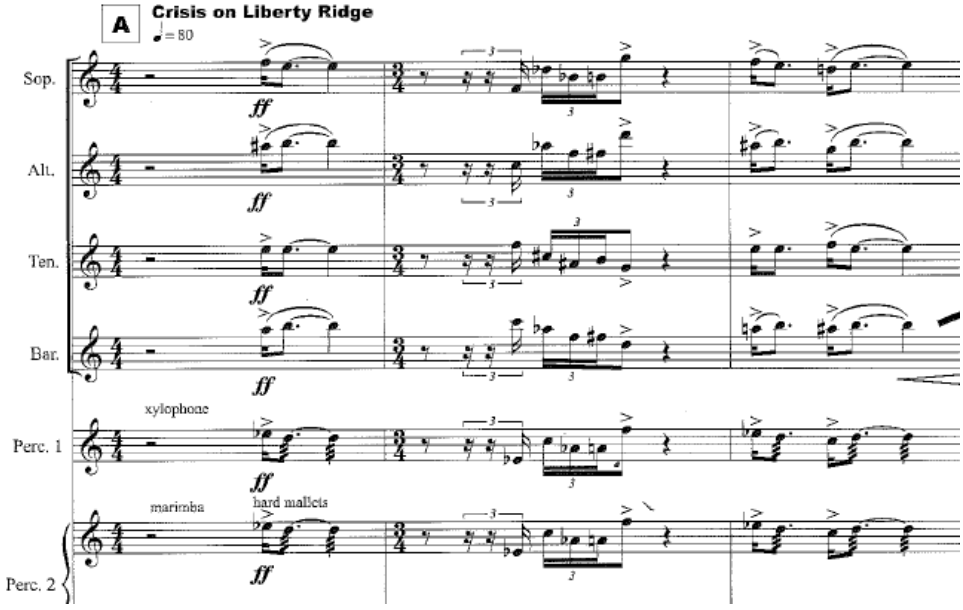


Figure 3 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 1

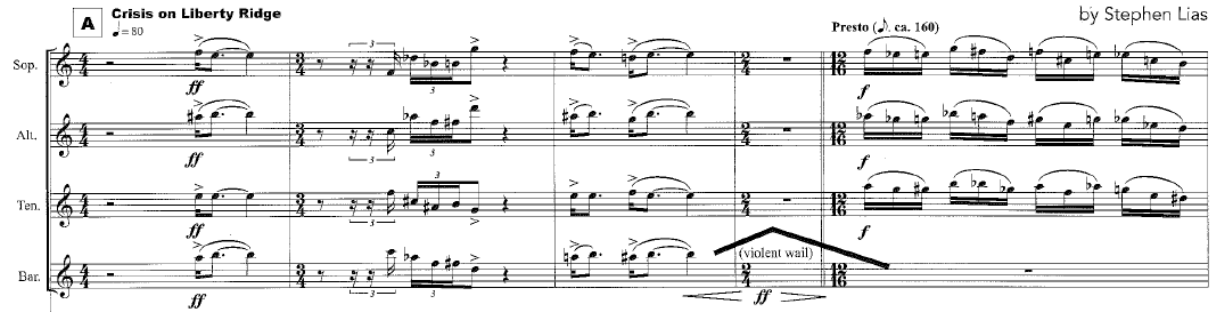
[34] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

Melodic motives like those above organize the piece and help evoke a specific image being depicted to the audience. The specific ways in which they develop often serve to reflect the changes in the story as it unfolds.

Rhythm

For Lias, melody is often very closely linked to rhythm. There are moments in his music where the rhythm flows freely and the time signature changes in order to accommodate the final product. As a result of this approach Lias frequently draws on mixed meters and changing time signatures. The opening moments of *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* are an example of this, seen below in Figure 4.[35] Lias remembers the first measures of the piece initially existing independent of any meter; he determined how to notate it after the fact. He recalls:

> [...] this is a piece that started in a DAW. The presto section at the beginning, [...] I probably set up Logic to be a time signature of 1/16. So, literally, Logic thought every measure was a 16th note long, and that allowed me the opportunity to just write in steady 16th notes without regard to where bar lines might be. And so I'm pretty sure that my memory of at least from the 12/16, the presto, up through the unmetered section on the next page, that little moment probably was just me playing around with it in Logic until it felt right to me. And then once I had it all written, then I would have to ask myself, "Alright, how are these things grouped beat-wise? What would make sense in terms of metering them once I notate it?"[36]



[35] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

[36] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

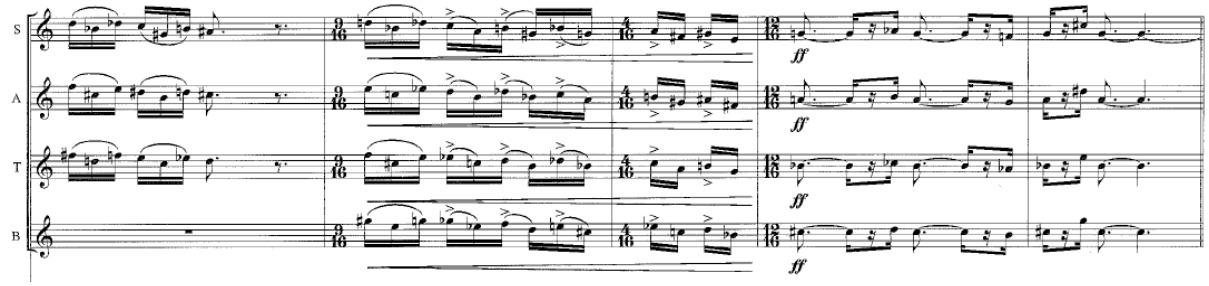


Figure 4 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 1-10

Figure 4 demonstrates two points about Lias's approach to rhythm. First, rhythm is inextricably linked to melody in his work. It also highlights that his rhythmic writing is best thought of first without bar lines.

Harmony

Lias states that he feels the most connected to harmony. In his words:

> I should say, I generally think of myself as a harmony guy. [...] I mean, harmony is one of my superpowers. If I listen to a piece of music, I can usually sit down at the piano and play it afterwards. I mean in terms of pop music, as a party trick. Hearing chord progressions in real time is very, very easy for me. And when I write a piece of music, I feel like the manipulation of harmony over time is one of the things that I enjoy the most [...].[37]

This affinity for harmony is present in many of Lias's works. Many pieces include prominent chorale sections that exemplify the composer's treatment of harmony. This is observed in *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue*. The chorale in that piece is first heard as a single melody in the marimba, then returns expanded into a four-voice chorale (see Figure 5 below), culminating as a dramatic funeral lament in the saxophone quartet.[38] For further discussion of this chorale and its development, see section V on pg. 28.

[37] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

[38] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

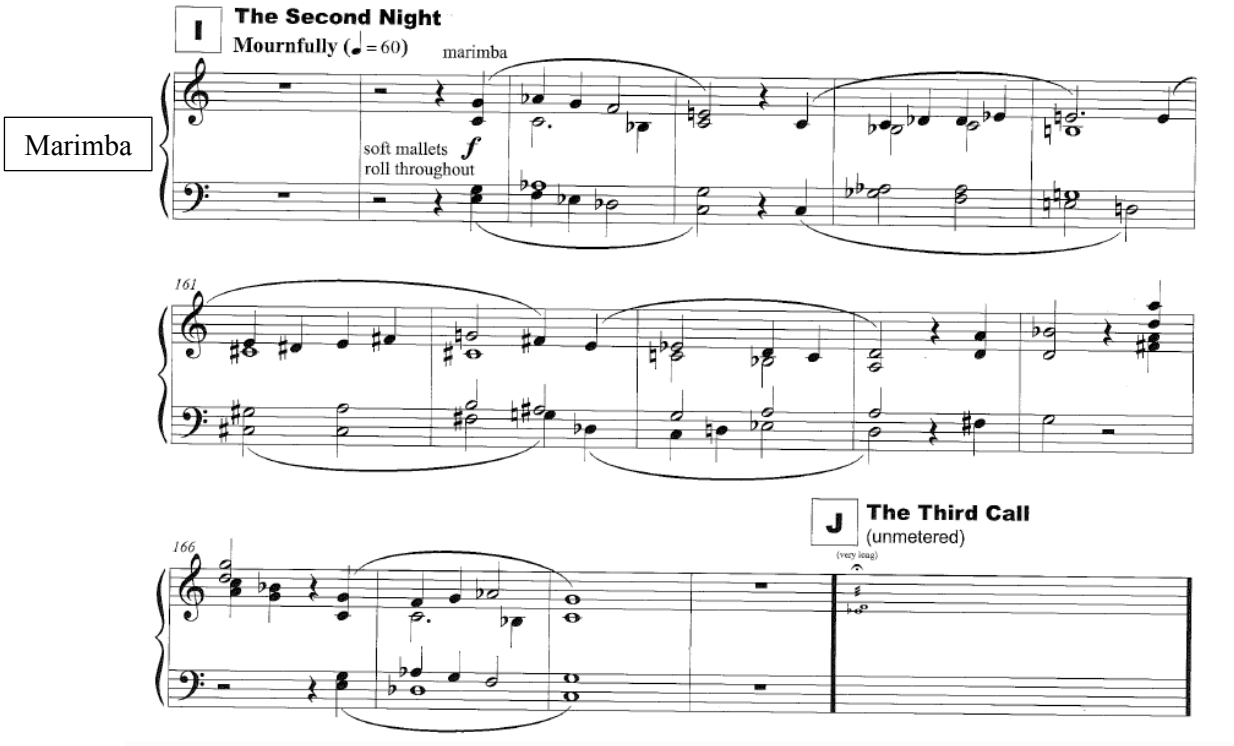


Figure 5 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 155

Knowing that harmony is what Lias considers to be his "super power," it becomes apparent that there are numerous instances of harmony acting as the driving force behind the music or the main point of interest in a given piece.

Mount Rainier Search and Rescue

IV. Genesis and True Events

Genesis

Mount Rainier Search and Rescue began as a request from Nathan Nabb, who at the time was performing with the Oasis Quartet and had recently been hired at Stephen F. Austin State University. Nabb was preparing repertoire for an engagement with the XPlorium Chamber Ensemble in Taiwan and came to Lias to request a piece specifically written for saxophone

quartet and percussion ensemble.[39] Lias agreed and began to consider what the piece should become. His first thought was that the piece should be "something muscular and spiky and gnarly."[40] He also decided that he would like to make the piece part of his body of works inspired by the national parks, and received permission from Nabb to do so. With those parameters in mind he began to do research. He did not feel that he had any personal experience that was suitable to the kind of piece he was trying to write, so he started looking into incidents within the parks. He considered such topics as the disappearance of a newlywed couple attempting to navigate the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, as well as a bizarre night in Glacier National Park during which two bear attacks occurred nearly simultaneously but miles apart. Ultimately, Lias decided against both of these initial ideas and continued to think. About his search he stated:

> I was trying to think of something that's gnarly and had attitude and would be good. And so none of those things were really clicking. And so on a whim I thought, "oh, what about a search and rescue incident?" and I Googled "National Park Search and Rescue," I just typed that into Google. And at that time, the very top thing that came up was the incident reports that Mount Rainier puts out. And literally, I clicked on the top link and the first document that opened was the 2004 report of climbers Peter Cooley and Scott Richards and the incident. And I read it with this rapt attention, and then clicked on links to contemporaneous articles about it in the newspaper. And what captivated me about the event was, not just the specifics, which were really compelling, but if you zoom out from those specifics and you replace the names of the places and the kinds of... If you replace that with generalities and say, "Person terribly injured needing rescue, rescuers heroically attempting the unthinkable and pulling off a miraculous rescue, but in the end, someone still dies and there's tragedy." If you zoom out and look at that, then you're looking at every earthquake, every tsunami, every wildfire, all the natural disasters that are happening all over the world where somebody is stranded and relies on the heroism of some other brave person to rescue them. And in the end, somebody still ends up dying. That's endemic to the human condition. And so it struck me that this story was not just a compelling story about these two guys and something amazing and terrifying and tragic that happened to them, but that it was something that was universal. It had a universality to it that spoke to the human condition and human dependency and heroism. And so I just

[39] Presto Music. "XPlorium: The XPlorium Chamber Ensemble." Last Modified, 2024. https://www.prestomusic.com/classical/products/9246236--xplorium.

[40] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

> felt like this was it. As soon as I encountered it, I was like, "This is what I have to write about."[41] [42]

Lias immediately began sketching musical ideas and entering into his creative process with this idea, however he quickly came to a realization. He had what he calls a "crisis of conscience" regarding creating the piece, saying that "[...] this is someone else's real life tragedy. It's not mine. I don't own this. How can I make art about this when I have no ownership in it and I have no permission to do this[?] [...]?"[43] This realization prompted Lias to briefly abandon the idea, but he found himself unable to move on from the concept and attempted to reach out to Scott Richards, the survivor of the incident. After hearing nothing for quite a long time and growing increasingly nervous about his "looming deadline," Lias finally received a reply. In his words:

> And then finally, I got a response from him that was very gracious. And not only did he say, "What a cool idea," but he also agreed to be interviewed. And he said that Peter Cooley was a musician, Peter Cooley's daughter was going to college on a music scholarship, and his family couldn't think of anything that they would like better than for his death to be commemorated in a piece of music. So that was the key that opened the door for the whole thing.[44]

The end result of his efforts is a piece that is an artistic and dramatic interpretation of the true events which occurred on the mountain. He reflected on his goal in writing the piece:

> [...] my job creatively was to make a programmatic piece that clearly tells a story, depicts a story, not just tells one but depicts one, but does it in a way...I didn't need to be true to the real life timeline if that wasn't going to make the best art. This was a piece of art I was making. And often, we make weaker art if we imitate life too accurately, and so I wanted to figure out what were the things that I needed to add, to compromise on that would capture the larger reality that I talked about, the more meta reality of the piece.[45]

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[41] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

[42] "Major Search and Rescue Incidents on Mount Rainier, 2004," U.S. National Park Service, accessed December 18, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/mora/planyourvisit/upload/sar04-reformatted.pdf.

[43] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

True Events

The climbing incident involving Scott Richards and Peter Cooley began around 6:00am on May 15th, 2004. The two-person team was ascending a section of Mount Rainier called Liberty Ridge and were near 12,000 feet of elevation when Cooley's crampon caught causing him to fall. Richards was on the opposite side of the ridge crest and was able to arrest his partner's fall using a hip belay, but not before Cooley had fallen approximately thirty feet and suffered severe head trauma as well as injuries to his left arm and leg. At 6:10am, Richards reached Mount Rainier National Park on a cell phone and relayed what had happened. He was advised by Ranger Mike Gauthier to chop out a platform on the ridge where he could secure a tent and do his best to stabilize and prepare Cooley for what would be a lengthy rescue operation.[46] Richards recalls:

> He [Gauthier] said...this is pretty clear to me. He said, "You're on your own for a period of time. There's nothing we can do. It's going to take us a while to even figure out where you're at." I mean, in not so many words, but he was like, "You need to figure this out. You need to get to shelter. You need to take care of yourself for a while, until we can get it going." It was very clear. I mean, Mike is an awesome ranger down there, and it was very clear to him where I was, and it was very clear to him that I was in a shitty, shitty location.[47]

Once Richards had gotten the two of them as secure as possible, he described their situation in this way:

> You know, just a heinous situation. A very small tent on a fifty-three [degree] ice slope, bad weather, and he had a bad head injury. So the beginnings of a bad head injury are usually met with combativeness, disorientation, completely stand up...you know, I had him roped in. He'd stand up, fall down. I mean, you can imagine everything coming out of him. We were in a three-by-six tent with no fly. It was high-end...very lightweight mountain hardware. [...] Huge ventilation. [...] it had a vestibule, but no door. So, the way I pitched the tent, the goddamn snow just rained down the slope, and just filled it. I was shoveling, you know, and Peter, for a period of time the first day or so, would just...he

[46] "Major Search and Rescue Incidents on Mount Rainier, 2004," U.S. National Park Service, accessed December 18, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/mora/planyourvisit/upload/sar04-reformatted.pdf.

[47] Scott Richards, interview by Stephen Lias, Nacogdoches, Texas, Spring 2011, appendix B.

> was in incredible pain, you know? Get up and fall over, and I had to block the door, you know?[48]

Two helicopters as well as climbing field teams were assembled for the rescue, but the weather quickly deteriorated and forecasts predicted large amounts of rain and snow. One helicopter attempted to approach Liberty Ridge for reconnaissance, but whiteout conditions forced it to land on the Carbon Glacier to wait for a gap in the weather. At this point, an air-assisted rescue seemed uncertain. A field team of two climbing rangers, David Gottlieb and Chris Olson, was prepared and sent to make a quick ascent of Liberty Ridge. An additional team of five climbing rangers supported the advance team of climbers. Richards was given an update on the progress and difficulties of the rescue attempts, and he prepared Peter to spend the night on the mountain.[49] He says in his interview:

> I would talk to him. I would rub him. I cradled his head in my arms. It was very sad. I knew this was just a desperate situation, and my friend was hanging on. [...] I chewed up aspirin, I put it in his mouth, spit it in his mouth. I tried to give him water. I tried to do anything I could to make him comfortable. I gave him all the sleeping bags we had. I gave him every stitch of clothing [...].[50]

As dawn broke on Sunday, May 16th, Richards reported that Cooley was unable to eat or drink, and was in and out of consciousness all night. Helicopter teams prepared for aerial extraction of Cooley as well as air drops of supplies for the ground teams, and climbing teams continued to make the arduous trek toward the site of the accident. At this point, more than sixty people were involved in the rescue effort, and it had the attention of international media. At noon that day, a helicopter team attempted a flight, but the mission was aborted due to continued bad weather. At 6:35pm, a brief clearing in the weather allowed the second helicopter team to drop

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[48] Scott Richards, interview by Stephen Lias, Nacogdoches, Texas, Spring 2011, appendix B.

[49] "Major Search and Rescue Incidents on Mount Rainier, 2004," U.S. National Park Service, accessed December 18, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/mora/planyourvisit/upload/sar04-reformatted.pdf.

[50] Scott Richards, interview by Stephen Lias, Nacogdoches, Texas, Spring 2011, appendix B.

supplies to Richards and Cooley. The climbing teams prepared to make an ascent of Liberty Ridge the next morning, while their support teams were to follow and establish an advanced camp at Thumb Rock.[51]

On the morning of May 17th, two more helicopter operations turned back due to weather. Around noon, rangers David Gottlieb and Charlie Borgh reached the accident site and attempted a medical assessment, but due to conditions and safety concerns only limited care could be provided. The team began to prepare for a technical rescue. At 5:03pm, a helicopter rescue team was able to reach the site and extract Cooley by hoist. Richards descended on foot with Gottlieb and Borgh to spend the night at Thumb Rock. It was there that they were notified that Peter had sadly been pronounced dead upon his arrival at Madigan Hospital; he had passed away in the helicopter en route.[52] Richards recalls what he was feeling in this moment in the following way:

> I was devastated. I was so...I mean, overall, I was numb anyway, and I knew Peter was in tough shape, but he was definitely very much alive when we left him, you know what I mean? [...] Just everything came through my head. I'm like, "God, this is just a nightmare." It was just a nightmare, really. The nightmare continued, you know? [...] Because there was so much energy. [...] "Oh, yeah, we finally got him off!" [...] I'm up on the mountain for multiple days, and yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm alive, and they're alive. And the rescue goes, then it doesn't go, and then it goes. Finally, it goes and they pull Peter off, and "oh my gosh, he makes it!" But he doesn't.[53]

The official report from the National Park Service, written by Mike Gauthier, concludes with the following analysis of the incident and the ensuing rescue efforts:

> Cooley and Richards were accomplished climbers, and this accident was not a result of any lapse in judgment or lack of skill. Cooley's short, but ultimately fatal fall seems to be the result of an unfortunate misstep. Cooley was wearing a climbing helmet, but sometime during the fall he hit his head on a rock that contacted his temple just under the helmet brim. That impact eventually caused his death. [...] The fact that Richards was able to care for his climbing partner for almost [sixty] hours on a small exposed platform that he chopped in ice during poor weather speaks highly of him as an alpinist, rescuer[,]

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[51] "Major Search and Rescue Incidents on Mount Rainier, 2004," U.S. National Park Service, accessed December 18, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/mora/planyourvisit/upload/sar04-reformatted.pdf.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Scott Richards, interview by Stephen Lias, Nacogdoches, Texas, Spring 2011, appendix B.

> and friend. [...] While many were saddened by the outcome of this extended event after so much effort by so many people, it should be noted that the rescue was also a great success in that Richards returned safely and no rescuers were hurt. Without his climbing partner[,] Richards would have been placed in the difficult position of soloing the route in order to reach safety.[54]

V. Examination

An in-depth examination of *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* is best achieved by considering the different sections of the work as scenes in a film. The piece depicts Cooley's accident and the immediate aftermath, phone calls between Richards and emergency personnel, helicopters attempting to reach the stranded climbers, cold nights alone on the mountain, and ultimately an impassioned expression of grief at Peter's death. In the real-life incident, the action was happening simultaneously at several different locations and, as in a film, the piece contains hard cuts between the different "scenes" as the drama unfolds. These are labeled for the performers and signaled to the audience by chimes and abrupt changes in the character of the music as seen in Figure 6.[55]

[54] "Major Search and Rescue Incidents on Mount Rainier, 2004," U.S. National Park Service, accessed December 18, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/mora/planyourvisit/upload/sar04-reformatted.pdf.

[55] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

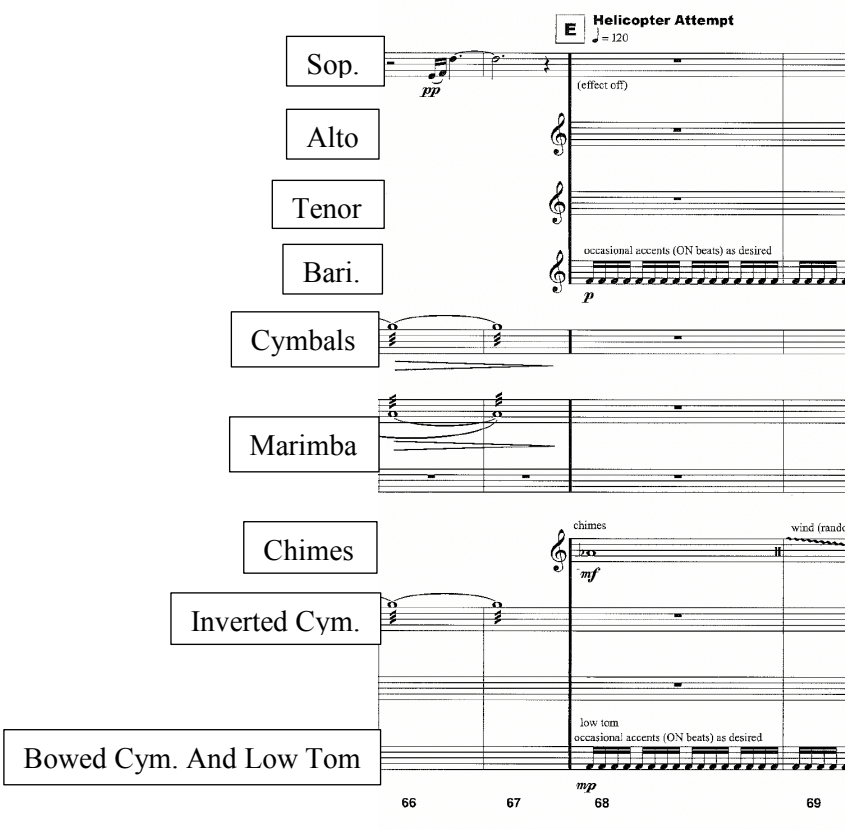


Figure 6 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 66

Each scene in the piece has its own musical material and atmosphere, and each time the listener is returned to a certain scene, that musical material has changed with the progression of the story. The scenes are largely organized in sets of three. There are three phone calls, three helicopter attempts, three nights on the mountain, etc. The exception to this is the opening accident motive.

Accident and Grief

The opening motive of the piece is the sole motive that appears only twice in the work. In its initial appearance in the opening bars of the piece, it is used to represent the shock and fear of Peter's accident as he loses his footing and falls. It is seen below in Figure 7.1.[56]

[56] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

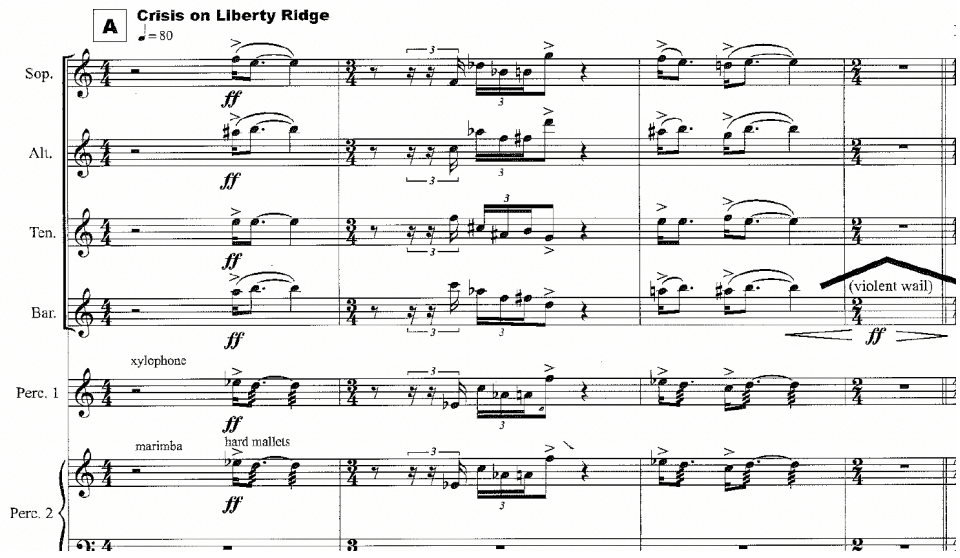
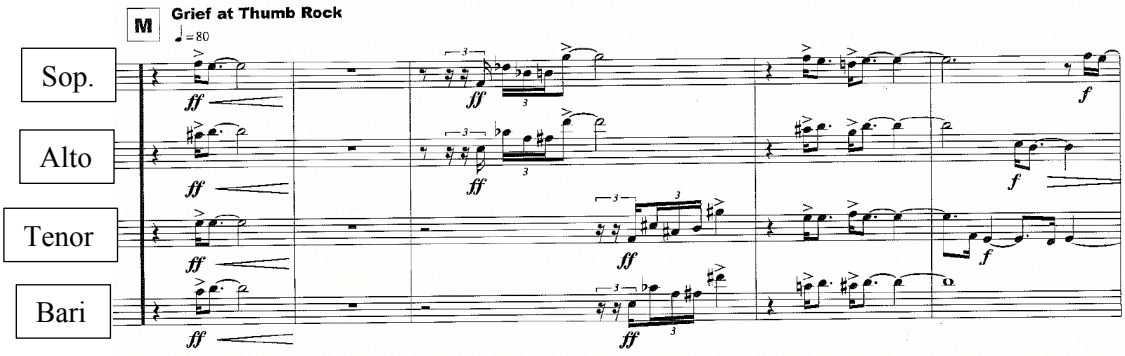


Figure 7.1 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 1-4

When the motive returns for its only reappearance at m. 219, it represents a different type of wound. The same material that depicted Cooley's accident is intended here to represent the sudden shock and grief of Richards receiving the news that Cooley did not make it. In this instance, the motive is extended and layered in new ways, and echoes of it slowly fade over six measures. The second iteration of this theme is seen below in Figure 7.2:[57]



[57] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

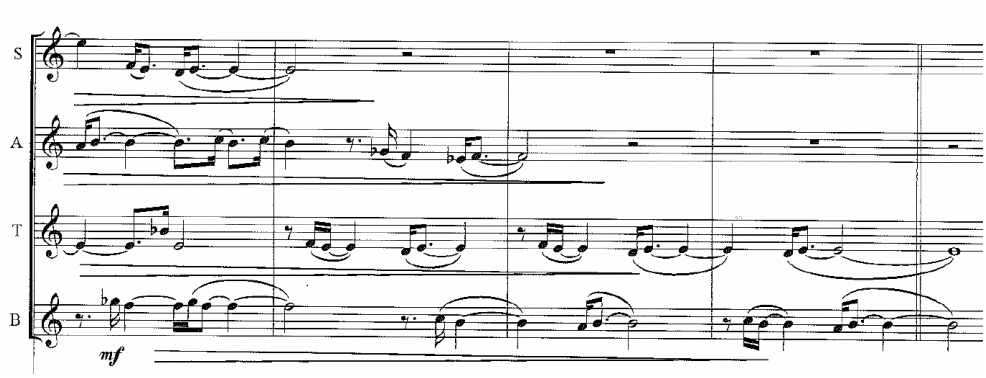


Figure 7.2 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 219-228

Phone Calls

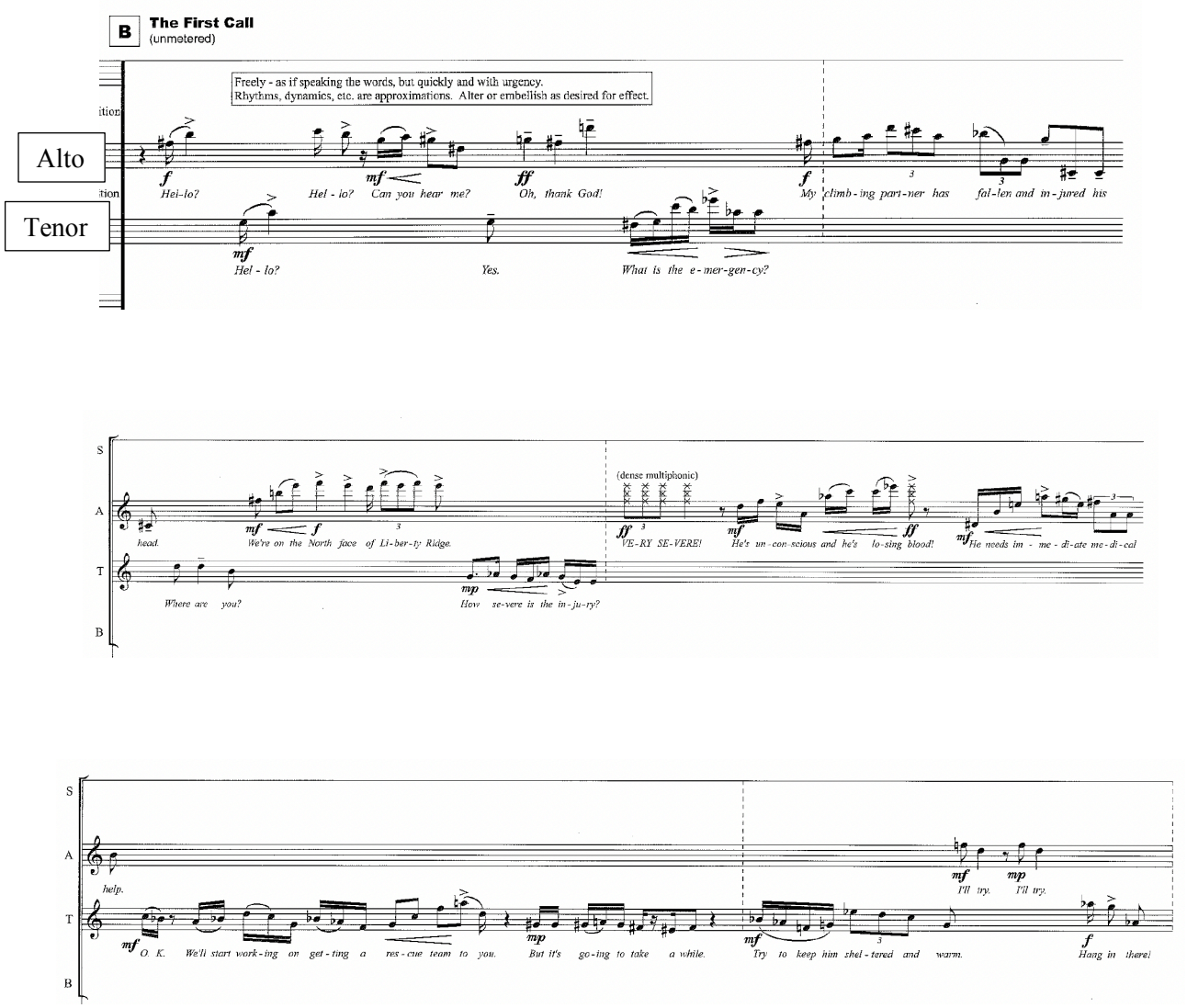
Lias uses three recitative-like sections of the piece to represent phone calls between Richards and emergency personnel. Each one is marked "unmetered," and the first one includes instructions for the players that state: "Freely – as if speaking the words, but quickly and with urgency. Rhythms, dynamics, etc. are approximations. Alter or embellish as desired for effect."[58] In his interview with the author, Lias provided some interesting perspective on the creation of these portions of the work:

> As I was researching it, in all of the accounts of the story, they talk about they had periodic cell phone calls scheduled so that they wouldn't run out of cell phone battery. So the calls were part of the story to begin with. And how would I work those into the piece? How would I represent them? And I decided maybe I can just be really literal and do it like a phone call. And my first attempt at it, the saxophone parts had just noteheads and words. And my instructions to the players were, "You know how to speak the English language. Read the words, and then play these note heads with whatever emphasis and articulation and rhythm you would use in that situation to speak those." Nothing against the players, but I came to the stark realization, that saxophone players, even the very best ones in the world, are not actors. Even with that direction and with the words there, I was still getting da, da, da, da, da, da, da. They were just playing equal note values at equal dynamics. And I found it so wildly off from what an actor would do if they were saying those lines that I made the compromise of putting rhythms and articulations and dynamics in, when what I really wanted was the player to semi-improvise the line using the notes that I had provided, but using their own expression and articulation. And I think that's still my hypothetical ideal of how that would work. But like I said, you can't expect saxophonists to be actors, and what we really need is a good actor to say the line. So what

[58] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

you see in the score, the version that you've worked with, is, I think it went through three incarnations before I finally gave in and put all the articulation and phrasing and dynamics in there. I'm like, "All right, let me show you how to do this line." So that's how those came about.[59]

The first phone call is below in Figure 8.1.[60]



[59] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

[60] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

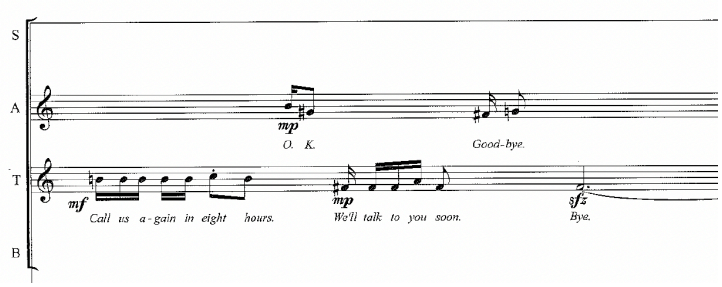


Figure 8.1 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 20

The second phone call, lasting from mm. 100-104, is shorter, and generally calmer. Seen below in Figure 8.2, this phone call contains the instruction "Somewhat less urgent, but not slow."[61]

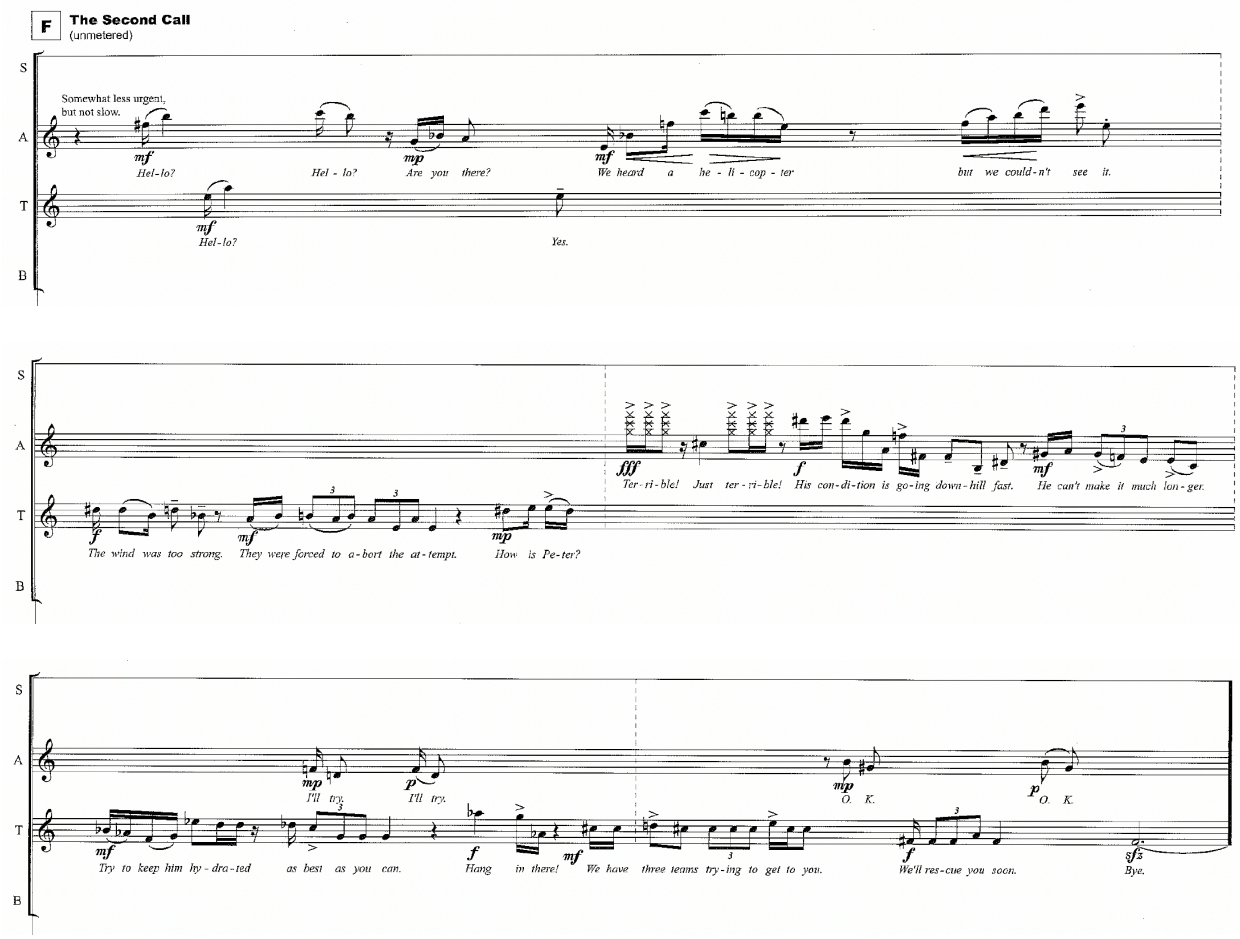
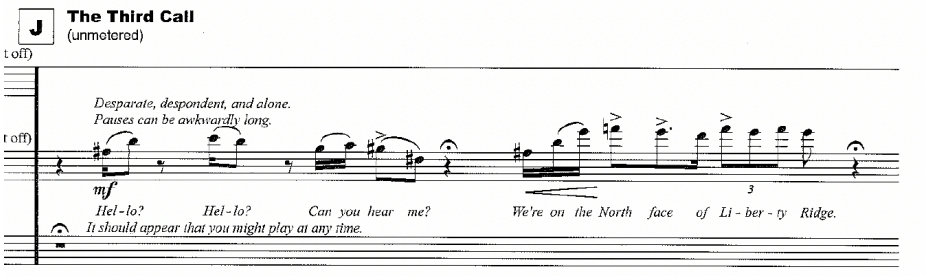


Figure 8.2 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 100

[61] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

The final phone call of the piece is one of the most emotionally powerful and haunting moments in the work. In this call, the tenor saxophone player representing the emergency personnel is instructed that "It should appear that you might play at any time." However, they never do. As seen in Figure 8.3, the alto saxophone instructions say "Desperate, despondent, alone. Pauses can be awkwardly long."[62] In this moment, the listener is made to feel the utter desperation and isolation of Richards, however this moment never happened in real life. Lias elaborates:

> But early on in terms of the trajectory of the piece, I needed a way of crystallizing the utter feeling of helplessness and aloneness that Scott was feeling. And having gotten the idea of these musical representations of phone calls between him and the search and rescue, the idea of him trying to make a phone call and getting no answer, having set that up. In music, we often do a one, two, three relationship where the one and the two are the ones that set up the three. And that's what I really wanted to do with this, is set up the precedent that there's someone talking to someone else over these phone calls, and then have the third one get no answer. And it felt like the perfect metaphor for how desperate they were for rescue and how alone and helpless they felt. And so there was nothing in real life that was like that particularly, but I felt like as an artifice for what we're trying to portray here, it works really well and it gave a desperation to the piece about two-thirds of the way through that I felt was just right.[63]



[62] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

[63] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

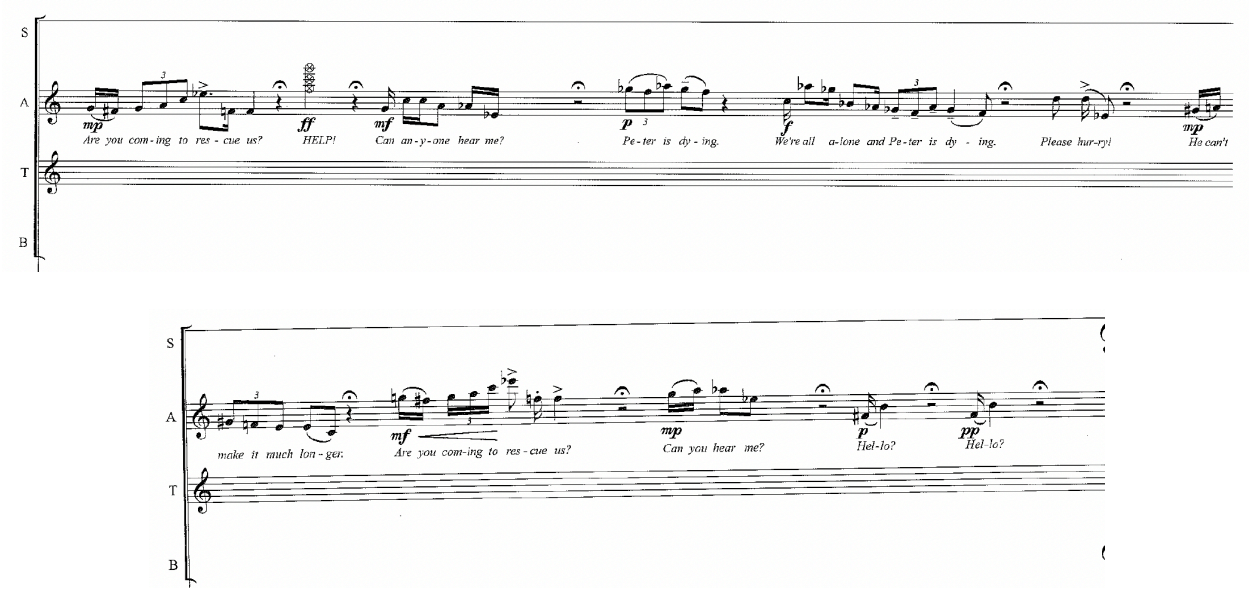


Figure 8.3 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 170

Nights on the Mountain – Chorale

Three chorale episodes in the marimba represent the three nights Richards and Cooley spent on the mountain. Alto and soprano saxophone glissandi (modified by electronic delay and reverb effects) and ethereal cymbal sounds accompany the developing marimba chorale to create an atmosphere of desolation and loneliness. While the listener might be tempted to focus on the haunting whine of the saxophones, the crucial feature to pay attention to is the chorale. In his interview, Lias spoke about these sections of the piece:

> Scott talked about the nights alone on the mountain just trying to survive the cold wind, and you'll hear in the interviews that I asked him what he was thinking about and things. And so the idea of having wind blowing and having these echo-y, mournful sort of howling sounds that the saxophones are doing, kind of crying over top of something that sounded vaguely like a hymn was the basic idea. Three layers of unrelated sounds, actually four, if you count the pedal tone that I've kind of got going on.[64]

[64] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

In the first appearance of this material at m. 51, the listener is presented with only a single melody in the marimba, and haunting interjections by the soprano saxophone. See Figure 9.1 below.[65]

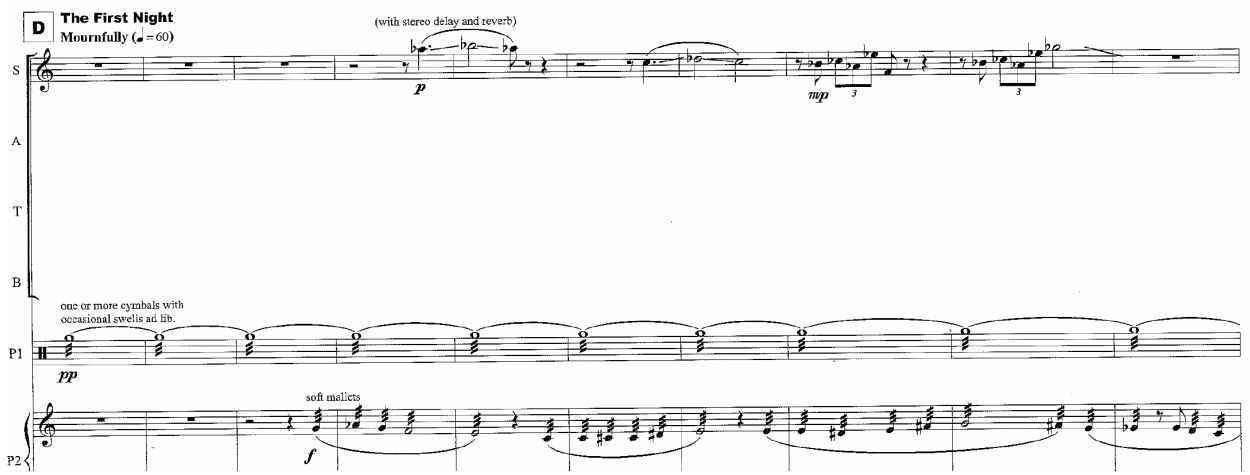


Figure 9.1 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 51

The second time this material appears, there are two significant changes. As the second night on the mountain begins, the first thing that becomes apparent is that the chorale melody from the first night is now expanded into four voices. The second is that the alto saxophone joins the mournful cries of the soprano, adding to the texture of haunting echoes accompanying the chorale. See below in Figure 9.2.[66]

[65] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

[66] Ibid.

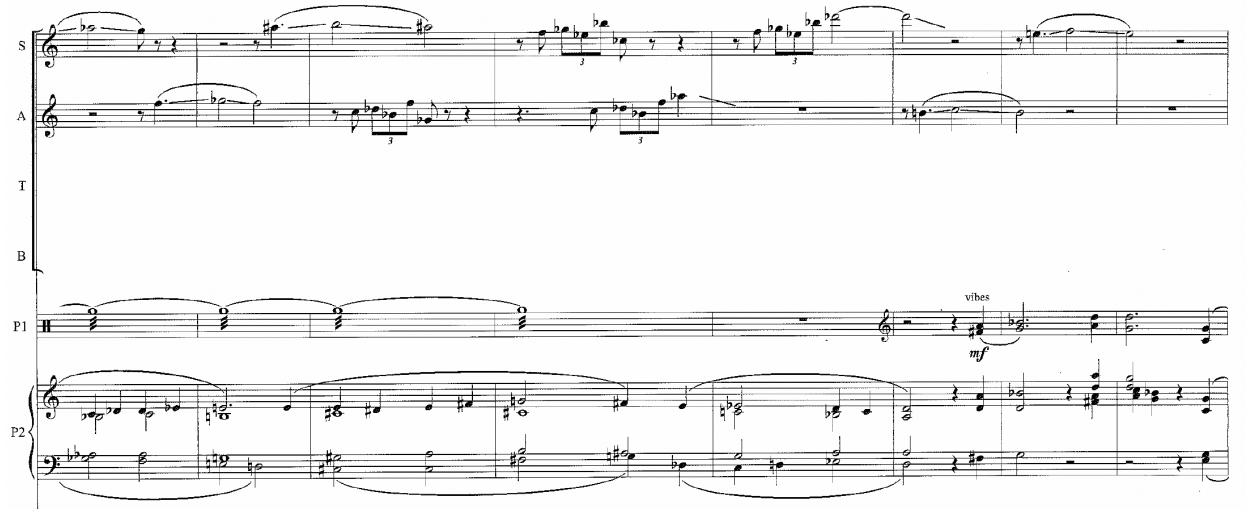


Figure 9.2 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 159

The representation of the third night in the piece is not labeled as such in the score. Instead, the next time this chorale reappears is at m. 228 in the section titled, "Grief at Thumb Rock."[67] After the restatement of the accident motive from the beginning of the piece, the chorale from the second night re-emerges. It builds, and the soprano saxophone lets out an anguished cry as the saxophone quartet joins in a final powerful statement of the chorale. In this climactic moment of the work, the chorale (which has been slowly developing over the course of the piece) culminates in this impassioned outpouring of grief as seen in Figures 9.3 and 9.4.[68]

[67] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

[68] Ibid.

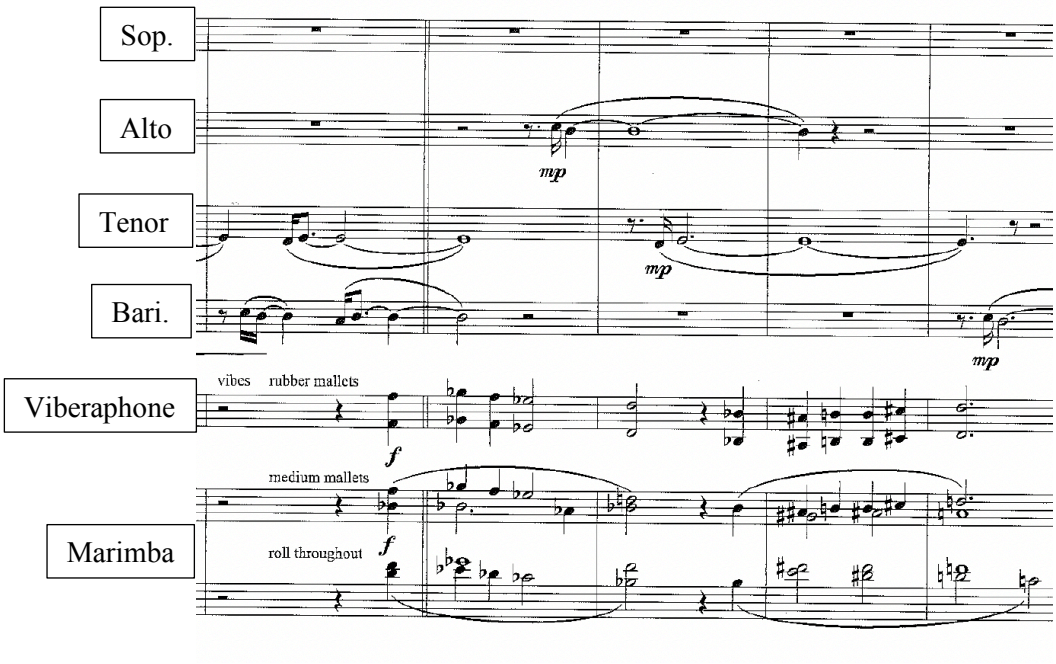


Figure 9.3 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 227

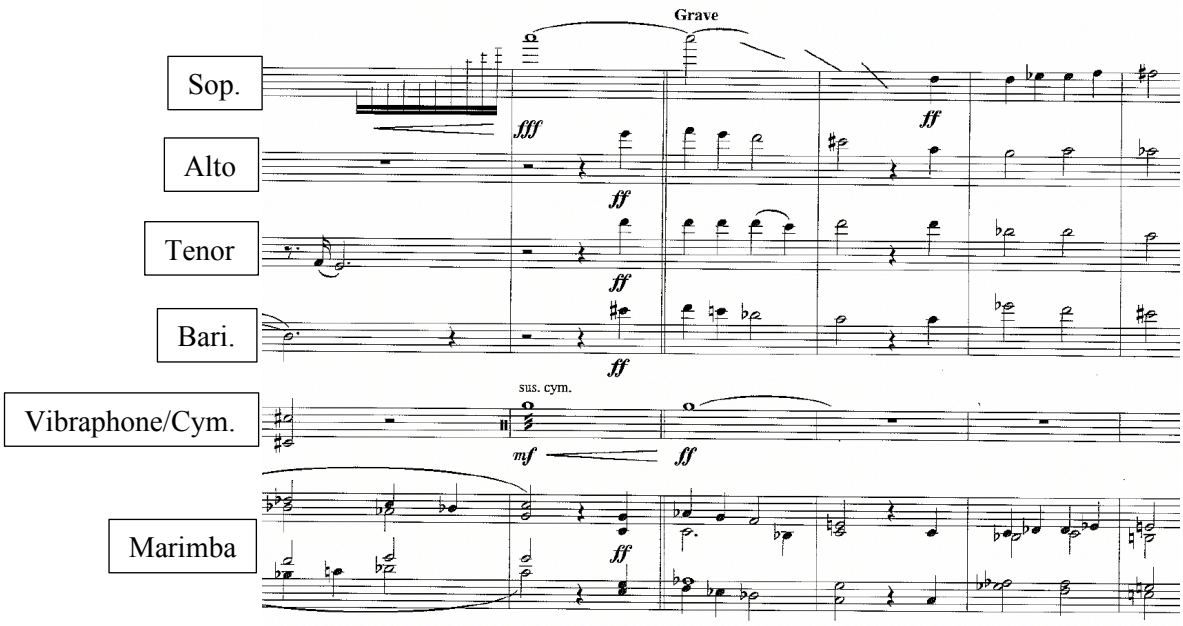


Figure 9.4 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 234

Climbing Teams

Three sections of the piece represent the two climbing teams that worked to reach Richards and Cooley on the mountain. The teams are initially depicted by the two keyboard

percussion motives displayed earlier in Figures 2.1 and 2.2. Eventually, the saxophone quartet joins in. See below in Figure 10.1.[69]

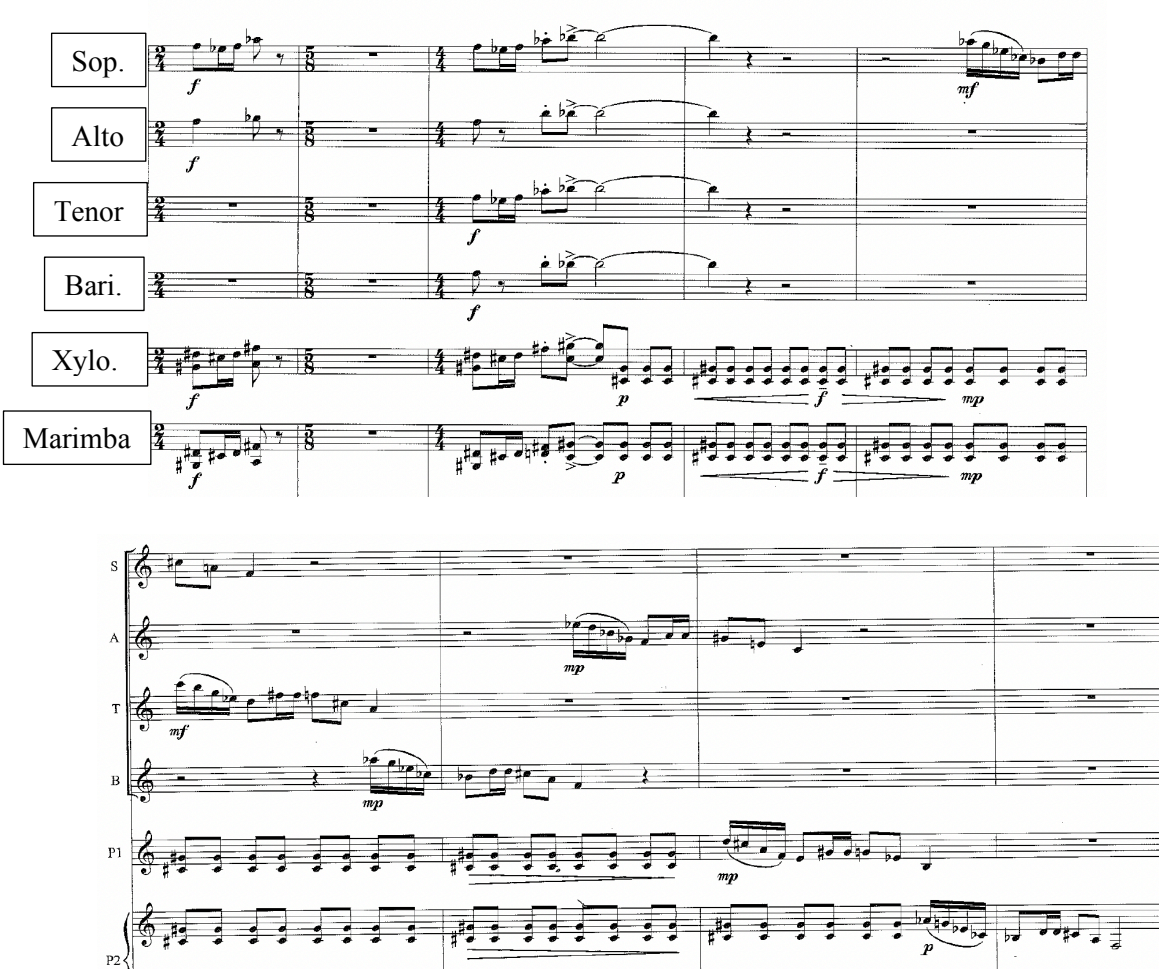


Figure 10.1 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 41

The constantly shifting time signatures in these sections represent the uneven terrain the teams were forced to navigate, and some percussionists are instructed to play in a "barbaric ad lib" to represent boulders crashing down the sides of the mountain.[70] When this material returns

[69] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

[70] Stephen Lias, interview by author, Evanston, Illinois, May 13, 2023, appendix A.

for a second time at m. 108, it is initially similar to its first iteration, but a new third motive is added. It is displayed below in Figure 10.2.[71]

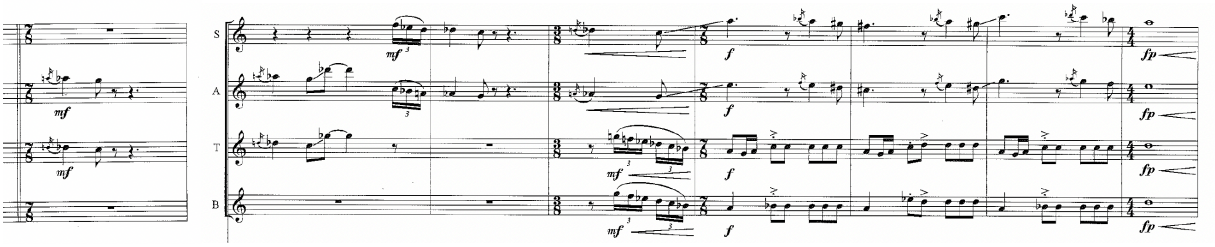


Figure 10.2 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 117

In the third appearance of the climbing teams at m. 172, it is neither the keyboard percussion nor the saxophone quartet which play first. Instead, as seen below in Figure 10.3, a percussion introduction builds up to a statement of the third motive in the saxophones.[72] True to the real life events, the final appearance of the climbing teams coincides with the final appearance of the helicopter teams.

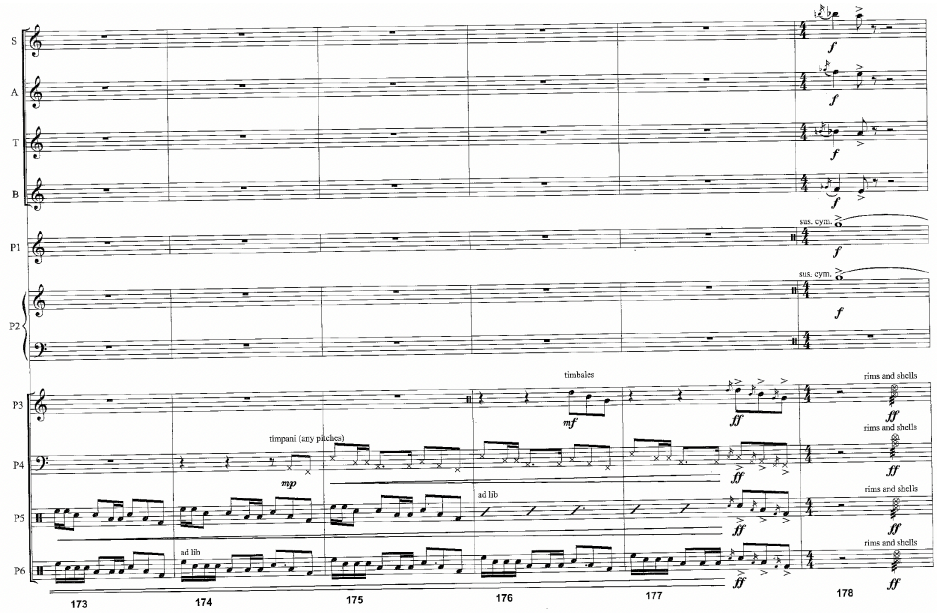


Figure 10.3 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 173

[71] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

[72] Ibid.

Helicopter Teams

The final thematic element to discuss is the most straightforward programmatic representation in the piece, that of the helicopter teams. The helicopters are represented by relentlessly driving sixteenth notes, in both the percussion and saxophones. In the first iteration, shown below in Figure 11.1, the helicopter theme is slowly replaced by wind sounds as the weather forces the helicopter to turn back.[73]

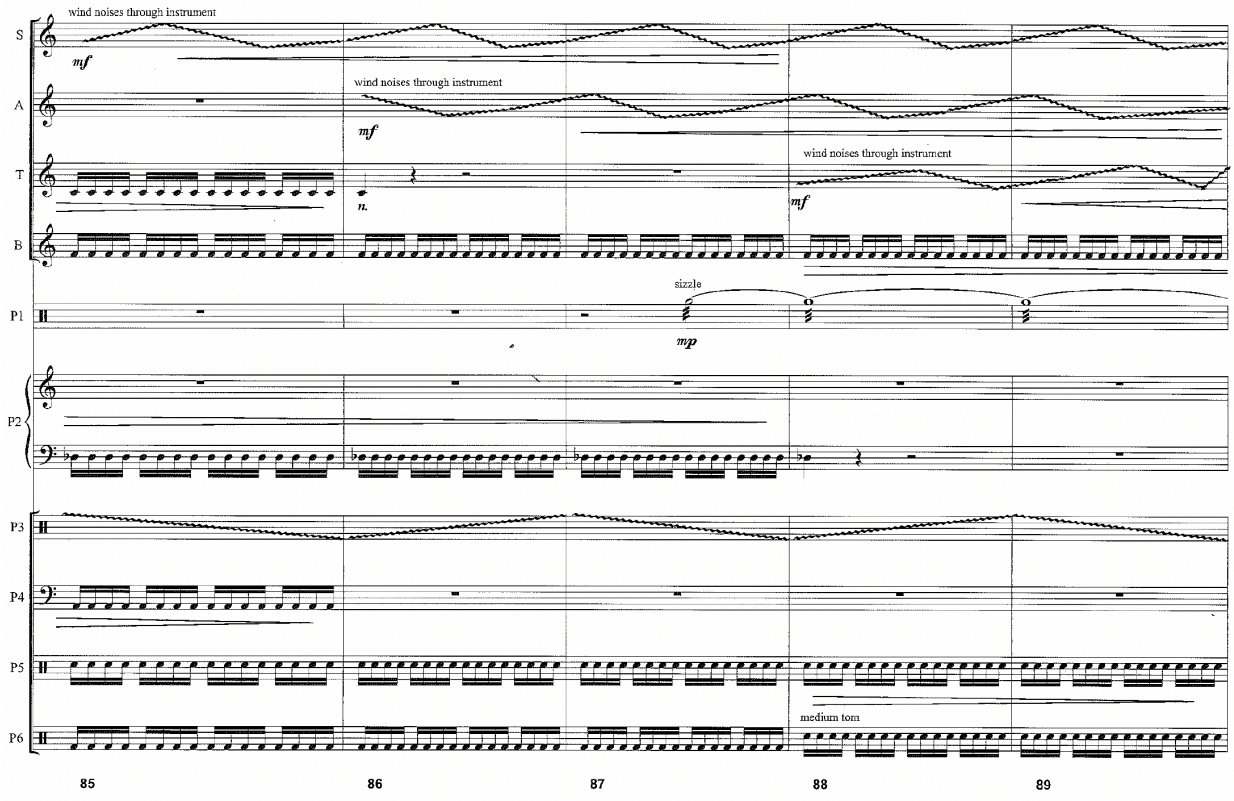


Figure 11.1 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 85

The second helicopter attempt is thwarted in much the same way as the first, but in another reflection of the true-to-life events, they are able to drop supplies to the stranded

[73] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

climbers. The landing of these supplies is represented by sporadic interjections from the soprano and alto saxophones as well as percussion. See Figure 11.2 below.[74]

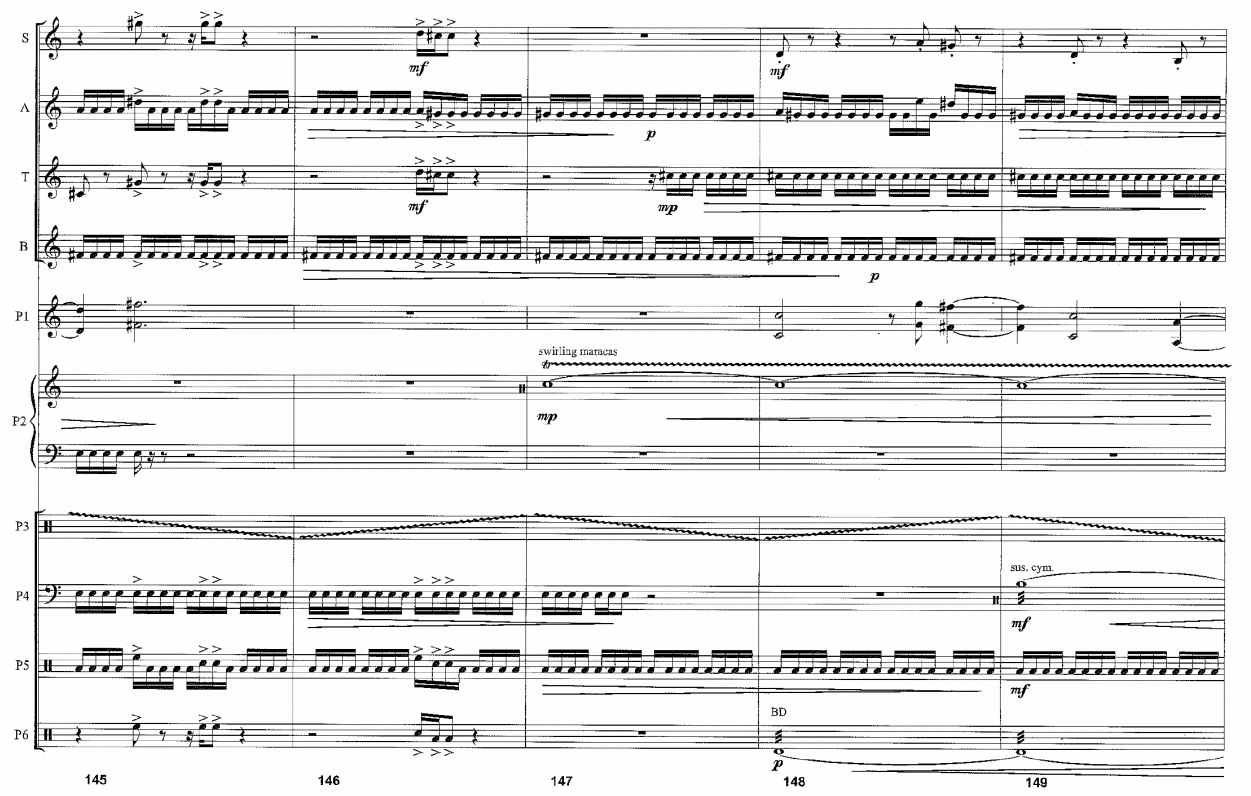


Figure 11.2 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 145

The helicopter teams are successful on their third attempt to lift Peter from the ridge. This is represented musically by overlapping upward sixteenth note runs in the saxophone quartet as shown in Figure 11.3.[75]

[74] Stephen Lias, *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* (Malvern PA: Alias Press and Theodore Presser Company, 2011).

[75] Ibid.

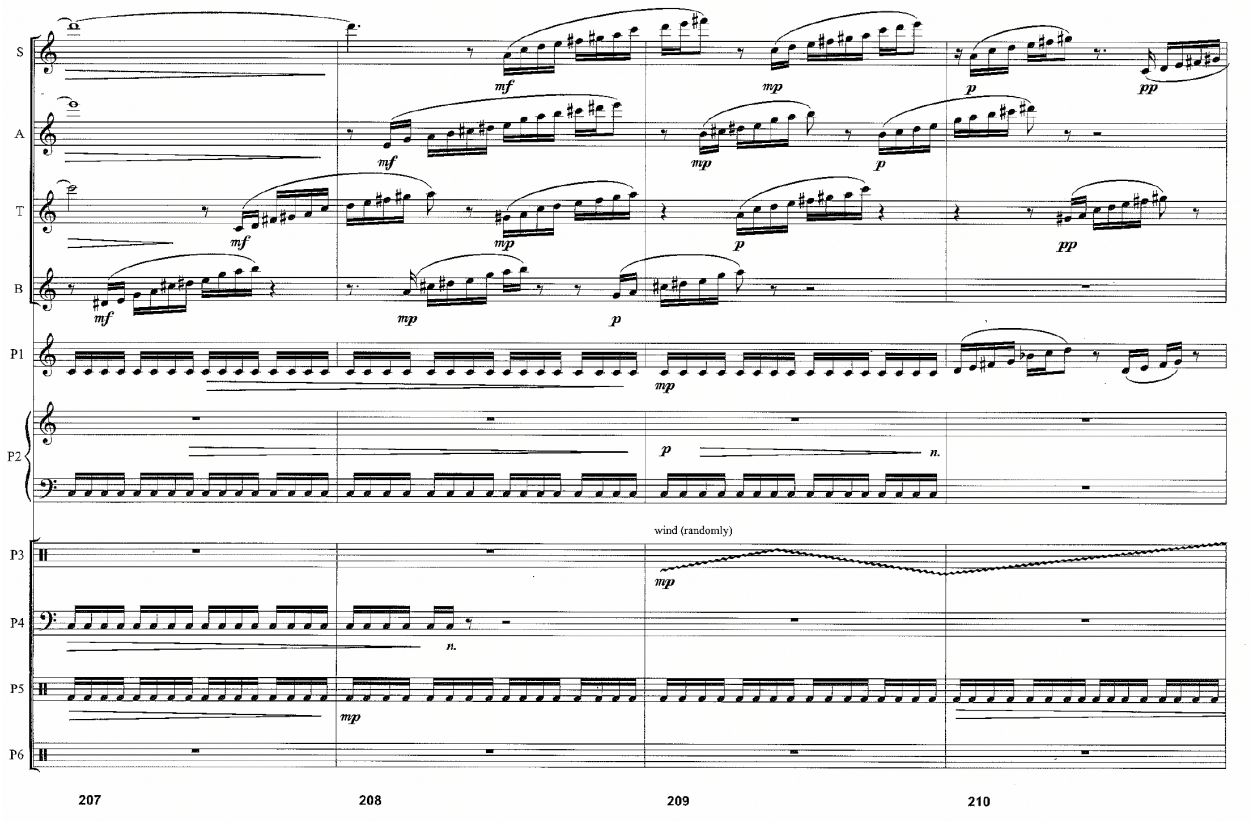


Figure 11.3 - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue m. 207

Conclusion

For all of the reasons outlined in this document, the author is convinced that Stephen Lias is a compelling artist who is consistently creating unique and noteworthy music. He is a delightful and interesting figure in contemporary music, and his approach to his art is varied and meaningful. From a researcher's perspective, he is also incredibly personable, responsive and open to inquiries about his life and work, and eager to make artistic connections. *Mount Rainier Search and Rescue* is only one example of the impactful work Lias has already produced, and he continues to write new music on a regular basis. At the time of this document's completion, Lias is also entering a phase of increased writing for wind ensemble, the results of which should be fertile ground for future research and interaction with the composer. The author encourages all

readers of this document to further engage with Stephen Lias and his music. The experience will surely be worth their time and energy.

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Appendix A
Stephen Lias – Interview with Author

David Roush: Great. So tell me a little bit about yourself and anything you'd like to share right off the bat.

Stephen Lias: Boy, that's probably the hardest question you'll ask. I mean, most of what you would want to know about me as a composer is probably summarized in the bio that's on my website, so I don't know that I have a ton to add to that.

I mean, this piece falls sort of within the sweep of my national park inspired pieces, which started about a dozen years ago. So that's sort of a subset of the creative output that I normally write.

Of course, I write regular chamber and concert music too, but within that, the last dozen years or so have seen a whole lot of pieces that were focused on national parks. And this was definitely one of that stream of pieces.

David Roush: Could you speak a bit to how you got started in music and how you got started in composition specifically?

Stephen Lias: Oh, okay. Well, starting in music back in high school is when I...I mean, I was in a music program in high school, and I was not good at anything else. And so that tends to help define what you're going to do with your life.

I wasn't athletically inclined, I'm a small guy, but I was good at music, I had a great ear. I could play the piano, I could sing. I kind of did the high school actor, conductor, performer, musician, kind of everything. And that was sort of what I... I decided that that would be my focus for my music degree.

So I got an undergraduate degree in music education actually with an emphasis in voice, and did some student teaching and things, and then decided that teaching in public school wasn't going to be my thing.

But I was composing music right from the start. And then it was in my master's degree that I really started feeling like I was not just a musician who composed, but maybe I was a composer, and that was my main thing.

And I had, just as an interesting tangent, I was walking sort of in this weird set of footsteps of Samuel Barber, oddly. I was going to the high school that Samuel Barber had gone to, and I was going to the church that Samuel Barber had been kicked out of for not holding a fermata properly.

And I then subsequently became friends with Samuel Barber's nephew through a completely other set of weird coincidences. And after I got my bachelor's degree and decided I didn't want to teach public school, I actually moved to Texas, where I now live, to work for Samuel Barber's nephew.

And so [it was] an odd set of coincidences... And I've often wondered, I don't know...when I was in high school, that didn't play any present role in my thinking about being a composer, but it may have had a subliminal effect on the idea that, like, "Hey, somebody who went to my high school became a famous composer," that was in my head. Maybe that was something that started a thread that I've been following, I don't know for sure. But it's an interesting side note.

David Roush: It is.

Stephen Lias: Did that cover that whole question? What was the other part of that question? How did I get into music, and then...?

David Roush: Yeah. You covered it, I think. So then where did your formal music training come from? And who were some of your primary teachers throughout?

Stephen Lias: Sure. Well, after I had lived in Texas for a while, I needed to get a master's degree. The work that I was doing for Samuel Barber's nephew sort of evaporated out from under me and so I decided...I was playing gigs and doing studio work and stuff, and wanted to get a master's degree.

And the only place I could commute to without moving was the university where I teach now, Stephen F. Austin State University. So I got my master's at SFA back in the early '90s, and I was studying with two terrific teachers who were here at the time.

One was Darrell Holt, who was a great composer, but also a really, really exceptional jazz musician. And so I studied both jazz and composing from him. And then another one of my teachers was Dan Beaty, who's kind of a Charles Ives scholar and a more esoteric composer.

And then I took a couple years off and taught at community college. And then went to Louisiana State University and studied there with Dinos Constantinides and Stephen David Beck. Dinos has since passed away, Steve Beck now runs their program at LSU.

And those people were wildly different from one another, all four of them, and so I got a really good grounding in lots of different approaches to composition.

And then after I finished my doctorate, I was teaching at the community colleges back in east Texas again, when Dan Beaty, one of my former teachers, retired. And Darrell Holt, one of my other former teachers, nudged me and said, "Hey, we've got a good job opening you might be good for," and so I ended up getting the job that Dan Beaty had here at my own alma mater for my master's degree.

And it's been a great fit for me ever since. It's a big, good, thriving school of music with lots of talented people. So that's where I've been ever since.

But those were my principal teachers of composition. My principal influences... You always have to bear in mind that I am in my mid-50s, which means that I was 12 years old when Star Wars came out. So that's not a trivial matter. The first

orchestral music that entered my consciousness was John Williams. And so that's a legacy that I've sort of had my whole life, that I was very influenced by the music of my youth.

And then also in my college years, I think I was most influenced by Leonard Bernstein. I ended up writing my doctoral dissertation on Leonard Bernstein. And I worked for over 10 years at the Texas Shakespeare Festival, both as their composer and their music director. And so I've got a long history in musical theater as well as traditional chamber and concert music, and Leonard Bernstein was a big part of that.

So I've got sort of equal parts John Williams and Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, and then a whole panoply of chamber and concert music composers from the last 30 years who have influenced my music. So that's sort of the landscape of sounds that are going on in my head.

David Roush: Great. Yeah, that covers a few of my questions, so that's awesome. So how, if you had to, would you generally describe your compositional style?

Stephen Lias: No composer is good at answering that question, for one really important reason...and I will answer your question, but the disclaimer has to come first.

Every composer fancies themself a very multifaceted creator. And when I think about my output, I think of them (the spectrum of pieces I've written) as wildly diverse.

Maybe other people don't think of them that way, and that's fine. But as the artist, I think all of us as artists like to think that we're not just recycling our stuff and writing in one channel. That each new piece, we're exploring a new channel or a new direction, or we're stretching ourselves in a new direction.

And so when you ask an artist, "How do you pigeonhole yourself?" That's a question that every artist resists. We're like, "No, I don't want to pigeonhole myself!"

And so I think I'm one of those people that likes to approach each piece as a new challenge, and likes to use different harmonic vocabularies in each piece.

Certainly, I would say that in the cast of characters who we think of as the current contemporary classical music, I fall on the accessible side. Certainly, I'm very interested in my music communicating to an audience, which is a central facet of how you frame your work.

There are great, great composers who I admire, who were writing music as a form of personal self-expression, not as a form of communication with an audience. They wrote great music that does communicate with audiences, but to them, they were writing something that they needed to get on paper rather than writing something that they needed to say to an audience.

I'm always thinking about the person in the dark, in the red velvet chair. I'm always thinking about what experience they will have, what they will take away from the piece. It's okay with me if many different people have many different experiences with my piece, but I do feel like I'm communicating. That's my goal, is to communicate something to an audience member.

And because of that, I think I lean toward music that can be understood. So I have some pieces that are fairly esoteric, and actually Mount Rainier Search and Rescue has some sections that require a great deal of the audience, that require a certain amount of involvement.

But in terms of my compositional language, if I had to use broad terms to pigeonhole myself, I would say I'm generally accessible in the music that I write. Usually, in a piece of my music, you can sense where a tonal center is, but I have no allegiance to that tonal center.

That's pretty common these days, I think that would be true of John Adams and Michael Torke and the whole range of contemporary composers from young to old. We're well past the time when everything was crunchy and avoided tonal centers, we're decades and decades past that generally.

But we're also...I don't know of any composers who are working now who feel like the audience cares whether 30 bars from now you're still going to be on the same key or not. And so I think that's certainly true of my music too.

That's probably as close as I can come to characterizing my music. You may do a better job, you have the objectivity of not having to live inside my head every day.

David Roush: Sure! So along those lines, can you describe your compositional process? When you take on a new piece, what does that look like for you?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. This is another one...I know a lot of composers who are good at answering this question, and my answer is that each piece dictates a new process for me. I do not always start in a certain way or progress in a certain way.

I can tell you the range of them, though. Some pieces start as pure music, some pieces start as a programmatic idea, like Mount Rainier Search and Rescue did. So my music is not always about something, but it often is.

Then sometimes it starts with pencil and paper, sometimes it starts in notation software. Sometimes it starts in a DAW, like in Logic or something, which alleviates me the necessity of having to think about, "What meter am I in?" Or, "What note value is this?"

Then if I'm working in a DAW, then I'm just playing with sound. And once I like the sound, then I can figure out how I might notate it. And so there are other pieces where I start out with the notation and work from there.

So it varies quite widely. Sometimes with a large ensemble piece, I'm working with a short score and then move to a large score, sometimes I write large score from the beginning.

With a piece that's programmatic, like this one is, I can specific... I guess, let me ask, would you like me to describe specifically what my process was for Mount Rainier? Or do you want to wait and get to Mount Rainier after you've gotten through other questions?

David Roush: I think we'll get to that more specifically a little bit later.

Stephen Lias: Okay.

Then my general answer is, yeah, I tend to...If it's programmatic, I tend to do a bunch of research first. And then I tend to ask myself, "What would be a good way of starting this piece?" I don't just go to whatever I did last time.

I say, "Maybe this will be a piece where I start at the piano. Maybe this will be a piece where I start with a sketch pad and draw shapes and lines and rhythms on the sketchpad. Maybe I'll go to a DAW, maybe I'll..." And I just let the creative process unfold at its own pace in whatever way it wants to.

David Roush: Yeah, that's great, thank you. So do you have any specific ways that you think about... I guess you kind of answered this in your previous answer, but if you think specifically about rhythm, harmony, melody, do you have specific ways that you think about or approach each of those?

Stephen Lias: Melody, yes. And, I mean... I'm thinking how to frame the answer.

So again, speaking on behalf of all composers everywhere, I mean, I'm on a journey. And every day of my life, I'm learning how to do melody better and rhythm better and harmony better. And so in each piece there are things that I've done for years and things that I'm doing for the first time, and I'm mixing them up and trying things I heard in another piece by Jennifer Higdon, and... It's always a bit of finger painting.

I have some techniques that I've found will often get me out of a rut. And with regards to phrasing and melody and rhythm and melody, the interrelationship between those factors and language, spoken language, has become really, really fascinating to me. And I have a lot of pieces where that rears its head in some way or another.

And in Mount Rainier, it reared its head in a very obvious way with the phone calls, which we'll talk about in a minute. But I have other pieces where I'll be writing a purely instrumental piece, and I'll feel like I'm falling into the trap of writing regular four bar phrases, which sound really dull and hackneyed to me. And I'll say, "What could I do to get myself out of that?" Or, "What could I do to create more nuance in the rhythms that I'm writing?" And I'll language it.

I'll say, "What would this be if I were saying sentences?" Or, "Let me pull a random book off the shelf and see how sentences are formed." And sentences...everyone's brain is hardwired to understand language, and so we understand phrases, and we understand the rhythm of language even when specific words aren't being used.

And so I'll often structure a melodic line based on some secret sentence that I've created that nobody else knows is there, but I know it's there. And that's what's helping me make a more nuanced, asymmetrical phrase, or make the rhythm a little less predictable or hackneyed. So I do a lot of that. And not in every piece, but in many pieces. So that's one of my tricks.

I should say, I generally think of myself as a harmony guy. I don't know, I mean, harmony is one of my superpowers. If I listen to a piece of music, I can usually sit down at the piano and play it afterwards. I mean in terms of pop music, as a party trick. Hearing chord progressions in real time is very, very easy for me. And when I write a piece of music, I feel like the manipulation of harmony over time is one of the things that I enjoy the most, so.

David Roush: Great, thank you for that. So now I'd like to move to your attachment to the outdoors. A great many of your pieces are inspired by nature and specifically the national parks. How did your attachment to the outdoors evolve?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. It's an interesting trajectory. I was not particularly outdoorsy in my youth, it was in my 30s that I started doing things like kayaking and skiing. Because as I said earlier, I wasn't very athletic in high school, and so I thought of myself as being sort of inept in that respect.

And then it was in college that I discovered skiing, which was not a team sport and was not competitive. And I was great at it. And I was like, "Oh my goodness, I might enjoy outdoor activities as long as I don't have a coach yelling at me." And so that sort of started me down a different way of thinking.

So I started doing things like hiking and backpacking and camping and skiing and kayaking more and more in my 30s, but didn't connect that up to musical activities at all until around 2009. And I was applying for a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, and the application required that you submit a project proposal.

And so I sort of was casting about for what would a project be that I could do that would be maybe worthy of a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. And that was literally the moment that I got the idea of combining the two interests. And I thought, "I know, I'll be the composer-in-residence for the National Park Service, and I'll write big pieces about national parks."

And so I wrote this quite deeply detailed project proposal. I had a couple symphony conductors and a National Park Service Ranger on my advisory panel that helped me write the proposal. Anyway, but I didn't get it, I didn't get the Guggenheim. But then I had made up the idea, and once I had the idea, it became

evident that I didn't really need a Guggenheim Fellowship to do this, because who's going to stop me from writing music about a national park?

So I just started writing pieces based on the opportunities that presented themselves. The first ones that I wrote were Timberline Sonata, which was a trumpet sonata. Well, no, I guess that River Runner was a trombone sonata about kayaking through Santa Elena Canyon at Big Bend. That was the first one. And then I wrote a trumpet piece called Kings Canyon and a trombone piece called Sequoia. So I started all this trombone and trumpet stuff.

And then right after I had gotten that idea and started doing it, I started applying to artist in residence programs at national parks. And so in 2010 I got to be the artist in residence at Rocky Mountain National Park, that led to a trumpet sonata called Timberline Sonata. 2011, I was the artist-in-residence at Denali National Park that led to a string orchestra piece for the Russian String Orchestra.

And so one thing led to another. I got some grants, I started doing more residencies at Gates of the Arctic and at Glacier. And so over the last dozen years now, that whole trajectory has really gained a lot of momentum.

It had the most momentum in 2016, which was the centennial of the National Park Service. And so in that year, I had just dozens and dozens of performances and commissions from large orchestras and things like that. And then things fell off after the centennial. And then of course, the pandemic had its own effect.

But I'm happy to say that it's now sort of been revived. And, as you know, I just got back from Great Sand Dunes National Park, which is going to result in a orchestral piece for the Boulder Philharmonic next year. After I get back from Ireland, my next trip is to lead a composing in the wilderness workshop in Lake Clark, which is a bush plane flight and then a float plane flight into the far remote wilderness of Alaska.

And while I wasn't planning on writing a piece about that, I've subsequently gotten a band commission from Washington and Lee University. So I'll be writing a grade four band piece about Lake Clark National Park for them.

So I'm still in the business of writing National Park pieces, and I'll continue to enjoy doing that as long as the opportunities continue to present themselves.

But I also am writing lots of other music. I've got a commission right now. I just finished a horn and piano piece. I've got a commission for a piece based on the literature of James Fenimore Cooper. So it's not like I limit myself only to national park related pieces, but it's become a sort of identity for me. There aren't a lot of composers who have sort of filled that niche, and I've got so many works for national parks now that it's a nice sort of subset of my output.

David Roush: Yeah. A couple of follow up questions: You mentioned a lot of writing for brass, and we didn't talk about this, are you a brass player originally?

Stephen Lias: No, no. This results in having healthy relationships with your colleagues. I have just fantastic performer colleagues.

SFA is a large school of music. We've got 450 music majors and 60 music faculty members, many of whom are world-class players. So, many of the works, not all of them, but many of the works that I've done for chamber music have been because my colleagues have asked for a work.

The River Runner, the Trombone Sonata, which is now out on two different CDs, that was written for Deb Scott, who's my good friend, and had taught in the office next door to me for many years, fantastic trombone player. The Trumpet Sonata was written for Gary Works, another colleague of mine. Mount Rainier Search and Rescue happened because Nathan Nabb, fabulous saxophone player, had just recently joined our faculty back in 2011, and invited me to write a piece for his professional group. So, many of these pieces are just because of the colleagues that I work with. I don't play brass, at all. I'm not a wind player. Other than being a mediocre singer, I'm also a mediocre jazz pianist. My only performing that I've done in the last 20 years really is schmoozy piano while people eat.

Yeah. I've gotten good at writing for certain instruments, because I've done a lot of pieces for them. I'm pretty good at writing for saxophone. I'm pretty good at writing for flute. Those happen to be where a lot of commissions have come. But I'm not a wind player myself, at all.

David Roush: Sure. Speaking of your SFA colleagues, next time you get a chance, tell Chris Kaatz hello, for me.

Stephen Lias: Chris is getting married, today!

David Roush: Yes! That's awesome.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. I have a Zoom meeting in another two hours with one of the Composing in the Wilderness groups. And I invited one of our other band directors who's going to be associated with that to attend, and she said, "I can't. I'm going to Chris Kaatz's wedding."

Yeah. I'll tell Chris. I don't know when I'll see him, because he's going to get married today and then go on a honeymoon, and I'll be in Ireland. But whenever I see him next I'll tell him you said, hello.

David Roush: Yeah, appreciate that.

We've talked a little bit about Composing in the Wilderness now.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

David Roush: Let's talk a little bit more about that. How did it start, how has it evolved over the years, that sort of thing?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Let me grab another drink, here.

David Roush: Sure.

Stephen Lias: When I was the artist in residence at Denali, I met some people who got all excited.

They just got excited about the opportunities that might present themselves. Well, let me back up and say, here's how it actually happened. The Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival, Fairbanks is two hours from Denali National Park, but they're all in the interior of Alaska. Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival has this long history of being this sprawling wonderful arts thing, where you can go to play oboe in the orchestra or take classes in mime, or Indonesian cooking, or photography, or folk guitar, or whatever, Irish dancing. It's a big, big organization, but they had nothing for composers.

Then, Alaska Geographic is a partner organization to the Alaska National Parks. They have been running educational wilderness programs where they take people, students, teachers, into the wilderness for four or five days at a time, with scientists and naturalists and guides. But they had nothing related to musicians.

So, those two things were going on, and then I came into the scene in 2011, and a couple of people that were connected in the area, started going, "Hmm." They came to me, literally, and said, "We're thinking that maybe the Summer Arts Festival and Alaska Geographic could team up to do something for composers. What would that look like?" They put it in my plate and said, "If we did that, do you have any ideas of what that would look like?"

I immediately said, "I know exactly what that should look like." I said, "There are tons and tons of summer programs for composers, where they go various places, and work with various famous people, and workshop pieces, and maybe get them rehearsed or performed. There are loads of those, probably more than we need. Then there are also tons and tons of high-end wilderness experience trips, where you can pay to take a guided wilderness experience trip. But if they have nothing to do with the arts, they're just people paying money to go on a trip. There is nothing that brings those two worlds together. There's nowhere in the world. Nowhere in the arts is there a, be inspired by wilderness and make art about it program, especially in composition." So, I was the right guy at the right time to help them frame this thing.

And we made a deal, that they weren't sure it would fly or they would be able to fill it. And I said, "Look, I am well-connected with the international composition community. I'm sure I can fill it. But let's do it as a test run." It was 2012. I said, "Let's do it as a test run. And if I can fill it, then we'll know it works. And if I can't fill it, then we won't do it again." I knew I wanted it to not be a teacher and student thing. There's no hierarchy. I wanted it to be composers having an adventure together, and then writing music about it. The first year, it took us about three months to fill it.

We are limited to nine composers, because of back country rules in Denali National Park. It took us three months to fill it the first year. Second year, it took us one month to fill it. The third year, it took us one week to fill it. The next year, it took less than 48 hours, and it was full. Up until then, it had been first come, first serve. Then, we realized, "Okay. Now, we're so popular that we need to have a real application process." So, for the last six years or so, there's been a fairly rigorous competitive application process.

And over the first five years, we continued to refine how we did it, how many days they got to compose, what the instrumentation was, what musicians we hired, and we really upped our game. For the last six years or so, we've really, especially with our "classic trip," we call it, into Denali National Park, that trip has the special sauce. We know exactly how to do it, and make it be very life-changing for everyone. And it's just been wildly successful. And we've had participants from all over the world, and huge applicant pools every year of really talented people. And it's so rewarding to see that happen. Our musicians are all New-York-based musicians, most of whom have ties to Alaska in one way or another. They come up, and it's just great.

Then, after it became really, really popular, we started getting a lot of needling about, "How are you going to grow this? How are you going to do something even more expansive?" So, in 2018, we took our first expansion step, where in addition to our Denali trip, which we offer every year, we offered a second trip. We jokingly called it, Composing in the Wilderness Extreme, which was more immersive.

Our regular trip, they stay at Alaska Geographic's Field Camp, which is like canvas covered little bunk cabins. And we have a yurt where we meet. And we can prepare food over propane stoves, and have pit toilets and things. It's pretty cush as far as back country living goes. But we had lots of people who wanted to do something more extreme. So, in 2018, we started a new program, where we would take a group of composers on a real honest-to-goodness wilderness trip, that involved either backpacking or kayaking or canoeing. Then, instead of having them compose their pieces in just a few days, we'd send them home and let them compose their piece over a few months. And then, because the trip was more immersive and costs more, we wanted to also raise the bar in terms of the gravitas of the performance. We gave them three months to compose their pieces, and then we premiered the pieces in New York City, which is just a better resumé value for the composers. And they get better videos, better recordings, things like that.

So, 2018, we took a group. We canoed the North Fork of the Koyokuk River in Gates of the Arctic National Park, up above the Arctic Circle, so a week-long canoeing trip. It was just amazing. 2019, we did kayaking in Prince William Sound, with whales and glaciers. Both of those trips resulted in performances in New York City.

Then, the pandemic hit and we took a few years off from the extra trip. Then, last year, in addition to our Denali trip, we took a group in Durango San Elias National Park on our first real backpacking trip. Backpacked in some of the most

stunning places I've ever seen, walked across glaciers. Those six composers had their pieces premiered just in March, again in New York City, at Federal Hall National Memorial. That's the third of those trips that we've done.

Then, to complete out the story of Composing in the Wilderness's expansion, 2023 is going to see a new set of expansions, things that are even more exciting. We're offering our regular Denali trip with the same formula we've always done, and that's continuing to be wildly successful. We got so many applicants from the University of Missouri Kansas City, that I called them up and said, "How would you feel about us just offering you guys your own trip?", which we've never done before. But it seemed like there was a critical mass, there. And what occurred to me, which we're trying, the pitch I made to them is, I said, "Look. More than half of the cost of Composing in the Wilderness is the performers, the recording crew, and the extra days we put people up in the dormitories at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in order to do the performances. I said, "You guys are UMKC. You've got performers that are as good as ours. What would you think if we offered you the entire Denali, and then subsequent three-day composing retreat. We'll offer you that exactly the same way we do our other workshops. And then, we'll send them home. And you guys can do the rehearsal/ recording/performance stuff at UMKC, with your own performers, and that will cut the cost of the trip in half.

They went for it. So, for the first time, we're going to do our regular Denali trip, and then we're also doing a UMKC specific trip. And then, in addition to that, we're doing a more extreme trip, where we're taking six composers into Lake Clark National Park, but even that's a brand new venture for us. It has felt for a couple years like it was time for us to step out of chamber music. And up until now, everybody's writing for quartets or sextets. The Lake Clark trip will be a brand new venture. We're partnering with University of Nebraska Lincoln, Grand Valley State University, and my own university, Stephen F Austin. And those three universities are going to premiere wind ensemble pieces. All six composers are going to write Grade Four or Grade Five wind ensemble pieces, and those three schools are going to present the entire program. It's a concert-length experience of all world premieres written by composers who all went on the same trip to the same remote place.

This is a really exciting new venture, that we're stepping out into large ensemble stuff, and partnering with really great performing groups around the country. And that way the composers get more than one premiere, which is really great. From a band director's point of view, we've done a highly curated selection process to make sure we're selecting composers of good credentials. And the band directors are getting brand new repertoire without any commissioning fee. It's a win-win all around. And we're...fingers crossed, knock on wood, that goes really, really well, and that can be a model that we use, going forward.

Because once again, we're saving ourselves the money of having to pay the performers to fly to Alaska, or to do a concert in New York City. If this model works really well, then there's no reason we couldn't do a future version of it, where they're writing choral pieces or orchestral pieces, and we're working with different university or professional ensembles all over the country.

That's where we are right now, in 2023. We're gearing up for our biggest summer ever of three different trips. I'm now sharing the leadership duties with Nathan Lincoln-Decusatis, who's a great composer from Fordham University in New York. And that's the long scope of the workshop.

David Roush: That's great. All that's really exciting! I'll be very interested to see what comes out of that concert experience.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

David Roush: Are there any experiences that immediately come to mind as being particularly powerful or influential from your workshops?

Stephen Lias: Well, I honestly believe that, each year, Alaska shows us something new. Part of the reason Alaska is such a perfect place to go is, it's so wild and so unpredictable, and there are new things to be discovered that we'd never imagine.

The Muldrow Glacier, which comes down off of Denali National Park, which is the highest peak in North America, the Muldrow Glacier is a surge glacier, which only surges every 50 years. And it was due to surge for the last decade, and last year it surged...not last year, two years ago. So, we had a group that was able to go hike out pretty close to the glacier, and get that experience that they know won't happen again for another two generations. Things like that are quite magical.

Last year, I don't know how much you know about wildlife, but one of the most reclusive and difficult to encounter animals is the wolverine. And I've seen two wolverines in my life, and people think, "Wow. I've lived in Alaska for 30 years, and I've never seen one." And I've seen two, so I feel lucky. Seven out of the nine people in our group saw three last year at one sighting. It turns out that we think that a bear was messing with their burrow, and so they were all being chased across the road. But last year, the bucket list thing was that they saw three different wolverines all in one sighting.

We had a very close bear encounter last year. Anytime people encounter a bear, that's a pivotal moment in their wilderness experience. We're very safe. We're always traveling with people who know what they're doing. We've got leaders and guides who have bear spray, so it's not like anyone's ever really in danger. But on our trips, those are the sorts of things that are quite remarkable.

The river trip we took up in the Arctic Circle, we got into some dangerous water. And some of our members were not quite prepared for how to handle that. We had one particular day with six or seven water rescues in the same day, where we'd finally get ourselves geared back up again, and everybody's ready to go, and then we'd have another capsize, and somebody's caught under a tree. Yeah.

There've been lots of individual experiences like that. But getting out of the comfort zone is the purpose of the trip. The basic premise of Composing in the Wilderness is that, if artists ever create art out of inspiration, then what would happen if we turned up the inspiration knob as high as it'll go. That's what these

trips are designed to do, to get people out of their comfort zone, to get them trying things they've never tried, to get them to encounter wildlife and geology.

Yeah. I could go on and on. There are lots of individual things that have happened over the years. But I think the most profound ones that I get excited about are the personal discoveries, people finding that they can expand their boundaries of what they're capable of doing. Yeah. It's a very, very rewarding program to run, let me tell you.

David Roush: Yeah.

Stephen Lias: I don't have to fake my enthusiasm for that, because it's a real hoot to get out there with people, and just see what happens.

David Roush: Yeah, that sounds really, really powerful.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

David Roush: Could you speak a little bit about how you came to composing for the wind medium? How that's come about, and evolved over the years?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. It is not by design. I think that composers generally, we take the opportunities that present themselves. By being opportunists, certain trajectories start to form naturally. I like to say, "I can be at the rudder of my ship, and that's all nice and stuff, but the ship is in a river, so I don't always get to choose where it ends up. All I can do is try."

Yeah. As it happens, the instruments that I've written the most for are saxophone and flute. I've written a lot for trumpet and trombone, as well. And all of those pieces are the result of colleagues or commissions. People have come along and said, "Hey, I'd like you to write this piece or that piece."

And you write one saxophone piece that doesn't stink, and a good player plays it, and then suddenly you've got a whole lot of other saxophonists interested in you writing more saxophone music. And before you know it, you've got eight pieces that include saxophone. That's really the way that trajectory has run.

I wouldn't say that it's been by design that I pursued wind music. It's just been where a lot of the commissions have been over the last dozen years, or so.

David Roush: Sure, sure.

Maybe this is an obvious question, but is there a difference in the way that you approach the wind band versus the orchestra?

Stephen Lias: Oh, profoundly different. Profoundly different. If I'm writing for large ensemble...I'm hardwired as an orchestral composer. I'm learning...I wish I was learning faster, how to be a better wind ensemble composer. I'm learning. And I've got a big wind ensemble commission I've got to write in the next year, or so.

I better be getting better at it. Yeah, they're quite different mindsets. There are different ways the composer has to handle the group, because of the difference in sonic palette that they're working with. But also there are different aesthetic assumptions.

In the orchestral world, there is no situation in which anyone thinks that two oboe players, playing together, is a nice sound, or two clarinet players, or two flute players. In the orchestral world, you would never, ever have both of those players play unison, unless it's tutti, and you need the volume. Because it is always assumed that those instruments in the orchestra are going to sound better as soloists. And if you have two oboes and two flutes playing something in four part, that they should be written this way where they're all soloists, rather than this way, where they're pairing up with one another.

That's the opposite of the presumption in the band world. The band world assumes that multiple flutes playing unison is a pretty sound. And I still have to adjust myself to that. I understand that those are very different aesthetics. But I'm hardwired in the orchestral way. So, when I make mistakes in my band writing, it's always because I leaned in an orchestral direction rather than in a band direction.

But I'm getting better at that. I don't think that one is better than the other. I just think that you have to get immersed in that sound before you get really good at writing it. They're definitely different compositionally. Obviously, the strings add another color to the sound palette that you don't get in the wind ensemble. Yeah. It's quite different, but you also have to get used to different presumptions, different aesthetic assumptions.

David Roush: Yeah. Is there a piece from your wind band output that maybe most resonates with you or that flowed most easily when you were writing it?

Stephen Lias: The piece...so my wind repertoire is spotty. Probably Tarantella is the best wind ensemble piece that is an original of mine that I think still stands really well. I think that piece is a perfectly effective piece. There are two other pieces of mine that are band transcriptions that were done by other people. So they're band pieces by me, but I didn't really do the band transcription.

And then I wrote a really terrific piece inspired by a place in Alaska, called Kennecott, for band that isn't currently available because I just need to re-score it. It's a good piece, and I think if I ever have the bandwidth in my life to set aside a couple months to really rewrite that piece, I think I could rewrite it so that it would be 30% easier and 0% less cool. And so it just needs a re-scoring. And so that one, it's not really available right now, but that's a very cool piece.

My most recent piece is a band transcription, one of the movements of the trumpet sonata. I got a request from a community band in Colorado asking for a piece that could commemorate some people who had passed away during COVID, and they wanted something that was adapted from something I had already written about Rocky Mountain National Park. So I picked a slow movement of that trumpet sonata and adapted it as a grade three band piece. And

it turned out really lovely. Our wind ensemble here just performed and recorded it. On the airplane tomorrow, I'm going to be editing the video of that recording session. It's called Dream Lake. It's just been released, but I don't have the demo of it up online yet, so within the next few weeks that'll go up.

And it turned out to be really lovely. I think as grade three band music goes...I'm not good at writing lower grade levels, but I think that piece, although it's slow, so it's an intonation trap for a band, it turned out to be really lovely. So I'm very happy with how that one turned out. And I'm hopeful that my Lake Clark piece that I'm going to write this coming year is going to be effective too. I think I'm ready now. I've done enough band work now that I'm ready to really throw myself into a good one, so hopefully that'll be the one that comes across. The Mount Rainier piece I didn't think of as a wind ensemble piece because it was a commission from a saxophone quartet. So I don't think of that, even though I know that's what we're ultimately going to talk about here.

That's my experience with wind ensemble. I spent about a decade as a chamber music composer, and then I spent about a decade where my main output was incidental music for live theater. That was what I was doing with most of my time. And then it's only been the last 10 years that I've gotten commissions and performances from professional orchestras, so I feel like I'm in my orchestra phase now, and if I get into a band phase, I'm only at the beginning of that.

David Roush: Awesome.

Stephen Lias: The band is a closed shop. Either you're in the band club or you're not. Maybe you can introduce me to people to be in the band club.

David Roush: I'll work on it!

Okay, so I guess the matter at hand here - Mount Rainier Search and Rescue. I obviously experienced this piece for the first time at Minnesota during the peak of the pandemic and it really resonated with me, so we're looking to take a deeper dive into it here. Can you tell me a little bit about it and how it came to be and that background?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. There's a lot to tell here, so feel free to redirect me because a lot of this will be stream of consciousness, but I'll try to tell it chronologically. So we had just recently hired Nathan Nabb, fabulous saxophonist, and he was playing soprano sax in the Oasis Quartet at that time. And the Oasis Quartet had been invited to play in Taiwan at a... You know what WASBE is?

David Roush: Yeah.

Stephen Lias: So it wasn't part of WASBE, but it was adjacent to WASBE. It was either right before or right after WASBE on the shoulder of that festival in Taiwan that year. And for reasons I don't even remember, whether the repertoire preceded the request or not or whether the request was for saxophone quartet and percussion ensemble, but anyway, it was for saxophone quartet and percussion ensemble was what they were asked to bring. They got funding and it was a big deal. They

were doing a piece by Mark Engebretson and David Biedenbender, a new arrangement of Carnival of the Animals for that ensemble, and stuff like that.

He invited me to write a piece for that concert. We really were brand new colleagues. We didn't know each other very well. And I said, "Do you have any commission money?" And he said, "No." And I said, "Okay, I'll do it, but only if you take me with you." And so my deal was that I got to go on the trip to Taiwan in exchange for writing the piece. So that was the initial agreement. And, fast forwarding to the end of the story, this afternoon I have to return the lawnmower to Nathan that he permanently borrows from me. Nathan and I are now best friends a dozen years later. He's now the director of our school of music, and so when I think about this piece is also all tied up into a bunch of friendships that formed as a result of it as well.

But anyway, so I knew I was going to write a piece for saxophone quartet and percussion ensemble, and I didn't know what it was going to be. And with that ensemble, I felt like it should be something muscular and spiky and gnarly. There was so much opportunity for strong musical statements with that. And I said, "Can it be about a National Park? Do you care?" And he was like, "I don't care, sure." So I was generally thinking maybe it would be something about a National Park. I was casting about for different ideas.

Unlike most of my National Park pieces, I didn't have a ready-made experience or a personal experience or a place I had been, and so I started doing some research. And for a while, I was thinking that maybe I would write about the first...There's a crazy story about the first married couple that tried to boat through the Grand Canyon. And it's epic and weird, and maybe he killed her, and it's got lots of weird twists and turns and it's operatic. And so I thought maybe that would be my storyline. Tried messing with it, didn't work. I tried a couple other things. There was a night in Glacier National Park when, in two different parts of the park, bears attacked girls sleeping in their tent at the same time on the same night.

I was trying to think of something that's gnarly and had attitude and would be good. And so none of those things were really clicking. And so on a whim, I thought, oh, what about a search and rescue incident? And I Googled “National Park Search and Rescue,” I just typed that into Google. And at that time, the very top thing that came up was the incident reports that Mount Rainier puts out. And literally, I clicked on the top link and the first document that opened was the 2004 report of climbers Peter Cooley and Scott Richards and the incident. And I read it with this rapt attention, and then clicked on links to contemporaneous articles about it in the newspaper.

And what captivated me about the event was, not just the specifics, which were really compelling, but if you zoom out from those specifics and you replace the names of the places and the kinds of... If you replace that with generalities and say, "Person terribly injured needing rescue," rescuers heroically attempting the unthinkable and pulling off a miraculous rescue, but in the end, someone still dies and there's tragedy. If you zoom out and look at that, then you're looking at every earthquake, every tsunami, every wildfire, all the natural disasters that are

happening all over the world where somebody is stranded and relies on the heroism of some other brave person to rescue them. And in the end, somebody still ends up dying. That's endemic to the human condition.

And so it struck me that this story was not just a compelling story about these two guys and something amazing and terrifying and tragic that happened to them, but that it was something that was universal. It had a universality to it that spoke to the human condition and human dependency and heroism. And so I just felt like this was it. As soon as I encountered it, I was like, "This is what I have to write about."

And I started sketching musical ideas immediately, and I got about four days into this enthusiastic writing process and suddenly had a crisis of conscience that I should have had before I even started writing. And I'm sure it's already occurred to you, but in my enthusiasm, I was like, "This has to be what this is about." And my crisis of conscience obviously was, "Wait a minute, this is someone else's real life tragedy. It's not mine. I don't own this. How can I make art about this when I have no ownership in it and I have no permission to do this and I have no..." And so I was like, "Oh, no, I can't do it." I decided I wouldn't do it, and then I went back to trying to write the piece about the Grand Canyon couple and I was like, "No, this isn't right. This isn't right."

And so, as I'm sure you've figured out, I finally decided I've just got to try and pursue this and pull the threads and see if I can find the people associated with it. So I did a bunch of research and found the surviving climber, Scott Richards. I found some contact information for him and I sent him a long email that, "You don't know me, but..." And I felt like, what's he going to say? I explained what I wanted to do. And then I didn't hear anything for quite a long time, long enough that I was really getting nervous because I had to write the piece. I had a looming deadline.

And then finally, I got a response from him that was very gracious. And not only did he say, "What a cool idea," but he also agreed to be interviewed. And he said that, Peter Cooley was a musician, Peter Cooley's daughter was going to college on a music scholarship, and his family couldn't think of anything that they would like better than for his death to be commemorated in a piece of music. So that was the key that opened the door for the whole thing. So I then interviewed him. I have a recording of the interview, which I'm happy to share with you.

David Roush: That would be awesome.

Stephen Lias: You'll be fascinated to hear what he has to say.

So the process of interviewing him and then getting the family and the survivor's buy-in gave me all the permission that I needed then to really go gung-ho on the piece. And I will also, if you're interested, I think I may have digital files of some of the planning stuff, where I did this intense comparison study of all the firsthand accounts of how many helicopter crews there were, how many hiking teams that were trying to rescue them, what time of day, how many days, what

hour of day. I have big spreadsheet of the real life events and when they all happened. If I can find that, I'll share that with you too, if you're interested in it.

David Roush: Yeah, very.

Stephen Lias: But my job...so then having had the interview, having talked to him about what was going through your head at night, the whole thing, then I really dove in. And my job creatively was to make a programmatic piece that clearly tells a story, depicts a story, not just tells one but depicts one, but does it in a way...I didn't need to be true to the real life timeline if that wasn't going to make the best art. This was a piece of art I was making. And often, we make weaker art if we imitate life too accurately, and so I wanted to figure out what were the things that I needed to add, to compromise on that would capture the larger reality that I talked about, the more meta reality of the piece.

And so, as you know, it's structured in...we have the accident, we have the aftermath of the accident, and then we have a phone call, and then we have a night on the mountain, and then we have a rescue, a team starting to hike up to rescue them. So we have these series of helicopter attempts, helicopter failures, helicopter successes, attempts of hiking up the mountain at various points over a series of phone calls. The real event was also a series of those things, but not in particularly that order. Most particularly, the thing that is the least like reality but was very important to me is the third phone call. In the real life events, that never happened. There were a series of phone calls, but they always went off in the way that they went off. The words that I have for those phone calls are completely made up. Those are not real phone calls. Those are all completely fictitious.

But early on in terms of the trajectory of the piece, I needed a way of crystallizing the utter feeling of helplessness and aloneness that Scott was feeling. And having gotten the idea of these musical representations of phone calls between him and the search and rescue, the idea of him trying to make a phone call and getting no answer, having set that up. In music, we often do a one, two, three relationship where the one and the two are the ones that set up the three. And that's what I really wanted to do with this, is set up the precedent that there's someone talking to someone else over these phone calls, and then have the third one get no answer. And it felt like the perfect metaphor for how desperate they were for rescue and how alone and helpless they felt.

And so there was nothing in real life that was like that particularly, but I felt like as an artifice for what we're trying to portray here, it works really well and it gave a desperation to the piece about two-thirds of the way through that I felt was just right. And like I said...so the phone call...let me talk a little bit about how the phone calls came in to be. As I was researching it, in all of the accounts of the story, they talk about they had a periodic cell phone calls scheduled so that they wouldn't run out of cell phone battery. So the calls were part of the story to begin with. And how would I work those into the piece? How would I represent them? And I decided maybe I can just be really literal and do it like a phone call.

And my first attempt at it, the saxophone parts had just noteheads and words. And my instructions to the players were, "You know how to speak the English language. Read the words, and then play these noteheads with whatever emphasis and articulation and rhythm you would use in that situation to speak those." Nothing against the players, but I came to the stark realization, the saxophone players, even the very best ones in the world, are not actors. Even with that direction and with the words there, I was still getting da, da, da, da, da, da, da. They were just playing equal note values at equal dynamics.

And I found it so wildly off from what an actor would do if they were saying those lines that I made the compromise of putting rhythms and articulations and dynamics in, when what I really wanted was the player to semi-improvise the line using the notes that I had provided, but using their own expression and articulation. And I think that's still my hypothetical ideal of how that would work. But like I said, you can't expect saxophonists to be actors, and what we really need is a good actor to say the line. So what you see in the score, the version that you've worked with, is, I think it went through three incarnations before I finally gave in and put all the articulation and phrasing and dynamics in there. I'm like, "All right, let me show you how to do this line." So that's how those came about.

So anyway, so that's the inception of how the piece got thought up. I will say, I remember I was finishing the piece in 2011, it was May, and I was on my way to do my residency at Denali National Park that led to Composing in the Wilderness. This was the year before we started Composing in the Wilderness, so this was the original Denali residency. I emailed the score and parts to the group from Alaska as the last day that I had Wi-Fi before I went into the park.

And then we all met up later that summer in Kentucky to rehearse the piece, and I'll say, I discovered that the ending I had written was totally wrong. And so there were parts about it that were working, parts that weren't working. The chorale was there, and that chorale at the end worked great. And the moment we played it, everybody was like, "That rocks." But there were other parts of the way I'd written the ending that were not working at all, and so luckily it was a four-day rehearsal that we had set up there, and we did Mount Rainier the first day, and then they were rehearsing all these other pieces they were doing in Taiwan. I did a classic Steve Lias and went out hiking in Kentucky for the whole next day, and hiked and agonized in my head about how to rewrite that ending. And went back to my motel room that night and rewrote it to be what it ended up being. On the third day of that four-day rehearsal, I brought them a rewritten ending that is what now is in the published version of it. The phone conversations and the rewritten ending are the only things that I think I really rewrote during the creative process. The rest of it is pretty much the original version.

So yeah, it got premiered in Taiwan, and then we did it at the North American Saxophone Alliance Conference in Arizona the next year. Then we booked the smaller recital hall at CCM in Cincinnati for their entire spring break the following spring, and did recording sessions of everything that had been on that whole Taiwan tour, the Carnival of the Animals, and Mount Rainier, and the

Engebretson piece and everything. That was 2013 when we did those recording sessions.

It was like nine years later that the CD came out. The CD that just came out last year that has this piece on it, that's called Xplorium. That CD was recorded almost a decade ago, but it just took so long. Somebody else was in charge of it. Then the record deal they had with Innova fell through and then they had to shop it around to other companies, et cetera, et cetera. But now there's a really great recording out there of this piece that I'm really happy with. I think that's the end of my roughly chronological spiel about it. What questions does that raise that you want me to go into deeper on?

David Roush: Great. So I think we can just go through the major sections of it and talk a little bit about the biggest things with each part, I know you've said harmony is a big focus, but especially at this opening section, speak to rhythm and meter and melodic material, how that came about.

Stephen Lias: Yeah, this is easy. So I should say earlier when you asked me about what my process is, this is a piece that I started in a DAW. The presto section at the beginning, I was literally...I probably set up Logic to be a time signature of 1/16. So, literally, logic thought every measure was a 16th note long, and that allowed me the opportunity to just write in steady 16th notes without regard to where bar lines might be. And so I'm pretty sure that my memory of at least from the 12/16, the presto, up through the unmetered section on the next page, that little moment probably was just me playing around with it in Logic until it felt right to me. And then once I had it all written, then I would have to ask myself, "All right, how are these things grouped beat-wise? What would make sense in terms of metering them once I notate it?"

So, yeah, I vividly remember that this was a composed without notation first, five or six sketches. I sketched the opening, and then I sketched the sort of...the letter C where the team set out the bum-bum-da-dum-bum, that kind of figure. And then I sketched what the helicopter idea would sound like. And then I think I sketched the chorale. Those were the four things that I did initial sketches of separately in a DAW, and then started working on the formal structure of how I would put it all together in the piece. So, if you see me changing meters in interesting and weird ways, that never indicates that I thought "I think I'll have a 7/8 bar next." That's never what I'm doing in this piece. I'm always saying, what do I want it to sound like and what would be the most intuitive meter to score that in?

David Roush: Yeah, that's interesting. And then in terms of melody, how was this structured or thought of?

Stephen Lias: No specific memories of anything about how I derived any of this opening. You're just talking about letter A?

David Roush: Yeah. Yeah.

Stephen Lias: I don't have any memory of how I contrived those melodic gestures.

David Roush: Okay.

Stephen Lias: So it just was something that felt like it complimented the story I was trying to tell at that time, I guess. Yeah, I can't think of any. There are other places in the piece where I'll probably think, oh yeah, there's a reason why I had that melody there, but I can't think of anything here.

David Roush: Sure, sure. So looking ahead then at the first call...now I remember...so at Minnesota, because the performance was prerecorded, we did the thing with the subtitles?

Stephen Lias: Yep.

David Roush: How did you end up liking that? We never really talked about it afterwards.

Stephen Lias: Yeah, I like it fine. The only thing that I feel sheepish about is that because these are not...I just don't want anyone to think this is actually what was said. It's just not, it's completely not. I mean, what was really said would be, there'd be a way, it'd be much sloppier, there'd be a lot more profanity. There'd be a lot. It was just like real life. I just don't want anyone to think this is what people were really saying or that that's what I'm trying to say.

So the only reason I would feel reluctant about anyone seeing that is that possibility of perception. I liked quite a lot, the fact that whoever was watching got to really get a sense of what the phone calls were, and in particular, the third phone call without the responses, the, "Hello, are you there? Can anybody hear me?" All of that really, I think probably was very compelling with the words on the screen. So I think that's a perfectly good idea as long as the audience knows this is an artistic sort of encapsulation of what sorts of things were being said, not specific words that were being said.

David Roush: Yeah, sure.

Stephen Lias: Yeah, I liked it.

David Roush: We can certainly add disclaimers as needed as we look at it. Great. And then of course, the team sets out next. You see anything that comes to mind immediately about that section?

Stephen Lias: No, since I write so much wilderness-y, adventure-y music, I have a lot of pieces that have sort sort of a marching or walking or a hiking theme in them. And this was sort of a rum-te-tum-te like strong people hiking up a mountain. So that underlying march-y feel to it was all I was setting out for. I don't know.

You're right, especially in these sections, this isn't a piece where I got to really flex any harmonic muscle. But yeah, I don't know that I have anything profound to say about that. It felt like a good fit for the marching thing, and I like interspersing it with those 5/8 barbaric percussion things that kept a sense of urgency and kept a sense of boulders rolling down the mountain or something. It just felt like I needed to keep it not too nice, a little bit on the edge.

David Roush: Yeah, I get that. I get that. And then, tell me about the night sections. How did those come to be?

Stephen Lias: Sure. Organizationally, early on in my charting out what the formal structure of the piece would be, it became evident that...you've heard me talk about the one, two, threeness of this, right? So we have first helicopter attempt, second helicopter attempt, rescue. We have first night, second night, and then the culmination of the nights is the big chorale at the end. That chorale is the same melody that starts out as a single line melody in the first night, gets played as a four-part melody, but in the marimba, in the second night, and then gets screamed out as this anguished cry of sadness by the full ensemble as the funeral dirge at the very end. And so I had that formal structure planned, and so I knew that there was going to be this growth of this idea that would start out.

Scott talked about the nights alone on the mountain just trying to survive the cold wind, and you'll hear in the interviews that I asked him what he was thinking about and things. And so the idea of having wind blowing and having these echo-y, mournful sort of howling sounds that the saxophones are doing, kind of crying over top of something that sounded vaguely like a hymn was the basic idea. Three layers of unrelated sounds, actually four, if you count the pedal tone that I've kind of got going on.

But basically I was thinking of those three layers, like a hymn of sadness and these cries that were echoing, and then wind sounds trying to capture aloneness. And then you'll see in the next night when we get to the next night that the echo-y mournful cries are echoed. Now we have both the soprano and the alto echoing one another doing that, and that the mournful hymn is now in four-part harmony, but the wind is continuing. So it's growing between the first and the second night sort of setting us up for that final trajectory. So that was the thought process behind how I thought about presenting those nights.

David Roush: And then, let's see, the first helicopter I think is pretty straightforward.

Stephen Lias: Yeah, it's a very unsophisticated, compositional idea that just maybe the most elemental thing about a helicopter is the thrumming of the blades that dugga, dugga, dugga, dugga, and so having this kind of post minimal ostinato pattern, doing nothing but imitating that and fighting against the wind, and then ultimately having the wind triumph so that the helicopter sort of just disappears under the wind, seemed like the most obvious way of portraying that. As I say, it's very unsophisticated, but it works well.

David Roush: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And then the second call and the teams return, anything in there?

Stephen Lias: Let's see. No, in each of these cases, I'm being... You notice there are no transitions in the piece. The piece, if you imagine it as a film, it's always just a direct edit to a new time and location. And those edits are always accompanied by the chime. That chime is always an architectural point. And so each one of these places that I revisit, whether it's the nights or the helicopters or the teams, is showing a progression. And so this second moment with the teams is enlarged.

I'm doing more things with the counterpoint. I'm doing more things with the rhythm and the percussion. But other than that, it's simply showing a progression of upping the ante as the rescue attempts are growing in intensity. But that's really all that's underneath that.

David Roush: Yeah, that makes sense.

Stephen Lias: And the same is true, so the next section is the second helicopter. This is when they dropped supplies out of the helicopter. And so this time, instead of just hearing the helicopter engine, when we get to page 16 there, you're seeing those sharp figures. Dung, dung, dung dung, da da dung. That stuff is kind of like things being dropped out of the helicopter. Not that it's really literal, but at least that's another way that it's ramping up or expanding from what it was before.

David Roush: Yeah, that's the impetus for it. Yeah, that makes sense. And then, the second night...so that chorale melody appears for the second time, but more harmonically fleshed out.

Stephen Lias: Right.

David Roush: Yeah. And then the teams approach?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Now this is a little bit more related to real life in that they had two different helicopter teams that were both trying to reach them, and they had two different climbing teams that were both trying to reach them. And finally, both a climbing team and a helicopter got to them at essentially the same time.

And so in the piece I did stay sort of true to that, in that on page 20 you kind of get the climbing team culminating as that helicopter arrives at letter L. And so that worked out because that was good for the art of the piece as well as the real life storyline of the piece. But this is definitely sort of the culmination of, I guess if we go with my kind of one, two, three analogy, almost everything in this piece has three incarnations, and this is the third of the climbing ones. And its biggest and most climactic one, which then leads us into the third of the helicopter ones, which is also the biggest and most climactic one and the final one.

David Roush: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Very cool. And then our conclusion-

Stephen Lias: Yeah, before we go to the conclusion, I will say they airlifted Peter Cooley into the helicopter, which is very, I'm like Dr. Seuss saying it. It's so obvious at the bottom of what page 22. All those upward gestures are literally him being lifted up into the helicopter.

David Roush: Okay, yeah.

Stephen Lias: And so this section is pretty true to life. The helicopter flew away, and then Scott was hiking down with the team that had made it to him. They gathered up everything, and they started hiking down, and they made it to Thumb Rock. When the helicopter crew radioed to the rescue crew that Peter Cooley had died in the helicopter. They never even got him to the hospital. And so this moment at

letter M is one of the only gestures that I don't do three times, is this gesture, which is the original accident gesture from the opening of the piece, and I'm using it now as representation that the wound that Peter got at the beginning of the piece, now Scott is getting the equivalent of an emotional wound like that, finding out that his friend has now died. And so that's what's happening at letter M.

And that sort of descends, it dissipates over about 20 seconds there, and then we get the chorale coming in first softly in...well, I mean it's loud in the marimba, but comparatively it's soft. And then these cries in the soprano saxes. Those unspecified pitch cries sort of are the ultimate expression of Scott's grief in that moment with then the full ensemble coming in on the chorale then at the grave section there, which really, I got to say, everybody in the ensemble was blown away by how powerful that chorale turned out to be.

When you have only four saxophone players, you don't always get a sense of how huge the sound can be when you put them all in the strongest part of their register and then add the tam tam and the bass drum stuff under them. So I remember in rehearsal with the very first readthrough of that part of the chorale, everybody was sort of shell-shocked about how powerful it was. It was very cool.

David Roush: Yeah, it absolutely is. Yeah. Well, that's all fantastic insight into this, which I really appreciate you sharing.

Stephen Lias: Now, I told you, I interviewed him obviously you know from having seen the score that he heard the piece afterwards. So I sent the performance when we came home from Taiwan. I sent him a video and a recording of that performance. And I don't know that I've ever been as nervous as that.

The guy works at a construction company now. He's just not the sort of person that would listen to contemporary classical music. And this is a challenging piece anyway. And how gracious his comments were just blew me out of the water. And so I asked him if I could put that phrase about how he felt about the piece on the [published] piece, and he agreed to that. I've been in touch with him a couple of times subsequently, just to let him know that further things are happening with the piece. He seems like, I don't think he wants to necessarily be involved in the life of the piece or is eager to be interviewed or anything like that, but he's gratified to know that it's out there. And I think it's been nice to have that connection on both ends of the piece, both before and afterwards.

And then subsequently, it didn't get performed for quite a long time. And then during the pandemic, I think three or four different groups picked it up because everybody was looking for ways of subdividing their wind ensembles into smaller groups they could put on stage. And there's lots of rep for brass ensemble and woodwind ensemble, but then you've got your saxes and your percussion leftover. What are you going to do? And so it seemed like this ready-made piece for people with this odd pandemic related problem to solve.

David Roush: Truly. Yeah, it worked out really well. That's exactly it. Dr. Threinen...Emily Threinen...assigned me the piece, and I'm obviously very thankful she did. Yeah,

it's great. Well, I think for right now, that's everything I've got. I really appreciate you taking the time to speak with me, and this was really great.

Stephen Lias: Oh, sure. I'm delighted. And you said the first part of this you're doing on May 30th?.

David Roush: Yeah, yeah.

Stephen Lias: And that is the day that I'm back in town and available. I don't know if it's something that you'd be live-streaming or anything, but if you needed anything from me that day, I would be around. I'll be just back from this trip. But what I will try to do is either maybe on the airplane or once I get to Ireland, I'll try to dig up as much of the stuff we've talked about and email it to you as I can. Certainly the scores will be no problem. It may take me a few days to dig through my old files and find some of the original planning sketches and things that I made, and I think I know where I put the digital file, the recording of my interview with him. But anyway, I'll try to get that to you real quickly.

David Roush: Perfect. I really appreciate that. And I'll shoot you an email with some perusal score requests.

Stephen Lias: Great.

David Roush: It'll be great. Well, thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Stephen Lias: Oh, I'm happy to do it. Great to chat with you. And please just let me know if you have any follow-up questions.

David Roush: Will do. You have a great day and a wonderful trip through Ireland. That sounds awesome.

Stephen Lias: It's going to be great. Thanks, man. See you.

Thank you. Have a good one.

Appendix B
Stephen Lias – Interview with Scott Richards

Stephen Lias: So, what I'm mostly interested in is, I've gone through all of the available accounts of that event, including the incident report from the rescue service, and then also some of the followup press that they did.

Scott Richards: Right.

Stephen Lias: And there are some things that, as I'm writing the piece...I mean, the piece, it doesn't actually give a blow-by-blow of every event, because it was a pretty complicated series of events.

Scott Richards: Right, right. Definitely had a lot of different elements to it, for sure.

Stephen Lias: Yeah, yeah.

Scott Richards: My deal up there, and then what was going on back here in Cape Elizabeth.

Stephen Lias: Right. Right.

Scott Richards: And then the rescue, the rangers, and just that whole piece, trying to figure out how to get that going. So, yeah, definitely [inaudible].

Stephen Lias: Right. Because there were two different helicopter teams, and I think three different climbing teams, am I right?

Scott Richards: Yeah, pretty much, but really, Charlie and the Gottlieb group is the one who finally got to me.

Stephen Lias: Right. Right.

Scott Richards: [inaudible] Charlie passed away a few years back in a climbing accident, so...

Stephen Lias: Oh, I see. I see.

Scott Richards: The whole thing's been...And Dave, Dave is the other guy who came. Both awesome climbers, and I've been trying to get ahold of Dave this summer, and he was involved in a body rescue in Northern Tibet.

Stephen Lias: Wow!

Scott Richards: It was a friend of his, and they were putting up a new roof over near K2 and things went bad, because they both fell, and his friend was killed. So, they were both nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor because of efforts to get me, and of course Charlie had passed in a climbing accident a few years back, and then Dave was on the other side of the world, involved in another climbing accident, so...

Stephen Lias: Wow.

Scott Richards: Unfortunately, it's just kind of the nature of the beast, I guess.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Yeah. So, as I read all these accounts, there are a couple of things that obviously come to my mind, and there are going to be sections of the music sort of devoted to each broad phase of the event, and one of the things that, as I think about it, seems to me to be the most compelling is the notion of you staying up there overnight with your...was Peter conscious or unconscious most of the time?

Scott Richards: Well, so, it was a three-night deal with me, and he was very in and out of it, if you've ever read up on any head traumas.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: And he had a broken arm, broken leg, too.

Stephen Lias: Oh, wow.

Scott Richards: You know, just a heinous situation. A very small tent on a fifty-three ice slope, bad weather, and he had a bad head injury. So the beginnings of a bad head injury are usually met with combativeness, disorientation, completely stand up...you know, I had him roped in. He'd stand up, fall down. I mean, you can imagine everything coming out of him.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: We were in a three-by-six tent with no fly. I don't know if you know much about camping. It had no fly. It was a high-end...very lightweight mountain hardware.

Stephen Lias: Yeah, yeah.

Scott Richards: They're called the... I forget the name of the damn tent. Anyway. Wingtent, I think it's called.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. I do a lot of backpacking. I don't do any climbing, but I do backpacking, so I know the gear.

Scott Richards: Yeah. So, anyway, this tent had no fly. Huge ventilation. That was the whole thing, so it wouldn't condensate, but it had no...it had a vestibule, but no door. So, the way I pitched the tent, the goddamn snow just rained down the slope, and just filled it.

Stephen Lias: Oh, man.

Scott Richards: I was shoveling, you know, and Peter, for period of time the first day or so, would just...he was in incredible pain, you know? Get up and fall over, and I had to block the door, you know?

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: A lot...just basically...

Stephen Lias: Was he lucid?

Scott Richards: Oh, in and out, man. He was a train wreck, you know?

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: You know. Take a claw hammer to the front of your head, and take off above your eye, and that type of deal.

Stephen Lias: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Scott Richards: You can imagine. He had a massive head trauma. You know, so, that's what happens with people with head trauma. Initially, the first couple of days, they're lucid, they're whatever, and then they slowly...you know.

Stephen Lias: Right. So, I guess in the middle of the night, at 2:00 a.m., and you're in this situation, on any given night while you were up there, I'm just interested in phrases that are going through your head.

Scott Richards: Oh, you know, I would talk to him. I'd rub him. I cradled his head in my arms. It was very sad. I knew this was just a desperate situation, and my friend was hanging on. I talked to him, you know? I chewed up aspirin, I put it in his mouth, spit it in his mouth. I tried to give him water. I tried to do anything I could to make him comfortable. I gave him all the sleeping bags we had. I gave him every stitch of clothing, so they sling loaded a number of crap in.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: You know, sleeping bags, and then I had a down coat that I used. And I had plenty of gear, but it was getting wet.

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: From a variety of reasons...you can imagine. So, I was really just trying to just keep him warm and comfortable, and that was difficult, because it was a heinous situation. It was storming. It was snow continually. This guy would get up and just be in incredible pain, and then he'd subdue back in the sleeping bag. So, I just did anything I could to keep my partner as comfortable as I could, and a lot of times I was just trying to keep him in the tent and talk to him, and say, "Hey. We'll get it." But, he was not having long conversations with me at all.

Stephen Lias: Right. Right.

Scott Richards: No, it wasn't like that.

Stephen Lias: So, when you were talking to him, the kinds of things you were saying were just encouraging? "We're going to make it through. You're going to get through."

Scott Richards: Absolutely. His family loved him. "We're going to get out of here." I had a radio. It felt like a long period of time, a couple of days, and they were trying to get their act together. The storms would come in, the storms would leave. I was just keeping the tent from blowing off the side of that mountain. We were in a bad place. We were on the Willis Wall side of Liberty Ridge, if you ever... Just a bad, bad place.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: Snow and ice just would... It felt like a train coming down the side of that mountain continually.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: And here I am up there, just like, "Oh my god." I just wanted him to come off that mountain in one piece.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: I just so thought... You know, he was a strong guy, bright. Stanford, Yale.

Stephen Lias: Oh, wow.

Scott Richards: Yeah. Bright, bright guy.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: Had him a good company out here. Family, a beautiful family at home. Yeah. Yeah, you know, so I had a lot at stake. I just didn't want to...Yeah. Anyway. I tried to keep him as comfortable...I guess the bottom line is I just tried to keep the situation as stable as I could.

Stephen Lias: Right. And were you also having to coach yourself to stay focused, to not panic, or is that part of your training?

Scott Richards: Yeah, I was...so...I think it's like being in war. I think you go to another level.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: I think I could've gone five days without eating or drinking. You know, I mean, it's just amazing. I think your body goes to a different level of awareness, you know what I mean? I'm in a daze without really sleeping very much, or eating, but it wasn't because I didn't have food; just was in a different mindset. And that's how it must be when you're in a foxhole.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: I can only assume, you know?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. That's a good way of putting it.

Scott Richards: You know, everything I did was...when I did something up there...when I left the tent after a day or so, I had to rope up to go pee, I had to rope up to do anything, because we were on a...and I knew that I couldn't fall, you know what I mean? It would've been very easy to let my guard down and just...

Stephen Lias: Right. Right.

Scott Richards: So, I was in not a good spot.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: And then because it became the rescue. "Well, the guys are on the glacier." And, "Oh, the helicopter's coming." "The helicopter can't come." "The guys are climbing." "They got five feet of snow." "They can't come."

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: So, it was a lot of that.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Okay, let me switch to another thing. I'm interested in the phone calls that you had with the search and rescue people, and exactly what, like in the first phone call, when you finally got somebody search and rescue on the phone, what exactly did you guys say to one another?

Scott Richards: He said...this is pretty clear to me. He said, "You're on your own for a period of time. There's nothing we can do. It's going to take us a while to even figure out where you're at." I mean, in not so many words, but he was like, "You need to figure this out. You need to get to shelter. You need to take care of yourself for a while, until we can get it going." It was very clear. I mean, Mike is an awesome ranger down there, and it was very clear to him where I was, and it was very clear to him that I was in a shitty, shitty location.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: And getting there was going to be difficult. And the weather was shitty. So, he just gave me encouragement. And then, he was very aware that the radio conversation were being, with the airwaves, were open to news media.

Stephen Lias: Oh, yeah.

Scott Richards: He chose words carefully.

Stephen Lias: Oh, I hadn't thought of that angle on it.

Scott Richards: Because at this point, it was starting to be huge news, and he was telling me, "Hey, this has become national," and I had the whole deal at home. And my dad...most of my world up there, but I think he was aware of where this was going, and trying to keep it-

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: You know. I mean, I think initially they were thinking, "Man, this is going to be a body recovery," and then once Peter continued to stay going, this was like, "Okay, we've got a guy up there that's hanging in here. We need to get him off the mountain now." But they had lost the helicopter a few years earlier, I believe, up there or somewhere. Hood? I don't know if you remember some of those?

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: They were very, very cautious about just saying, "Hey, we're coming in. We're going to drop men on the mountain."

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: They weren't going to lose anybody coming to get me, which was very smart.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Yeah.

Scott Richards: I was in a bad, I was in a very technical part of that mountain.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. So, the first call, he was kind of saying, "You guys are on your own while we get our act together," and then there were-

Scott Richards: Yeah, he was very supportive, very, "Hey, we're there. We're there. This is what we're going to...we're going to try to get you some stuff."

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: And I think I was just like, "I'm okay, it's my climbing partner who's mortally wounded in this...he's the guy we're trying to help."

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: And I think he was just logistically trying to get it together, and trying to get a handle on me. I had to hand out GPS. He needed longitude, latitude, elevation, that type of stuff. He was just trying to figure out, "Hey, how are we going to...where is he, and how are we going to get him out of there?"

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Okay, so then, contrast that with maybe three or four phone calls or radio calls in, when they're getting much closer to you, they're trying to do the rescue, but they're getting blown away. What were those phone calls like?

Scott Richards: You know, a lot of times it was, "We're coming but the weather's shitty. The men, they're not making good progress, except,"...every once in a while..."except for Charlie and this other guy Dave, who are attempting to keep moving." They had left the trail at, I don't know, 11:00 at night, or hiking all through the night.

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: Yeah, but I think there was a lot of guys that were...I don't know if they were out of the office or what, that were trying to get up there. It was a huge slog in...

Stephen Lias: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Scott Richards: ...huge slog from the road in to where we were. I mean, you get to the glacier. So, the weather wasn't good enough to do any airlift in like that.

Stephen Lias: Okay. Yeah.

Scott Richards: So, that was...and then I think at one point we talked a little bit with a trauma specialist, trying to get a handle on Peter, and then we shifted to, "What's his vitals? What's going on with him?" That type of stuff. But there was so little they...without fluids and all the good stuff you do when you're in an ER.

Stephen Lias: Yeah, yeah.

Scott Richards: Yeah.

Stephen Lias: Okay, just two more questions. Right when he slipped and fell, I'd really be interested in sort of a, from your vantage point, the blow-by-blow of everything that happened from the moment he fell until you made the first call.

Scott Richards: Oh, yeah, you know, it was basically we transitioned from a very steep part of the mountain, and he was walking away from me, and I'm feeling mellow slope. When I mean mellow, maybe 45 degrees.

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: It appeared that he caught his crampon on the back of his foot. I think you probably read that in the account; that they said-

Stephen Lias: Yeah, they said it appeared that he just had a minor slip of the foot, really.

Scott Richards: Right, right, right. He had, and we hadn't put any pro in because he was literally 30 feet from me, 40 feet, but the angle of where he was, he basically started angling down, and then unfortunately the slope, it was very crusty and icy. He accelerated because he was wearing a type of clothing that he accelerated. I had him kind of on belay, but he went off...I think a 12-foot...basically a cliff.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: First thing he impacted was a pile of rocks. The only rocks down below kind of deal.

Stephen Lias: So, he fell straight down that 12 feet and hit the rocks. It wasn't that he-

Scott Richards: Well, it's kind of like, picture a ski slope, and then take a chunk out of the middle of it, and then the slope continues, you know?

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: I don't know, it must've... I'm not sure why this little rock band... And it might not have been 12 feet. It's probably eight, because I had to climb back up it when I left.

Stephen Lias: Okay.

Scott Richards: It was close to 12. So, basically, came up this ski jump sort of deal in reverse, continued on to the next slope. And we're only talking maybe 30, 40 feet.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. And then the rope went taught.

Scott Richards: Right, and he was going face-forward.

Stephen Lias: Sure.

Scott Richards: And the rope caught.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: I mean, the rope kept him from going another 8,000 feet, which is where he would've ended up.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Of course.

Scott Richards: And I stopped him, but unfortunately, he impacted his head.

Stephen Lias: So, then you're hanging on to the rope. You're keeping him from falling. How do you get-

Scott Richards: Yeah, and I basically... It was then it was weird, because the weather had shifted somewhat there, but not bad, and then it got silent. I mean, almost like... And I was yelling, "Hey, Pete! Pete! Pete!" Nothing. And I sort of took the rope and descended as quickly as I could to see him, and then started trying to deal with it at that point.

Stephen Lias: So-

Scott Richards: Put a couple of ice screws in and tried to connect him, and then the saga began. And then the shitty weather began, believe it or not. Wind picked up, the snow

began, and then everything shifted at that point, I swear to God. This starlit morning became this cloudy, windy snow.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Yeah. So, the weather, there was this moment of kind of lull, and then-

Scott Richards: Well, yeah, it was definitely a moment. You know, we started that climb at 10:30, 11:00 from rock up to that point, and I don't know how many pitches it was of good grade three ice climbing in snow that's very hard.

Stephen Lias: Uh-huh.

Scott Richards: I mean, hard as far as a hard pack.

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: And as we approached the point where we stopped and he said, "Hey, can I take the lead?" it was just starting to get light out at that point, I should say. And the stars were out that night, kind of. It seemed that way. But I swear to God, after he fell, it seemed like the weather turned.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Yeah. Okay, one more question, and that is, in all of the accounts, I haven't been able to read how it was and when it was that you found out that he hadn't made it.

Scott Richards: Thumb Rock.

Stephen Lias: So, you were hiking down when he left on that heli-

Scott Richards: Yeah, he got off finally, and got down to the next...where you would traditionally do the...what I guess you'd call one...yeah, second night of that climb.

Stephen Lias: Okay.

Scott Richards: If you read a guidebook on the climb. Thumb Rock is before the real technical part of that climb. And yeah, I was down there, and we were kind of settling in, and Dave got some sort of radio contact.

Stephen Lias: Right. This is you and Charlie and Dave at this point, right?

Scott Richards: Yeah.

Stephen Lias: Okay.

Scott Richards: It was the three of us, yep. And, yeah, he just told me. He decided at that point that he shouldn't tell me. I think they were worried. Obviously, I was coming off of a pretty screwed-up three, four-night deal. But I think he took it on himself to say, "You know, Scott, you should know," and I appreciate that, as a climber. These guys are climbers, you know?

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: They're not your EMT deal, these guys are climbers before they're anything, so they got it.

Stephen Lias: And so, what was your reaction?

Scott Richards: I was devastated. I was so...I mean, overall, I was numb anyway, and I knew Peter was in tough shape, but he was definitely very much alive when we left him, you know what I mean?

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: He was...

Stephen Lias: So, when they came in-

Scott Richards: Just everything came through my head. I'm like, "God, this is just a nightmare." It was just a nightmare, really. The nightmare continued, you know? It was an epic night. That night, I think the wind blew. I was in a stupid tent, this K-Mart type tent, Sears Roebuck...slung load into these guys. They didn't even have a tent.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: These guys didn't even have a tent. Or, no, they didn't have a sleeping bag. They had this crappy tent, they had no sleeping bags. They had been hiking for days.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: We were taking these MRE, these military rations, and they were putting the product that heats them up in their boots to warm them up, just-

Stephen Lias: Oh, man.

Scott Richards: The whole thing was bad. But we had tons of food. But I was numb, man. I don't think I slept that night either. I mean, I went to bed, and I was just... Thumb Rock is pretty up there.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: It isn't one of these, "Oh, yeah, this is a great place. I think I'll walk around." You've pretty much got to watch your step up there.

Stephen Lias: So, when they-

Scott Richards: Anyway.

Stephen Lias: When they took Peter off in the helicopter, was your gut feeling that he's, "All right, we've finally got him over the hump. He's going to make it"?

Scott Richards: Oh, totally. Oh, yeah. I was elated.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: It was an ordeal, man.

Stephen Lias: Well, that's one of the things that interests me about this. It seems like there's a moment of...you used the word 'elated'. It seems like there's a moment of, "We made it! We conquered this horrible mess!" And then, just after you get down to Thumb Rock, you get kicked in the pants again.

Scott Richards: Yeah. Yeah.

Stephen Lias: With the worst news.

Scott Richards: I was devastated.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: Not to the point where I'm like, "I can't function," though, to...

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: I just was, I was just, "Wow. My best friend is gone. Oh my god. The nightmare is continued. Now the nightmare really is continued."

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: You know, I just didn't even...I took each moment as it was kind of coming at me; getting him on the helicopter, and then downclimbing was no easy task.

Stephen Lias: Oh, I know. That can't have been easy.

Scott Richards: That was a major deal, getting me down, getting them down, without...we just didn't want anyone else getting killed.

Stephen Lias: Right.

Scott Richards: That was their whole deal. And I got that. So, finally [I] was at Thumb Rock, we're still high on that mountain, and I'm just, "Okay. Hey, we got...we're almost there." Then he got that call, and he told me, and they were bummed. They were bumming out huge, too, because-

Stephen Lias: Oh, yeah.

Scott Richards: So much. Everybody was. I mean, there were so many people that I think it just kicked them in the teeth when Pete died.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: Because there was so much energy. [Inaudible] was dealing with a family at home, and, "Oh, yeah, we finally got him off!" I mean, I don't know if you saw a lot of the news, but you can imagine. I'm up on the mountain for multiple days, and yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm alive, and they're alive. And the rescue goes, then it doesn't go, and then it goes. Finally, it goes and they pull Peter off, and oh my gosh, he makes it! But he doesn't.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: You know?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Yeah, that's why it's such a fascinating situation. It's just such a rollercoaster.

Scott Richards: Oh, a huge rollercoaster.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: Emotionally, and we're still...I had a close friend of mine pass away Friday night. He had a heart attack.

Stephen Lias: Oh, I'm so sorry.

Scott Richards: Great guy. Family man of four. Similar to Allene. Allene was Peter's widow, who had a family of three. Similar age, the whole thing. And I'm in a small town, but an affluent town, and I was just...I think a lot of people are just, they're feeling the dread again. It's just brutal.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: Climbing's great, but definitely rain hell on the people that love you.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. So, do you do a lot of climbing anymore?

Scott Richards: I don't. I don't. I backpack now. I told my family...that's my wife and Allene...that I had lost the...I mean, I love the mountain, and I take a group of high schoolers, we go winter mountaineering and all that. It's a huge part of my life, but the desire to do that...Because the impact is just huge on the people you love.

Stephen Lias: Oh, yeah.

Scott Richards: You know, if you read any of the stories of all these men who have died, you know, it's not so much about them, it's about who they left behind; the sons and daughters, and the wife, and their mothers and fathers.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: Yeah. Peter was a big part of this community. It's a massive loss.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Yeah.

Scott Richards: Anyway. No, not really.

Stephen Lias: Well, I certainly share your love of backpacking. I haven't done the climbing thing, and I've never sort of gone in for the things that would put my life on the line that way, but I find the whole idea compelling, and because I'm a composer, and I love doing that sort of thing, I've sort of made it my business these last few years to write pieces about adventure, and about these sorts of things.

Scott Richards: Yeah! I think it's neat. I've tried to explain it to people, even Allene, my connection with you, your calls...not that we really know each other, but... and Peter was hugely into music.

Stephen Lias: Oh, really?

Scott Richards: He sang. Yeah, he was part of a church. And their daughter just got this huge scholarship some place. I think Margo was...I don't know necessarily music, but she was big into music. I mean, she had a scholarship down...I don't know what it's called.

Stephen Lias: Oh, great!

Scott Richards: Anyway, so, music was a big part of their lives. So, it's cool that, you know...

Stephen Lias: Yeah. I'm really glad you told me that. Yeah.

Scott Richards: Yeah.

Stephen Lias: Well, you're welcome, let me tell you a little bit, if you want to see the group that's going to premiere this pieces is called The Oasis Quartet.

Scott Richards: Let me write that down.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. And you can just go to oasisquartet.com.

Scott Richards: Oasisquartet.com. I've just got a little piece of paper right here. Oasisquartet.com. Okay.

Stephen Lias: Yeah, and that way you can see who the guys are going to be. It's them, and then a large percussion ensemble that they're bringing along with them from, I think from Cincinnati.

Scott Richards: Nice. You write it, and then you sell the music to these guys?

Stephen Lias: No, well, they're-

Scott Richards: How does that all work? I don't know much about the music industry.

Stephen Lias: Yeah. Well, in classical music, there's really no money to be made, so we don't call it an industry.

Scott Richards: Oh.

Stephen Lias: But, what we do is, when a group like them wants to premiere a new piece, they come to a composer like me and they commission me to write it. So, they're basically hiring me to do a job for them. And so I write them the piece and give it to them, and they perform it. And then once it's been performed, if it goes well, then maybe a publisher will pick it up, and then maybe somebody will record it and put it on a CD or something.

Scott Richards: Oh, that's cool!

Stephen Lias: Yeah. And you're welcome to go to my website if you want to see what I do. My website is StephenLias.com.

Scott Richards: Lias is L?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. First of all, Stephen is with a P-H.

Scott Richards: P-H.

Stephen Lias: And Lias is L-I-A-S.

Scott Richards: Dot com?

Stephen Lias: Yeah, StephenLias.com. And there you can hear some samples of the kind of stuff that I write, just to get a sense of what it'll be like.

Scott Richards: Okay.

Stephen Lias: And of course, once we get this piece together, we're doing a big rehearsal of it in Ohio in late June, and so I'll be flying up there for that for them to put the piece together, and if we get a good recording of it while I'm there, then I'll make sure I shoot you that. Do you have an email address that I could use?

Scott Richards: I do. I'll give it to you, if you don't mind.

Stephen Lias: Yeah, go right ahead.

Scott Richards: Maine, M-A-I-N-E, automation... That's Maineautomation.com.

Stephen Lias: Okay.

Scott Richards: Let's see, no, Maineautomation dot... I'll give you my other one. So, it's Maineautomation.rr... Maineautomation... Actually, I'm going to give you the one that is more direct to me.

Stephen Lias: Okay.

Scott Richards: It's Maineautomation2.

Stephen Lias: Maine automation, and is it just-

Scott Richards: Yeah, just number two, just the number. No number sign or anything.

Stephen Lias: Okay. So, it's Maineautomation2?

Scott Richards: @Maine.rr.com.

Stephen Lias: 2@Maine.rr.com.

Scott Richards: So, you're going to Denali, I heard?

Stephen Lias: Yeah. I actually have three trips back-to-back in the next few weeks. I'm taking some students with me to California-

Scott Richards: Nice.

Stephen Lias: ...and then I put them on a plane back to here and I continue on to Australia, where I've got an exchange student I'm going to check in on, and I'm going to do some recruiting down there to try to get Australian students to come to our university.

Scott Richards: Wow.

Stephen Lias: And then I come back-

Scott Richards: Are you at the University of Texas?

Stephen Lias: My university is named Stephen F Austin State University, and we're about two hours north of Houston.

Scott Richards: Oh, okay. Cool.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: And that's yours?

Stephen Lias: Say that again?

Scott Richards: And is that your university?

Stephen Lias: Yeah, my university that I teach at is two hours north of Houston. Yeah.

Scott Richards: Nice.

Stephen Lias: And so, when I get back from Australia, then I just have one day to repack, and then my wife and I are going up to Denali, and I'm going to do a presentation for the Denali arts people about composing music about national parks. And then I'm going back into the park; they're letting me stay for a week at one of the ranger huts back 40 miles into the place.

Scott Richards: Wow! So, you must've gone to school for music probably, huh?

Stephen Lias: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I got a doctorate in composition.

Scott Richards: Wow. Good for you!

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: That sounds neat. And you've created your own university? Is that...

Stephen Lias: Oh, no, it's not my own university. No, no, no. No, it's just a place where I teach. The university is named after, you know the city of Austin is-

Scott Richards: Sure, oh, absolutely.

Stephen Lias: Okay.

Scott Richards: Yeah.

Stephen Lias: We're not in Austin, but the city of Austin is named after the same guy our university is named after.

Scott Richards: Oh, okay. All right.

Stephen Lias: His name was Stephen F. Austin.

Scott Richards: I apologize for my ignorance. I do a lot of work in Texas, so I'm down in Dallas occasionally.

Stephen Lias: Oh, okay. Dallas is about three hours away for us.

Scott Richards: Yeah.

Stephen Lias: Yeah.

Scott Richards: You don't have that accent.

Stephen Lias: No, I'm from Pennsylvania.

Scott Richards: Well, good. Well, if I can be any more help-

Stephen Lias: Hey, this has been tremendously helpful, and the guys in the saxophone quartet are all really excited that I've been able to talk to you about the piece, because it's

just going to make the piece a lot more genuine, and I think it's going to help me do my job better.

Scott Richards: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. If you need anything else down the road, feel free to give me a jingle.

Stephen Lias: Okay. And like I said, you can go to my website, or you can email me, or hook up with me on Facebook if you do that.

Scott Richards: Okay, great.

Stephen Lias: Hey, thanks a lot, Scott.

Scott Richards: All right, take care.

Stephen Lias: You, too. Bye-bye.

Scott Richards: Bye. Bye-bye.