

A Note from the Composer.

A series of recent works of mine have traced, in various ways both literal and abstract, the experience of becoming a father.

The Only Way Is Through zooms out and tries to reckon with challenging times—a global pandemic, the fracturing of the international world order, and, with only minor hyperbole, the sleep regressions of a toddler.

The title comes from Robert Frost's poem "A Servant to Servants," in which a woman exhausted by the repetitions of domestic life observes that "the best way out is always through." I had initially imagined setting the entire poem, but these words became a mantra to me instead, something I whisper to myself late at night when feeling overwhelmed.

The work begins as a processional. The opening minutes involve just the percussion quartet, proceeding through a line formed by the choir, carrying energy chimes that resemble a child's toy, alongside metal pipes, glockenspiel, and crotales: instruments that try to create resonance even outdoors. The choir doesn't sing yet; it calls the percussion in on breath alone, through cheap harmonicas taped to sound only a few notes — an atmosphere somewhere between an instrument and a person warming up to speak.

Because the players are spread too far across the field to hear one another, the piece uses a click track, starting at quarter note = 40 and gradually

accelerating over the course of the journey, so slowly that the change itself is imperceptible to the ear, though the tempo keeps quickening all the same (as does life, as does time). After seven minutes, the choir sings for the first time with a simple "shh" — inspired by a vocalization that helped my small child sleep — before the main word of the piece, "through," emerges. "Through" is like a river through which the piece flows; the other words imagine themselves around it. The full phrase "the only way is through" takes almost twenty minutes to reveal itself, one word at a time, like meditation, or something more neurotic than that, but an attempt. Along the way we hear the many things people had to endure: famine, drought, sickness, the ordinary catastrophes of being alive.

Near the twenty-six minute mark, the work enters a zone of quiet meditation. The choir whistles, and we are allowed, if the day is nice, to appreciate the ambient sounds around us as part of the music. From there, the piece begins to process itself — not as recap, but finding a new way forward with the same materials, pushing out. And finally, a piece built entirely on clean edges and orderly pulses gives itself over, not in defeat but with something like joy, to the messiness of the world, falling apart, learning to live a little, together as much as apart, until the music finds its way "out."

—Christopher Cerrone