

# Interview with Jake Runestad: When the Text Always Comes First!

*By Cara Tasher, conductor and teacher*

His music in one word: Relevant. Jake Runestad, composer and conductor, is one of the leading voices in choral music. He has already received thousands of performances around the world and he is only 30. Quite remarkable. Jake and I corresponded via email in May and June.

**Cara Tasher (CT):** *To paraphrase a good book: “what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun,” yet you are one of several living composers writing music that sounds new and fresh. What makes your music sound unique and how did you develop this sound?*

**Jake Runestad (JR):** First of all, thank you for your kind words! I know that many of us composers continue to search for our truest voice and it’s a thrill to hear that you consider my music to be unique! When it comes to writing vocal music, I feel that my duty as the composer is to find the music inherent in the text itself – for me, the text always comes first. I improvise singing the texts that I choose in order to find lines that utilise the natural prosody of the words, that feel good in the voice, and that allow the words to be understood as clearly as possible. Because of this, I hope that the performers and listeners find that each of my works is unique to the text to which it is set. I am also extremely interested in themes that are current, globally relevant, and socially conscious. This has resulted in works such as “We Can Mend the Sky” which is a setting of a poem by 14-year-old Warda Mohamed and explores the journey of an immigrant, “And

So I Go On” which delves into the intense sadness of losing one’s life partner, and “Dreams of the Fallen” which tells the story of those who have experienced war and attempt to live with the lasting impact of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Each of these works has a completely different sound world based on the emotions surrounding the human experience they communicate, as well as the specific sounds relating to the texts themselves.

**CT:** *How did you begin composing and how did you get where you are today?*

**JR:** I grew up in Rockford, Illinois in a very musical family – both of my parents are amateur musicians with beautiful voices and strong musical sensibilities. We would sing together around the house and my parents would bring me and my sister along to their choir rehearsals (in lieu of paying for a babysitter). I’m sure the sounds at these rehearsals seeped into my brain and helped to create the foundation of my musical understanding and love for vocal music! We had a piano at home and I began playing by ear and plunking out melodies that I heard on the radio. This developed into adding accompaniment and then exploring my own sounds and creating short piano pieces. In high school, I played keyboards and sang in a few bands, created works utilising multi-track recording, and wrote some *terrible* love songs (I knew nothing about love)!

My senior year of high school, I wrote a piece for my school’s wind ensemble (I played saxophone) and during the performance, I felt one of the most invigorating, purposeful feelings I had ever felt. In that moment, I knew that composing for others would be an integral part of my life. I attended college in south-eastern Minnesota to study instrumental music education, and met composer Libby Larsen while she was in residence for a premiere with my school’s orchestra. The orchestral conductor,

knowing I was a budding composer, set up a meeting with Libby. During our meeting, Libby perused my music, asked me many questions about my work, and showed great interest in me. At the end, she said, "Jake, I'd like for you to study with me." As you can probably imagine, I was astonished and thrilled! I had several lessons with Libby at her home in Minneapolis and she encouraged me to attend graduate school and pursue life as a composer. After I completed my student teaching in Lima, Peru, I went directly to the Peabody Conservatory where I received a master's degree in composition studying with Kevin Puts. Throughout my schooling, I wrote choral music in addition to works for wind band, orchestra, and opera. After graduate school, I developed strong relationships with several choral conductors who really supported me and believed in my music. They began performing these works and sharing them with others, and this circle began to grow and grow and now stretches across the globe!

**CT:** *In your online video for American Composer's Forum Next Notes, you advised budding composers to "always write from your heart." Based on the music that I've heard from your pen, your heart must be beautiful, vibrant and exciting. What inspires you to write and where do you find the texts for your works?*

**JR:** My world view is made up of a collection of my life experiences as well as interactions with each person that I have encountered along the way. I believe that the most powerful music is a direct expression of life – with all of its complexities, all of its joy, all of its pain, and all of its beauty. If we are to be honest with ourselves (and with others), the art must not shy away from difficult subjects or truly authentic feelings. We cannot merely gloss over the surface of these complex emotions – we must engage with them deeply in order to hear and feel something profound. In my work, I try to hone in on the essence of the human experience

and be completely honest and vulnerable in bringing that out through the marriage of text and music.

There are so many engaging texts that have been written but not all lend themselves to being set to music. Many writings already contain all of the information (or too much information) one needs to experience their meaning. When searching for a text for a vocal work, I seek words that are simple, direct, and communicate something about the human experience. These words must not be too flowery or too descriptive so that there is room for the music to add meaning of its own.

One of my favourite ways to create is through collaboration with living writers. I have written three operas with living librettists, and many of my choral works have been projects with living poets including Brian Turner, Warda Mohammed, and Brian Newhouse. One of my most frequent collaborators, the über-talented poet and librettist Todd Boss, has written original words for several works including "And So I Go On," "Waves," "One Flock," and a forthcoming work about the 276 young women who were stolen from their school in Nigeria by the terrorist group Boko Haram. I love feeling the electrifying energy that is volleyed back and forth when collaborating and I find the resulting work to be far greater than the sum of its parts.

**CT:** *You've already amassed an enormous output of music. Which of your works are your favourites to see and hear performed?*

**JR:** Oh my! That's like choosing a favourite child! I don't think that I can choose favourites, but I will tell you about two works that have taken on a life that I never expected.

When I was in college, I put together a small choir of my friends in order to practise conducting and to perform new music. I wrote a work for them called "Nyon Nyon" that

incorporates unique vocal sounds, beatboxing, and nonsense words. At the time, I thought it was just a fun way to make music, but little did I know that this work would become my most-performed piece, receiving thousands of performances around the world! 2016 is the tenth anniversary of this work and it is just as thrilling to hear it today as it was when it was first created!

In November of 2015, just after the terrorist attacks in Paris, France, California State University at Long Beach found that one of their students, Nohemi Gonzalez, was killed there while studying abroad. The chamber choir, under the direction of Dr. Jonathan Talberg, shared music at Nohemi's vigil held on campus. The following day, the choir was to begin rehearsals on holiday music but Dr. Talberg, after considering the previous day's event, felt that the choir needed more time to grieve the loss of their colleague. At the beginning of rehearsal, Dr. Talberg passed out my SATB work "Let My Love Be Heard," and the choir sight-read, rehearsed, and recorded this piece – in a single rehearsal. They posted the recording on SoundCloud and the president of the university shared it with the entire school community as an offering of love, hope, and peace in this difficult time. I received countless messages from listeners stating how much this music meant to them and helped them to feel more deeply, to name their grief, and to provide a bit of solace. I had never intended this work to carry that specific message, nor to serve that specific purpose, but that is the beauty of music – it can speak in so many ways and the composer never knows what life it will have beyond the printed page. Each time I listen to their recording of "Let My Love Be Heard," I can hear the pain and emotion in the singers' voices – it is one of the most beautiful interpretations of my music I have ever heard.

**CT:** *Are there any specific performances of your pieces that you have attended that you can identify as being especially*

*poignant for you?*

**JR:** In 2013, I had the world premiere of a new work at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana with the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus. Entitled "Dreams of the Fallen," this work, scored for solo piano, chorus, and orchestra, is an exploration of the impact war has on an individual. The work features poetry by Brian Turner, an award-winning poet and veteran of the war in Iraq. The performance was held in a large space at the museum with military planes hanging from the ceiling and tanks flanking the orchestra. There were hundreds of veterans in the audience and many more around the world watching a live stream of the event. Just before the performance, I was backstage thanking the choir and a singer in her late 80s stood up and addressed me and the choir: "My father and my brother served in WWII- my brother never came back. I want to tell you what an honour it is to sing this piece for my brother, for my father, and to be alive to sing it today with all of you." Until that moment, I didn't fully understand the reach that this work would have or the way it would allow others to engage in the countless stories of those affected by the war experience. I spent the better part of the performance in tears while I thought about this woman, her brother and father, and the brave individuals around me whose lives have been changed by war.

**CT:** *Share with us a look into the mind of the composer. How do you approach a new composition?*

**JR:** I'll give a specific example with my work "Come to the Woods." I was commissioned by Craig Hella Johnson and Conspirare to write a new work for a concert experience dedicated to exploring human relationships. After conversations with Craig about potential themes, we settled on the human relationship with the natural world. I am a lover of nature and spend much of my time hiking, backpacking, camping,

and cycling outdoors. One of my favourite writers about the natural world is John Muir – a naturalist who helped to establish Yosemite National Park in California and founded the Sierra Club to protect wilderness areas in the USA. Muir has become a kind of folk hero in North America and I decided to create a work that captures the depth and uniqueness of his own human condition – his adventurous spirit, his passion for the wilderness, and the peace he received from living amongst the trees.

I pored over Muir's journal writings and kept a collection of my favourite passages. At one point, I came across a story in which Muir saw a storm coming and in order to experience it fully, he decided to climb a large fir tree. Yes, he climbed a tree in a storm. You may think of him as crazy, but I found this to be such a poignant metaphor and a beautiful image for a musical work. I worked and worked to refine various excerpts from my favourite passages in order to create a libretto with a clear narrative (yet room for the music to speak!). When it came time to compose, I improvised singing Muir's words attempting to capture the unique energy of each moment. These melodic lines became the main musical material and I paired them with a soundscape clarified by the piano. "Come to the Woods" has become one of my favourite pieces thanks to the meaningful collaboration with Conspirare as well as the depth with which I engaged in John Muir's life story – for me, the music feels like a pure extension of his words.

**CT:** *The incorporation of sometimes oppositional devices adds great power to your message: shouting, whispering, overtone singing, über-nasality, vocal sirens, body percussion, clapping, minimalism, maximism without excessiveness, dissonance, extreme consonance, speech-like rhythms, and soaring melodies...How did you come to utilise this diversity of musical expression?*

**JR:** I love finding new techniques and/or new sound palettes that help to enhance the meaning of the music. One of the amazing things about the human voice is its versatility – it can do almost anything! Thanks to the advent of the internet, we as listeners and creators are now exposed to music from around the world at the click of a button. This has allowed many musical cultures to move beyond their traditions and incorporate new ideas, new sounds, and new techniques into their music. I work hard to encourage singers and composers to consider more than just strict, four-part harmony and to explore the myriad of sounds that are possible with the voice. I have found that this freedom to incorporate diverse techniques helps to make a greater impact, to more clearly tell a story, and to more fully engage the performers and listeners.

**CT:** *How do you manage your publishing company on top of your composing requirements and conducting engagements?*

**JR:** I consider myself extremely lucky to be a full-time composer and I really love the freedom and sense of engagement and community that my own publishing company offers. At the same time, there are a lot of moving parts to handle with my commissions, residencies, and conducting engagements, in addition to publishing my music. I have a fabulous assistant who helps in handling many of the business elements of my company – store orders, setting up video clinics, reporting performances to my performing rights organisation, facilitating residencies, etc. With all of the travel that I do, my assistant is a lifesaver in helping me to stay sane and to have time to compose! With that said, I am still very hands-on with my music distribution and I love the ability to connect with those who are performing my music in order to answer questions and establish relationships. These relationships make our musical collaborations all the more meaningful.



**CT:** *It seems to be your tenth anniversary of your first publication. What do the next ten years hold for you?’*

**JR:** Wow, ten years is a long time! Honestly, I have no idea what the next ten years hold for me; however, I hope to continue to create meaningful musical experiences and to engage in projects that help us all to think more deeply, love more wholly, and live more fully.

## **BIOGRAPHY**



Considered a “choral rockstar” by American Public Media, **Jake Runestad** is one of today’s most popular and often-performed composers of choral music. He has received commissions and performances from leading ensembles including *Conspirare*, the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, *Seraphic Fire*, the Phoenix Chorale, the Netherlands Radio Choir, the Taipei Philharmonic Choir, as well as hundreds of collegiate, community, and high school choirs around the world. Jake’s visceral music and charismatic personality have fostered a busy schedule of commissions, residencies, workshops, and speaking engagements, enabling him to be one of the youngest full-time composers in the industry. Jake Runestad holds a Master’s degree in composition from the Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University where he studied with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Kevin Puts. Find out more at: [JakeRunestad.com](http://JakeRunestad.com)

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