# LOWER PARTS: A GOSPEL-CLASSICAL CHORAL PORTRAIT OF THE IN-BETWEEN

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#### **Abstract**

Lower Parts is a choral piece written for gospel and classical choir. The piece presents the concept of deep mental anguish as told through the lens of the 63rd Psalm.

The work uses the timbral differences between the two ensembles to illustrate the "in-between" - the liminal space that the author settled in as a result of life's stressors. Nonetheless, *Lower Parts* emerges as a testimony of the author's survival of the turmoil. The work serves as a plan for reconciliation between two choral practices that are usually kept very separate from one another.

The separation of classical choral formats from gospel choral formats presents an assumption of superiority. Thus, *Lower Parts* is an attempt to heal the rift and tell the story of a composer's plight with an identity that falls in between mental stability and emotional anguish.

### **Dedication**

To my mother, Carlene and my two brothers Owen and Terrell.

Your stories have helped mold me into the man I am.

And to my wife, Mia who has seen through all of this with me.

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#### **Introduction: My Struggle With The In-Between**

For a long time, my entire identity has consisted of what I like to call the "in-between." I would not quite fit into one of two "identities" and found myself stuck in an undefined space, in the middle, or "in between."

In my concert choir experience, I would be struggling to sing tenor parts that were genuinely too high for my not-so tenor vocal range. But when I tried to switch to the bass section of the concert choir, I found myself unable to give the lower notes the weight and richness they required. So once again I was stuck in-between – this time with respect to my singing vocal range.

In high school, I never really fit in with the predominantly black circles and in my more culturally mixed circles I was commonly found myself to be a scapegoat for racist jokes. That scenario, plus the fact that I was unable to understand anything my Jamaican great-grandmother said due to her unique accent, left me isolated. So the pattern continued and I was stuck inbetween in terms of my cultural heritage and racial identity. During my high school years I pursued sexual relationships with men who were sometimes twice my age. However, my life path has led me to fall in love with, and marry, my best friend who is a woman through and through. So for a time I was stuck in-between in terms of expressing my sexuality.

As a composer and music producer, I was heavily influenced by the drums and rhythmic patterns of hip-hop, while also being melodically intrigued with Japanese video game music. In addition to these influences I was playing Jamaican and gospel music at church. These diverse musical experiences placed me in-between and I often found myself ready to scream at my in-

between location of self. The struggle within me was constant and the fact that I was never able to come to a clear definition caused a level of inner turmoil. This personal inner struggle was amplified by several already-existing family stressors since my Mom and my two brothers were dealing with mental illness. It made my liminal space far more liminal.

In university, I was given the opportunity to really explore this "in-between" place - at least musically. I created electronic compositions while also singing in a gospel choir. I conducted orchestra rehearsals and performances while enrolled in one-on-one jazz voice lessons. But though I could explore my musical ambidexterity, I was seeing these "factions" appear in the social circles associated with all of these spaces. And these social factions demanded that I choose a side. Thus, in my music education, there was still a constant itch which asked the question, "What am I?" Am I jazz? Am I classical? What am I?

Even though all of these different spaces afforded me the opportunity to explore the breadth of my musical talent, I always had this feeling of not belonging to any of those spaces. Mainly because my involvement in these circles was enough for me to gain enlightenment, but not thorough enough for me to develop camaraderie and commitment to the social circles associated with each side I would have deferred to. Thus, "Lower Parts" is a deliberate exploration of that in-between space that I have occupied for the last 15 years of my life, where I didn't understand my place and the pain that has come along with that.

My understanding of what it meant to stand in the in-between was unexpectedly strengthened by my family's health. My mother, older brother and younger brother over the last 10-15 years have had struggles with mental trauma that completely changed our family dynamic.

As a Bible-believing Christian I found it was my duty to pray this situation away. You could imagine my confusion when the situation not only remained, but got worse. In my home it was as if debilitating mental illness was a contagious disease that had somehow not hit me. This all happened during my bachelor's degree and my master's degree - along with my processing of all the changes. I've always said my loss was as if my family members had died. They weren't the people I knew after their breakdowns and after being sedated by their medication.

I remember days when I would cry, adding more to Lower Parts in their memory. But the more I would try to finish Lower Parts, the greater my own mourning would be. It eventually led to me avoiding finishing it altogether, thus the large amount of time it's taken to get it done (along with the pandemic and York strikes). But Lower Parts now stands as not only an exploration of my in-between, but a mourning of my family's in-between - an observation of my family's suffering and an expression of my own. Even writing this paper at times felt like a walk of shame - displaying the parts of my life that kept me from moving forward. But I am very confident that me telling my story indicates the opposite. And the art I now present is a relic of survival - for me and for my family.

#### **Compositional Overview**

#### The Text

I originally intended the musical structure of this piece to be one movement for every verse in Psalm 63 from the Bible.

1 O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. 2 So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. 3 Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. 4 Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. 5 My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness. And my mouth shall praise *You* with joyful lips. 6 When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the *night* watches. 7 Because You have been my help, Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice. 8 My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me. 9 But those who seek my life, to destroy it, Shall go into the lower parts of the earth. 10 They shall fall by the sword; They shall be a portion for jackals. 11 But the king shall rejoice in God; Everyone who swears by Him shall glory; But the mouth of those who speak lies shall be stopped. (Psalm 63, NKJV)

The entire 63rd Psalm is filled with images that point to amorous pursuit (see verses 1-2) that leads to satisfied love (vs. 5) and from there to a deep sense of security (vs. 6-8). I originally explored these concepts as I wanted to expand all eleven of these verses into a full work. But the dark imagery of bloody triumph in verses 9-11 invited me to give a very clear voice to dark emotions and thoughts I was experiencing in the in-between. I eventually embraced this concept as the "Lower Parts" of verse 9.

But those who seek my life, to destroy it, Shall go into the lower parts of the earth. They shall fall by the sword;
They shall be a portion for jackals.
But the king shall rejoice in God;
Everyone who swears by Him shall glory;
But the mouth of those who speak lies shall be stopped.
(Psalm 63:9-11, NKJV)

The juxtaposition of this imagery to the first eight verses and the dark conclusion confirmed that this text would be suitable to paint my emotional descent. The fact that this was the one piece that survived in the midst of all I was going through is very appropriate.

These three verses are arranged like an epic triumph, but I wanted to adapt the meaning of the text to emphasize its darkness. So the way that I set the text was like a bloody battle where I was the one defeated and being sent to the lower parts. I was battling myself and my victory was thus a damaged, flawed victory that left me with a lot of questions. I thought that setting the text that way would allow my story to remain authentic. Especially since in my eyes, my fight deserved a cleaner victory.

Going through everything with my family left me traumatized and without a voice, therefore I chose to let this part of the Bible become a blank canvas on which to paint all of my frustration, anger, and confusion on. I wanted to unfold what the "Lower Parts" felt like to me personally and reserve the creative processing of all my emotions to a biblical space. I felt like that plan kept me from completely losing my mind.

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#### **The Four Sections of Lower Parts**

I split "Lower Parts" into four distinct sections: The Fall, The Lower Parts, The Resolution and The Reality.

#### 1. "The Fall" (Rehearsal Markings A-D)

The fall consists of a call and response between the classical soprano and alto sections. I conceive of the latter half of the ostinato (A-B-C#) as representing the air that flies above one's face. There is also a premonition of confusion as the last notes are upward while the word "down" is sung. Ostinatos are employed as a very common compositional device in this piece, as they reflect the "vamp" sections of gospel songs that have sections singing their own unique counterpoint-like lines. The repetition also serves as an allusion to the exhaustive meditation I had done in considering these complex concepts. This rhythmic device offers diversity by creating the opportunity for layering. For example, the phrase "they will go down" at bar 4 creates a pulse phrase that anchors the ostinato by emphasizing the down beat.

I chose notes that I felt would be accessible to both sections. To make the "down" idea unending, I created a call and response between the two sections. If the sopranos just kept that ostinato going, the technical challenge of sustaining the breath would have limited the section from continuing the idea easily and naturally. The notes present themselves as a little bit more powerful in the alto section due to the tessitura or where the musical pitches and vocal line sit in the range of the singers. Thus, it made sense to have the classical altos sing the "call". The extra power drives the repetition in an unexpected way.

#### 2. "The Lower Parts" (Rehearsal Marking E)

Again layered with ostinato, I decided to pass this section to the gospel ensemble for several musical and stylistic reasons. The chest-dominant vocal nature of a gospel choir would allow this lower inversion to sound darker and thus musically represent something like the bottom of a pit. The glissandos in the higher parts behave almost like birds that "swarm above" a body that is somewhat ready to die. The goal of this section was to create the feeling of "inescapable mental torment," where one idea starts and, before that idea finishes, another one begins. All three pieces create a dense layer of voices that could go on for a very long time if I had decided. Emotionally, this is what it felt like to process the "in-between".

One would think that someone being "in-between" would just stay emotionally stable. But the weight of being the one to balance such a mediatory position, meant a lot of descent. I sank. And I wanted this section to feel that way.

#### 3. "The Resolution" (Rehearsal Marking F)

The resolution is a slightly comedic section to me. A slower, more meditative section seems necessary for a piece like this where there is just so much chaos. But honestly, the turmoil my family and I had experienced didn't have a calculated, conclusive resolution the way that most movies do. In fact, this resolution section feels much more like a pocket of "calm" between rain torrents. Mentally, when I had these moments of calm, I had the opportunity to make conclusions about what was happening, try to pick up the pieces and create new "rules" that made sense of the way life had turned out. That is what the homophony in this section represents. I would not characterize it as calm, but would call it a break or release from the chaos.

I found the concept of "rejoicing in God" to be a very common theme for me personally and an aid to finding peace in the in-betweens I've described previously. I struggled (and still struggle) with a very deep sense of injustice towards God and even towards myself for the way things turned out. That sense of the need for revenge only compounded on itself to make me more and more miserable. It wasn't until I started to take care of myself that I actually started to ascend out of my own "lower parts". That's what this section is: a realization that what was happening to my family was not going to solve itself and it wasn't going to be a clean cut exit with no damage done. When I came to that realization, the God I rejoiced in, let me know that it was time to move on.

So I created more and more of a life of my own. I started weightlifting. I started going to therapy. As I created my own space of resolution these spaces of clarity became more and more of my reality and I didn't get dragged back into the chaos. The homophonic, slower tempo of this section is meant to mirror the "stability" of the monarchy described in Psalm 63:11.

11 But the king shall rejoice in God; Everyone who swears by Him shall glory; But the mouth of those who speak lies shall be stopped. (Psalm 63:11, NKJV)

There is a strong juxtaposition between the King's stability and his enemies that are a divided "portion for jackals". Thus, this section paints that concept with both choirs singing the most homophonic texture in the entire piece so far.

The melody in the section is a lot more conventional, but it actually never has a true resolution on the tonic (I chord) on the word "glory." There's a continuation of the sentiment, but the word "glory" is something that is emphasized musically, but is never a point of true

resolution harmony-wise. I imagine this as an expression in my heart of what it means for someone to "glory" in the midst of sorrow.

#### 4. "The Reality" (Rehearsal Marking G-H)

This section essentially represents aspects of my life that will never be the same after that initial "fall" into the lower parts. The things that you've seen in and on the way to the "lower parts" can be horrific, mortifying and ultimately life-changing. The baritone and bass chant of "the mouth of those who speak lies shall be stopped" is challenged by the strength and power of the "lies" sung first by the gospel choir at bar 129. The challenge becomes even more complex with the "lies" song by the rest of the classical choir at bar 148.

It paints the picture of the day-to-day when it comes to accepting The Resolution. It more specifically paints the intensity of what it looked like to begin living with 3 family members that were diagnosed with mental illness. Though there is a level of resurrection and hope, when it comes to my relationship with them, there is a new reality that is very different than before. With the resolution came a lot of damage and for that reason, it's like learning to live all over again. There were many "lies" that I fought against to get out of that rock bottom - much like the juxtaposition of the bass line to the rest of the harmonic layers from the two choirs. But this section represents a somewhat redemptive quality.

The events of the fall to the "lower parts" created a resilience in me that allowed me to keep living. That resilience is not subservient to the damage of the fall. It also no longer ignores it. It is now all a part of the new identity. So instead of resolving to a major key to bring some

sort of "happy resolution", the ending chord resembles an acceptance of the in-between and the struggle that comes with it.

I essentially wanted the ending (Rehearsal Marking H) to feel very much like a negro spiritual, thus the return to a very strict 4/4 with an accent on downbeats. The accents on the downbeats help to create an anchor for the syncopation I wanted to create. Originally when considering things, I wanted the melody to be on the word "down" but as time passed, I felt there needed to be some unique text added. So I decided upon:

Call on the Lord in a troubled time
And if you call on the Lord,
He will be right there
Call on the Lord in a troubled time
And in a troubled time He'll be there

But then I got the idea to circle back to the idea of "down" as a way of creating a sense of triumph. Especially because I had an altered version of the piece's first melody at the end. So I changed the lyrics as follows:

Trouble will come in the noonday sun
And there is war in the night,
You can hear that sound
But call on the Lord in a troubled time
And He will strike your enemy down

To emphasize the "down" I created a syncopated accent as the section was repeated in full arrangement. For the full arrangement, I could have had the sopranos of each ensemble to continue the melody together or I could have had the gospel ensemble to handle sections together. I decided that my goal of blending the worlds was most important.

#### **Ensemble Rationale and Choices**

Now though this piece serves as an expression of my own emotional turmoil, the setting of the piece between a classical choir and a gospel choir serves as a separate exploration. I wanted to combine the beauty of both ensembles to create a unique experience. All throughout the piece I wanted the two ensembles to operate mostly as two groups, with separate roles though there are sections where I decide to blend the two of them. In the piece, the gospel choir usually serves as the melodic leader. I chose this ensemble for this role for a few reasons. Gospel choir singing is percussive. Songs like "It's Only a Test" by Bishop Larry D. Trotter and the Sweet Holy Spirit Combined Choirs demonstrate the gospel choir's characteristic harder, glottal onset and offset (e.g., "It's Only a Test" at 4:34). This percussive nature allows the homophony to rhythmically move a piece. Timbre-wise, gospel music is also very flexible as demonstrated in "My Soul Doth Magnify the Lord" by O'landa Draper & The Associates. Not that classical choirs can't create unique sounds. I've simply found that gospel choirs are much more extreme in terms of the timbres that are created out of the ensemble - like the dark "woo-woos" or the twangy "my soul doth magnify"). Lastly, gospel choir diction is very close to 21st century, Western speech patterns and styles which appeals to me and was something I wanted to use as for the leading ensemble.

Classical choral singing has the capacity for an impressionistic, decorative, polyphonic style that allows for rhythmic layering that reinforces the metre of a piece. The head voice-dominant singing style of the higher female voices provides an extension in the full range of the ensembles. It also provides a slightly wider capability in the softer side of the dynamic range.

The entire piece represents a fight to become unified - seeing what avenue is the right one to make both of the ensembles into one ensemble.

There were a few places where I intentionally wrote in the unity of the two ensembles. "Those who seek to destroy my life" at bar 13 was used as an original conclusion I had that my life was about to be destroyed. So I made sure both choirs said this loud and clear. The transition into the Lower Parts at rehearsal letter D drew a very sharp distinction between two worlds and the "crash" of hitting rock bottom. The "glory" of bar 100 is an emphasis on the concept of glory (benefiting and gleaning from God) while also a consideration on whether what I've experienced from trusting in God is actual glory. Lastly, the spiritual section of rehearsal mark H is a moment of inner reconciliation that makes a final conclusion about God's relationship to me as it relates to the Lower Parts.

Because the two ensembles used for this piece have different rehearsal and learning practices, I would need to be diverse in the way that I prepare both ensembles. For the gospel choir, I would use the demo recording of the piece for them to learn the parts and for rehearsal we'd go through the polishing by rote. For the classical ensemble, they would read the sheet music.

But when both ensembles are ready, I would bring them together and use the similarities found in their parts to actually broaden their understanding of one another. This would be an attempt for me to recreate the "in-between" where both of these ensembles are adopting each other's learning styles.

#### **Melodic Simplicity and Audience Perception**

In writing the melodies of this piece, I wanted to balance the perception of the complexities through what the audience hears and the invitation for the audience to participate in what they hear. I wanted to convey the tension of my experience, while providing memorable melodies that would remain with an audience after the piece was performed. In having this piece performed, I would want to sing through sections of the piece with the audience - unite the audience as a choir, like I had done with the classical and gospel ensemble. To do that, I wanted to create melodies that were memorable and easily accessible to the range of the average person. For example, the "They will go down" from the gospel choir at bar 5 is very simple in melody and its accessibility would make the text stand out.

I also wanted to create parts that when sung alone, would be melodically interesting for each part singing and not simply an accompaniment to the melody. Rehearsal marking C is a great example of this, as each part rhythmically works together to create a layered wall of sound that is dynamic and engaging for each singer - save the bass and baritone part. But the basses and baritone receive their own interesting melodies at bar 70.

#### **Word Painting**

Now because I had created limiters on the melodic experience, I needed to find other ways to paint the dark nature of my story. So I chose to do this with the crafting of the melodic intervals, syncopation, polyrhythmic layering and harmony.

The first major sign that something is "different" about the piece is the flat 5 in the "those who seek to destroy" line found at Bar 14. This flat 5 could have easily been sharp to fall in line with

the B minor pentatonic scale, but I chose to create an unexpected turn in the melody along with the B flat major chord on that same note. The listener that comes from either a gospel or Classical song background would instantly pick up that something is different about the atmosphere being created.

I harmonically expanded on the imagery by adding more ventures away from the B natural minor key centre. In the repetition of the "those who seek to destroy my life" line at rehearsal letter B, the soprano and alto lines feature chromatic departures from the conventional gospel parallel harmony and help the harmony to arrive at a development of the original thought. This painted the questioning of the text; a qualifying to see if the claims made in this verse of Psalm 63 were true, especially in the in-between.

At bar 164, there is also a very sharp entry of a CMaj11 chord that is built off of the F# in one of the closing melody to paint the "trouble [that comes] in the noonday sun". This harmonic realization vastly differs from traditional gospel harmony. Each of these deviations calls for the audience to consider the text and listen to the painted struggle.

Rhythmically, I chose to challenge a classical choir's usual emphasis on the 1 and the 3 by introducing syncopation that diversified the layering of the ensembles. For example the melody at bar 70 leans heavily on syncopation, as well as the soprano-alto response to the tenor's melody at letter C. The Lower Parts section at Letter E also features glissandos from the concert choir with various starting points rhythmically that melodically find their end at their four-bar phrase.

#### The Addition of the Gospel Baritone

Traditionally, gospel choir harmony has an SAT arrangement. All male parts get combined into one male section. Unfortunately, this leaves lower male voices to fend for themselves, often singing out of their range out of the gate. For example, Hezekiah Walker's "Christ Did It All" started tenors on a pretty strong Ab4. For baritones, that is a zealous start and it's unheard of for basses. Of course, to say that gospel choir doesn't feature 4-part harmony is too much of a blanket statement. Some notable places I heard the use of four parts were in some very rare cases in Donald Lawrence's more ensemble work with *The Company*. They would have occasional cluster harmonies that were a major second away from one another for extra colour (see "Sunday Morning" by Karen Clark-Sheard and "The I Am Factor") but never a true commitment to a 4th part. It was even rarer to find a fourth part in the men. Look through the works of Richard Smallwood, Hezekiah Walker, Kirk Franklin, Walter Hawkins, Dr. Mattie Moss Clark and the Clark Sisters, Donnie McClurkin. There are little-to-no 2nd-tenor, baritone or bass parts.

This alone created more "liminal space" that I had to navigate on my own. Thus in this piece, I built a part that was more accessible to me. Thus, the baritone part that I created for 'Lower Parts' was a departure from traditional gospel harmony. I scored it for my own vocal talents as well as the other men out there that could not sing the higher, belted tenor parts. Combining this new section with the higher tessitura of the tenor parts, it created more room for the expression of the male voice in this piece. The baritone part also serves a spot for me and my voice in this ensemble. I conformed a lot of the nuances of the part to what I would like to sing and created a section out of it. This way my voice continues throughout the entire piece.

#### **Conclusion**

What I failed to recognize about the liminal space I was in was that I had gained an unprecedented ability to speak the languages of the spaces I lived between. I could vocally adapt the styles of jazz and classical music. I could play in the styles of gospel and Contemporary Christian Music. I could speak to both classically trained and aurally trained musicians. At first, this brought confusion. I was confused about what I felt was a very clear agenda to separate the worlds and polarize them - make them enemies. It frequently made people choose between the worlds and never know what was on the other side of their choice. But out of this confusion, I desired to see the two worlds reconcile. But I failed again. I waited for someone to reconcile the worlds and heal the rift that only I was seeing. As I waited, I became more and more disappointed with the "agenda" I saw and felt more alienated by the tension I experienced between the classical and non-classical worlds. But then I realized there was a very peculiar opportunity to set up camp in the inbetween and make this space beautiful, rather than disdain it.

Lower Parts serves as a processing of the roller coaster that has been my growing pains and family distress. One would think that in the midst of such distress, it would make sense to abandon the faith that disappointed me.

To such a suggestion (one that first came from myself), I must respond with a deep sense of gratitude. My family was distressed, but by the grace of God they are not dead. Many of the situations I witnessed should have resulted in tragedy, but their lives were spared. I credit that to the sovereignty of God. Not only are they alive, but I am also alive to share the story of many other families that have been distressed by mental anguish. My faith preserved me when I

wanted to take my own life because of the turmoil. If I serve as a beacon of the hope of survival for someone who is not as far along in the journey as I am, I credit that also to God.

I have the opportunity to create new memories with them and allow the latter parts of our lives to be a healing journey.

To say that life is void of suffering is a lie. To say that God automatically eliminates all suffering is a lie. But Jesus Christ grants comfort to those who suffer, so that they have the foresight to endure and the hindsight to tell survival stories; just like the Apostle Paul:

We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.

(2 Corinthians 4:8-10, NKJV)

May the reader of this text and the listener of this piece survive the Lower Parts.

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#### **Musical Scores**

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R. Nathaniel Dett – "O Holy Lord"

Moses Hogan – "Joshua Fit the Battle"

Handel – "Coronation Anthems"

Roy Harris – "Symphony No. 3"

Wynton Marsalis – "All Rise"

Mozart - "Coronation Mass"

Mozart – "Requiem Mass in D minor"

Offenbach - "Tales of Offenbach" - "Doll Aria"

Palestrina – "Pope Marcellus Mass"

Josquin Des Prez – "Ave Maria"

Henry Purcell – "Dido and Aeneas" – "When I Am Laid in Earth"

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