

Musical Analysis of:

Dead Elvis

by

Michael Daugherty

Final Thesis

Presented to Graduate Faculty of University of Bergen- Grieg Academy

In Partial Fulfillment for a
Masters of Applied Music

Rachael Goins

May, 2012

Table of Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. Background
- III. Musical Analysis
- IV. Literary and Historical Background
- V. Critique and Interpretation of Composer's Intentions
- VI. Performance Practice
- VII. Conclusion
- VIII. Bibliography

Introduction

Michael Daugherty's *Dead Elvis* at first glance looks like a simple post-modern piece for solo bassoon dressed as Elvis impersonator; straightforward and utterly silly. But hidden within this repetitive, seemingly simple piece are irony, tragedy, comedy, and complex literary and cultural references spanning from the 13th century to 1977, when unpacked reveal an exciting and well crafted theme and variations that has become a standard and cherished member of bassoon repertoire bassoonists are grateful to have.

Written in 1993, "Dead Elvis" calls for: violin, clarinet, c trumpet, bass trombone, contrabass, percussion and solo bassoon dressed in an Elvis Las Vegas 1970's jumpsuit. Daugherty states explicitly in the program notes "Dead Elvis is scored for the same instrumentation as *Histoire du Soldat* (1918), in a which a soldier sells his violin, and his soul, to the devil for magic book. I offer a new spin on this Faustian scenario: a rock star sells out to Hollywood, Colonel Parker, and Las Vegas for wealth and fame. I use *Dies irae*- a medieval Latin chant for the Day of Judgement-as the principal musical theme in my composition to pose the question, is Elvis dead or alive beyond the grave of Graceland?" (Daugherty, 1993)

Daugherty draws on many musical styles in *Dead Elvis* from boogie woogie, rhythm and blues to opera, Gregorian chant and pieces them together in a contemporary, avant-garde piece. *Dead Elvis* is built around variations of the first seven notes of the 13th century *Dies irae* chant. This chant has been used in many famous works such as Berlioz' *Symphony Fantastique*.

Background

Daugherty has written approximately 80 works, many for orchestra and wind band as well as a mix of instruments in chamber ensembles, the majority of them inspired by American popular culture. His inspirations and themes include : *Hollywood, Las Vegas, Leopold Stokowski, Philadelphia, Rosa Parks, 1960's Civil Rights movement, Desi Arnaz, James Cagney, Barbie, Super Man, Hell's Angels, Jackie O, Elvis, Liberace, Frank Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe, Lucy Arnaz, Paul Robeson, Route 66, Mount Rushmore, Motown, trains, Abraham Lincoln, Radio City Music Hall, Sunset Strip, Diego Rivera murals, Detroit, American auto industry, motorcycles and UFOs*. Daugherty has written program notes on nearly all his works including a description of what event or person inspired him to write the piece. In this respect the content of Daugherty's work is similar to that of Andy Warhol who used many of the very same figures: Marilyn Monroe, Elvis, and Jack O to name a few as well as other intrinsically American objects or ideas such as motorcycles and rhythm and blues.

"For me icons serve as a way to have an emotional reason to compose a new work. I get ideas for my compositions by browsing through second hand book stores, antique shops, and small towns that I find driving on the back roads of America. The icon can be an old postcard, magazine, photograph, knick-knack, matchbook, piece of furniture or roadmap. Like Ives and Mahler, I use icons in my music to provide the listener and performer with a layer of reference. However, one does not need the reference of the icon to appreciate my music. It is merely one level among many in the musical, contrapuntal fabric of my compositions.

The Metropolis Symphony and Bizarro are based on the Superman story; Desi is inspired by the television character Ricky Ricardo. One hears urban Detroit in the industrial sounding Motown Metal and the courage of an Afro-American civil rights icon in the emotional charged Rosa Parks Boulevard. UFO is inspired by the unidentified flying objects that have been an obsession in American popular culture since 1947.

Not surprisingly, Niagara Falls draws its inspiration not only from the falls themselves, but most importantly from the pop culture that surrounds this natural wonder." (michaeldaugherty.net, 2012)

Daugherty has become widely known as *the* composer who writes about American 20th century cultural icons and has said he is surprised there are not more composers who write music in a similar sort of genre. Daugherty has been compared to Charles Ives and Aaron Copland for his use of songs from folk and popular culture; "references" as he puts it (Perlich, audio interview). Dead Elvis, which is a theme and variations on the Dies Irae, has musical similarities with Ives' "Variations on America" (1892) which is a theme and variations on "America the Beautiful". Both pieces take a world famous melody, so ingrained they are bordering on cliché and play with the theme to make fresh and unexpected music. Daugherty's style is American in its use of bombast, steady rhythm and snappy melodies that audiences and critics deem to be a ingenious mix of popular culture appeal and sophisticated composing.

Daugherty has quite an impressive resume having received a Fulbright scholarship to study with Pierre Boulez at ICRAM in Paris, as well as a masters from the Manhattan School and a doctorate from Yale. He went on to study at Darmstadt and with Gyorgy Ligeti in Hamburg. Daugherty then became a professor of composition at Oberlin Conservatory (1986-91) and currently teaches at the University of Michigan.

Charles Ullery, principle bassoonist of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, who taught at Oberlin the same time as Daugherty, asked him to compose a piece for bassoon students to perform at playing juries. The result was “Bounce” a duet for two bassoons written in the very highest register of the bassoon. Ullery then asked Daugherty if he might be interested in writing a piece for bassoon solo and strings and “Dead Elvis” is what he came back with. Initially Ullery was surprised with the result. The first performance was with the Grand Tetons Chamber players in 1993 without an Elvis costume and Daugherty conducting. It was after that first performance that Daugherty decided to try the piece with a costume and it has become standard practice since for the soloist to dress as an Elvis impersonator. Ullery also recorded “Dead Elvis” with David Zinman and the London Sinfonietta on the album “American Icons”. He has performed “Dead Elvis” several times with the SPCO who has recently decided to invest an official Elvis costume and wig for future performances (Ullery, 2012)

Daugherty is especially inspired by icons from the mid 20th century when he was growing up. He got the idea for “Dead Elvis” from watching old Elvis movies.(Daugherty, 2012) While composing he will take a break to watch a Star Trek episode or a Humphrey Bogart film in a studio filled with second hand shop memorabilia and Star Trek souvenirs.(Daugherty, 2004) Daugherty has said he would love to compose a Star Trek piece but would never be able to because of copyright law.(Perlich, 2004)

The use of celebrities such as Elvis and Liberace would not be possible in the present day due to strict copyright. He was able to write Dead Elvis shortly before Elvis's name became trademarked. (Perlich,2004) Daugherty has transitioned to composing about significant historical figures and places in American history such as Rosa Parks and Abraham Lincoln to avoid dealing with possible copyright infringements. In preparation for composing “Dead Elvis” Daugherty traveled to the International Elvis Impersonator Convention in Las Vegas for research and inspiration. Around the time “Dead Elvis” was written in the early 90's, there was no internet which made the convention difficult to find. The Elvis impersonator culture was more underground or “trailer court” than it is now (Perlich, 2004). In his opinion Elvis's memory and legacy have become more commercialized. It is an interesting stance to take because it is likely due to Elvis's notoriety that “Dead Elvis” is one of Daugherty's more successful

pieces. Whether Daugherty intentionally writes about these subjects hoping to sell more cds or be commissioned is of course up for debate but it would be naïve to think that the celebrity of the subjects his works surround do not contribute to his commercial success.

Daugherty models the framework of “Dead Elvis” on *Histoire du Soldat* by Stravinsky using the same instruments but instead of being centered around the violin Daugherty makes the bassoon the soloist. *Histoire* is meant “to be read, played and danced” (Stravinsky, 1924). The narration by C.F. Ramuz is based on another Faustian tale called “The Runaway Soldier and the Devil” (Taruskin, 1295). *Histoire* follows the fairy tale almost exactly, centering around a soldier who has deserted the war. The devil approaches the soldier as he plays his fiddle, and offers him a magic book that will predict the future making him rich in exchange for his fiddle, an allegory for his soul. The music of *Histoire* is often played as a suite without the narration and dancing, some say because the narration is not necessary to enjoy the music and is even a hindrance to the music itself.

“...this stuffy moralite, conventially linear in form and complacently preachy in content, was the bastard offspring of mismatched talents in temporary opportunistic alliance, Its inauthenticity as a work of art forever condemns it to stepchild status among Stravinsky's works for the stage, even as the inspired music, unencumbered by the verbal ball-and-chain, has long since won its inevitable place among the Stravinskian evergreens.” (Taruskin, 1293)

Despite the narration being trite or even unnecessary to the success of a performance of the piece, it is the collaboration between Ramuz and Stravinsky that led to the creation of this beloved work which has been the inspiration for modern works such as “The Fiddler's Tale” (1998) by Wynton Marsalis and of course “Dead Elvis”. It is also a perfect piece for students to put together because of the small number of instruments.

Histoire left a mark on music history with its use of unusual rhythms and syncopation throughout the music. The music changes meter nearly every bar but you can tap your foot to the beat as though it were in 2/4. A use of rhythm that lends itself to dancing is something that *Dead Elvis* and *Histoire* share as they both have a driving beat throughout. Stravinsky, like Daugherty, also borrows musical styles from other non classical genres such as the tango, waltz, ragtime and the Lutheran chorale. The Grand Chorale, which is the penultimate movement of *Histoire* is based on “A Mighty Fortress”, a famous Lutheran chorale. And like Daugherty basing his instrumentation on Stravinsky's, according to Taruskin, *Histoire*'s instrumentation is based on klezmer bands of eastern Europe despite Stravinsky's claim that he based his choice of instrumentation on standard jazz instrumentation with the exception of the bassoon.

“Thus the ensemble of *Histoire du soldat* is no jazz band, but a stylized village band compounded out of overlapping

cadres of ustilug *klezmerium*, Vaudois *faristes* and *pasodoble* players from Seville, all led by a Gypsy fiddler. The fact they play ragtime no more types them than the fact that play a chorale.” (Taruskin, 1306)

Musical Analysis

“Dead Elvis” is comprised of eight sections of music in which the Dies irae is varied and restated. Daugherty uses the dies irae in thirteen ways throughout the piece: different transpositions, rhythms, sound effects and of course instrumentation as he weaves it through the piece, sometimes as the melody and sometimes as the accompaniment. He only uses the first seven and at times only six notes in the case that he does not want there to be resolution to the tonic pitch.

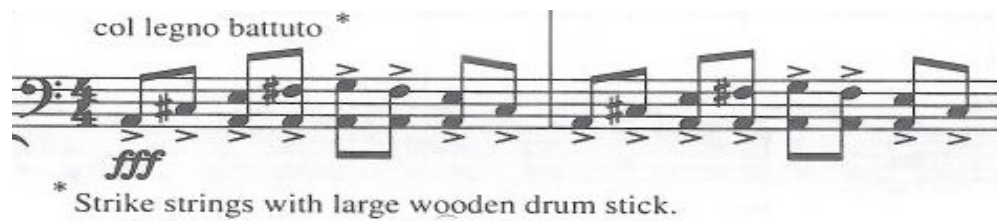
Illustration 1: Dies Irae melody



The piece consists of bits and pieces of cultural references which he repeats several times mixed with chromaticism. The music is seemingly minimalist but Daugherty does not consider himself or “Dead Elvis” to be minimalist. In “Dead Elvis” he uses some techniques that are found in minimalism such as using short motifs several times with slight variations, using a concept for the work, and harmonies that do not change for long periods. On the other hand while each individual part in “Dead Elvis” is minimal, when they are played together the texture is complicated, creating a richer sound which at times feels as though there are two different meters or two different melodies playing at the same time. Looking at his other works, especially the symphonic works like “Time Machine”(2003) the textures and melodies are very lush. Some are programmatic, like “Dead Elvis” and deeply expressive and dramatic, attempting to portray tragic figures like Jackie O or complex characters like Liberace and Elvis with a modernized take on Sturm and Drang (Daugherty,1993) The technique of repetition is one used in popular music and I think that is where the connection lies rather than with minimalism. Minimalism has had an influence on popular music but I think in the case of Daugherty popular music is having an influence on his work and not the other way around. His use of standard scales, ostinato, canon, sequences, prominent melodies, complex rhythmic patterns, abrupt shifts in character and tempos throughout his works indicate his works are not minimalistic even if he might utilize some of the same techniques.

“Dead Elvis” opens with the contrabass striking the strings with a mallet to create a louder, electric boogie woogie sound as the bassoon enters with the “Peter Gunn” motif.

Illustration 2: Contrabass boogie woogie bass line



When utilizing the boogie woogie bass line he uses just the first chord of the progression throughout the piece. Daugherty quotes only the opening minor third from the theme of “Peter Gunn” which is repeated several times throughout the piece. This particular theme is a well known jazz standard that has been embedded into American popular culture and has been featured in many films and television shows foreshadowing the entrance of a mysterious character, often in an ironic way. “The Blues Brothers” film is probably most famous for the use of this theme. This film is also, coincidentally, the inspiration for the comical Bassoon Brothers bassoon quartet, who premiered Daugherty's piece “Hell's Angels”, the first concerto for bassoon quartet and orchestra.

As the soloist enters the stage dressed as an Elvis impersonator and holding a bassoon, which is likely one of the more obscure and silly looking instruments in most people's realm of knowledge, an ironic and comical atmosphere is created on stage for the audience. The “Peter Gunn” theme creates a sense of excitement and mystery as well as comedy as the journey of Dead Elvis begins. The bassoon repeats this three bar motif twice with *molto* “Elvis” vibrato, prefacing the first entrance of the Dies Irae theme by the violin which is answered by the trombone. The bassoon repeats the same melody three times as the violin and trombone continue a call and response of the Dies Irae theme. The bassoon, bass, violin, trombone and percussion initially start out taking turns beginning with the bassoon, bass and percussion while the violin and trombone enter with their call and response afterward, alternating. But the Dies Irae call and response decides to stop waiting and plays while the bassoon continues the “Peter Gunn” motif. The lines that were initially working together in an ordered fashion become a bit chaotic moving independently of one another. Daugherty shortens the number of beats between the clangs of the percussion so that it ceases to punctuate the end of the phrases in the melodic lines until the bar before rehearsal G. Daugherty uses this technique frequently in his music and refers to it as “layering” when he writes lines that are independent of each other but compliment one another. A polyphonic atmosphere is created as the call and response of the Dies Irae plays alongside the “Peter Gunn” theme supported by boogie woogie ostinato and the punctuation of the

percussion.

The image shows a page of a musical score with seven staves. From top to bottom, the staves are labeled: Cl. (Clarinets), Bn. (Bassoon), Tpt. (Trumpets), Tbn. (Trombones), Perc. (Percussion), Vn. (Violins), and Cb. (Cello/Double Bass). The Cl. staff has a box containing the letter 'G' in the top right corner. The Bn. staff features dynamic markings of *ff*, *f*, and *ff* with accents. The Tbn. staff has dynamic markings of *f* and *p* with accents, and the word *gl.* (glissando) is written above the notes. The Perc. staff includes a *(l.v.)* marking. The Vn. staff has a *gl.* marking above the notes. The Cb. staff has a *gl.* marking above the notes. The score is written in a common time signature and features various rhythmic patterns and articulations.

Daugherty groups the instruments into pairs or small groups several times throughout the piece. The bassoon, bass and percussion begin as a group and then the violin and trombone become a pair countering the rest of the group. Another example of different instrument pairings: violin, percussion and bass during the first “galloping” variation

Illustration 3: instrument groupings #1

and again later when each instrument is paired except for the percussion before the restatement of the “Peter Gunn” theme:

Illustration 4: instrument groupings #2

The bassoon and bass, violin and clarinet, and trombone and trumpet, using their plungers in tandem to create a glissando sound effect, are all paired.

The Dies Irae is passed onto the bassoon in a galloping variation that builds in excitement as more instruments enter. The percussion, violin and bass play an echo of the bassoon gallop. In the third statement of this variation the Eb clarinet plays chromatically in the stratosphere of its range, feeling out of time as it begins on the second beat and plays long syncopated notes that change in length value

seemingly at random, creating a disoriented effect.

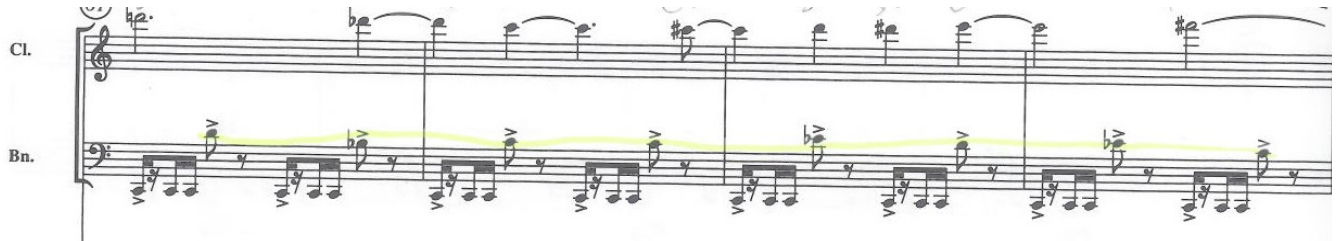
The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Clarinet (Cl.) and Bassoon (Bn.). The Clarinet part is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The Bassoon part is written in bass clef with a key signature of one flat. The Bassoon part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, often beamed together, which is highlighted with a yellow glow. The Clarinet part consists of a series of notes, some with slurs, moving across the staff. The overall texture is rhythmic and driving.

Illustration 5: Clarinet line against basson dies irae “gallop”

The bass adds a bartok pizzicato that has a subtle percussive effect. The sound stops in a grand pause except for a single forte piano B natural in the trumpet that allows the soloist to make a flashy pose or raise an arm. This section of the piece reaches a climactic point as the violin and cymbal scrape away sixteenths, the trombone in rhythmic unison with the bassoon half a step up, and the clarinet crescendos to fff. This four bar phrase is repeated five times until the grand pause. The final bar in the phrase is played with another grand pause, and to close the bar is repeated three more times. I find that his use of repetition builds suspense as the phrase repeats itself over and over with more instruments adding to the texture with slight changes and dynamic increases until it builds and builds to a grand pause or a sudden transition to a new section of music.

Illustration 6: Culmination of galloping theme with grand pauses and bartok pizz.

This moment also sets up a dramatic operatic declaration of “It’s Now or Never” with the bassoon completely alone. Daugherty’s use of melody is minimal but he changes instrumentation, rhythm, mood and dynamics to make the music interesting. Adding one more instrument line while the other continues to chug away and making changes in the rhythms by increasing or decreasing the speed of the rhythm from eighths to sixteenths or shortening the amount of rests between a motive to increase the intensity.

The music makes an abrupt shift as the soloist begins playing “O Sole Mio” or as it is known to Elvis fans “It’s Now or Never”. This melody was originally a Neapolitan song written in 1898 that has been sung by many opera greats such as Luciano Pavarotti. This is the one moment in the piece that quotes Elvis but really it is quoting Eduardo di Capua. According to Daugherty, he chose this melody because it is not copyrighted and it was one of Elvis’s favorite songs. (Daugherty, 2011) This is a very exciting and dramatic moment in the piece and also the longest quotation that Daugherty uses in “Dead Elvis”. The rhythm in the violin feels distorted next to the other parts as it plays the Dies Irae one sixteenth note off the beat below the bassoon melody. The effect of the violin is reminiscent of the shower scene music from “Psycho” by Bernard Herrmann which creates a strong dissonance not only

musically but emotionally. Countering that mood, the bassoon is really able to sing in the high tenor register and use extreme Elvis vibrato in this shining moment of joy before the piece delves back into chromaticism.

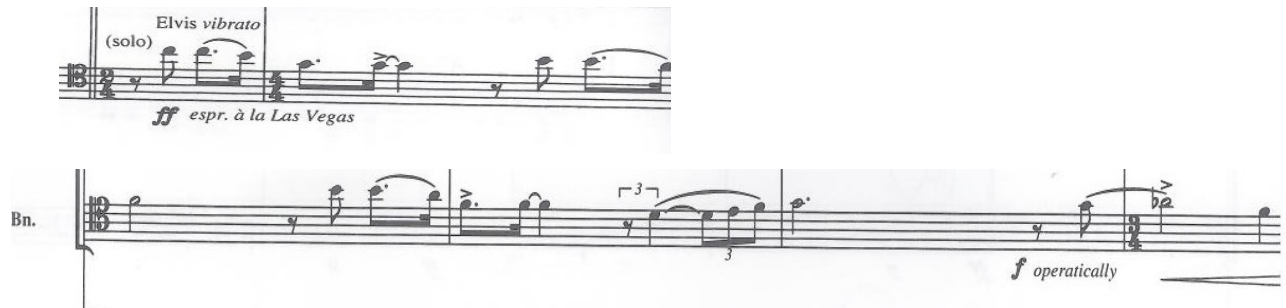


Illustration 7: "It's Now or Never" or "O Sole Mio" quotation

As the piece moves to the next section the Dies Irae theme, played by the violin, increases in tempo and is then passed to the bassoon this time in E dorian. The bassoon and the contrabass repeat the Dies Irae motif nine times as the violin and clarinet build chromatically with long, intensely sustained notes. The trombone wallops the Dies Irae melody with a plunger sforzando preceding the trumpet's pulsating sound effect that foreshadows exciting moments yet to come as it plays fast sixteenth notes of Bb, A, Bb, G, A, F which is yet another transposition of the Dies Irae motif in G dorian. The band as whole creates a cacophony of polyphonic sound with two instruments on each melodic line. As the bassoon builds slowly moving from the syncopated Dies Irae theme to a chromatic scale, building steadily from the extreme lows of the instrument to the piercing Rite of Spring tessitura. As bassoon continues to climb chromatically a sequence of syncopated rhythm begins at an A# going up by a half step each measure and then finally a new sequence of the same rhythm but moving by a half step each note until it reaches a climax on high D#.

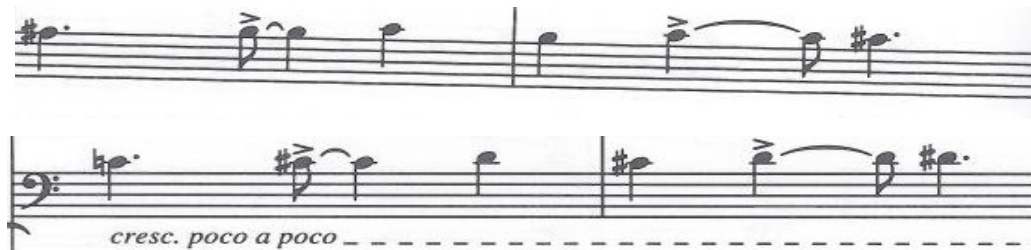


Illustration 8: Chromatic sequence #1

Illustration 9: Chromatic sequence #2

The piece reaches a penultimate climax that launches into a new level of intensity as the music returns to the “Peter Gunn” theme only this time transposed up a step and with the bass line moving at a frantic double tempo.

Illustration 10: Doublebass boogie woogies line

Daugherty adds flair to the solo part by adding scale flourishes to the main theme and changing to a high tessitura in the bassoon while the clarinet echoes with it's own flourishes.

Illustration 11: transposition of "Peter Gunn"

Illustration 12: transposition and octave change of "Peter Gunn" and clarinet flourishes

Daugherty's “layering” technique returns in this section. While the bassoon is playing the “Peter Gunn”

theme again in 4/4 he writes the rhythm of the violin so that it feels like it is playing in $\frac{3}{4}$ at a slower tempo creating a polymetric atmosphere.

The image shows a musical score for a band. The instruments listed are Bassoon (Bn.), Trumpet (Tpt.), Trombone (Tbn.), Percussion (Perc.), Violin (Vn.), and Cello (Cb.). The Bassoon part features a long, expressive line with dynamic markings of *fff* and *ff*. The Trumpet and Trombone parts have a few notes with dynamic markings of *pp* and *p*. The Percussion part has a few notes. The Violin part is highlighted in yellow and consists of a series of notes that create a 3/4 feel against the 4/4 band. The Cello part has a complex, rhythmic pattern.

Illustration 13: Violin written in 3/4 against 4/4

A denouement unfurls in the music as the bassoon is left alone with a virtuosic double tonguing Dies Irae variation. Each instrument enters one by one playing until the band has created a Dies Irae canon with the clarinet soaring above and punctuating the variation with syncopated eighths in the highest tessitura. The image of Elvis spiraling down into the depths of hell (or Hollywood) is created by the repetition of the Dies Irae theme as it continues to build in volume and intensity as each instrument is added until it suddenly stops like a house falling on the wicked witch of the east. The soloist could potentially make this pause as long or as short as they would like choosing to accelerate to the end or to take time and move from one side of the stage to the next only to suddenly cry out with a one bar repetition of the theme. This grand pause and recall of the theme is done three times and finally the piece moves into an adagio section.

Illustration 14: *Dies Irae canon*

Daugherty creates a comically sad mood turning the orchestration upside down; the violin plucks away the ostinato as the bass plays a tacky and tasteless dies irae variation in a shockingly high range to foreshadow the solo voice. The bassoon croons the dies irae garishly with *molto vibrato* to convey the image of an older Elvis singing his hits in a Las Vegas hotel, bound by contract and attempting to revive his past glory.

Illustration 15: *Bassoon melody in Slow section, variation on Dies irae*

Continuing through the variation with added flourishes, the bassoon plays chromatically and virtuosically to a high E, the highest note in the piece, soaring like an opera singer above a slow moving big band, with muted horns and a steady bass. Woven within this big band atmosphere is the Dies Irae theme embellished with harmon mutes and glissandos. Daugherty uses a planing effect here as the band moves in parallel motion on the Dies Irae theme.

Illustration 16: Planing technique

After the bassoon reaches the final high E of the piece, it begins a slow chromatic descent down, suddenly playing a syncopated rhythm that shifts between being on the beat, one 16th off and one 8th off. An image of Elvis losing his energy or forgetting his lyrics, as he had been known to do in his final years, is created until finally the bassoon is in the depths of the instrument at a tempo of 40 bpm, the band fading away in the background to nothingness.

Illustration 17: bassoon chromatic descent

The trombone enters surreptitiously with a long glissando and lands with the bassoon in a crashing thump as the bassoon begins the final Dies Irae variation. The tempo reaches it's peak at 176.

Playing alone, the bassoon lands on each measure with a sforzando note of the Dies Irae variation with three and a half beats of silence in between. And then with a sudden burst of flair, scales up to repeat the theme this time accompanied by the violin scraping frantically away at 16th notes woven with the Dies Irae theme. The sound quickly switches to the sound a 1960's Elvis movie. The bassoon grooves on syncopated dance rhythms with a boogie woogie harmony as the horns create a jazzy atmosphere with plunger mutes. The audience is suddenly in a dance scene straight from "Viva Las Vegas".

Dead Elvis employs dance rhythm with a steady driving beat, beginning with constant eighth notes strummed by the contra bass, an exaggerated reminiscence of a Las Vegas vamp played as Elvis makes his big entrance. The driving beat then moves to the bassoon while it takes over the Dies Irae. During the more exciting and tense passages the driving beat comes into play in the contra bass, bassoon and percussion. Even in lyrical passages when the main beat is syncopated and feels more relaxed the whole piece can be danced to. The end is especially dance like in the solo line, using

syncopation very reminiscent of 1960's dances like the twist.



Illustration 18: bassoon "twist" rhythm

Frenzy impends as the dance music accelerates and the bassoon is alone to play a rhythmically varied chromatic scale as the final cadenza. I feel that Daugherty really fails to be musically creative at this point in the piece where he could have played around with the different motives and themes that have been established. He instead goes with a plain chromatic scale straight from the bottom to the top.

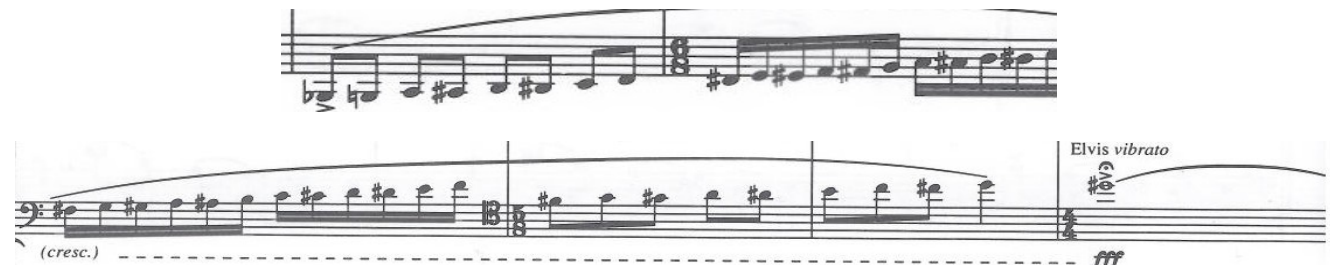


Illustration 19: Bassoon cadenza

The band enters with one final frantic statement of the Dies Irae and the piece ends on low Bb held as long as possible.

Literary and Historical Background

Daugherty portrays Elvis's life and death in an ironic pastiche that borders on spoof. The blunt, almost crass title brings about images of zombies and Halloween skeletons, intriguing the listener as to what is to come in the next ten minutes. Cue the entrance of a bassoon soloist dressed as an Elvis impersonator and the audience is sure to giggle with delight at a truly unusual sight. It is rare to see a bassoon soloist in a typical concert setting even in classical music due to the lack of projection and limited repertoire. Pairing one of the more rare and obscure instruments with the most famous pop icon apart from Michael Jackson is a unique and unexpected choice.

Looking more closely at the literary roots of the piece we go back into western history to the 16th century when the tragedy of Faust was first circulated through Germany and eventually to England where it was translated to English and developed into a theatrical work by Christopher Marlowe (Ashilman, 2011) The most famous Faust story is of course Goethe's Faust. I chose to use Marlowe's Faust as a reference because I felt it more closely reflected the story of Elvis as well as the dramatic of progression in the music.

Christopher Marlowe's "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" (1604) likens the story of Faustus, a man of lower class but great brilliance, to that of Icarus who flew too close to the sun. Faustus, a scholar has reached the peak of learning and wants to know more. He turns to magic and contemplates whether to strike a deal with the Lucifer that Mephistopheles will be in Faustus' service for 24 years.

*"Evil angel: Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art
Wherein all nature's treasure is contain'd:
Be thou as Jove is in the sky,
Lord and commander of these elements*

*Faust: How I am glutted with conceit of this!
Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please,
Resolve me of all ambiguities,
Perform what desperate enterprise I will?" (Marlowe, 4)*

Faust does enter into an agreement with the Devil and signs in blood that he will give his soul over to him after 24 years of service from Mephistopheles.

*"Faust: say, he surrenders up his soul,
So he will spare him four and twenty years,
Letting him live in all voluptuousness:
Having thee ever to attend on me.*

*To give me whatsoever I shall ask,
To tell me whatsoever I demand,
To slay mine enemies, and aid my friends
And always be obedient to my will.
Go and return to Lucifer,
And meet me in my study at midnight,
And then resolve me of thy master's mind.” (Marlowe, 11)*

Faust takes on the powers of a spirit and Mephistopheles serves Faust as demanded. He travels the world and is visited by Emperors and the Pope. His fame spreads.

*“Now his fame is spread forth in every land:
Amongst the rest the Emperor is one,
Carolus the Fifth, at whose palace now
Faustus is feasted 'mongst noble men.” (Marlowe, 28)*

But in the end Faust cannot escape his fate. He is met by an old man who begs him to repent but Mephistopheles chastises and threatens Faust for betraying his lord and master, Lucifer. Faust begins to truly fear for his soul and prepares for his fate. In one final soliloquy Faust begs for forgiveness but it is too late.

*“O, it strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air,
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell! (thunder and lightning)
O soul, be chang'd on to little water drops.
And fall into the ocean, ne'er to be found! (enter Devils)
My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!
Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!
Ugly hell, gape not! Come not, Lucifer!
I'll burn my books!- Ah Mephistopheles! (Exeunt Devils with Faustus)” (Marlowe, 45)*

The tale of Faust is one of the oldest in Western history and continues to have an important and relevant place in our culture as an everyman tale that addresses the most fundamental and complex of struggles of human existence: the preservation of one's morals in the face of temptation to power, status and wealth. Faust is a tragic hero, arguably a villainous one as well, who trades his soul for material gain. Over and over he denies opportunities to repent and in the end is torn limb from limb, his soul dragged to hell. He is a character we both sympathize with and despise for his weakness and ill-fated decisions much like Elvis. Nobody is all good or all evil. And nobody has one devil. Elvis certainly had more than one, living a life with many ups and downs.

Elvis grew up a poor, the son of a sharecropper who could barely make a living. But he dreamed of a more exciting life.

“The first thing Elvis had to learn transcend, after all, was the failure and obscurity he was born to; he had to find some way to set himself apart, to escape the limits that could well have given his story a very different ending. The ambition and genius that took him out and brought him back is there in that first music- that, and much more.” (Marcus, 127-128)

He had unusual talent and Sam Phillips took notice of him. He saw that he could make a lot of money from a good looking white kid who could sing in the sexy, wild, rock and roll style of black music. He began his recording career at Sun Records in 1953.

“If Elvis drew power from black culture, he was not exactly imitating blacks; when he told Sam Phillips he didn't sing like nobody, he told the truth. No white man had so deeply absorbed black music, and transformed it, since Jimmie Rodgers; instead of following Rodgers' musical style, as so many good white singers had, Elvis followed Rogers' musical strategy and began the story all over again.” (Marcus, 156)

Some would say that Elvis helped pave the way for black music to be popularly accepted while others were bitter at his “borrowing” of black culture and black music. He made a huge hit of “Hound Dog” which was originally a song sung by Big Mama Thorton, a black r&b singer.

“Most important the image was white. Rockabilly was the only style of early rock 'n' roll that proved white boys could do it all-that they could be as strange, as exciting, as scary, and as free as the black men who were suddenly walking America's airwaves as if they owned them. There were two kinds of white counterattack on the black invasion of white popular culture that was rock 'n' roll: the attempt to soften black music or freeze it out, and the rockabilly lust to beat the black man at his own game.” (Marcus, 143)

Elvis, among other white singers, borrowed the music of a sub culture, an oppressed culture and “absorbed” it in order to make themselves glorious and famed at the expense of others who were prohibited from being recognized in the same way. But this is not necessarily the way that Daugherty or Marcus interprets the parallels between Elvis and Faust, nevertheless, Elvis's rise to power and fame has the similar element of “borrowing power” that Marlowe's Faust does.

Greil Marcus and Daugherty consider Elvis's Faustian like act of selling out to be when he left his rockabilly, blues and folk roots. The young boy with a guitar who sang his heart out that became a Hollywood huckster making cheesy films. He signed a contract with colonel Tom Parker and everything changed. “Elvis disappeared into oblivion of respectability and security in the sixties, lost in interchangeable movies movies and dull music.”(Marcus, 121)

“it is virtually a critical canon that Elvis's folk purity, and therefore his talent, was ruined by (a) his transmogrification from naive country boy into corrupt pop star (he sold his soul to colonel Tom, or Parker just stole it), (b) Hollywood, © the Army, (d) money and soft living, (e) all of the above. *

- (footnote) This Faustian scenario is an absolutely vital part of Elvis's legend, especially for all those who took part in Elvis's event and felt bewildered and betrayed by his stagnation and decline. We could hardly believe that a

figure of such natural strength could dissolve into such a harmless nonentity; it had to be some kind of trick. Even a decade after the fact, Phil Spector was convinced that Colonel Parker hypnotized Elvis” (Marcus, 159)

Is it fair to say that Elvis was not power and fame hungry to begin with? Clearly Sam Phillips of Sun Records, where Elvis first recorded, was very interested in making a lot of money off of Elvis from the beginning and Elvis too wanted to become a star. “When I was a boy I was the hero in the comic books and the movies. I grew up believing in a dream. Now I've lived it out. That's all a man can ask for.” (Marcus, 134). So really his desire for fame and material gain was there from the beginning as he borrowed black musician's culture and became famous off of it. The irony is that by borrowing music from a taboo culture he became wildly famous and when he left those “roots” behind for Hollywood and the mainstream he was demonized, or worse, ignored. Initially Elvis's films were successful but as he made more and more the public began to catch up with the opinions of the critics and box office sales dropped along with record sales. Elvis was considered a has been and was no longer taken seriously by music lovers. He made a successful reappearance with a comeback special in December of 1968 in a style reminiscent of his earlier days. He began touring again and thus began the Las Vegas performances in white jumpsuits that would become the trademark in the final leg of his career. His divorce from his wife was looming despite the success following his comeback and he would begin to use prescription drugs heavily. These two factors would take a heavy toll on Elvis's health and well being which began to deteriorate badly. Greil Marcus describes Elvis in concert late in his career as going through the motions but not really seeming to care. The audience is so excited just at the sight of him simply because he is Elvis despite his failure to live up to the myth that surrounds him:

“He will sing, as if suffering to his very soul... But this little melodrama of casual triumph will itself be a throwaway. As with the well planned sets, the first class musicians, the brilliant costumes, there will be little life behind the orchestration; the whole performance will be flaccid, the timing careless, all emotions finally shallow, the distance from his myth necessitating an even greater distance from the musical power on which that myth is based.” (Marcus, 122)

Elvis Presley died young at age 42 in 1977, ill with several ailments that were potentially caused and likely aggravated by drug abuse. He had an astounding career that changed popular culture permanently by bringing rock and roll music to the main stream.

“Elvis has emerged as a great *artist*, a great *rocker*, a great purveyor of *schlock*, great *heart throb*, a great *bore*, a great *symbol of potency*, a great *ham*, a great *nice person*, and, yes, a great American.” (Marcus, 121)

Elvis has become a legendary icon in western culture; impersonated widely, written about extensively, both scathingly and with acclaim. His life has been exposed, analyzed, and even mythologized into the likeness of a tragic hero to be pitied and revered. In death his life and musical legacy continue to be a point of fascination in American history.

Critique and Interpretation of Composer's Intentions

Reading Daugherty's program notes on the story behind "Dead Elvis" one is left with the feeling that he wants to create different possibilities of interpretation for different listeners. Music is an art form that is even more open to interpretation than literary and visual art but in this case Michael Daugherty is using literary, historical and visual aspects in his music which make the interpretations more concrete and harder to deviate from.

In Dead Elvis, the bassoon is Elvis (or perhaps an Elvis impersonator).

Does this rock star sell out his Southern folk authenticity to the sophisticated professionalism of Hollywood movies, Colonel Parker and Las Vegas in order to attain great wealth and fame?

Yes, if you are basing your answer on history and facts. Absolutely, yes. It is obvious that Daugherty and the audience will know the answer to this question so why does Daugherty frame this as a question rather than a statement?

Dead Elvis goes far beyond this romantic Faustian scenario. For me, the two clashing Elvis images (the hip, beautiful, genius, thin, rock-and-roll Elvis versus the vulgar, cheesy, fat, stoned, Las Vegas Elvis) serve as a Sturm und Drang compositional algorithm.

One can see that this is where Daugherty both reveres and despises Elvis. He has said that when it comes to icons and celebrity he both "revels in it and is skeptical of it at the same time" (Perlich, 2004) "When I think about Elvis, he is a character that you love him and he's interesting and you loathe him at the same time." (Perlich, 2004) He effectively uses music with very different moods to portray the young Elvis (fast and exciting) and the older (mysterious and operatic). Daugherty feels that at this point everything has been done and most certainly a young rocker who makes good, becomes successful and downspirals into a drug addled early death has become a cliché; a sad but true one. If one steps back to consider it, this is quite serious material he is working with: A Faustian take on a man's success and destruction. But comedy is created with the visual and emotional dissonance of Elvis playing dramatically volatile music on the bassoon.

Further, my use of the dies irae (a medieval Latin chant for the Day of Judgement) as the principal musical theme of "Dead Elvis" signifies yet another aspect of the Elvis myth: some people believe Elvis is dead, while others believe he is alive and well in Kalamazoo.

The Dies Irae chant which was written in the 13th century is a part of the Requiem mass honoring the dead.

“The hymn is a meditation on the Last Judgment, when Christ will come again in glory, no longer granting mercy, but as the Just Judge who will separate the just from the wicked, casting the latter into eternal fire, and welcoming the former to eternal bliss. The hymn closes with a supplication for mercy before the coming of that terrible day.” (Franciscan archive)

A safe assumption to make is that most people in the western world have heard the Dies Irae, and undoubtedly so if they are classical musicians. Strong associations of approaching doom, death and hell are made with the Dies Irae unequivocally due in part to Berlioz's (“Symphony Fantastique”) musical portrayal of witches dancing at a funeral of the beheaded, but of course also because the hymn describes the day of coming judgment when the “wicked are cast into eternal fire”. Much like “Peter Gunn” brings up the image of “The Blues Brothers” so ingrained in us that it is hard to visualize anything else. It is curious that Daugherty, who has made a career of writing music with popular and western culture references, would say that he uses the Dies Irae to ask the question if Elvis is dead or alive when its strong connotations are only with death and not with life. “Dead Elvis” is structured in such a way that the Dies Irae seems to be haunting Elvis, continuing to come up in variation after variation in different instruments with varying prominence, that certain doom is only a matter of about ten minutes until finally the piece ends with a final apocalyptic bang. Knowing what we know of Elvis, the audience would most likely assume that in the piece he is already dead, or will be by the end of the piece. Daugherty is able to convey other aspects of the piece mentioned in the program notes without words such as the extreme character changes between the young Elvis and the older Elvis but in regards to the question of Elvis still being alive, he fails to express his idea effectively through music. Perhaps he should have called it “Dead Elvis?”.

Perhaps the question is not whether Elvis is alive or dead, but why the phenomenon of Elvis endures beyond the grave of Graceland. Elvis, for better or worse, is part of American culture, history and mythology. If you want to understand America and all its riddles, sooner or later you will have to deal with (Dead) Elvis.

Like any of the greatest stars ie Michael Jackson, Marilyn Monroe, the Beatles etc. there are impersonators, fan websites, movies, essays, criticisms, and posthumous album releases to continue making money off of the fame of these individuals, and perhaps this is the case with Daugherty as well, and because they have a place in the hearts and minds of the public and even more simply because the

public still enjoys the works that were created by these special few whose fame has endured beyond death, Elvis very much included.

But considering when these program notes were written which is nearly twenty years ago, Elvis's death was a much more recent occurrence and his first generation fans were still very much alive. Today, however, Elvis is not as pervasive as he once was in our mainstream pop culture.

“What was striking, given the staggering ubiquity of Elvis Presley after his death, was his disappearance from ordinary talk, paintings, movies, t-shirts, other people’s songs—from the cultural conversation through which a society explains itself to itself.” (Marcus, 2003)

Future audiences and performers of this piece will likely not have the same associations with Elvis they did in 1993. Less likely to be fans they are more likely to look at Elvis as a spectacle of kitsch like Liberace; someone who is wildly famous but a bit of a joke.

Daugherty wants to tell a story of an American icon but also appears unsure of whether or not he wants his piece to be completely programmatic. The use of questions rather than statements implies that he does not want to limit the listener's imagination in telling them how the story unfolds. But is this a realistic goal when using so many historical, literary, cultural and musical references? If one were to listen to the piece on the radio it would come across surreal and Dionysian, perhaps intriguing the listener as to why the title “Dead Elvis” is associated with a theme and variations of the Dies Irae. A live performance would bring in the element of comedy to a much higher degree but it would not necessarily be clear that the piece is programmatic. Surreal images and moods in the post-modern music combined with the visual of an Elvis impersonator would put it in the genre of performance art; a completely absurd pairing for who knows what reason? With the knowledge of the composer's intentions from the program notes, the story is given form in relation to Elvis's life as well as to the story of Faust. The spectrum is narrowed quite a bit in terms of what could be happening in the music and performance. There is merit in all three experiences. Absolute music allows the listener to have a more unique, individual experience, while the programmatic listening is more informed and can possibly give the piece more depth in a concrete and universally understood meaning.

Performance Practice

Regardless of whether Daugherty's intentions or program notes contain, at times, questionable substance, the piece does work. He manages to take recognizable motifs from popular culture, literary and musical history to create a funny and off-beat piece of music that audiences continue to enjoy; not to mention the bassoon player. Dead Elvis has become a very popular piece among bassoonists. It gives them a chance to be the center of attention, playing something totally out of the ordinary that an audience might actually be interested in hearing and seeing. The soloist can display virtuosity in range as well as technique but it is repetitive enough to be easy to memorize. Because the piece is conceptual there is a lot of freedom to be artistically creative. It is not often that bassoonists are given interesting repertoire that non bassoon players find exciting as well. "Dead Elvis" is a piece that transcends "bassoon music" and allows bassoonists to simply be musicians; to be true performers and soloists and that is something that they will hold onto for years to come.

Daugherty indicates in the score "Elvis Las Vegas 1970's jumpsuit is recommended, but optional". The piece was initially performed without an Elvis costume and it was later that it became standard practice for live performances (Ullery, 2012). Now most would say that the costume is essential to the theatrical element of the performance. Other indications by Daugherty include to go down on one knee before the final low Bb to end the piece. He makes indication to use "Elvis vibrato", to play "operatically" and "espressivo a la Vegas". His use of direction is fairly minimal and it has been bassoonists who have taken the piece to even more extreme theatrical levels.

Many bassoonists choose to enter from off stage while the bassist vamps the first four bars so they can take their time and make a grand entrance. Engaging with the audience by having a member of the ensemble announce "Ladies and Gentlemen, the king..." or a variation thereof is a popular addition to the performance. Physical aspects such as dancing on the stage and taking extra time at grand pause to make various poses or moves such as crotch thrusts and moving across the stage are all possibilities. One bassoonist in London designed dance moves where she would die and rise again before the rock and roll finale (Pullen, 2012). Taking a knee while pretending the bassoon is a guitar or a microphone is another classic choice. Many players incorporate going down on one knee at other places in the piece than the end or at several points they deem appropriate such as at the end of "It's Now or Never". It has become standard performance practice to borrow and add your own dance moves to "Dead Elvis". Bassoonists look to other performances on youtube, of which there are several, or their teachers who have performed it. The piece is simple enough to allow the performer and the band freedom to be creative and entertaining but still difficult enough that one needs a competent ensemble of players to approach it.

Conclusion

I first encountered “Dead Elvis” by chance when a friend of mine attending the Royal Academy of Music in London performed it. There was a recording put on YouTube and I was impressed not only with her performance but with the discovery of a unique and wacky piece. I emailed the performance to some bassoon colleagues including my teacher, Per Hannevold, who then insisted that I perform it as well. Performing and researching “Dead Elvis” has decidedly been the defining aspect of my masters degree and it has been a fascinating exploration of popular culture, specifically Elvis, with whom I was not previously familiar, tragic drama, *Histoire du Soldat*, and Michael Daugherty.

“Dead Elvis” is one of Michael Daugherty's most successful and well known pieces and it is no wonder why. It steals the show of every concert it is performed on. Unleashing the bassoonist's inner rock god, the audience is thrilled and tickled to see something extroverted and original that every performer can make their own. An entertaining piece that bassoonists can play outside of a bassoon recital, layered with historical and literary references spanning centuries, is one to be treasured.

Bibliography

Ashilman, D.L (Feb.,2010) Selected Literary Works based on the Faust Legend. *Faust Legends*. [Internet] University of Pittsburgh. <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/faust.html#literature>

Domer, Adam D. (2009) *Analysis of Michael Daugherty's "Le Tombeau de Liberace"*. <http://etd.ohiolink.edu/send-pdf.cgi/Domer%20Adam%20D.pdf?akron1239633394>. (March,2012)

Daugherty, Michael and London Sinfonietta (1999) *American Icons, London Sinfonietta, Charles Ullery*. Decca Music Group. [CD]

Daugherty, Michael (2000) *Dead Elvis*. Revised score. New York, Faber Music. [Music Score]

Daugherty, Michael and ArtSite Design (1999-2012) *Dead Elvis for solo bassoon and chamber ensemble*. [Internet] <http://michaeldaugherty.net/index.cfm?pagename=works#> (September, 2011)

Daugherty, Michael and ArtSite Design (1999-2012) *Biography*. [Internet] <http://michaeldaugherty.net/index.cfm?pagename=bio> (September, 2011)

Daugherty, Michael (August 2011-May, 2012) *Dead Elvis*. (Email Correspondence)

Franciscan Archive. *Dies Irae*. [Internet] http://www.franciscan-archive.org/de_celano/opera/diesirae.html (March,2012)

Guralnick, Peter (1999) *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley*. Great Britain, Little Brown and Company

Interview with Michael Daugherty, part 1 (2008) *YouTube*. [Internet] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaZP26bllGQ> (April, 2012)

Interview with Michael Daugherty, part 2 (2008) *YouTube*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cFqrtO32o&feature=relmfu> (April, 2012)

Johnson, Lawrence B. (2010) Composer Michael Daugherty Hears the Sounds of America. *Los Angeles Times*. [Internet] http://sokogskriv.no/ep_tmp/files/14829918664b94d98a2d624.pdf (April, 2012)

Marcus, Greil (2003) *Elvis Again*. [Internet] http://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/marcus_w03.html (May,2012)

Marcus, Greil (1990) *Mystery Train*. Wiltshire, The Camelot Press

Marlowe, Christopher (1892) *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Perlich, Martin (2004) *Interview with Michael Daugherty*. [Internet] <http://martinperlichinterviews.com/archives/interviews/michael-daugherty/> (May, 2012)

Pullen, Hayley (May, 2012) *Performance Practice of Dead Elvis*. [Email Correspondence]

Stravinsky, Igor (1924) *Histoire du Soldat*. London, Chester Music

Taruskin, Richard (1996) *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Ullery, Charles (September, 2011-May, 2012) *Dead Elvis*. [Email correspondence]