

# Sean Ellis Hussey

## *writing samples*

### **For the Animalz Hiring Squad**

*(I added a 4<sup>th</sup> sample at the bottom, sorry I couldn't pick 3!)*

1. *Music Ethnography of Foster Care*- Description and Mission- written for public announcements, grant applications, blog, and website
2. *Music Reflects: Reflecting on Music*- Blog post for *Music Ethnography of Foster Care*
3. *What to Look for in Software Transitions*- Guide for nonprofit organizations- written for Daxko March 2021
4. *Connecting Cultures Through Music*- poster and infographic for the Clinton Global Initiative Summit

## **Music Ethnography of Foster Care**

### **Description and Mission**

*Safe, stable, loving, and permanent home: A Musical Ethnography of Foster Care* (MEFC) is first and foremost an ethnographic study meant to convey the experiences of former and current foster youth, biological family members of foster youth, foster parents, social workers, and others working within or affected by the foster care system.

On March 22, 2000, while discussing proposed reforms for the Adoption and Safe Families Act, then US Senator Mike DeWine stated that the goal of government should be "...to make sure that every child has the opportunity to live in a safe, stable, loving, and permanent home." Since then, federal and state legislatures have passed numerous laws that directly affect the health and safety of foster youth. The implications of these laws have yet to be explored in a public sense, meaning the ways in which foster care affects the community-at-large remain hidden and misunderstood. Currently there are well-supported academic findings that explain pressing issues within the US child welfare system; however, there is disconnect between this research and the general public. This leads to inaction and a lack of understanding from the legislative bodies that influence the structure of the foster care system. Music is often viewed as a reflection of society and centering any musical expression on an ethnography ensures a musical product truly reflective of a culture: this is the intention of MEFC. Music is a salient form of communication that can generate a palpable humanitarian argument for social change.

In order to collect this ethnographic catalogue, composer/artistic researcher Sean Ellis Hussey and Chicago-based choir Constellation Men's Ensemble have held community-wide gatherings to facilitate discussions, conversations, and interview sessions with those directly connected to the foster care system. These group and individual sessions were audio recorded. Through analysis, Sean Ellis Hussey has parsed out common qualitative themes throughout the interviews. With the help of creative consultant Jamie Olah, these stories have become the backbone for an evening length multimedia vocal oratorio. This musical work will address issues amongst the foster care population by chronicling real-life experiences using the audio recordings as source material for electronic tracks to accompany Constellation Men's Ensemble's live singing.

In recognition of National Foster Care Month, this work will premiere in Chicago in May 2020. Throughout the month, in partnership with the Roosevelt University Center for Arts Leadership, there will be a series of talks and presentations regarding foster care in Chicago; the third largest foster care system in the country. Following the Chicago performances, the final work will be made available through a public website, both as an audio/video recording and as complete scores, parts, and electronics at no charge. The goal is to enable other choirs to perform the work in their communities and inspire continued conversation that will lead to a nation-wide change in our foster care system. The amalgamation of ethnographic research, artistic musical expression, and communal input will enhance the potential civic

engagement of this work. The reality of the foster care system is far removed from its ideal potential. By allowing people to confront this political deficiency through the creation, performance, and dissemination of MEFC we will inspire audiences to ask what they can do to enact a healthy society.

MEFCC is an offshoot of previous work for Sean Ellis Hussey's graduate recital *Welfare. Openness. Data. Reunification. Inspiration. Collective Action* that premiered on April 7, 2018. The themes, text, and music for this recital were derived from interviews with 10 former foster youth. The performance's reception and inspired dialogue demonstrated the need for further exploration. MEFCC will employ a similar generative method but will increase the size and scope of the ethnographic sample, focusing on Cook County, the third largest foster care population in the country.

## **Music Reflects: Reflecting on Music Blog Post (6/28/18)**

Today, while reflecting yet again on the seeming hopelessness and inhumanity of US immigration policy, I experienced a strange craving to listen to Vivaldi concerti. Normally when I listen to these famous and often overdone pieces I train my ear with transcription, try to decipher if the ensemble is using period instruments, or test my relative pitch and guess to which Hz frequency the A is tuned. So it struck me as a strange choice to go from our egregious political climate to music I normally consume as a technical exercise or as an apolitical backdrop. But I started to reflect on this choice and suddenly remembered that Vivaldi composed many of these pieces for children living in an orphanage.

In this context, Vivaldi's music became a strong advocate for the ability of ALL children, and their role toward the future. It was also a reminder that music, as something beyond the proscenium stage or headphones, has a powerful and unstoppable ability to connect. The heart of these concerti at their genesis was arguably a need to look at the future through the virtuosity and creativity of homeless children living in Venice. And Venice, at that time, was a cosmopolitan trade city and the epicenter of hybridity that led to the Baroque. All of these secrets are imbedded in these concerti. And through this, the music can reflect important political tropes today.

I have a strong desire to control the manifestation of these latent messages within the music I create. A little over a year ago I started a music project that explores the foster care system, and had a test run for this research as my graduate recital, *Welfare. Openness. Data. Reunification. Inspiration. Collective Action*. The impetus for this endeavor started when I saw two of my undergraduate mentors struggle with the foster care system as foster parents. They had been fostering a baby girl for over two years, she was born addicted, the biological mother missed drug tests for several months, she had been legally abandoned by her biological parents, she had been living with my professors since she was maybe a few months old, and

they wanted to adopt her. And yet, at the end of this mind-numbing and emotionally grueling case, the court ruled in favor of the biological mother permanently cutting all ties between my professors and their daughter.

As I dug deeper into the foster care system, I quickly realized the expanse and density of the institution. The United States foster care system is extremely complex with a spectrum of triumphs, failures, and overall difficulties. To unravel and solve these problems, we first have to acknowledge that they exist on multiple levels within the system. On a broad level, there are structural issues of racism and class dynamics. Zooming in reveals problems due to the state funding structure of the system. Finally, on a case-by-case level, it seems there are an infinite number of circumstances, making it extremely difficult to ensure individual safety and success for every foster youth. For example, reunification, a federal mandate that courts make every attempt to reunify foster youth with biological family members before allowing adoption, is not successful for many foster youth as in the case of my undergraduate mentors and their daughter, who is now missing. And legislating a sweeping change based on the average would still negatively affect so many people. Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) are designed to help alleviate these problems. But even with the tireless effort of these volunteers, the system is still too large for CASA to perfectly address these difficulties.

Poet and former foster youth, Lemn Sissay, states, "...you can define how strong a democracy is by how it treats its child, the child of the state." By this, I think Sissay is pointing out that foster care runs latent within the structure of a democracy, and issues converge on and proliferate from this root. These issues include conversations we have or don't have regarding abortion, education, welfare, housing, and so much more. Current political discourse does not give room for the right amount of nuance in solving these foundational issues.

My goal for the future of this project to have music provide perspective and inspire activism toward addressing these problems. Currently I am starting to explore these ideas in the context of a multi-media oratorio or concert music documentary. This evening-length work will be inspired by both quantitative research and qualitative interviews with foster youth, foster parents, social workers, CASA volunteers, etc. The recordings of these interviews will be used as source material for electronic pieces, similar to the opening of my graduate recital. This will be a collaboration with Constellation Men's Ensemble, and possibly other entities in Chicago and Cook County! More on that soon.

For now, I urge you all to think deeply about the music you listen to, and how your choices reflect your surroundings, as was the case for me with Vivaldi. I also encourage you to remember the message children provide, their constant echo that becomes the future of our society. I can think of a lot of "children" who have inspired me lately.