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Project Narrative

In 2017, the Butte America Foundation (BAMF) (“About Us.” *Butte America Foundation.*) and KBFM-LP 102.5 FM (“KBFM 102.5.” *KBFM 102.5 FM.*) were awarded a \$30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, to develop The Verdigris Project, a collection of radio programs that explores the industrial and cultural history of Butte, Montana (“About.” *The Verdigris Project.*). The Superfund Advisory and Redevelopment Trust Authority and local sponsors also supported the development of these three series, that draw inspiration and content from the oral history recordings preserved by the Butte-Silver Bow Archives (“About.” *Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives.*). With \$3,500 from these funds, BAMF commissioned me to compose the theme music and interstitial interludes for these radio shows. For *Butte, America’s Story*, a 5-minute daily podcast about the cultural and political history of Butte, hosted by Dick Gibson (Gibson 2021), *Mining City Reflections*, a 15-minute podcast about the lives of Butte’s women and immigrants, hosted by Marian Jensen (Jensen 2021), and *Life Underground*, an hour podcast featuring the oral history of underground mining in Butte, hosted by Clark Grant (Grant 2021), I composed four 1-minute themes (Nichols 2020b) and 25 short interludes. As a point of inspiration, I built these compositions around excerpts from field recordings that producer Clark Grant made of his late father Eric Grant playing harmonica, on their family acreage in rural Arkansas. Around loops of these short harmonica motives, I composed and recorded layers of folk-inspired acoustic violin passages, meant to evoke nostalgia. The four themes can be heard on the project website (“The Music.” *The Verdigris Project.*).

Combining these themes and interludes with oral history archive recordings and modern interviews, KBFM founder Clark Grant and the other hosts are now writing and producing episodes, with an expected broadcast premiere of the three series in March 2021. To celebrate the launch, BAMF is planning a commencement event in the newly renovated ballroom of the Carpenter’s Union Hall in downtown Butte, early April 2021. As the centerpiece for this event, BAMF is commissioning me to compose a four-movement string quartet, that the Cascade Quartet (“About the Cascade Quartet.” *Cascade Quartet.*), the resident string quartet of the Great Falls Symphony, will perform, with looped recordings of Eric Grant on harmonica, accompanying their acoustic performance, and recordings from the Oral History Collection (“Oral History Collection.” *The Verdigris Project.*), interspersed between and throughout the movements. KBFM General Manager Clark Grant is applying to the Great Falls Symphony Fee Sponsorship Program, to cover the performance fee for the Cascade String Quartet and I am applying for a \$4,000 Virginia Tech Center for Humanities Faculty Summer Grant, as the funding to compose the four-movement piece for string quartet, recorded harmonica, and recorded spoken word, titled *Verdigris*, during the summer of 2020.

While on faculty at the University of Montana and since joining the faculty of Virginia Tech, I have drawn inspiration in my classical compositions from the folk music of mountain culture. When choreographer Jane Comfort was in residence in Montana, in 2006, she and I collaborated on ten short movements, inspired by the central region of the state, commissioned by the Headwaters Dance Company, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. I composed two of the movements for clarinet, violin, and piano trio, performed by the Sapphire Trio, and the other eight movements for electroacoustic fixed media. One of the trios was inspired by the culture of Butte, specifically the step-dancing tradition and recreation that miners enjoyed in the M&M Bar and Café (Nichols 2016a). Years later, in 2012, when the Montana Music Teachers Association commissioned me to compose a piece for their annual conference, I again wrote a dance movement for the Sapphire Trio, this time inspired by group tango lessons at the Downtown Dance Collective in Missoula (Nichols 2016b). These dance movements are good examples of the rhythmically active style that I will compose for parts of the Verdigris commission.

As a violinist, I have performed in string quartets and am familiar with string repertoire, so as a composer, I have enjoyed writing for the ensemble. In 2008, I was commissioned by the conductor of the University of Montana Symphony Orchestra to compose a one-movement string quartet for his wedding, titled *Bells Resound*. In 2014, for the Big Sky Alive Festival in Helena, Montana, the Cascade Quartet performed *Bells Resound*, in the Myrna Loy Theatre and in the rotunda of the Montana State Capital. Because of their expressive performance of my piece, I thought of them for the Verdigris performance. Also, in 2014, I was commissioned by the Third Angle Ensemble, as one of four finalists for their New Ideas in Music competition, to compose a string quartet. For this piece, I chose to amplify the acoustic instruments and process them with digital audio effects in interactive computer programming. After the Third Angle String Quartet premiered the four-movement piece, titled *At the Boundary*, the Flux Quartet performed and recorded the piece at Virginia Tech, the Klang String Quartet performed it at the NY Phil Biennial in Brooklyn, New York, and the Beo String Quartet performed it at the Charlotte New Music Festival (CNMF) in Charlotte, North Carolina (Nichols 2016c). Impressed with their virtuosity and musicianship, after working with the Beo String Quartet at the CNMF, I organized a performance, through the Moss Arts

Center, for them to perform a concert in the Anne and Ellen Fife Theatre, including the premiere of my three-movement string quartet, titled *Or Be Forever Fallen* (Nichols 2017). For this piece, I again amplified the acoustic instruments and processed them with digital audio effects in interactive computer programming, and collaborated with video artist and School of Visual Arts professor Zach Duer, to include an accompanying sci-fi video, that was interactive with the audio signals of the amplified instruments. The Beo String Quartet have since performed the piece, on their recent concerts in Pennsylvania, and are planning future performances, throughout the year. For his October 2019 campus residency, I wrote a three-movement string quartet for my undergraduate violin professor Charles Castleman, who premiered the piece, along with Virginia Tech string faculty violinist John Irrera, violist Molly Wilkens-Reed, and cellist Alan Weinstein, in the Squires Recital Salon and at Eastern Divide (Nichols 2020a). Beo will perform *In Gratitude*, this summer at the CNMF. This latest piece is the most representative of the nostalgic style of work that I will compose for the Verdigris commencement celebration.

Many of my compositions incorporate electroacoustic fixed media, some with recorded spoken word. In 2008, after working with choreographer Jane Comfort, the Headwaters Dance Company commissioned me to compose a piece with choreographer Amy Ragsdale. She was designing a piece based on the ever-escalating travel threat-levels issued by the Transportation Security Administration, so I recorded a quartet of voices reading recommendations from the State Department, on what to do in the case of a terrorist attack. I stripped and granulated the recorded spoken word into pure pitched sing-song and jittery textures, and mixed the remaining melodies and rhythms over layered processed recordings of airport baggage claim, into a piece titled *Current Threat Level* (Nichols 2015b). In 2009, the School of Education at the University of Montana commissioned me to compose a piece of electroacoustic fixed media to be played at the opening ceremony of the new Phyllis J. Washington Education Center. For this piece, I recorded children in kindergarten, fourth grade, and sixth grade, talking about their favorite school activities, subjects they studied, and what they wanted to do when they grew up. I edited and processed these recordings into a pastiche of overlapping phrases, that swirled over layers of processed recordings of children playing in the school yard, and titled the piece *Playground* (Nichols 2015a). This piece has been played at a dozen conferences and festivals from Fullerton, California to Miami, Florida and Lisbon, Portugal to Seoul, South Korea. With funding from the National Science Foundation, the Montana Institute on Ecosystems commissioned me to compose a piece inspired by the research of limnologist Mark Lorang, into how animals, birds, and insects navigate their lifecycles by the sound of rivers. With this commission, I was able to hire choreographer Nicole Bradley-Browning, animator and video artist Amber Bushnell, and poet Mark Gibson, to collaborate on a piece titled *Sound of Rivers: Stone Drum* (Nichols 2013). For this work, I recorded the poet performing his text and presented it both unchanged and as a collage of granulated action words, that mixed with sonified river, wind, and spectral analysis data and processed electric violin, performing outlines of jazz motives mentioned in the poem. After joining the faculty at Virginia Tech, I was excited to pursue a similar collaboration, in 2017, with choreographer Rachel Rugh, video artist Zach Duer, and poet Erika Meitner, inspired by the mountain culture of Appalachia. For this piece, titled *What Bends* (Nichols 2018a), I composed layers of contrapuntal violin and mandolin parts in the style of old-time music and built overlapping textures of looping rhythms, from the performed poetry. Most recently, in 2018, I collaborated with directors Amanda Nelson and Natasha Staley, graphic designer Meaghan Dee, lighting designer John Ambrosone, and media engineer Tanner Upthegrove on *Shakespeare's Garden* (Nichols 2018b), an immersive multimedia theatrical event, that we presented for three days in the Cube of the Moss Arts Center at Virginia Tech. For this piece, I lightly processed recorded student performances of Puck and Fairy from Act II, Scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with preverb, that streamed across the different layers of the spatial audio system. This light treatment of the recorded spoken word, adding a nostalgic quality to the sound, is closest to what I imagine I will use, for the Verdigris composition.

Like in several of my pieces, I plan to bridge the Arts and Humanities, in my composition for the Verdigris opening celebration and hope the committee will consider funding this summer creative scholarship project.