

DT0054 | THE OPPOSITES GAME | TRUMBORE

# THE OPPOSITES GAME

SATB Chorus, Baritone Soloist & Piano  
Text by Brendan Constantine

d'aletrumbore  
c o m p o s e r

## THE OPPOSITES GAME

*for Patricia Maisch*

This day my students and I play the Opposites Game with a line from Emily Dickinson. My life had stood a loaded gun, it goes and I write it on the board, pausing so they can call out the antonyms

My	Your
Life	Death
Had stood?	Will sit
A	Many
Loaded	Empty
Gun?	

Gun.  
For a moment, very much like the one between lightning and its sound, the children just stare at me, and then it comes, a flurry, a hail storm of answers

Flower, says one. No, Book, says another. That's stupid, cries a third, the opposite of a gun is a pillow. Or maybe a hug, but not a book, no way is it a book. With this, the others gather their thoughts

and suddenly it's a shouting match. No one can agree, for every student there's a final answer. It's a song, a prayer, I mean a promise, like a wedding ring, and later a baby. Or what's that person who delivers babies?

A midwife? Yes, a midwife. No, that's wrong. You're so wrong you'll never be right again. It's a whisper, a star, it's saying I love you into your hand and then touching someone's ear. Are you crazy? Are you the president

of Stupid-land? You should be, When's the election?  
It's a teddy bear, a sword, a perfect, perfect peach.  
Go back to the first one, it's a flower, a white rose.  
When the bell rings, I reach for an eraser but a girl

snatches it from my hand. Nothing's decided, she says, We're not done here. I leave all the answers on the board. The next day some of them have stopped talking to each other, they've taken sides.

[text, continued]

There's a Flower club. And a Kitten club. And two boys  
calling themselves The Snowballs. The rest have stuck  
with the original game, which was to try to write  
something like poetry.

It's a diamond, it's a dance,  
the opposite of a gun is a museum in France.  
It's the moon, it's a mirror,  
it's the sound of a bell and the hearer.

The arguing starts again, more shouting, and finally  
a new club. For the first time I dare to push them.  
Maybe all of you are right, I say.

Well, maybe. Maybe it's everything we said. Maybe it's  
everything we didn't say. It's words and the spaces for words.  
They're looking at each other now. It's everything in this room  
and outside this room and down the street and in the sky.

It's everyone on campus and at the mall, and all the people  
waiting at the hospital. And at the post office. And, yeah,  
it's a flower, too. All the flowers. The whole garden.  
The opposite of a gun is wherever you point it.

Don't write that on the board, they say. Just say poem.  
Your death will sit through many empty poems.

Brendan Constantine

"The Opposites Game" was originally published in *The American Journal of Poetry*.  
This poem is used with permission.

## PROGRAM NOTE

In Brendan Constantine's text for *The Opposites Game*, a teacher asks their students to name the opposite of each word in a line of poetry by Emily Dickinson: "My life had stood a loaded gun." When the students arrive at the last word, they confront what may be an unanswerable question: What is the opposite of a gun?

Their heated debate cycles through answers both whimsical and serious (a midwife, a prayer, a dance, a museum in France...). Finally, they arrive at an answer and complete the original intention of the Opposites Game: "Your death will sit through many empty poems." Constantine's poem is dedicated to Patricia Maisch, a survivor of the 2011 Tucson, AZ mass shooting that wounded twenty people and took six lives.

This setting of Constantine's poem explores the musical implications of opposites, reflections, and right answers. As the piece begins, the notes used for "My life had stood a loaded gun" are inverted to create a second, upside-down melody, creating musical antonyms as well as literary ones. Near the end of the piece, the music for "the opposite of a gun is wherever you point it" becomes the retrograde—a musical term for when the notes of a melody are played in reverse order, creating another kind of musical opposite—of the melody used for "Your death will sit through many empty poems."

*The Opposites Game* was commissioned for Conspirare and Craig Hella Johnson, with premieres by Choral Arts Initiative (Brandon Elliott, Artistic Director; world premiere, chorus & piano) and Conspirare (Craig Hella Johnson, Artistic Director; world premiere, arrangement for chorus & string quartet).

## PERFORMANCE NOTES

If range is an issue, Sopranos and Tenors may omit any notes that dip below the staff. While most of these notes are doubled by the Altos or Basses, the conductor may also choose to have a few Altos or Basses join any unaccompanied Soprano or Tenor melody that briefly moves below the staff.

Commissioned for Conspirare and Craig Hella Johnson.  
Premiered by Conspirare & the Miro Quartet (SATB & string quartet arrangement)  
and Choral Arts Initiative (SATB & piano).

# The Opposites Game

for SATB Chorus, Baritone Soloist & Piano

Text by Brendan Constantine

Music by Dale Trumbore

Carefree, at first; ♩ = 80

SOPRANO  
ALTO  
TENOR  
BASS

*p*  
*p*  
*p*  
*Solo* *mf*

ah  
ah  
ah  
ah

Carefree, at first; ♩ = 80

Piano

*p* *mf*

This day my stu-dents and I play the Op-po-sites Game with a

5 *p* *mf*  
ah My life had stood a load-ed

5 *p* *mf*  
ah My life had stood a load-ed

5 *p*  
ah

line from Em-i-ly Dick-in-son.

5 *p*

The Opposites Game

10

gun, oh ah

gun, oh ah

ah

**Solo** *mf* *p* *pp*

it goes and I write it on the board, paus-ing so they can call out the an-to-nyms—

10

*mf* *p* *mf* *p* *ppp*

16

*mf* *mp* *p*

Your Death Will sit Ma-ny

*mf* *mp* *p*

Your Death Will sit Ma-ny

*mf* *p* *mp*

My Life Had stood? A Load-ed

**Tutti** *mf* *p* *mp*

My Life Had stood? A Load-ed

16

*mf* *p*

The Opposites Game

A

22

Emp - ty

Emp - ty

Gun?

Gun.

Gun?

Gun.

Solo

For a mo - ment, ve - ry

22

ppp

f

pp

27

much like the one be-tween light-ning and its sound, the child-ren just stare at me,

27

mf

p

The Opposites Game

32 *poco accel.* . . . **In time;** ♩ = ca. 80

*pp* and then it comes, *mf* a flur - ry, *f* a hail storm of an - swers—

*pp* and then it comes, *mf* a flur - ry, *f* a hail storm of an - swers—

ah

*pp* and then it comes, *mf* ah

32 *poco accel.* . . . **In time;** ♩ = ca. 80

36 **B** ♩ = ca. 100

*p* says a - noth-er,

*mp* says one. *p* says a - noth-er, *< mf* That's stu-pid,

*mf* Flo-er, No, Book, *p < mf* That's stu-pid,

*mf* Flo-er, No, Book, *mf* cries a

36 **B** ♩ = ca. 100

The Opposites Game

41

*mf* The op-po-site of a gun is a pil-low... *f* Or may-be a *p*

*mf* The op-po-site of a gun is a pil-low... *f* Or may-be a *p*

*mf* The op-po-site of a gun is a pil-low... *f*

third,

41

*p* *f* *Red.*

46

*mf* *p* *mf* *f*

hug, but not a book, no way is it a

*mf* *p* *mf* *f*

hug, but not a book, no way is it a

*p* *mf* *f*

but not a book, no way is it a

*p* *mf* *f*

but not a book, no way is it a

46

*p* *mf*<sup>3</sup> *p* *mf* *f*

— (Red. ad lib.)

The Opposites Game

50 **C**

book. book. book. book.

*p* With this, the oth-ers ga - ther their thoughts and

50 **C**

*mp* *p*

54 *p* *f* *mp*

and sud-den - ly it's a shout-ing match. No one can a - gree, for

*p* *f* *mp*

and sud-den - ly it's a shout-ing match. No one can a - gree, for

*f* *mp*

sud-den - ly it's a shout-ing match. No one can a - gree, for

*f* *mp*

sud-den - ly it's a shout-ing match. No one can a - gree,

54

*f* *mp*

**D**

58

ev - 'ry stu-dent there's a fin - al ans - wer. It's a song, a

ev - 'ry stu-dent there's a fin - al ans - wer. It's a song, a

ev - 'ry stu-dent there's a fin - al ans - wer. It's a song, a

*pp* *mp* *p*

*pp* *mp* *p*

Detailed description: This block contains the first system of music, measures 58-62. It features three vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, and Tenor) and a piano accompaniment staff. The lyrics are: "ev - 'ry stu-dent there's a fin - al ans - wer. It's a song, a". The piano part includes dynamic markings *pp*, *mp*, and *p*. A large blue watermark "For Personal Use Only" is overlaid on the page.

**D**

58

*p* *pp* *mp*

Detailed description: This block shows the piano accompaniment for measures 58-62. It consists of two staves (treble and bass clef). The piano part includes dynamic markings *p*, *pp*, and *mp*. A large blue watermark "For Personal Use Only" is overlaid on the page.

63

like a wed-ding ring, and la - ter a ba - by.

prayer, I mean a pro-mise, like a wed-ding ring, a ba - by.

prayer, I mean a pro-mise, like a wed-ding ring, and la - ter a ba - by.

like a wed-ding ring, a ba - by.

*mf* *mf* *mf* *mf*

Detailed description: This block contains the second system of music, measures 63-67. It features three vocal staves and a piano accompaniment staff. The lyrics are: "like a wed-ding ring, and la - ter a ba - by. prayer, I mean a pro-mise, like a wed-ding ring, a ba - by. prayer, I mean a pro-mise, like a wed-ding ring, and la - ter a ba - by. like a wed-ding ring, a ba - by." The piano part includes dynamic markings *mf*. A large blue watermark "For Personal Use Only" is overlaid on the page.

63

*mf* *p*

Detailed description: This block shows the piano accompaniment for measures 63-67. It consists of two staves (treble and bass clef). The piano part includes dynamic markings *mf* and *p*. A large blue watermark "For Personal Use Only" is overlaid on the page.

The Opposites Game

67 *mf* A mid - wife?

*mf* A mid - wife?

*p* Or what's that per-son who de-li-vers ba - bies? *mf* Yes, a mid - wife.

*mf* A mid - wife?

67 *mp* *mf*

**E** 72 *p* *mf* *p* *mf*

No, that's wrong. You're so wrong you'll

*p* *mf* *p* *mf*

No, that's wrong. You're so wrong you'll

**E** 72 *pp* *mf* *p* *mf*

The Opposites Game

76 *f* 3  
ne - ver be right a - gain.

76 *f* 3  
ne - ver be right a - gain. —

80 **F** *mp*  
it's

*pp* *mp*  
It's a whis - per, a star, it's

*pp* *mp*  
It's a whis - per, a star, it's

*pp*  
It's a whis - per, a star, —

80 **F** *pp* *p* *mp*

The Opposites Game

83

say - ing I love you in - to your hand and then touch - ing some - one's ear.

say - ing I love you in - to your hand and then touch - ing some - one's ear.

8 say - ing I love you \_\_\_\_\_

83

*p* *mf*

**G**

88

Are you cra - zy? \_\_\_\_\_ Are you the pre - si - dent of Stu - pid - land?

Are you cra - zy? \_\_\_\_\_ Are you the pre - si - dent of Stu - pid - land?

88

*p* *mf* *f*

H

93

*mf* You should be, When's the e - lec - tion? \_\_\_ *pp* *p* It's a ted-dy bear, \_\_\_ a

*mf* You should be, When's the e - lec - tion? \_\_\_ *pp* *p* It's a ted-dy bear, \_\_\_ a

H

93

99

*mf* a per-fect, per-fect peach. *pp* it's a  
*mf* sword. *f* a per-fect, per-fect peach. *mp* 3 Go back to the first one, \_\_\_ *pp* it's a  
*mf* sword. *f* a per-fect per-fect peach. *pp* it's a  
*mf* sword. *f* a per-fect per-fect peach. *pp* it's a

99



116

*pp*

*mp* *mf*

No-thing's de-cid - ed she says, We're not done here.

*mp* *mf*

she says, We're not done here.

**Tutti** *pp* *mf*

hand. ah

116

122

*p*

ah

*p*

ah

**Solo** *mf*

I leave all the an-swers on the board. The next day

122

The Opposites Game

J

128

some of them have stopped talk-ing\_ to each oth-er, they've ta-ken sides. There's a

There's a

128

133

And a Kit-ten club. And two boys call-ing them-selves The Snow-balls. The

And a Kit-ten club. The

Flo-wer club... And a Kit-ten club. The

Flo-wer club... And a Kit-ten club. And two boys call-ing them-selves The Snow-balls.

133

The Opposites Game

137 *mp* *p* *mf*

rest have stuck with the o - ri - gi - nal game, which was to try to write po - et - ry.

rest have stuck with the o - ri - gi - nal game, which was to try to write some-thing like po - et - ry.

rest have stuck with the o - ri - gi - nal game, which was to try to write some-thing like po - et - ry.

which was to try to write some-thing like po - et - ry.

137 *p* *mp* *mf*

14 **K** poco accel. ♩ = ca. 100

*p* *p* *p* *p*

the op-po-site\* of a gun is a mu -

It's a dia - mond, it's a dance, the op-po-site of a gun is a mu -

It's a dia - mond it's a dance, the op-po-site\* of a gun is a mu -

It's a dia - mond the op-po-site of a gun is a mu -

14 **K** poco accel. ♩ = ca. 100

*p* *mf* *mf*

\*Sopranos and Tenors for whom range is an issue may omit this note.



**L**

155  $\text{♩} = 80$

*p* *mf* *p* *mf* *p* *mf* *p* *mf* **Solo**

The ar-gu-ing starts a-gain, more shout-ing, and fi-nal-ly a new club.

The ar-gu-ing starts a-gain, more shout-ing, and fi-nal-ly a new club.

The ar-gu-ing starts a-gain, more shout-ing, and fi-nal-ly a new club.

The ar-gu-ing starts a-gain, more shout-ing, and fi-nal-ly a new club.

**L**

155  $\text{♩} = 80$

*p* *mf* *f* *mp*

The ar-gu-ing starts a-gain, more shout-ing, and fi-nal-ly a new club. For the

160

*p* *mf* *p*

first time I dare to push them. May - be all of you are right, I

160

*p* *pp* *mf* *p*

The Opposites Game

165 **M**

say. Well, may - be. May-be it's ev'-ry - thing we said... May-be it's

165 **M**

170

ev'-ry-thing we did-n't say. It's words and the spa-ces for words. They're

170

The Opposites Game

176 *mp* *p* *mf* **N**

look - ing\_ at each oth - er now. It's ev - 'ry thing\_ in this room\_ and out - side this

look - ing\_ at each oth - er now. It's ev - 'ry thing\_ in this room\_ and out - side this

look - ing\_ at each oth - er now. It's ev - 'ry thing\_ in this room\_ and out - side this

look - ing\_ at each oth - er now. **Tutti** *p* *mf* *mf*

look - ing\_ at each oth - er now. It's ev - 'ry thing\_ in this room\_ and out - side this

176 *pp* *mf* **N**

180 *ff* *p*

room\_ and down the street\_ and in the sky. It's

room\_ and down the street\_ and in the sky. It's

room\_ and down the street\_ and in the sky. It's

room\_ and down the street\_ and in the sky. It's

180 *pp* *f*

The Opposites Game

185

ev - ry - one on cam - pus and at the mall, and all the peo - ple

ev - ry - one on cam - pus and at the mall,

ev - ry - one on cam - pus and at the mall, and all the peo - ple

ev - ry - one on cam - pus and at the mall,

185

*p* *p* *mf* *f*

190

wait - ing at the hos - pi - tal. And, And at the post of - fice. And

wait - ing at the hos - pi - tal. And, And at the post of - fice. And

wait - ing at the hos - pi - tal. And, And at the post of - fice. And

And at the post of - fice.

190

*mp* *poco rit.* *Slower, barely* *poco accel.* *mf*

*mp* *p* *mp* *pp*

The Opposites Game

**O** In time; ♩ = ca. 88

195

yeah, it's a flo-wer, too. All the flo-wers. The whole

yeah, it's a flo-wer, too. All the flo-wers. The whole

*mf* All the flo-wers. The whole

*mf* All the flo-wers. The whole

**O** In time; ♩ = ca. 88

195

200

gar - den. ah

gar - den The whole gar - den. ah

gar - den The whole gar - den. ah

gar - den ah

200

The Opposites Game

204 *mf* *rit.* *p*

The whole gar - den The

*mf* *mf* *pp*

*mf* *mf*

204 *mf* *f* *p* *rit.*

208 **P** Gentle; ♩ = ca. 76 *mp* *p*

op - po - site\* of a gun is where - ev - er you point it. nn

*pp* *mp* *p*

The op - po - site of a gun is where - ev - er you point it. nn

*pp* *mp*

Basses & Tenors *mp*

The op - po - site\* of a gun is where

Basses move to Tenor line through m. 213

208 **P** Gentle; ♩ = ca. 76 *pp* *mp* *p*

\*Sopranos/Tenors for whom range is an issue may omit these notes. The conductor may also choose to have a few Altos join the Soprano entrance.

212

*mp* Don't

*p* ah

*mf* ev - er you point it. ah

Tenors *p* *pp*

Solo *p* *mf* Basses, Tutti *p*

The op-po-site of a gun is where-ev-er you point it. ah

212

**Q** 217

*mf* write that on the board, Just say poem.

*mp* they say. Just say poem.

*p* they say. Just say poem.

*pp* Just say poem.

**Q** 217

The Opposites Game

222

*p* ————— *mf*                      *mp* ————— *p*

Your \_\_\_\_\_ death                      will sit \_\_\_\_\_ through ma - ny\* \_

*p* ————— *mf*                      *mp* ————— *p*

Your \_\_\_\_\_ death                      will sit \_\_\_\_\_ through ma - ny

8

222

sub *ppp*                      *mf* ————— *p*

227

**R** rit. . . . . Gently, slow; ♩ = ca. 54

*p* ————— *f*

emp - ty \_\_\_\_\_ poems.\*                      Your death will

*p* ————— *f*

poems. \_\_\_\_\_                      Your death will

8

*p* ————— *f*

Your death will

*p* ————— *f*

Your death will

**R** rit. . . . . Gently, slow; ♩ = ca. 54

227

*ppp*                      *f*

\*Sopranos for whom range is an issue may omit these notes.

S

232 *mp* *pp* *mp* *pp*

sit through ma - ny\* emp - ty poems

sit through ma - ny emp - ty poems

sit through ma - ny emp - ty poems

sit through ma - ny emp - ty poems

S

232 *p* *p*

238 *mp* *poco* *pp* *poco rit.*

poems. oh

poems. oh

oh oh

poems. oh

238 *poco* *poco rit.*