

JS 037

5 minutes

# *Undelivered*

*SATB and Percussion*

*Music by*

Joshua Shank

*Text by*

John F. Kennedy

## Note from the composer

On November 22, 1963, the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, was on his way to the Dallas Trade Mart to give a speech when he was assassinated in broad daylight. Because the words he was set to deliver were never spoken to the American public (via media coverage), the speech has become President Kennedy's de facto final words. Though it was set against the backdrop of the escalating Cold War tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union—the Cuban Missile Crisis (the closest the world has ever come to nuclear war) had occurred less than a year before—its core theme is the inseparable link between learning and altruistic leadership.

However, what feels astonishingly relevant today—and what stopped me in my tracks when I first read it—are the thoughts JFK was going to offer on domestic extremism, misinformation, and the dangers of embracing rhetoric disconnected from reality. At the time, President Kennedy was referring to Edwin Walker, a former World War II general who had fomented riots at the University of Mississippi when that school integrated in 1962 and had described civil rights demonstrations as “Pro-Kennedy, pro-communist, and pro-socialist.” Walker had also accused Kennedy—famously a Catholic—of appointing “anti-Christians” to federal office. I'll leave it up to the reader to make their own connections with the current state of political discourse.

To translate the speech into a musical work, I landed on a simple concept. President Kennedy was never able to read these words to the room that was assembled to hear them, so what if the choir simply did the thing he was never able to: *deliver the speech*. Having arrived at that idea, I also wanted to add something to fill the silences—to make the work “hover” a bit during the breaths—but also to represent the listening audience as well; hence, the unseen percussion. Due to the speech's focus on the future as a result of the past and present, I placed an anonymous poem which I felt was connected to JFK's sentiments at its conclusion and set it to the school song the young Jack Kennedy would have heard sung many times during his student days at Harvard (in this case accompanied by church bells ringing far off somewhere in Cambridge).

*Undelivered* was commissioned by the Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum in commemoration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy (a Harvard alum from the class of 1940). It was premiered by that ensemble in Sanders Theater on the campus of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts on November 4, 2023 under the steady baton of Dr. Andrew Clark.

## Performances notes

- This probably goes without saying but, when the harmonies are closer, shore up the vibrato where possible to let stuff shimmer a bit.
- Where a 3-part divisi occurs in the SA or TB, it's preferable to have an even split between the voices if possible.
- Staggered breathing should be employed throughout with no apparent break in the musical line unless specified.
- If possible, the percussionist should be separated visually or spatially from the ensemble; perhaps hidden from view behind the choir, or potentially at the opposite end of the space. Feel free to experiment with this (or ignore it altogether if it proves unrealistic).
- *To the percussionist:* Unless otherwise noted, the glockenspiel part is meant to sort of fill the silences when the choir is taking a breath. You could potentially strike right as they breath or perhaps just before so the glock is ringing in the silences. Don't be too precious about it, though. You and the conductor will figure out what works best.

## The Text

By John F. Kennedy (1917-1963)<sup>1</sup>, with four lines from an anonymous poet

In a world of complex and continuing problems, full of frustrations and irritations, [we] must be guided by the lights of learning and reason—or else those who confuse rhetoric with reality and the plausible with the possible will gain the popular ascendancy with their seemingly swift and simple solutions to every problem.

There will always be dissident voices heard in the land, expressing opposition without alternatives, finding fault but never favor, perceiving gloom on every side and seeking influence without responsibility. Those voices are inevitable.

But today other voices are heard in the land—voices preaching doctrines wholly unrelated to reality...which assume that [bitter and abusive language] is as good as victory...or that strength is but a matter of slogans.

Words alone are not enough. [We are] a peaceful nation. And where our strength and determination are clear, our words need merely to convey conviction, not belligerence.

But...freedom can be lost...by ballots as well as bullets. [Our success] is dependent upon...a clearer recognition of the virtues of freedom as well as the evils of tyranny.

Only a nation which practices what it preaches about equal rights and social justice will be respected. Only a nation which has fully educated its citizens is fully capable of tackling the complex problems and perceiving the hidden dangers of the world in which we live. Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

We in this country...are...the watchmen on the walls of world freedom. We ask, therefore, that we may be worthy of our...responsibility—that we may exercise our strength with wisdom and restraint.

*The future is an open door.  
Let us not stand in our own way.  
For we are the ones to explore  
The world that lies beyond today.*

B&F Music  
Joshua Shank

*Note:* Citing this speech correctly stumped me, because U.S. Presidents almost always rely on speechwriters to rough out the first few drafts of their speeches—possibly even the final draft after extensive notes—and I wanted to attribute this to the person who worked on it. In this case, the speechwriter was Ted Sorensen (1928-2010). He was one of President Kennedy's closest advisers and primary co-writers on a number of things for over a decade (including the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Profiles in Courage*); JFK even once referred to him as his "intellectual blood bank." Sorensen said that "John Kennedy was the true author of all of his speeches and writings. They set forth his ideals and ideas, his decisions and policies, his knowledge of history and of politics. He played a role in every major speech, selecting the subject matter and themes, arguments, and conclusions... More importantly, he alone was responsible for the decision that lay at the heart of every major speech...which reflected turning points in American history for which he was responsible."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The speech has been edited primarily for length as well as the composer's experience of first reading it in 2022. Originally, it was around 2,600 words. This edit brings it down to approximately 900, so you should definitely check out the original (which is freely available from the JFK Library as well as easily searchable online).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Kennedy Smith and Douglas Brinkley, (Editors), *JFK: A Vision for America*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2017, p. 22.

# Undelivered

Text by  
John F. Kennedy

Music by  
Joshua Shank

Recitative (the measured bits are around quarter = 66)

Glockenspiel (medium hard rubber beater)

always let vibrate (see performance note)

The first system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Glockenspiel, marked *mf*. The middle and bottom staves are for the vocal line, also marked *mf*. The lyrics are: "In a world of complex and continuing problems, full of frustrations and irritations, we must be". A large watermark "B&F Music Joshua Shank" is overlaid on the middle staff.

In a world of complex and continuing problems, full of frustrations and irritations, we must be

The second system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Glockenspiel. The middle and bottom staves are for the vocal line. The lyrics are: "guided by the lights of learning and reason--or else those who confuse rhetoric with re -". A large watermark "B&F Music Joshua Shank" is overlaid on the middle staff.

guided by the lights of learning and reason--or else those who confuse rhetoric with re -

The third system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Glockenspiel. The middle and bottom staves are for the vocal line. The lyrics are: "al - i - ty, and the plausible with the possible will gain popular ascendancy with their seemingly swift". A large watermark "B&F Music Joshua Shank" is overlaid on the middle staff.

al - i - ty, and the plausible with the possible will gain popular ascendancy with their seemingly swift

4

and simple solutions to every problem. There will always be

and simple solutions to every problem. There will always be

B&F Music  
Joshua Shank

6

dissident voices heard in the land, expressing opinions without alternatives, finding fault but ne-ver

dissident voices heard in the land, expressing opinions without alternatives, finding fault but ne-ver

7

favor, perceiving gloom on every side and seeking influence without responsibility.

favor, perceiving gloom on every side and seeking influence without responsibility.

Those voi - ces are in e - vi - ta - ble. But to - day o - ther

*poco rit.*

**B&F Music**  
**Joshua Shank**

10

*a tempo*

voices are heard in the land--voices preaching doctrines wholly unrelated to reality...

*a tempo*

voices are heard in the land--voices preaching doctrines wholly unrelated to reality...

11

which assume that bitter and a - busive language is as good as victory,

which assume that bitter and a - busive language is as good as victory,

13

strike on cutoff

poco rit.

or that strength is but a matter of slogans.

Words a-lone are not enough.

or that strength is but a matter of slogans.

Words a-lone are not enough.

**B&F Music**  
 Joshua Shank

17

*p a tempo*

We are a peaceful nation. And where our strength and determination are

*p a tempo*

We are a peaceful nation. And where our strength and determination are

18

**B&F Music**  
 Joshua Shank

clear, our words need merely to convey conviction, not bel-li-gence. But free-dom can be

clear, our words need merely to convey conviction, not bel-li-gence. But free-dom can be

lost by bal-lots as well as bul-lets. Our success is dependent upon a clearer re-cog

lost by bal-lots as well as bul-lets. Our success is dependent upon a clearer re-cog

B&F Music  
Joshua Shank

22

-nition of the virtues of freedom as well as the evils of

-nition of the virtues of freedom as well as the evils of

23

24

ty-ran - ny. Only a nation which practices what it

ty-ran - ny. Only a nation which practices what it

"This illegal copy will self destruct in 5...4...3..."

preaches about equal rights and social justice will be respected. On - ly a

preaches about equal rights and social justice will be respected. On - ly a

**B&F Music**  
Joshua Shank

nation which has fully educated its citizens is fully capable of tackling the com - plex

nation which has fully educated its citizens is fully capable of tackling the com - plex

prob - lems and per - ceiv - ing the hid - den dan - gers of the world in which we live.

prob - lems and per - ceiv - ing the hid - den dan - gers of the world in which we live.

*poco rit.* *a tempo*  
**B&F Music**  
Joshua Shank *mf a tempo*

29

Lead - er - ship and learning are indispensable to each other.

Lead - er - ship and learning are indispensable to each other.

**B&F Music**  
Joshua Shank

30

*mf*  
We in this country are the watchmen on the walls of world freedom.

*mf*

We in this country are the watchmen on the walls of world freedom.

**31 More placid than before**

**B&F Music**  
Joshua Shank

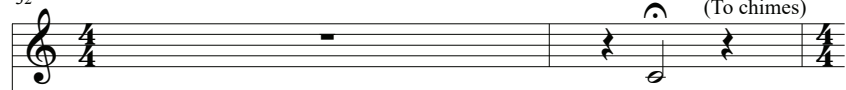
We ask, therefore, that we may be worthy of our responsibility--that we may ex - er - cise our

We ask, therefore, that we may be worthy of our responsibility--that we may ex - er - cise our

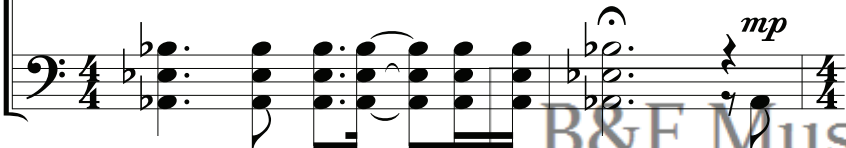
quarter = 48

32

(To chimes)



strength with wis-dom and re - straint. The



strength with wis-dom and re - straint. The

B&F Music  
Joshua Shank

35 quarter = 77

As church bells, in the distance



mp *rit.* to the end

S1



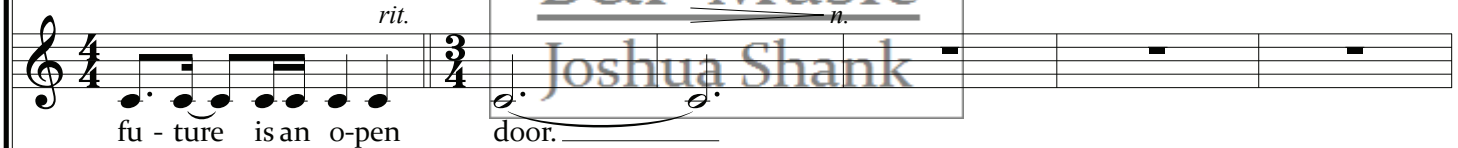
The fu - ture is an o - pen door. Let us not stand

S2



The fu - ture is an o - pen

A



fu - ture is an o - pen

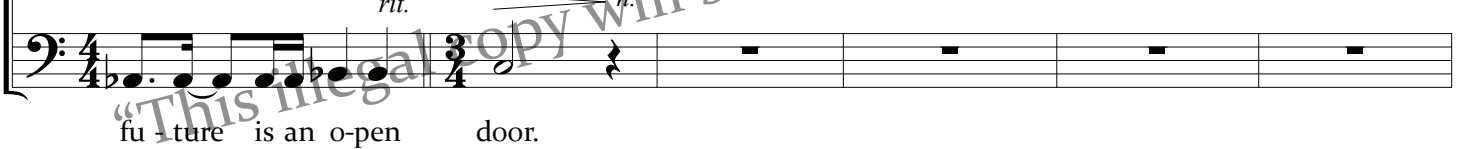
B&F Music  
Joshua Shank

T



The fu - ture is an o -

B



fu - ture is an o - pen door.

40

S1 in our own way. For we are the ones to ex -

S2 door. Let us not stand in our own way. For we are the

T pen door. Let us not stand in our

*mf*

*mf*

B&F Music  
Joshua Shank

46

49

S1 plore The world that lies be-yond to - day. For we are the

S2 ones to ex - plore The world that lies be - yond to - day.

A ay

T own way. For we are the ones

B ay

*mf*

*mf*

*mf*

*mf*

B&F Music  
Joshua Shank

*pitch set change*

*pitch set change*

ones to explore The world that lies beyond to - day.

For we are the ones to explore The world that lies

to explore The world that

**B&F Music**  
 Joshua Shank

“This illegal copy will self destruct in 5...4...3...”

*pitch set change*

*rit.*

*a tempo, but slowing to the end*

Musical staff with notes and rests, including a fermata at the end.

*rit.*

*a tempo, but slowing to the end*

Musical staff with lyrics: "Let us not stand in our own way."

*rit.*

*a tempo, but slowing to the end*

Musical staff with lyrics: "be - yond to day."

*rit.*

*a tempo, but slowing to the end*

Musical staff with notes and rests, including a fermata at the end.

*rit.*

*a tempo, but slowing to the end*

Musical staff with lyrics: "lies be - yond to day."

*rit.*

*a tempo, but slowing to the end*

Musical staff with notes and rests, including a fermata at the end.

**B&F Music**  
 Joshua Shank

Cambridge, July 2023

"This illegal copy will self destruct in 5...4...3..."