The Metropolitan Opera’s 50th Anniversary Gala:  
A Conversation with Robert Sutherland, Chief Librarian

by Patrick Lo, in conversation with Robert Sutherland

Introduction

The Metropolitan Opera (Met) opened the doors of its new home at Lincoln Center in New York City on September 16, 1966. Fifty years later, the Met celebrated its golden anniversary in its current home with a spectacular Gala evening. This 50th Anniversary Gala was not only a showcase of the Met’s legacy and unparalleled artistic standards, it was also a reunion of singers and conductors from around the world who have graced the stage of this, a large and important classical music organization in North America.

In addition to the most glamorous opera stars we saw onstage at this unforgettable Gala event, we should not forget the team of unsung heroes—the Met Opera librarians—who were responsible for all the music material preparation, thus allowing such supreme artistic experience and opera magic to take place seamlessly on the Met stage. According to Laure Campbell, former Orchestra Librarian, San Francisco Opera, “I think I speak for many librarians when I say that a gala concert of many arias and overtures can be one of the nightmares of librarians.” In the following interview, Robert Sutherland, Chief Librarian of the Met Opera, discusses the kind of work, and the overwhelming amount thereof, that was involved in preparing for this 50th Anniversary Gala. He also recounts other first-hand behind-the-scene stories, and presents his perspective on this operatic challenge.

Lo: As the Chief Librarian at the Metropolitan Opera, could you tell me about your major roles and responsibilities?

Sutherland: I coordinate with the conductors and directors of specific operas concerning which editions and versions of an opera we will use. That is always a complicated equation depending on who is conducting, who is directing, and who is singing. Major singers will have their own opinions as to what we should be doing and what they want to sing. I then figure out how we can put all these different

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Robert Sutherland currently holds the position of Chief Librarian at the Metropolitan Opera. In addition to his library work, Mr. Sutherland has been active as a music editor, copyist and engraver, served three terms as President of the Major Orchestra Librarians’ Association and coordinates the judging of the Paul Revere Awards for graphic excellence on behalf of the Music Publishers’ Association.

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elements together so that when we distribute information about the opera and start preparing the
music everyone will have the same idea of what we are going to do. That is the prime focus of what I do
and preliminary discussions can take place many years before an opera is performed.

To be effective in this role, I need to research the different editions, both currently available and out-of-
print, of the operas that we perform. We need to have all the information necessary for artists to learn
their roles, for technical and music departments to prepare our productions, and to ensure that there is
as little confusion as possible among everybody involved in bringing an opera to the stage.

I am also responsible for maintaining, obtaining, or creating the necessary performance material for our
productions and, as changes are made in rehearsal, ensuring that everyone involved has the necessary
information or material needed. I am fortunate to have three colleagues who help me in this endeavour.

I could not possibly do the job that I am expected to do without the invaluable assistance of my
colleagues Jennifer Johnson, Àngels Martinez and Melissa Robason (fig. 1). While I am taking care of
administrative details and preparing information and materials for future seasons, they ensure that the
materials being used for our current rehearsals and performances are correctly marked and up-to-date
as well as preparing new material for future performances. They also are very involved with our
rehearsals and performances. Since the Met usually has three operas rehearsing concurrently during the
day and a performance of a different opera that evening, we work in shifts, keeping in touch about the
day’s changes and other issues that will affect future rehearsals and performances. We try to have two
people on at any given time so that one can focus on the rehearsal/performance, and the other can
focus on the constant changes that happen during a given day.
Our preparation for the 50th Anniversary Gala was done following this pattern. All four of us worked on the material as it was being determined and confirmed. The procedures that we follow in preparing material allowed us to work very efficiently together so that at any given moment, a glance at our master score and any of the selections would give a sense of what was done, what needed to be done, and what information was required before we could complete the preparation. Any additional information was usually communicated through a group email that went to all of us.

**Lo:** Is this your first time to be invited to give an interview about your professional experience in preparing music for an opera gala?

Sutherland: I have participated in opera gala sessions at Major Orchestra Librarians’ Association (MOLA) conferences, and was honoured to write the Foreword for John Yaffé and David Daniels’ book, *Arias, Ensembles and Choruses: An Excerpt Finder for Orchestras.* That said, this is the first formal interview that I have given on the topic of opera galas.

**Lo:** Could you tell the readers what, exactly, an opera gala is? From the perspective of a music librarian at the Met, what are the major differences in preparing music for a major opera gala, in comparison with getting the music ready for a regular opera performance?

Sutherland: An opera gala concert is, essentially, a concert programme consisting of opera’s greatest hits. It typically consists of the finest and best-known selections from any given opera, and there is typically more than one soloist. A concert of vocal excerpts can be an incredibly satisfying and enjoyable experience for audience members regardless of whether they like opera or not.

**Lo:** For an orchestra librarian, what kind of work was involved, and what was the extra workload, in preparing music for the 50th Anniversary at Lincoln Center Gala at the Met Opera?

Sutherland: I think it best to speak about preparation of opera galas in general prior to describing the 50th Anniversary at Lincoln Center Gala at the Metropolitan Opera.

A typical opera gala programme is usually about the length of a symphonic concert—from 2 to 2.5 hours with intermission. It may start with an overture or other orchestral feature. Depending on the number of singers involved there may be orchestral selections interspersed with the vocal selections to give the singers a break between pieces. If there is a chorus available, there may be selections with orchestra, soloist and chorus or orchestra and chorus alone.

As with symphonic programmes, sometimes opera gala concerts are programmed well in advance; other times they come together in a flurry of activity in very little time. There is a saying in the opera world: “Singers are either getting sick, are sick, or are recovering from having been sick.” Cancellations are common and changes in repertoire is the norm, not the exception. As a rule of thumb, I assume that I will prepare at least 50% more repertoire than actually gets performed. Then there is the question of
which key the singer prefers and whether orchestral material is available in that key, whether cuts are made, where the singer wishes to start the piece, and where and how they wish to end the piece. It is important to be organized.

There are also variants of opera gala programmes when they are part of vocal competitions. Recently, we had to have 102 pieces prepared for our National Council Finals concert: 25 semi-finalists had listed four pieces each that they might sing (some of which changed the week before the semi-finals) plus selections for two guest artists. (For those doing the math, there were some duplicate pieces which were offset by the repertoire changes that came in.) We found out who was singing in the Finals concert on a Monday afternoon. We had to have all of the conductor scores prepared, vocal score books for our media producers, and orchestral material ready for rehearsal by Wednesday evening. In such cases, especially with respect to pieces under copyright, arrangements must be made with publishers in advance and music received prior to knowing whether the piece will be performed. The following photo (fig. 2) shows music being returned the day after the Finals concert.

Figure 2. Music being returned to publishers the day after the National Council Finals concert

I prepared “Robert’s Rules of Opera Gala Preparation” for a session on preparing for opera gala concerts at a Major Orchestra Librarians’ Association conference. These rules will, perhaps, give an insight into what a librarian should expect when faced with an imminent opera gala. Mssrs. Yaffé and Daniels were kind enough to include them in their book, Arias, Ensembles and Choruses: An Excerpt Finder for Orchestras.
Robert’s Rules for Opera Gala preparation

1. The final programme and programme order will not be confirmed until the performance is over.

2. Expect to prepare 50 to 100% more material than will be performed.

3. Always remember: starts, stops, cuts, keys.

4. No matter how many times a work has been performed, someone will always want to start before, or end after, the existing printed material.

5. Just because an artist or the artist’s agent, secretary, etc. provides orchestral music it does not necessarily follow that it is the correct music, or that it can be performed as provided.

6. The title given by the artist or artist management rarely matches the title used by the publisher.

7. The same title may be used for different pieces, or alternate versions of an aria. It is best not to assume all titles are unique. (“Deh vieni”: from Nozze di Figaro or Don Giovanni? “Fuor del mar”: from Idomeneo – which of the two composed versions? “Lisa’s aria” from Pique Dame – Act I or Act III? [Actually one is an aria, the other an arioso, but they are both often referred to as “Lisa’s aria.” There are many such examples.])

8. The quality of music received is usually inversely proportional to the amount of time the material is received before the first rehearsal/performance—music received at the last minute usually always requires work.

9. Always have a vocal score that matches the orchestral material for any given piece.

10. Always create a vocal score reference book containing all the pieces on the programme. Have an extra copy for the accompanist who may, or may not, have been hired for the rehearsal that may, or may not, have been scheduled with artist and conductor.

11. Beware of selections composed with offstage music. It is not always cued into the regular orchestra material.

12. Remember to ask about possible encores. With some artists, the list can be as long as the printed programme, with said artist reserving the right to choose which piece or pieces at the last minute.

13. When feeling frustrated and angry after yet another last-minute change and wondering, “Why do opera galas/singers have to be this way?” well, they are that way and are not likely to change. They certainly have not for me. Frankly, I find a nice glass of wine helps … only after work, of course!
Having described opera galas in general, there are “galas,” and then there are “Galas.” A concert performance is one thing. When an organization starts adding sets, costumes, video presentations, and various other components that turn a concert into “An Event,” that ups the ante. In addition to the usual things that one expects to encounter, there are copyright concerns and licensing to deal with—what might be a modest fee for a work sung in concert becomes much more complicated when it is performed in costume and a set. What are known as Grand Rights apply and are separately negotiated based on box office revenue. And then there are the media considerations and additional material that has to be produced for the various people involved in the various media elements. The list goes on....

The longest opera gala that I have experienced lasted eight hours and was performed in three segments. We did not know the programme order for the second part until the first part was underway, as the organization was waiting for a famous singer who had indicated that he/she “might” appear. The programme order for the third part was confirmed during the second part when it was apparent that the singer would not show up.

And so we come to the specific questions about the 50th Anniversary at Lincoln Center Gala that we performed at the end of our 2016-2017 season.

Lo: For this 50th Anniversary Gala that took place at the Met in May 2017, how early in advance did you and your library team need to start preparing music for such a major event?

Sutherland: The library was involved in assembling possible repertoire in October 2015—a year and three quarters before the performance. It was quite complicated. Singers had already been approached about singing in the Gala and initial repertoire selections had been discussed. The production team had already created the shape of the Gala which covered landmark productions and performances starting with the opening of the “new Met” at Lincoln Center. There were also video presentations involved. This Gala differed from many concert gala performances in that the production dictated the opera productions/performances that were being represented and their order in the programme, so repertoire selections were limited.

A master document outlining the production was created by the Artistic Department and shared with the library, which included the piece, programme order, opera, selection from the opera, conductor, artist, estimated timing, and had links to archival recordings of the pieces. We were also kept up to date about which artists had been approached, who had confirmed that he/she would appear, and whether the repertoire was confirmed.

The library prepared two reference vocal scores of the repertoire in three-ring binders, one of which was kept with the Artistic Administrator and the other in the Music Library. This allowed us to alter the reference score easily as artists, repertoire, and programme order changed. The online video and audio links were also updated by the Artistic Department.
As repertoire was confirmed, we made sure that we either had the necessary material in house or made arrangements to obtain or create the material. In the case of repertoire that was under copyright, performance and media licenses were negotiated and obtained and rental requests placed.

As the Gala date approached, we had to make more master vocal scores for the stage directors, stage managers, media, and titles departments.

Ultimately, there were three conductors, two cover conductors, 37 artists who sang, 20 singers who covered the selections, as well as the Met chorus performing during the Gala. In addition, there was the production team of 4, eight assistant directors, seven stage managers, and two rehearsal pianists.

We performed 32 selections over the course of the five-hour performance with one intermission. We started at 6:10 PM and finished slightly after 11:00 PM.

Lo: Do you have any special procedures, mechanisms, or checklists tailor-made for your library team for such a major event?

Sutherland: We use the same basic system that we use for all gala concerts. We pull material for each of the selections from our library collection or obtain rental material for those works under copyright. We go through the score and all of the parts and make a list of all the tasks that have to be done before the material can be used in performance. These include checking the obvious—keys, cuts, starts, and stops as well as ensuring that there is a coherent rehearsal system, mistakes and page turns have been fixed and, if the material is horrible, reprinting or enlarging it so that it can be performed at sight. I keep a master list of each piece, tracking whether we have a vocal score that matches the orchestral material, whether we have enough full scores, whether there are cuts or specific information for starts and stops, especially in through-composed music, whether the string parts are bowed, and whether the material is ready for performance. It is a happy sight to see the big check mark on the “to do” list indicating that the material is ready for performance.

We also create a programme order/instrumentation sheet for our reference vocal score and for all of the folders of orchestral material (we prepared 64 folders of orchestral material—it was a big orchestra!). This sheet included the programme order, who was performing each piece, the title as it appeared in both the Met master document and on the orchestral material, a shorthand version of the orchestral instrumentation so that musicians could see in which pieces they perform, and the estimated timing of each piece. Our media producers were also given this list with their scores.

During the performance, I timed each piece; we keep a database of performance timings for future reference, as well as the running time when each piece began during the performance. My sheet also included any changes or alterations to the instrumentation (reduced strings for example) as well as information about maestri bows, entrances into or out of the orchestra pit or other production details involving the orchestra.
Lo: When it came to preparing music for such a major gala evening, did it create any unpredictable challenges for you as an orchestra librarian?

Sutherland: I am happy to say that we are a good team and have had considerable experience with such programmes, so while there were inevitable challenges, we had anticipated the problems we were likely to encounter and were ready to act when they appeared. I suppose that is what defines us—our ability to imagine and predict what might happen and to be prepared to deal with any of the possibilities should any of them actually happen.

Lo: What did the 50th Anniversary Gala event mean to the entire Met organization and to the audience? And most importantly, what did it mean to you as the Chief Librarian, as you have dedicated your services to the Met for over a quarter of a century?

Sutherland: I can’t speak for the organization or audience, but can say that it was a major production, involving a great many people who were dedicated to making it a memorable musical and cultural experience. There was an impressive Gala Committee formed to provide the financial support for such an undertaking. A film, entitled The Opera House and directed by Susan Froemke, was produced. The usual Metropolitan Opera Playbill included a very nice booklet that contained quotes from many of those interviewed in the film.

The Gala showcased some of the great highlights of the past 50 years and inspired me, and I am sure many others, to work toward creating new highlights in the years to come. Ultimately, it put in very real perspective how fortunate we are to be a part of the ongoing phenomenon of the Metropolitan Opera, and how we are all just caretakers of a great and ongoing heritage.

Lo: What would be the worst nightmare that could happen to an orchestra librarian when it comes to music preparation for such gala evenings? I would assume there would be countless last-minute change requests flying in from different directions and all landing on your small desk?

Sutherland: There have been occasions when, for one reason or another, the programme has changed between the dress rehearsal and the performance. Whenever we have to put out music that has not been rehearsed, and my colleagues are on stage or in the pit sight-reading, everything has to be absolutely perfect. And being human, we are never 100% perfect. So I always breathe easier when everything goes well. This applies to all performances, not just opera galas. Librarians might not be on stage, but we can stop a performance dead in its tracks if we have not prepared the music correctly.
Lo: When the Met Gala was actually taking place onstage, what exactly was going on inside the Met Library?

Sutherland: In answer to what was going on in the Met Library during the Gala, I can only partially answer that question. All four librarians worked to prepare the performance material for the Gala. Only two of us worked the performance. I was in the pit, stage left (where the conductor enters) for the entire Gala, just out of view of most of the audience, doing the timings, checking the running time and being on hand in case there were any problems with the conductor, orchestra, or music. Jennifer Johnson covered both the pit stage right during conductor or major instrumentation changes and also the library. I can’t say whether there was much activity in the library since I wasn’t there, but we always try to have a librarian in the library during performances to handle the inevitable inquiries that come up—confirming information, providing singers and staff with last minute material and anything else necessary, from a performance material standpoint, to allow the performance to proceed smoothly.

Lo: Any interesting behind-the-scene or backstage stories related to the 50th Anniversary Gala that you would like to share with readers?

Sutherland: A personal highlight was the surprise appearance of Dmitri Hvorostovsky who travelled to New York for the event and sang a very moving “Cortigiani, vil razza dannata” from Rigoletto. We were given very little notice that the piece would be performed and even then it appeared with “TBA” for the artist on our instrumentation sheet. What a wonderful surprise to see Mr. Hvorostovsky make his way on stage. He was involved in so many memorable performances at the Met and on tour. Sadly, he passed away six months later.

I would like to share a copy of my programme order/instrumentation/timing sheet (Appendix), which was annotated as the performance went on and shows a crossed out “TBA” with “Hvorotovsk” written in. There are also references to Donald Palumbo, our excellent Chorus Master, and David Chan, our concertmaster, who played the solo brilliantly in Lombardi.

Appendix conductor code:
Y N-S = Yannick Nézet-Séguin
MA = Marco Armiliato
JL = James Levine
Appendix: Gala programme order/instrumentation/timing sheet

50 Years At Lincoln Center Gala

(As of May 7, 2017)

1st Half:

Orchestra

1. Bernstein
   Overture from WEST SIDE STORY. Y-N-S
   2+P, 2+E, 2+E-B, Alto, Ten and Bar. Saxes, 2+C / 4, 3, 1 / 1, 5*, 1, 1[Pet] / Electric/Spanish Guitar / (Whistler) / Strings

Chorus

2. Barber
   Act I Prologue from ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA Y-N-S
   2+P, 2+E, 2+B, 2+C / 3, 3, 1 / 4, 1, 1[Col./Pet] / Strings

P. Domingo

3. Giordano
   "Nenniko della patria" from ANDREA CHÉNIER Y-N-S
   3, 1+E, 2+B, 2 / 3, 3, 1 / 1, 0, 0, 0

P. Beccala

4. Verdi
   "Oh! fede negar potessi... Quando le sere al placido" from LUISA MILLER
   2+P, 2, 2, 2 / 4, 3, 1 / 1, 0, 0, 0 Y-N-S
   5:38 6:28

Volle

5. Mozart
   "Hai gia vinta la causa!... Vedrò mentr’io sospiro" from LE NOZZE DI FIGARO
   1. 2, 2, 2, 2 / 2, 0, 1 / 0, 0, 0 Y-N-S
   6:34 5:45

Yende / Kwiecien

6. Donizetti
   "Pronta io son" from DON PASQUALE MA
   1+P, 2, 2, 2 / 4, 3, 1 / 1[BD], 0, 0
   8:10 7:05

Opolais

7. Puccini
   "Vissi d’arte" from TOSCA MA
   3, 2+P, 2+E, 2+B / 4, 2, 0 / 0, 1[BD], 1, 0
   4:43 3:20

Pape

8. Mussorgsky
   "Boris’ Mad Scene" from BORIS GODUNOV MA
   3, 2, 2, 2 / 4, 3, 1 / 0, 0, 0
   7:20 6:54

Yancheva / Calleja / Croft / Y. Wang / Vermeire

9. Puccini
   "Che gelida manina... Si, mi chiamano Mimi... Eh! Rodolfo!... O soave fanciulla"
   from LA BOHÈME Y-N-S
   2+P, 2+E, 2+B, 2 / 4, 3, 1 / 1, 1, 0
   14:00 15:32

TIBA

10. Verdi
    "Cortigiani, vil razza dannata" from RIGOLETTO Y-N-S
    1+P, 2+E, 2 / 4, 3, 1 / 1, 0, 0
    4:50 6:52

DiDonato

11. Massenet
    "Va! Laisse couler mes larmes!" from WERTHER Y-N-S
    2, 1, 2+AS, 2 / 4, 0, 1 / 0, 0, 0
    4:00 2:52

Volle

12. Mozart
    "Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja" from DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE Y-N-S
    3, 2, 2, 2 / 0, 0, 0, 0
    2:49 7:32

Graham / Polenzani

13. Berioz
    "Nuit d’ivresse" from LES TROYENS MA
    2, 1+E, 2, 2 / 4, 0, 0, 0 / 0, 0, 0
    10:22 7:13

Zajick

14. Cilea
    "Acrabba volatìa" from ADRIANA LECOUVREUR MA
    2+P, 2+E, 2 / 4, 3, 1 / 0, 1, 2*, 1, 1[Col., 1[Pet] / Offstage chime (**Player 2)
    4:10 7:43

Camarena

15. Donizetti
    "Ah! Mes amis... pour mon âme!" from LA FILLE DU RÉGIME
    1+P, 2, 2, 2 / 4, 3, 1 / 0, 0, 0, 0 MA
    4:20 7:52

Netrebko / Job

16. Verdi
    "Vieni! T’affrettai... Or tutti sorgete" from MACBETH Y-N-S
    1, 2, 2, 2 / 4, 3, 1 / 0, 0, 0
    4:20 7:52

Start 6:10 PM

CAML REVIEW / REVUE DE L’ACBM 46, NO. 3 (NOVEMBER / NOVEMBRE 2018)
### INTERMISSION

#### 2nd Half:

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<th>Chorus</th>
<th>Wagner</th>
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<td>Yende / Owens</td>
<td>Gershwin</td>
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<td>Groissböck / Morris</td>
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<td>Lučič</td>
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<td>0, 0, 0, 0</td>
<td>0:19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleming / Domingo</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Baigne d’eau mes mains et mes lèvres” from THAÏS J.L.</td>
<td>3:05</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>2, 2+3E, 2, 2 / 4, 0, 0</td>
<td>10:25</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1, 0, 0, 1</td>
<td>0:56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meade / Fabiano / Groissböck</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Qual volutta trascorrer” from 1 LOMBARDI J.L.</td>
<td>8:28</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1+P, 2, 2, 2 / 4, 2, 3, 1 / 1[BD], 1, 0</td>
<td>10:07</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Solo Violin</td>
<td>12:47</td>
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<tr>
<td>DiDonato</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Bel raggio lusiglier” from SEMIRAMIDE J.L.</td>
<td>4:00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1+P, 2, 2, 2 / 4, 0, 0</td>
<td>8:18</td>
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<td>0, 0, 0, 0</td>
<td>10:49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netrebko</td>
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<td>“Un bel di vedremo” from MADAMA BUTTERFLY J.L.</td>
<td>4:00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2+1/P, 2+1/E, 2+B, 2, 4, 3, 3, 1 / 1, 1[BD], 1, 0</td>
<td>5:16</td>
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<td>Y N-S</td>
<td>0:54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moore, Zajick / Eyvazov / Lučič / Morris / Vemic / Chorus</td>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>“Gloria all’Egitto, ad Iside” from AIDA J.L.</td>
<td>3:50</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2+4P, 2, 2, 2 / 4, 2, 3, 1 / 1, 2[BD, Tr.], 0, 0 / Onstage Trumpets/Offstage Brass</td>
<td>5:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y N-S</td>
<td>11:06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary:** 2+1/P, 2+1/E, 2+B, 2, 4, 3, 3, 1 / 1, 1[BD], 1, 0

**Guitar / Strings:** 14 9 7 8 6