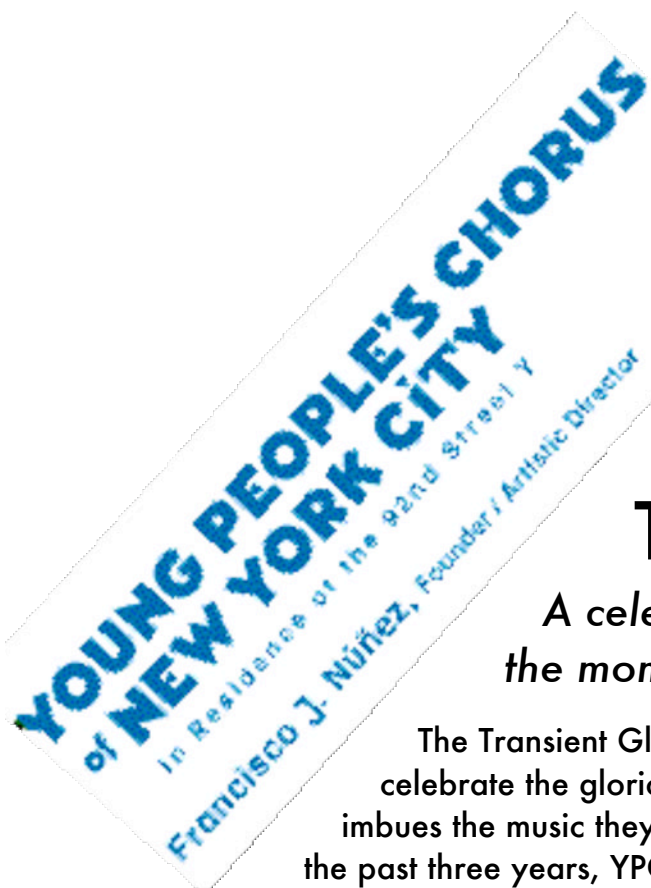


# Transient Glory IV Study Guide

Soundcheck w/ John Schaefer | WNYC 93.9FM | April 22, 2004 | 2:00-2:35pm



## Transient Glory

*A celebration of living music and  
the momentary beauty of the young voice*

The Transient Glory concerts were created by Francisco Núñez to celebrate the glorious, though fleeting, voices of young people, a sound that imbues the music they sing with a particular poignancy and innocence. Over the past three years, YPC's Transient Glory concerts have premiered works commissioned from such prominent composers as Michael Torke, John Tavener, David del Tredici, and many others. Transient Glory has now expanded into a publication series of those commissions spearheaded by Boosey & Hawkes, enabling youth choruses throughout the world to perform this music, and a series of Transient Glory CDs on Vital Records, the first of which was released this past October to critical raves.



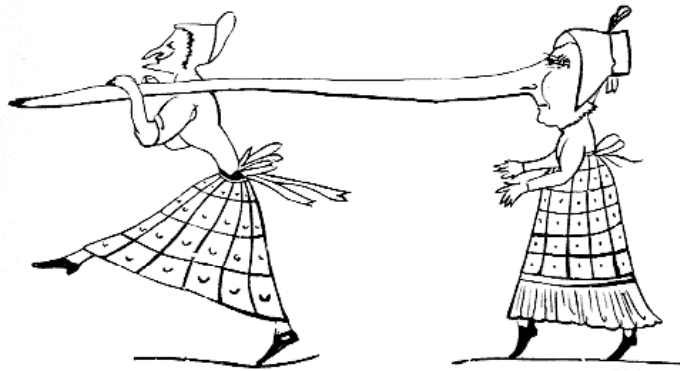
# Benjamin Lees *The Nervous Family* Edward Lear

Composer Benjamin Lees just completed *The Nervous Family*, his first choral work for young people. One of the first tasks for the composer was to choose a text that he could set to music. In his hunt for great words, Lees came upon the 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet Edward Lear. Lear was famous for his wit, humor, limericks, and nonsense rhymes. Lees decided immediately that the absurdity of the poet's ideas would be well suited to young peoples' voices. Mr. Lees said that when he had written the last note of the piece he had a feeling of total exhilaration. "In my mind's eye," he said, "I already saw and heard the young choristers giggling with delight at their task."

Here's an example of some of Lear's work from 1872. He wrote this poem and drew the picture. Could you imagine writing music out of these words and this cartoon?

"There was a Young Lady whose nose was so long that it reached to her toes; So she hired an old lady, whose conduct was steady, To carry that wonderful nose."

From Edward Lear's *The Book of Nonsense & More Nonsense* published by Warne London, 1885.



The composer chose to work with Lear's poem, *The Nervous Family*. Here's the poem. Read it and listen to how the words sound. Why does the poet repeat certain words and phrases? Do you think the rhyming lines make the poem funny or serious? Why?

We're all nervous, very very nervous,  
And we're all nervous at our house in town,  
There's myself, and my Aunt, and my Sister, and my Mother,  
And if left in the dark we're all quite frightened at each other!  
Our Dog runs away if there's a stranger in the house,  
And our great Tabby Cat is quite frightened at a mouse,  
For she's so nervous, very very nervous,  
And we're all nervous at our house in Town.

My poor shaking Aunt can't work at her needle,  
And my shaking hand spills half my cup of tea  
When wine at her dinner my timid Sister's taking  
She drops it on the table, so much her hand is shaking  
And my poor old shaky Mother,  
when to take her snuff she tries to pop it in her nose,  
O! She pops it in her eyes.  
For she's so nervous, very very nervous,  
And we're all nervous at our house in Town.

We all at dinner,  
Shake, shake, shake at carving,  
And as for snuffing candles, we all put out the light,  
T'other evening after dinner we all to snuff did try,  
But my Aunt couldn't do it nor my Sister, nor could I,  
'Child! Child! Give me the snuffers!' said my mother in a float  
'I'll show you how to do it!' so she did, and snuffed it out,  
For she's so nervous, very very nervous,  
And we're all of us nervous at our house in Town.

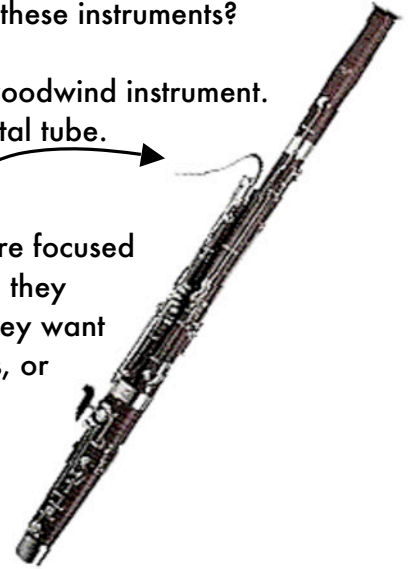
We're getting much too nervous to go out to dinner  
For we all sit a'shaking just like puppets, puppets upon wires.  
I'm too nervous to speak loud, so I'm scarcely ever able  
To ask for what I want, or to talk across the table;  
And my poor shaking Aunt where e're she sits, is sure to see  
Some sympathizing Jelly always shaking vis-à-vis,  
Which makes her more nervous, very very nervous,  
And we're all of us nervous at our house in Town.

We're too nervous, too too nervous  
To get ready in time to go to church,  
So we never go at all, never never never go at all,  
Since we once went late one day;  
For the Clergyman looked at us, with a dreadful sort of frown,  
And my poor shaky Mother caught his eye and tumbled down;  
And my Aunt and Sister fainted, And tho' with care and pain  
We dragged them slowly out, yet we've been again  
And we're all nervous, very very nervous,  
And we're all of us nervous at our house in Town.

Our nerves in stormy weather are particularly bad,  
And a single peal of thunder is enough to drive us mad,  
So when a storm comes on, we in a fright begin  
To lock ourselves in closets where the lightning can't come in.  
And for fear a little thunder to our nervous nervous ears should come,  
We each turn, turn, turn a barrel organ, and my Mother beats a drum,  
For we're all nervous, nervous, very very nervous, nervous,  
And we're all nervous, nervous, nervous at our house in Town.

After finding a good text, it was the composers' job to choose the instruments he wanted to write for. Lees knew he was writing for The Young People's Chorus of NYC, so before deciding if he wanted to add any other instruments, it was important to understand what made the chorus of young people so special. One distinctive characteristic of young people is that their voices are *transient*, meaning their high, pure tones only last for a short time, until they hit puberty, when their voices quickly change. The sound of young voices is very special and unique. No matter how hard they try, older choruses can't quite attain this glorious, though fleeting, sound that young voices can achieve. So Lees knew he was writing for a very special set of instruments: young, high, diverse voices. What sound might provide a contrast to these instruments?

Lees chose to compliment the chorus with a solo bassoon. The bassoon is a low woodwind instrument. The player makes sound by blowing through a double reed attached to a thin metal tube. Some people think the bassoon sounds funny when it plays low short notes, or *staccato* notes. The bassoon is also famous in the orchestra for being good at blending with other instruments, to make a sound more focused and clear. Composers take the bassoon's ability to blend into consideration when they are orchestrating. When composers orchestrate, they choose which instruments they want to play together. Orchestrating is a lot like cooking. You have certain ingredients, or instruments, that you use to make specific tastes and flavors, or sounds, become more clear. Did Lees choose the bassoon because it is a low instrument and the voices are high? Or because the bassoon can sound comical on those low, short notes? Or because the bassoon is so good at blending with other instruments, like voices? Or maybe the composer just liked the bassoon, and when he read *The Nervous Family* poem he enjoyed what the bassoon sounded like with the text? Why do you think the composer chose to add a bassoon to the chorus? What instrument would you choose?



In *The Nervous Family*, the bassoon seems to be having a dialogue with the singers. For example, the chorus sings: "And our great Tabby Cat is quite frightened at a mouse," to which the bassoon interrupts very quietly, almost timidly with "da-da-da." Another example comes at the end of the music, when the chorus communicating what they do when they are scared of a thunder storm, sings "We each turn a barrel organ, and my Mother beats a drum," to which the bassoon responds very loudly and boldly, "ba-da de de de de dee!" All through the piece, Lees uses the bassoon to "act out" the jokes in Edward Lear's poem. Sometimes the bassoon represents the timid cat, afraid of the mouse, while at other moments the bassoon is transformed into a patriotic drum, roaring at the thunder. When you are listening, try to imagine what role the bassoon plays in response to the poem. Is the bassoon a member of the nervous family?

Before we listen, let's just think for a minute about the title of the piece; *The Nervous Family*. What do we expect from a piece with this title? Do we expect to meet the many different personalities who make up this family? Have you ever written a poem or piece of music about your family? The title of Benjamin Lees' piece could have just been, *The Family*, but it's not, it's *The Nervous Family*. What would you call your family piece?

There is one other important idea that makes Lees' piece wonderful: the nervousness. How does a composer translate nervousness into music? What makes music sound nervous? How can a composer make musical nervousness sound funny?

Try counting and clapping these numbers out loud: 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4-5, 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4-5-6, 1-2-3-4

In music, when the meter, or pattern of beats and pulses, changes frequently, it makes the music feel somewhat uneasy, edgy...or nervous. A piece with this feeling of unstable time is described as being polymetric. This not only makes the music feel wobbly, but also makes the emphasis on certain words even more exaggerated.

Try saying this phrase out loud: "And if left in the dark we're all quite frightened at each other!"  
Now emphasize the underlined words: "And if left in the dark we're all quite frightened at each other!"  
Now try it the way Lees set the words: "And if left in the dark we're all quite frightened at each other!"  
Do you see how the way you emphasize different words changes what a phrase means, and how the words sound?

We are ready to Benjamin Lees' *The Nervous Family*, with text by Edward Lear. Keep your ears open for the following ideas: what are the ways that the composer sets the text to music?; how does the composer convey the meaning of the text through the music?; what role does the bassoon play in the piece?; does the music sound nervous, humorous, serious, joking?; why was this music written specifically for young people's voices?; do you like the piece?; how would you set this poem?



**Enjoy listening...but don't get too nervous!!!**