

ABSTRACT

I'm a Christmas Unicorn: A musicological and theological analysis of Sufjan Stevens's song, "Christmas Unicorn"

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The purpose of this thesis is to introduce the reader to Sufjan Stevens's 2012 fifty-eight track album *Silver & Gold*, and specifically the final song, "Christmas Unicorn," a twelve and half minute anti-epic pop song that starts off in a folk style and builds to an electronic, symphonic climax. The album presents many styles of Christmas songs, including Bach chorales, hymns, original songs, "Jingle Bells," and a Prince cover. I argue that this album is a post-modern presentation demonstrating all the different expressions of Christmas are valid, no matter how commercial or humble. "Christmas Unicorn" synthesizes all these styles through the metaphor of the unicorn, which is a medieval symbol of Christ in the Nativity and the Crucifixion. Stevens uses the symbol of the unicorn to represent Christ as well as all humans and all the different attributes of Christmas.

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I'M A CHRISTMAS UNICORN: A MUSICOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL
ANALYSIS OF SUFJAN STEVEN'S SONG, "CHRISTMAS UNICORN"

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By

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The focus of my thesis is “Christmas Unicorn,” a song by Sufjan Stevens in the Christmas album, *Silver and Gold*. I had bought this album when it came out in 2012 before I did all of my holiday driving. From November through December of 2012, all I had in my car was *Silver and Gold* for driving across the state to visit my fiancée in Houston and his family, and back to visit my family. Listening to the five volume, fifty-eight track compilation made the frequent three-hour drive to Houston much more palatable. I realized that the final song, “Christmas Unicorn,” was more than just a silly song to finish off the album. It spoke to me personally, but I also realized that Stevens was intentional in creating something truly special. It was not until I started researching for this thesis that I realized how deep his intentions went.

In *Silver and Gold*, Stevens juxtaposes a medieval song about death, by John Dowland, with a carol about Christ’s birth. The juxtaposition of Christ’s Incarnation and Crucifixion is present throughout the album in the music and the cover art. The Christmas Unicorn represents Christ and all Christians who try to become like Christ, which demonstrates the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*.

I became most intrigued with this album after I went to the “The Surfjam Stephanapolous Christmas Sing-A-Long Seasonal Affective Disorder Spectacular Music Pageant Variety Show Disaster.” The name of the concert is intentionally long and hard to say; it is a taste of all the long lists and juxtapositions that Stevens uses throughout the

Notice the pink Christmas Unicorn/My Little Pony/Donkey in the center of the Wheel. That image is central to this thesis. Bryan Parker, who photographed the picture, says that “the stage was so full that the eye found it almost impossible to take in completely, and [he] later found [him]self trying to recall simple details like how many people were onstage.”³ I agree with his sentiment: the amount of things going on was incomprehensible, exhausting, and yet amazing. Even in the concert, Stevens used his maximalist artistic tendencies to bombard his audience with clashing colors and paradoxical ideas. In the live concert in Philadelphia, Stevens told his audience, “I’m sure this is like a psychedelic nightmare for some of you, but it’s like a dream come true.”⁴

In the Austin performance, Rosie Thomas would invite a random audience member to come up and spin the “Wheel!! Of!! Christmas!!!” The audience member would jump up to the stage with the audience screaming, spin the wheel, and then Stevens would perhaps fudge which song the wheel actually landed on. The atmosphere was fun all around. Each time after the wheel would spin, Stevens would quip, “Fate has determined that the next song will be,” and then he and his band would launch into the song and the hot and crowded audience would join in. One of my favorites was an impossibly quick rendition of “Sleigh Ride.” The words were printed in the program, but very few were able to keep up with the lightning fast pace. Everyone was giggling and trying to keep up.

³Ibid.

⁴Sufjan Stevens, “Sufjan Stevens – Christmas Unicorn @ Union Transfer,” flash video, *Youtube*, November 23, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzTGvU28YgU>, (accessed April 2, 2014).

Sufjan Stevens's copilot and person in charge of keeping the energy up was Rosie Thomas. She was dressed in a snowman costume, and she must have been hot under the lights on a Texas stage. She acted as the cheerleader for the whole concert and used a high pitch, child-like voice to yell at the audience and get them pumped.



Figure 2: Rosie Thomas in Snowman costume at Fonda Theater⁵

The Christmas portion of the concert ended with “Christmas Unicorn.” The feeling in the room was magical. Stevens put on his unicorn costume, consisting of a bicycle helmet with a unicorn horn duct taped on, metallicly sheened streamers, and colorful balloons.

⁵Ibid.



Figure 3: Stevens in Christmas Unicorn costume⁶

Rosie Thomas threw out pink unicorn figures as shown in Figure 3. Huge red balloons were released into the audience during the chorus and everyone tried to reach them so they could hit them back into the air. Glittery confetti was released during the climax of the song. Everyone was screaming and singing and hugging. After begging for an encore for about three minutes of solid cheering after the song, Stevens finally came out with his guitar and played a few of his songs from his album, *Illinoise*. It was definitely strange to hear his older music in a more typical singer-songwriter style. It was beautiful, but the whole crowd had just gone through two hours of magical Christmas music of every type and everyone took a while to calm down and listen to acoustic songs without electronics, screaming, or flashing colors.

⁶Bryan Parker, "Sufjan Stevens Live at Emo's Austin."

The concert was great experience. One of my friends commented that he did not want to listen to Stevens's old stuff after that concert.⁷ *Illinoise* had wonderful songwriting, but *Silver and Gold* is part of Stevens's newest age of incomprehensible pop art. It is a necessarily huge project that successfully frames the song, "Christmas Unicorn."

In my thesis, I will analyze the album, *Silver and Gold*, and the song, "Christmas Unicorn," from musicological, theological, and artistic angles. Dorothy Sayers laments, "It is now very difficult for the artist to speak the language of the theologian."⁸ I will attempt to synthesize different aspects of analysis of this song and hopefully give the reader an understanding of the theology, music, and art behind "Christmas Unicorn." Perhaps we can achieve the "synthesis of experience" that Sayers calls us to move towards.⁹

⁷Michael Webbon, comment, 2012.

⁸Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, (New York: Harcourt, 1941), 31.

⁹Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

Biography of Sufjan Stevens

Sufjan Stevens is a singer-songwriter, composer, and multi-instrumentalist who lives in Brooklyn, New York.¹



Figure 4: Photo of Sufjan Stevens from his blog²

When a *Guardian* journalist visited Stevens's sparsely decorated Brooklyn office in 2011, Stevens apologized for the lack of homely comforts, "Even my apartment has a semblance of a storage facility. It's just stacks, there are no bookshelves, just books and

¹"Sufjan Stevens," *Asthmatic Kitty Records*, <http://asthmatickitty.com/artists/sufjan-stevens/>, (accessed January 16, 2014).

²Sufjan Stevens, "Art is all around us; stay alert!" *2014: Year of the Sufjan*, <http://sufjan.com/post/73638532189/art-is-all-around-us-stay-alert>, (accessed January 30, 2014).

piles of stamp collections and weird little sewing and knitting projects.”³ He loves to collect a multitude of things that inspire him. “I don’t believe in *too* much,” he says when talking about the balance between simplicity and complexity, “I’m a maximalist.”⁴ Stevens’s maximalism will be evident when we explore his album, *Silver and Gold*, in chapter three.

Stevens was born on July 1, 1975 in Detroit, Michigan and grew up in Petosky, Michigan, which is a small town in Northern Michigan.^{5,6} He has six siblings and was raised by his father and his stepmother.⁷ He joked, “I can’t even name all of my brothers and sisters.”⁸ His grandmother was also at the home and was a kind matriarch according to Stevens.⁹ “They were ‘eccentrics, hippies, spiritualists’ whose idea of a Christmas present was ‘a home enema kit or a toothbrush made from recycled newspapers.’”¹⁰ Stevens joked on stage at a concert that he would get “leather satchels of crystals for

³ Tim Lewis, “Sufjan Stevens: I’ve always been insecure about what I do,” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/may/08/sufjan-stevens-interview-age-adz>, (accessed January 27, 2014).

⁴Rebecca Milzoff, “Sufjan Stevens’s Ballet Lessons: How Justin Peck’s new piece for NYCB got its soundtrack,” *New York Magazine*, September 23, 2012, <http://nymag.com/arts/classicaldance/dance/features/sufjan-stevens-justin-peck-year-of-the-rabbit-2012-10/>, (accessed January 30, 2014).

⁵“Info,” *Asthmatic Kitty Records*, <http://asthmatickitty.com/info/>, (accessed January 16, 2014).

⁶Biography,” *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/sufjanstevens>, (accessed January 27, 2014).

⁷Tim Lewis, “Sufjan Stevens,” *The Guardian*.

⁸Sufjan Stevens, “That was the Worst Christmas Ever,” video on Youtube, December 30, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdyjueoSg1o>, (accessed February 1, 2014).

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Tim Lewis, “Sufjan Stevens,” *The Guardian*.

healing.”¹¹ Stevens’s parents raised him in a “Subud cult that has ties to Islam and Indonesia and Middle Eastern spiritualism.”¹² Because he was born into this cult, his parents gave him the Arabic name, ‘Sufjan,’ which means “comes with a sword.”¹³ Stevens quips in his interview with Odland, “It’s one of those charming militaristic Muslim names. I guess my purpose in life is to kill and avenge.”¹⁴

Although Stevens was raised nontraditionally, he found himself loving the traditional Christian church experience as an adult, far different from his spiritualist upbringing. From at least 2002 to 2005, Sufjan Stevens was a member of an Anglo-Catholic church.¹⁵ He said that he “kind of admire[s] it for being so traditional and sort of unchanging and unwavering in a lot of its doctrine, but also very sort of open and broad in its understanding of human nature.”¹⁶ This traditional but open church is definitely different than his upbringing in an isolated cult. Although Stevens appreciates the Anglican Church and its tradition, he has a mixed view of the church as an institution:

The church is an institution and it’s incredibly corrupt obviously, but that’s because it’s full of dysfunctional people and people who are hurt and battered and abused. It’s very normal in any institution to have that kind of level of dysfunction. That’s unfortunate. I find it very difficult, I find church culture very difficult you know; I think a lot of churches now are just fundamentally flawed. But that’s true for any institution you know, that’s true for education, universities and it’s definitely true for corporations because of greed, and I think part of faith is having to be reconciled with a flawed community. But the principles, I don’t

¹¹Sufjan Stevens, “That was the Worst Christmas Ever.”

¹²“Sufjan Stevens,” interview by Noel Murrery, *The A.V. Club*, July 13, 2005, <http://www.avclub.com/article/sufjan-stevens-13942>, (accessed 16 January 2014.)

¹³“Sufjan Stevens,” interview by Jeffery Odland. *Junkmedia*, May 12, 2004, <http://www.junkmedia.org/index.php?i=1031>, accessed January 16, 2014.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵“Sufjan Stevens,” interview by Noel Murrery, *The A.V. Club*.

¹⁶Ibid.

think the principles have changed. They can get skewed and they can get abused and dogma can reign supreme, but I think the fundamentals, it's really just about love. Loving God and loving your neighbour and giving up everything for God. The principles of that, the basis of that is very pure and life changing.¹⁷

Stevens said this only two years before he released *Silver and Gold*. In the final chapter, we will explore how he approaches and accepts the flaws of the church and of humanity. He obviously has some issues with the church as an institution. He points out his grievances by acknowledging the flaws in commercialism and brands of Christianity focused on prosperity. However, he also shows that every type of music has some sort of pure form of "giving up everything for God," even if it is tainted with some of the ugliness and perversion of the world.¹⁸

When asked about his first musical experience, Stevens said it was lip-synching in his middle school contest with a costume and choreography.¹⁹ He was a fairly accomplished oboe player as well. He played oboe at Interlochen Arts Academy for a year when he was fourteen. His experience there was less than ideal:

It was just awful: four-hour ensemble rehearsals, competitive juries, gossip groups posed as sectionals, practice rooms insulated with asbestos. We were all so maladjusted. I cried everyday. I hated my oboe. It was the only instrument for which I took lessons, and now it's the only instrument I have no interest in playing (although I use it for overdubbing occasionally). About that time, I started learning the piano by ear, eavesdropping on my sister's lessons, or listening to recordings of Rachmaninoff. The piano seemed so much more mysterious than the oboe: it had internal organs, a series of interlocking hammers and strings, a lid. I started making up songs, variations on "Chopsticks" or Bach minuets. When I went to college, I started learning guitar, bass guitar, drums, banjo. I bought a cheap kit (two toms, a snare, a kick) and practiced off-beats and 5/4 rhythms. I played recorders for a folk band, then borrowed my sister's flute.

¹⁷"Adz And It Shall Be Given Unto You: Sufjan Stevens Interviewed," interview by Jeremy Allen, *The Quietus*, October 12, 2010, <http://thequietus.com/articles/05085-the-age-of-adz-sufjan-stevens-interview>, (accessed 22 January 2014).

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹"Interview with Sufjan Stevens," *Delusions of Adequacy: For the Love of Music*, September 26, 2006, <http://www.adequacy.net/2006/09/interview-with-sufjan-stevens/>, (accessed January 21, 2014).

If something was available — an accordion, a sitar, a harmonica—I’d spend enough time noodling to get something down on tape. I was promiscuous—each instrument was a new sordid affair.²⁰

The school he was attending when he started ‘noodling’ on different instruments was Hope College in Holland, Michigan, which belongs to the Dutch Calvinist tradition.²¹ He also received a Masters degree in creative writing at the New School for Social Research in New York City.^{22,23} The New School is a musicologically significant school; thus I will go into some historical detail on the New School to put Stevens’s education in context. The New School for Social Research opened in 1919 inviting “‘intelligent men and women’ to study the ‘grave social, political, economic, and educational problems of the day.’”²⁴ The school was founded on the idea that adult students were apprentices who worked alongside the faculty in friendship.²⁵ In 1951, one of the faculty members made these remarks about his experience at the New School:

Students come to the New School of their own volition because they want to know. This is a blessing to the teacher in many ways. New School students are the best of all question askers. They not only ask questions, they also make contributions of their own to the learning and the teaching process. They feel free, and are encouraged to feel free, to bring their own experience and knowledge to bear upon the development of any point. In my classes I have often learned fundamental facts of greatest importance and in one or two cases I have persuaded students to publish in scientific journals, with much accruing benefit to the universe of knowledge. What more can a teacher say than that he learns from his students? Another reason I like teaching at the New School is the warmth

²⁰Ibid.

²¹“Info,” *Asthmatic Kitty Records*, <http://asthmatickitty.com/info/>, (accessed January 16, 2014).

²²Ibid.

²³“About Us,” *The New School for Social Research*, updated 2013, <http://www.newschool.edu/nssr/about/>, (accessed January 16, 2014).

²⁴Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, *New School: A History of the New School for Social Research* (New York: The Free Press (A Division of Macmillan, Inc., 1986), 19.

²⁵Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, *New School*, 20.

prevailing everywhere. Other schools are free, but at the New School warmth is added, and that makes a great deal of difference. There is a humanity and a cordiality at the New School which is unique. One feels welcome and free and if there were a better practical demonstration of democracy in action than the New School I have yet to learn of it.²⁶

This statement matches up with Stevens's outlook on life. Stevens does not treat any one person or scholar as greater than another person purely because of academic pedigree. He sees beauty and artistic greatness in Prince and Royal Robertson.²⁷ He covered the pop artist Prince's "Alphabet Song" in *Silver and Gold*, and he based the album *The Age of Adz* on the folk artist's Royal Robertson's apocalyptic art.²⁸ It is easy to imagine Stevens in an evening class talking with his professor at the New School and the professor learning something from the conversation.

Many important American composers in the twentieth century have taught at the New School, including Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, and John Cage.²⁹ Stevens has an approach to new instruments similar to that of Henry Cowell and John Cage. Stevens has said this in an interview:

To be honest, I have a hard time talking about my music as art because I don't believe it. Music is something much more primitive: accelerated sound, oscillating waves and reverberations (sine, cosine, etc.). We are only participating in the laws of physics, applying terms like rock ballad, cantata, Catholic mass. My only goal is to extend myself—instrumentally, thematically, theoretically—until I come across something exciting (something otherworldly), making the most joyful noise possible.³⁰

²⁶M. F. Ashley Montagu, "It Is a Privilege to Teach at the New School," *Bulletin: New School* (October 29, 1951), NSA.

²⁷Sufjan Stevens, "Prince 4 Ever", *2014: Year of the Sufjan*, blog, <http://sufjan.com/post/72198027651/prince-4-ever>, (accessed January 31, 2014).

²⁸"Sufjan Stevens: *The Age of Adz*," *Asthmatic Kitty Records*, October 12, 2010, <http://asthmatickitty.com/merch/the-age-of-adz/>, (accessed January 31, 2014).

²⁹Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, *New School*, 229-230.

³⁰"Interview with Sufjan Stevens," *Delusions of Adequacy*, September 26, 2006.

Stevens's statement relating music and physics is remarkably similar to John Cage's ideas. Henry Cowell describes John Cage's music as follows: "Each 'event' is an aggregate of materials of sound that cohere, making a tiny world of their own as physical elements find themselves joined together in a meteorite. A work of Cage's therefore, might well be likened to a shower of meteors of sound."³¹ Cage and Stevens are very similar in their approach to making sound and noise in a melange rather than trying to fit within a musical genre.

After finishing school, Stevens worked for a while as a graphic designer.³² This skill is evident in Stevens's attention to the detail in the visual art of his albums as well as his blog. In 1999, he cofounded an independent record label called Asthmatic Kitty Records with his stepfather.^{33,34}



Figure 5: Graphic from Asthmatic Kitty Label³⁵

³¹Henry Cowell, "Current Chronicle," *Musical Quarterly* (January 1952), reprinted in Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage*, 95.

³²Tim Lewis, "Sufjan Stevens," *The Guardian*.

³³Ibid.

³⁴"Info," *Asthmatic Kitty Records*, <http://asthmatickitty.com/info/>, (accessed January 16, 2014).

³⁵Ibid.

Stevens's official job title according to the record company's website is "Minister of Aesthetics" of the Brooklyn office.³⁶ This job title, although it means that he is in charge of the whole Brooklyn division, sheds some light on how Stevens approaches art. Although he is primarily a musician, he is obsessed with all aspects of aesthetics. His songwriting is not about just writing a song, but creating and exploring an aesthetic that is interesting to him.

In 1999, Stevens released the albums, *A Sun Came!* and *Enjoy Your Rabbit*. His debut, *A Sun Came!*, incorporates Middle Eastern influences with absurdist quotations from the psalms.³⁷ He uses unusual instruments as well as interesting harmonies to accompany psalms. He employs repetition and different instruments like percussion, violin, and a chorus of scalar winds in Philip Glass style, as well as mixed meter and long instrumental interludes.³⁸

These first two albums gained him an entry in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music*.³⁹ This is interesting because, only a few years after he had an entry in this encyclopedia, Stevens said in an interview, "Christian music (as a genre) exists exclusively within the few insulated floors (cubicles and computers included) of some corporate construction in Nashville, Tenn. Otherwise, there's no such thing as Christian music."⁴⁰ While Mark Powell put Stevens in this "Christian Music" category, Stevens

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Mark Allan Powell, "Sufjan Stevens," *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002), 875.

³⁸Sufjan Stevens, *A Sun Came!*, Asthmatic Kitty: June 13, 2000.

³⁹Mark Allan Powell, "Sufjan Stevens."

⁴⁰"Interview with Sufjan Stevens," *Delusions of Adequacy*.

expressly does not want to be a part of the “Christian Music” genre. He also does not seem to respect the Christian music industry. Stevens does not consider himself writing and performing music as a Christian. I think he may have some parallels with Dorothy Sayers. She says in the preface to *The Mind of the Maker* that she is “not writing ‘as a Christian,’ but as a professional writer.”⁴¹ She did not wish to be considered “as a Christian,” but as a first-rate writer, just as Stevens wishes to be considered simply as a musician and artist.

Stevens’s first album to gain wide public recognition was *Michigan*, which was the first installment in what he had said would become a project of an album for all fifty states.⁴² Perhaps his best known album is *Illinoise* that came out in 2005 and won the Shortlist Music Prize.⁴³ This was the second and last installment of his ambitious fifty state project. Tim Lewis accurately describes Stevens at this time as being “a folk singer but only because a more adequate genre had not yet been coined.”⁴⁴

In 2009, Stevens released the album of his first piece for orchestra called BQE after the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.⁴⁵ Although many in the Brooklyn community think the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway is an urban blight, Stevens tried to approach the roadway as art. The original symphonic piece was premiered in 2007 at the Howard Gilman Opera House, and the album was released with a comic book, a documentary

⁴¹Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: Harcourt, 1941), xiv.

⁴²Tim Lewis, “Sufjan Stevens,” *The Guardian*.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Stephen Halking, “The BQE”, August 17, 2009, <http://stephenhalker.blogspot.com/search/label/Sufjan>, (accessed February 2, 2014).

filmed on 16 mm film, and a 3-D viewmaster.⁴⁶ A collection of multimedia is also featured in the album release of *Silver and Gold*. Here is the album art for *The BQE* designed by Stephen Halking:

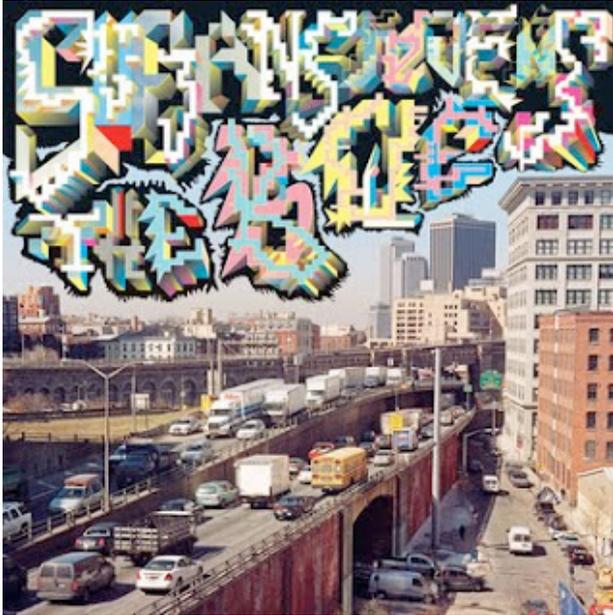


Figure 6: Album art from *The BQE* by Stephen Halking⁴⁷

More recently, Stevens has achieved critical acclaim in the classical ballet world. His album, *Year of the Rabbit*, has been arranged by Michael P. Atkinson for the New York City ballet.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸“Year of the Rabbit,” New York City Ballet, <http://www.nycballet.com/ballets/y/new-j-peck-stevens.aspx>, (accessed January 29, 2014).



Figure 7: New York City Ballet, *Year of the Rabbit*⁴⁹

Justin Peck, the choreographer of the ballet, had to convince Stevens to collaborate with him because Stevens did not know whether he would like the stodginess of classical ballet.⁵⁰ Peck took Stevens to some ballet performances, and Stevens acquiesced, letting Atkinson arrange his electronic album for string orchestra.⁵¹ Stevens was pleased with the ballet: “I think it feels confident, but it doesn’t take itself too seriously. And I’m the same way.”⁵² Even when Stevens’s work makes it into the classical realm, he still does not take himself too seriously. Such artistic snobbery is still unappealing to him, no matter how successful he is.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Rebecca Milzoff, “Sufjan Stevens’s Ballet Lessons: How Justin Peck’s new piece for NYCB got its soundtrack,” *New York Magazine*, September 23, 2012, <http://nymag.com/arts/classicaldance/features/sufjan-stevens-justin-peck-year-of-the-rabbit-2012-10/>, (accessed January 30, 2014).

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

The ballet was well reviewed as the New York Times declared, “The rabbit of Mr. Peck’s imagination is off at a run. Chasing after it will be a pleasure.”⁵³ Sufjan Stevens is a versatile artist and performer, and this thesis shows how his work is beautiful and intricate.

⁵³Brian Seibert, “A Choreographer Emerges, Assisted by the Chinese Zodiac: City Ballet Performs Justin Peck’s ‘Year of the Rabbit,’” *The New York Times*, October 7, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/arts/dance/city-ballet-performs-justin-pecks-year-of-the-rabbit.html?_r=0, (accessed January 29, 2014).

CHAPTER THREE

Silver and Gold

The album, *Silver and Gold*, was released on November 13, 2012.¹

The version that I will be referring to is the special edition CD version. Figure 8 provides a visual as to the scope and size of the album.



Figure 8: *Silver and Gold* from Stephen Halker's blog²

All of the original songs written by Sufjan Stevens are public domain “in the spirit of generosity inherent in the holidays.”³ He says that he makes the songs free because he feels that the music industry should move towards a more democratic sharing of ideas.⁴

¹“Download Sufjan Stevens—‘Ding-a-ling-a-ling’ + Busdriver remix,” website, October 12, 2012, <http://prettymuchamazing.com/mp3/download-sufjan-stevens-ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling-busdriver-remix>, (accessed February 1, 2014).

²Stephen Halker, photo, <http://stephenhalker.tumblr.com/>, accessed February 2, 2014.

³Sufjan Stevens, “I sing my jolly-jolly candy-coated Christmas song of vindication,” essay, *Silver and Gold*, 11 (Brooklyn: Asthmatic kitty, 2012).

⁴Ibid.

A few examples of the art and music in *Silver and Gold* help to give context and greater meaning to the last song of the multi-disk album, “Christmas Unicorn.” Each of the various styles used in the “Christmas Unicorn” is exposed in one of the previous songs on the album. “Christmas Unicorn” incorporates various aspects of Christmas and post-modern Christmas culture, including the birth of Christ, Santa, pagan symbols, medieval ideas, and every genre of music from techno to baroque. All of these conflicting and paradoxical definitions of Christmas and Christmas music are synthesized in “Christmas Unicorn” but one has to comb through the whole album to understand the true breadth and meaning of the song.

Stevens writes in the introduction to *Silver and Gold*, “Christmas music does justice to the criminal, marrying sacred and profane, bellowing obtuse prophecies of the Messiah in the same blustery breath as a candy-coated, holly-jolly, TV-jingle advertising a string of lights and a slice of fruitcake.”⁵ This statement accurately sums up why Stevens uses jarring juxtaposition of different styles to broadly define ‘Christmas music.’

Art

A description of the album’s visual art not only gives one an idea of the general aesthetic of the album, but also explicitly outlines some of Stevens’s ideas about paradox and the definition of Christmas. Along with the five CD’s in the box (each with its own album art), there are four sheets of stickers, four sheets of washable tattoos, a poster, a foldable star ornament with instructions, and a booklet with essays, clipart, and lyrics.⁶

⁵Ibid., 9.

⁶Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold* (Brooklyn: Asthmatic Kitty, 2012).

These various “supplemental materials” convey the colorfulness of the album’s musical language.

The stickers, tattoos, “Let it Snow” airbrush cover, and airbrush unicorn were designed by Stephen Halker, who describes himself on his blog as a “Brooklyn based Illustrator who spends way too much time surfing the web, and not enough time skateboarding.”^{7,8} This shows that Halking must be aware of Internet pop cultural references, as I will discuss further in chapter four. Stephen Halking had collaborated with Stevens on his *BQE* project by designing seven Viewmaster reels as well as a comicbook and the album art.⁹ Halker is also the artist for one of the main images I will explore in this thesis, which he calls the “Christmas Donkicorn” on his blog:



Figure 9: “Christmas Donkicorn” by Stephen Halking¹⁰

⁷Ibid., 10.

⁸Stephen Halker, “Stephen Halker,” *Blogger*, <https://www.blogger.com/profile/11948087802736671655>, (accessed February 2, 2014).

⁹Stephen Halking, “The BQE”, August 17, 2009, <http://stephenhalker.blogspot.com/search/label/Sufjan>, (accessed February 2, 2014).

¹⁰Stephen Halker, photo, <http://stephenhalker.tumblr.com/>, (accessed February 2, 2014).

Stephen Halking also designed a few other stickers that explore key themes from the album. Figure 10 shows two pictures found throughout the art of the album that are often juxtaposed for effect.

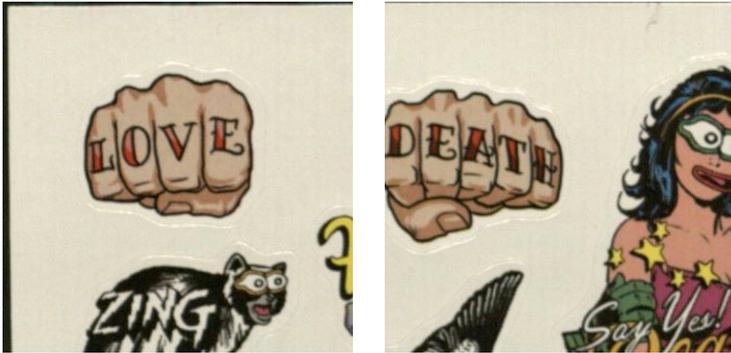


Figure 10: Stickers from album by Stephen Halking¹¹

One of the key themes explored in the album is the paradox of love and death. These stickers are a perfect demonstration of that paradox. Death is seen as the left hand, or the “sinister” hand from the Latin, *sinistra*. Also, the left hand’s six fingers point to a perversion of good or of “love.”

¹¹Stephen Halker, stickers, *Silver and Gold* (Brooklyn: Asthmatic Kitty, 2012).



Figure 11: “Love” and “Hate”¹²

Using the word “death” instead of the more commonly used word in knuckle tattoos, “hate,” highlights how Christ counteracts the evil of sin in the world through his faithful sacrifice of his life. On the back of Volume 6, these two fists are portrayed with a rainbow in between.¹³ Even though the ideas of “love” and “death” seem contradictory, they are linked together in a complementary way with a rainbow, a symbol of promise. Jesus was a fulfillment of a promise and he conquered death with love. This juxtaposition foreshadows how the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Jesus are linked through the symbol of the unicorn.

There is a pivotal picture on page 24 of the booklet directly across from the table of contents for the lyrics (see Figure 12).

¹²Brad, G. B Tattoo, <http://www.prohost1.co.uk/GBTattoo/Gallery/BRADOLDSCHOOL98.jpg>, (accessed April 7, 2014).

¹³Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold Vol. 6*, album cover, (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012).



Figure 12: Picture across from table of contents in booklet¹⁴

There is a blue airbrushed unicorn drawn by Stephen Halker in the background. It is surrounded by colorful clipart in a circle, and a rainbow bridges across the middle of the circle with the “LOVE” fist on the left part of the rainbow and the “DEATH” fist of the right part of the rainbow. This visual shows how love and death are linked together as a

¹⁴Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold*, booklet (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012), 24.

paradox through the death of Christ because of his love. These fists represent how Christ bridges the gap by loving so much that he died. Hanging from each of these fists are two white lambs with copious amounts of bright red blood spilling from them. This blood represents the blood of Christ and the blood of the lamb of the Passover. A picture of Jesus with the crown of thorns on his head and a red rose at his chest is in the center of the rainbow, representing Christ at the Crucifixion. On either side of Jesus are the words, “Alpha” and “Omega.” The omega is on the same side of Jesus as death, since it is the final letter of the Greek alphabet. At the bottom of the circle but going into the blue space is a baby Jesus with an orange mandorla throwing up one fist with the rocker symbol and the other fist with the symbol of peace that saints typically show in icons.

Although all of these images are central to the album, I will be focusing on the unicorn as the unifying symbol of all of these paradoxical ideas. The unicorn in Figure 12 is the largest symbol and the only one to appear in the background. The unicorn’s horn appears to be creating a path up and out of the circle; Christ is God’s instrument used to break the infinite circle of mortality and Hell. A rainbow of God’s promise not to destroy the world is fulfilled through the birth, death, and reincarnation of the Messiah.

Pastor Thomas Vito Aiuto explicitly explores this paradox in an essay in the album booklet entitled, “A Brief Exposition on Advent & the End Times.”¹⁵ Advent is a preparation for the first coming of Christ at the Nativity but also for his second coming at the Apocalypse. Pastor Aiuto ends his essay with three brief statements:

The end is near.
You are going to die.
Happy Holidays.¹⁶

¹⁵Thomas Vito Aiuto, “A Brief Exposition on Advent & the End Times,” *Silver and Gold*, 16-19.

¹⁶Ibid.

These links can be uncomfortable, but Stevens boldly braves these topics through the vehicle of maximalist music and bright colors. Stevens makes a loud and brash claim that is brave as well as insightful by linking Advent with the Apocalypse, Christmas with Crucifixion, and Love with Death. These juxtapositions make the way for jarring associations such as Jingle Bells next to Bach chorales.

Jessica Dessner, another artist featured on the album art, crafted the “Ornament in Space” and “Christmas unicorn” pencil drawings.¹⁷ She describes herself on her blog as a “Brooklyn-based artist, poet, and dancer/choreographer.”¹⁸ Stevens recruited his artistic friends nearby rather than hire designers and studio musicians in Nashville. Dessner drew the cover art for the album, *Silver and Gold*, with Stevens doing the graphic design.¹⁹ Dessner majored in dance at Barnard College and had a successful dance career in New York before she branched out into other art forms.²⁰ Stevens first collaborated with her on the album art for *Run Rabbit Run*.²¹ Dessner describes their tight-knit circle, “A lot of the artwork and a lot of the music and projects that happen in my particular arena (Brooklyn’s alternative-arts scene) come out of these friendships. We’re hanging out and someone says, ‘Hey, want to do this?’”²² Most of the people with

¹⁷Sufjan Stevens, “I sing my jolly-jolly candy-coated Christmas song of vindication,” 10.

¹⁸Jessica Dessner, blog, <http://jessicadessner.com/>, (accessed February 2, 2014).

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Stephen Rosen, “Jessica Dessner Is Drawing Inspiration.”

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

whom Stevens collaborates are his friends who happened to have very similar goals. Dessner also choreographed and danced on tour with Stevens's *Age of Adz*.²³

Musicians

Stevens had a huge team of musicians helping him with this massive album project. In the booklet that comes with the special edition, Stevens lists his musical collaborators with the preface:

I'd like to acknowledge my co-conspirators ("et tu, Brute"), who've willingly indulged in this feverish tradition over the years, participating in all the late-night pageantry, hand-clapping, hocketing, harmonizing, guitar-strumming, scat-singing, tambourine shaking, booty-breaking, gingerbread baking, hallelujah-happy-holiday-Christmas-madness, god-forsaking, merry-making.²⁴

After this introduction, he goes on to list a large number of artists and musicians. This reveals much about Stevens's propensity to compile huge long lists of things that are seemingly contradictory and yet artful when placed together. He likes bombarding his audience with massive amounts of information in order to hammer home paradoxical ideas. I will highlight only a few of these musicians since space does not permit me to go into too much detail about all of them.

One of the first on Stevens's list of musicians is Bryce Dessner, who is a notable composer, guitarist, and curator who lives in New York City.²⁵ He has worked with Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and David Lang²⁶ and has written pieces for the Kronos Quartet, Eighth Blackbird, and So Percussion, which are perhaps the best-known

²³Ibid.

²⁴Sufjan Stevens, "I sing my jolly-jolly candy-coated Christmas song of vindication," 10.

²⁵Bryce Dessner, <http://www.brycedessner.com/>, (accessed February 1, 2014).

²⁶Ibid.

American new music chamber groups.²⁷ He is the guitarist for The National (a rock band), which has been nominated for a Grammy Award and has several top-selling albums.²⁸ The *New York Post* describes The National: “They create sprawling songs that evoke the feeling of living in places where you have room to spread out, where people actually own land.”²⁹ Sufjan Stevens’s style could be described in a similar way. Bryce Dessner has worked with Sufjan Stevens and Nico Muhly on a collaborative song cycle called *Planetarium*, which goes through each of the planets in homage to Holst’s *The Planets*.³⁰ Bryce Dessner plays guitar on the album, *Silver and Gold*, as well as in the live concert with Stevens. Bryce Dessner’s twin brother, Aaron Dessner, also works on the album and is a member of The National.³¹

Aaron Dessner is a guitarist, keyboardist, and writes most of the songs for the National.^{32,33} He has a similar vocabulary to Sufjan Stevens. When the *New York Magazine* asked “In one sentence, what do you actually do all day in your job?” Aaron Dessner responded, “Noodle.”³⁴ He, his wife, and his two-year-old daughter live in an

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Christopher Kompanek, “National’s Treasure,” *New York Post*, May 19, 2011, <http://nypost.com/2011/05/19/nationals-treasure/>, (accessed February 3, 2014).

³⁰Bryce Dessner, <http://www.brycedessner.com/>.

³¹Stephen Rosen, “Jessica Dessner Is Drawing Inspiration: Art, dance and music intertwine in a blossoming visual art career,” *CityBeat*, November 10, 2010, http://citybeat.com/cincinnati/article-22074-jessica_dessner_is_drawing_inspiration.html, (accessed February 2, 2014).

³²Aaron Dessner, “While Stuck in Traffic, the National’s Aaron Dessner Fantasizes About Living in Rural New England,” interview by Vanita Salisbury, *New York Magazine*, December 1, 2011, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2011/11/nationals-aaron-dessner-21-questions.html>, (accessed February 3, 2014).

³³Christopher Kompanek, “National’s Treasure.”

³⁴Aaron Dessner, “While Stuck in Traffic.”

old Victorian house in Brooklyn with one of his bandmates renting the top two floors.^{35,36} Sufjan Stevens and Bryce Dessner live in the same neighborhood (Ditmas Park) as Aaron Dessner, and Dessner's older sister, Jessica Dessner (the artist for the album cover), cuts his hair for free.³⁷ They are a close-knit family that loves to make art together. Most of the musicians contributing to the album are entrenched in the Brooklyn culture and are connected to each other, just wanting to "noodle" on different instruments together.

The co-entertainer for the live concert was Rosie Thomas. Rosie Thomas says on her blog that she "just wants to entertain people."³⁸ She plays piano, guitar, sings, and is also a comedian under the name "Sheila Saputo."³⁹ She released her own Christmas album in 2008, *A Very Rosie Christmas*, under her own label, Sing-A-Long Records.⁴⁰ Back in 2007, she told Stevens, whom she calls "Suf," "I think I need to get away," and he said, "Well, great, come here and we'll hang out and we'll do something creative."⁴¹ So she went to New York for a month and they recorded her debut album, *With Friends*.⁴² She moved to Brooklyn in 2009. She has a similar approach to Stevens about selling her songs for money. She feels as if she has no ownership over them after she

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶ Christopher Kompanek, "National's Treasure."

³⁷Aaron Dessner, "While Stuck in Traffic, the National's Aaron Dessner Fantasizes About Living in Rural New England."

³⁸Rosie Thomas, "About," blog, <http://www.rosiethomas.com/>, (accessed February 14, 2014).

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹"Interview with Rosie Thomas," interview by Laura Leebove, February 12, 2012, *emusic*, <http://www.emusic.com/music-news/interview/interview-rosie-thomas/>, (accessed February 14, 2014).

⁴²Ibid.

records them, and if it were up to her, she would just give away all of her merchandise for free at shows; the creative process matters more to her than record sales.⁴³ Stevens does not care to make money on royalties on his original songs from *Silver and Gold*; maybe this is an influence from Rosie Thomas's ideas.

Music

A multitude of different musical styles coexist in *Silver and Gold*. The album contains fifty-eight total tracks.⁴⁴ The genres involved include: techno, baroque pop, chorales, hymns, classic fifties ballads, Stevens's original indie songs, and solo piano music. Sufjan Stevens's strange relationship with Christmas is rooted in his childhood: his parents gave strange Christmas presents, and he said that he just wanted "to have a normal Christmas with gifts and a tree and like stuff."⁴⁵ The nostalgia for Christmas is not a looking back at the past for him; he and his siblings never got to have the 'normal' Christmas they wanted. The audience gets to experience Stevens's strange view of Christmas through *Silver and Gold*.

Let us begin with Volume 6. Stevens had already released Volumes 1-5 with his *Songs for Christmas* album; *Silver and Gold* contains volumes 6-10. I am considering *Silver and Gold* as its own discrete album because of the ideas that link the separate songs together. Volume 6 has the most collaboration of Stevens with Bryce and Aaron Dessner. This whole CD was originally recorded in Aaron Dessner's attic in 2006 on

⁴³"Interview with Rosie Thomas: Rosie talks about *These Friends of Mine*," interview by Kim Ruehl, <http://folkmusic.about.com/od/artistsz/a/RosieThomasQA.htm>, (accessed February 14, 2014).

⁴⁴Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold* (Brooklyn: Asthmatic Kitty, 2012).

⁴⁵Sufjan Stevens, "That was the Worst Christmas Ever," video on Youtube, December 30, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdyjueoSg1o>, (accessed February 1, 2014).

Stevens's VS-880-EX.⁴⁶ The Dessner twins and Stevens collaborated on writing the music for "Lumberjack Christmas/ No One Can Save You From Christmases Past," "The Midnight Clear," "Carol of St. Benjamin the Bearded One," and "Barcarola (You Must Be a Christmas Tree)."⁴⁷ Volume 6 has the most relaxed and 'normal' feel among the songs in *Silver and Gold*. The later volumes utilize more avant garde techniques and more shocking treatments of classic Christmas carols.

"Go Nightly Cares" by John Dowland covered by Sufjan Stevens (track six of Volume 6) is an example of baroque pop used in *Silver and Gold*. It contains suspensions, choir, lute, guitar, period violins, and viols. The original lyrics are, "Or let me die, as I desire the death./Welcome sweet death."⁴⁸ A John Dowland song about death that has seemingly nothing to do with Christmas is in the middle of the first album. Even though the words are not sung in the album, the intention is clear. Stevens is drawing on the medieval ideas of the Nativity being linked with Christ's death. Placing a song about death right next to Christmas songs implies that Stevens thinks that death is a part of the Christmas story along with birth and life. He deliberately draws attention to this paradoxical juxtaposition.

Volume 7 was originally recorded in Stevens's Brooklyn office on his VS-880-EX at The New Jerusalem Rec Room, Clarksboro, NJ, and more editing in 2012 in Stevens's Brooklyn office.⁴⁹ The first song on the seventh album is a solo piano piece

⁴⁶Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold* (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012), 70.

⁴⁷Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold Vol. 6*, album cover (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012).

⁴⁸John Dowland, "Go Nightly Cares," *John Dowland: The Collected Works* (London: The Decca Record Company Limited, 1997), 105.

⁴⁹Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold* (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012), 70.

“Christ the Lord Is Born” written by the Czech composer, Leos Janacek. It was originally published in 1909 on Christmas Eve, and was also published posthumously in 1994 as a part of a collection of piano miniatures called “Intimate Sketches.”⁵⁰ This piece shows that Stevens is a learned musician who has a vast knowledge of repertoire.

The most jarring song on the album is Stevens’s rendition of “Jingle Bells.”⁵¹ It starts with Stevens singing a simplified melody along with an acoustic guitar playing sixteenth notes.⁵² He may be mocking some punk rock styles. He pauses, and then a laugh track of children plays.⁵³ He enters again, finishes the verse with some dissonant double tracking, and then stops for the chorus to begin, which is just a discordant, slow, yelling of the chorus with instruments playing random runs and dissonant harmonies.⁵⁴ Everyone sounds tired. There are more laugh tracks of giggling children.⁵⁵ This is just supposed to be a palette cleanser in between two of Stevens’s original songs, but he is also commenting that “Jingle Bells” is a false song that is hardly about anything at all except for a glossy Christmas card sentiment. In the lyric book, he puts alternate lyrics written by his friend, Lowell Brams, next to the original “Jingle Bells” lyrics:

Crabgrass beer; whitetail deer
Spinach on Pa’s teeth
Lookout son, he’s got a gun
Pointed at your ear

⁵⁰*Klavirni miniatyry, sesit I: intimni skici*. Editio Moravia, Brno; UE, Mainz, 1994. PN UE 30191, 12 (without underlaid text), ed. And intro. By Jaromir Dlouhy and Reinhold Kubik.

⁵¹Sufjan Stevens, “Jingle Bells,” words and music by James Lord Pierpoint, *Silver and Gold Vol. 7* (Brooklyn: Asthmatic Kitty, 2012).

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

Broke guitar; fake memoir
Tie-dyed head to toe
Five to one, he'll bag him one
And stuff it in the car. Hey!⁵⁶

Stevens cannot leave a happy song alone without some paradox to undercut it and add some truth. Stevens is showing through his treatment of “Jingle Bells” that he does not respect the shiny and commercialist Christmas that ignores the paradox of life and death. Looking at only the happy side of things is a perversion of the truth. He still accepts “Jingle Bells” as an expression of Christmas because he has included it on his Christmas Album. Even though Stevens does not like the commercialist side of things, he still accepts it as part of the vast tapestry of all things Christmas.

Even though he does not seem to approve the commercialism of “Jingle Bells,” he covers Prince’s song, “Alphabet St,” respectfully.⁵⁷ Stevens challenges notions of what great Christmas music is. Stevens’s recorded “Alphabet St” along with the rest of Volume 8 in his office in 2008.⁵⁸ Stevens covers Prince as a pun because Jesus was also called the “Prince of Peace.” On the back of the cover for Volume 8, Stevens writes that words and music for this song are by “His Majesty Prince.”⁵⁹

Another striking juxtaposition is the use of “Ah Holy Jesus” three times throughout Volume 7.⁶⁰ This hymn appears for the first time after a noisy “We Wish

⁵⁶Lowell Brams, “Jingle Bells,” lyrics, *Silver and Gold* (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012), 39.

⁵⁷Sufjan Stevens, “Alphabet St.,” song by Prince, *Silver and Gold*, Vol. 8 (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012).

⁵⁸Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold* (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012), 71.

⁵⁹Sufjan Stevens, “Alphabet St.”

⁶⁰Sufjan Stevens, “Ah Holy Jesus,” words by Johann Heerman, *Silver and Gold*, Vol. 7 (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012).

This juxtaposition shocks the listener. It accepts both the happiness and the truth of Christmas, adding to the massive frame surrounding the final song, “Christmas Unicorn.”

Cat Martino sings “Ave Maria” in the Latin in Volume 9. This ninth volume was recorded with Sebastian Krueger, Nathan Lithgow, and Cat Martino in the Brooklyn Office in 2009. Stevens writes in the song booklet that the words to “Ave Maria” were “written by God himself.”⁶⁵ Cat Martino sings beautifully with girls’ choir providing harmony. Stevens is paying homage to Roman Catholicism by acknowledging the importance of this song. He also wants to highlight the importance and holiness of the Blessed Mary, the mother of Christ. Clipart of Mary appears throughout the art of the album, always with her traditional blue robe and halo as she is depicted in icons, illuminations, and medieval cathedrals.⁶⁶ In the picture above the lyrics for “Ave Maria” in the booklet, Mary is depicted in a blue robe in the middle of the two fists of “LOVE” and “DEATH.”⁶⁷



Figure 14: “Ave Maria” clipart⁶⁸

⁶⁵Sufjan Stevens, “Ave Maria”, lyrics, *Silver and Gold* (Brooklyn: Ashmatic Kitty, 2012), 55.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

SYMBOLISM OF THE UNICORN

In this chapter, I explore the history of the unicorn as an ancient pagan symbol, an appropriated church symbol in medieval times, and a post-modern pop culture symbol. This will allow me to analyze what it means for Stevens to appropriate the unicorn as a Christmas symbol of Christ as well as all human beings. Stevens knows that his audience is mostly approaching the song “Christmas Unicorn” from a post-modern perspective, but the symbolism he uses in his song stems from medieval Christian symbolism.

Whereas this chapter is divided into sections of ancient, medieval, and post-modern symbolism of the unicorn, all of these categories are more intertwined than I had originally realized. The story of the hunt of the unicorn is older than the Christian tradition that appropriates it. And while post-modernists on the Internet use the unicorn humorously, it often ends up having similar connotations of innocence and power as it did in the Middle Ages. All of these aspects of the symbol of the unicorn are important for the symbolism in Sufjan Stevens’s “Christmas Unicorn.” His song shows how everyone has flaws and hidden talents, and how these attributes together make up a symbol of a beautiful person, or a Christmas Unicorn. He is taking the unicorn from post-Moderns and reclaiming it as a symbol for Christ, all the while keeping the fun and glitter of the modern children character My Little Pony.

Ancient Symbol

One of the first recorded writings about the unicorn was by Ctesias of Cnidus, a Greek physician to the Persian court of Artaxerxes and Darius II,¹ who wrote about it in his book *Indica* around 398 BC:

There are in India certain wild asses which are as large as horses, and larger. Their bodies are white, their heads dark red, and their eyes dark blue. They have a horn on the forehead which is about a foot and a half in length. The base of this horn, for some two hands'-breadth above the brow, is pure white; the upper part is crimson; and the remainder, or middle portion, is black. Those who drink out of these horns, made into drinking vessels, are not subject, they say, to convulsions or to the holy disease (epilepsy). Indeed, they are immune even to poisons if, either before or after swallowing such, they drink wine, water, or anything else from these beakers.²

Ctesias travelled to Persia and spent time with translators trying to make sense of the Persian libraries.³ He spent his time writing about the Indian wild ass without ever having seen a living unicorn. Chris Lavers suggests that Ctesias's unicorn was an amalgam of three different animals on the Indian subcontinent.⁴ The antidote properties of the horn described seem to fit the Indian lore surrounding the rhinoceros horn, which supposedly had antidote and healing properties.⁵ However, the rhinoceros has a horn coming out its nose, not its forehead, and it does not have multiple colors. Ctesias may have seen elaborated and colorful drawings of rhinoceros horns in Indian paintings and

¹Margaret B. Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1976), 14.

²Chris Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Location 55-60.

³ *Ibid.*, Location 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, Location 153.

thought that this was what the actual horn looked like.⁶ The animal's mythical speed and colors likely came from another animal besides the rhinoceros. Lavers posits that the *kiang* from Tibet, a swift mule-like animal, could be the origin of the mythical animal's speed and colors since the *kiang* had red and white colors and could supposedly outrun horses.⁷



Figure 15: *Kiang* seen on Tibetan highlands⁸

The third animal that contributed to the idea of the unicorn was the male *chiru* or the Tibetan antelope.⁹

⁶ Ibid., Location 125.

⁷ Ibid., Location 216.

⁸“The Road to Nyoma,” photo, BCMTouring, September 25, 2009, <http://www.bcmtouring.com/forum/travelogues-north-india-f61/20-days-5000kms-tale-wild-wild-ride-roof-world-t14625-36/>, (accessed April 2, 2014).

⁹ Chris Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*, Location 167.



Figure 16: Tibetan Antelope¹⁰

These creatures “have straight black horns rising almost vertically from their heads.”¹¹ Although it is called an antelope, it is actually more closely related to a goat. When seen from profile, the *chiru* may have looked like it had only one horn. And often times, it was very difficult to get near to these animals, so people mostly saw them from a distance. The legend that the *chiru* only had one horn was also perpetuated because vendors would often sell the *chiru* horns one at a time and say that they had come from a one-horned

¹⁰ Yang Xi, “Top 10 Most Endangered Animals in China,” last modified November 18, 2010, http://www.china.org.cn/top10/2010-11/18/content_21370085_2.htm.

¹¹ Chris Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*: Chapter 1, Location 167.

animal.¹² Ctesias probably heard about the one-horned, but had seen only the single horns in the market place.

The legend of the unicorn was not limited to the Indian sub-continent and Greece. The Roman writer Pliny the Elder gives the name *monoceros* (Greek for unicorn) to an animal with “a body like a horse, head like a stag, feet like an elephant, tail like a boar; it makes a deep bellow, and one black horn two cubits long projects from the middle of its forehead.”¹³ In Chinese folklore, the unicorn or *kilin* was a symbol of good fortune and longevity, and in Arabian folklore, the unicorn, or *karkadann*, was a fierce fighter.¹⁴ One of the stories involving the *karkadann* uses it as a pagan fertility symbol.

The most remarkable is as monumental and magnificent as Mount Alvand. The creature has three legs, six eyes, nine mouths, and a golden horn When this karkadann puts its head into the water, all the female creatures therein become impregnated and all the evil creatures therein die and are thrown upon the shore. The waters become pure and fruitful.¹⁵

The horn of the unicorn was said to have healing medicinal powers. Specifically, the horn was thought to be an antidote to poisons.¹⁶ Apollonius of Tyana “was told that cups made from the horns were used by the kings of India in the belief that they were free that day from sickness and poison.”¹⁷ These cups may have been made from rhinoceros

¹²Ibid., Location 167.

¹³Margaret B. Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 14.

¹⁴Nancy Hathaway, *The Unicorn* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 12.

¹⁵Ibid., 62.

¹⁶ David Hunt, “The Association of the Lady and the Unicorn, and the Hunting Mythology of the Caucasus,” (April 2003): 89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30035068>, (accessed October 29, 2013).

¹⁷Margaret B. Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 15.

horns.¹⁸ The unicorn is often depicted in art dipping its horn into watering holes so other animals can drink the purified water.¹⁹

The unicorn can also represent the forces of evil and temptation.²⁰ “In a twelfth-century rulebook for nuns, the unicorn is described as wicked and wrathful, an emblem for violent people.”²¹ In the Middle Ages, there were myths of wild people who lived in the woods naked, but were covered with hair.²² These wild people, especially the women, had the ability to tame and ride the unicorns.

Medieval Christian Symbol

Although the unicorn was originally a pagan symbol, the Christian Church superimposed a new interpretation on it.²³ The King James Version of the Bible uses the word “unicorn” as a translation of the Hebrew word *re'em*.²⁴ A *re'em* is an auroch or a wild ox, but the representations of these creatures were often in profile and looked like they only had one horn. It was not discovered until a few hundred years ago that the *re'em* was the auroch, so for many years Christian scholars tried to justify the purpose of the unicorn in the Old Testament. This led to a variety of interpretations by theologians. In one interpretation, the unicorn became a symbol of Christ.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Nancy Hathaway, *The Unicorn*, 103.

²¹Ibid., 19.

²²Ibid., 18.

²³ David Hunt, “The Association of the Lady and the Unicorn, and the Hunting Mythology of the Caucasus,” *Folklore* 114, no. 1 (April 2003): 88.

²⁴ “Unicorn,” *JewishEncyclopedia.com*: The unedited full-text of the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia.



Figure 17: Auroch²⁵

This example is a bas-relief of an *auroch* from the Ishtar Gate built by King Nebuchadnezzar II circa 575 BC.²⁶ An *auroch* was the ancestor of modern cattle and was much larger and stronger than their peaceful descendants. Kings would hunt *aurochs*, and eventually hunted them to extinction by the 17th century.²⁷ By the time the bible was translated into Greek, the aurochs were scarce and no one knew what they were called or what they looked like. The original Greek translation of the Hebrew bible, or the *Septuagint*, was made around the third century BC, and since the translators had never seen or heard of the *re'em*, they substituted another mythical animal known to have great

²⁵An Auroch from the Ishtar Gate, 604-562 BC, Istanbul Archaeological Museums, Turkey, <http://www.historyandcivilization.com/Picture-Gallery---The-Ishtar-Gate.html>, (accessed October 26, 2013).

²⁶Mark Stokle, "The Ishtar Gate," *History and Civilization*, last modified December 15, 2012, accessed October 26, 2013, <http://www.historyandcivilization.com/Picture-Gallery---The-Ishtar-Gate.html>.

²⁷Ibid.

symbolic strength and mystery.²⁸ And since the *Septuagint* was supposedly divinely inspired and thus perfect, the unicorn's presence in the bible was not questioned.²⁹ Thus, the Greek translation for *re'em* became *monokeros*, the Latin translation (the *Vulgate*) became *unicornis*, and the King James Version translated *unicornis* to "unicorn."

A passage in the King James Version, Numbers 23:22 reads, "God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of a unicorn."³⁰ The Revised King James Version substitutes the word "wild ox" for unicorn.³¹ However, the original King James Bible had a lasting impact on Christian culture, and theologians had to deal with the purpose of the unicorn in the bible. This mistranslation ended up becoming a lasting legend in medieval tapestries and art. The unicorn developed allegorical meaning.

Tertullian of Carthage (AD 160-220) was one of the first theologians to link the unicorn with Christ.³² He analyzed this passage from Deuteronomy: "His glory is like the firstling of the bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth."³³ Tertullian wrote that the unicorn's horn represented the top part of the cross while the bull's horn represented the side arms of the cross. Lavers quotes Tertullian, "Finally it is by the virtue of this cross that, according to the custom of horned animals, He pierces every race with faith, lifting

²⁸Chris Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*: Chapter 3, Location 524.

²⁹Margaret B. Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 15.

³⁰Numbers 23:22 (King James Version).

³¹Numbers 23:22 (New King James Version)

³²Chris Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*: Chapter 4, Location 625.

³³Deuteronomy 33:17 (King James Version)

them from earth to heaven.”³⁴ The unicorn is linked with the crucifixion and the salvation of mankind. This will be important to the symbolism of Stevens’s “Christmas Unicorn.”

The unicorn hunt was a common theme in medieval manuscripts and illuminations. Frederica Law-Turner examines the *Ormesby Psalter* manuscript and analyzes the hunt of a unicorn depicted next to Psalm 38.³⁵ In the traditional unicorn hunt, a virgin is left alone in the woods to trick the unicorn into embracing her, and then the hunters appear once the virgin has lured the unicorn. Since a virgin is involved in the hunt, the unicorn also becomes a symbol of chastity.³⁶

This story was seen to be an allegory of the Incarnation as well as an allegory of the capture of Christ; the unicorn represents Christ being captured before His Crucifixion.³⁷ This again is in keeping with Stevens’s usage of Christ’s Nativity and Crucifixion juxtaposed throughout the entire album. In the fourteenth century, the unicorn was the paradoxical symbol for both Christ’s birth and death. The virgin used to lure the unicorn symbolized the Virgin Mary both at her conception of Christ and at the cross lamenting Christ’s death. Law-Turner cites Guillaume le Clerc’s writings to show that this symbolism of the unicorn was explicit in the thirteenth century.

³⁴Chris Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*: Chapter 4, Location 627.

³⁵Frederica Law-Turner, “Beasts, Benedictines and the Ormesby Master: Pictorial Exegesis in English Fourteenth-century Manuscript Illumination,” *The British Art Journal* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41615343>, (accessed October 26, 2013).

³⁶Nancy Hathaway, *The Unicorn*, 14.

³⁷David Hunt, “The Association of the Lady and the Unicorn, and the Hunting Mythology of the Caucasus,” *Folklore* 114, no. 1 (April 2003): 81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30035068>, (accessed October 26, 2013).

This wonderful beast,
Which has one horn on its head,
Signifies our lord
Jesus Christ, our saviour.
He is the spiritual unicorn,
Who took up in the Virgin his abode
Who is so especially worthy.
In her he assumed his human form
In which he appeared to the world.
His people of the Jews
Believed him not, but spied on him
And then took him and bound him
Before Pilate they led him
And there condemned him to death.³⁸

The unicorn at this time was a symbol for Christ coming to dwell on Earth via his Birth through the Virgin Mary. So in a unicorn hunt, the virgin used to lure the unicorn represents the Virgin Mary. Traditionally the unicorn embraces the virgin in the hunt, and this is when the hunters attack. An embrace is an intimate analogy to Christ being in the womb of Mary. In the third century, the Virgin Mary began to be labeled the *Theotokos* or “Christ-bearer.”³⁹ The pure maiden that lures the unicorn highlights the strength of the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁴⁰ She plays an active and irreplaceable role in the Incarnation of Christ, or the capture of the unicorn. The *theotokos* also plays a major role in the art of *Silver and Gold*.

³⁸ Frederica Law-Turner, “Beasts, Benedictines and the Ormesby Master,” *The British Art Journal* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 7, accessed October 26, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41615343>.

³⁹Mary Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 219.

⁴⁰Ibid.



Figure 18: “The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle”⁴¹

The tapestry in the image above is one of the *Unicorn Tapestries* from the fifteenth century made by artists in the Southern Netherlands. In this tapestry, both the killing of the unicorn and the unicorn being brought back to the castle are displayed.

Saint Ambrose of Milan asked rhetorically, “Who is this unicorn but the only begotten

⁴¹ “The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle (from the Unicorn Tapestries.)” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/467641>, (accessed October 26, 2013).

Son of God?”⁴² The hunters driving their lances into the unicorn’s body symbolize the Passion of the Christ.⁴³ The scene at the right has women and one man grieving over the dead body of the unicorn, perhaps pointing to the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist and other women grieving at Christ’s crucifixion.⁴⁴ The unicorn’s severed horn tangled up in oak branches could also symbolize the Crown of Thorns.⁴⁵

It is reasonable to assume that Sufjan Stevens is aware of this Christian symbolism of the Unicorn. Included in the album art for *Silver and Gold* is an “Apocalyptic Tableau pencil drawing poster” by Matt Gordon, a large picture with no perspective or vanishing point as well as a milieu of mythical and bizarre creatures.

⁴²Nancy Hathaway, *The Unicorn*, 14.

⁴³“The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.



Figure 19: *Apocalyptic Tableau pencil drawing poster* by Matt Gordon⁴⁶

This drawing is similar to a medieval tapestry in its scope. There is no foreground or background, and several different storylines are being played out in one visual arena. Although a friend of Stevens did this piece, its inclusion on the album seems to show that Stevens is aware of medieval art and perhaps even the *Unicorn Tapestries* that are

⁴⁶Matt Gordon, *Apocalyptic Tableau pencil drawing poster*, last updated October 16, 2012, <http://thestudioofmattgordon.blogspot.com/>, (accessed October 29, 2013)

currently on display in New York City (Stevens lives in Brooklyn). This tapestry also reveals that the artist was aware of the origins of the legend of the hunt of the unicorn.



Figure 20: close up of Figure 19⁴⁷

An earlier version from the *Physiologus* (circa 300 AD) has the virgin expose her breasts to the unicorn, the unicorn sucks upon her nipples, and then the maiden grasps the horn of the unicorn.⁴⁸ Or, the unicorn would drink milk from her breasts and become drunk and rest his horn in her lap.⁴⁹ This story also is found in Arabic folklore with the *karkadaan*.⁵⁰ This more sexualized unicorn hunt story has the unicorn representing “the lover, trapped and seduced by his beloved.”⁵¹ In this position the hunters make the attack. In the drawing above, Matt Gordon depicts a woman slightly to the left of center in this drawing of a young woman with one of her breasts exposed (Figure 20). Her mouth is open in shock, and a baby alien and a small unicorn lie in her lap as if to drink from her

⁴⁷Matt Gordon, *Apocalyptic Tableau pencil drawing poster*.

⁴⁸Chris Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*: Chapter 3, Location 524.

⁴⁹Nancy Hathaway, *The Unicorn*, 62.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., 17.

bosom. Matt Gordon is definitely aware of the earlier version of the unicorn hunt story as he has depicted the scene almost exactly the same in this tableau.

Although the hunters could symbolize the crucifixion of Christ, they could also symbolize all people who find salvation through Christ.⁵² The hunters are carrying out the will of God by bringing the unicorn to the palace and finding what they were seeking through the blood of an innocent creature.⁵³ Again, this is in keeping with how “Christmas Unicorn” treats the audience. Voices echo Stevens in the long repetitive chorus of “I’m a Christmas Unicorn.” I have labeled this choir, the “Unicorn choir,” because this is how Stevens labels them in the lyric booklet. Every new repetitive entrance may represent another person who has been saved through Christ. And since Christmas is about the Incarnation, and everyone is made in the image of Christ, every time a new person enters the kingdom of God is another reflection of Christ’s birth.

Post Modern Symbol

Although the pagan and medieval Christian symbol is very important to Stevens’s use of the unicorn, this is a post-modern album for a post-modern audience. In recent Internet culture, unicorns are ubiquitous. However, they are mostly used in jest, associated with rainbows and frivolity. Since hipsters and people in their twenties and thirties make up a huge portion of Stevens’ audience, I think it is safe to assume that Stevens would expect his audience to have a post modern view of the unicorn when he sings the song, “Christmas Unicorn.” Hipsters tend to like symbols that are ironic as a

⁵²Ibid., Location 820.

⁵³Ibid.

joke, and unicorns are one of those ironic symbols that are paradoxical in nature and popular on the Internet.

A popular website called Reddit refers to itself as “The Front Page of the Internet.” As of October 24, 2013, Reddit had reported 81,431,088 visitors within the previous month.⁵⁴ This site includes different sections called subReddits that cater to specific interests. One particular subReddit is called *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. It is a community where My Little Pony fans post fan art of their favorite characters from the television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.⁵⁵ Most fans may have begun watching the show as a joke, and then became fans of the show because it has surprisingly interesting characters and plots. Urban dictionary defines a “brony” as “A name typically given to the male viewers/fans (whether they are straight, gay, bisexual, etc.) of the My Little Pony show or franchise. They typically do not give in to the hype that males aren't allowed to enjoy things that may be intended for females.”⁵⁶ In the TV show, some of ponies are unicorns and have magical powers. Here is an example of fan art that “bronies” post to the *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* subReddit.

⁵⁴ “About Reddit,” *Reddit*, <http://www.reddit.com/about/>, (accessed October 24, 2013).

⁵⁵ “My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic,” <http://www.reddit.com/r/mylittlepony/>, (accessed December 4, 2013).

⁵⁶ Bronydude, “Brony,” *Urban Dictionary*, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bronies>, (accessed December 4, 2013).



Figure 21: Fan Art of Twilight Sparkle⁵⁷

This specific drawing is of Twilight Sparkle, a main character in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. This drawing is a sexy, glamorous version of a unicorn character from the children’s television show. Some of the art on the album *Silver and Gold* depicts a *My Little Pony* version of a unicorn, and in a few instances it carries a serene but very pregnant Mary. Stevens recognizes the popularity of *My Little Pony* beyond the

⁵⁷ BlueEonDrive, “Just Twilight Sparkle,” *deviantART*, <http://blueondrive.deviantart.com/art/Just-Twilight-Sparkle-405082600> (accessed October 26, 2013).

age group of children. The fandom of *My Little Pony* is aware of the silliness and yet also the seriousness with which they treat their pastime. It is a paradox that grown men are fans of unicorns on a children's television show, and Stevens is aware of this paradox when he has a My Little Pony unicorn bearing the Virgin Mary.



Figure 22: Sticker from *Silver and Gold*⁵⁸

This picture wraps many different ideas of the unicorn into one. It looks like a My Little Pony character, but it has a unicorn horn and donkey ears like the donkey that bore Mary. And since the Virgin Mary is very pregnant in this drawing, it is obvious that she is literally bearing Christ at this point; she is the *theotokos*. Since the unicorn represents Christ, the pink My Little Pony Christmas Unicorn also represents Christ being with Mary and carrying her through her difficult journey. The childishness of a children's toy (My Little Pony) reminds us that Mary was also only a child when she was bearing Christ; she was probably only thirteen or fourteen years old. She represents how God works through the least empowered characters throughout the bible. Mary wears a golden halo in this drawing, highlighting her sainthood. The star of Bethlehem is also

⁵⁸Stephen Halker, photo, <http://stephenhalker.tumblr.com/>, (accessed February 2, 2014).

placed in this picture, showing us that she is on the way to Bethlehem. Christ is about to be born in this drawing. She is serene and expectant, just as Christians try to be during Advent. Both the unicorn and Mary are paradoxes because the unicorn has a complicated history and Mary has no power in her society but she bears the King.

Unicorns are also present in viral videos marketed towards teens and younger adults. “Charlie the Unicorn” is a viral Youtube video that was released in 2006. The official video on Youtube that was released in 2008 has 20,269,062 views as of October 27, 2013.⁵⁹ It is estimated that it has a total of fifty million views total counting the different places it has been posted. Steele uses surreal humor with two high-pitched, breathy-voiced unicorns pestering Charlie the unicorn to go to Candy Mountain. They pass by a *Liopleurodon* (an aquatic dinosaur), a splintery bridge, and eventually arrive to a suspect-looking Candy Mountain in the middle of the forest. Charlie enters the cave, and then wakes up to find that his kidney has been harvested. People in my high school would quote this video frequently. In this instance, a unicorn is just another surreal character in a viral video that is not supposed to make any sense. Unicorns in Internet culture are typically used to represent something that does not quite fit, or something magical or surreal.

In the recent Disney movie, *Tangled*, the largest ruffian that Rapunzel encounters has an affinity for miniature unicorns.⁶⁰ The ruffian appears menacing at first, but when

⁵⁹ Jason Steele, “Charlie the Unicorn” (video), posted January 10, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsGYh8AacgY>, (accessed October 27, 2013).

⁶⁰ *Tangled*, directed by Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, music by Alan Menken, based on *Rapunzel* (Walt Disney Studios, 2010), DVD (2011).

the whole cast of ruffians sings about their dreams, he brings out his miniature unicorn figurines and his eyes widen.



Figure 23: *Tangled* ruffian with miniature unicorn figurines⁶¹

This seems in keeping with the way unicorns are seen in our post-modern American culture. They are regarded as silly, whimsical things that have no touch with reality, and they often show the weak sides of seemingly tough characters. Most post-modern references to them are paradoxical. Liking unicorns is an admittance of weakness or childishness. To see such a large and gruff man admit that he likes miniature unicorn figurines definitely defies expectations.

Unicorns have even entered the gaming realm. *Robot Unicorn Attack* is a popular iPhone game created by Adult Swim. The gamer controls a unicorn that jumps across the

⁶¹ Ibid.

sky and uses his rainbow power to destroy sparkly stars.⁶² Ironically, the game was marketed to males in their twenties and thirties.⁶³ Jamie Dwyer suggests that this sort of thing being popular in the twenties to thirties male demographic indicates a shift in homosexual symbols becoming more a part of mainstream culture.⁶⁴ This demographic finds it appealing because it is an ironic juxtaposition, but this also shows a familiar acceptance of homosexual culture. Dwyer also states that homophobic males who choose to ignore any homosexual symbols will miss out on a huge portion of contemporary pop culture.⁶⁵

Stevens' audience definitely overlaps this twenties to thirties male audience that finds unicorns ironically humorous. Stevens would expect his audience to listen to the song "Christmas Unicorn" with this set of expectations of a unicorn: silly, gay, whimsical, fun, and ironic.

Unicorns and Rainbows

In post-modern culture, rainbows and unicorns are often closely associated. Neal Whitman tracks this specific association becoming more common in the eighties when Hasbro released the My Little Pony toy collection.⁶⁶ Rainbows and unicorns became a

⁶²Thenisia Sullivan, "ROBOT Unicorn ATTACK" (video), February 22, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1QUX6--waA&feature=player_embedded, (accessed October 28, 2013).

⁶³Jamie Dwyer, "Unicorn is the New Skull: Mainstreaming of Gay Culture," *Zandland Blog*, last modified July 26, 2010, <http://www.zandland.com/2010/07/unicorn-is-new-skull-mainstreaming-of.html>, (accessed October 28, 2013).

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Neil Whitman, "Rainbows and Unicorns: A Linguistic History," *The Week*, last modified February 26, 2013, accessed October 28, 2013, <http://theweek.com/article/index/240563/rainbows-and-unicorns-a-linguistic-history>.

more popular search item in Google at this time.⁶⁷ Jamie Dwyer points out that this may be because the rainbow flag was adopted by homosexual groups in 1978, and gradually through the 80s, the rainbow and unicorns became more popular items in pop culture. Eventually in the 2000s, the new socially liberal generation that is now in their twenties and thirties have grown up around homosexual culture and are more accepting of gay culture as mainstream. Dwyer explains how a game such as *Robot Unicorn Attack* could be a fun, silly game that mocks the happiness of rainbows and unicorns, but is also cooperative with and respectful of homosexual culture at the same time.⁶⁸

Stevens challenges traditional gender roles by singing in a sweet and ethereal voice, wearing colorful costumes, and doing dance routines. When Stevens sings “You’re the Christmas Unicorn,” he is showing acceptance of everyone including anyone who is homosexual or who does not fit into traditional gender roles.

Stevens’s unicorn costume for “Chritmas Unicorn” at the live show included an array of different colored tube shaped balloons.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Jamie, Dwyer, “Unicorn is the New Skull.”



Figure 24: Sufjan Stevens in his Christmas unicorn costume⁶⁹

His brightly colored, rainbow unicorn costume challenges gender roles and hipster stereotypes. When Stevens uses the unicorn as the primary symbol for his Christmas album, he is challenging traditional modern ideas about Christmas and returning to older medieval Christian symbolism. His audience lives in a post-Christian world, but Stevens preaches a Christian message by making great art that uses all of these paradoxes. The unicorn is the perfect symbol for Stevens to use to show the paradox of Incarnation and Crucifixion as well as imperfection and beauty in the believer.

⁶⁹“The Surfjohn Stevens Christmas Sing-A-Long Seasonal Affective Disorder Yuletide Disaster Pageant On Ice,” *The Stranger*, December 8, 2012, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/joshc/8260719698/in/photostream>.

CHAPTER FIVE

“CHRISTMAS UNICORN”

“Christmas Unicorn” is the final song on Volume 10 of Sufjan Stevens’s *Silver and Gold* compilation album. In this chapter, I will analyze five different musical processes and the theology of *theosis* implicit in the song and art of the album. The song is twelve minutes and thirty-eight seconds long, which is much longer than the average three-minute pop song. However, the song itself is only two minutes long with ten verses, and it ends with a justifiably long, ten-minute coda that supports the length and weight of the entire album. The music of “Christmas Unicorn” does not easily fit into any one genre. The song shifts from folk to symphonic to electronic polyphonic sound mass. In the live concert version, he prefaces the singing of the first verse by saying, “It’s that part of you that’s all love and all joy. This is the tale of the Christmas Unicorn.”¹ This exclamation indicates that the song, though humorous, is about something significant, and prepares me to argue that Stevens goes beyond absolute music into something about the identity of humankind and Christmas.

Stevens recorded “Christmas Unicorn” in his Brooklyn office in December 2010 with Vesper Stamper and Alex Sopp.² The female background singers (which Stevens labels “Unicorn choir” in the booklet) consisted of Sonya Hofer, Cat Martino, Rosie

¹Sufjan Stevens, “Christmas Unicorn,” Youtube video, December 2, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivFOTEnJfVE>, (accessed March 28, 2014).

²Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold*, booklet, 71.

Thomas, and Vesper Stamper.³ Brian Wolfe added the drum part in postproduction, recorded by Devin Greenwood at Honey Jar, a small studio similar in size and location to the Brooklyn office, February 2012.⁴ This drum part contributes to the huge sound mass that can be seen on the waveform in Figure 25.

Musical Analysis

I will highlight five different musical processes that are explored in the song: intensification, stylistic shift, layering, text setting, and quotation. The most obvious musical process is the intensification that happens over time in the song. The waveform, seen in Figure 25, shows the range of sounds at different frequencies (vertical axis) over time (horizontal axis). The time in minutes is right above the waveform. The song starts off quietly with a small dynamic range and expands to a solid sound mass from the middle to the end of the song where it tapers off. This demonstrates the musical process of intensification: sound becoming louder or more intense over time. Stevens's purpose in intensifying the dynamic range the song over time is to both highlight the stylistic shift from simple to complex and create a loud, impactful finale to the entire album.

³Ibid.

⁴Sufjan Stevens, *Silver and Gold*, booklet, 71.

Waveform and cell analysis of "Christmas Unicorn"
 By Janna Martindale

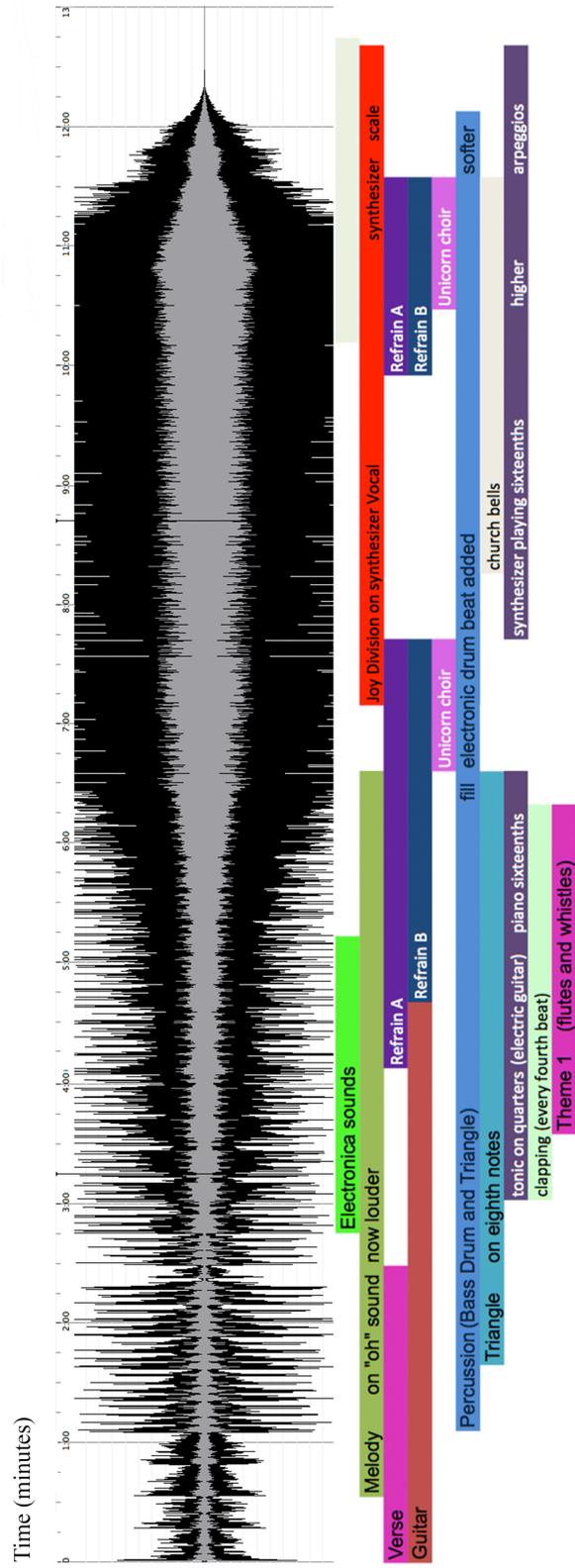


Figure 25: Waveform and Cell Analysis over time

One of the most important tools supporting this intensification is the pedal tone on sixteenth notes starting at 5:18. This highlights the importance of synthesizer and also builds the energy. This importance of the synthesizer marks the shift to more electronic sound, perhaps signifying the commercialism of the post-modern world. The piano joins on a fifth at 6:04, and then the synthesizer starts to shift through different colors to draw more attention to itself and preempt a new section. This builds all the way through 6:29, where more fills are heard in the drums.

The first minute is lo-fidelity with a constrained range of frequencies. The vocal line is prominent in the beginning of the song, something akin to folk or country music, with a simple repetitive melody that allows the words to come through. The vocal line is double tracked and over simplified seemingly mocking of folk rock and Beatles music. Stevens is including all these different genres to show that each form of expression of Christmas is still valid. The background is made up of solely a guitar finger picking triads. This folk style is sharply juxtaposed by the lyrics containing theological vocabulary and thought provoking social commentary. In the second half of the tenth verse, the tempo slows down and a grand pause is executed before the last line is sung a cappella by Stevens.

Sufjan adds a synthesizer in the second minute of the song, marking the beginning of many entrances of electronic instruments. Synthesizer, electric guitar, and pipe whistles slowly cover up the acoustic guitar. In each repeating four-measure cell, a new instrument is added or taken away, creating a slow shift from folk and vocal-heavy music to a more electronic and symphonic scope. From 7:20 onwards, there are no more acoustic instruments, only electronic instruments and voice. The shift to electronic is

complete; and Stevens shows that post-modern society has shut out simple folk songs and is too busy to listen to words anymore. The entire song ends with just the synthesizer fading out with improvisatory sixteenth note scales.

The coda of “Christmas Unicorn” demonstrates the musical process of polyphonic layering. While the music is more electronic and shifted more to commercialism, Stevens is using medieval polyphonic ideas that focus more on melodies rather than vertical harmonies. I have transcribed the melodies from the five different themes used in the song: verse, contrapuntal melody, refrain, refrain sung by unicorn choir, and the quotation of the chorus from “Love will tear us apart” by Joy Division. Sometimes, only one of these melodies is sung and other times, all are sung at once.

Themes in “Christmas Unicorn”

The musical score for "Christmas Unicorn" is presented in five staves, all in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are as follows:

- Verse:** I'm a Christ - mas Un - i - corn in a un - i - form made of gold With a billy goat beard and a sore - er - er's shield and... mistle - toe on my nose
- Melody:** (Instrumental line)
- Refrain:** I'm the Christ - mas Un - i - corn Find the Christ - mas un - i - corn You're the Christ - mas Un - i - corn too It's all right. I love you.
- Unicorn Choir:** I'm the Christ - mas Un - i - corn I'm reg - al You're the Christ - mas Un - i - corn I love you.
- Joy Division:** Love love will tear us a - part a - gain Love love will tear us a - part like that

Figure 26: Themes in “Christmas Unicorn”

Beginning on the third verse (0:33), Stevens starts to sing the background melody prominent throughout the entire song. I have labeled this as “melody” on the transcriptions of the different themes used (see Figure 26). The entrance of percussion corresponds to an increase in height of the waveform at time 1:05 (see Figure 25). At the beginning of the coda, (2:29), the contrapuntal melody is more exposed and with more grit to Stevens’s voice. Everything builds on top of the layers beneath, but the finger picked guitar in folk style disappears amidst the sound mass. The pipe whistles enter

with the verse melody at 3:32, which I have labeled with a dark pink. This brings back some of the baroque ideas and contrasts the drums, electric guitar, and the synthesizer ‘noodling’ on top. Refrain A enters at 4:05, Refrain B enters at 4:41, the Unicorn Choir enters on top of all the other melodies at 6:31 after the drum fill. More attention is given to each new entrance, even though the other melodies still remain. Each melody as it enters does not seem to fit at first, but then becomes pivotal to the sound, pushing forward the development of the song. The ladies of the Unicorn Choir sing in raw, childlike voices in contrast to the sweet, developed technique demonstrated earlier in the album. The Unicorn Choir represents the cherubic angels that announce the birth of Christ in the Luke narrative. They repeat the refrain up a third from the refrain Stevens’ sings. All of these different melodies interact and layer on top of one another.

At 7:33, everything except for the drums and synthesizer drop out to prepare for the final round of intensification. Finally, the quotation from Joy Division enters and finishes the rest of the song, in which the lyrics from “Love Will Tear Us Apart” are featured most prominently. At 7:00, the melody from Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear Us Apart” enters only with synthesizer, no words. Stevens also sings “Oh” along to this new melody in the mix; this new melody takes over all of the other polyphonic lines. They start singing the words in 8:36.

Stevens is quoting “Love will tear us Apart” by Joy Division, a British post-punk rock band.⁵ Joy Division did not have a ‘Christian’ background. Peter Hook, the bassist, has admitted that he had stolen the first album he had ever obtained, and that he and the

⁵“Christmas Unicorn,” song.

other band members continued to steal even when they were making money.⁶ Once again, Stevens is quoting music from someone he thinks makes great art rather than something that might be considered to be ‘Christmasy.’ The story behind the name Joy Division is gruesome; the band was originally called Warsaw, and Ian Curtis, the lead singer, suggested the name Joy Division after reading *House of Dolls* by Ka-Tzetnik 135622.⁷ “‘Joy Divisions’ was the name given to groups of Jewish women kept in the concentration camps for the sexual pleasure of the Nazi soldiers.”⁸ Peter Hook says that the band thought the name got across the “punk, ‘No Future’” image for which they were looking.⁹

“Love Will Tear Us Apart” was written in 1979 and released as a single in 1980, one month before Ian Curtis committed suicide.¹⁰ It was recorded at Strawberry Studios in Stockport and was produced by Martin Hannett.¹¹ Hannett would mix down the recording at two o’clock in the morning so he could avoid the musicians, but the band would show up to see him at his process.¹² The song reached the top 20 charts for nine weeks after its release, and *Rolling Stone* named it one of the top 500 songs of all time, making it Joy Division’s biggest hit.^{13,14} Some have speculated that the song’s haunting

⁶Peter Hook, *Unknown Pleasures: inside Joy Division* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 14, 17.

⁷Ibid., 5.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰John Bush, “Song Review by John Bush,” ALLMUSIC, <http://www.allmusic.com/song/love-will-tear-us-apart-mt0043236719>, (accessed March 25, 2014).

¹¹Peter Hook, *Unknown Pleasures*, 184, 360.

¹²Ibid, 305.

lyrics reflect the suicidal state of Ian Curtis's mind as well as his dying marriage. The lyrics seem to refer to a marriage falling apart in the second verse: "Why is the bedroom so cold?/You've turned away on your side."¹⁵ Stevens is bringing up the paradox of the future of death in Christmas by quoting "Love will tear us apart."

The "mechanistic drumming" by Stephen Morris, the mid range tempo, and the "wave of haunting synthesizers" from "Love will tear us apart" are all mimicked in the second half of "Christmas Unicorn."¹⁶ First, Stevens quotes only a slightly simplified version of the chorus melody. Then the "Love will tear us apart" quotation turns into one melody in the polyphony. "Christmas Unicorn" starts off as a song about seemingly harmless subject matter, but Stevens shows that love is not a wholly complacent thing. Love tore Christ's body apart. Even though suicide is a perverted form of death, it still mimics the sacrifice of Christ's death for love. Dorothy Sayers says, "'the sterner side of love' is the power that must be 'present in the artist's attitude to his work.'"¹⁷ "The sterner side of love" is definitely present in Stevens's creation of the song, "Christmas Unicorn," and the inclusion of the lyrics, "Love will tear us apart."

Stevens is accepting the band Joy Division as significant artists and musicians who end up making notable music despite or even because of all of their human flaws.

¹³"Joy Division," Official Charts Company, http://www.officialcharts.com/artist/_/Joy%20Division, (accessed March 25, 2014).

¹⁴"The RS 500 Greatest Songs of All Time," *Rolling Stone*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20060820114448/http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/500songs/page/2>, (accessed March 25, 2014).

¹⁵Bernard Summer, Gene Mcfadden, Peter Hook, John Whitehead, Ian Kevin Curtis, Stephen Paul David Morris, and Jerry Allen Cohen, "Love will tear us apart," <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/joydivision/lovewilltearusapart.html>, (accessed March 28, 2014).

¹⁶John Bush, "Song Review by John Bush."

¹⁷Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: Harcourt, 1941), xxiv.

Stevens uses the art of Royal Robertson, Joy Division, and Prince, in order to elevate these artists as greater than any of the fifties commercialist songs or even more explicitly Christian songs.

The lyric booklet says “[repeat ad nauseum]” after the chorus.¹⁸ To repeat *ad nauseum* means to repeat until it makes one sick. An onslaught of Christmas lights, mall Santas, and sweets can make one nauseous. Ralph Wood has suggested that this may be a play on the words “repeat ad gloria” often used to describe Christian music, which means “to the glory of God.” Stevens is creating a link between the oversaturation of Christmas commercialism with angelic singing of holy songs to God. Even though gaudy Christmas decorations are not ideal, Stevens links the commercialism of Christmas with the praise of God through song. His song incorporates the gaudiness of Christmas with its sound mass and polyphony.

Commercialism of Christmas

Stevens says in the live concert version that he has difficulty with the commercialism of Christmas. He explains that it seems to him that all the bright Christmas lights and mall sales have nothing to do with the birth of Christ. In the song, “Christmas Unicorn,” though, he accepts all of the ugliness and gaudiness of Christmas commercialism to be a part of the Christmas tradition. This is evident to the listener hearing the loud sound mass in the second half of the song. In one of the prefaces to the live concert version of the song, Stevens says, “No matter how much you don’t like

¹⁸Ibid.

Christmas, just be aware, there's another one just around the corner. You're going to have to deal with it sooner or later. This is my way of dealing with it."¹⁹

I think Stevens is saying that the unicorn can act as both a Christian symbol and a commercial symbol. God loves everyone, even those who advertise for 'K-mart blue specials' and decorate their yards with dozens of blow-up plastic Santas. If one accepts all forms of expression of celebration as valid, one can see that gaudiness can effectively demonstrate love for the plenty of the world. Stevens has said in an interview quoted in the first chapter: "I think part of faith is having to be reconciled with a flawed community."²⁰ Stevens is seeking to reconcile the flawed community with Christ and Christmas.

Theological Interpretation

Although this song has many theological implications, I will focus on the idea of *theosis* and the symbolism of the Christmas Unicorn. Unicorns were used as a symbol of Christ in medieval tapestries and illuminations so as to represent Christ in both birth and death. Stevens sings the following chorus repeatedly for the last ten minutes of the song.

I'm the Christmas unicorn
(Find the Christmas unicorn)
You're the Christmas unicorn, too
It's all right, I love you.²¹

In this song, Stevens is not limiting the symbolism of the unicorn only to Christ. He

¹⁹Sufjan Stevens, "Sufjan Stevens – Christmas Unicorn," flash video, *Youtube*, December 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkDhYzNNCag>, (accessed April 2, 2014).

²⁰"Adz And It Shall Be Given Unto You: Sufjan Stevens Interviewed," interview by Jeremy Allen, *The Quietus*, October 12, 2010, <http://thequietus.com/articles/05085-the-age-of-adz-sufjan-stevens-interview>, (accessed 22 January 2014).

²¹*Ibid.*

names every human being as a Christmas unicorn. This echoes the Christian claim that every person is made in the image of God. Berdyaev has said:

God created man in his own image and likeness, i.e. made him a creator too, calling him to free spontaneous activity and not to formal obedience to His power. Free creativeness is the creature's answer to the great call of its creator. Man's creative work is the fulfillment of the Creator's secret will.²²

Accordingly, Dorothy Sayers has observed, "The characteristic common to God and man is apparently . . . the desire and ability to make things."²³ Stevens, as the primary creator of "Christmas Unicorn," is perhaps imitating God and Christ in their creative qualities. Stevens is also recognizing the creative spark in every human. Ralph Wood has suggested that every time the chorus is repeated, it may represent another human being born into the world who has the promise of becoming Christ's image and salvation. This would also show how the song builds layer upon layer, because more people are being added to the world all the time.

Before he goes into the 10 minute vamp, he ends his beginning soliloquy by singing, "For you're a Christmas Unicorn, I have seen you on the beat/You may dress in the human uniform, child... But I know you're just like me."²⁴ C. S. Lewis has similarly said that there is divinity within every person: "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship."²⁵ This sounds as if the song were saying that because the audience

²²Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, xviii.

²³Ibid., 22.

²⁴Sufjan Stevens, "Christmas Unicorn."

²⁵C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, Collier Books, 1980), 18.

consists of humans created in the image and likeness of God, they are potential Christmas unicorns. C. S. Lewis also declares the divine intention: “[God] will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine.”²⁶

Perhaps the Christmas Unicorn is a model of deification. The Anglican emphasis on deification comes from the Orthodox belief in *theosis*, the doctrine that human are intended to participate in God’s own life. “Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”²⁷ This passage reveals that God intends for Christians to share in the divine nature of God.

The 4th century Christian theologian Athanasius of Alexandria said about Christ, “He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”²⁸ Athanasius says that deification is the flip side of the Incarnation.²⁹ Christ’s incarnation is linked with the birth of each new individual in the world. Christ’s repeated incarnations are linked with each human’s possibility of deification and becoming little Christs. Stevens’s Anglicanism would be likely to make him familiar with the doctrine of deification, and he is also familiar with Orthodox theology, as seen in his use of icons in the art of the album. Chris Jensen, a C. S. Lewis scholar says, “Deification . . . is bound up with

²⁶C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174, 176.

²⁷II Peter 1:4 (NIV)

²⁸St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, ch. 54.

²⁹“Shine as the Sun,” 52.

Lewis's abiding appreciation of myth and poetry."³⁰ So may the doctrine of *theosis* find resonance in Stevens's "Christmas Unicorn." If everyone is a potential Christmas unicorn, everyone has the ability to become fully human by becoming fully divine. Because the unicorn is a mythical animal with profound Christian significance, it follows that Steven's mythical song about a unicorn, when given voice in the emotional atmosphere of a concert, is akin to what happens when C. S. Lewis's ideas become most compelling in his mythical Narnia with its dancing trees and talking animals. Often the most complex and profound ideas become more convincing when they are taken out of abstract theological language and put into strong musical or poetic settings or mythical stories. Stevens's "Christmas Unicorn" also more accurately embodies the truth behind the message than a sermon could.

N. T. Wright has held fellowships at Oxford and Cambridge, and has also worked with the Lichfield International Arts Festival.³¹ He is a part of a collaboration of theologians and artists whose work has been articulated in *Sounding the Depths*. Wright writes, "If all theology, all sermons, had to be set to music, our teaching and preaching would not only be more mellifluous; it might also approximate more closely to God's truth, the truth revealed in and as the Word made flesh, crucified and risen."³² This statement accurately describes the theology of "Christmas Unicorn."

³⁰"Shine as the Sun," 47.

³¹Ibid, xv.

³²Tom Wright, "Resurrection: From Theology to Music and Back Again," edited by Jeremy Begbie, *Sounding the Depths: Theology Through the Arts* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 211-212.

Wright argues that the danger of modern and post-modern artists is that they often produce art that has form without substance.³³ By contrast, the preacher is in danger of declaring the substance of his theological argument while missing its real imaginative truth because it lacks artistic form.³⁴ The symbolism of repeated incarnations via deification also fits in with the “Christmas Unicorn” song. So just as the unicorn represents Christ both in birth and in death, so does Stevens’s “Christmas Unicorn” represents human beings born and becoming born again after the death of baptism as well as the lifelong love that becomes incarnate through the willing death of personal self-sacrifice.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

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