In the crucial fourth scene of my opera *Fly Away Peter*, premiered in 2015, the protagonist, Jim Saddler, finds himself in the trenches in France during World War I. Working with the librettist Pierce Wilcox, we decided to structure this scene as a series of disconnected vignettes: brief but intense images of horror and violence, as perceived through Jim’s eyes. The excerpt shows the first three of ten such vignettes. The vignettes are framed by statements of a refrain, composed for all three voices accompanied by the full ensemble (bars 1–3, 23–7, 48–52 and 65–7). The text in the refrain fragments and re-orders the phrase ‘it will go on for ever’—never heard in its entirety—while the music for each refrain is based on re-articulations of the notes of a large chord, with winds and strings following different rhythmic cycles counted in semiquavers:

Bars 1–3: winds 3+2 / strings 3+4
Bars 23–7: winds 2+3+2 / strings 3+4+3
Bars 48–52: winds 2+2+3+2 / strings 3+3+4+3
Bars 65–7: winds 2+2+3+2+3 / strings 3+3+4+3+4

These cycles progressively lengthen to the middle of the scene and then contract; the partition of the ensemble also begins to shift. The rhythmic patterns are partially obscured by the fact that some notes are sustained, and the vocal parts select attack points freely from the two layers. Each syllable is articulated by two of the three voices, creating a strange hybrid of homophony and polyphony. The overall intended effect of the refrains is to suggest a vast, impersonal but disordered machine.

The vignettes themselves are focused on intensity of colour. The first vignette (bars 5–22) concerns the ubiquitous rats, whose scurrying is suggested by percussion played with wire
brushes and *sul ponticello* strings. In contrast, the clarinet recalls birds, which are central to Jim’s sense of identity.

The second vignette (bars 28–47) depicts Jim’s horrified reaction to experiencing a corpse falling out of the wall of his trench, illustrated with *glissandi* and a focus on murky, low-register colours (trombone, bassoon, double bass). This is interrupted by the first of three tiny ‘arias’ for the mezzo-soprano (bars 33–41), whose role throughout the scene is one of disembodied commentary. These passages are the only places in the scene that use the vibraphone for flashes of jagged, strident brilliance.

The third vignette shows the fate of Stan Mackay, one of Jim’s fellow soldiers, whose head is shot off by a sniper. Each of the minor soldier characters played by the tenor is introduced in Scene 3, and each is associated with a particular harmony and a few melodic fragments that recur at each of their subsequent appearances or mentions of their name. These simple ideas serve as fleeting moments of familiarity within the nightmare landscape of the War.
Scene 4
The War

Ferocious \( ( \lambda = 144 ) \)

JIM (Bar.)

Feel the rat
on your face in the dark
Feel the water from the walls it sweats

Tam-tam (scraper with triangle beater)
Fa - mi - lar of life, crea - ture of the un - der world

Fa - mi - lar of death, crea - ture of the un - der world

Hold the rat

Sul pont.
See— See the—  
This world is up-side down.

[Music notation image]

Frightened—

This world is up-side down.

[Music notation image]
hand reached out and touched me

From the wall of my trench a corpse

Look down the earth is split An other world

lurched out
When I sleep now (even in sunlight) I feel the same hand brush my neck

The dead man turns in his sleep
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"Stan McKay"

Stan McKay

MS.

"Fly Away Peter"
His face is gone, I cannot remember it. I cannot remember his face.

A man should not—A man I spoke to without a face.