

# CORPS OF DISCOVERY

A Musical Journey  
North Dakota Version (2007)

Composer Michael Ching  
Librettist Hugh Moffatt

**Length:** Two Acts, under two hours with intermission

The original version of CORPS OF DISCOVERY was commissioned by the University of Missouri and given its premiere there in 2004. With a three page cast list and three acts, the original version is not practical except for grand opera performances. The North Dakota version of CORPS was toured throughout that state by the Fargo Moorehead Opera.

Very tuneful, CORPS is very much a “numbers” opera and concerts of excerpts have been performed by organizations such as the Orlando Philharmonic and U.S. Army Field Band and Soldier's Chorus.

Because of the careful supervision of University of Missouri faculty, CORPS OF DISCOVERY is unusually true to the history of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

CORPS OF DISCOVERY librettist Hugh Moffatt is a well known Nashville songwriter whose song “Rose of My Heart” was on Johnny Cash's last recorded album.

**Cast** (eight men, six women)

Captain Lewis,	tenor,	leading role
Captain Clark,	baritone, tall	leading role
Sacagawea,	soprano or mezzo	leading female role
Shannon,	light tenor, young man	leading role
Potts, a bass baritone,	tall Germanic woodsman	leading role
York, African American,	preferably a bass baritone	leading role
A tenor version is possible		
Sergeant Pryor,	tenor	supporting role--one arietta
Pryor must become Shoshone in one scene of Act II		
Bar Patron/Calls Like a Lark	mezzo	supporting
Bar Patron/Lost Her Moccasins)	mezzo	supporting
BarPatron/Cruzatte/Labiche/Shoshone	tenor	ensemble
Bar Patron/Otterwoman	soprano	ensemble
Bar Patron/Corps/Cameahwait	baritone	ensemble
Bar Patron/Corps/Charbonneau	baritone	ensemble
Bar Patron/Awake at Dawn	soprano	ensemble

## **Orchestration:**

Pianist-conductor and Violinist-fiddler  
or

Full orchestration 1/1/1/1 1/1/1/0 harp, percussion, piano strings minimum 1/1/1/1/1

## Synopsis

### Act I

As the opera begins, two enlisted men in the Corps, George Shannon and John Potts are introduced to patrons at a bar in St. Louis. This bar setting provides the framework for the storytelling of the first act. It is fall 1806, a short time after the Corps has returned from its three year journey. Shannon excitedly tries to explain the wonderful adventure, but it is the older, more serious Potts who focuses the narrative. He describes the difficult journey up the Missouri--pulling the keelboat upriver under dangerous conditions. At a campsite for the evening, Lewis encourages the men to keep detailed journals of their trip, so that President Jefferson and the world can learn what lies up river. Shannon and Potts then describe the death and burial of their comrade, Sergeant Floyd. Floyd's cousin, Pryor, vows to continue the journey. Floyd's death makes them ponder their lot in life--what each of them hope to get out of the journey. They ask York, slave to William Clark, what he hopes for and ask him, doesn't he hope to be free? York can't help but harbor some hope, but before he goes too far for himself, he shuts down and says he needs to see to Captain Clark.

Back in the bar, the patrons ask about the Indians. Potts describes New Year's Day in 1805 spent with the Mandan and Hidatsa when they sang and danced with the Indians. Shannon's most striking memory of that time was the birth of Baptiste Charbonneau, born to Sacagawea and her husband. The baby came with them on the trip and even through all the hardship and adventure, Shannon remembers how having a family with them kept the whole expedition strong. Potts counters that the wonderous adventure is what motivated him and that now that they are back in St. Louis, he wants to go back out into the wilderness again. He remembers the day they left Fort Mandan for the unknown west. Lewis gives the speech from that day in the Spring of 1805 and the Corps sets out.

### Act II

The trip to the Pacific is told, but through a different storytelling framework. As the act begins, we see the female members of Sacagawea's Hidatsa family group working on drying their squash crop. It is August 1806 and the Corps has just returned to their village. The women excitedly anticipate the reunion with Sacagawea. Lewis is brought in. A few days earlier, he was accidentally shot in the butt by Pierre Cruzatte. The Corps tease Cruzatte, who says it must have been an Indian. Clark asks Sacagawea and Charbonneau for permission to take their child, Baptiste, with him downriver to St. Louis in order to raise him with his son, complete with a Western education. Sacagawea says she needs some time to decide. Lewis praises Clark--Jefferson wants them to bring some native children to raise "in civilization." It makes them ponder their own futures. While Clark seems to have a lady in mind for marriage, Lewis' future is murkier. He must struggle to finish the journals for publication.

We move back to the squash garden. Sacagawea is reunited with her family but she is quiet. Some of the women have noticed a change in her and feel she has gotten arrogant. She says she is weighing the decision to send her son with Clark. Furthermore, she has seen a vision from Grandmother Who Never Dies, showing that this is indeed the future. She says that Clark truly cares about the boy. Some of her family can't believe this. She goes on to describe a time on the trail when she was very sick and Clark cared for both her and the baby. She got well; they moved on and she describes being reunited with the Shoshone, the tribe of her birth. Indeed, her brother has become the Shoshone's chief. We then see the crucial scene near the Rockies when Lewis negotiates with the Shoshone for horses which can carry them over the mountains. We proceed on to the difficult passage through the mountains, when the Corps struggled and nearly lost itself searching for the way through. Sacagawea then recalls the arrival on the Pacific ocean and the crucial time when Lewis and Clark allowed the Corps to vote on the

possible location for winter camp. She describes a strange gift giving ritual celebrated by the men called Christmas.

We come back to the squash garden and Sacagawea's situation. Again, one of her family members, doubts that she can have received visions from the spirits. Sacagawea proudly asserts that she has learned about herself. She has become a woman who belongs to no one and she has learned to be free. The women are now in awe of her and ask her about the future. She describes how her son Baptiste will move away across the ocean, consort with royalty, and be his own man.

The Corps is readying to leave the Mandan villages. On Clark's instruction, York comes to ask Sacagawea what will she do about her son? They say their farewells--York intends to ask for his freedom some day. Clark arrives and Sacagawea tells him that she will send her son to St. Louis, but not right away. Clark accepts this and they say goodbye with respect and deepest friendship.

The Corps floats away downriver and Sacagawea watches them go. We hear the chants of the native women alternating with the river song of the Corps. The Corps floats away downriver and Sacagawea watches them go. We hear the chants of the native women alternating with the river song of the Corps.

The opera ends with a Mozart-like finale with all assembled. It is a plea for us, like the Corps, to work together.

**Licensing Information:** Permission to perform is available from the composer and librettist through e-mail at [MrBillow@juno.com](mailto:MrBillow@juno.com)

**Attachments and Excerpts:** Two excerpts from CORPS OF DISCOVERY are attached to this pdf

Review from FARGO Forum 2007

“Write it Down” Lewis, Clark and male ensemble

Music to “Write it Down”

“Who are you?” Sacagawea and female ensemble