REALIZATIONS

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“If a performer did not have the urge to participate in the music and, yes, to contribute to it, why then he wouldn't have become a performer in the first place.”

—Richard Taruskin

“The central energies that define music are not conscious, much less articulated, in the culture.”

—W.A. Mathieu

INTRODUCTION

Having always understood the activity of music as a process of acquiring skills, I took my two years at Wesleyan as a chance to acquire insight. I had begun to notice that measuring progress as either a quantity or a quality of skill never felt satisfying. My C.V. demonstrated, in the words of a friend, that I was “motivated by... something in certain live music scenes that's utopian and convivial,” that I believed “these networks… can be inclusive” in ways that “other, tighter forms of collaboration usually aren't,” and that “they can provide a beneficial community without being overt about vulnerability…an intermediate between loose bonds that leave people isolated and tight bonds that limit identity.”

Insight into the way I approached social engagement through music, I hoped, would free the skills I already had to be deployed in new, more gratifying ways.

The epigraph above, in Taruskin’s original context, is aimed at austerity measures imposed on performances of so-called Early Music. It also speaks to a psychological aspect of classical music training that extends far beyond the historical performance niche. The average classical player, I believe, is instilled with the idea that she is not

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2 W.A. Mathieu, Harmonic Experience: Tonal Harmony from its Natural Origins to its Modern Expression, Rochester Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1997), 1.
3 Joe Edelman, email message to author, April 18, 2015).
permitted to make a personal mark on the tradition until she has threaded a rare needle, rising to almost impossibly high standards by way of an unlikely combination of aptitude and resources. Despite my love for the treasures of the classical repertoire, I realized I would never be able to participate meaningfully as a true contributor on those terms. And, I realized that participation and contribution, as acts of confirming and renewing a certain kind of community, were more important to my creative goals than achieving mastery of any one musical dialect. Mastery is one way of demanding the right to contribute to an artistic practice. My way, though, would prove to be less about scaling the highest peak of a discipline and more about exploring its watershed, finding the confluences where different discourses intersect and combine.

In 2014, I attended one of the East Coast’s major gatherings for so-called old time Appalachian music, a largely amateur musical world in which participation is the primary activity. Aside from a fiddle contest, performance is tangential to the main mode of music-making: forming small groups and playing tunes from a strictly policed traditional repertoire, for hours, days, and nights on end. The conventions of the festival weren’t new to me; in fact it’s possible that my familiarity with the drill of the “Old Time Gathering” was what made me so surprised to meet a young man hurrying around the campground with a page of sheet music. Reading notation is not how old-time musicians transmit and receive repertoire, which they do avidly and insatiably by ear. The music on the paper was Terry Riley’s In C.

The man with the paper was Ben Townsend, an energetic fiddler who cleverly and resourcefully organized two joyful realizations of the piece. Later, I learned Ben was following through on a crazy idea he’d had with some classically trained friends, partly to
see if it was possible, and, in his words, to prove he “could put [his] little printed-up flyer of the score up and just write a place and time and people who understood could show up and participate and not have to buy anything.” Knowing none of this, I debated whether to participate at all. I didn’t immediately recognize the serendipity of a true confluence of my interests being laid at my feet; instead I suspected a gimmick, some classical violinist fish-out-of-water trying to compensate for being humbled by old-time. I was at Clifftop to ride the wave of intuitive, ear-based, anti-establishment music, not to bruise my brain on notation. Fortunately, I did decide to show up, and I was amazed at how well the exercise actually worked. Slowly, I began to see what it taught everyone involved about how music can mean differently in different contexts. I started to take in what it revealed about my own prejudices and self-defeating habits of mind.

You see, I could imagine so many problems with playing In C at the OTG. Musicianship in that context, as I’ve described, is measured by different criteria than I assumed it was in Terry Riley’s world, even if the piece was informed by his engagement with non-Western practices. First, in my mind, there was the issue of execution. I imagined a potential cluster-fuck when it came time to assemble the players and establish some kind of order for learning and performing the piece. Townsend was clearly an impresario, but he was no conductor. In fact, he didn’t even read music – he had memorized all of the cells of In C and used the score as kind of pictogram to remind him of the order. As a non-reader, Ben found it hard to conceptualize the idea of sight-reading as a way of transmitting the piece. His biggest fear was that “no one would commit the time to memorize all the parts just to play it” – that people wouldn’t be invested in a shared effort because it was too hard. As a trained reader, I feared the opposite. Sight-
reading demanded no investment and offered plenty of opportunities for swagger. I feared people wouldn’t be invested because it was too easy.

In the event, my fears were overturned by the way this version of In C worked, not just on the level of execution, but in the joy and enthusiasm the participants shared during and after the session. The score for In C seemed to benefit from the skills and outlook brought to bear by exactly the demographic Townsend had turned out: recreational musicians with enough formal training to read notation, who also cultivate a unique appreciation for what it means to actively contribute while following a strict set of guidelines. The kind of subtle, ego-less improvising called for in old-time jamming felt, in that setting, akin to the kind of understated steering of the material called for by In C’s indeterminate repeats. The modal underpinning of the piece, moreover, makes the title itself a kind of inside joke in the context of old-time practice, where jam sessions are organized by key because of contingent scordaturas. In C is more “in C” the way an old-time tune is “in C” than the way Beethoven Symphony no. 1 is “in C.”

I asked Ben Townsend how he approached re-framing Riley’s work, and his answer surprised me. “I guess I never even considered this as recontextualizing the piece… For me to hear the earlier "original" recordings of this piece and to gradually find my way to Terry Riley was a recontextualization in and of itself, since I found In C through a psychedelic freak-out band from Japan. But as I studied on the piece and Terry Riley's conversations about his intent, it seemed just like Clifftop and what we all love there. Several simple musical phrases that we can all play and repeat to our liking that are easy enough for most anyone to start out on and complex enough to make a life study, however you want to approach it. Sure he wrote the phrases down because that's the way
that world works, but the intent to be simple enough and to bring people together, a sense of musical egalitarianism and a free piece for everyone to enjoy and interpret, sounds a lot like old-time music doesn't it?" (see full text of interview, Appendix)

I include the story of this cross-cultural epiphany as a way to frame a thread that runs through my own work: a drive to create music that can function, can be intelligible, can mean, in more than one social context. This idea is different, though I still sometimes get them confused, from hybridity. Hybridity is also a strong element in my music, as I have absorbed a variety of musical vocabularies through listening and performance, but In C at the folk festival succeeds where a hybrid would fail, believable to neither camp. Henry Flynt, who situated himself at precisely this intersection (which he calls “avant-garde” and “hillbilly”), emphasizes the difference between hybridity and double meaning. “Rock was not the fusion of rhythm & blues and hillbilly music that the pundits said it was,” he writes. “What really happened was that R&B and doo-wop went mass-market at the same time that rednecks began to cover R&B, also for the mass market.” From this perspective, rather than an outlying situation, it is music’s very ability to mean in multiple contexts that gives it the power to structure new social ecosystems, identities, and even economies.

Yet if it were that easy, if no friction were created by bringing a work of early West Coast experimentalist concert music inside the walls of a revanchist folk revival fortress, there would be no thrill in the undertaking. In C succeeded there partly because of the superficial overlap of materials Townsend describes – repeated short cells of modal

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4 Ben Townsend, email message to author, April 20, 2015.
material readily realizable by fiddles, basses, voices, and plucked strings; and harmonic stasis with its resultant emphasis on texture, timbre, and groove. But beneath the sonic surface, does this overlap reveal a common set of values inherent in the musical practices they represent? Or is it an accident of convergent evolution, where the sounds happen to please two very different sets of criteria? Is it a case of Elvis, or the Shaggs? Perhaps, what fixes In C as belonging to any tradition is not what it contains, but how it is understood. Where I saw a prompt for correct execution based on an authorial text, Ben saw an invitation to collective improvisation. Where I saw “New Music,” he saw “old”

In the following chapters, I discuss the musical projects I created at Wesleyan with a central curiosity: How do I approach composing as a socially embedded activity? The commonalities that emerge remind me that even when I feel like I’ve created a messy, incoherent body of work, it is all de moi. First, I see a strong connection between my experience as a performer and the way I compose. This link turns up in my concern for performers’ experiences, and in the wide variety of styles I reference in my music. Also, it informs an engagement with the physicality of sound that stems from a long relationship with the particular constraints of my instruments, strings and voice. Second, the work often pursues questions of authenticity, identity, and the artistic presentation of self. This inquiry takes many forms, from work for solo performance to creative participation in online communities. Finally, I see an interest imagining scores as a channel for communication, more than as a way of fixing the identity of a piece. This applies especially to examples of graphic and video notation, but it touches any work in which I want to transmit ideas to performers, whether through standard notation or repurposed trash.
Part I groups together pieces composed for conventional performance by ensembles. In Chapter I, I describe Pieces written for instrumental ensembles and New York New Music ensemble loadbang. In Chapter II, I discuss my experience negotiating the cultural and theatrical parameters of composing songs for Sweet Land the Musical, a project that has been developing in Minneapolis in parallel with my time at Wesleyan. Chapter III covers pieces written for vocal ensembles, including a Wesleyan student group, the Mixolydians, and the New York Virtuoso Singers.

Part 2 deals explicitly with my experiences as a performer at Wesleyan. In Chapter V, I discuss realizations of work by Alvin Lucier, while Chapter VI asks a series of questions about the process of transcribing a duet by Meredith Monk for solo performance. Chapter VIII, I describe a piece that fuses my roles as performer and composer, a partly improvised work for solo viola called Open String Study.

In Part 3, I deal with two pieces explicitly concerned with the concept of online community. The Song-O-Phone, discussed in Chapter V, set up an extended game of online musical Telephone, resulting in twenty-seventy iterations by different authors of a short pop song. Chapter VI introduces the phenomenon of ASMR videos on YouTube, and discusses a project conceived as a way of participating clandestinely in that community, Trashghan.
PART 1

I now see the *In C* performance at Clifftop as emblematic of how I attempt to simultaneously inhabit a multiplicity of musical territories. In the following three chapters, I will discuss instances of how I have engaged with conventional performance situations as a composer who gives performers a score to execute. These range from the well-defined parameters of writing for classic musical theater, to the more fluid boundaries of writing for vocal ensembles, to the comparative freedom of devising pieces for unconventional instrumental ensembles.

II

**Folk Songs, Pennyfarthing 5, and Shrigley Studies**

In a 1987 documentary, Steve Reich tells this story about the Cologne premiere of his choral work *The Desert Music*:

“The Cologne premiere of *The Desert Music* was really very poor… largely because the orchestra was somewhat older, German, and the chorus was made up of basically hausfrau types… and yet it was clear to me at the time that I couldn’t go up to them and say, ‘no look, no vibrato, and it’s done much more marcato,’ because I could see that in their bodies, in their beings, they simply were not *The Desert Music* and my words would simply be a waste of time, so I sort of sat back and sort of said, well, this is a disaster, and that’s the way it’s gonna be.”

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Reich’s remarks on this high-profile failure highlight the cultural challenges of realization, even within the classical establishment. Reich doesn’t exactly critique the efforts of the Cologne performers, but he acknowledges that no direction from him could help them to acquire the stylistic vocabulary of the piece. There was no way around the cultural gap. Using Taruskin’s formulation of authenticity, “knowing what you are, and acting in accordance with that knowledge,” it was impossible for the Cologne singers to stage authentic Reich. I see this situation as an inverse of my own concern in imagining a piece for three upright basses for my thesis concert, \textit{Folk Songs}. Rather than finding performers who would bring an implicit understanding of how to perform my music, through similar training or cultural background, I wanted to consider the “beings” of the performers I was writing for, and use their native vocabularies to inform the composition.

I imagine part of the impetus for both \textit{Folk Songs} and \textit{Pennyfarthing 5}, discussed below, came from instrument envy. I wish I played bass and drums, and I’ve dabbled in both, but the concert offered an easier option -- to play those instruments by proxy. Writing for bassists and drummers also offered a way to subvert the concert the situation by making it culturally ambiguous, like playing \textit{In C} on a banjo. Putting \textit{two} drum sets on stage adds another layer of contrarianism: now the drummers are part of an ensemble. Does this make them “percussionists” instead of drummers? Likewise, grouping three upright basses in an ensemble confuses the issue of style before any notes are played. Is it chamber music? Are they a bass section? Who is the bass player?

Why two drum sets, and why three basses? Putting together the thesis concert program, I noticed my habit of writing for multiples of the same sound. One way I work is to multi-track myself playing or singing, in order to hear harmonies and counterpoint
realized, as a crutch for not playing piano. But this is also a chicken-and-egg situation – I could choose to multi-track myself playing different instruments, or try to manipulate my voice to sound different from track to track. Instead, I tend to be drawn to layered masses of the same sound. Considering this mirroring or multiplication of timbre, I’m reminded of similar choices in Reich’s works like *Four Organs, Violin Phase, Vermont Counterpoint*, etc. Describing the musical process underlying *Music for Pieces of Wood*, the composer has said, “To understand the piece, imagine listening to a kaleidoscope,”⁷ to explain how the rhythmic framework is constructed. For me, this metaphor also applies to multiplying a given timbre and mirroring it back against itself. This technique amplifies the effect of small gradual changes, since in a sea of the same timbre, it is only the changes that stand out. I wouldn’t say that I conceived the instrumentation for *Folk Songs* or *Pennyfarthing 5* in response to, or in imitation of, Reich, but it’s possible that subconscious association with their repetitive materials helped suggest a timbral kaleidoscope.

The first instrumental piece I worked on in this vein as a composer was *Dots and Loops*, which was played August 21, 2014 at Viracocha gallery in San Francisco. This piece explored mapping of visual repetition onto sonic repetition. The score is adapted from knitting patterns notated in a grid style, popular in Japan and among some English-speaking knitters. (see complete score, Appendix) It is more common for English-language knitting patterns to be written out in a kind of coded prose (e.g. Row 1: p1, k1, p2 together, k across to last 3 sts, p, k, p), but the more graphical system I referred to plots the stitches out into a grid, which is read analogously to the knitting process, from

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bottom to top, and horizontally back and forth. *Dots and Loops* put forward many of the same elements as *Folk Songs* and *Pennyfarthing 5*: playing a style of music in the “wrong” context (electric guitars playing minimalist music in a club on a program with singer-songwriters); scoring for multiples of the same instrument/timbre, additive processes, and negotiation between open and predetermined pitch sets.

Pitch set turned out to be a site where I chose to exert control in *Dots and Loops*, as part of negotiation around presenting process-influenced music at a club, which induced my own anxiety about intelligibility. To smooth things over, I specified an open tuning that would guarantee consonant fundamentals and harmonics, with gradual development from octaves to fifths and fourths. This palette also reflects my interest in scordatura and overtone-based tunings, influenced by practices suggested in Walter Mathieu’s book *Harmonic Experience*. However, it was secondary to the project of translating knitting patterns into a score.

Where *Dots and Loops* emerged from an interest in transposing a found graphic (knitting notation) to sound, *Folk Songs* began with a question about what it would mean to base a score on musicians’ pre-existing vocabularies – their imprinted mental musical patterns. As I noted in the printed program, “The group of people who play a given instrument constitute a kind of “folk” who share and transmit a specific set of knowledge and practices. Yet bassists seldom congregate in non-orchestral performance settings.” What musical materials would be suggested by imagining this social configuration? What language is spoken in Bass-landia? Underlying this question is an interest in creating scores that structure not just only sonic configurations, but social situations, aiming for a balance of specificity and openness, which acknowledge the musicians’ level of comfort.
and skill. Individual voices, with all their flaws, color the sound, not interchangeable players trying execute flawlessly.

The second section of *Folk Songs*, “Bass Drag,” calls for the three bassists to improvise walking lines, first in sync with each other, then out of sync as each takes turn pushing and pulling against the primary pulse. In an earlier iteration of the score, a single pulse was maintained throughout the movement, as the role of time-keeper passed around the ensemble. On hearing that version in rehearsal, however, I felt that the consistent pulse would likely lull the listener away from hearing the tension caused by the rushing and dragging parts, which faded into the background, an interesting lesson in the relationship between pulse and attention (see chapter IX), and analogous to a similar observation Professor Kuivila had made regarding *Pennyfarthing* 5. I modified the score so that the time-keeper role would still be passed around, but it would also correlate to tempo changes, so that what had been a dissident pulse (rushing or dragging) would suddenly become the “correct” pulse, against which the other players would instigate their small mutinies.

While low-register walking lines are at home on other instruments, like the piano and organ, the walking bass line encapsulates specific meanings associated with the instrument as a voice in an ensemble. It bridges the worlds of rhythm and harmony, establishing a reference point for the drummer, the comping instruments, and the melodists. In thinking about this musical activity -- simple in concept and infinite in variety, yet idiomatically highly constrained -- I wondered how the convention came to stand. Foreshadowing the discussion of obscure online communities in chapter VI, I discovered the “Online Journal of Bass Research.” Citing a fascinating passage from a
biography of Chicago bassist Milt Hinton, the site describes how Hinton experimented with chord tones and passing tones, as though discovering melodic voice leading for the first time.\(^8\) This scalar vocabulary, in turn, built on the bass’s increasing importance as a replacement for the tuba in jazz ensembles, after which the standard progressed from arco to snap pizzicato, finally settling on the “round” pizzicato sound idiomatic today.\(^9\)

As a native of the performers’ domain, I am acutely aware of the ways writing with or against the training and psychology of players results in vastly different experiences. At the same time, I recognize that performers often perpetuate stereotypes about what other musicians can and can’t do based on their instrument, and, more dangerously, hold limited expectations for the palette of sounds that are available and appropriate to the correct playing of an instrument. I had never thought to ask when walking bass line vocabulary emerged in jazz, but questioning such a fundamental building block of the style invites a second look at so many more of the music-as-usual expectations I have acquired over time.

In Daniel Chua’s treatise on absolute music, style is discussed as a part of Baroque practice that bridged a gap between the score, which represented only part of a work, and the performer. “The score,” Chua writes, meaning a notated document barren of the stylistic details imparted through performance, “does not make the composer.” Imparting only a subset of the information central to the identity of the work, it’s also a property of a Baroque score that it “does not look as it should sound.”\(^10\) Reading this historical analysis made me wonder whether the lack of acknowledgement of the


\(^{9}\) Ibid.

presence of style was part of what irked me about classical pedagogy. Notation is taught an end point, not a starting point. Deviation is an error, not a reflection of style.

To take Chua’s phrase out of context, ever since I started learning to read music notation as a kid, I always felt it did not “look as it should sound.” When I began teaching violin to elementary school students ages 7 – 11, I was fascinated by the varying degree to which students found notation to be intuitive. Their aptitude for reading music, unsurprisingly, seemed to bear little relation to their innate musicality, natural aptitude for playing violin, intuitive pitch sense, or any other measure of musicianship. Furthermore, different students had different difficulties with the notation. For many, counting the lines and spaces was effortful, and for some, the concept of “up” being higher pitch and “low” being lower pitch, while also mapping this onto the left-right-ness of the violin, was a challenge. And for a maddening few, it seemed that the one-to-one connection between symbol and sound simply did not scan. (“See that note? It looks the same as the one you played before. Two of the same note. Why did you make two different sounds?) Though I pushed them to make the connection, I empathized.

Newer ways of symbolizing musical sounds abound that are more universally intuitive than Western notation. This is evident in grid-based sequencing interfaces such as Ableton Live11, as well as in the popularity of games like Guitar Hero and Dance Dance Revolution, platforms predicated on the idea that certain aspects of pop performance are, in fact, attainable by the average person.12 It doesn’t take long for onlookers to grasp the correspondence of visual objects to sonic impulses, or of graphical

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patterns to rhythmic repetition. This phenomenon informed the idea for *Dots and Loops*, as well as for creating a video score for *Pennyfarthing 5*, in which two drummers play a very complicated, public game of *Guitar Hero*. In this way, *Pennyfarthing 5* bridges interests evident in other work discussed below such as *Trashghan*, considering approaches to notation not just as a communication between a composer and a performer, but as a means of establishing affinity within a community of musical practice, and in particular, communities oriented around specific technologies.

It will be interesting to explore in the future how the practice of creating alternative visual cues for sonic patterns in *Pennyfarthing* is related to the deployment of knitting patterns in *Dots and Loops*. Both reveal a desire to relate visual rhythms with aural ones, and both deal with practices that are disseminated and shared via online communities. The resonance between the two, beyond mapping visual patterns onto the generation of analogous sonic patterns, stems from the fact that this activity seems to be a compelling impulse in popular media. I have referred above to the video score for *Pennyfarthing* as being in the style of *Guitar Hero* or *Dance Dance Revolution*, platforms that combine audio and visual cues. The movement of icons on a screen provides advance warning about the correct moves, while the underlying pulse is conveyed through background music. *Pennyfarthing*’s video score ultimately incorporated both of these elements, using the click track as an auditory cue. However, it may be a closer cousin to a YouTube phenomenon in which individuals post midi scores of well-known classical music pieces, along with visualizations that consist of “notes” falling onto an image of a piano keyboard. These videos can be generated using various software platforms, including one called “Synthesia,” and they demonstrate that an instinct to relate visual
patterns with sounds is not restricted to the community of musicians trained in conventional notation.

In the program notes for *Pennyfarthing* 5, I explained that “I first developed a crush on hocket writing for two drum sets during Toby Summerfield’s 2005 recording session for his large ensemble Never Enough Hope, featuring eminent Chicago drummers Frank Rosaly and Tim Daisy. Some of the precedents we discussed while I worked on this piece include Tortoise, Steve Reich, and Mice Parade,” and that *Pennyfarthing*, named for the old-fashioned bicycle with two different sized wheels, is an attempt to engage with minimalist processes (additive, phasing) while shifting the character of the materials away from an austere chamber music palette toward the rich signification of familiar pop patterns.” (see complete program notes, Appendix) In the context of *Folk Songs*, I see a similar inclination to situate abstract generative processes within a deeply idiomatic context – composing *Desert Music* for the hausfraus. (*The Cologne Music?*) Of course, the notion of *Pennyfarthing* as idiomatic for “drummers” as a species crumbles in the face of what I ended up with: a complicated, through-composed, hocket piece in standard notation, as opposed to how I first imagined it -- groove based, cyclical, notated with graphical patterns. However, I was pleased with the way the video score, realized by Noah Rush ’14, brought back the element of visual patterns in the live performance.

My initial image for *Pennyfarthing* was a hocket that gradually and imperceptibly drifted between different grooves, never quite settling in any of them. This proved elusive, and I burned through many potential tactics in trying to impose a feeling of drift on pop drum patterns that are intrinsically anchored, as my advisor pointed out, in 4/4 time. (The designation 5 comes from the performance version being the fifth major
overhaul of the piece.) Instead of making use of the players’ existing internal repertoire of patterns, as in *Folk Songs*, the score ended up dictating specific cross-relations, with little room for individual flourishes. This marked a major difference from, for example, “Bass Drag,” in the level of accuracy required of the performers for a successful performance. Where in the first two movements of *Folk Songs*, no error can really derail the piece, and the players are afforded considerable agency in the pace at which they proceed through the material, and even what pitches to play, in *Pennyfarthing* the hocket requires the players to nail their parts. Incongruities are audible. The video score adds a layer of accountability, since now the audience is able to see what they performers are supposed to play. Even if they don’t read standard notation, viewers can easily track changes in the patterns of falling dots, provided they connect them with the drum attacks. (For example, a light blue dot on the far right of the left player’s score corresponds to a cymbal hit.) Once that correspondence is established, if the blue dots stop falling before the cymbal sound ends, the listener can easily discern a mistake.

For the Fall 2014 Wesleyan Composition Seminar, Professor Paula Matthusen organized a performance of students’ work by New York new music quartet loadbang, comprised of male vocalist, trombone, trumpet, and bass clarinet. The assignment to write for this ensemble marked the first time I would be asked to write music for a group of performers that I didn’t know personally, which I think shows just how socially directed my writing has been up to now.

The list of references in loadbang’s bio reads like it was designed to point out gaps in my own knowledge -- starting with my failure to recognize at first that the name
loadbang was a reference. Adding to my anxiety, the vocalist performed with the kind of classically trained sonority I often find it challenging to listen through – I trusted that he could probably execute straight tone or any other technique I asked for, but his distinctive vibrato and timbre didn’t feel like a blank canvas. Loadbang’s very being, to use Steve Reich’s phrase, did not feel suited to The Dina Music. Given this disconnect, I turned to a language I thought we might all understand: irreverence. I proposed to write a suite of short, digestible pieces, using text and artwork by U.K. cartoonist David Shrigley, to create miniature stagings of his deliberately clumsy visual jokes. I chose six cartoons that I found humorous, visually arresting, or germane, plus one set of “song lyrics” that had been published as text but without any accompanying music.  

The cartoon I was most excited about, “Those Who Are Very Confused,” was the realization that worked the least. I have since created a revised version, not yet performed, that may address some of the problems with the first attempt, though I think the loadbang performance’s main problem was lack of rehearsal. I was more pleased with the results of a (subtly) process-based piece, which I revisited with the Mixolydians, based on a cartoon with the caption, “Would you still love me if I looked like this… And smelled of fish?” (see score, Appendix) The text is divided into three phrases. The vocalist progresses through the first two phrases additively, first one word, then two words, then three, etc. until the whole phrase is sung. In a homophonic texture, all four voices play together, but each voice moves individually by a particular interval. For the first phrase, “Would you still love me,” all the voices (meaning voice and instruments) start in unison move up by their designated interval. For “If I looked like this,” the voices

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13 I would soon discover that the compilation of words-without-songs by Shrigley on which I based “For You lyrics were taken, called Worried Noodles, had been turned into an album released in 2007 on Tomlab records. “For You” was set and recorded by David Byrne.
start an octave above the original unison, and move downward by their designated interval, resulting in a different set of harmonies. For the final phrase, “And smelled of fish?” a jokey cadence defies the intervallic rules set up previously and delivers the punch line. Maybe this setting is my attempt to dress up a Stephen Merritt song in New Music clothing. In any case, when I re-arranged “Would You Still Love Me” for SATB chorus, the Mixolydians struggled with the harmony, especially the descending major thirds assigned to the altos in the second half.

Playing In C at Clifftop affirmed my identity as a participant in several musical communities. Writing for loadbang confirmed that I am not a participant in all of them.
In the following email exchange, between composer Mark Orton, director/producer Perrin Post, and myself, I reveal my own doubt as to being qualified to write a musical. Orton had scored the 2005 film *Sweet Land* on which Post was planning to base a new musical theater work. When asked whether he was interested in scoring a musical adaptation of the film, he declined, but recommended me to collaborate with librettist Laurie Flannigan Hegge on original songs.

**From: <perrinpost@aol.com>**
**Date: Fri, Apr 12, 2013 at 9:00 AM**
**Subject: Sweet Land musical**
**To: dinamaccabee@gmail.com, markorton42@gmail.com, laurieflanhegge@gmail.com**

Hi Dina, Mark & Laurie
Laurie and I talked we'd love the two of you to work on the opening number. Let's talk [with] Dina and meet via phone asap and I can tell you what I'm looking for as far as tone and such…
… I would love to know more about your musical theater music too!
thanks!

Perrin Post

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**Mark Orton <markorton42@gmail.com>**
4/12/13
to me
Hey
For the record I never mentioned your musical theater music. Just said you were a
fan and had played in pits and were familiar with the genre. Let me know if u
want me to mention that and remind me to tell you my Andrew Lloyd weber joke.

Dina Maccabee <violina@gmail.com>
4/12/13
to Mark

yeah... was trying to figure out how I’ll respond to that question. I've done a lot of
theater scores but never a musical. I guess I'll probably just tell them that? Or
keep it vague?
dm

Mark Orton <markorton42@gmail.com>
4/12/13
to me
vague is the name of the game
congrats again on wesleyan!

While I would look to Orton’s music to calibrate the tone and character the
creators wanted for Sweet Land the Musical (SLM), this exchange is a reminder that I was
also looking to him as an experienced composer for strategies about landing the gig. My
“vagueness” was a dodge: in actual fact I had never written a musical, or any part of one.
I had written many original songs and several theatrical scores, and I had designed sound
for numerous theater productions. I had also worked with Orton for long enough that I
trusted his instincts: if he thought I would be able to please the creative team, I believed
him. Still, I was fundamentally under qualified, and nervous about the skills I knew I
didn’t have – arranging for specific vocal types, integrating music with dialogue, creating piano reductions, orchestrating. Nonetheless, I was excited at the possibility of writing a musical and thought I’d enjoy the task, even if much of the work was to be “on spec” until an actual production generated any real income.

Nearly two years later, I have set lyrics for the better part of a two-act musical. Much of the music has been performed in workshop settings in Minneapolis, and I have arranged for several pieces to be performed at Wesleyan. I know much more now about how much I didn’t know then.

At a social gathering recently, someone was testing a theory that the music you were “into” between the ages of 9 and 12 is an indicator of your “true” taste. At 9, the idea goes, you begin to differentiate your identity from that of your parents. By 12, you have begun to adjust your affinities to suit the demands of peer pressure. But during that brief but golden epoch, your musical infatuations are authentically yours. There are major problems with this hypothesis, but for a moment I will entertain it because of this: the reason I was open to accepting the role of musical theater composer stemmed not from any current professional goals, but from the music I cherished between the ages of 9 and 12 -- the last time I paid any serious attention to Broadway.

Which musical experiences leave permanent marks, even when succeeded by many more recent, more relevant, more sophisticated impressions? What intuitive power do lyrics and melodies, involuntarily stored in long-term memory, exert? Without having listened to the musical theater genre with real passion in more than 20 years, it’s likely that I can recite or at least follow along word-for-word with Les Miserables, Chorus Line, The Little Mermaid and West Side Story, and slightly less encyclopedically, Music Man.
Notwithstanding the stylistic (and qualitative) differences among this selection of shows, such total recall makes clear that the seed of musical theater was planted early and irrevocably. Indeed, the obsessive listening, and memorizing, was done in that golden period when I began to conceive of a private, personal relationship with music listening.

Unlike one middle school classmate who now stars on Broadway and married a Rockette, I eventually outgrew the musical theater phase. Most of the work I did professionally prior to coming to Wesleyan took place within the musical territory of “listening” music, concerned with carefully coded shadings of musical meaning, rather than theatrical narrative. My songwriting duo, Ramon & Jessica, did assume characters, with our genders were reversed (I am Ramon.) For a while, I performed that character in a white dress with a black wig; other common costume choices for both members include sunglasses (indoors in dark clubs), polyester suits, and other ironic garb. In retrospect, I see these habits as a way of pushing back on the impossible task set before performer-composers making original music in a pop format: to create a performable, heightened version of your self. Alternatively, one could choose a genre-dependent persona, adopting its style of music, haircut, shoe style, jeans-tightness, etc. Either choice was unsatisfying.

What it means to perform authenticity became a conundrum from which I eventually found myself eager to take a long and perhaps permanent break, a realization that helped prompt me to apply to graduate school. Musical theater, at the same time, offered a ready-made stylistic toolbox and a clear set of rules. In musicals, the music’s role is beholden to the truth of the story, not of the composer or the performer. This approach, even though the genre could be formulaic, came to feel compellingly honest – more honest than the compromise of the “authentic” singer-songwriter.
The *SLM* project also offered a chance to work from traditional sources, creating a musical world around what its characters might have heard: traditional and popular Norwegian and American music circa 1920. In fact, it demanded creating two worlds, or a dual world, sensitive both to the historical reality of the subject and to the audience who, as consumers of musical theater, bring a certain set of expectations. So, my question then became, how can I set up and use the rules of the fictional world to meet musical theater expectations, rather than adhering to the rules of *Les Mis*, or of *Rent*?

In his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, “Music Theatre and Musical Theatre,” Zachary Dunbar suggests that stylistic eclecticism actually defines Musical Theater, in that “as a subspecies of music theatre, musicals may be differentiated by the degree to which a show absorbs and reconfigures past and present styles and forms.”¹⁴ This may seem at odds with the fact that musicals and their conventions are so instantly recognizable, as is the demographic of their listeners and fans. However, this can be explained by the rigid conventions of the performance style: hyper-emotive belting with a distinctively aggressive vibrato. The stylistic influences might be diverse, but the presentation is predictable. “Most every other style of music embraces idiosyncrasies, champions subtlety, celebrates its mumblers and growlers, and doesn’t care if we can’t hear a word here or there if the overall feeling is visceral,” writes New York musical theater composer Dave Malloy, “But musical theater remains chained to an orthodoxy of diction, projection, and extroversion.”¹⁵

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While the diverse homage to different musical styles is evident in SLM’s songs written to date – from the Music Man homage “The Auction” to the attempt at a bel canto-ish aria, “Call Me Inge Torvik,” in the writing process the collaborative team has, largely tacitly, adhered to the ideal Dunbar describes “integrated-ness: that is, the degree and frequency with which song flows from dialogue, or music combines with story-telling plots.” This ideal marriage of story and song is presumed and enshrined in the SLM team’s frames of reference. It goes without saying that we are building on the back of West Side Story, for example, and not a vaudeville revue. The songs should emerge seamlessly from the dialogue, pushing the story line forward, rather than repeating information already presented in expository dialogue.

An example of this precept at work is “The Auction,” an a cappella ensemble number in which the protagonist places the winning bid on a foreclosure auction to prevent his friend from being evicted. As I approached setting the lyrics for this piece, the context and concept were supplied: a theatrical scene in which an auctioneer sells off the contents of a house, while the community reacts in various ways to the proceedings, depending on their relationship to the main characters and their obligation to advance the plot. On May 1, 2014, I received the lyrics. On May 4, starting at the beginning, I used Logic 9 to multi-track myself singing through each part, “improvising” the melody and counter-melodies as I went along. I made no preparatory decisions about structure, key changes, chord movements, or melodic development, relying on the lyrics to provide the information I needed to match the mood, tone, and attitude of the narrative. Though I regard this compositional strategy, or non-strategy, as convenient and enjoyable, I realize it is dangerously limited. Still, I can’t help feeling superstitious about the unscientific
process, which carries a trace of the ineffable, and, perhaps, my childhood fascination with music as magic.

In drawing on Norwegian folk music to create the musical world of SLM, I hoped to be more strategic. In dealing with the act of “drawing on” a foreign musical territory for the explicit purpose of invoking a national identity, it seems imperative to address the issue of appropriation. I am not Norwegian, nor have I studied Norwegian music, either of which might give me a “pass” to draw at will from the tradition. Even then, if I were a member of that club, what actual musical activities would I engage in? What defines the sound of that body of music? As a European “folk” music, the parameters that come to mind are: specific tunes and melodies; forms (e.g. dance forms), rhythmic patterns or grooves; ornaments; tunings; vocal timbre; instrumentation; and modes. Complexity is added by the fact that the world of SLM is not actually trying to transport audiences to Norway, but rather to a rural Norwegian immigrant community in 1920 Minnesota, a very specific and real cultural and sound world to which I don’t have much access outside my imagination.16

Some ways SLM’s realization would be forced to depart from traditional influences were contextually dictated. Musicals that offer an alternative to the “enunciate and project” model do exist, and, as Dave Malloy suggests, might be necessary to the development of the genre. However, SLM is not such a show. It is rooted in the theatrical community of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is being written to cater to that community, with specific actors and singers in mind for various parts, all exponents of a classic musical theater style. At the same time, the director has indicated she values my

16 While writing the thesis, but after much of the SLM composition had been done, I was thrilled to find a specific treatment of this subject matter in the dissertation by Leroy Larson, Scandinavian-American Folk Dance Music Of The Norwegians In Minnesota (University of Minnesota, Ph.D., 1975)
“outsider” approach to writing Musical Theater, and in conceiving instrumentation, she allowed for a lot of leeway. In selecting an ensemble, I was interested in distinguishing urban from rural, professional from “folk,” and South from North.

Professor Neely Bruce introduced me to Edvard Grieg’s 1902 composition *Slåtter*, op. 72, instrumental Norwegian folk tunes arranged for piano. The relevance of this work to my approach to *SLM*, and to my overall project, stems not just from its involvement transporting musical materials from one locale to another (from a local, folk setting to a professional, urban concert milieu; or from performer-oriented to author-oriented) but from Grieg’s awareness of the problems involved. Ståle Kleiberg, in his 1996 treatment of the work, “Grieg's 'Slåtter’, Op. 72: Change of Musical Style or New Concept of Nationality?” confirms both the difficulty of the project, and Grieg’s reservations, explaining that due to its complexity of ornamentation and the use of sympathetic strings, “hardanger fiddle slåtter cannot be adapted to simple notation for practical use in the home - a conventional means of reinforcing a sense of national identity.” He quotes a letter in which Grieg himself remarks, 'So far it seems to me a sin to adapt the slåtter for piano, but I shall nevertheless sooner or later commit this sin.'

In the early twentieth century, whether in Grieg’s Norway or Bartok’s Hungary, recasting folk tunes as art music could not avoid participating in the debate around the construction of national identity. And perhaps, miniaturized, this is not so far from the project of drawing on folk music to construct the world of a musical. There are times when I wonder, as Grieg did, whether this act of sorting and lifting certain aspects of the source material, selecting for those aspects that are easily translated and discarding those

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which aren’t, is a sin I have already committed. Naturally, the stakes are lower in deploying local culture as theatrical subtext than in using it to construct national identity, especially given, as Ana Mara Ochoa Gautier observes, “that today the intensified circulation of what historically have been considered local musics everywhere is now quite commonplace and ubiquitous.” But the process does beg the larger question: what does the musical intend to do, and how, as the composer, do I contribute to that purpose?

As mentioned, SLM is an undertaking very much of, and for, the Minneapolis theater world. Will Weaver, the author of the 1989 short story on which it is based, “A Gravestone Made of Wheat,” is a native Northern Minnesotan who teaches at Bemidji State University. In his interview with the Intellectual and Cultural Leaders of Minnesota project, Weaver jokes that when he was accepted to a Stanford writing program, it was because of his local flavor; they “hadn’t seen any stories about deer hunting.” This quip contributes to the sense that part of Sweet Land’s appeal, both as a film and its subsequent adaptation as a musical, are part of a project of affirming Minnesotan identity, in particular for creative work. Until director Ali Selim raised funds in Minnesota for the production of Sweet Land, eventually achieving limited theatrical and national DVD release, Hollywood hadn’t greenlighted a lot of scripts about Scandinavian immigrants in rural Minnesota, but an urge to tell and hear these stories seems to drive a strong sense of loyalty to all of the existing iterations of Sweet Land.

Later in the same interview, Weaver comments, “The Sweet Land movie now is in development for a musical by the same name. This amuses me greatly: to go from idea to

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short story to feature film to musical. I’m not sure what’s next for that little story. We shall see. The musical will be coming out of Minneapolis, with many of the Guthrie Theater [people], with many of the fine singers and artists and lyricists here in the Twin Cities.⁴⁻²⁰ Weaver is aware that with the chain of adaptations, a series of recontextualizations is already going on, which necessarily impact the story. For example, he summarizes the central dilemma of “A Gravestone Made of Wheat” as revolving around the desire of a farmer to bury his wife on his land, which is illegal. The conflict is between the farmer’s promise to his wife and his duty to the law. Down the line, in the book for SLM, the driving conflict has become the desire of Olaf, a Norwegian immigrant in a Norwegian immigrant community, to marry Inge, a German national without proper papers, a union opposed primarily not by the Sheriff, but by the Pastor. Certainly in a theatrical setting, a potential wedding is more uplifting, compelling and stageable than a burial. Fortunately, in this case, at least the first link in the chain carried the author’s approval. “The matter of film adaptations is a very complicated one for the author,” says Weaver. “On the one hand, it’s a wonderful gift for the author that someone takes the work seriously enough to pay for it and make a film of it. On the other hand, there are always great changes that come with the territory of film adaptation. It’s a mixed blessing. There are truly gains and losses in a film adaptation. In the example of my story, “A Gravestone Made of Wheat,” which became Sweet Land, <there were> quite a few changes, but the same heart of the story still beat in the film.”⁴⁻²¹

So constructing a musical world for Inge and Olaf is a project of building identity within a project of building identity; of presenting Scandinavian heritage as a facet of

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²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Ibid.
Minnesotan storytelling. (Quick, call the Jewish experimental composer from San Francisco!) As a commissioned composer in this situation, my role is to serve rather than to critique or mold the motivation for the larger work. This means many of the variables are pre-determined, as discussed above, by constraints of genre and context.

The easiest ways to refer to Norwegian music proved to be in melodic gestures and non-diatonic modes. Filtered through my own songwriting tendencies, these influences are possibly inaudible to the listener in the final product. In excerpts performed at Wesleyan, probably the clearest example of merging theatrical motives with inspiration from Norwegian music (especially recordings of the overtone flute featured on *Norwegian Folk Music*\(^{22}\) by Jon Faukstad, Hans W. Brimi, and Mary Barthelemy, held in the Wesleyan LP collection) is “Don’t Look Back,” performed by Heather Megill Reba on the March 29, 2015 thesis recital with viola and bass accompaniment. (see score, in the Appendix.) The impetus for the setting came from an idea to use an accented sixteenth note “fiddle” rhythm on a minor second to paint the approach of a train, as Inge arrives at the station. The director asked for an “up-tempo, driving, train song” that would underscore a “nervous, tense moment for Inge.” Melodically, I was interested in drawing on the suspended, unsettled feeling invoked by the overtone-flute melodies on *Norwegian Folk Music* LP, particularly “Budeislått” performed by Mary Barthelemy on the seljefløyte, a willow overtone flute. The pitches in this recording are (roughly) D E F# G# A B C, which I tend to hear as Lydian with a lowered 7. Full disclosure: I did not do a survey of seljefløyte repertoire to find out if this mode is typical. Nor have I asked what region of Norway Weaver’s characters might have emigrated from. Brimi’s record

\(^{22}\) Hans Brimi et. al, *Norwegian Folk Music: fiddle, accordion & flute music from Gudbrandsdalen*, Philo 41067, 1980, LP
documents music from Gudbrandsdalen, a valley in central Norway, but this a more
specific attribution than my ethnographic imagination for SLM would venture to go, and
so I let it stand for Norway, or for that matter, Scandinavia. Undoubtedly, this smearing
over of musical identities is a sin – yet I was rather pleased with the results. I began by
breaking the only rule I had established (the violin part begins with scale degrees 7 and 1,
rather than b7, and the major 7th persists in the vocal melody) and followed this with the
totally cliché move of indicating an element of suspense by using the rather vanilla, and
in no particular way Norwegian, Lydian mode. It worked, the lyricist and director liked it,
we moved on.

Another factor lurking behind all of the music composed for SLM is the
knowledge that I was in some ways a substitute for the director’s first choice of
composers, Mark Orton, who scored the film version. Now known for his ensemble Tin
Hat Trio and high profile film work such as Nebraska, Orton’s music has a particularly
warm and spacious character that evokes open expanses of an American landscape in a
uniquely un-cheesy way. This effect owes to Orton’s sophistication as a composer and
arranger who is fluent in all the applicable styles (his website describes the Nebraska
score as “a guitar driven score that blends elements of acoustic chamber music with
Americana and alt-country,” who studied classical composition at Hartt, engineered
sound at the Knitting Factory (when it mattered,) and is undeniable on fingerstyle guitar
or lap steel. I don’t have any of these qualifications, other than being competent on a
string instrument, so the only advantage I had in filling in for him was that I know his
music and his sound very well. A more scrupulous or theoretically inclined musician (or
one who played any chordal instrument) might have made note of some of the ways
Orton achieves his sound, as far as chord voicings, melodic tics, and especially chord progressions, which tend to orbit tantalizingly just outside the I-IV-V conventions associated with Americana, distant enough to sound distinctively wistful but not strange enough to distract. Instead, I opted for the largely subconscious “What Would Mark Do” approach, in which, if stuck on a chord progression or melodic development, I would simply close my eyes and listen for what his style would call for at that juncture.

“WWMD” proved a fairly reliable crutch for countering or complementing my own habits. At the first ensemble rehearsal for a workshop production in Minneapolis in 2014, a young accordion player deftly ran through all the charts, tastefully filling in the spaces I had provided for him to improvise, generally getting all of the feels I called for without much explanation. At the end, he turned to me and asked, “Have you ever heard of a band called Tin Hat?” After that, I stopped worrying about trying to sound like Mark Orton.
IV

Composing for the Mixolydians and New York Virtuoso Singers

The effort to internalize some essential quality of traditional Norwegian music in the course of composing of songs for SLM is predicated on an existing practice of learning traditional music. I have spent dozens, probably hundreds, of hours looping drastically slowed down recorded passages, mostly of traditional violin players. Slowing down recordings reveals details of pitch, emphasis, and noise that I can’t hear at regular speed; not noise as an artifact of recording, but as evidence of the effort required to produce tone. Bow noise and fingerboard noise become not only audible but essential features.

Still, the image is unstable. I often pore over a particular passage until I’m convinced I’ve seen all its contours, only to return later to find I have missed or incorrectly apprehended countless facets of the recording. I am aware of at least three filters coloring what I hear: a mental abstraction of the melody (a standard version I have learned, or an amalgamation of other versions), a conception of style (what the fiddle in this context “should” sound like), and the muscle memory evoked by hearing violin sounds. Behind all that, there is the objective sound of the recording; still, as it proceeds from one iteration of the melody to the next, I become attached to details that may be totally inconsistent. And while this discovery is humbling, the changeability of the object of listening isn’t surprising. After all, don’t we always hear in music some combination of the sound our ears perceive and the sounds our minds expect?
The idea of using live voices or instruments to imitate the sound of a slowed down recording had been on my mind for some time, when the opportunity arose to write for the Mixolydians, Wesleyan’s student-led chamber choir. I had begun setting excerpts from *The Observer’s Book of Weather*, a pocket-sized field guide I took from my father’s library, first printed in 1955. The book fascinates me less for its science than for the quaint poetry of its explanations (“The worst kind of thunderstorm… usually brings with it a trail of destruction, especially in the less temperate climes.” “The results may eventually reveal more fully the extent to which our weather in the lower layers is influenced by developments occurring aloft at impenetrable heights.”). As with Shrigley Studies, discussed in Chapter I, since a twelve-person vocal ensemble was a new configuration for me, I chose to create a series of short movements testing out different possible approaches. For the slowed-down recording experiment, I picked the first popular recording I could think of that would both fit with the Weather theme and provide a juicy, monophonic melody to zoom in on: *Stormy Weather*, as recorded by Billie Holiday in 1952\(^{23}\), which also fit with the era of *The Observer’s Book* text. The result, “Holiday,” offered what I hoped would be a series of small but surmountable challenges for the ensemble: microtonality, learning by ear, and monophonic ensemble singing without a pulse. (See Appendix for “Holiday” score.)

Picture the scene shortly after Darth Vader light-sabers off Luke’s Skywalker’s hand. Taking a moment to reflect on the workings of his prosthesis, Luke peers through a rectangular orifice into a cavity filled with cold metal parts. Every now and again, pop music adopts a similar gaze, suddenly fascinated with its own hidden workings. Take, for

\(^{23}\) Billie Holiday, *An Evening with Billie Holiday*, Clef Records, 1953
example, a YouTube “video” called “Justin Bieber 800% Slower.” Nick Pittsinger, aka Varien, achieved internet virality with this slowed-down remix of Justin Bieber's song "U Smile," which at the time of writing has 2,730,000 views on YouTube. Why choose Justin Bieber? Why this song? Why does taking something everyone accepts as bad and slowing it down make it into something widely received as good? I really don’t know, but all I want to suggest here is that my awareness of it, combined with my own practice of transcribing slowed down recordings, influenced the idea for “Holiday.”

Another motivation for “Holiday” stems from the fact that transcribing slowed down recordings is precisely not what classically trained musicians do. Part of the fun in working with the Mixolydians was finding where boundaries of their comfort zone lay, and I was interested to see whether learning a score by ear was something they would embrace or disdain. As college students fully immersed in recorded music culture, I hoped that asking them to imitate a recording with precision wouldn’t be too much to ask, despite their classical orientation. After all, the concept of slowing music down has no problems with intelligibility in "Justin Bieber 800% Slower." I could create an example for the ensemble to imitate that would fall within their vocal range and limit its duration to something manageable..

In considering how to score a transcription of two seconds of Billie Holiday’s swooping vocal, stretched to a length of one minute, I came up with several questions that would help shape the direction of The Observer’s Book:

1. What is the Mixolydians’ “comfort zone?” How far outside it should I ask them to go?
2. How much, with regard to both duration and complexity, can I expect them to execute?

3. What would I like to learn from the interaction?

4. How much control do I want to (or can I) exert over the learning process?

5. What challenges will they enjoy, and what will be frustrating? How will I know?

In retrospect, these questions reveal my concern with engaging the social experience of the performers as a primary consideration. A different set of questions, for myself, tests this theory. Would I be capable, for example, of giving the Mixolydians something I knew they would find foreign, or even odious, expecting that they would make a good faith effort to master it and perhaps grow to appreciate it? Could I compose something without the performer’s state of comfort or success in mind? I don’t think so, or if even I could, I probably wouldn’t.

My assumption in shaping and scoring “Holiday” was that the Mixolydians would be more comfortable with some kind of notation than simply being asked to learn it by ear. I did toy with the idea of a graphic score, given the suggestively sinuous quality of the excerpt, which would trace a smooth curved line, following parameters for pitch and amplitude (I figured at least one member would be familiar with Stockhausen.) In the end I opted for a compromise: discrete note heads indicate pitches that the vocal line “passes through” while on its continuous slide. Because slowing down a recording results in blurry durations rather than clear impulses, a certain sameness can be heard: vocal syllables become long sweeps, drum beats become swooshes of noise, pulse falls below the threshold of intelligibility as a regularly recurring pattern. While in the future I would be interested in transcribing a polyphonic slowed-down recording, in this case I felt that unison glissando could yield an interesting texture with twelve voices, and might be
executable given the short amount rehearsal time available. I was also interested in how the group would negotiate unison, something I imagined that as a chamber choir they don’t often deal with, at least not for a whole piece. Pulse was not available as an organizing principle, so negotiating a unison without a felt pulse could pose a challenge that would create interesting side effects.

I imagine there is a professional ensemble out there who might enjoy learning a passage by ear and performing it in unison by listening to and watching each other, conveying the memory of its timing in their bodies, as any conductorless ensemble would approach a notated rubato passage. For the Mixolydians, it proved expedient to create a score that could be conducted. Choosing an arbitrary tempo of \( \text{♩}= 60 \), I arranged a series of notes representing points the continuously sliding melody passes through, which could be used as signposts relative to a 4/4 conducting pattern. Slides are indicated with glissando marks -- almost but not quite continuous throughout the passage. I indicated deviations from diatonic pitch using cents, but values were approximate, as the audio-score was available for those who wanted to work on matching the pitch precisely. In other words, the score for “Holiday,” is mainly an argument for learning it by ear.

Another important point of resonance in *The Observer’s Book of Weather* is its orientation toward the amateur. “Not only the official meteorologist,” it exclaims, “but the amateur observer has a big part to play.” I often feel like an amateur observer in relation to the technology of experimental music. Relative to a lay-person, I have a decent command of the tools of mainstream music performance and recording. But many of my colleagues’ tools and vocabularies -- analog circuits, computer music programming, modular synthesizers -- are intimidating and unfamiliar. I don’t even have the basic skill
set I would need to begin to penetrate them, unlike, say, approaching a new musical style on violin. But I find much work done using these technologies compelling, even without a good understanding of the methods involved. What part, then, do I have to play as an observer, primarily engaged with more conventional musical technologies, yet interested in the questions posed by work that deals with more technical approaches to sound?

As for the piece I derived from the Book’s text, I consider it to be a collection of preliminary trials, centered on the questions I set forth above regarding working with the Mixolydians, as well as one more important one: How could I gradually start working toward using the voice without text? This last question points to another theme that threads through the pieces presented in this thesis: the problem of “experimental” music settling reflexively into a style. The fear, with regard to my own work, of falling into a trap of imitating the sound of experimental works I admire, rather than being inspired by their methods or processes or the questions they enact, is understandable for a musician who has spent much of her career imitating sounds as precisely as possible. Using vocal music non-narratively, especially as in work by Monk, Feldman, and Cage, and to a lesser extent Lucier, is a gesture that I sometimes fear using as a stylistic tic, rather than as the result of a compositional question.

The most successful moment of The Observer’s Book of Weather, upon performance, was the opening gesture in the opening movement, “Sirens,” in which the singers are asked to “siren” their voices from a low G to a G two octaves higher, each entering at his or her own discretion, to create a texture of overlapping slides that also collectively sustain a constant tone (G). Other attempts to use randomized or improvised timings to create a collective texture proved less effective in this particular performance.
In “EDM,” the group is asked to fade in and out on an ostinato rhythm with each part contributing a note in the harmonic series. The resonant effect of this play on sweep-filtering as a trope in dance music relies on precise tuning of each voice relative to the fundamental, which probably demands the skill of a professional ensemble. In “Ring Mod,” pairs of singers are asked to generate individual call and responses using text from an old adage included in the Book, “The bigger the ring, the nearer the rain.” A more experienced group of improvisers might have been able to make more dynamic contrasts by managing the density of their individual entrances. More likely, I need to revisit the score and revise the singers’ task to yield something inherently interesting, and not just interesting if it achieves the textural effect I desired. That is, if its success depends on it sounding a certain way, I should score out the entrances rather than leaving it up to the singers, or I am wasting their energy in asking them to experiment when I have already arrived at the parameters I want.

The issue of text setting recurred in the 2015 composition seminar taught by Professor Neely Bruce, which offered a chance to write complex vocal music for a high-level professional ensemble. Unlike generating material for SLM, this assignment called on the composers to select texts to set. Just how to approach this was a question I had been actively working through over the past year, via several concurrent projects. At one extreme, in SLM, the libretto was my starting point. At the other end, a project proposal for my songwriting duo Ramon & Jessica called for text setting in a context where we had previously written all our own lyrics. In 2013 I applied for a grant from the San Francisco Friends of Chamber Music to fund a new work by the duo. The decision to seek institutional support came from the pressure of living in two different places and
acknowledging realities of family obligations. Constructing a long-term project with an outside institution looking over our shoulders presented a way to combat inertia and reset a cycle of performing slightly under-rehearsed versions of old material. Our creative time was no longer as free to spend as it once was, and a monetary reward, even if small, might help cordon off the time needed to develop new material that we cared about. These are all solid reasons to write a grant; the only thing missing was a project to propose.

In writing the request, I worked under some partly conscious and partly unexamined ideas about what might make Ramon & Jessica seem less like pop and more like concert music. The funder we approached had shown generosity and imagination in other funding cycles, awarding grants far outside the conventional classical chamber music box, but a songwriting duo seemed like a stretch. At the same time, the last major project we had worked on, a commission by choreographer Amy Siewert for her dance company Imagery, resulted in a twenty-minute a cappella score, performed live, in which we began to develop some of our existing vocabulary of vocal hocket, timbral blending, and counterpoint. While we did write our own lyrics for that project, it was by no means pop. If anything, it was chamber music. Based on the strength of that project, I felt we had a chance to be funded under the rubric of chamber music, if we took the leap from writing our own lyrics to setting existing text, which I considered more “composerly.” In the end, we figured out how to turn the artiness dial up to 11: Gertrude Stein.

I describe this process as background for considering what text to set for the New York Virtuoso Singers, in a situation where I had neither an existing story to tell nor a
need to prove artistic seriousness. One morning, a broadcast of *Marketplace*\(^25\) included a story about an educational program designed to introduce educationally underserved girls to computer programming. It touched a nerve, not because of its heartstring-pulling narrative, but due to the glorification of a trope I find infuriating, the glibly ubiquitous principle “do what you love.” I resolved to start a new vocal piece that would combat this toxic idea.

It is common to hear, when you tell someone you are a musician, “how wonderful you are doing what you love,” or if you mention financial difficulties, “at least you are doing what you love.” I hear this often enough that I think there is a pervasive notion that what artists do is qualitatively different from what non-artists do, driven by overflowing sentiment and romantic disposition, rather than by discipline, labor, rational decision making, compromise, or allocating resources. I took a closer look at the narrative being articulated by Shawnee, the 14-year old protagonist of the radio story. Surely, if computer programming inspired her, she would end up happier pursuing that than a career based on social or financial pressures. “Doing what you love” may be simplistic, but might it not also optimistic?

Later the same day, I came across another report exposing deeply gendered inequities in the tech workplace. In this context, the naiveté of the Shawnee story becomes painfully clear: loving an activity and finding a viable occupation doing it, let alone being happy (both stories presume that accruing both maximum money and maximum happiness are, all things being equal, optimal) are not necessarily mutually reinforcing. Loving, working, earning – what do they have to do with each other?

Starting from these texts, then, my approach to Shawnee was not Cagean, but closer to the “found poetry” approach taken in Observer’s Book of Weather. I read through the texts and selected passages that carried both the content and the attitudes I was interested in. In the piece about Shawnee, the phrase “My grandma always told me” seemed to bring together both the speaker’s trusting, unworldly perspective, and the pervasive mythos of the wisdom being imparted. The rest of the score (see Appendix) proceeds from the simple descending motive I used to set this phrase. The role of Shawnee is given to the Alto, and the rest of the singers are instructed to match her diction and vocal approach. The earnestness of this character informs the attitude of much of the setting, including a heartfelt four-part chorale. The textures that call for conventional vocal technique, however, are punctuated with unconventional sounds, including purr, ululation, vocal fry, and other effects. I don’t call these techniques extended, since they come from everyday speech artifacts rather than virtuosic vocal practice. Instead, they reframe the “pretty” sections as the zone of artifice, suggesting that everyday utterances, like everyday life and work, are messier and less consonant than the value system Shawnee is being fed.

The Mixolydians, World Music Hall, November 11, 2014
Part 3

In my previous experience, interest in freeform experimentation with sound was associated with the domains of experimental and improvised music, domains I had access to primarily as a performer on upper strings and voice. Even though I made forays away from these conventional instruments while at Wesleyan, exploring new configurations like daxophone and crocheted plastic, my engagement with these customary tools continued. In the next two chapters, I will take stock of my Wesleyan experiences as a performer, considering my engagement with works by Alvin Lucier and Meredith Monk, as well as a new piece of my own for solo viola.

V

Performing Lucier

I started writing and singing pop music after I finished my undergraduate classical music training. (I mean pop as shorthand for a set of social conventions: form a band, choose a name, write short songs about personal feelings and relationships, learn the songs by ear, figure out a few covers for aesthetic reference, play your set while people drink coffee or beer, repeat.) Stylistically, my band Ramon & Jessica would not be filed under “pop,” here a shorthand for radio oriented club music. It had more timbral affinity with “folk” (as a subgenre of popular music, not as a traditional practice) or what might have been called “indie.” On fliers, we snidely called our sound “Lo-fi indie pop,” or
sometimes “Low-pop indie-fi.” We were not unselfconscious about the framing of identity through our aesthetic choices, but our choices were still mostly intuitive. We noticed our predilections, but we didn’t try to overturn them.

Ramon & Jessica’s approach to instrumentation projected the value of making do with what we had: mainly toy Casio keyboard and viola. This approach applied to vocals as well. Neither Jesse Olsen nor I were vocalists trained in any practice, and the accuracy we did have reflected who we were: two lifelong musicians with good ears, and two untrained singers performing their non-training. Many of our vocal choices, like straight tone, minimal ornamentation, and light projection, were influenced by the two-part harmony we used throughout nearly all our songs, which required a careful blend. For me, there was also an unspoken and mostly subconscious imperative: to try not to sound like someone trying to sound like a pop singer. Later on, when we had to contrive descriptions of our sound for promotional materials, I would often use the word “unaffected vocal style” to try to encapsulate this feeling, an earnest desire for naturalism faced with the impossibility of having “no style.”

My faith in music as a young person was pluralistic: many kinds of music could be compelling, moving, or mesmerizing. At the same time, I knew that choosing more than one identity through musical preference was not allowed. You could not be a punk (listen to Operation Ivy) and also a hippie (listen to the Grateful Dead). For anyone of my generation and milieu (suburban U.S.A. of the late 1980’s/early 1990’s) this is an obvious fact, but I don’t think it’s insignificant in trying to situate my compositional approach.
What better piece to realize while at Wesleyan, then, than Alvin Lucier’s *The Duke of York*? My program note for a performance in November, 2014 reads as follows: (see Appendix for complete program notes):

“The score for The Duke of York, included in *REFLECTIONS: Interviews, Scores, Writings 1965–1994*, describes a tantalizing task: “Two persons design a musical performance in which one of them, the synthesist, uses an electronic music synthesizer or equivalent configuration of electronic equipment to alter the vocal identity of the other, the vocalist, who selects and orders any number of songs… in ways determined by his or her relationship to the synthesist and the particular purpose of the performance… All aspects of the sound images including those produced by recording techniques and other special effects should be regarded…as much a part of the remembered or imagined identities as such vocal considerations as inflection, articulation, timbre, breath control, projection, and vibrato.”

Relating subtle aspects of vocal identity to accumulations of personal and cultural memories offered a compelling way to interact creatively with fellow graduate composer Cecilia Lopez. While we share musical sensibility, and find ourselves in the same rare time and place, we also grew up on different continents and have practiced very different sets of performance skills. Working with the composer, we focused the scope of the piece to comprise a gradual transformation of vocal timbre, achieved as Lopez applies a single, near-transparent transformation to each pass of a repeated melody. Recalling the cumulative process of *I am Sitting in a Room*, small changes pile up to gradually render the voice unrecognizable. Unlike that piece, *The Duke of York* opens the possibility for wildly unexpected results, as the synthesist is instructed to gradually increase effects, but never turn back the dials.”

What I didn’t say in the note, naturally, is that I had fair warning from both visiting professor David Behrman and advisor Ron Kuivila that performing *The Duke* might not be the composer’s first choice of repertoire. Still, when Lucier agreed to take
time to rehearse the piece with me and Cecilia, I took it as a sign that he didn’t
disapprove. In retrospect, it may have been an effort on his part to contain the damage. I
cannot speculate on Lucier’s exact problems with having *The Duke of York* performed,
but I can say that my understanding of the piece’s themes – interpersonal connections, the
role of popular music in fixing identity and memory, gradual but ultimately anarchic
transformation – were sidelined during the rehearsal process, in favor of a rigorous
approach to realizing both the vocal and synthesizer parts.

In the end, both Cecilia and I made changes to how we realized our parts, relative
to what we had imagined based on the score. In trying to follow the letter of the score, I
had practiced imitating the precise vocal qualities of several recognizable singers, like
Bono and Shirley Jones. We planned to choose from a list of songs, in the moment of
performance, to preserve an element of spontaneity. In rehearsal, however, Lucier
specified that we should choose only one song, and as we searched for the right material,
he seemed to prefer one I happened to remember (not one I had prepared,) “Roses” by the
Magnetic Fields. “Roses” is about thirty seconds long and contains one verse. Sung over
and over again, this provided a ground against which the gradual transformation effected
by the synthesist could be revealed. But for me, this solution didn’t jive with either the
spirit of the song or the thrust of the piece. Repeating the same lyrics for eight minutes
would change “Roses” from a terse ditty into a chant, contributing little to meaning to the
relationship between the two performers. Furthermore, the song is not mainstream, and
therefore unlikely to elicit shared, culturally contingent memories in listeners. In the end,
I sang “Barbara Allen” in the style of Joan Baez, a compromise no one loved, for its
repetitive structure and my ability to approximate the vocal style.
At one point, I asked Lucier directly about how we might address the extra-musical indications in the score. He asked me what the score said, and I replied that I thought it reflected philosophically on the power of musical memory and social bonds. His answer, to paraphrase, was “forget the philosophy.”

The score for *The Duke of York* addresses questions directly relevant to my work, around the communication and conservation of musical knowledge. Before I began to understand Lucier’s renunciation of all but its technical aspects, I was very excited about its themes of memory and place -- not, as I would glean, themes currently commanding Lucier’s interest. Making the piece even more interesting for me, if less so for the composer, it provided an opportunity to reference pop music as a site for the transmission and exchange of knowledge, a subject threaded through the work presented in this thesis. But Lucier’s disinterest, if anything, makes *The Duke of York* even more relevant to the question of how music means in different musical territories, especially if I consider different time periods of a composer’s life and work as different terrains.

In my childhood, despite my privileged access to instruments, lessons, and ensembles, I was mostly miserable as a violin and viola student. My memory is that I cried at most lessons, which means once a week, every week, for roughly fifteen years. I include this fact mainly to suggest a possible underlying narrative of being drawn to a sound-world, and a social world, while also being made extremely self-conscious and uncomfortable by it. It seems likely that a fundamental, longstanding dissatisfaction with playing my primary instrument influences my approach to composing. I’m still not sure I understand the psychology of that dissatisfaction, but this much makes sense: I was not especially good at violin, but I had good ears, which means that when I played, I

26 with apologies to Daniel Chua
perceived that I was not making the sound that I wanted to make. Or, the sound I thought I was supposed to make.

But what sound was I supposed to make? Classical pedagogy is surprisingly unconcerned with sound, a point Tony Conrad makes with the following anecdote:

“I can't say that my early experiences with the violin were pleasurable, because I always thought the violin sounded so bad. I'm saying that I didn't practice much, if at all, or advance well, even with my own private teacher. An excellent young symphony violinist, Ronald Knudsen, started coming to my house when I was in high school, to teach me…He advised a better instrument; he made me go back to scales; nothing worked. The saccharine 19th century salon pieces in my music book could have sung out, if I had played them "expressively," with vibrato; but I hated vibrato. Then Knudsen gave me some 18th century music, full of double stops, and I discovered what it was like to hear two notes sounding together.

Playing in tune, Knudsen urged, was a matter of playing slowly and listening carefully. And playing ever so accurately in tune made the music sound so much better. Whatever you can play slow, you can easily play fast, he always said. When he found that I was responsive to the intonation exercises he gave me, Knudsen brought me a book on acoustics. I was playing two-part harmony from the Bach Chorales. Then we started spending my whole lesson on long conversations about the harmonic series, scales and tunings, intonation, long durations, careful listening, and the relationship between these ideas and disciplined attention to fundamentals.

Knudsen's wife was Japanese; perhaps this was linked to his almost "Zen" approach to practice. He passed on to me exercises that he had found startling: could I hold one bow stroke for a half minute? -a minute? How closely could you learn how long a half minute was? Could I play in tune? I mean, really in tune? And more than one note at a time, which was the only way to really hear intonation most clearly? Were there other notes, scales, harmonic progressions, which could be understood through intonation? If I were really careful, it might take me a long time just to get my violin really in tune. And anything that I could play slow I could play fast; the secret of playing well was playing more slowly.”

For me, a similar revelation came more slowly, but eventually just as surely.

Some time after college, I picked up the book *Harmonic Experience*, by W. A. Mathieu,

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http://www.musiq.com/ambient/conrad1.htm
while visiting friend and collaborator Toby Summerfield at his Chicago apartment. Leafing through the opening chapter, I was astonished: here was an approach to mastering music that focused on listening attentively to a single, naked sound, rather than cramming as many pitches into a window of time as possible. Later, when I started grasping for an approach to writing for solo violin/voice, I would apply Mathieu’s method during a month-long residency at Byrdcliffe Artist colony, in which I imposed the constraint of taking with me only a violin, a metronome, and a recording device. Using the violin as a drone, I used my voice to learn to hear just-intoned intervals, a practice that immensely strengthened my feel for pitch using both my voice and the instrument. Approaching harmony as an additive texture, or as multiple resonances interacting, rather than a set of correctly placed points, was a way in to understanding music through sound rather than style. This experience, in turn, informed my eventual interest in performing *Still and Moving Lines of Silence in Families of Hyperbolas*. It’s not a giant leap from playing drones for hours, learning to find exact just-intoned intervals with my voice, to creating beating patterns by making microtonal adjustments to my vocal pitch relative to sine tones.

In working through the first part of Mathieu’s *Harmonic Experience*, I learned that attempting to *maintain* a pitch, using violin or voice, could be as interesting as varying it to create a melody. To sustain requires continued input of energy at a constant level, contrary to the cyclical need to breathe or change bow direction. When practicing either Mathieu or Lucier, an awareness of beating patterns is key to distinguishing approximate tuning from exact. But an important distinction separates them: Mathieu

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describes the experience of being truly in tune in metaphorical terms. “When you hear a
defect fifth in tune,” he writes, “it is pleasing enough. But when you sing it in tune, it
glows, and you glow along with it.” Conrad gushes less, though one might see the
suggestion of transcendence in the story of his slow-violin breakthrough. For Lucier, the
physicality of sound is a phenomenon to be revealed; it is not a metaphor for anything.

I admit that I first approached Still and Moving Lines of Silence in Families of
Hyperbola (1973-1974) as a very nerdy party trick. To make sure I could execute the
vocal part, I volunteered to demonstrate the phenomenon for Music 109, and I established
then that I could “hide” my voice under sine tones at a low volume, disturbing the tones
with beating patterns while disguising the source of the disturbance. I couldn’t control the
speed of the beats very well, but I could at least differentiate between “buzzy” fast beats
closer to 50 cents away from the tone, and “slow” beats created by singing closer to the
tone itself. Knowing that I could execute the physical demands of the piece, the next
problem became how exactly to realize it in performance. The score published in
Chambers contains many possible permutations, and the section that calls for
performance by a vocalist (rather than dancers or electric guitars as in other versions)
gives only a vague outline of how to proceed:

“Play any number of sine tones, simultaneously in chords or clusters, or sequentially,
through any configuration of loudspeakers. Any number of singers sing long pure tones in near-
unison above or below the given sine tones so as to produce audible beating, forming continually
variable rhythmic patterns. Sing within intervals, breathing upper pitches at one speed, lower ones
at another, creating double rhythms.”

29 Mathieu, 26
30 Alvin Lucier and Douglas Simon, Chambers: Scores by Alvin Lucier (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan
University Press, 1980) 128
An interview with Douglas Simon in *Reflections, (1995)*, gives a better picture of Lucier’s concerns when activating the piece with a vocalist, as well as how Joan La Barbara’s interaction with the piece caused him to shed some of his initial technical concerns.

“I’ve done versions of Still and Moving Lines of Silence in Families of Hyperbolas with wind instruments or the human voice in which I simply have players interact with the oscillators; in other words, the players act as oscillators in a way, playing with very careful tuning. For example, if you have one oscillator coming from one loudspeaker, a wind or brass player can play above or below that pitch and create beats toward or away from the speaker. Then I can bring in the same oscillator frequency from another speaker, in another direction, so he or she is beating toward or way from that one – do you see what I mean? He or she can beat in one direction with respect to one speaker and in the opposite direction with respect to another. Then all the player has to do is vary his or her pitch below or above where he or she was to invert the directionality. If the locations of the sounds are varied, the players will find themselves creating new spinning configurations. I love to use the players unamplified because then they’re really in an environmental situation.”  

And, regarding La Barbara’s approach,

“We were rehearsing the piece for a Paris performance and I had ideas of using different vowel and consonant sounds to give us different harmonic structures, but when Joan got in the physical situation, the rules broke down; all my theory didn’t really amount to anything…. So I simply explained to her the principles and she immediately understood and started, well, improvising — I suppose I can use the word “improvising.” Then I would ask her what she was doing and she would explain it; it was very beautiful and very direct and much less “composerly” than if I had designed it on paper first.”

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31 Lucier, *Reflections*, 158
In realizing this work, what do I take from Lucier’s observations, and from his ambiguity? First, preparation clearly needs to take place in the space where it will be performed. Second, the audience should both experience the sensation of the hyperbola moving, and be given the tools understand how it is happening. In other words, the performance should be transparent. More subtly, as a third principle, I interpret Lucier’s account to mean that the people performing the piece, namely the vocalist and the sine tone generator operator, should care about, and take care with, demonstrating the desired effects. While the audience passively experiences a spatialization of sound, the performers actively extend their listening out along with the sound they produce – not simply demonstrating the phenomenon (which could be done without live performers anyway) but performing the internal state of tuning, of invisibly touching objects at a distance. Of La Barbara’s performance, Lucier recalls, “nobody in the audience budged because they knew that she was doing something, even if they didn’t know she was singing.”\textsuperscript{32} I took to heart the spirit of productive collaboration, and the composer’s willingness to let go of technical dogma. Still, restraint was paramount, as reflected in the directive, “the idea is not to get the grossest effect.”\textsuperscript{33}

Based on these principles, and with Ron Kuivila’s help, I designed a situation that would resemble the way the vocal rendition is described in \textit{Reflections}. Two speakers would be placed in the room, each amplifying one sine tone, and I would stand in between, singing acoustically. The sine tones would be managed by a trusted collaborator, Jason Brogan. Three snare drums would be placed throughout the hall. The locations of the loudspeakers, the snare drums, and the vocalist, would be determined

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32} Lucier, \textit{Reflections}, 162
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.}
based on experimentation in the space. Jason would use Max MSP or Supercollider to progress through a series of pitches, determined by the resonances of the snare drums.

The extremes of my vocal range are from about 125 Hz. to 1500 Hz., though usable this reduces to 160 Hz to 1000 Hz. At low volumes, the differences in timbral quality among the registers of my voice are not as noticeable as they would be if I were trying to project, but pitches would still exploit the different registers. As Lucier describes, a single pitch would be amplified by one speaker. The voice tone would enter (as invisibly as possible) to create beats against that tone. Then the right speaker would enter with a tone just on the “other side” of the voice, that is, slightly different from the original tone in the same direction as interval with the voice but slightly past it. The first tone would slowly drop out, changing the direction of the beating toward the second tone. Each speaker would proceed to fade in and out through a series of tones and their close neighbors, exploring the full spectrum available via my voice. The series of tones takes inspiration from the seating area of World Music Hall, an exaggerated staircase. The two loudspeakers would create a “ladder” of tones, with the voice navigating both above and below the sine tones as they fade in and out. Meanwhile, two snare drums would also be placed within the space, based on Lucier’s description, “In one of the versions, I deploy four snare drums anywhere in the space so that as the crests spin by each drum, it vibrates. In that way, the audience can clearly hear the movement. And if I have two pairs of oscillators you can see how I can make twos against threes, seven against eights, all kinds of rhythmic patterns.”

In the event, very little of this conceptualization of the piece would come to pass. As I learned while working on The Duke of York with Cecilia Lopez, in his approach to
realizations, Lucier appears more concerned with reflecting current interests than with fidelity to the score as published. In fact, he seems completely unconcerned with the wording of the score, except with respect to adhering to technical or mathematical specifications. This came as a surprise, given the amount of freedom the published texts seem to allow for. For a perspective on the experience of preparing and presenting Still and Moving Lines, I asked composer Jason Brogan what he recalled about the experience.

DM: Tell me about your role in presenting Still and Moving Lines on the November concert.

JB: So my involvement entailed the creation of a patch in Max, a very simple patch that generated a stereo pair of sine tones.

DM: How was your role described in the score, or how did you extrapolate from the score to what you were gonna do?

JB: I remember at some point having an informal discussion about the piece with a friend of mine the percussionist Nick Hennies, who has recorded and performed the pieces live. So because the score is a set of text instructions you are kind of forced to elaborate upon those instructions. And what’s nice about Alvin’s work is that despite the scores consisting primarily of text, that there’s a whole community of people who have been doing the pieces for years now.

DM: Have you performed other works by Alvin?

JB: I remember in Fall 2008 I programmed a piece that apparently he doesn’t like to have performed. It’s the “Memory Space” piece. So like the first part is like a parentheses, a set of parentheses in which you put the name of the city in which you’re performing the piece. So that was my first.

DM: Did you know at the time that he didn’t like having it performed?

JB: No, no. No, I had no idea, and I was so excited about the piece. And then the second encounter was for the Dark Star Festival at CalArts. It’s a summer festival curated by Michael Pisaro. We did Still Lives, which is for piano and electronics.

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34 Alvin Lucier, [Hartford] Memory Space (1970), in Reflections
DM: Was Alvin involved with that performance at all?

JB: He sent Michael the CDs with the sine tones.

DM: How do you think Alvin evaluates success in performances of his work, based on the experiences you’ve had?

JB: That’s a good question. I may be speaking for myself, but I feel like he might find successful some kind of considerable engagement on the part of the performers in the experimental process that follows from the score, or set of instructions.

DM: And would that be your criteria as well?

JB: Yeah, because it’s truly experimental music, you know, there’s experimentation involved. Things are happening in real time. And often with Alvin’s music, you set up some kind of process that happens over time. It could be a kind of like a fixed clock-maker process, or it could very well be, you know a kind of process of real-time exploration, of a space, or some kind of acoustic phenomenon.

DM: Do you remember anything about the feedback that he gave when we were rehearsing with him?

JB: I was surprised that he thought it wasn’t loud enough. Yeah. That was kind of shocking to me.

DM: It seems like there’s some implication in the score, or maybe it’s just in conventional wisdom, that it should be as quiet as possible. Does that come from the score, or is that myth?

JB: I don’t think it’s in the score, but I like and appreciate that in that score he doesn’t specify dynamics. Because then you really focus more on whatever you’re setting up, you know…. he could very well make the composerly move of indicating dynamic or dynamic range, but instead, I feel like he really pushes you to focus on the interaction between the voice and the sine tones within the space. And then from that interaction, you know, you kind of settle upon whatever dynamic range works.

DM: So it was interesting that what we had settled on was different from what he wanted, and it was almost impossible to know what those two different expectations were based on. Do you have any comments on the experience of the performance itself?
JB: Maybe not so much the performance, because really for me it was, you know, just making the patch and setting it up and making sure it would work, and then just fading in and out the tones… But there’s so much additional work I feel like goes into presenting his work live or in front of an audience. Where you’re, you know, finding the best positioning for the speakers. You’re experimenting with dynamics. And you know, in his feedback pieces, you could spend and hour just making minor changes in how one microphone is positioned in front of a loudspeaker. So there’s a lot of work that I feel goes into doing his music, that’s maybe, that’s not made clear or even made public in terms of the actual concert situation.

In the event, one of Jason’s main contributions to this performance was to alert me to the fact that the version of *Still and Moving Lines* I had been working from, published in *Chambers* in 1973, was not the most recent score. This came up when I mentioned that the frequencies to use for creating sine tones was unspecified. Jason pointed out that later version does specify the frequencies, and not surprisingly, Alvin was firm in using the coordinates he had determined correct for the revision of the score. I say not surprisingly, because while working with Lucier on both this piece and *The Duke of York*, when he was clear on a set of parameters he deemed central to the concept of the piece, he was not interested in messing around with those parameters. Coming to the work through the scores alone, however, this insistence was indeed surprising, given the amount of freedom implied, as Jason suggests, by the instructions themselves.

Perhaps it is easiest to make sense of this discrepancy by viewing both scores for *Still and Moving Lines* as points in a progression from vagueness to specificity, a progression that does not, like the synthesizer settings used in *The Duke of York*, go backwards. That is, the first version allows for experimentation with frequencies, but once a satisfactory value for that parameter has been arrived at, as in the second version, it is no longer a fruitful site for experimentation.
I also asked Cecilia Lopez to reflect on her experience staging *The Duke of York.* Her response succinctly conveys the complexity of our engagement with the piece:

“On one hand he really emphasized his interest in making the sound transformation clear. He demanded clarity constantly, which is something that I usually resist. However when following his pace for the process I could really discover how he wanted to listen the original sound change. How details and listening depth develop in perception when one follows such a schematized pattern. It is almost an experiment.

On the other hand, the score itself invited a much more open and personal interpretation. The score calls for memory, subjectivity and identity explorations between the two performers. I always thought this piece was a very interesting exception to Alvin’s work for that exact reason and expected to go much deeper in that sense while performing the piece. I am always curious to the space that the performer’s subjectivity is given in pieces that explore acoustical phenomenon. I felt that we didn’t find the way to go in that direction after negotiating with him in rehearsals.”

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Dina Maccabee and Jason Brogan, World Music Hall, November 11, 2014

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35 Email to the Author, April 25, 2015
VI

Twelve Short Questions about Performing “Hocket” from Facing North

Q1: I have said that I struggle with the inadequacies of notation, that I prefer to learn by ear, that I hate scores. Meredith Monk once tried to renounce publishing her scores, saying of her work “I’m going to let it die with me, because no one will understand how to do it.” But she has also dismissed reproducing her work by ear, saying, “other people have tried to do it note by note, and it doesn’t work, it never works.” Is it important to honor the composer’s opinion on transcription?

A: The initial idea was to perform “Hocket,” a movement from Facing North, Monk’s 1990 “chamber music/theater piece,” as written -- a vocal duet. I had heard Monk perform Click Songs and excerpts from Facing North as a teenager, and though I didn’t write music or sing professionally at the time, the impressions they made were lasting. It was a new kind of singing that avoided over-wrought expressionism, which I detested in pop and opera.

I had a lot of other questions about Monk. Is it ok to wear white on stage in Symphony Hall? Are those cornrows? Is that allowed? Are they feminine, or childlike, or trying to be black? Though I wouldn’t realize until later that I had absorbed some of her musical DNA – sparseness, unaccompanied vocals, hocket, -- I may have sensed that Monk would be one of the artists I would look to in seeking permission to create.

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37 Meredith Monk, Facing North. ECM New Series, 1992, CD, Liner Notes
38 Though as a kid I somehow tolerated it in musicals once I became obsessed with West Side Story, Les Miserable, and Chorus Line.
Speaking of permission, the first time I heard *69 Love Songs*, when it was first released, I couldn’t imagine how anyone could stand listening to Stephen Merritt for more than a few seconds. Some months went by and it came up again, this time striking in a moment of emotional need. Songs like “I Don’t Want to Get Over You” and “Don’t Fall in Love with Me Yet” simultaneously delivered cleverness and pathos, irony and sincerity. This had a profound effect on my relationship to the pop-song idiom, and my musical practice: I wasn’t comfortable performing earnest adolescent emotion, just as I couldn’t perform romantic violin pieces with their uncomplicated bravado and sentimentality. What I could do, and what Magnetic Fields songs showed me was possible, was write coy, poignant, mildly weird pop songs.

Q2: This reminds me of the Tony Conrad story from chapter VII, when he says he didn’t want to play the insipid violin pieces with vibrato.

A: I agree. Shall we have another Tony Conrad story? When Tony Conrad was asked to explain his coy, poignant, mildly weird 2 hour drone performances, in a 2012 interview recorded in Copenhagen, he describes becoming aware of his own musical taste. As a teenager, he swooned over Tchaikovsky and Brahms, until a friend suggested he listen to Bartók instead. To Conrad's adolescent sensibility, Bartók was "horrible, horrible music." Yet after repeated listening, he came to like it. "I had changed my taste from [thinking Bartok was] the worst to [thinking Bartok was] best," he remembers, for the first time locating his own agency in determining taste. "I thought like well, shit, if Bartok is, you
know... then maybe Schoenberg is good too?” 39 Without drawing comparisons either between myself and Tony Conrad, or Stephen Merritt and Bartok, I think this kind of switch, from worst to best, is worth tracking.

Q3: It sounds like once you heard Meredith Monk and Stephen Merritt, you felt like you had license to write music.

A: Right, though I didn’t know what musical world I fit into. But to return to the story of preparing “Hocket,” I would like to look at page 79 of Scores: An Anthology of New Music, compiled by Roger Johnson 40. Despite the title of the collection, page 79 raises red flags about whether it is really a “score.” The page is titled, “Knee” and “Slide” from Our Lady of Late. It reads,

“Our Lady of Late is a composition for a soprano voice and a wine class filled with water. The entire work, which runs an hour, is divided into 16 shorter sections. Each section deals with a particular vocal quality or setting. Our Lady of late is a vocal meditation exploring the full spectrum of the female voice including elements of pitch, color, texture, timbre, rhythm, harmony, range, emotion, character and movement.”

Q4: That sounds up your alley.

A: It certainly is! But what follows makes clear this score is less a score than a transcription:

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40 Roger Johnson, Scores: An Anthology of New Music (Schirmer, 1981)
“The range of the vocal part is from D below middle C to high C# (two octaves above middle C). The glass is played by wetting the index finger and rubbing it around the rim of the glass, producing a drone during much of the entire piece. The drone changes pitch five times during the course of the piece which is achieved by drinking a particular amount of water from the glass.”

Q5: And how much water is that?

A: I have no idea and the “score” doesn’t say. But the next section is called “Performance Notes on the Two Excerpts,” maybe it will tell us something about how to explore the full spectrum of the female voice while taking indeterminate sips of water from a wine glass which is simultaneously being rubbed by the index finger of an unspecified person. Here’s what it says:

“Knee: The voice quality is very nasal, ragged, high, and rough. The voice slides into the notes, and there are slight pitch changes within the notes. The syllable “Ni” is generally sustained with the attacks coming within the phrases or notes.

“Slide: The voice slides from the flat, non-vibrato, clear, very high head tone down through the glottal break to the low chest voice the voice simply touches the top note but does not hit it squarely or stay on it before the slide. The pitches are approximate since the voice does not “sing” a particular note for any length of time. The voice glides in circles, spirals and peaks. Sometimes the figure is in the high head voice, sometimes at the break in the middle. Towards the end of the section there are more percussive impulses and shorter attacks. The speed of the slides varies from slow to very fast as indicated.”

Q6: This isn’t really a performance note as much as a listening note.
A: That’s not a question.

Q7: Well actually it’s worse than that. The last thing it says in prose is, “Since these two sections are presented out of context from the rest of the work, it is suggested that they be performed as exercises or experiments rather than as finished concert pieces.”

A: So, why perform it?

Q8: Ultimately, I didn’t. I was asked to present work of mine, “contextualized” by work of other artists who have influenced me. I was doing a vocal concert, so it really had to be Meredith Monk if it was going to be anyone. I wasn’t going to contextualize by arranging Stephen Merritt or Beck songs for a cappella ensemble. Ok maybe just the Beck. But, so, I wanted to do “Hocket” but it seemed like it was going to be too hard.

I had access to “Hocket” through several sources, primarily the ECM recording of Monk with Robert Een and a video published on YouTube of Monk performing it with Theo Bleckmann. Without a clear concept of how I would perform it, I began learning the piece by ear from those sources, first using the video to get a rough idea of who is singing when. It can be difficult to tell, as the notes ping-pong back and forth, and the male and female voices ignore their normal ranges. I cut the Een recording into three sections, slowed them down, and listened on headphones to take advantage of panning. I notated what I heard, attempting to transcribe pitch, rhythm, and syllables.

Transcribing “Hocket” felt fundamentally unfaithful to the work. As much as it seemed to be explore conventional materials – counterpoint, motivic development,
virtuosic ensemble performance – it was appeared to be engaged just as much with the physicality of the vocalists and their relationship to one another. In the staging of the Monk/Een version, also on YouTube, the two singers walk toward, and then away from each other over the course of the piece. In the Monk/Bleckmann video, the performers stand in front of microphones, but each sound seems irreducibly tied to their movements, subtle choreography inseparable from the act of generating sound.

Learning the piece by ear and performing the notes, even if I imitated the movement, would be an accomplishment of listening, concentration, memorization, and performance. As a performer, much might be gained in the hours spent in preparation. Yet imitating the result of Monk’s compositional process somehow didn’t seem faithful to the specificity of its development and performance. But back to questions. What is Monk’s approach to the piece? Has she written or spoken about it?

A: Monk had this to say at Munich performance of the piece: “[Hocket] is still the most terrifying piece ever, even though we’ve done it a thousand times. It’s like being on a tightrope. So, this piece was originally, I worked with Robert Een on this piece, and, so it’s a little different with two women. But with Bob also he was going into his falsetto, so there was this thing of not knowing who was actually singing. So we’ll do the ‘Hocket’ for you.”

Q9: But if Monk performed “Hocket” with several different perfumers, including Robert Een, Theo Bleckmann, and Katie Geisinger, and then Theo Bleckmann performed it with

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41 “Meredith Monk with Kate Geisinger in Concert,” YouTube video, 1:30:12, posted by “mmonkhouse,” Jun 25, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-PVlBnt-x0
Emily Eagen at a TED talk, it really is a score, right? Something that can be described and reproduced, not as a process available only to Monk herself, or in a single correct iteration, but as a portable set of instructions with enough information to execute the piece, without missing some ineffable facet of it? Might the documentation of a definitive performance serve as a score that Bleckmann and Eagan can imitate in order to generate a true realization, the work itself? After all it’s just two singers, not some configuration of electronic equipment or the result of an unrepeatably chance process.

A: Because even if there’s no published score, it exists as a reproducible experience. I mean, it’s a fucking TED talk now. Let’s not even mention that again.

Q10: It was TEDx. But anyway, there’s an important subject to address, which is how certain kinds of virtuosity, certain modes of vocal performance, specifically, relate to YouTube as a medium. YouTube isn’t really, or isn’t only, about storing and exhibiting content. It’s about spreading it, going viral with it. View counts, re-posts. And TED is the height of YouTube content for a certain kind of social network practice, which centers on “sharing” inspirational narratives to a kind of vaguely constructed public of your “friends” and hoping they “like” it. Maybe they will even “like” “you.” So what does being deemed suitable for a TED talk called “TEDxMET: ICONS” say about “Hocket” as a piece of experimental music, and Meredith Monk as an experimental composer?

A: I don’t know yet. #thatovertonesingergirl, #dirtyprojectors, #huutajat, #chocolaterain

Q11: Okay then, how does your performance of “Hocket” relate to the questions you raise in your thesis regarding transmission, imitation, and social engagement?

A: Well the TED issue is really at the crux of those questions. My approach to “Hocket” was very much not about inciting social engagement, in the way that, say, Song-O-Phone or Trashghan are. I would be psyched if either of those works was in a TED talk. They are meant to probe the limit of what can be popular, and popularly intelligible. But *Hocket* for me is not about that. I think the stylistic crystallization of Monk’s music into something that does work on YouTube might be a mishearing of an exploratory work as virtuosic for its own sake. It might mistake a compositional and psychological interest for an interest in execution, in realizing a stylistically consistent sound.

Q12: Is there work of your own that you feel could be subject to a similar confusion? Do you court that kind of confusion deliberately?

In-progress transcription of “Hocket” from *Facing North*, detail
In December 2014, I first performed *Open String Study*, an ongoing investigation of overtones produced using a “spiccato sul ponticello” technique of bouncing the bow near the bridge of the viola. In the course of exploration, I remembered that many of my conservatory viola lessons were spent developing “core” sound, my teacher’s term for a full, pure, and clean tone. This “core” concept is in part a reaction to differences between violin and viola mechanics: viola strings respond more slowly and require more energy to overcome inertia and excite their full range of frequencies. In classical practice, favoring overtones by playing near the bridge is a special effect that invokes the creepy or surreal. Bow mechanics that unleash non-fundamental frequencies, like changing direction or applying pressure inconsistently are undesirable and meant to be hidden as much as possible. Of course, there is a limit to how “invisible” a bow change can be.

There is also a limit on the other end of the spectrum – how much pure overtone can be coaxed from the open string, without exciting the fundamental. While playing ever closer to the bridge seems to encourage higher and higher overtones to speak, there is a threshold of control at which the bow refuses to engage the tautest final millimeters of the string and simply skips over the bridge. The strings also seem to “warm up” using this technique, offering higher harmonics the longer they are played – but another threshold limits this parameter, which is the length of time before my arm feels like it will fall off.

The supernatural quality of ringing the overtones in the very resonant Crowell Concert Hall, through playing repetitive, hypnotic repeated strokes, seems to evoke both
wonder at the effect and interest in the technique. The concert hall ritual affirms a mingling of the transcendent and the technical, allowing for intellectually sanctioned awe. I, meanwhile, find a way to the instrumentalist itch to do something demonstrably hard, while evading allegations of showing off by ascribing equal credit to the magical powers of the instrument and the room.

I look forward to continuing this curious approach to the potential of the viola to speak in unaccustomed registers, if only allowed to do so. Certainly, Tom Zé’s irreverent approaches to both conventional instruments, as well as his use of non-instruments like band saws to create musical sounds, heavily inform this attitude. I also see a connection with my study of pedagogy by Walter Mathieu, discussed in chapter III. But while Mathieu’s interest in drones and the overtone series is perhaps sonically closer to the austerity of Open String Study, which contains little of the grit or growl of a Zé recording, I ultimately find Zé to be a more apt ally. While I see much further work to do in both developing this piece and understanding its underpinnings, at present I ascribe this preference to my own orientation towards working against a tradition (Zé) rather than appropriating from a tradition (Mathieu.) Henry Flynt puts this bluntly in an essay on his own music, saying “For me, innovation does not consist in composing European and academic music with inserted “folk” references. It consists in appropriating academic or technical devices and subordinating them to my purposes as a “folk creature.” Where Mathieu draws Hindustani materials into a Western (and ultimately Jazz oriented) context, Zé places takes an experimentalist approach to a popular form.

43 Flynt 2015
I also understand Zé as an artist who problematizes the time-honored rock-star tradition of performing the self. While scene-membership is essential to pop identity, Zé is a Brazilian pop star whose oeuvre is often defined by exclusion from a more famous musical community. Left behind in Brazil when his compatriots, Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso went into political exile in London, he proceeded down a path of increasing weirdness, seemingly complicit in his own obscurity until being re-anointed as an exemplar to the hip by David Byrne. Zé scholarship has drawn attention to his subversion of the pop song through plagiarism and collage, sonic tools that by his own account are overtly political. On a molecular level, Zé approached the very tools of signification necessary for setting up the tension of stylistic collage, the genre-identified instruments specific to Brazilian folk music and rock and roll, as subject to reconfiguration. Here is how he describes one of his signature effects, a reconfiguration of instrumental roles that pushes back against the most clichéd quality of popular Brazilian song -- its prettiness.

"In experimenting, I discovered that by using three strings on the guitar and the bass and having their function change from being harmonic, from being above the rhythm section to come down and contaminate the rhythm section, that in a sense they spoiled the sound but they also made it more delicious... Combining this technique with other experiments such as pairs of cavaquinhos and having them play outside the tonality of the song... I had to fish around, it had to be just outside or I wouldn't be able to sing in key... but I realized that if I combined these two experiments I would have the beginnings of a style."45

Zé came to codify his approach to dissonance using the elusive term "induced harmony," or harmonia induzida, which he has described as "a practice that is neither

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45 David Byrne, Arto Lindsay and Tom Zé, “Tom Zé,” BOMB, No. 42 (Winter, 1993), 51.
bitonality nor polytonality, but consists in maintaining the harmony in an interval of a song while stopping on a tone, while the melody comes and goes in other harmonious tones on the scale.”

The liner notes to the recording of Zé’s 2005 operetta *Estudando o Pagode* include the following description:

“INDUCED HARMONY: An old aspiration: attempt to produce popular song with more than one tonal center of reference: a play of simultaneities like that which we already see in some comic strips, films, and other games. I pursue this through induced harmony, which happens when the backing instruments remain stuck on the tonic, and the singer, with the complicity of the listener, sings while "correcting" the harmony. It would be better to throw all of this out if it were not for the innate tendency to practice games similar to those I saw, heard, or participated in during my childhood involving música sertaneja. The raw attempts produce useful solutions from their quality as incipient practices. This incipience is at the center of my interests.”

In a *Pitchfork* interview from 2006, Zé interprets induced harmony again:

“Musical discourse sustains one's interest with tensions, or in other words, with dominants, subdominants, modulations, etc., and the induced harmony provokes a sensation of tension even when we are in tone. It also invites the listener to "correct" the harmony because, even when using one's intuition, the listener knows when the harmony does not sound correct. Right away, the errors become apparent on purpose.”

Zé is preoccupied not merely with the interaction of conflicting harmonies within the sound world of the song, but with the effect this has on the listener. It is the listener's active engagement with "correcting" the harmony that gives meaning to the "mistakes."

This idea of requiring the listener to fill in missing information is one that I relate to

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much of my music, especially the minimal pop writing of Ramon & Jessica, but also to
the technique of hocket, in which the listener’s ear deduces a linear melody from
disjointed points. Zé often employs another layer of specificity by using regional
instruments such as cavaquinho, as well as idiosyncratic horns or vocal textures, present
in much of the material Byrne would have encountered on Estudando o Samba, most
notably on the tracks "Toc" and "Ma." Toying with harmonic expectations as a way of
engaging active listening is hardly unique; what I relate to, specifically, is the way Zé
achieves this through reconfiguration of materials and intuitive play.

In presenting an overtone-driven piece for scordatura strings, I would be remiss
not to state the influence of Tony Conrad, and by association, John Cale and Lamonte
Young. In his writings, Conrad's ideas about trance, based on the work of hypnotist
Milton Erickson, map with startling accuracy on much of Tom Zé's music. In a 2011
Madrid interview, Zé indicates that if he had to choose only one song to represent his
work, it would be the song "Toc" from Estudando o Samba. This song in particular, with
its single note single rhythm guitar ostinato that lasts through the entire duration of the
song, periodically assaulted by erratic horn lines and noisy samples, corresponds to
Conrad's definition of trance processes, which he lists as boredom, distraction, confusion,
and interruption. It is also a clear influence on the ostinato of Open String Study.

Conrad's definition of musical trance forms part of his argument for abstract
music's cultural potency. This call to action seems to reflect a desire for his own
explorations of drone, timbre and the workings of harmony to be capable of carrying
more message than their abstract surfaces would imply. "If there were to be a scale that
was completely different from the standard diatonic scale, yet that could support the full
weight of Western music theory,” he writes, “such a scale would certainly afford a
calculable advantage for achieving a different perspective on the twelve-note system.”
One hundred years after Webern took up studies with Schoenberg, Conrad continues to
wrestle with Viennese ghosts -- yet with distinct optimism, never doubting that new
harmonic systems and techniques are on the horizon.

I’m still looking for ways my interest in drone and tuning might be either creative
or performable. Certainly Open String Study suggests one direction. The experience of
working through Mathieu’s exercises felt more analytical than creative, a path to
understanding physical phenomena more than expressing aesthetic situations. There was
a universe of pitch relationships to understand, explore, and learn to identify and create,
but I didn’t find a direct route to elaborating on them or elucidating them with my own
insight. As ever, I felt self-conscious about appropriating a mode of composition that
might seem “styled” – in this case, composing in various modes seemed like it would turn
out to be a bad ripoff of Hindustani music, with which I wasn’t even especially familiar
beyond the Sargam Mathieu uses in the book.

I associate Lucier and Mathieu strongly with the cultures of their respective
coasts, and I wouldn’t expect many other composers to be interested in both. But for me,
Lucier’s work in the vein of making acoustic phenomena perceptible provides a path
toward incorporating the lessons drawn from Harmonic Experience into the space of
performance. That is, a creative response to making discoveries about sound can consist
of creating a situation in which that discovery is apparent, rather than configuring that
discovery to an expressive shape.

\[ TK \]
Open String Study, in some ways, affirms new optimism in my own relationship with the baggage-laden instruments I have trained with. Recognizing some similarity to the motoric overtone work of Arnold Dreyblatt, I still proceeded with my own inquiries, where in earlier phases of my career I might have quit. I see this as a sign of commitment to follow my own questions to their logical end, regardless of any prizes for originality. Open String Study also provides a way to map some of the egoless qualities discovered in both old-time music and In C into a performance setting. It seems likely, at least, that the piece’s is intelligibility on an academic concert stage is attributable to Riley, and Reich. Reich, in particular, I associate with engaging a concert audience not through constant contrast, but through gradual change transmitted through a matrix of motoric repetition.

Open String Study almost never happened as a live performance. For the December 2014 composition seminar concert in World Music Hall, I prepared a video of the piece, pictured below. However, when the video’s sound failed, I opted to perform a live realization.
Part 3

The preceding chapters discussed music composed with the social experience of performers in mind. The sociality of an ensemble, of course, is something different from a musical community, which I imagine as a fluid social grouping, a loose network connected by interests, activities, and vocabularies. The pieces described so far bring attention to the relationship between overarching musical communities and the temporary social engagements that comprise them. In Part 2, I discuss two pieces that explicitly engage the idea of community online. First, I describe a project that capitalized on the communal spirit of my own personal contacts, an association that falls somewhere between a social network and a community of musical interest. Then, I describe an artistic intervention into a community of strangers, the online realm of ASMR.

VIII

Song-O-Phone

“Dear ______,

I've sent an original a song out by email and asked a chain of people to do covers... when you receive the song, you record a cover version within 24 hours and pass it along to the next person. So a giant game of telephone. Song-O-Phone. Are you interested?”

The Song-O-Phone project was partly inspired UnderCover, a Bay Area concert series that presents classic albums, performed live, with a different local band playing each song. Curating the program for Joni Mitchell’s Blue in 2012 gave me a chance to call on many friends and colleagues to create a varied and unexpected collage of

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interpretations of Mitchell’s work. In the Song-O-Phone, this concept is telescoped down to encompass a series of variations on one song. In the process, different understandings of the meaning of “cover” are exposed, from straightforward interpretation, to subtle re-imagining, to total deconstruction.

The Song-O-Phone takes up the idea that in a work of pop music, though sheet music transcriptions certainly exist, the recording is generally the score. It is the most fixed instantiation of the work, against which other iterations are measured. It follows that the qualities comprised in a recording are the qualities that are most important to a song’s identity. If standard notation privileges pitch and rhythm as sites of specificity, pop recording often focuses on timbre as the most recognizable feature. To stand out in a field with limited harmonic complexity, an artist must have a “sound” that is instantly intelligible. I would argue that in a mainstream English-speaking contemporary context, the most “covered” songs, which inspire not just the most admiration but the most imitation, might be ones with strong identities in terms of both “sound” and transcribable musical content. The Beatles, Radiohead, and Nirvana come to mind as artists whose songs have been recast in dozens of different styles (Beatles in the style of Bach keyboard pieces; Nirvana as EDM, Radiohead for jazz trio), still retaining the identity of both the song and the artist, even when smushed into different grooves, time signatures, singing styles, harmonizations, and instrumentations. Melody on its own can have this capacity (I’m sure there are also arrangements of Bach in the style of the Beatles), and the ubiquity of Muzak perhaps speaks to the resilience of melody as an elemental code, which can retain its intelligibility even when other signifiers are stripped away. Still, if melody were songs’ only truly unique DNA, artists could just release a midi score.
In the *Song-O-Phone* project, I explored the question of what makes a song itself, with help from two corners: my social network and the internet. Much has been said, and much of it pessimistic, about the impact of internet sharing on the business of selling and distributing music. But social media serve both to structure connections among individuals and to frame cultural artifacts as transmissible objects, their ability to serve as a generic, moldable social context seems to compel individuals to contribute content. There are as many ways and reasons to generate and distribute content online as ever, but the immediacy of contact, the frictionlessness of transmission, and the vast size of potential connections and thus potential audience, make social networks a natural laboratory for what Manuel Castells calls “the search for new connectedness around shared, reconstructed identity.”\(^{51}\)

By 2015, sharing content via the internet is second nature to practically all of the artists in my community, which made conducting the *Song-O-Phone* experiment nearly as straightforward as having the idea. It quickly became clear, though, that ideas about the meaning of a “cover” varied. The main split I observed was between those people who saw their task as emulating the original as closely as possible, and those who saw an opportunity to impose their own aesthetic, creating something new using the previous content as raw material.

In my instructions, I didn’t indicate my own understanding of what it means to make a “cover” version, for two reasons. First, striving (as always) to balance authorial constraints with performers’ creative freedom, I thought it would be more interesting to leave the concept open to interpretation. Second, I naively assumed that a “cover” would be taken similarly among my colleagues to mean a rendition that maintained enough

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connection to the original to be recognizable. As I see it, playing a cover loses its meaning as a tribute if the audience doesn’t connect it with the original. However, it soon emerged that my implicit definition was not universal, leading to what felt at first like a failure of the project, in which the song was changed beyond recognition within a few links of the chain. Ultimately, these erasures provided a canvas for totally new and wonderful material to arise, making the project more creatively fruitful and broader in scope than I had originally imagined.

The song I sent to the first link in the chain had a simple form, with three verses and three choruses, no bridge. I held myself to the same constraints as the rest: to record (and in my case, compose) within 24 hours. After writing the song at the piano, I made an uncharacteristic choice to generate the accompaniment using Ableton, and only record the vocals live. To expedite further, I took a risk by choosing out-of-the-box celeste and piano samples, but I was satisfied with the results: guileless sounds used to put across a simple song. While recording, I realized that the vocal melody was really more of an extension of the piano part than a true melody line, and it involved a lot of jumps. I thought this could go two ways in subsequent versions: it could stand out, retaining its distinctive profile of ascending fifths and descending thirds. Or, it could present a challenge to participants who weren’t primarily singers, and undergo a process of simplification based on performance limitations. Both of these ended up being true in the various chains of transmission. However, one of the main reasons I ended up changing tactics, from a single game of Telephone to several parallel chains, was because of a factor I didn’t count on, which was the deliberate alteration of the structure of the song.
This move made me realize that while I expected variations based on mishearings and stylistic shifts, I didn’t expect the idea a “cover” to invite structural change.

When I was a kid, structured play time often included a game of “Telephone.” The game’s power to amuse arose from the inevitability of failure. Mishearings of the original spoken phrase are guaranteed, not just because the phrase is transmitted by whispering, but because it is heard out of context. All sounds are under-articulated, and since the phrase is arbitrary, any meaning is possible. The mishearings are then integrated into the phrase, and typically what emerges at the end has no resemblance to the original.

It was this framework for gradual change as a result of failure by both mishearing and lack of context that I imagined would operate on the material transmitted through the Song-O-Phone. Interestingly, the ease of transmission allowed by the internet, which inspired this model of social music making in the first place, also removes some of the constraints that would produce generative failures. For example, there is no perceptible loss of sonic information in the course of transmitting an audio file over email. While compressing the file may result in changes that are appreciable by an expert, this loss doesn’t approach the threshold of damage achieved by copying magnetic tape, or resonating sound in a room, or whispering in the ear. When reproducing a recording that was made to stand along as a work, not a document of a performance, no aura withers. In considering Benjamin’s thought in relation to contemporary online presentations of art, Krzysztof Ziarek points out that electronic reproducibility fundamentally changes the notion of an artwork as a static object, noting that “at the basis of the creative interactions and virtual mutations gathered into the work is the new technical ease with which various
aspects of being become available to us as information and as such become subject to unprecedented manipulation.”

As it turned out, there was indeed a strong element of failure based on misheard lyrics, since singing, like whispering, can dramatically destabilize text. In retrospect, this should have been obvious, given the legacy of “wrapped up like a douche,” “’scuse me while I kiss this guy” and other pop Mondegreens. Before that fact, though, I was unsure how much the lyrics would change, so I added a constraint by prohibiting artists from sending lyrics as text. Partly to foster a process of “mishearing,” and partly to put an equalizing limit on the amount of time each artist would spend, I added the constraint that the cover had to be completed within 24 hours. I guessed that this would encourage any changes to be intuitive, since the players didn’t have long to orchestrate an approach. As I would find out, intuitive does not necessarily mean simple. For some musicians fluent in recording and arranging, the 24-hour timeframe was enough to fully rearrange, re-harmonize, and re-orchestrate the song. Who knows if a longer window would have given them time to rethink this approach and come back around to something simpler? I should mention that the 24-hour constraint also results from my experiences shepherding other collaborative projects. If contributors were required to submit within 24 hours, I would know right away whether there was going to be an issue with follow-through. This avoided the prolonged hunting down of submissions I’m certain would have occurred if I had not introduced a time constraint.

In the actual game of Telephone, part of the uncertainty is generated by the phrase being heard without the context that normal speech would have, with reference to a topic

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that both speaker and listener are aware of. As an analog to this out-of-the-blue quality, I added a constraint to the way I structured the chain of artists. Taking into account any scheduling requests, I tried to arrange the artists in an order that prevented people who knew each other well from having adjacent positions. This wasn’t 100% consistent, since the group of people involved tended to have many cross-connections, but given the separation of several social worlds I was drawing from, mostly Wesleyan-based and Bay Area-based, the song was largely allowed to ricochet from stranger to stranger. I hoped this would allow the hearing of the song to focus on what was actually on tape, rather than the listener’s assumptions based on prior knowledge of the performer.

In Telephone, the players aren’t encouraged to make creative changes to the original phrase. They are meant to repeat it as precisely as they can, which is why the result is ironic and hopefully hilarious. In Song-O-Phone, by contrast, leaving open the definition of “cover” allows for a mix of both active and passive changes, errors of both commission and omission. This under-articulation of the terms, in retrospect, may reflect a lack of clarity on my part as to what kind of change I was interested in tracking. If I had clarified my interest in filtering the song through the respondents’ sensibilities and intuition, I might have used a constraint proposed by Jonathan Zorn after the fact: the artists must to listen to the song only once before they record their own version. This is an elegant scheme that I sometimes wish Jonathan had suggested earlier in the process. On balance, I wonder whether the apparent difficulty would have discouraged participation. As it was, only a handful of people I contacted declined to participate, and nearly everyone gave me unsolicited feedback as to how much they enjoyed both the idea and the process of the piece, saying things like “this is SUCH a fun project… thanks for
including me."\(^{53}\) (see Appendix for more participants comments.) This indicates to me that, at least for this particular group of people, my intuition as to how to structure the constraints was on target.

Perhaps the biggest departure from the metaphorical Telephone game is that at the end of the *Song-O-Phone*, we have access not just to a single metamorphosed end result, but to all the iterations along the chain. Each version serves simultaneously as a transitional point and as a culmination that stands on its own. The affordances of the internet,\(^{54}\) just as they allowed the piece to be made in a short period of time, allow for the presentation of a linear, iterative process in many ways, as pointed out by Professor Paula Matthusen. Where CD, tape or vinyl might facilitate listening to each chain in the order it was generated, a website allows, and perhaps encourages, a listener to jump around, hearing different iterations in whatever order they choose, or listen to fragments of songs. I imagine that the main audience for the project, at the time of writing, is the participants themselves, and I would guess that they might first listen to the original, then their own song, then the iterations directly before and after theirs. They might then work backwards, or go to the end to hear the (currently) final iteration, or they might go back to the beginning and listen in order. Or, they might scan for versions made by friends. As Professor Matthusen suggested, in the future it would be interesting to obtain data about these listening activities and perhaps design another internet-based collaboration with multiple orders in mind as a desired outcome. Currently, I am working on presenting the project via the *Free Music Archive*, a curated website that describes itself as a platform which “provides a legal and technological framework for curators, artists, and listeners to

\(^{53}\) Eric Kuhn, email to author, March 17, 2015

\(^{54}\) Lange, 2008
harness the potential of music sharing,” for content creators who feel “allowing a degree of free cultural access is beneficial not only to their own pursuits, but to our society as a whole.”

In a presentation arranged for Toneburst Laptop & Electronic Arts Ensemble, performed on my March 29, 2015 thesis recital, all thirty versions of the original song were heard in an extended collage, with excerpts chosen by the members of the ensemble, using a simple sampler/looper interface I created in Max MSP with help from visiting professor Jonathan Zorn. The players followed a video score, created in PowerPoint, that used words and imagery to showcase how the song’s lyrics mutated over time. (see images, Appendix) Preparing this piece for performance posed a major challenge as to how to condense almost an hour and a half of submitted material into a single piece, that was itself only a small part of a diverse concert program. And, it required the content to undergo yet another translation, from a composer-performer model in which the songs were recorded by the authors, to a performance model in which those materials would be performed by someone else.

It is perhaps more apparent from a linear online encounter than from the collaged concert realization that the factors affecting musical change are readily apparent in the earliest iterations of the chain. Songs II and III, both created by professional musicians, one working in pop and one in rock and jazz, both adhere to my understanding of a cover: a sympathetic re-arrangement of the original harmonic, melodic, and lyrical material, which uses changes in instrumentation and feel to achieve a stylistic contrast. Song IV exhibits traits of simplification I imagined might be produced by the difficulty of the vocal melody. The harmony, too, begins to simplify, as Eric Klein explains, “I settled on

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55 FreeMusicArchive.org
bar chords and my old youthful square pattern, which was so dependable in my twenties when all I wanted to do was screamsing [sic] as loud as I could.”

By V, the wheels are off the cart. This version dispenses with the lyrics of the chorus and replaces them with a repetition of the fragment “still a million miles,” spoken in an affected accent, over what sounds like a genre-specific groove, reminiscent of Caribbean dance music.

When I received Song V, the question of what is allowable in a “cover” version was blown open to invite questions about adaptation, authenticity, and originality. It also exposed some of my own unconscious framing of this project as functioning within a pop music context: pop covers inspire camaraderie through familiarity, or on a more sophisticated level, attract engagement through clever referencing of styles and materials. A related genre, the mashup, demonstrates cultural expertise by exposing unintended correlations between songs. Song V seemed to break the rules of both these forms by simply painting over a section of the song and introducing material that is itself a stylistic appropriation, but not an appropriation of a specific, familiar source. It’s possible that this intervention does in fact make a deliberate reference that relates to textual and intertextual meanings of the song, but if so I didn’t understand it. In breaking these rules, I suggest, this artist saw an opportunity to contribute to the diversity of the Song-O-Phone’s repertoire, rather than engaging in the conventional, ritualized practice of performing a cover. He saw his role as making meaning primarily in the context of the project itself, and the social group it made explicit, rather than imagining itself on a broader public stage.

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56 Eric Klein, email to author, March 4, 2015
58 Miller, 2012
The appeal of the *Song-O-Phone* project depends on an implicit interest in tracing difference across re-iterations of similar things. In this way, it takes up one of the central pre-occupations of YouTube, which is not just to imitate what is presented, in the way that as kids we used to imitate the choreography on MTV, but to document and broadcast that imitation, entering private activities into a public cycle of imitation and re-iteration. After all, why not expand your audience from your family and friends to a potentially limitless crowd?

During the fall of my second year at Wesleyan I began researching the implications of a burgeoning YouTube sub-genre known by the acronym “ASMR,” which stands for Auto-Sensory Meridian Response. In a course called “Ethnographies of Emerging Media,” I was interested in confluences between sociality and art, eventually focusing on YouTube as a site of paramount importance for both, at least for the moment. Much of the thought encountered in the course, taught by Jordan Kraemer, dealt with developments in the accessibility of information with respect to space and time: it is now the norm for online content to be immediately and infinitely available and reproducible. Yet by being accessible, content is not suddenly rendered universal; online platforms reflect existing social and cultural frameworks, or perhaps “foster a renewal of some degree of offline sociality.” Some authors also have begun to observe how the internet’s “affordances,” a useful term suggested by Patricia Lange, enable not just the mirroring of

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existing social formations, but the creation of new ones. This notion came to inform my inquiry into the phenomenon of ASMR videos, since it underlies the reasons for my initial fascination with its juxtaposition of surprisingly experimental abstract content with normative cultural signifiers. The content of ASMR videos defied placement in any cultural box I was familiar with, yet its popularity on YouTube, and the internal referentiality of its content, was evidence that a social context for this genre was demonstrably in place.

The public discourse of technological anxiety often imagines the internet as a disassociative “rabbit hole”: a place where our attention goes, leaving our bodies behind. But the idea of internet use as a disembodied activity is complicated by the proliferation on YouTube of videos related to ASMR, in which the explicit goal is to invoke a somatic reaction in viewers. The practice of creating videos that produce a bodily effect offers clues as to how communities and identities are formed and articulated online, while providing what is perhaps a unique example of auditory culture whose primary concern is somatic, rather than aesthetic, psychological, or neurological. That is, it is not simply a matter of attention.

Inducing the physical sensation of ASMR requires not just a complex set of imagined relationships and co-presences, but the constitution of communities and socialities to frame and structure those interactions. I am interested in interrogating this particular, contemporary use of the internet with respect to the ways auditory culture is circulated, the way amateur or DIY art-making is performed, and the surprising confluences between intimate online transactions and art.
In parallel with a project of informal online ethnography, I began a creative project as a way of engaging with some of the concepts surrounding ASMR. This project, *Trashghan*, offered a way for me to press on some distinctions that come up often in my work: folk vs. art; art vs. craft; virtuosity vs. creativity, mastery vs. exploration – all arguably false but ultimately fruitful binaries that bear on the positioning of my music and other work.

The traditional afghan form, constructed from identical squares, stitches together several ideas central to my current interests: the role of repetition in traditional forms, the transmission of “folk” knowledge on YouTube, and gendered conceptions of craft, from knitting to home recording. It also offers a way to enter the discourse of ASMR using tactics outside its conventions, which include YouTube comments, Facebook wall posts, and video tropes. *Trashghan*, constructed from discarded plastic bags and packaging materials, is organized according to various levels of crinkling potential, more than visual symmetry or beauty. (see image, Appendix) The end-goal of this project was to send *Trashghan* to an ASMR video creator to experiment with in a video, infiltrating the interactive feedback circuit of YouTube with a material intervention.

As a composer, I am interested in how shifting technologies influence both the aesthetic, expressive qualities and the social circulations of sonic artifacts. Given the centrality of sound to ASMR videos, then, I was surprised to find that while video makers and viewers are engaged in highly specific practices of experimenting with, recording, and listening to abstract sonic materials, informal online conversations about ASMR rarely dealt directly with questions of sound. Rather, public discussions seem
preoccupied with tensions around the somatic aspects of ASMR and public expressions of intimacy.

Yet sound is central to the projection of intimate space. The sonic vocabulary of ASMR videos includes a range of a-rhythmic, non-pitched sounds that tend to be relatively high frequency and low volume, recorded in a way that achieves a sense of close proximity. Its preferred vocal register, often called “soft speaking,” is half-voiced, as one might speak in a library or directly into someone’s ear. For durations lasting from five minutes to an hour or more, fingernails tap on a wooden box, hands deliberately crinkle a plastic bag, voices recite mundane monologues, bottles of nail-polish gently click together. These methods of producing sound, easily differentiated from familiar acoustic sources like musical instruments, field recordings, singing, or everyday speech, are not random, as they might appear in the context of a single video, but are reproduced, with variations, in thousands of videos. To me, these rambling, open-form videos comprise radical sound experiments. But is this how ASMR video makers and viewers understand them? The ease of interactivity and feedback available on YouTube enables content creators to reproduce aspects of previous videos quickly and meaningfully, and to respond with agility to requests made by viewers, producing a vast repertoire that is in some ways cohesive, yet remains highly exploratory and freeform.

Drawing again from Lange, this experimental zone, which seems at first precariously far-out, actually constructs a safe public space for private encounters. Situations like suit-fittings, makeovers, medical exams, and haircuts are acted-out, mitigating the threat to either party’s “real” identity through fictionalization, even while the subject’s face is often shown. Trigger videos focus on hands doodling, tapping,
sorting, or manipulating objects, while the subject’s face is cut out of the frame, guaranteeing a safely anonymous interaction. Looking past the alienating strangeness to understanding the ways ASMRtists structure their content and choose their visual and sonic approaches can illuminate how these videos produce a safe space for intimate encounters, whether by setting up a scenario that is anonymous or one that is make-believe.

It is important to note that, while many men have created popular ASMR channels, the majority of videos are made by, and feature, women, who perform mainstream femininity through clothing, makeup, jewelry, and other cues. Making an argument about the basis of this gendering is beyond the scope of this paper, but it informs the questions I have tried to formulate: If watching a video of a young woman’s fingers making soft crinkly sounds with a plastic bag exerts a bodily force on a viewer, what is the root of that force? The woman, her fingers, the crinkly sounds, or the notion of a plastic bag? A willful reading of proximal sound as signifying physical proximity, or a passive, automatic pleasure response to small sounds? When she softly rambles directly into the microphone about her makeup collection, is intense relaxation triggered by the softness, the closeness, the rambling, or the concept of the collection? Or is the belief that a stranger is capable of transmitting attentive, gentle care an underlying explanation?

A remarkable aspect of ASMR videos’ rapid construction as a cohesive genre is the lack of an existing professional model to appropriate in order to claim legitimacy as cultural products. These home-made videos in some ways resemble classic YouTube content like “Me at the Zoo,” made in a DIY confessional mode that follows more from the tradition of home-videos than from broadcast media. Yet ASMR creators almost
universally post their content in a “channel,” and virtually all of them use a handle, joining a cottage industry of brands like “ASMRrequests,” “WhispersRedASMR,” “MassageASMR,” and “Cosmic Tingles.” These channels thus frame their content not as private information posted publicly (Lange, 2008) but as public performance, modeled after television.

Yet unlike other DIY YouTube genres that have professional analogs, such as instructional videos or product reviews⁶⁰, an example of mainstream media that proclaims to work directly on the body is harder to locate. Consequently, perhaps, videos’ success is achieved not by what Bourdieu describes as “the inseparably ethical and aesthetic (and therefore political) taste of the dominant,” but rather by “the recognition granted by the set of producers who produce for other producers, their competitors, i.e. by the autonomous self-sufficient world of ‘art for art’s sake,’ meaning art for artists.” (Bourdieu, 1983)

But is an ASMR video art? One significant challenge of understanding ASMR as simply one more genre of cultural production on YouTube, alongside music videos and fan-fiction Star Wars re-enactments, lies in the recognition that that the success of any ASMR artifact is not a matter of taste, but of effectiveness – that a given video results in a specific somatic effect in the viewer. The growth of ASMR-related activity online is predicated on Lange’s “technical and social affordances” of social media, including viewing, creating, and sharing. The name “YouTube” smashes together mass media and the individual, but how “You” are meant to exercise agency in relation to the “Tube” is, perhaps deliberately, left vague. Is this a singular or a plural “you”? Are “you” the tube’s viewer, a curator of its content, or the content itself? YouTube’s founders reportedly built

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⁶⁰ Kiri Miller, 2012
the platform so they could share footage of Janet Jackson’s wardrobe malfunction at the 2004 Super Bowl. Yet rather than launching with a piece of pop culture or international news, YouTube kicked off with an amateur documentary called “Me at the Zoo.” So, really, YouTube started with “Me.” Participation in the ASMR genre, whether as a consumer or producer, reflects an underlying motivation to seek recognition, or legitimization, for an individual experience, one that many participants feel has been marginalized or stigmatized in offline social spaces. While each person who finds the ASMR community may have a unique experience, the desire for legitimization of that experience is shared -- to establish, first, that other people have the same experience, and second, that this experience is neither pathological nor – what may be synonymous in mainstream American culture – erotic. The fear of this label, evident in comments by both earnest viewers and “trolls,” points to broader questions about the relationship between intimacy and sexuality in the cultural settings in which ASMR videos are produced and consumed, as well as normative understandings of acceptable physical and social contact. The tone of these comments indicates that there is much at stake – this is a touchy source of insecurity that may reveal something basic about both psychology and sociality of the phenomenon.

The sudden emergence of an ASMR phenomenon points to the possibility that YouTube may present not just the reproduction online of existing social and cultural frameworks, but a new kind of public space that allows for new forms of public intimacy, and perhaps other configurations and art forms. This space is structured around the opportunity for participants to be both fully transmissible in voice and visage, while remaining safely anonymous, and on cultural products being both publicly accessible and
restricted to access by an affinity group that condones and uncodes them. Given that a 
smart phone offers all the tools necessary to create, share, and consume YouTube videos, 
it is easy to take for granted that a person with average technological competence can 
reproduce enough of her self, beginning with her sonic image, to induce a physical 
feeling in a stranger. I suggest, however, that this set of activities is more than a simple 
reconfiguration of technological competences.

While some ASMR videos do present narrative content, many include either 
disorganized rambling, overtly unintelligible speech, or no semantic content at all. 
Rather, the interaction depends on the apparent magic of summoning a partner from 
behind the computer screen, a partner whose visual and sonic images are good enough 
simulacra to induce profound feelings of safety and intimacy. So while Willy Wonka may 
not yet, or ever, be able to broadcast a physical body, ASMR videos open public 
discourse to new areas of public physicality, and thus, perhaps, bestow power on 
communities constituted around experimentation, the intuitive exploration of intimacy 
among strangers rather around on encodings of aesthetics, identities, or tastes.

The reception of the Trashghan, once teleported into a YouTube video by 
“ASMRtist” Gentlewhispering like young Mike getting sent into a television set by Willy 
Wonka, offers much to think about. The video, called “Back to Basics: YouTube Button 
& Crinkly Blanket / ASMR,” was published on Mar 18, 2015, and at the time of writing 
has accrued 385,166 views – far more than any other artistic content I have posted, but 
nothing compared to a viral video, or even some of Maria’s other videos with views in 
the millions. Still, it’s a lot of eyeballs. Without my instructing her to do so, Maria 
understood that the obvious ASMR move in interacting with the Trashghan was to
methodically touch and interact with each square, exploring the both sounds it produces and interpreting its visual symbolism. What I didn’t expect was her focus on the “environmental” implications of working with plastic.

After working through several of the bags, the narrator, who speaks from behind the camera as if looking at the Trashghan from the same perspective as the viewer, comes to a square with a yellow crocheted circle surrounding the cut-off base a plastic water bottle. “I like this one, it represents the sun, a beautiful thing, and in the middle of the sun we have the bottom of the plastic bottle. I have a theory on this, well first of all of course you see the irony I’m sure. And I think that after our world is gone and our civilization is gone, if that ever happens, but you know it can happen in a million years, why not, I think that this rug, this blanket I’m sorry, will be perfect representation of some of our worst accomplishments, well, best and worst, I’m not trying to be a hypocrite. But I see the scary side of it and the beautiful side of it. It’s something that is truly needed, and it is an accomplishment in some way, all the plastics in our life, and we learn to love the sound of it. Yet it is something that needs to be recycled, otherwise it’s a waste that will stay and it will be our history, will be the representation of us today, is the trash. Very unfortunate, hopefully other things will stay behind us too.61 (see full text, Appendix)

Certainly any artwork made from discarded materials, like El Anatsui’s monumental bottle-cap murals, or Andrew Junge’s styrofoam Humvee, implies a commentary on the modern condition of systemic waste. However, this was not my primary concern in making Trashghan, which was conceived as a musical instrument, a tool designed for a particular kind of sonic improvisation. Gentlewhispering understood

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this intuitively, but added a layer of political interpretation that caused some mixed opinions among viewers, eliciting comments like “I did enjoy this video, great sound and a beautiful blanket. But I wish you hadn't talked as much especially about recycling, irony etc. I get it you feel strongly about it and it's an important topic, however I am trying to relax/sleep not feel guilty or feel bombarded with information.” Some viewers, though, were inspired by the added message, posting response like, “The number of plastic bags that were saved from entering landfills because of this blanket is delightfully astonishing.” One of my favorite fan readings of the video contains the following observation: “If you think about it, the person who did it saw beauty where anybody else saw only garbage, and transformed it into art... quite the same as you're doing with ASMR.” I believe this comment conveys the self-consciousness that runs through the genre regarding the unstructured, a-musical and non-narrative nature of the sounds that cause tingles, sounds that in a mainstream context would constitute mere sonic garbage.

At first, I was nervous to read the comments, because #assholes. Fortunately, Gentlewhispering’s viewers proved largely open-minded and positive, with strong DIY-oriented values, so commentary was largely favorable. In fact, Gentlewhispering’s doomsday narrative attracted more criticism than Trashghan itself, which viewers seemed to enjoy as a piece of “outsider art.” I noticed that many commenters focused on the amount of time taken to complete the work, which suggests an underlying belief in a valuation of art and craft that stems from the equating of labor input with an artifact’s worth. (If only this were true!) I have included a selection of comments in the appendix.

62 YouTube comment, posted by “Franni Hughes,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqfuNG3m9Uk
63 YouTube comment, posted by “Natasha Paulson,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqfuNG3m9Uk
64 YouTube comment, posted by “Winter Song,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqfuNG3m9Uk
for the reader to consider, as well as a transcript of Gentlewhispering’s narration. Other future questions to investigate include the problem of what kinds of art do and don’t work on YouTube, especially with regard to ideas of contemporary “audiovisual musicality.”

The aptest commentary on the Trashghan comes from Gentlewhispering herself, midway through the video. “I like,” she whispers, “that only [the] ASMR community will see the beauty of sounds in this piece as much as maybe the art purpose of it and the message.” This intuitive understanding of the function of the piece is especially gratifying considering the thrust of the collection of work in this thesis. With the Trashghan, I was able to enter into the dialogue of an artistic community while completely skirting the issue of having to invent or perform a version of myself that would fit into its social context. No new skills were acquired, and no stylistic anxieties overshadowed the generation of the piece. Rather than performing a personal identity, the Trashghan condenses the priorities of one form (quiet sounds, methodical construction, iterative design) and maps them onto an object that invites performance by an artist fluent in its conventions.

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Conclusion

I titled my thesis concert “A Different Kind of Everything,” as a way of convincing myself to own and celebrate the program’s variety. I had recently heard myself explain to a colleague why I had stopped performing to enter graduate school: I was burned out, as a performer, from doing too much of everything. I wanted to find a focus. But as a composition student, I didn’t suddenly discover one true calling. I just found myself attracted to a different kind of everything. In writing this thesis, I have tried to balance a search for cohesiveness in the collection of work with the recognition that what it really represents is a messy catalogue of tests. With some kind of order imposed, I hope the spirit of those tests begins to emerge.

“Hocket,” in some ways, was a fruitful test, although I didn’t compose it. First, I see a shift in orientation toward work that inspires me. My instinct, as a performer, is to emulate. I have the tools, as discussed in relation to Sweet Land the Musical, “Holiday,” as well as “Hocket,” to imitate sounds I find compelling. The original sociability of that piece as a duet turned out to yield an entirely different space as a solo. At the same time, the performance mainly drew attention as a technical feat. All I did, I felt, was transcribe sounds from a recording and practice executing them – skills I already had and understood. If my question had been, can I execute ‘Hocket’ compellingly in performance?” the answer would be yes. But the ability of that piece to steal the show tells me my compositional instincts are not yet on par with my performer’s intuition. If I
ask instead, “do I understand how “Hocket” works well enough to make something new
in response? The answer is, not yet.

In some cases, like in the first movement of Folk Songs, called “In G,” I overtly
imitate a compositional tactic. “In G,” like In C, consists of a series of cells to be repeated
as many times as the performers wish. But the real test underlying that piece, in
retrospect, owes more In C’s effectiveness as a framework for bringing together a group
of people for a shared musical experience. To really succeed in emulating that aspect, I
would have to imagine Folk Songs as something bass players might want to re-create, in
the sense of recreation. Would it need to be, as Townsend put it, “easy enough for most
anyone to start out on and complex enough to make a life study?” Would it need to be
written intuitively, rather than strategically, to emulate how Riley describes having
imagined the piece while riding the bus? Or would it need to be practical, easily
transmitted, as Robert Carl notes, on a single sheet of paper?

While obviously none of the work completed while at Wesleyan achieves the
level of accessibility or universality of In C, at the time of writing, the pieces that stand
out as opening possibilities for future work are Trashghan and Open String Study.
Paradoxically, these two pieces are at the opposite ends of the spectrum as far as the
conventionality of their instruments – from an expensive viola to worthless plastic trash.
But each has done a lot of work in making visible the recurring concerns of my
compositions: the link between composer and performer, the physicality of sound,
articulation of identity and belonging to a community, eccentric and approaches to

66 Robert Carl, Terry Riley’s In C: Studies in Musical Genesis, Structure, and Interpretation (Oxford
University Press, 2009) 41
67 Frank Oteri. “A Conversation With Robert Carl, Author Of Terry Riley’s In C,” New Music Box, Jan. 14,
conventional materials. I have gathered from feedback on both pieces that they are immediately accessible, without giving away their whole hand in the first moment of encounter. They also both capitalize on skills I already had – crocheting with plastic and beating up my viola – simply turning those techniques toward the exploration of a phenomenon I wanted to know more about.

One of Meredith Monk’s mentors, Pema Chödrön, teaches that Buddhism offers a metaphor for thoughts as evanescent clouds. “When we look deeply into the clouds, they fall apart, and there’s the expanse of sky.”68 If I think about my interests this way, they become things I have collected, not things I am composed of. What if these interests are less like traits, and more like attachments, keeping me “hooked,” as Chödrön would say, into a perpetual cycle of dissatisfaction? This thesis is part of a process of looking deeply into those clouds, wondering if they will fall apart. The disappearance won’t happen during my time at Wesleyan, or within this document. But I am optimistic about having interrupted the urge to constantly acquire new skills, to add more alluring fluffy clouds to my collection.

This frame of acceptance is fundamentally different from how I have tried to deal with the multiplicity of my interests up until now. I have often thought I ought to move from a multiplicity toward a singularity, either by ignoring most of the clouds and focusing my energy on nurturing one or two of them, or by somehow bringing them all together as a single interdisciplinary cumulostratocirrocumulus megacloud. Instead, I will try for the time being to just stare at the clouds and see what shapes they suggest, neither wishing for more nor better ones.

68 Pema Chödrön, Living Beautifully: with Uncertainty and Change (Shambhala, 2013) 19.
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