Compositions 2011-2013

By

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Introduction

These writings represent an attempt to frame my recent work in terms of the work that came before it and the work that will come after it. I set out here to define the various directions that my work has taken and to give context for those directions. The pieces discussed are part of the culmination of one phase of activity: my engagement with The Abstract Experience, and the beginning of another phase: my engagement with The Representational Experience. I hope to illuminate the experiences and processes that lead to these works and give insight into how these experiences and processes will inform my future compositional endeavors.

Experiences Part 1

“We would like to surrender to this Abstract Experience. We would like to let it take over.... The Abstract Experience, is the only thing – a unity that leaves one perpetually speculating.... The Abstract Experience is like a metaphor without an answer. Whereas the literary kind of art, the kind we are close to, is involved in the polemic we associate with religion, the Abstract Experience is really far closer to the religious. It deals with the same mystery – reality – whatever you want to call it.”

Morton Feldman - “After Modernism” (1968)
It seems to me the primary preoccupation and the primary achievement of John Cage and the composers who associated with him during the 1950s was a music in which sounds were not subjected to value systems. In more evocative terms: musical content (sound) is divorced from tradition (value systems). This seems to be especially true of John Cage himself. It could be said that this stream began with Varese or perhaps Schoenberg (and I think most of the so-called “New York School” would have no major problems with being placed within this stream) but this ideal seemed to reach its most distilled form in the music of Christian Wolf and Earl Brown, the early music of Morton Feldman, and, most blatantly, the music of John Cage. 3 years ago this was the ideal or the stream that I was most interested in engaging with.

Perhaps the peak of my non-compositional engagement with this stream occurred with the piece *Patterns In A Chromatic Field* by Feldman. With this piece I experienced a profound contact with the disorienting quality that this music often possesses. Feldman’s late music in particular distorts one’s orientation to pitches and rhythms and the passing of time to such a degree that it induced in me, on a number of occasions, the inability to discern the relationships between pitches. After hearing the same 5 notes rearranged in different orders for 2 hours, I could no longer tell which notes were higher or lower than others. I have experienced this phenomenon in other music that deals with materials in a similar way: some of Tyshawn Sorey’s music, for example, has induced the same reaction.

The other composition that I can mention as relates to profound contact with these qualities is *Etudes Australes* by Cage. In this piece the experience of decontextualized sound is encountered. Part of the effectiveness of this piece is the textural and timbral uniformity of the unaccompanied piano. We are not distracted by textural or timbral variation (not much at least). As the piece progresses various combinations of pitches and intervals are heard that can sometimes be reminiscent of tonality or harmony. Yet it is clear when considering the experience of the piece as a whole and when considering
how the piece was made that these associations are not intrinsic. Etudes Australes is one of a series of Cage pieces that derive their pitch material from the superimposition of the placement of stars on a star chart onto a 5 line staff. The pitches were selected “arbitrarily” or at least it can be said that it was not the consideration of any musical value systems (tonality, harmony) that guided their selection.

The word transcendental could perhaps be applied to the experiences I had with this music. I encountered a sound world (The Abstract Experience) that was enveloping and disorienting. To hear (or more precisely, to listen to) a piece like Patterns In A Chromatic Field or Etudes Australes is to be physically inside the musical experience. Time, musical and non-musical, is experienced non-linearly. It is like jumping into the deep end of a huge swimming pool.

During the last 2 or 3 years I have been reoriented to the musical experience in a number of ways. This reorientation began with my becoming aware of and cultivating a sensitivity to the harmonic overtone series.

**Experiences Part 2**

“To base the organization of complex compositions solely upon serial techniques, which depend mainly upon interval-scale ordering, is to use an inadequate mnemonic tool. A composer must settle for undigested randomness or else he must take great care to stimulate memory and proportional awareness on all time scales.... Great complexity in the materials of art calls for a compositional technique with maximum organizing power. To establish connection between the known and rational and familiar on the one hand and the unknown and irrational and unpredictable on the other requires subjecting them to the same measure. Proportionality is such a common measure, if we bear in mind
the modifying principles of variation and approximation. It is not incompatible with other modes of
organization such as serial ordering. It applies with equal effectiveness to formal, rhythmic, and pitch
organization. It can be realized best by ear, in the case of pitch; by kinesthetic perception, in the case of
rhythm; by intuitive timing, in the case of formal divisions. Yet it is capable of intellectual formulation
and manipulation.”

Ben Johnston - “Musical Intelligibility: Where Are We? (1963)

There is an often repeated story about the composer Giacinto Scelsi. After his wife left him
sometime in the 1940s, Mr. Scelsi found himself engaged in an extended stay at a sanitarium. In this
sanitarium he found a piano and with this piano he began to develop his sensitivity to the overtone
series. He would play one note and listen to the entirety of its decay. He would do this many times in a
row until he was able to hear a good deal of the harmonic overtone spectrum contained within that
note.

My initial experiences with the overtone series were very similar. I would play a low note on the
piano and train myself to hear its overtone spectrum. Once I could hear the pitch content of the
spectrum I would compare those pitches to their corresponding pitches on the keyboard. The results
were surprising: I began to understand how the piano and thus equal temperament was (in a sense) out
of tune. This sparked an understanding and a curiosity that eventually led to an in-depth investigation
into the resources of natural harmonics on open strings.

Around the same time as I was becoming aware of the overtone series (I should note that this
awareness started with my ears and with intuition, not with theory or physics. Those came later.) I
became interested in early European music. I heard, in this music, a value system (particularly as it relates to intervals) that I had never heard before and that I had no knowledge of.

Taking into account the development of polyphony and the implications this had on the idea of consonance vs. dissonance and the way that all of this combined moves towards a “value-system” in Western European music, the importance of the overtone series becomes clear. The first intervals to be considered consonant were unisons, octaves, fourths, and fifths. Later thirds were added to this collection. These intervals are all found in the lower portion of the overtone series. The entire orientation of early polyphony seems to be pointing towards a sensitivity to the overtone series. As I developed my own sensitivity to the series and as I began to hear, in early European music, a value system that was affirming the same kind of sensitivity, I began to develop the concept of The Representational Experience.

Sensitivity to the overtone series ultimately leads to a sensitivity to intervals. During the 14th century and into the 15th century, there was a musical stream in England, France, Italy, and the Netherlands that favored 3 or 4 voices and a strong bent towards cadential consonances broken up by the dissonances of moving contrapuntal lines. Taking in account the use, function and perhaps even the meaning of intervals in this music has lead to the development of this intervallic sensitivity. In this music the sounds are contextualized and certain orientations towards these sounds are central to how the music works. They are central to how the music can be effective. Furthermore, the considered or inspired placement of these elements can result in very powerful music. One has the chance or the opportunity to orient one’s self within this music. One can learn how to anticipate musical events and how to interpret their meaning. By properly positioning or “tuning” one’s self, one can be sure to receive the logic or information the music is offering with maximum efficacy.
What we have arrived at is a musical experience or musical value system that offers incredible power and potential and does so in seemingly the opposite manner as The Abstract Experience (The Abstract Experience being part of a musical value system which places value on not having a system). An experience that functions successfully according to the considered or inspired placement of elements or materials and that defines a considered or inspired placement in terms of the elements’ or materials’ intrinsic relationships to each other is a Representational Experience.

The Representational Experience and The Abstract Experience can be thought of as states of being induced in the individual by experiencing music. What we are dealing with here is the effect of sound on a human being. If we wish to differentiate between sound and music (which I think we sometimes do, apologies to Mr. Cage) we can say the effect of music on the human being. The extent to which the orientation and contextualization I spoke of as being related to The Representational Experience are a product of nature or nurture is not something I wish to debate. I have used my own experiences with early European music (specifically hearing the piece Moro, Lasso Al Mio Duolo by Carlo Gesualdo and the Kyrie from Guillaume De Machaut’s Messe De Notre Dame) as a point of departure for defining The Representational Experience. The Abstract Experience as defined by Morton Feldman is something that I encountered in his and other’s works. Upon hearing the aforementioned early European music pieces and receiving the information or logic that they contained, I saw the need for an investigation into the implications therein as a way to begin formulating an answer to Feldman’s Abstract Experience.
Processes

Compositional engagement with The Abstract Experience was my main creative concern prior to the cultivation of my “new” sensitivity. As I became aware of the information or logic that was available within this experience I looked (and am still looking) for ways to gain insight into its implications. For me, composition has always held enormous value as a tool for learning. My compositional engagement with The Abstract Experience is ongoing but I can point to some pieces that were finished prior to my “new” sensitivity as a way to begin discussing my creative process (processes).

About 3 years ago I wrote a series of compositions that dealt with the manipulation of “musical” materials outside of a “musical” context. Pitches, rhythms and other materials were organized and structured according to schemes that would inform but not dictate the musicality of the piece. The experiential (or “real”) musicality of the piece came only during rehearsal and performance. What emerged was a multi-tiered creative/experiential process. The inception of a composition would consist of an idea about the structuring or organization of a given set of musical materials (pitches, rhythms, instrumentations, etc.). The idea would be considered until it was in a workable state. The next step was to translate the idea into a workable form: notation. Once all the elements were in place the actual writing of the piece would begin. At this point the organization of the materials would be fully developed and those materials would be designed to inform a sound world or musical experience but the actual writing of the piece was still a process of discovery. In other words, all the elements and their relationships had been defined and now it was time to see if and how they would function.

Mistakes is a piece from this phase of my compositional process and its title reflects my experiences with the process. After adjusting all of the parameters accordingly to ensure that the piece did what I wanted it to do I found that my own human error had (and not for the worse!) been an
integral part of the adjustments. The piece still worked (it still “did what I wanted it to do”) in spite of my mistakes. In rehearsal and in performance I found that the information or logic of the composition was still intact and that the reception of that information or logic, on the part of the composer, the performer or the listener, had not been adversely effected.

What is interesting here is the directional nature of the creative/experiential process. The life of the music begins with “extra-musical” considerations. Of course, as I have stated earlier these considerations are always meant to move towards and inform a sound world or musical experience but the true nature or identity of this world/experience is only revealed after the fact. As far as the pre-performance life of the music is concerned, the process is the experience. More recent pieces, having been greatly informed by the cultivation of my “new” sensitivity, were created in a seemingly opposite way. The experience is the process.

*F# Fetish* is a composition for solo piano that I have been developing over the last 3 years (and I hope to continue to develop it into the future!). This piece grew directly out of my “Scelsian” experiences with the piano and the overtone spectrum. As I began to develop a sensitivity to the differences between overtone series derived pitches and intervals and equal temperament derived pitches and intervals, I became interested in the resources of open string harmonics. I had been exploring harmonics on guitar for some time and I was eager to engage with the possibilities of harmonics on the piano. By isolating overtone partials with my fingers on the strings inside the piano and juxtaposing them with the closest corresponding pitches on the keyboard I was able to deal more directly with the microtonal differences between unequal and equal temperament.

After exploring these techniques and their results for the last 3 years I have arrived at a fully formed piece that has its own unmistakable identity. This is an extreme version of the process being the experience because as of yet the piece has no notation. In this case, the process is all there is! Other
pieces that have been composed using the method of “starting with the music” have dealt with these
issues in other ways. Using the piano or the guitar or even the notation software Finale as a
compositional aid relates to an engagement with The Representational Experience. The life of the music
begins with an experience (a real time sound experience) of what the music is. Once the nature of the
music is gleaned through this experience the process of bringing it into a workable form can begin.

At this point it is important to examine the relationships or lack of relationships between
experiences and processes as I have defined them. The cultivation of a sensitivity to what I was
experiencing in Early European (and other) musics led to a reconsideration of the processes I would
utilize in order to create music. The understanding here being that music can be a way to provide the
opportunity for an experience. I became interested (and am still interested) in a more direct creative
process, hence “starting with the music”. The lessons I learned from studying early European music and
from the perceived successes and failures of my previous compositions left me with the desire to
engage more directly with the “real” musicality of a given set of musical materials or ideas.

It should also be noted that I am not taking an absolutist position of either or both of The
Abstract or Representational Experiences. In coming to the end of this cycle of research and subsequent
awareness, the mixing of these two qualities is more and more becoming the ideal. I can point to my
composition Chemical Hiatus Suite as an example of composite or multi-experiential music.

This composition features four contrasting (in terms of instrumentation, mood, etc.) movements
where the musical material for each movement is derived from the same harmonic and melodic
sequence. The idea here is for the source material to be flexible enough to accommodate the different
focuses of each movement. The harmonic and melodic sequence was composed much like a “song”. I
worked with the elements at the piano until I arrived at a desired structural balance (in other words
until it sounded the way I wanted it to). Here we see the Representational Experience as the point of
departure for this phase of the creative process. I allowed my response to real time sound experiences guide my compositional choices. The next phase, expanding the sequence into four autonomously engaging musical movements, was informed by a composite Representational/Abstract Experience process. I worked with the given elements outside of the “real” musical experience in some cases and in others I used the piano, the guitar, or Finale is an anchor into the “real” experience. As the various movements have been finished and as I have heard them in rehearsal or in MIDI playback the give and take of The Abstract vs. The Representational qualities of the music has been striking. Moving towards the combination of these two experiential qualities and how that combination relates to the level of transparency in music is what I foresee in the next cycle of research and awareness.

**Compositions**

Solo For Soprano Saxophone (2012)

This piece grew out of a desire to continue the exploration of certain aspects of my earlier compositional process as described above. I had created pieces that involved detailed pre-compositional work followed by an “improvised” realization of the score. The musical elements that a given composition would deal with and the way that it would deal with them were formally worked out. The realization of the score was then a process of exploring the “world” that had been defined by the pre-compositional work. *Solo For Soprano Saxophone* was created using a modified version of this process.
I wanted to give myself the chance to explore more freely during the process of realizing the score. This would mean less pre-compositional definition. I had a very clear notion of the world I wanted this piece to affirm but I wanted to let some of the finer definition points of this world be established during the realization of the score. I defined only the most essential sets of parameters and relationships to only the most essential degree. Realizing the score was then a process that depended upon intuition and discovery to a greater extent than in previous pieces created using a similar compositional method. This new willingness to trust my instincts grew directly out of the experiences I had composing *Mistakes*. Those experiences prompted a consideration as to the degrees of definition or control of various musical elements and the effect that varying those degrees would have on the totality of a given composition.

The specific musical elements that are explored in *Solo For Soprano Saxophone* were chosen to satisfy both technical and psychological/metaphysical interests. It should also be noted that the manner in which these elements were dealt with in this composition represents a decision to deal with extremes. In almost all of my compositional output prior to this piece considerations of practicality had played a very important role in compositional decisions. I was writing for specific people and situations and almost all aspects of a given piece would be subject to a realistic consideration of those people and situations. *Solo For Soprano Saxophone* affirms a compositional decision making process where the only technical limitation is my imagination.

Specialized rhythmic notation (its technical execution and the psychological/metaphysical effects of its execution) is something I had explored in other pieces and I was eager to extend my exploration of this element (these elements) past realistic considerations about the performance opportunities available to me. Superimposed, ratio metric rhythms are used prominently in the piece. Specific applications of the rhythms consist of the subtlety in the difference between the phrasing of
melodic patterns within a matrix of pulses divided by 5 as opposed to 6 (5:4 or 10:8 vs. 6:4 or 12:8), the subtlety in the difference between a single attack on the 5th of 5 16th notes in the place of 4 16ths (5:4) as opposed to a single attack on the 6th of 6 16ths in the place of 4 16ths (6:4) and the incorporation of ratio metric rhythms into measures with odd valued time signatures: a measure of 11/16, a grouping of 5 is superimposed over the first 4 16th notes (5:4), the middle 3 16th notes (no superimpositions), a grouping of 6 is superimposed over the last 4 16th notes (6:4).

The execution of these kinds of rhythms induces, most directly on the part of the performer, a psychological/metaphysical experiential space that I find particularly interesting. The flowing orientation and re-orientation process that a performer moves through while navigating this type of notation is just as much (sometimes more) of a reason to compose it as are the aural effects of its precise execution. Another musical element whose psychological/metaphysical dynamics were taken into account in "Solo For Soprano Saxophone" is range. This piece uses pitch material from the very top of the instrument (a minor 3rd above the highest pitch in the altissimo range) to the very bottom of it. Again, the execution of such demanding material creates the conditions for an interesting psychological/metaphysical experience. Reaching for the farthest extremes of execution and sometimes even attempting to reach past them is part of how the piece engages the performer.

Finally the dynamics and performance notes complete the psychological/metaphysical signature of the piece. Dynamics ranging from ppp to fff are used in conjunction with the performance notes “wild, with abandon” and “detached, with control”. The dynamics are used to further heighten the impact of the execution of complex rhythmic and melodic passages. For example a highly active passage featuring large leaps using sudden and extreme crescendos/décrescendos would be immediately followed by an extremely high sustained pitch with a dynamic of ppp. Another example is a measure with an odd valued time signature that asymmetrically superimposes ratio metric groupings and is to be
performed “detached, with control”. The psychological placement, on the part of the performer, of this passage would be very different if the performance note read “wild, with abandon”.

Taken as a whole, *Solo For Soprano Saxophone* is meant to project an opportunity for The Abstract Experience on the part of the composer, performer or listener. The elements that make up the composition and their relationships are designed to project a sound world where no one musical orientation or set of associations can be used to decode the composition. The psychological/metaphysical elements (and the way that the notation affirms those elements) are dealt with in a mono-directional, linear manner but this is the only traceable component that was designed into the piece.

Solo For B Flat Clarinet (2013)

As enjoyable as it can be to disregard practicality, it eventually rears its ugly (beautiful?) head. *Solo For B Flat Clarinet* is a much condensed and rescored version of *Solo For Soprano Saxophone*. The circumstances that lead to this adaptation involved an interested, clarinet playing colleague without too much time on his hands. So the saxophone became a clarinet and 18 pages became 4. The clarinet version addresses all of the same issues and considerations as does the saxophone version but does so over a much shorter time frame. In other words *Solo For B Flat Clarinet* seeks to engage the composer, performer and listener in all the same ways as does the parent piece. The one major difference is that due to the shorter time frame the psychological/metaphysical elements are dispersed in a non-linear way. So *Solo For B Flat Clarinet* then is designed to project completely the opportunity for The Abstract Experience.
Solo For Guitar (2010-2012)

_Solo For Guitar_ is the culmination of the last three years of investigation into open string harmonics as a resource for overtone series derived interval tuning as it relates specifically to the guitar. As I have outlined earlier, my sensitivity to the overtone series was cultivated at the piano. I had been aware of and utilizing open string harmonics for some time on the guitar but it was not until after my “Scelsian” piano experiences that I began to understand their implications.

Isolating different overtone series partials by stopping the string without pressing it all the way onto the fingerboard or fretboard is a technique that is widely known among string players of all kinds. As a guitar player who names Derek Bailey as my main instrumental model, I had been exploring the timbral and microtonal implications of open string harmonics for some time. However I had been doing so without an understanding of the overtone series. After training myself to hear the overtone spectrum contained within a low note on the piano I began to experiment with ways to exploit specifically the harmonic nature of open string partials on the guitar. Eventually I decided that retuning certain strings to certain partials would be an ideal way to proceed. The tuning I developed used the pitch D2 as the fundamental on which the overtone series derived intervallic structure was built. The 6th or lowest string is tuned to the fundamental (D2), the 5th string is tuned to the 3rd partial 1 octave lower (A2), the 4th string is tuned to the 2nd partial (D3), the 3rd string is tuned the 11th partial 2 octaves lower (approximately G sharp 3), the 2nd string is tuned to the 13th partial 2 octaves lower (approximately B flat 3), the 1st or highest string is tuned to the 7th partial 1 octave lower (approximately C4). By isolating the 5th partial (approximately F sharp 4) on the 6th string and by substituting the 3rd partial (E4) of the 5th string for the 9th partial (E5) of the fundamental I was able to sound a scale using all open strings and their harmonics. The scale consisted of partials 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 of the fundamental D2.
It is important to note that during the development of this tuning I used no electric aids to help me tune the strings or intervals. I am able to isolate up to partial 13 on the lowest string of the guitar and I used those partials themselves to tune the other strings. Also I am reluctant to use the term Just Intonation to describe this tuning and the intervals it creates. The various kinds of Just Intonation, as I understand them, seek to create a comprehensive tuning system in which all the harmonies in a given piece are tuned according to overtone series derived ratios. *Solo For Guitar* seeks to make use of practical approximations of overtone series derived intervals in conjunction with chromatic intervals. What I was after in this piece was a sound, not a theory.

The creation of *Solo For Guitar* was an extreme example of a multi-tiered compositional process. After devising the tuning for the instrument I was left with the problem of how to translate the implications of the tuning into a workable form. This challenge proved to be substantial. After many false starts I finally began to understand the technical/psychological world that this piece would inhabit. I took inspiration from my experiences listening to and receiving the logic of Cage’s *Etudes Australes* and devised a way to create a score that would leave room for personal engagement on the part of the performer and still project the value system that had grown out of the tuning and its implications.

I wanted the relationships between the overtone series derived intervals to retain their intrinsic “meanings” or identities. This would mean retaining the hierarchy of the overtone series as it relates to how the different pitches and intervals appeared in the piece. The use of chromatic pitches on the fretboard provided a way to occasionally throw off the balance created by the hierarchy and identities. I used the technique of rolling two die to dictate the dispersion of pitches however I “fixed” the dice game in order to ensure the preference of certain pitches over others thus retaining the overtone series derived hierarchy. The rhythmic frame for the piece was very simple: each measure gets 3 counts and
chance operations (again, dice) were used to dictate whether a pitch or a series of pitches would land on count 1, 2 or 3.

Three further elements that were controlled by chance operations during the creation of the score for *Solo For Guitar* are dynamics, decay and right hand placement. A dynamic range from pppp to ffff was employed; sostenuto or staccato decays and sul tasto, normale or sul ponticello attacks are used to add further timbral interest to the sound world of the piece. We arrive at a score where every pitch has attached extremely specific tone generation, dynamic and attack placement instructions. The realization of the score by a performer is very much about deciphering the notation and making decisions as to which instructions can realistically be adhered to at a given moment. It is interesting to note that the piece began as a practical way to deal with certain kinds of intervals on the guitar. The development of the score involved setting up detailed procedures that would ensure certain relationships and qualities were retained as it relates how the notation dealt with the material. The end result is a score that brings the performer into a situation where rational and meta-understanding must be eschewed in order to simply deal with the specifics of the notation on a moment by moment basis. Of course, by spending a longer period of time and practice with the score the performer may begin to become aware of some elements of the larger arc of the composition.

With *Solo For Guitar* we are coming close to a middle ground between The Abstract and Representational Experiences. Certain elements of the piece are dealt with in such a way as to project a traceable value system and can help to orient the listener to the various sound events, their relationship to each other and the intentions behind their organization in the piece. Other elements are specifically designed to project the value system affirmed by something like chance operations and The Abstract Experience. It seems to me that this piece is still in a period of coming to be understood. It will take
more time and practice with the score and its implications before I can speak more definitively about

Solo For Guitar.

F Sharp Fetish (2010-2013)

_F Sharp Fetish_ is the culmination of the last three years of investigation into open string harmonics as a resource for overtone series derived interval tuning as it relates specifically to the piano. This piece is the direct result of my so called “Scelsian” experiences with the overtone series.

The elements that make up this piece grew out what seems to be becoming a trend: a combination of imagination and practicality. When I became interested in exploring what was contained within a single, low note on the piano sustained for the duration of its decay it occurred to me that the best way to hear this content was to sound the first single course string at the bottom end of the keyboard. On almost all of the pianos I had access to at the time the first single course string was an F sharp. Slowly I trained myself to hear up the series and when my ear became fixed on the 7th partial I, for the first time, became aware of the difference between the pitches and intervals in the overtone series and the pitches and intervals on the keyboard. The juxtaposition between the 7th partial of the low F sharp and its closest corresponding pitch on the keyboard would become the foundation upon which the entirety of _F Sharp Fetish_ was built.

In keeping with various sound generation techniques I had developed on the guitar I began to explore the possibilities for overtone partial isolation by stopping the string with my finger inside the piano. Over time I was able to memorize the different finger positions that would isolate the 3rd, 5th and 7th partials along the length of a given string inside the piano. Much like the encounters involved in the beginning stages of the compositional process that was used to create _Solo For Guitar_, these early piano
encounters with overtone partials predated my understanding of what the harmonic overtone series actually was. I was aware of the phenomenon of overtones at this time but my ability to engage conceptually or physically with the overtone series was underdeveloped to say the least. So for me the early stages of awareness as it relates to the overtone series were involved more with micro tonality than with meta sonority.

Another important aspect of *F Sharp Fetish* that came into view during the early days of its development was physicality. The method for partial isolation (manually stopping the string inside the piano at different points along its length) created the conditions for a particularly unique physical component as it relates to performing the piece. I had been exploring specific physical components to instrumental performance as dictated by sound generation necessities on the guitar for some time prior to the experiences that lead to *F Sharp Fetish*. The physical relationship that an instrumentalist cultivates with his or her instrument, especially as it relates to specialized sound generation, seems to me to be more and more a part of our contemporary music performance psychology. The physical relationship that is cultivated with the piano by the performer of *F Sharp Fetish* is something that grew directly out of the sound generation necessities of the piece. In other words, I did not set out to write a piece that dealt with physicality but that component revealed itself as an essential one once the practical considerations that went into creating the piece came together. I have come to view the physical challenges involved in performing the piece as a highly engaging part of its identity. The fact that this aspect developed organically and was not a part of my initial design is all the more pleasing.

For the purposes of my thesis concert at Wesleyan I designated three movements or focuses of *F Sharp Fetish*. The first is an extended exploration of the microtonal qualities inherent in the combination of overtone series derived pitches/_intervals (inside the piano) and chromatic pitches/_intervals (on the keyboard). The acoustic phenomena that result from this combination are also
explored. The 7th partial of the low, single course F sharp is the center from which the rest of the content in this movement emanates. By juxtaposing this partial with other partials/overtone spectrums and chromatic pitches and by using the sustain pedal to create different pitch decay combinations a huge range of overtone series derived pitch/interval sounds, chromatic pitch/interval sounds and microtonal pitch/interval sounds become available. The performer can use the 7th partial of the low, single course F sharp as an anchor and by building different qualities of sonorities around it (as describe in the previous sentence) create a very complex, very intriguing sound world. The beating patterns and timbral variation that result from this kind of construction serve to further define this sound world.

The second movement deals more specifically with a completely overtone series derived pitch/interval construction with the low, single course F sharp being the fundamental. The extreme consonance of this construction is offset by the dissonance of a minor triad that uses the 7th partial of the appropriate fundamental as its root. For example, the fundamental G has, as its 7th partial, a pitch that is quite a bit flatter than a chromatic F. By using this partial as the root and placing an A flat and then a C directly above it becomes possible to create a harmonic construction that gives the impression of a root position minor triad but with a glaringly noticeable microtonal hue. This movement establishes a completely overtone series derived pitch/interval sound world that is brought to a potential climax several times over the course of its performance only to have this potential climax diffused by the introduction of a severely microtonally hued minor triad.

The third movement involves the exploration of a specific construction of partials from different spectrums. The 7th partial of the low, single course F sharp, the 3rd partial of the A above that F sharp and the 5th partial of the C above that A are all approximately Es. The physical situation that results from insolating all of these partials together (manually, with fingers on the strings inside the piano) is perhaps the most extreme version of the aforementioned physical component of this piece. The navigation of
this physical situation and the timberally varied array of sounds it produces form the crux of this movement. In performance this movement has proved to be the most flexible and at times its execution evolves into what approaches improvisation.

As of now this piece exists solely as a set of elements and relationships in my, the performer/composer’s, head. I was very interested in finding a way to communicate this set of elements and relationships without having to create a formal, fixed score. Towards the beginning this piece’s life I was looking for a way to codify or document the elements that it was presenting to me. As the piece developed I began to understand that the traditional kind of codification, in other words a score, would not be consistent with the experiences I was having. However, I was still very interested in having someone else play the piece. I became curious about the possibility of passing it on in the form of a so-called oral tradition. In other words, I would teach it to someone.

I attempted to pass the piece on in this manner to a colleague of mine at Wesleyan but I must admit that I failed in this task. The reasons for the failure are many fold. *F Sharp Fetish* requires that the piano be handled in an unorthodox way. A good performance of the piece requires the mastery of the techniques that make up this unorthodoxy. The challenge of this composition can be likened to the challenge of learning a new instrument. Another difficult aspect here is the amount of time it takes for me to absorb and consider the implications of the various techniques and the sounds they produce. I can say that I am still learning this piece and in a way still composing it.

*F Sharp Fetish*, like *Solo For Guitar*, deals with a space in between The Abstract and The Representational Experiences. Certain elements of its design involve traceable events that are meant to project specific orientation opportunities while other elements are meant to provide the opportunity to simply marvel at the complexity of sound. *F Sharp Fetish* can be viewed as an ongoing project. The instrumental performance and sound construction dynamics demonstrated by this piece are elements
that I hope to further explore in future work. Also, after three years of real time, real word development I feel comfortable enough with these elements to commit them to paper. A fully notated score that affirms all of the possibilities that this piece proposes is something I hope to begin working on soon.

Chemical Hiatus Suite (2012-2013)

*Chemical Hiatus Suite* is another example of a composition that was taken through a rigorous, multi-tiered compositional process before arriving at its final state. This composition differs from the previously discussed compositions, however, in that it begins to represent my most recent fascination: engaging with different aspects of “tradition”.

The music that would eventually evolve into *Chemical Hiatus Suite* began life about 5 years ago. The piece existed at that time and, still exists in one of its forms, as a series of inter-related harmonic and melodic movements. The initial idea was to compose a “tune”, in the jazz sense, that dealt with triadic poly tonality. I arrived at the decision to sound one triad in the harmony and outline the other in the melody. The triads I was using were not 1, 3, 5 triads. For example, the first poly chord consists of what could be called an F minor major 7th triad sounding in the harmony: F, A flat, E and an F sharp minor major 7th triad: F sharp, A, E sharp being outlined in the melody. The melody and the subsequent extrapolation of the tune into a suite for voices and instruments used different inversions of the tri-chords to create a specific kind of consonance vs. dissonance flow. The piece, in its initial tune form, sat idle for approximately the next 3 years but all the while I remained very interested in the implications and the possibilities proposed by the specific kind of poly triadic combination from which this composition derived its identity.
After working for some time with the material that would eventually make up *Chemical Hiatus Suite* I began to recognize, due to the material’s flexibility, the possibility for extrapolation into larger scale ensemble and developmental textures. Reworking the material into a multi-movement suite for an ensemble made up of friends, some of whom are multi-instrumentalists, provided an interesting challenge as it relates to the use of different instruments and their combinatorial textures as well as the different types of compositional techniques and moods that could be employed with the goal being to keep the entire piece engaging. My task was to create four contrasting movements of music that would each be developed out of the same harmony and melody. Each movement would have its own identity as well as project the identity of the tune as it had originally existed.

Movement one is a piano solo. This movement focuses on the sonorities that develop from specific placements and combinations of the tri-chords as it relates to range, dynamics and inversions. The tri-chords are arranged and re-arranged in different orders and ranges to effect specific harmonic movements and sonorities. The presence of partial or whole major or minor triads through the series of tri-chords gives the music a quality of constantly moving in and out of sounds approaching traditional harmony. Imitation is also used in this movement. The melody from the tune serves as a kind of theme that goes through various permutations and is subject to imitative counterpoint.

Movement two is for the entire ensemble: soprano voice, baritone voice, alto flute, bass and piano. This movement begins with the material adapted into an intimate three voice texture (voices, flute) that uses suspensions and anticipations as well as interval permutations. This texture is developed from being sparse and non-gestural to more active and slightly more gestural. The bass and then the piano enter eventually to bring in a fuller and more contrapuntal texture. Again, all of the content that the instruments and voices sound has been derived from the original “tune”. The movement is designed to affirm its own, self-contained value system while at the same time representing the identity of the
source material. The form and pacing of the source material serves as a model for the form and pacing of this and every movement.

Movement three is a trio for clarinet, cello and piano. This movement focuses predominantly on the texture created by imitative counterpoint. It begins with the clarinet and cello in fairly strict cannon at the interval of a minor second. Slowly more activity is introduced and when the piano enters the counterpoint becomes thick and very complex. This movement is interesting in the way that it projects the harmonic progression of the tri-chords solely through the monophonic linear movement of each voice. The melody from the original tune is used as a theme that is taken through variations and is developed into what is essentially a two, then four voice fugue. Movements one and three can be paired in terms of the sound worlds and compositional techniques that they deal with.

Movement four is for the two voices, clarinet and cello. This movement uses a choral textual as its focus. If movement three projects a mostly horizontal focus then movement four projects a mostly vertical focus. Again, the original melody is used to sculpt the melodic counters of each voice. Inversions of the different tri-chords that make up the poly tonal harmony are used in different ways to dictate form. This movement deals most directly with the oblique nature of the harmonic “functionality” of the source material. Partial or whole major or minor triads make appearances throughout but they are always obscured by the surrounding harmonic context. The finale of movement four and thus the entire suite is a gradual transformation of a single ensemble sonority from dissonant to consonant. Movements two and four can be paired in terms of the sounds worlds and compositional techniques that they deal with.

The play on notions of so-called tonality or atonality that goes in *Chemical Hiatus Suite* is perhaps the thing I find most interesting about it. The piece uses harmonic and melodic material that allow it to constantly push and pull on how the listener hears the piece and how he or she interprets
what he or she is hearing. This engagement with notions of musical tradition is extended further by the way in which the piece employs varying compositional techniques and ensemble sonorities. The use of imitative counterpoint or of choral textures brings the music into a space where it engages directly with a listener’s sense of tracing. Certain associations that a given listener might attach to certain sounds are called to attention only to be obscured by other associations. The use of musical tradition as an element that can bring a piece of music into a subjective, invocative space is something I wish to explore in greater detail in the future.

The quality I am describing is directly related to The Representational Experience. Chemical 

Haitus Suite and the remaining pieces which I will discuss all utilize engagement with tradition as a way of establishing their identity. Taking into account the associations attached to certain sounds as part of the design of a given piece can inject a kind of subjectivity into the musical experience that can be very powerful. Having the cultivation this phenomenon as another element at my disposal as a composer will only help me to write more effective music.

Agnus Dei - Gilles Binchois (unfinished)

The idea for this composition was developed as part of project with the ensemble in residence during my second year at Wesleyan. I had been fascinated with a particular recording of one of Gilles Binchois’ Agnus Dei settings. Binchois is a 15th century Franco Flemish composer who is best known for his secular chansons. I have always been particularly interested in his sacred music and in this recording of his 3 voice Agnus Dei the mixing of the voices and the way that the sonorities excited overtones suggested, to me, the possibility for further overtone series derived interval and pitch development of the piece.
As I have previously explained, early European music had opened a door for me. Through this music I became more sensitive to sonority and the placement of pitches and intervals as it relates to the overtone series. I was very interested in engaging compositionally with the qualities I was sensitized to in this music. In keeping with my cultivation of The Representational Experience activities I became interested in the possibility to engaging directly with this music, in other words using certain pieces or fragments of pieces as source material for compositional development. The desire here was to learn more about a piece by going “inside” it. I want to make it clear that in writing music that develops out of other people’s music I only wish to further experience the music itself. I want more time and space with and for the piece. I am interested in the intrinsic contents of a “sampled” piece of music but I am only interested in extolling its identity, not my own.

As I became aware of the acoustic opportunities in Binchois’ Agnus Dei and of the possibility to extend these opportunities I decided to create my own version of the piece. In order to retain the acoustic opportunities contained in the interaction of the voices there was a need to have a high degree of timbral uniformity in the ensemble that would perform it. I originally intended to score the piece for string quartet and soprano. This proved not to be possible so the piece was subsequently scored for soprano, tenor, clarinet, bass and tuba. The notion of timbral uniformity obviously was complicated by the ensemble. After analyzing the original three voice setting, I set out to bring overtone series derived pitches and intervals into the piece. I would use the different sonorities as harmonic basses with which to bring out various overtones and intervals. I must now admit that my understanding of the overtone series was, at the time, not quite efficient enough to successfully meet this goal. My comprehension of how overtone series derived constructions could be logically built and how to communicate these constructions to instrumentalists through the score in a practical way was lacking. Things were further complicated by a whole number of problems relating to the ensemble and their involvement in the project. The ensemble never successfully dealt with the music and the piece was never finished.
I have decided to include the composition here because it represents an important step in my still unfolding understanding of The Representational Experience and its implications. Music that uses other music and its intrinsic content as a base for extrapolation is a practice that I have developed out of my understanding of The Representational Experience. Becoming aware of the power of musical experiences which propose specific and defined orientation coordination for the listener left me with the problem of how to design this quality into my own music. If I am looking for the experience of existing and defined musical psychologies, why not just go to that music. The notion of engaging with an existing musical world rather than creating my own has become more and more attractive to me recently.

Stinkfist - Tool (2013)

In my estimation, my most successful adoption of the qualities of The Abstract Experience as of yet is a piece for three voices that uses a composite musical language derived from the ars subtilior and the musica reservata and takes as its text and part of its melodic content a song by the band Tool entitled Stinkfist. The ars subtilior as a term used to describe a highly experimental kind of French and French influenced music that arose in the very late 14th century. This music is technically and historically fascinating. It features extreme chromaticism and very extreme rhythmic convolution. It is very difficult to perform and is thought to have been the repertoire of specialized groups who performed for aristocratic connoisseurs. The historical situation from which it arose was one of Anti Popes presiding over rebel papacies and aristocrats who inspired and patronized songs about, among other things, hallucinogenic drug experiences. Music reservata is a term used to describe a kind of Italian and Italian influenced music that arose during the 16th and into the 17th centuries. Again, we have a bizarrely chromatic music that was created for the enjoyment of connoisseurs. Tool is a fairly experimental heavy
rock band whose music uses polyrhythms extensively and whose lyrics sometimes deal with double entendre or dark humor. The lyrics to their song *Stinkfist* can be interpreted as describing the choice of a positive lifestyle over a negative one or as an extremely vulgar sexual act.

Tool was always an important band in the musical community I grew up in and consequently their music has sentimental value for me. During the course of considering how to engage with the elements of early European music that so fascinated me the problem of text proved to be inescapable. I was interested in the voice and its special qualities and the use of voice in this music always dealt intimately with text. In the lyrics to *Stinkfist* I found an interesting set of words that could be interpreted in interesting ways and that had a lightness to them. I was interested in a play between the meaning or meanings of text and the meaning or values associated with the music. I must confess that there is a certain “non-academic” quality projected by the combination of these elements that is attractive to me.

The sound world of my piece is a composite construction made up of different sections that represent different stylistic and mood qualities derived from the aforementioned early European musics. Intervalic voice placement according to the European tradition of consonance and dissonance is adhered to in some ways while chromaticism is used extremely liberally in others, there are sections featuring imitation and different sections of the text are sung by different singers at the same time. The section of the text that is sung in the refrain of the original song retains the original melody in my piece but the rest of the music is my own attempt at affirming the various elements I have discussed. Put simply, this composition uses all of the devises that I am interested in. Great care was taken to unify the piece and give it its own complete identity but the decision to include such varied sounds stemmed only from my desire to hear them. I am interested in how and if this piece can affirm so many disparate
elements and at the same time, to an outsider (someone who is not aware of the context), seem like a unified, autonomous and objective piece of music.

This composition represents for me a very successful melding of all of the discussed elements. The meanings and associations that go along with the various elements are intact and help to give the piece context. The context that derives from the combination of these elements is a bizarre and striking one. To me the music has an indecipherable quality to it. Even though I am aware of all the associations and the context those associations conjure, the piece seems inscrutable. The Representational Experience offers the potential for very powerful musical experiences and this piece hopes to harness that potential.

The Subject Will Deserve It (2012)

_The Subject Will Deserve It_ is another piece for 3 a cappella voices. This piece is very much an affirmation of harmonic and rhythmic elements from medieval European music. Rhythmic and melodic modes are employed and the piece affirms the world of early polyphonic music in an explicit way. The piece is divided into A and B sections that repeat as dictated by the text. The text is from a source that I do not wish to reveal. The only reason for this is that the text is compelling on its own and I had no intention of projecting the context of its source. If I did reveal the source there would most certainly be considerations as to its context and how that relates to the piece and I do not wish to create the conditions for these considerations. _The Subject Will Deserve It_ is a very simple piece and I wish to keep it that way. Furthermore the text was chosen very arbitrarily. The music was finished first and the text was added very much as an afterthought.
This piece and the last two pieces I will discuss here engage The Representational Experience explicitly to the point of attempting to hide my own compositional voice. In some ways they are test pieces. I wanted to learn more about the implications of The Representational Experience and composing them was a way of dealing directly with those qualities I was interested in. That being said, *The Subject Will Deserve It* and the last two pieces bring me great joy and I consider them just as important as any other of my output.

**Quasi-Sonata For Piano (2012)**

This is a solo piano composition that developed very organically out of my desire to engage with a certain kind of music. This piece is very loosely meant to affirm what I heard in music from the classical era. I was thinking about W. A. Mozart, Joseph Haydn or perhaps Domenico Scarlatti. I love those composers, especially Mozart and Scarlatti, and I wanted to engage directly with those qualities in their music that fascinated me. I find in a composer like Mozart so much interesting psychological and value system related, not to mention technical, content. I was interested in getting closer to those qualities. *Quasi-Sonata For Piano* is again a kind of test piece.

The entire piece develops out of the opening motif. There has been some confusion as to whether or not it is a sonata or a theme and variations. I was interested in the challenge of creating an entire piece with contrasting sections using the same material but on a much smaller scale that other, similar endeavors. I also wanted the piece to humbly project the values and psychology of 18th century western European music. Just as before, I was attempting to engage with tradition and traditional associations directly. This is a simple piece but, again, I enjoy it and I learned much from going to the world where this music is.
Untitled (2012)

*Untitled* is a very short, very simple two voice contrapuntal piece scored for piano and clarinet. The pianist only ever uses his or her right hand. This piece and *Quasi-Sonata For Piano* represent an affirmation of The Representational Experience in the extreme. I make no attempt to communicate anything about myself in these pieces. The music exists outside of me in a way. Engaging with tradition as a compositional resource is something I wish to do on a much larger scale and in a much more personal way in the future. These two pieces represent very small scale initial approaches to a big subject.

**Conclusion**

I wish to give special thanks to my advisor, Professor Anthony Braxton. Having the opportunity to work with him has been a life changing experience. Being able to engage with his music and his ideas has helped me to solidify my own compositional orientation. He is truly one of the greatest composers and scholars I have had the pleasure of learning from. I have no smaller appreciation for the contributions of Professors Paula Matthusen and Ronald Kuivila. My experiences at Wesleyan have been absolutely formative. Those experiences were made possible in such a large part by Professor Matthusen and Kuivila’s dedication to the program. Perhaps the biggest acknowledgement must go to my family. The unconditional support of my parents I am sure is the most significant contributor to the success of my musical endeavors thus far.
I am a person who seeks to experience and learn music above almost nothing else. My output as a musician reflects my desire to simply experience more, hear more, play more and learn more. I hope to continue to develop my understanding of music and my ability to engage with it. My compositional output reflects all of these same qualities and my hope is that these writings have illuminated how my love of music informs my engagement with it. As long as I can keep going, I will be satisfied. Thank you!
Scores

Solo For Soprano Saxophone

Solo For B Flat Clarinet

Solo For Guitar

F Sharp Fetish

Chemical Hiatus Suite: Movs. I, II, III and IV

Agnus Dei - Gilles Binchois

Stinkfist - Tool

The Subject Will Deserve It

Quasi Sonata For Piano

Untitled
dramatic! restrained...

p

p
dramatic! restrained...

blend w/ ensemble

p
A. Fl.

w/ ensemble
blend w/ soprano

27

Pno.

w/ ensemble
right hand w/ baritone

27

S

w/ ensemble
blend w/ flute

mf

B

w/ ensemble
w/ piano

mf

27

Cb.

w/ piano (staggered)

mf
III

moderate tempo

B♭ Cl.

Piano

Cello

6

B♭ Cl.

Pno.

Vlc.

6

6

6

pp
Stinkfist-Tool

John Welsh - Tool

something had to change undeniable
something had to change dilemma bore dom's
something had to change a burden any

able constant over stim
not constant over
one should bear constant over

ululation numbs me but it's not enough
i would not want it's not enough
it any other way it's not enough
Stinkfist - Tool

I need more nothing seems to satisfy
I need more I don't want it
I need more I just need

to feel to breath to know

to feel to breath to know

it to feel to breath i'm

i'm a live finger deep within the border line show me
i'm a live re lax turn

a live re lax turn
that you love me and that we be long to ge ther re lax turn a round

and take a round and take

and take my hand I can help you change

I can help you change my hand I can help you change

ti erd mom ents in to blend and

plea sure say the word and blend and

we'll be well up on our way blend and
Stinkfist - Tool

balance pain and comfort deep within
balance you till you will not
balance want me another way

it's not enough I need more no thing seems to
it's not enough I need more I don't
it's not enough I need more I just

satisfy to feel to breath
want it to feel to breath
need it to feel to breath
to know I'm alive knescp deep within the
to know I'm alive

I'm alive

border line this may hurt a little but it's some thing you'll get used to re
lax slip a

lax slip a

lax slip a way some thing kind of
way some thing kind of

way some thing kind of
Sad about the way that 
sad about the things 
sad about the come 
to everything what 
to everything of 
to everything sub 
mean anything i'll keep 
I really i'll keep 
things at all i'll keep 

Stinkfist - Tool
elbow deep inside the borderline
show me that you love me and that we be
re lax
turn a round
re lax
turn a round
long together shoulder deep within the borderline
relax
and relax
and relax
take

turn a round and take my hand
my hand
my hand
The Subject Will Deserve It

John Welsh

1

those that can pity here may let fa

ll a tear if they think it well if they think it well the

2

those that can pity here may let fa

ll a tear if they think it well if they think it well the

3

if they think it well if they

think it well the subject will deserve it the

4

subject will deserve it if they

subject will deserve it if they

5

subject will deserve it if they
The Subject Will Deserve It

those that think it well can pity here

think those that can it well pity here

think it well if they think it well

may let fall a tear if they think it well

may let fall a tear if they think it well

if they think it well the subject

if they think it well the subject will deserve it

if they think it well the subject will deserve it

will deserve it the subject will deserve