

PART ONE

Shaking Hands and Playing Records: People, Things, and Their Relationship to My Life and Creative Output

It is my belief, that there is no such thing as a work of art devoid of outside influence. All ideas come from somewhere else. As Daphne Keller argues, “human culture is always derivative, and music perhaps especially so. New art builds on old art.”¹ Each new thought or idea builds off of that which came before it; this is how society grows. While this is an over-generalizing statement (that may or may not be true), I certainly feel that it is true of my own personal work. My work is influenced by a diverse array of outside influences; it is the combination of these things that results in my unique creative output. This essay will examine how two specific categories of influence, interpersonal relationships and other works of art (in other words, people and things), impact my work.

Due to the fact that all these people and things are interconnected, it is difficult to create a straightforward framework through which to organize my discussion. My approach then is to first speak of how people and things influence me in a general sense. These preliminary sections will contain some discussion regarding the relationship of practice-led research to others, as well as myself, but will be followed with a more formal discussion of practice-led research as a concept, and how it relates to my own work. I will then present an in-depth analysis of my specific works as they relate to my “streams of influence.”

1. Daphne Keller, “The Musician as Thief: Digital Culture and Copyright Law,” in *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, ed. Paul D. Miller (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 135.

People

Of all the things that influence my creative output, I feel that it may be my interpersonal relationships that have had the strongest overall impact. It seems sensible to divide my relationships into two separate categories; those which I would consider “romantic relationships” and those that might simply be labeled as “friendships.” While there is certainly overlap between the two categories, I still think it is useful to divide them for several reasons. First is the overwhelming disparity of time spent between the two. One tends to spend far more time with those they are romantically involved with than others. This results in the second reason for dividing the two – intimacy. The overall level (or at least a certain kind) of intimacy that is achieved in a romantic relationship will never be matched in a friendship. Third, there is the working relationship between my friends and I (of whom nearly all are musicians) which is seldom matched in a romantic relationship. This condition is obviously possible (notable examples of couples who also create art together include musicians Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore of the band Sonic Youth, actress Frances McDormand and film director Joel Coen, and composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham), however, is a circumstance that I have yet to encounter in my own personal life.

I will now, reluctantly, begin with a discussion of my romantic life and its influence on my work. This is a highly personal subject and with it comes a certain level of discomfort in its discussion. However, I feel that its influence on my work and who I am as a person is strong; avoiding the subject would be irresponsible and would only

serve to inhibit any personal growth I might make though the process of my self-analysis in this essay.

First, I would like to suggest that a great deal of the art of our time, has been created as some sort of response or reaction to sexual attraction (as either an attempt to impress, or as an expression of the emotion which motivates its creation). These factors may or may not be the main impulse in an artist's mind when creating a work of art, but I feel that they are probably always present on some level. This is a difficult thing to prove—we can never really know what an artist's true motivation in creating a work of art is—but there are several examples which may help to explain my stance. Take F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which is frequently referred to as "the great American novel." Its inclusion as a great work of American literature has a great deal to do with the theme of success and its relationship to the "American Dream" that runs throughout the book. Yet while this may be the overt theme of the novel, there is a strong sub-theme which is essentially about unrequited love and its effect on an individual. I do not think it is coincidental that Gatsby's unwavering obsession with Daisy Buchanan and the need to become successful in order to attempt to win her affections parallels Fitzgerald's efforts to become a successful writer before marrying Zelda Sayer. When his works were criticized (before the writing of the *Great Gatsby*) for being overly concerned with love and success, Fitzgerald responded, "But, my God! It was my material, and it was all I had to deal with."² This clearly suggests that Fitzgerald had no problem using his personal life as an inspiration for his writing. To look at another example, we might turn to the work of Alfred Hitchcock. A frequent theme that

2. Matthew J. Bruccoli, "A Brief Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald" in *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1995), 11th paragraph.

constantly occurs throughout his work is that of voyeurism. *Psycho*, *Rear Window*, and *Vertigo* are just a few examples of films that exhibit this theme. All three of these films also starred blonde actresses—Janet Leigh, Grace Kelly, and Kim Novak. Hitchcock had an obsession with blonde actresses, so much so that they are frequently referred to as “Hitchcock Blondes.” To me, it seems that Hitchcock is acting out his desire to “watch” these women by placing them as the stars of his films. *Vertigo* is perhaps the strongest example of this behavior; the film is literally about a man's obsession over a blonde woman. Now Hitchcock was, it appears, a happily married man, but this seems to not have kept him from consistently acting out some of his inner-fantasies through his creative work.

Like literature and film, music is frequently about love and sex. Because of its abstract nature, it is difficult to determine how much of music is driven by this motivator, but there are at least a few examples which can be used to suggest this is the case. Leon Janacek's second string quartet, subtitled “Intimate Letters” is a prime example of romance fueled art. Its inspiration is pulled from the turbulent emotions which run through a series of letters between Janacek and Kamila Stosslova, a married, younger woman with whom Janacek was obsessed. The tone of the work is exactly as one might expect given the situation which sparked its inception; it is a series of fragmented emotional snapshots—one moment it expresses joy and excitement, the next longing and misery.

More recently, musician Justin Vernon (who records under the name Bon Iver) broke through to relative stardom with his album *For Emma, Forever Ago*. The album was recorded, almost entirely, while Vernon had locked himself away in a cabin in

Wisconsin after the break up with both his old band and his girlfriend. Stephen Deusner of Pitchfork wrote in his review of the album that “the biographical details behind the creation of an album shouldn’t matter when it comes to a listener’s enjoyment, but *For Emma, Forever Ago*...exudes such a strong sense of loneliness and remoteness that you might infer some tragedy behind it.”³ It is clear that the genesis of this work came from the personal experience Vernon was dealing with at that particular time in his life. I cite this example in particular because it is quite similar to how my own work is created. While not everything I create comes from some sort of heartbreak or tragedy, there is always some element of my own personal experience present in the creation of any work of mine.

I did not become a musician to, for lack of a better term, “get chicks.” Honestly, I don’t feel like I had many other options. I began playing the violin at the age of three and simply cannot even remember a time in my life when I did not think of myself as a musician. However, I can say that I have made certain career choices and creative decisions based on how I thought it might improve my romantic life. In reading the previous sentence, I realize that this may come off as completely shallow and a bit absurd, but that doesn’t make it any less true. I’m still (relatively) young and still without a life partner and it’s an issue in my life that I can’t seem to ignore. I grew up during the dawn of MTV, which clearly didn’t create the notion of musicians as sex symbols, but certainly did a great deal to help accelerate the proliferation of this concept. During my teen years, this sexualization of musicians began to cross over into the classical world as well. Violinists such as Lara St. John and Vanessa Mae, although both extremely

3. Stephen M. Deusner, “Album Review: Bon Iver, *For Emma, Forever Ago*,” Pitchfork, accessed August, 8th, 2011, <http://www.pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/10709-for-emma-forever-ago/>.

talented performers, began promoting themselves as sexual objects. For example, Lara St. John's 1996 debut album featured the violinist on the cover, shot from the waist up, naked, with only her violin covering her breasts. This album cover seemed to create more discussion than the music contained within, and while the album seemed to sell well, I don't think anyone can be certain as to whether this was due to St. John's performance or the cover art. Regardless, the way that performing artists have been portrayed, by both the media and themselves, has made me completely aware of the effect that a musical performer can have on a member of the opposite sex. While I don't feel the need to try and promote myself as a sex symbol, it doesn't seem wrong to exploit my role as a musician for romantic advancement. Being a musician, in part, defines who I am and what I have to offer as a unique individual. Those that see this part of me as being of value are the type of people I tend to be interested in; those who don't see this as valuable will probably never have a meaningful place in my life.

When I am in a relationship with another person they tend to become the central focus (or at the very least a significant focus) of my life. They are the person with which I spend the bulk of my non-work time. In addition to the time spent in their physical presence, is the time spent reflecting on both their individual persona and our specific relationship to one another. The notion that they are not an influence on my creative work would be absurd. I do not separate my personal life (romantic or otherwise) from my work life or creative life; these things are all the same for me—they commingle.

To give an example, I must discuss my past relationship with an individual who, for the purposes of this discussion, I will simply refer to as L. She was a graphic design student at CalArts and we were romantically involved for approximately two years.

During that time, the discussion regarding the differences between our respective professions was frequently a source of disagreement between the two of us. In her opinion, we were incompatible because our creative lives were so different. From my perspective, there is not a lot of difference between a graphic designer and a composer. However, in order to come to this conclusion, I had to take it upon myself to do a fair amount of research regarding her field. When our relationship began, I knew very little of the graphic design world. In an effort to better understand L., I began reading text books on graphic design history. This resulted in two primary outcomes.

First, I began to see the parallels between graphic design and composition. They are both, at their core, an attempt to communicate. The “thing” that they communicate varies widely from work to work and artist to artist, but the notion of communicating an idea, message, emotion, etc., is not uncommon to either art form. Both fields present the artist with an essentially “blank canvas” through which they attempt to organize their material (either visually or sonically). For both fields, there is a long documented history of artistic development which has evolved over the years due to technological advances. One of these key advances is that of reproduction. Both graphic design and music made huge steps forward with the birth of the printing press. Suddenly, things that had previously necessitated being created individually by hand could now be mass produced in bulk, allowing for wider distribution as well as a more permanent form of documentation. This advancement continued in both fields; design began utilizing techniques like screen printing and photocopying while music suddenly gained the ability to preserve sound in a fixed medium. Another major advance for both fields was the dawn of digital media. Digitization allowed for works to be reproduced

for a fraction of the cost of physical media, as well as creating almost endless possibilities for creative manipulation. These technological advances dramatically increased the availability of art, creating an expansion in the range of influence a single work could have, as well as resulting in a fundamental change in the way artists thought about their own work. A further discussion on the impact of digital media will be presented in part two of this essay.

The second, and perhaps more important outcome, is that I began to find inspiration in the graphic works I was discovering. This led me to delve deeper into the works of several individual artists, most notably Vaughn Oliver, Stefan Sagmeister, and Mike Mills. I am now beginning to see these artists work as having a strong influence on both the way I approach my compositional work as well as my areas of personal research.

Vaughn Oliver had subconsciously been a heavy influence on me throughout my teenage years. His main artistic output has been as a designer for the 4AD record label. The Pixies, The Breeders, Belly, and Lush—all of whom have been musical inspirations for me throughout my life—released their entire outputs on the 4AD label; Oliver contributed to the album artwork for all of them. As a teen, the physical object of an album was frequently just as inspirational to me as the music contained within (and this is perhaps still the case). I was absorbing these albums, and Oliver's work, during the early to mid 1990's—a time during which the internet existed, but had yet to offer the wealth of information it does today. During this period, obtaining information about a band could be extremely difficult; frequently, the only information one had to go on was that which was included with the physical album itself. I would spend hours staring

at the packaging, in an effort to gain new insight to the music. Oliver's visual design work allowed me to begin to relate visual imagery to musical experience, as well as creating a sense of consistency from one artist to the next. While I had become aware of Oliver's work in my teens, it was my relationship with L. that caused me to look further into his work.

Stefan Sagmeister's medium is that of graphic design, yet I find that his writing and thoughts are applicable to any artistic medium. His book, *Things I've Learned In My Life So Far*, details the way he has chosen to live his life as an artist. Written while on a year long sabbatical from his design firm, Sagmeister asserts that in order to keep his work from becoming stagnant and stale, he must take a break from his regular job every seven years.⁴ What I find most inspiring about his work is that it always seems to be deeply personal. For example, one of his best known works is that of a poster for an AIGA event, in which he imbedded all of the text into his own chest via razor blade.⁵ Self-mutilation in the name of art—it doesn't get much more personal than that. A graphic designer's job, first and foremost, is to communicate. But although the need to communicate is always present in Sagmeister's work, it seems that simply being a graphic designer is not enough. Time and time again his work attempts to transcend the medium of graphic design and become a unique and personal artistic statement. Mike Mills is another artist who uses his unique personal feelings as an influence on his work. For example he states that his "Humans" project imbeds "highly personal themes into mass produced items such as posters, scarves, ribbons, fabric patterns, T-Shirts

4. Steven Heller, "Stefan Sagmeister's *Gesamtkunstwerk*," in *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far*, by Stefan Sagmeister (New York: Abrams, 2008), 12th paragraph.

5. The AIGA is the professional association for design.

and bags. Humans operates in between the art world and popular culture, in between graphic design and an art practice.”⁶ Both Sagmeister and Mills seem to blur the line between their profession as graphic designers and their role as artists. They cannot be placed in a single category and thus, are considered unique and innovative within their field. Researching these designers has allowed me to better contextualize my own practice as a performer-composer, providing me with a new perspective on the many roles an artist can play. If I define myself as an violinist, my role is very limited. If I expand that definition to violinist and composer, it broadens. It becomes even wider if I describe myself as a violinist/composer/improvisor. One step further is to simply call myself a musician. While this term is generally broad (and is always followed with “Well what kind of musician are you?”), it places no limitations or expectations on the role I “should be fulfilling” as a musician.

My investigation into these artists in the field of design would most likely have never been made without my involvement with L. This is just one example of how my romantic involvements have impacted my creative life, but I don’t think it would be inaccurate to state that every other romantic relationship I have had has in some way shaped the course of my creative output.

There have also been many “non-romantic” relationships that have had a huge impact on my creative life. Perhaps the most most notable is my association with Dave Reminick. The two of us worked together creatively for several years while I was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan as a graduate student at the University of Michigan. We were introduced to one another through my then girlfriend; yet another example of how

6. Mike Mills, “Humans,” Mike Mills, accessed August, 23rd, 2011, <http://mikemillsweb.com/humans.html>.

romantic relationships have shaped my creative life. Reminick and I played together in a band called The Teeth, a group which still stands out in my mind as one of my most rewarding creative efforts to date. The Teeth fused a punk rock aesthetic with compositional intention. All of our songs were created as a collaborative effort, written and workshopped collectively as a band in the rehearsal process. The practice of working as a group offered me the opportunity to see how the minds of three other musicians worked on a compositional level. Having had no formal compositional training that that time, our rehearsals, in many ways, functioned as my first composition lessons. This process had a huge impact on my later compositional efforts; it was a training ground for my own future work. Perhaps just as important as the experience of working together in The Teeth, were the music related conversations Reminick and I had with one another over the course of several years. Almost everything we talked about involved music. While we had many areas of shared musical interest, we were both also coming from very different musical backgrounds which gave us each unique interests and viewpoints. Additionally, Reminick served as a model for what a life in music could be. Rather than sticking to a single instrument, Reminick had degrees in composition, philosophy, saxophone, and music theory; on the side he played guitar and sang in punk bands. He was one of the few people I knew at the time who thought that this was an acceptable alternative to focusing ones career on a central musical goal. I believe that much of my own compositional aesthetic can be traced back to key conversations between the two of us. He was the one who first introduced me to the concept of “plunderphonics” (discussed at length in part two), which has subsequently become a strong area of interest and influence over the last several years. It was

through Reminick that this initial spark occurred. There is also a sense of what I might best describe as “overt brutality” in the way Reminick performs. This was apparent in his work as a soloist, improviser, and as a member of The Teeth. I feel that many of my own works are an attempt to try and capture this feeling compositionally.

Since moving to California in 2006, my musical life has been transformed by the individuals I work with in the Formalist Quartet.⁷ The group formed within my first days at CalArts, and it has been the one constant in my life since then. It is difficult to explain how involved the people in a quartet can become in your life. I have spent more time with them since moving here than any other individuals I know. There are hours spent together in rehearsal, traveling to concerts, touring, eating. The ways in which they have impacted my creative work is extensive and specific examples of this will be detailed later on in this essay. Yet there is a certain amount influence that they have on me that simply cannot be translated into words; there is something that you gain from a person simply by being in their presence. As a quartet, we spend a great deal of our time working on non-verbal communication; this is part of playing effectively as an ensemble. Short breaths through the nose, raised eyebrows, nods of the head, the movement of our instruments: these are all methods that enable us to know one another's intentions. Our individual personalities becomes evidenced through the music we create rather than the words we speak. Being surrounded by the quartet has changed me as both a performer and a composer. It is difficult to describe and document specifically what many of these changes are and what brought them about; like the music of Steve Reich, it is a process of very slow and gradual change. The

7. The other three members of the quartet are Andrew McIntosh, Mark Menzies, Ashley Walters.

Formalist Quartet is the longest running consistent group of musicians I have ever played with. I have played in bands and ensembles my entire life (or at least since I was thirteen, which feels like the same thing), but there has always been member changeover or a simple inability for these groups to continue longer than a few years. Time changes everything. An individual perspective on intonation, tempo, rhythm, is continually presented to me in three very different ways. We must all compromise in order for the group to work as a whole. Over time, the group has begun to move through this process with more ease and speed, and as a result, find its own individual sound. To give a very specific example, I would like to discuss how my own use of vibrato has changed since beginning to play with the quartet. All my violin training prior to attending CalArts was from a very traditional background. As such, vibrato was something I was expected to use most the time, particularly since most the repertoire I was performing at that time was from the classical to romantic period. The general use of vibrato has become more prevalent over the course of the twentieth century. The explanation for this has been explained by Mark Katz as occurring for three reasons:

First, [vibrato] helped accommodate the distinctive and often limited receptivity of early recording equipment. Second, it could obscure imperfect intonation, which is more noticeable on record than in a live setting. And third, it could offer a greater sense of the performer's presence on record, conveying to unseeing listeners what body language and facial expressions would have communicated in concert.⁸

This has resulted in vibrato becoming the established norm in the technical profile of most violinists today, as was the case for my playing when I arrived at CalArts in 2006 (although admittedly, my vibrato has never been as extreme as many violinists I've

8. Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 93.

encountered). However, over the course of the last 5 years playing with the Formalist Quartet, my overall use of vibrato has decreased dramatically. This is attributable to the type of music we play. The very first thing we ever played as an ensemble were chorales written by J.S. Bach. Vibrato was used much more sparingly in the Baroque era, so it seemed sensible for the quartet to nearly eliminate it from our performance of this repertoire. Additionally, we were using the chorales as an exercise in creating better intonation, adding vibrato (which in essence is a distortion of pitch), would have been self-defeating given our goal. While our initial objective as an ensemble was to perform all fifteen of Shostakovich's string quartets (of which we have performed only a few to date), we quickly were sidetracked by more contemporary repertoire. Since the music that we now focus on is so recently composed (we are often the first or second group to perform much of the music we play), there is no established performance practice. Vibrato, however, seems much less appropriate for the music of today due to an emphasis on non-traditional tuning systems (which would be rendered completely imperceptible with the addition of vibrato), the influence of electronically produced sounds, and a break from older compositional traditions. In fact, for many pieces we encounter, non-vibrato is the default mode of playing; the use of vibrato is usually indicated in the score for any notes or passages where the composer specifically wants that sound. This has resulted in a tendency to not use vibrato unless I am asked to. It has become a learned habit due to the amount of time I have spent putting it into practice while playing with the quartet.

Relationships play an important position in the life of any artist. Yet I feel that their analysis is frequently neglected as a method of examining the factors which

contribute to an artist's work. Personally, the relationships I share are perhaps the single most important influence on my work. While the examples that I have presented thus far are significant, there are certainly many more that are just as important. For example, the role that teachers have played in shaping my technique, musicality, and individual perspective has not even been touched on here—it could be discussed in an entire essay on its own—but it is of course one of the strongest contributing factors to my overall musical development. The discussion regarding the impact that individuals have played on my musical career and their relationship towards specific individual works, will continue throughout this essay, as well as in parts two and three.

Things

I have always been a consumer of art. For the purposes of this essay I am using the term “art” to include music, books, films, dance, visual art, etc. I was three years old when I received my first album, The Clash's *Combat Rock*, which was given to me by my uncle (because I had become fond of one of the songs through its extensive radio airplay); suddenly I was hooked. Other people's art has always been a huge influence on my on personal creative development. Some of these “things” have been mentioned in the previous section, and more will be presented within the discussion of my individual works as well as in the following two parts of my response, but it is still perhaps worthwhile discuss a few works that have had a strong influence on me throughout the years.

The best place to start this discussion is with Nirvana's breakthrough album *Nevermind*. I am of a certain age where it would probably have been impossible for me

to grow up in America and not have been aware of (and thus influenced in some way by) Nirvana. In a recent article in the New York Times, writer David Hajdu makes the observation that Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, Lou Reed, Paul McCartney, Jimi Hendrix and several other well regarded “rock” musicians were all born within a few years of one another. He offers the argument that this is partially due to the fact that they all would have been in their early teenage years in 1955 and 1956, when rock and roll was first exploding. Hajdu helps to substantiate this argument by citing Daniel J. Levitin, professor of psychology and the director of the Laboratory for Music Perception, Cognition and Expertise at McGill University, who claims that

fourteen is a sort of magic age for the development of musical tastes. Pubertal growth hormones make everything we’re experiencing, including music, seem very important. We’re just reaching a point in our cognitive development when we’re developing our own tastes. And musical tastes become a badge of identity.⁹

I feel a sense of relief in reading Hajdu’s argument; it gives a scientific explanation for the feeling of nostalgia that the year 1994 has held over me for years. Nirvana’s *Nevermind* was released in the fall of 1991 (when I was eleven years old) and their popularity never really wavered until Kurt Cobain’s death in April of 1994 (when I had just turned 14). Many of the works of art that have been important to me throughout my life were either created or personally discovered between this exact period.

It was *Nevermind* that prompted me to begin playing the guitar. My training was essentially self-taught, learning the guitar parts from *Nevermind* in its entirety. It didn’t take much skill and was fairly easy in comparison to playing the violin, but it was intensely rewarding. Cobain is frequently cited as saying that *Nevermind’s* break-

9. David Hajdu, “Forever Young? In Some Ways Yes,” *New York Times*, May 23rd, 2011, accessed June 9th, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/24/opinion/24hajdu.html?_r=2&ref=opinion.

through track, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was his best attempt at ripping off The Pixies. And so it was through Nirvana that I discovered The Pixies. If Nirvana made me want to play the guitar, The Pixies made me want to start a band. In 1994, the internet was a brand new thing. As I stated earlier in this essay, it was still relatively difficult to get information about musicians and artists at this time. The physical objects became the only basis for knowledge about a particular band, thus album covers and liner notes frequently held just as much inspiration as the music contained within the disc. It was through my discovery of The Pixies that I first became aware of the work of Vaughn Oliver. If Nirvana inspired me to learn guitar and the Pixies made me want to start a band, it was The Breeders’ *Last Splash* that made me want to learn drums. In the same way that I had learned guitar with *Nevermind*, I taught myself drums by learning *Last Splash* from beginning to end. Even still, that album is intensely important to me; I never get tired of it. Again, this work is tied to Vaughn Oliver (who created the cover) and is also connected to the Pixies (through Kim Deal who was the Pixies bassist and the principal singer/songwriter for The Breeders).

Aside from the motivation to learn guitar, learn drums, and start a band, it is difficult to describe what the actual impact of these (seemingly) connected works was on my creative life. Reflecting on this now, I think that what they all offered me was a sense of possibility. Through the process of becoming familiar with the music and learning to play those songs, I gradually came to the realization that it was possible to do the same things they did. They did not have extraordinary talent, they simply had something to offer. It was during this period that I first began to play in band and write songs; it was essentially the beginning of my composition career.

Since my teen years onward, there has never been moment in my life when I have not been actively consuming the works of other artists; they have been a constant source of influence and inspiration. John Cage's *Silence*, Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, the writing of Douglas Coupland, the paintings of Egon Schiele—these are just a few of the works that I have discovered along the way; there are many, many more that could be discussed. The point I would like to make, however, is that this collection of works that have influenced me over the years is unique—it is as if I have personally curated my own museum, the result of which is a web of influences that are still impacting my works to this day.

Practice-Led Research

The concept of “practice-led research” is still relatively foreign in the music world. In general, the term is far more popular in its application towards other art forms such as dance, creative writing, and the visual arts. Additionally, the entire concept seems yet to have been embraced by the American academic system and is far more accepted in England and Australia (although this is still a very recent development). To begin with, we must try and define what “practice-led research” is. This is somewhat difficult given that there seem to be a number of different terms used to label the same premise. Frequently practice-led research, practice-based research, creative research, experiential research, and practice as research are all used relatively interchangeably. These different terms are “a means to characterise the way in which practice can result in research insights,” and “are employed to make two arguments about practice which are often overlapping and interlinked: firstly... that creative work in itself is a form of

research and generates detectable research outputs; secondly, to suggest that creative practice—the training and specialised knowledge that creative practitioners have and the processes they engage in when they are making art—can lead to specialised research insights which can then be generalised and written up as research.”¹⁰ It has been further defined by artist Carole Gray:

By ‘practice-led’ I mean, firstly, research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners in the visual arts.¹¹

Although these definitions (particularly Gray’s) were perhaps intended to relate more specifically to other fields of artistic creation, they can be just as applicable to both musical performance and composition.

The very act of learning to play the violin is a practice-led method of research. It is, in fact, not even that dissimilar from scientific method. “Practicing,” at its core, is a method of trial and error. Once the desired outcome is found, repetition is utilized to prove that the same outcome can be reproduced consistently. Perhaps the more difficult acquisition is not the ability to play the instrument itself, but rather the knowledge required to allow one *to learn* to play the instrument. For performers, “how to practice” is the research method that we constantly strive for.

For composers, practice-led research becomes less clear. There are many composers who use what might be described as a more traditional “research process”

10. Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, “Introduction: Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice—Towards the Iterative Cyclic Web,” in *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, ed. Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 2, 5.

11. Carole Gray, “Inquiry Through Practice: Developing Appropriate Research Strategies,” (1998), accessed August 27th, 2011, <http://www.carolegray.net/Papers%20PDFs/ngnm.pdf>, 3.

to help them determine how to structure their works, what material might be contained within, and many other contributing factors. However, there are many other composers (like myself) whose research methods are far less concrete, making it difficult for their compositional process to be defined as research based. This is perhaps caused by a lack of understanding of what “practice” actually entails. Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe state that “practice needs to be understood in its wider sense as *all* the activity an artist/creative practitioner undertakes. Practitioners think, read and write as well as look, listen and make.”¹² When practice is looked at in this regard, it becomes much easier to see how all musicians, and even all artists, are working from a practice-led research method, whether they define their work in those terms or not.

I would like to examine two specific artists, Charles Ives and Steve Reich, who have been influential, both on a personal level and towards the advancement of American music in the twentieth century. Both performer-composers, Ives and Reich have utilized practice-led research of a means of creating their unique musical identities. Ives grew up in Connecticut, as the son of a band director. Ives was surrounded by music throughout his childhood and the experiences he encountered as a child contributed greatly to the development of his musical voice. There is a (now legendary) story of Ives witnessing two competing marching bands in the town square. In his biography on Ives, Jan Swafford suggests that this experience allowed Ives to arrive at “unprecedented spatial effects in the Fourth Symphony, surrounding the main

12. Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe, “Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-led Researchers,” in *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, ed. Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 214.

orchestra with distant choirs of instrumental groups and voices.”¹³ Ives’s father, George, was known to have been constantly experimenting with the possibilities of musical sound and is frequently cited as having been perhaps the greatest contributing factor to Ives’ development of style. Swafford notes that “George Ives’s experiments and ideas and the life of Danbury shaped [Charles Ives’s] perception of nearly every dimension of music.”¹⁴ Michael Nyman has noted that “many of the features of the music of Charles Ives that make him relevant to experimental music also stem from observation: less perhaps the observation of acoustic phenomena than of the acoustic-social behavior of men using sounds.”¹⁵ For example, Nyman writes:

Ives noticed that in a band performance the different ability and temperament of the players produced behavioural and consequently musical discrepancies which were of great fascination: a nervous viola player who speeds through his material, a lethargic horn player who was “unable to divide his attention between music stand and conductor, so he took what was for him a comfortable pace whenever the music got a little difficult, and he stuck to it through thick and thin so consistently that in several places it became the regular procedure for the band to play its cadence with a flourish and then wait quietly at attention until the horn player got through *his* last two measures”.

Such fluctuations between one individual and another found their way into Ives’ own music, and it is very significant that a serious composer of the times should find such things of interest at all, that he should be aware of a natural, relative, musical life which existed outside the citadel of Germanic absolutism.¹⁶

I would argue that there is a relationship between the manner in which Ives was raised (from a musical standpoint) and his awareness of this “natural, relative, musical life,” in that both are based upon experiential knowledge. Again, Smith and Dean suggest that

13. Jan Swafford, *Charles Ives: A Life with Music*, (New York: Norton, 1998), 92.

14. Swafford, *Charles Ives*, 88.

15. Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40.

16. *Ibid.*, 40-41.

at the basis of the relationship between creative practice and research is the problematic nature of conventional definitions of 'research', which are underpinned by the fundamental philosophical quandary as to what constitutes 'knowledge'. Definitions of research used in higher education are almost always similar to the OECD definition: "Creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications." This suggests that research is a process which generates knowledge, but takes knowledge as being an understood given. There is in this an implication that knowledge is generalisable (that is, applicable to some other process or event than that which has been studied in its production), and transferable (that is, can be understood and used by others in a manner which is essentially congruent with that of the original). It can be argued that artworks often embody such generalisable and transferable knowledge, so that aspect of the definition is not necessarily problematic to creative arts practitioners (if they "increase the stock"), though higher education administrators may find the idea that art can transmit knowledge more problematic. However, there is also an unstated implication in this definition, or at least in most interpretations of it, that knowledge is normally verbal or numerical. Since it is clear that a sonic or visual artwork can sometimes transmit knowledge in non-verbal and non-numerical terms, we believe that any definition of knowledge needs to acknowledge these non-verbal forms of transmission. It also must include the idea that knowledge is itself often unstable, ambiguous and multidimensional, can be emotionally or affectively charged, and cannot necessarily be conveyed with the precision of a mathematical proof.¹⁷

Smith and Dean are arguing for the notion that knowledge can be generated through the assimilation of creative works rather than strictly through research method alone, and that the process of acquiring this knowledge is valid form of research in terms of its ability to inform creative practice. I would argue that it is not only creative works that generate knowledge, but also everyday life. For Ives, the influence of his father, his observations of the musicians surrounding him, and living in New England under the strong influence of transcendentalism,¹⁸ all created knowledge which contributed

17. Smith and Dean, "Introduction: Practice-led Research," 2-3.

18. This influence is clearly evidenced in Ives's Essay Before a Sonata, in which he writes at length about Emerson, Thoreau, and "The Alcotts."

heavily towards his creative work. The acquisition of this knowledge was itself a form of research.

As we turn to Steve Reich, we can see how a few unique life experiences generated enough knowledge upon which to build his entire career. Reich himself explains:

In the mid-1960's I became extremely interested in tape loops, particularly of people speaking. At the same time I was looking at musical notation of Ghanaian drumming in A.M. Jones's great book *Studies in African Music*. In late 1964 I recorded a black Pentecostal preacher in Union Square in San Francisco. He was preaching about Noah and the Flood. At home I made various tape loops of his incredibly musical voice. One was of him saying "It's gonna rain!"

I had two cheap mono recorders and made two identical copies of the loop. I put one on each machine and put on my headphones. By chance, the two loops were exactly lined up in unison. The sound appeared to be in the middle of my head, but as I listened, it started to move to the left—first to my left ear, then down my left arm, out across the floor to the left, then finally a kind of reverb between the channels. I kept listening until the loops were 180 degrees out of phase and I could hear "It's gonna, its gonna, rain, rain." I kept on listening and slowly, very slowly, the two loops came back into unison. This was clearly something to pursue.¹⁹

This chance occurrence, which arose out of Reich's experimental practice, gave him the inception for the concept of "phasing" as a compositional technique. Refining the process of phasing created by the two tape loops, Reich created *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*. These two works were the beginning of an obsession with phasing. After translating this method of phasing to live instruments, Reich created *Piano Phase* in 1967, *Violin Phase* in 1968, and eventually *Drumming* in 1971.²⁰ But it was not phasing alone that allowed Reich to create *Drumming*; given his earlier interest in A.M. Jones's *Studies in African Music* it was not surprising that Reich traveled to Ghana in 1970 to

19. Steve Reich, "An Introduction, or My (Ambiguous) Life with Technology," in *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, ed. Paul D. Miller (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 1.

20. *Ibid.*, 2.

study african drumming at the Institute for African Studies.²¹ It was Reich's previous work with phasing as well as his time in spent in Ghana that created the situation under which *Drumming* could be conceived. In the summers of '73 and '74, Reich began to study Balinese Gamelan in Berkeley, California at the Center for World Music. It was in '74 that Reich began working on *Music for 18 Musicians*, a work which clearly owes a debt to the Gamelan tradition.²² There is a clear relationship between Reich's involvement in the music of other cultures and the works that he produced at that time. In his "Manifesto for Performative Research," Haseman writes that

it is well accepted in the literature on both quantitative and qualitative research that research design needs to flow from a central research question or problem statement, or (in grounded theory) from the experiences and understanding of the population being researched. The importance of identifying "the problem" or "the issue" is evident both in competitive grant processes and in framing research proposals for doctoral study. As a matter of course, applicants are asked to give a clear statement of the problem; to set out aims and objectives and the research questions to be answered; and researchers are often asked to list the hypotheses to be tested.²³

Given this statement, how would one qualify Reich's work? Was it research? Where was the problem and what were its objectives? Haseman continues his statement with the following insight:

Many practice-led researchers do not commence a research project with a sense of 'a problem.' Indeed they may be led by what is best described as 'an enthusiasm of practice': something which is exciting, something which may be unruly, or indeed something which may be just becoming possible as new technology or networks allow (but of which they cannot be certain). Practice-led researchers construct experiential starting points from which practice follows. They tend to 'dive in,' to commence practicing to see what

21. Steve Reich, *Music for 18 Musicians*, Steve Reich and Musicians, ECM-1-1129, 1978, 33⅓rpm, liner notes.

22. Ibid.

23. Brad Haseman, "A Manifesto for Performative Research," (2006), accessed August 27th, 2011, http://eprints.qut.edu.au/3999/1/3999_1.pdf, 3.

emerges. They acknowledge that what emerges is individualistic and idiosyncratic. This is not to say these researchers work without larger agendas or emancipatory aspirations, but they eschew the constraints of narrow problem setting and rigid methodological requirements at the outset of a project.²⁴

Reich was fortunate enough to have not been working under the confines of an academic degree, which allowed him to utilize his “enthusiasm of practice” as a means of developing works which may not have been clearly defined at the outset. It is clear, however, that Reich’s methods of practice-led research were vital for the creation of these works, and on a larger level, his entire career.

The overall impact of Ives and Reich is huge. Ives innovations cause him to frequently be cited the grandfather of contemporary music, while Reich has influenced a whole collection of composers, ensembles, and rock bands. Both have broken away from the role of a traditional composer and their careers have helped in the establishment of the concept of a “performer-composer.” While the notion of practice-led research is still relatively new and has still not been totally embraced by the academic community, it is clear that both Ives and Reich utilized a practice-led method of research in both their works and ultimately, their lives.

SPECIFIC WORKS

...still trying to make ends meet... (2006)

It is logical to begin an in depth analysis of my creative process with *...still trying to make ends meet...* due to the fact that I consider it the first mature work of my compositional output. The piece, for solo violin, was essentially written in a single sitting in 2006 and is a prime example of how practice-led research led to the creation

24. Ibid., 3-4.

of a work. Its inception came directly out of my own individual career frustrations. During my first semester as a master's student at CalArts, I felt as though my attention needed to be focused on learning repertoire. I was, after all, in a performance program. Yet every time I walked into the practice room, all I really wanted to do was write music. I was conflicted; it seemed wrong for me to be composing when I had so much other music to learn. This, I suspect, had something to do with the years of "traditional" training I had endured in my previous degrees where an emphasis had been placed on realizing "the composer's" vision, rather than the performer's. The solution, however, was simple—I switched my major to the "performer-composer" program; now the composer's and the performer's vision could be one in the same. I place this term, "performer-composer," in quotes because, even now after finishing that degree and beginning another, I am still unsure of its usefulness, as well as what it actually attempts to define. In other words, I find the term incredibly limiting. This is not to say that I don't think the "performer-composer" label can be useful in a discussion of the work of many artists who are active today; however, I feel that part of the necessity for its creation was as an attempt and find a more totally inclusive definition to apply towards artists who's work was neither strictly individual performance or composition, and with this objective, I feel it frequently fails. For many artists, it is a completely accurate way to describe their efforts, but for many others, it excludes a great deal of what they do in their musical lives. For me, the term "performer-composer" only covers a portion of what I do. This specific portion could be analyzed separately, but I feel that this would miss the point. I am looking for an all-inclusive approach to my life as a musician—all my musical activities are interconnected with one another. ...*still trying to*

make ends meet... demonstrates this point clearly. It is a piece that could not have been written by anyone other than a violinist; it is “violinistic” in its construction. More specifically, it was composed through an improvisational practice that was an extension of my previous experience utilizing extended techniques found in the works of other composers. The time, energy, and effort I had spent learning other works over the past several years was the research process that prepared me for composing this piece.

A great deal of the textural and harmonic language of the piece is directly related to a series of pieces by Sonic Youth guitarist Thurston Moore.²⁵ These pieces of Moore’s are performed entirely on guitars, rely heavily on the use of harmonics, and are an exploration of fragility and instability. It was not the entirety of these works that influenced my composition, rather, it was as if a brief moment had left an impression in my memory that had faded throughout the years. My composition began as an attempt to reclaim that memory. *...still trying to make ends meet...* is the first of many examples of how a specific work by another artist led to the inspiration for my own artistic statement. These inspirations can range from actual musical material which I may appropriate, to a sonic identity I may attempt to replicate, or to a simple thought or concept which leads my mind to place it may have never reached on its own.

At its core, *...still trying to make ends meet...* seems to be about the process of transition. The opening gesture comes from a place of silence, moves into a resonating chord, and returns to silence. This first motive could be analyzed as a microcosm of the entire piece. The piece, ending in the same way that it began, suggests that

25. These pieces were part of the score to the 1995 film *Heavy*.

transition is cyclical process that goes on indefinitely. Throughout the work, there is a constant change in the overall sound quality that I produce through the use of specific bow placement. This bow placement, along with musical material, is left open to be improvised in many sections of the piece. Given that the beginning and ending points of these improvisations are already defined, these brief moments are literal transitions from one notated section to the next. Additionally, the piece is full of motion from consonance to dissonance, clarity to distortion, and absence of pulse and tempo to strict metronomic time and rhythmic structures.

From a metaphorical standpoint, I think this work is representative of my transition from thinking of myself as a performer to thinking of myself as a composer or, despite my disdain for the term, performer-composer. Several months ago, one of my students in my "Introduction to Composition" class asked to meet with me privately with the purpose of me looking over a recently finished piece. We sat down and discussed it, and in the end I told him that I thought it was well thought out piece and that I was very interested to hear it as well as to see what he decided to write next. This led to him comment that he wasn't really sure that he would be writing anything next because he wasn't really a composer. This, of course, reminded me of myself. I told him that, since he had just brought me a completed piece, with the intention of me evaluating it for its compositional value, he must be a composer. It was difficult for him to argue with this logic, and I think that he gained a sense of relief through this realization. At the time I wrote *...still trying to make ends meet...* there was a fundamental shift in towards how I regarded myself that needed to take place in order for me to be satisfied with myself

creatively. In reality, it was really as simple as creating this piece and deciding to call myself a composer.

hope and optimism never got me anywhere (2009-2010)

This work, for string quartet, took me longer to complete than any other piece I've ever written. The initial inception for the piece came several years before I wrote a single note, and was directly influenced by the song "Busy Lights, Busy Carpet" by the D.C. post-hardcore band Q and Not U. It was perhaps not the entire song itself that inspired me, but rather just the first fifteen seconds or so. The opening of the song features two electric guitars, panned in the stereo field hard right and left, playing a hocketing sixteenth note figure. I cannot explain why, but for some reason I had the inspiration to translate this opening to a string quartet, with the two violins placed opposite each other (rather than next to each other as is usual in a string quartet set up) to recreate the feeling of the stereo field heard on the recording. I spent, in my estimation, the next two years thinking about this opening, planning to write the string quartet but never getting around to it. The second inspiration for this work came after viewing visual artist Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #65* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. The physical piece itself, instead of being created by the artist, was executed by a team of assistants following instructions that read: "Lines not short, not straight, crossing and touching, drawn at random using four colors, uniformly dispersed with maximum density, covering the entire surface of the wall."²⁶ These instructions were essentially a

26. National Gallery of Art, Press Office, "Conceptual Work of Art in Progress at National Gallery of Art," National Gallery of Art, last modified May 18th, 2004, <http://www.nga.gov/press/2004/releases/spring/lewitt.shtm>.

score to create a work of visual art, but the musician in me could not help but see that they could just as easily be used to create a piece of music. Additionally, LeWitt's work, once completed, looked like a graphic score in and of itself. The visual image the piece left in my memory, coupled with the term "maximum density" from its instructions, became highly influential on sound world I was beginning to conceive for my quartet.

While these two works had set things in motion in my mind, it was still quite some time before I began writing any notes. It wasn't until a year or so later that I found the motivation to begin writing the piece. The circumstance which finally motivated me to begin was the frustration surrounding the relationship between myself and L. After months of attempting to gain her interest, I had resolved to give up. The title for the piece, "hope and optimism never got me anywhere," came directly out of this experience. Shortly after making the decision to "give up," L. left town for a few weeks—it was during this period that I wrote the bulk of the material for the piece. The work was born out of angst and frustration, and this is precisely the emotional content the work contains. It took me the next two years to actually complete the quartet, and it wasn't until the conclusion of our relationship that I was actually able to finish the work and put it to rest.

When I saw the Sol LeWitt piece in D.C., I happened to be on tour with the Formalist Quartet. As I mentioned previously, this ensemble has had a huge impact on my life over the last five years, and that influence continued when it came to write my own work for quartet. From the moment I began working on the piece, I knew that I was writing it for, as the quartet is frequently referred, "the formalists." The act of having spent several years performing contemporary string quartets is, in my opinion, the best

possible research one can do when preparing to write a string quartet of their own. This is an experience that most composers will never have. My relationship with each of the other three members of the ensemble has in many ways informed the material I wrote. While composing the piece, I was always imaging what it would sound like being played specifically by the Formalist Quartet, rather than any other string quartet. The work is dedicated to them, and each part was written specifically for each player. Due to the fact that two of the members of the quartet both play viola, we have no set roles within the group. I rotate between first and second violin, and Andrew McIntosh and Mark Menzies rotate between first violin, second violin, and viola. Yet as I was writing the piece, I had already made the decision as to who would play which part, and wrote the material accordingly. Given that it is *my* string quartet I wrote the first violin part for myself. It is the only part within the work that asks for any improvisation. While the other members of the quartet are excellent improvisors, I knew that I wanted to keep them to strictly notated material. I was in fact hesitant about including any improvisational elements at all, but for that specific moment in the piece, which functions like a brief interlude (almost as if it is a short individual piece), it seemed like the best way for me to communicate my ideas, which would have become quite difficult (and less effective) to notate traditionally. The second violin part was written for Mark Menzies and is quite similar in character to the first violin part; the two frequently function together as a unit. The reason for specifically writing this part for Menzies is difficult to describe in words (I'm not not even entirely sure I fully understand it myself). I suppose that, despite Menzies being an excellent violist, I still think of him as a violinist first and foremost. Given that he was also, at one time, my violin teacher (and

still continues to be if not officially), there are bound to be similarities in our playing. I find that this is less the case between Andrew McIntosh and myself. Since the two violin parts operate as a pair, it seemed sensible to try and keep as much continuity as possible in playing style between the two violins. The viola part then falls to McIntosh. Just as the two violin parts frequently operate together, so do the viola and cello parts. I have conceptualized most of the piece as somewhat of a competition between the two violins and the viola and cello. It is if they are teams, fighting against one another. Of course, there was no option for Walters to play anything other than cello, but I was always conscious of who she is as a player when writing the part. The work is dedicated to the Formalist Quartet and will be premiered on December 10th, 2011.

music for sleeping (2011)

music for sleeping was written with a very specific function in mind—to serve as a lullaby for the newborn child of my friend, Colin Wambsgans. Wambsgans had asked several composer/friends of his to write pieces which he could then perform or play for his child. Already, it is clear that this piece would never have been created without the already existing relationship between myself and my friend. Much of the instrumentation for the work was already mostly determined from the beginning of the project due to the fact that it was necessary for Wambsgans to be able to perform the piece for his child and only had access to (and the ability to play) certain instruments. This resulted in the decision to write for (very simple) piano and pre-recorded material.

However, the larger influence on the work was the first track, “1/1,” from Brian

Eno's album *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. This album was the first that Eno actively labeled as "Ambient Music." In his "manifesto" regarding the term, he states:

An ambience is defined as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint. My intention is to produce original pieces ostensibly (but not exclusively) for particular times and situations with a view to building up a small but versatile catalogue of environmental music suited to a wide variety of moods and atmospheres.... Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.²⁷

These were essentially the same conditions with which *music for sleeping* needed to operate in order to function effectively as a lullaby. I was listening to *Music for Airports* heavily at the time I wrote *music for sleeping* (although I was unaware of Eno's manifesto at that time). The result was my own work borrowing heavily from both the sound world Eno created, as well as the compositional method that was used to create it. Eno's work contains very little in the way of a rhythmic pulse. A solo piano is featured, playing a simple, mostly single note melody. It is accompanied by long drones and sustained ringing of bells. It is repetitive, but without ever feeling like a repeatable pattern has been created. This is, literally, the approach I took when assembling the pre-recorded track for my work. The track contains eight separate violin parts, all of which alternate between sustained notes and silence. I recorded each part, without any planning as to the duration of the individual notes, the silence between them, or the length of that particular track. I then cut out segments from each track (each of which were approximately three to four minutes long) and assembled them together, so that each track was now thirty-two minutes long. This seemed like the

27. Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 96-97. Eno's "manifesto" was originally released on the inner sleeve of the *Music for Airports* album.

appropriate amount of time for a piece designed to lull you to sleep. Too short and you might not fall asleep, too long and it might wake you up before it is done. No attention was paid to the relationship between one track with any other, allowing me to create a continuous texture from very little source material while avoiding any exact repetition of itself. Then, only after completing the backing track (and while listening to it), did I compose the piano part to go with it. Rather than use the same piano melody over and over again as Eno does, I created a formal structure that would allow for consistent pacing and character while avoiding strict pitch repetition. This form is repeated twelve times over the course of the piece, with each successive occurrence stretching the limits of the formal structure. It is as if the melody starts off in a place of wakefulness and gradually moves to a dream state.

Even the title of my work pays tribute to Eno's. It took a considerable amount of time to come up with a suitable title; in the end it just seemed more appropriate to simply acknowledge the influence of Eno rather than to try and hide it. However, it was not as if I had originally set out with a goal of being influenced by Eno as my objective... it just happened. I was in the recording studio working, and the material I was working with simply developed along the same lines as Eno's work. I have found that the things that inhabit my everyday life materialize in strange ways. I cannot help this, nor would I want to. It is part of what prevents me from repeating myself as a composer.

not a place to build monuments or cathedrals (2010)

This work was written for the New Century Players at CalArts. My compositional

goal in writing the piece was to attempt to integrate an “experimental rock” aesthetic into a concert hall chamber music setting. The work is scored for an ensemble of twelve players plus two electric guitar soloists. The ensemble part is notated in a completely traditional manner and was designed to be as easy to read and simple as possible. The guitar parts, on the other hand, are almost completely improvised (at least in terms of pitch content) and utilize graphical notation to convey their ideas (see fig. 1). The reason for placing these two systems of notation in juxtaposition to one another was specifically based on the knowledge of the people I would be working with. The New Century Players ensemble is made up of CalArts faculty and students, who can sometimes be resistant to non-traditional forms of notation. Additionally, I knew that the rehearsal process for the piece would offer me very little time with the ensemble, and the need to explain new notational systems would have used up much of the time available for rehearsal. For this reason, I tried to make the ensemble part as easy to read and play as possible (while still conveying my compositional ideas). The guitar part, however, would have been completely useless had it been notated traditionally. This is for several reasons. First, I was writing the guitar parts specifically for myself and Chris Kallmyer, who is a close friend (and primarily a trumpet player)

Figure 1. Excerpt of graphical notation used for electric guitars in *not a place to build monuments or cathedrals*.



with whom with I've worked with on many occasions. While both of us are fine musicians who have no problem reading traditional notation, we are also primarily self-taught when it comes to our guitar playing and neither one of us relates our guitar playing to traditional notational systems—essentially, we play by ear. The opportunity to work with Kallmyer on this project was another reason I scored the work for two electric guitars. It could have been one or three, or for some other improvising instrument all together, but I knew, based on Kallmyer's background (he grew up amid the Washington, D.C. post-punk scene), that he would understand the aesthetic and sound I was looking for and would be able to execute it with little difficulty. Additionally, I knew that the bulk of the piece could be rehearsed between the two of us with less time constraints, which is why the solo parts are far more involved than the ensemble part. In other words, the piece was written for the players.

Yet another reason for using a graphical notation system for the guitars was that there was really no way to notate the sound world that I was looking for in a traditional manner. This is due to the fact that this sound world was directly influenced by the albums of the band Sonic Youth. Sonic Youth's musical aesthetic is noisy, chaotic, dissonant, and was developed through a process of experimentation, improvisation and group collaboration. For this reason, it seemed completely absurd to attempt to recreate this sound through traditional notation; it would defeat the point. The work of Sonic Youth, and particularly albums that I would consider from their middle period,²⁸

28. For me, this middle period spans from roughly 1990-1998 and includes the albums *Goo*; *Dirty*; *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*; *Washing Machine*; and *A Thousand Leaves*. It should be noted that this period of time also directly corresponds to my teenage years, which is when I began listening to them heavily. I think is part of the reason this period of their work seems to resonate with me more than their earlier or later work.

have been a strong influence on me for most of my music listening life. The band formed sometime between 1980 and '81, and are still together producing music today, which means they are one of the few bands that have existed for as long as I have. I essentially grew up with these albums as the soundtrack to my life. Sonic Youth, with all their various activities and eagerness to perform in rock, improvisation, and experimental realms, are in many ways perceived as the “academics” of the indie rock world. They’ve managed to build their careers in a sustainable way playing the music they want to play, without “selling out,” and have continually pushed musical boundaries. This is, in many ways, what I am attempting to achieve in my own career.

Recently, *not a place to build monuments or cathedrals* was performed for the second time, by the ensemble wildUp—a Los Angeles based new music collective of which I am an active member as both a performer and composer. Again, Chris Kallmyer and I played the guitar parts. What I find interesting about this experience is the influence that Chris Rountree, the director of wild Up, had on the success of the performance and my subsequent feelings towards the piece. Rountree’s approach was to significantly cut the durations of several sections of the piece, resulting in shortening what was once an eleven minute piece down to only eight minutes. Initially, I was somewhat offended that he had made these decisions without consulting me. While I may have been the composer and soloist of the piece, in performance there was little I could do to prevent Rountree from determining the overall pacing; in the end, all the power falls to the man waving his arms. Additionally, the piece had been put together with even less rehearsal time than in its initial performance; my expectations for the success of the performance were low. However, the piece ended up going very well

and it was perhaps the most successful performance of the concert. I can attribute this to two reasons. First, the faster pacing made the piece work better. In retrospect, I now feel that my initial timings for things were too long, resulting in the work feeling less cohesive. At the request of Rountree, I will be expanding the piece for a larger ensemble for another performance in 2012. Based on my experience from the second performance, it is my intention to integrate Rountree's abbreviated timings into the new version of the score. Second, the piece was performed in what is traditionally a rock venue, rather than an actual concert hall. Rather than having an "experimental rock" aesthetic placed in a chamber music setting within a concert hall, the concert hall chamber experience had now been transported into a rock music environment. The discussion of the relationship between environment and compositional development will be expanded upon in part two, however, my point is that neither of these situations would have occurred without the influence of Rountree. Our relationship is such that, while we both respect each other immensely as musicians, we are frequently in disagreement with one another...and this is a good thing. We keep each other in balance, oscillating between giving and receiving ideas, support, and inspiration.

my memories will never be an accurate representation (2008)
you take your path, i'll take mine (2009)

The reason for grouping these two compositions together is because they were both written for Andrew McIntosh. They are also both companion pieces to works written by McIntosh for me. These works, perhaps more than any others, display the relationship of influence between the two of us.

In 2007 I became relatively obsessed with works of short durations. Part of this obsession stems directly from earlier conversations with Dave Reminick regarding the band Naked City.²⁹ He had commented that their songs were so short that sometimes the memory of listening to the piece was longer than the actual experience of listening to the piece. This stuck with me and at some point I began asking for composers to write me works under a minute long. McIntosh was one of the few who did. The result was a work titled *Axolotl*. Although its duration is short (approximately 45 seconds long) it is one of the most difficult pieces I've ever played. This is due to the system of notation employed by McIntosh, which resulted in my having to completely re-notation the piece to be able to actually play it accurately. It was then suggested by McIntosh that I write him a piece in return. The result was *my memories are never an accurate representation*. Conceptually, the work is a direct result of the conversation I had with Reminick regarding a listener's memory of a piece. The material of the piece is presented and played, and is then repeated using harmonic pressure, resulting in a sort of "ghost memory" of the original. Musically, the work is quite difficult in terms of both pitch content (full of leaps across the instrument and a fragmented glissando which occurs over the duration of the piece) and rhythmic structure (it is written in a sort of "mock new-complexist" style). This was my attempt at revenge on McIntosh for having written such a difficult piece for me in the first place.

A few years later, McIntosh and I were traveling to San Diego for a rehearsal. We arrived at our destination much earlier than anticipated and so, as a way to kill time,

29. Naked City was a band fronted by saxophonist/composer John Zorn in the late 80's and early 90's. Their album *Torture Garden* featured forty-two songs, only two of which were over a minute long.

I suggested that we both try to write a piece for one another in the limited amount of time we had before our rehearsal began. The result of this situation was McIntosh's *stray from the path but a little, and all is lost* and my work *you take your path, i'll take mine*. The relationship between the two titles is not coincidental. McIntosh had come up with his title a few days earlier, thinking that it sounded like the kind of title that I would use for a piece of my own. After seeing what he had titled his piece, I came up with my own as a direct response to his. The creation of these two works happened at exactly the same time, yet it is only because the two of us happened to be together on that day with some extra time. But this is exactly the way the idea's for my works tend to come about. I will be having a conversation with someone, or reading a book, or watching a performance, and suddenly I will have an idea that wasn't there just moments before.

“An Die Musik” (2011)
“Radio Cure” (2011)

The last two works I will examine here must, again, be taken into consideration as a pair. They were both written at the same time, for the same ensemble, and are both arrangements of works by other composers.³⁰ Despite the fact that they are based on pre-existing works, I still feel that they are both uniquely original and are also an excellent example of how I have integrated the influence of other works in to my own creative statement.

30. “An Die Musik” is a song by the composer Franz Schubert while “Radio Cure” is a song by the rock band Wilco.

These two arrangements were commissioned by Chris Rountree for wild Up and were to be included as part of a set of songs which would pair arrangements of German “Art Songs” with American “Folk Songs.” Originally, several composers were contacted about composing arrangements for this program; in the end, of the five works we performed, three were arranged by Rountree while I arranged the other two. The guidelines I was required to follow for this project were that I was (1) limited to a string orchestra with the addition of two clarinets and one keyboard player (with the availability of toy piano and/or harmonium), (2) only able to use female singers, and (3) to keep the pieces at an approximate length of three to three and a half minutes each. The first task I set out to accomplish was to pick the songs that I would arrange. This was, personally, a difficult thing to accomplish since I have never been particularly influenced by either German lieder or the American folk tradition. Rather than try and search endlessly for some work that might inspire me, I thought back on the things that had already inspired me and attempted to find a way to justify them as fitting into the guidelines.

In 2008, I was performing at the venue Listen/Space in Brooklyn, NY, which is run by Katie Porter and Devin Maxwell. Both Porter and Maxwell are CalArts alumni, which is how I initially became connected with them. After the concert, Porter was playing music through the stereo system in the venue while the performers and audience conversed. Mid-way through conversation, I was struck by what I heard and immediately (and I suspect quite rudely) ceased conversation. It was hauntingly beautiful and felt oddly familiar, as if I had surely heard it at some point before. It featured a female singer, accompanied by a lightly strummed acoustic guitar. As the

second verse began, a second female voice (an overdub of the same singer) joined in harmony. Their voices were somewhat operatic, though not insincere. Suddenly, after the conclusion of the second verse, a distorted electric guitar began to play. It sounded distant, soaked in reverb, and in stark contrast to the perceived closeness of the acoustic guitar and voices. The electric guitar solo was dissonant and chaotic—the antithesis of what one might expect to hear in juxtaposition with the vocals and acoustic guitar. I, of course, had to find out what it was, and was informed by Porter that it was Josephine Foster’s arrangement of Schubert’s “An Die Musik” from her album *A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing*.³¹ Foster’s version of Schubert’s song was far more accessible to a listener such as myself. Had I been listening to a recording of Schubert’s original, I don’t think I would have bothered to take notice. It was through Foster’s version that I was able to see the genius of Schubert’s original work. “An die Musik” seemed like the only logical “art song” to use for my wild Up arrangement.

When confronted with the request to pick an “American Folk” song, the two artists that I immediately thought of were Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie (both of whom Rountree borrowed from for his arrangements). While I am aware of the contribution that both Dylan and Guthrie have made to the development of American music, I have never felt particularly drawn to either of them. My solution then, was to look to the present day for artists who have embraced the American folk tradition. The first thing that came into my mind was Wilco’s *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*.

I personally consider this album one of the greatest, of any genre, to be released in the last ten years. I credit a large part of the album’s success to the

31. Foster’s *A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing* was an entire album of her arrangements of German lieder.

involvement of Jim O'Rourke, who took on additional engineering and mixing duties. I have always been simultaneously envious and in awe of the career that O'Rourke seems to have built for himself. Aside from his work as a mixing and recording engineer, his efforts have ranged from through-composed instrumental works (O'Rourke holds a bachelor degree in composition from DePaul University), to guitar improvisations, to electronic laptop compositions, to singer/songwriter albums. He was even briefly the fifth member of Sonic Youth.³² O'Rourke has stated that "the whole basis of almost everything [he's] interested in is to point out things that are taken for granted" and describes his work as "a series of 'research reports' that investigate the socially fixed, yet ultimately arbitrary, nature of musical meaning, interrogating established relationships between sounds and their social value in order to produce new relationships and allow these sounds to be heard again differently."³³ It is clear from this statement that O'Rourke views his output as being related to a research method; each work stands on its own as an attempt to clarify a larger issue.

It took little arguing for me to convince Rountree that, while perhaps not immediately recognized as such, Wilco are a central part of the continuing American folk tradition today. With his approval, I set out to select a particular song for my arrangement. *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* is one of the few albums of our time that is consistent in quality from beginning to end; there really are no bad tracks. That said, there were certainly many tracks that I simply could not envision working as an

32. O'Rourke played as a full member of the band from roughly 2002-2005, although he had worked with them on several occasions prior to that as a guest artist.

33. Christoph Cox, "Studies in Frustration: Jim O'Rourke," *The Wire* no. 165 (November 1997), quoted in Bill Martin, *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Björk* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 172-173.

arrangement for voice, strings, clarinets, and keyboards. This is not to say that they cannot be successfully arranged by someone, I just personally didn't see a way to make many of the songs work. For example, it would have seemed just plain wrong to arrange "Heavy Metal Drummer" without the inclusion of drums in the ensemble. The two songs that immediately spoke to me as being viable for this project were "Radio Cure" and "Reservations." These also happen to be two of the longer songs on the album; it was clear that they would have to be cut down. This put "Reservations" at a disadvantage. Part of the beauty of the song is that the last several minutes of the piece seem to spin off into some other world entirely, breaking down into a sonic texture that more closely resembles a 1960's avant-garde tape piece than it does any sort of song form. While I would have loved to work with this material (and may do so at some point in the future), it seemed inappropriate for the context of this project. Turning to "Radio Cure," it was clear to me that sections of the song could be removed without losing the overall identity of the piece. Additionally, I felt that the song's vocal line would work well when sung by a female voice, rather than the male voice in the original.

Having made a decision to use Schubert's "An die Musik" and Wilco's "Radio Cure," I then had to choose what musical path I wanted these two arrangements to take. Choosing to just simply transcribe the two songs seemed uninteresting and too easy. What I wanted was to create a relationship between the two works. Inspired by Foster's arrangement of the Schubert, which had taken an art song and transformed into a piece of psychedelic folk music, I decided that I would attempt to make the Schubert sound like a pop song and make the Wilco sound like an art song.

Turning the Wilco into an “art song” was a relatively uncomplicated task. I created lush string orchestration in a “romantic” style, complete with suspensions, expressive rubato, and over dynamic climaxes. This was quite a departure from my usual compositional output, which is frequently harsh, energetic, and aggressive; yet it seemed completely appropriate for the work and I was intensely satisfied with the results. My arrangement of Schubert, on the other hand, required a completely different approach.

At the time I was beginning to work on these two arrangements, I was listening to a great deal of “girl groups” from the sixties. One of the most astonishing songs from this period is The Crystals’ “He Hit Me (It Felt Like a Kiss),” which seemingly condones the act of domestic abuse (although this was not the intent of the songwriters). Aside from its subject matter, it is one of the most striking songs of that time; it was produced by Phil Spector and is a prime example of his “wall of sound” recording technique. It opens with a distinct bass line, playing solo (aside from the finger cymbals which play on the down beat of each measure). The bass is treated with a heavy amount of “slap back” echo; it is the timbre of the bass that is, in part, what makes it so distinct. When I began my arrangement of the Schubert, this song somehow seemed like a logical departure point. In its original state, the Schubert’s only resemblance to a pop song was in its formal structure. It is, after all, a song and thus contains two verses which share the exact same musical material; the only difference is the text. In order to place the Schubert in a more “pop” context, I placed the bass line of “He Hit Me” underneath the melody of the Schubert. I then kept the identifying features of the bass line (which is primarily rhythm) while maintaining the harmonic progression of the Schubert. Also, I

placed a string interlude between the two verses of the Schubert to lengthen the song as well as to match the formal structure of the Crystals song. A few years after “He Hit Me” was recorded, The Beach Boys released “You Still Believe in Me” on their landmark album *Pet Sounds*. “You Still Believe in Me,” is built upon a bass line that is remarkably similar to that of “He Hit Me.” Working with the material from “He Hit Me” brought me to this realization. I could not resist the opportunity to integrate elements of The Beach Boys song into my arrangement as well. The harmonic progression of “You Still Believe in Me” was not that dissimilar to “An Die Musik;” I was able to juxtapose the melody of The Beach Boys song against the melody of the Schubert with almost no alteration. I then began to introduce elements of the formal structure of “You Still Believe In Me” to my arrangement. This included the addition of a few extra measures after the string interlude, as well as a modulation upwards in the middle of the second verse; these moments parallel the structure of The Beach Boys song. Given that I had borrowed now from two other songs to create my Schubert arrangement, I could not help but include one more reference (I saw the opportunity and couldn’t resist), so I added the celeste riff from the opening four bars of the Velvet Underground’s “Sunday Morning” over the break between the end of the first verse and the string interlude.

My arrangement of Schubert’s “An Die Musik” functions as a display of my musical influences. The combination of these pieces, which create the whole, is uniquely personal. For the listener, knowing where these separate references come from is not necessary to enjoy my arrangement of “An Die Musik,” however, awareness of these elements will provide added insight towards my musical inspiration and

compositional though processes, allowing the work to be appreciated on a completely different level.

Conclusion

Where does originality come from? It has to come from within an individual. And what is an individual if not a sum of their own experiences? In other words, there is no such thing as originality at all, rather, the perception of originality is simply the combination of an individual's unique experiences as a person. While some might try and argue that they disregard their personal lives and outside influences when it comes to the creation of their work, you simply can't get away from who you are. You will always be yourself. To quote Morrissey, "the more you ignore me, the closer I get"—in other words, the act of trying to remove outside influence from the creative process is, itself, a determining factor on how one's creative process functions.³⁴

In this essay, I have examined the role that both interpersonal relationships and the artistic creations of others have played on my own individual works and my general creative development, both on an individual level and in combination with one another. However, there are a number of other contributing factors which play just as strong a role as these two individual "streams of influence." The need to better define the manner in which this multitude of influences contribute to my creativity has led me to the notion of "practice-led research," both as a general concept and as a means of better understanding my own creative process. The discovery of practice-led research has not changed the manner in which I work, but it has changed the manner in which I

34. Morrissey, lyrics to "The More You Ignore Me, The Closer I Get," by Steven Morrissey and Boz Boorer, from *Vauxhall and I*, Warner Bros., 1994, compact disc.

contextualize it. It has given me the ability to place my work in a position to be more accepted within the academic community.

It is unfortunate that academia has yet to fully embrace the notion of practice-led research. The resistance I have come up against, personally, in regard to my working methods (from members of the academic institution in which I am currently enrolled—although not from my individual committee members, who have actively embraced and encouraged the notion of practice-based research), has instilled in me an instinct to rebel against academia. However, I realize that I am perhaps better off to attempt change the way academia views the notion of practice-led research. With this in mind, I would like to conclude this discussion with following passage from David Bohm's *On*

Creativity:

It is well known that a child learns to walk to talk, and to know his way around the world just by trying something out and seeing what happens, then modifying what happens, then modifying what he does (or thinks) in accordance with what has actually happened. In this way, he spends his first few years in a wonderfully creative way, discovering all sorts of things that are new to him, and this leads people to look back on childhood as a kind of lost paradise. As the child grows older, however, learning takes on narrower meaning. In school, he learns by repetition to accumulate knowledge, so as to please the teacher and pass examinations. At work, he learns in a similar way, so as to make a living, or for some other utilitarian purpose, and not mainly for the love of the action of learning itself. So his ability to see something new and original gradually dies away. And without it there is evidently no ground from which anything can grow.³⁵

Qualitative and quantitative research methods in the field of the creative arts place the researcher in a position where the “ability to see something new and original” dies.

Practice-led research helps to foster an environment where development and creativity can grow.

35. David Bohm, *On Creativity*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 4.

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