

## PART THREE

### **Breathe In, Breathe Out: Roger Reynolds's *Aspiration*, Andrew Tholl's *Asphyxiation*, and the relationship between them.**

#### **History**

On January 30th, 2008, I gave the United States premiere of composer Roger Reynolds's *Aspiration* for solo violin and chamber orchestra. The work is scored for flute/piccolo, b-flat clarinet/e-flat, bass clarinet, bassoon/contra bassoon, french horn, trumpet, trombone, percussion (crotales, vibraphone, 5 temple blocks, metal wind chimes, hi-hat, hi gong, low gong, and tam-tam), piano, two violins, viola, cello, contrabass, and solo violin. At the time of my performance, I was, to the best of my knowledge, the second soloist to perform the piece.<sup>1</sup> The work was written in 2005 and even now, 6 years after its completion, it appears to have only been played a total of seven times.<sup>2</sup> The circumstances under which I was given the opportunity to perform the work were as such: Mark Menzies<sup>3</sup> had been in negotiations with Reynolds to record *Aspiration* with his ensemble "inauthentica," with Arditti serving as the soloist. As I understand the situation, Reynolds wanted to hear the work played by the ensemble before agreeing to the project. Menzies then decided to program the work

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1. The piece was premiered by Irvine Arditti.

2. According to Reynolds's website, the work has been performed four times by Arditti, once by Emilie-Anne Gendron, and twice by myself. While the page references these as "selected recent/upcoming performances," I believe it to be all-inclusive in regard to *Aspiration*. Roger Reynolds, "Selected Recent / Upcoming Performances," Roger Reynolds, accessed August 28th, 2011, <http://www.rogerreynolds.com/performances.html>.

3. Menzies was my mentor at that time at the California Institute of the Arts where I was pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in the "performer-composer" program.

as part of CalArts' two week "interim" session, asking me to act as soloist. As part of this interim session, Reynolds would be in attendance for rehearsals of *Aspiration*, as well as to give a composition masterclass.

I had only met Reynolds on one occasion prior to his involvement in the interim session. He had been visiting the CalArts campus to meet with Menzies for some other occasion (I'm sure it involved Menzies working on some piece of Reynolds's, although I cannot remember which one), and Menzies was unable to, due to a prior commitment, return Reynolds to the train station. Menzies asked me to drive him to the station, I believe to allow me an opportunity to both meet and speak with Reynolds. This was, of course, an opportunity that excited me and I could not refuse. Unfortunately, the resulting forty-five minute car ride was, to say the least, uncomfortable. Reynolds seemed to have little interest in carrying on any sort of discussion, which I can certainly understand given the fact that he had be in rehearsals all day long and was presumably tired, and responded to most questions and attempts to engage in conversation with cursory answers and with a tone of relative harshness. My overall general impression of the man was that he was cranky.

With this in mind, I reluctantly signed up to be a participant in Reynolds's interim masterclass. I made the decision that, despite the trepidation I had in presenting my own music to him, it would be useful to the process of preparing *Aspiration* to present myself to Reynolds as a composer as well as to gain any insight towards how he thought about things on a compositional level. I assumed at that time that it was perhaps a rare occasion that a performer who is also as composer, performed any of Reynolds's works. Given the open nature of the *Aspiration* score, which I will discuss

in-depth later on, I wanted Reynolds to perceive me as having the ability to approach the piece from the perspective of a composer rather than just an interpreting performer.

The masterclass was arranged to be given as an open forum, with an audience present. The work that I had decided to present was my recently finished duo for two violins titled *the distance between us*. Unfortunately, I did not yet have a recording of the piece, as had been requested. This being the case, I decided that it would be better to perform the piece live than have nothing to hear at all. To bring any relevance to this story, I must first describe the work itself. *the distance between us* was written as a musical depiction of the shared experience between myself and my friend Martha Walvoord. Walvoord is an excellent violinist and, at the time I began my studies at CalArts, she had recently started teaching as a violin professor at the University of Texas at Arlington. In conversations with one another (via telephone), we both continually remarked that, in having just moved to new cities, it was remarkably difficult to meet people. In general, we were both spending a lot of our time alone, creating a feeling of isolation and loneliness. What struck me at the time was that, despite the two of us being separated by over a thousand miles, we were both essentially sharing the same experience. This notion inspired the overall concept that would guide my piece. While *the distance between us* is a duo, there is only one “line” of musical material. Both violinists play the same exact sequence of pitches, the only difference between the two parts being the durations of the notes. Additionally, the piece is to be performed in a large space and begins with the two performers separated by a sizable distance;<sup>4</sup> over the course of the first minute of the piece, the two violinists play while

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4. From its inception, the piece was intended to be premiered in main gallery of CalArts, which is both very large and resonant.

walking towards each until they meet in the center of the stage. As the piece comes to a close, the musical material from the beginning is recapitulated and the two performers exit the stage, leaving the same way they came in. This process creates a natural “fade out,” allowing the music to just simply disappear rather than abruptly stop. The concept I had decided upon when writing the piece limited the range of compositional decisions I could make. There is, of course, always the option of writing whatever one feels, but that would have made the piece very different, and would have negated my intention in writing the piece.

When it came time for Reynolds to comment on my piece, the thing that he seemed to criticize most was the fact that I had “missed an opportunity” to depart from the uniformity of the single line and create a counterpoint to the central musical material.<sup>5</sup> While his observation is certainly accurate, having done what he suggested would have completely destroyed the principals I had utilized in creating the piece. This experience left me with the feeling that he just simply didn’t understand what my goal and aim of the piece was. After the masterclass ended, Reynolds pulled me aside to offer some additional advice. Because the work was recently completed and due to the possibility that I might make revisions to the piece, I had not provided Reynolds with a beautifully bound copy of the score. Rather, the pages had been paper-clipped together and it was a copy of the same score that had been used for performance. Reynolds asserted that this was completely unacceptable in this kind of situation, and that one should never present their work in such an unprofessional state. This continued with a discussion of how composers owe it to their performers to create

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5. This is the phrase that I seem to recall him using, although it was admittedly, several years ago; it is possible that this is only how I remember the experience.

beautifully crafted scores.<sup>6</sup> I agree with Reynolds's belief that presenting scores in the most professional state possible is advisable and that there should be a "sense of duty" to the performer when presenting them with a completed part. However, the irony of the situation was that the violin part for *Aspiration*, which I had been in the process of preparing, is full of discrepancies and ambiguities and additionally offers virtually no opportunity for page turns (While lack of page turns is a relatively common issue in the performance "new music," I have had to resort to performing the piece with the music pasted up on three large poster boards, which is so visually absurd that it comes off as comical). Reynolds had taken me aside to make these comments after the masterclass, he explained, because he did not want to embarrass me in front of the audience. While I realize that the retelling of these circumstances might come off as childish complaining and the signs of a composer's hurt ego, I have brought them up for two reasons. First, to help the reader understand the beginnings of the musical relationship between Reynolds and I, and the fact that they were perhaps less than encouraging. Second, to point out that, on a compositional level, Reynolds and I have highly disagreeable philosophical viewpoints.

## **Working**

Since my experience in working with Reynolds occurred many years ago, the information I am offering here is based on my memory which is, as in all people, subject to inaccuracy and failure. In trying to recall the events which took place, I unfortunately am finding it very difficult to remember much of what transpired between

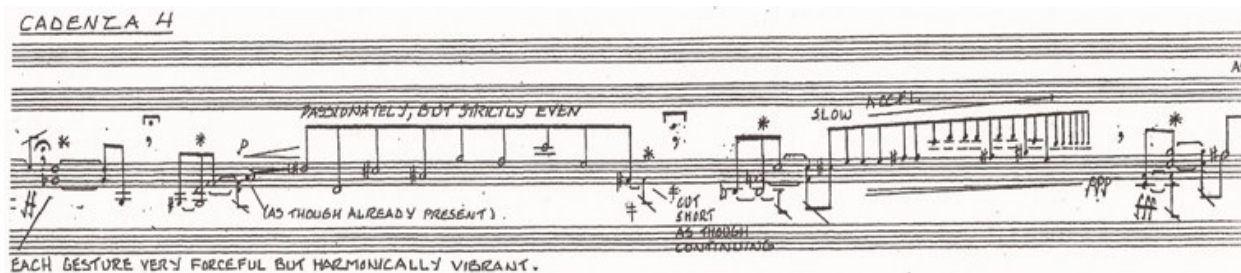
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6. My scores at this time were entirely hand notated, although always completely legible.

the two of us. The first thing that comes to mind, however, is the level of fear and intimidation I felt in the initial stages of working together. *Aspiration* is one of the most challenging pieces I've ever performed. Furthermore, I had very little time to learn the piece before beginning to work with Reynolds. Lack of preparation is the number one factor in the creation of nervousness when it comes to my life as a performer. When I feel that I have spent the necessary time required to learn a piece properly, feelings of nervousness tend to disappear. Of course, *Aspiration* is one of those pieces that a performer will likely never feel that they have spent enough time preparing, but the two weeks time I had to learn the piece before beginning rehearsals was no where near enough to allow me to feel comfortable. This, in combination with the previous two experiences I had shared with Reynolds, left me nearly terrified. Terror is not an ideal emotion to be under the influence of when attempting to play an extremely difficult piece for a composer who has proved in the past to be somewhat difficult to please. Fortunately, I found Reynolds to be far more forgiving when it came to the performance of his own works than when interacting as a teacher. In my experience, there are some composers who will rant and rave over the smallest, seemingly insignificant details; others seem to be just delighted to hear any attempt to play their music, regardless of its execution. As a performer, both these situations are unhelpful. Nitpicked details rarely improve a performance and being told that nothing is wrong gives no direction for improvement. Reynolds's attitude seems to fall comfortably between the two. He seemed clearly pleased with the effort that I had put into learning his piece and excited about hearing his work being played, but made no hesitation to alert me to things that he would like done differently. Still, I feel that these suggestions rarely amounted to

more than slight suggestions towards changes in pacing or character. Yet there is a great deal that can be gained simply from being in the presence of a composer. While Reynolds may not have had much to say verbally throughout the process, I was always acutely aware of his presence in the room. Body language and facial expressions can easily convey approval or dissatisfaction, and there is perhaps even more that is communicated on a subconscious level. The one request that seemed to come up repeatedly was a desire for my playing to be louder. In the sections where the solo line plays concurrently with the ensemble, there is very little dynamic range. For nearly the entirety of the piece, the solo part is marked at a dynamic level of “forte” or louder. I realize that this is a necessity for the violin part to be heard, and is frequently the case when performing any violin concerto, but Reynolds seemed to want me to push my volume to its extreme limits, always louder than the dynamic he has written—even to the point where I was sacrificing tone. I feel that I approached this suggestion hesitantly at first, believing that I still needed to leave dynamic space for the climactic moments of the piece, but as things progressed, I became more comfortable with, and even began to enjoy pushing my volume to its limits. It was certainly useful to be able to communicate with Reynolds regarding various aspects of the piece. For all the instructions that Reynolds gives regarding his notational techniques, there are still a few very unclear markings which are given no explanation in the score. These definitely required additional clarification from Reynolds himself. For example, at the beginning of the fourth cadenza, there are multiple instances where he has notated an elaborate series of sustained notes, with the beginning and ending point of each note meticulously detailed (see fig. 1). While what he wants seems to be very clear in terms

Figure 1. Excerpt from the fourth cadenza of Roger Reynolds's *Aspiration*.



of notation, it is simply impractical in terms of execution. When I asked him about what it was he was after with these gestures, he explained that they should be played as slowly rolled chords, much like how one would perform solo Bach. This explanation made sense, was very clear, and allowed me to immediately realize what he was after. Somehow, in his attempt to be clear through notational specificity, he had actually made things quite confusing. In the end however, my excitement over *Aspiration* and its subsequent influence on my work as both a performer and composer had less to do with the experience of working with Reynolds than it did with the actual piece itself.

## Challenges

So what then was it about *Aspiration* that effected me so strongly? First of all, as I have mentioned before, this is one of the most technically challenging pieces I have ever had to deal with. The third cadenza alone, is on the verge of unplayable. At some point during our time together, Reynolds explained to me that Irvine Arditti, whom evidently the piece was written for (despite the fact that it is not indicated as such in any part of the score), had commented that the piece was not challenging enough for him. Reynolds responded by revising the third cadenza. I recall Reynolds stating that there was some sort of pompous and quasi-witty retort from Arditti after receiving the



revisions, but I simply cannot remember the response accurately enough to recount it here. Regardless, I find the cadenza frustratingly difficult. It is written in such a way that, in order to make it musically convincing, you can't actually perform it as it is actually notated. Reynolds requests, at the beginning of the second cadenza, that the player "establish strictly the maximum tempo at which clear articulation can be managed."<sup>7</sup> This material returns in the third cadenza, with the indication to play "as in cadenza 2."<sup>8</sup> Yet this time, the material has been transformed. The line has become much more disjunct and, as the cadenza progresses, harmonics and glissandos are introduced. It is simply not possible to maintain a strict tempo throughout the cadenza and still allow for clarity of pitch. The challenge for the performer then is to find a way to allow for the notes and rhythms to be clearly heard, while maintaining the intensity of tempo and direction that Reynolds clearly intended.

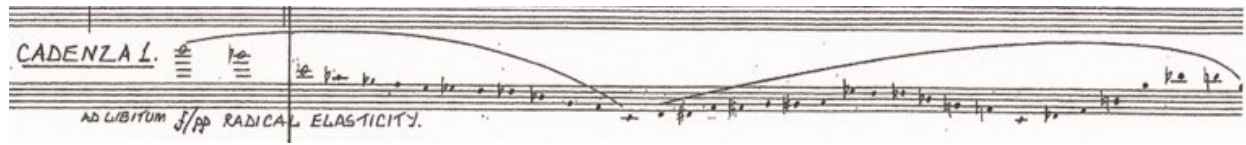
Beyond the pure technical aspects of the piece, *Aspiration* asks the performer to be mentally engaged in a way that I have never experienced with any other piece. There are two factors which contribute to this, and they are somewhat related. The first factor, which was hinted at earlier, is the general "openness" of the score. While there is no indeterminacy as to the pitch content within the piece, a great deal of the rhythmic material must be provided by the performer. Reynolds has achieved this by simply omitting stems on notes throughout large sections of the piece (see fig. 2). There is a hierarchy of relative durations indicated by open note heads, filled in note heads, and grace note figures, but this still leaves a great deal of information absent from the

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7. Roger Reynolds, *Aspiration*, (New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 2005), 19.

8. *Ibid.*, 40.

Figure 2. Excerpt from the first cadenza of Roger Reynolds's *Aspiration*.



score. Dynamics (at least in the case of the first cadenza) are to be “improvised” by the performer. Reynolds gives the performer the following instructions at the first entrance of the solo violin:

Throughout cadenza 1, there is a constant, wide-ranging but always smooth variation in speed. Open notes (♫) indicate maximal length but they should not seem suddenly long relative to surrounding pitches. Slurs suggest phrase identity, not necessarily bowing.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, the term “radical elasticity” is indicated just below the solo’s first entrance, along with the indication “ad libitum *f/pp*.”<sup>10</sup> While these indications are helpful as far as giving a general “idea” as to what Reynolds wants, it still leaves quite a bit of room for creativity on the part of the performer. What Reynolds is really asking for is that the performer step out of their usual role as an interpreter, and instead make a compositional contribution to the shape of the piece. Reynolds has created an opportunity for the soloist to contribute to this piece as both a performer *and* composer; this is a great deal of what has sparked my enthusiasm for *Aspiration*. This flexibility of duration occurs again in the third, fourth, and fifth cadenzas (the second cadenza is very strict in its rhythmic notation), yet this is only a portion of that which makes the piece so mentally challenging. The second factor then, is the manner in

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9. Ibid., 5.

10. Ibid.

which time flows throughout the solo violin line while it engages with the ensemble. During these sections, the solo part is notated on two separate staves. The top staff indicates time as the rest of the ensemble experiences it—in a forward moving linear manner. Meanwhile, the bottom staff is used for the notation of, as Reynolds refers to them, “interjections.” Reynolds indicates in the score that “the soloist’s interjections (on the lower staff) are performed with the maximum speed and intensity that still allows for harmonic clarity.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally he states that “interjections are placed ad libitum, as indicated approximately by arrows. Return immediately to the character of the interrupted sound.”<sup>12</sup> The implications of a notational system such as this is that there are in fact two different states of time for the soloist to try and realize simultaneously. I will refer to these two states as “ensemble time” and “interjection time.” Ensemble time is metric. It can be divided into beats and seconds, it has a predetermined pulse and is predictable. Interjection time, on the other hand, is left in the hands of the performer. I view this “interjection time” on a conceptual level, as an attempt to momentarily freeze time itself, which is of course impossible. Yet this is exactly what Reynolds is asking the performer to accomplish. It is impossible to “return to the character of the interrupted sound” because the interruption itself has inherently changed the the character of that sound. It is a paradoxical situation; a catch-22. I am not implying that it is not effective as a compositional technique; quite the contrary. It is the reason I find the piece so

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11. Reynolds, *Aspiration*, 8.

12. *Ibid.*, 9.

interesting on a conceptual level. It does however add to the difficulty of the piece. Performers are trained to learn how to place the notes in relation to the beat. Being accurate in this regard is essential for effective ensemble playing. It is the reason musicians spend hours practicing with metronomes. In order to play *Aspiration*, the performer must be able to maintain and follow a regular tempo and pulse, while executing a completely different “non-tempo/pulse” at the same time. In all my years of violin training, this situation has never come up. I do not know how to practice in this manner. One could, theoretically, practice this material with a metronome and perhaps gain some control over this new skill, however, practicing in this way would disregard the role that the ensemble will (or at least should) play on the performer’s decisions as to where to ultimately place the interjections. I have still yet to find a reasonable solution to become comfortable with this aspect of the piece. Rehearsal with the full ensemble seems to be the only tangible way to improve on this skill. It is much like practicing improvising; you can work on it alone and inevitably get better at certain aspects, but there is no substitute for being placed in a room with other musicians and being given the opportunity to react to their individual musical contributions.

## **Response**

More so than other compositions, *Aspiration* truly cannot exist without the unique voice of the performer. With so much of the composition left up to the performer, each performance will be radically different. So why then is this not enough for me? Why

have I felt the need to create my own piece in response to Reynolds's work? The answer requires a discussion regarding my viewpoint on the impact of the physical experience of performance on the compositional process.

You cannot perform music without physicality. The act of learning to perform a piece of music is the act of programming your body to perform a series of actions in a consistent manner. It is a routine, and the ability to perform that routine accurately each time means that it must be ingrained in the body and mind so deeply that it becomes sub-conscious. You can't stop and think about it in the moment.

This is true for violin and, I suspect, for other instruments and performers as well. But today, most performers do not compose (or at least, that is the model that has been established and is only now beginning to change). They learn their routine, and they do it well. Yet for those musicians (like myself) that spend their time both performing and writing music, this routine of performance can't help but spill over into an artist's creative output. The works of other composers leave their trace in the physical memory of the body.

Aside from physicality, there is the conceptual imprint that a piece leaves on the performer. You can sit down with a score and study it for a thousand years, but that will never give you the experience of playing it. This is possibly the great advantage that performer-composers may have over those who focus their efforts strictly as composers. A composer may conceptualize a piece from beginning to end, and may understand their piece very well, but on some level, they can never understand the piece in the same way the performer does. There are of course aspects that they will

understand better than the performer, but there is an element of knowledge that cannot be gained without the experience of performance.

In other circumstances, the composer may need additional input from the performer as part of their compositional process, making the performer a type of “sub-composer.” For example, I have worked on several occasions with composer Lisa Coons, whose compositional process seems to be (at least from my perspective) heavily tied to her ability to work closely with a performer. In our past collaborations, there have been many instances where Coons has had a concept and sound in her mind, but has been unable to find a practical way to notate it. Through a process of collaboration between the two of us, we have been able to come up with a language of music that is unique to our personal relationship—the result being that, in subsequent pieces she has written for me, she has left parts of the score blank and has simply suggested to me that I should make “that sound I made before.” It is a simple and elegant way of making her compositional ideas become realized. These sounds and the language that was developed through collaboration with Coons have since spilled into my own compositions. I could not have written my works, without having had the experience of performing her works first.

As part of his definition of form, Reynolds has stated that “wholeness is the critical *sine qua non* of a musical work. A true composition is not only a remark or stance or display, but a dimensional experience that either leads the listener along a path or proposes a landscape for exploration in such a way that an arc, a trajectory or proposal, engagement, and response has been traversed by its end.”<sup>13</sup> This

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13. Roger Reynolds, *Form and Method: Composing Music, The Rothschild Essays*, ed. Stephen McAdams (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

“experience” that Reynolds speaks of is just as applicable to the performer-composer as it is to the listener. *Aspiration* has done for me exactly what Reynolds has suggested a “true composition” should do; it has “proposed a landscape for exploration” for which I intend to issue a response through the composition of my own unique work.

It was not then the experience of working with Reynolds that inspired me to write a response, but rather the experience of working on the piece itself. The process of learning and performing *Aspiration* was, in and of itself, a form of practice-led research in preparation for the composition of my own work.

There were additional factors that contributed to the inception of writing my own response concerto, although they are perhaps far less philosophical in nature than the reasoning detailed above. First, I think that at this moment in time there is an ongoing shift towards composers writing large scale works for smaller ensembles. Economic constraints have made it nearly impossible for new works written by lesser known composers to receive an opportunity for performance, particularly in instances where a full symphony orchestra is required. Were I to write a standard violin concerto, which would be an obvious choice given my role as a violinist, the likelihood of it being performed would be extremely low. Although I am writing my response concerto specifically for myself, I am of course hopeful that it might have a continuing life with other performers in the future. Composing for an ensemble of a manageable size is imperative in allowing this to be a possibility. Reynolds orchestrated *Aspiration* for an ensemble configuration that will not exclude it from frequent performances due to the number of players required, while still maintaining an overall instrumentation that will

allow for a wide range of color and freedom at the compositional level. This point became apparent to me during the process of learning and performing the piece. Second, the formal structure of the *Aspiration* is unique in its abundance of soloist cadenzas. I cannot think of another work that is structured in such a way. This makes the point clear that the work is, first and foremost, about the soloist. If I am to write a concerto for myself, I want to allow it to function as a vehicle to showcase my abilities as both a performer and composer. It is my opinion that, in general, violinists seem to have a personality profile that involves possessing a certain amount of ego—perhaps more so than might be found in other instrumentalists. An even stronger case can be made for ego as it relates to the personalities of composers. What then of the violinist who is also a composer? The opportunity to intersperse moments of solo performance with the grandeur of an entire ensemble supporting me is simply too tempting to not take advantage of. *Aspiration* has proven that this model can work. Yet I find it both more appealing and logical to create a commentary on this formal structure rather than to just simply “steal” it and call it my own. My compositions frequently derive their meaning through their relationship to both other works of art and personal experiences; creating a response concerto to *Aspiration* will allow for both to occur.

## **Research**

The pre-compositional process, for any composer, is itself a form of research. Specifically for me, it is a process that I would describe as “practice-led research.” My research methods include instrumental practice (of both my own music and others), score analysis, the rehearsal process, reading related to the subject of investigation,



and active listening, just to name a few. Because all of these actions are a part of my ongoing life as a musician, it can be difficult to state an exact moment when the research process for a particular work actually begins. This being the case, I would claim that, at the very least, the preparatory process for my response concerto began the moment I was asked to perform *Aspiration*. While at the time I had not conceived of the idea to write a response concerto, all the experiences related to the project, as well as other experiences, have contributed to the creation of my work and will continue to do so until the piece is completed. Furthermore, the very act of responding in this essay to the questions posed must be viewed as an essential part of the pre-compositional research for my piece. The piece will not be written until I go through this process, and this process will shape the way my piece is conceptualized. That said, I will now discuss some of the more concrete elements that have led to my overall conception of the piece at this point in time.

## **Titles**

The title of a work is always a contributing factor in one's overall view of any given piece of music. They can be descriptive of the type of piece one is listening to—titling a work “Symphony No. 5” suggests, before even hearing a note, that it is for a symphony orchestra, and that the composer has most likely written four other symphonies that precede it. They might give awareness to the musical “story” a composer is trying to depict, for example, Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* (which translates to “A Hero's Life”) is meant to musically depict exactly what the title states. Or, titles can give poetic suggestion as to how the composer themselves might view the piece. One

of my personal favorite examples of this is Jeffery Holmes's *May the Bridges I Burn Light My Way*, which I performed on one of the first concerts I ever performed at CalArts. The title stuck with me, and has been influential in the manner in which I title my own works. Most all of my compositions have titles that are in some way poetic or act as a philosophical statement. Recent examples include *hitting things won't solve your problems (but it might make you feel better)*, *hope and optimism never got me anywhere*, and *i'll never be younger than i am today (for andrew tholl)*. My titles always have some relationship to the tone, material, or philosophical stance of any given piece. Frequently (although certainly not always), the titles of my works come before the actual work is written; in these circumstances my titles function as a guide towards both the structure of and the material within the piece.

Reynolds has titled his work *Aspiration*. *Aspiration*, as a word, is most frequently defined as a “strong desire, longing, or aim; ambition: intellectual aspirations,” or as “a goal or objective desired.” Yet an alternate definition of the word reads as the “act of aspiring; breath.”<sup>14</sup> It is unclear which usage of the word Reynolds intended when titling his piece. I suspect that he meant it in the sense of “ambition,” but regardless of his intention, I have made the decision to interpret the word based on both definitions. Since my concerto is a response to Reynolds's work, I have taken the title of his work as a departure point for inspiration. This has led me to the title for my own work—*Asphyxiation*. *Asphyxiation* is the noun form of the verb “asphyxiate,” which is defined as such: “to cause to die or lose consciousness by impairing normal breathing, as by

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14. *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, 1996 ed., s.v. “aspiration.”

gas or other noxious agents; choke; suffocate; smother.”<sup>15</sup> Asphyxiation is essentially the antithesis of aspiration. This can be viewed from both a literal and metaphorical perspective. On a literal level, one cannot breathe when they are being suffocated or smothered. Metaphorically, the inability to reach one’s goals can be described as “choking.” Simply given the titles alone, the relationship between my piece and Reynolds can clearly be observed. It is the relationship between these two titles which has allowed me to generate a starting point for the construction of my own work.

The use of a work’s title as a source of both structural and conceptual inspiration is not unprecedented. Mark Menzies, whose dissertation is an extensive collection of his own “creative transcriptions” and the circumstances under which they were created, took inspiration from Reynolds’s solo violin work *Kokoro* to create his work *MIXED (Ears) - contrapunctus II*. Menzies states that “the original idea of *Kokoro* as Reynolds describes it, grew from a reading of a definition of the Japanese word that is this title; *Kokoro*’s complicated series of definitions surround our word ‘heart’.” Menzies continues to explain that his composition “is a creative working on that central metaphor; the various meanings of ‘heart’ becomes metaphors for states of flowing water.”<sup>16</sup> Both Reynolds and Menzies have used this word, “kokoro,” as an entry point for their own compositions. This practice is apparently not uncommon for Reynolds. He writes of his work *Archipelago* that “the formal aim. . . arose from the impetus of the title image, a chain of islands in the sea.”<sup>17</sup> Reynolds has attempted to make the formal

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15. Ibid., s.v. “asphyxiate.”

16. Mark Menzies, “elements of critical study fragments of experimental practice” (D.Mus. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2008), 330.

17. Reynolds, *Form and Method*, 22.

structure of his work a sonic depiction of the visual image implied by its title. In the same manner that both Menzies and Reynolds have used the images and metaphors provoked by the titles of compositions, I will use the title of my own work, *Asphyxiation*, both as it stands on its own and through its relationship to the word “aspiration,” to create a basis for structure and meaning within my own composition.

### **Interlude**

Before moving onward to the actual content of *Asphyxiation* and its relationship to *Aspiration*, I would like to take a moment to address some thoughts regarding the term “creative transcription” as it relates to my work. First, a definition. Menzies initially describes it as “a form of creative and critically engaged work that supports [his] life as a musician - instrumentalist, conductor, composer, and educator.” He continues to state: “The concept of creative transcription as I have developed it, is to take an originating composition, or stylistic feature, or metaphor, and imaginatively refashion it into something different—something I call my own composition.”<sup>18</sup> For *MIXED (EARS)*, Menzies suggested that “it seemed entirely logical to recontextualize [*Kokoro*’s] poetic impulses so as to constitute a form to honor the provocative lyricism of the solo violin piece.”<sup>19</sup>

There is of course an element of “poetic impulse” in *Aspiration* that has led me to create my own work. One might argue then that *Asphyxiation*, when completed, will fall under the parameters of “creative transcription.” This statement seems to be

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18. Menzies, “elements of critical study,” 1.

19. *Ibid.*, 330.

partially true, however I would argue that part of the purpose of creative transcription is to offer a sort of re-imagining of a pre-existing work or a transformation; this is not my aim. I am attempting to create a companion piece to the Reynolds—a work that offers balance to the original rather than a re-imagining. Essentially, I am attempting to create duality; a relationship of light and dark, yin and yang, positive and negative.

It is possible that this “symmetry” will be achieved through “sampling” from the Reynolds; the purpose of this being to link the two works together, to give them a commonality. Aram Sinnreich, whose research is in the subject of “mash-up” culture, has written that “Sampling would more appropriately be termed ‘respiration’—the absorption, alteration, and exhalation of something external and ubiquitous.”<sup>20</sup> It is in this sense of the word that I intend to utilize materials from the Reynolds to create my own work.

### ***Aspiration***

Since I am approaching the creation of my own work based on “the experience” of working on and performing the Reynolds, it is my own personal analysis of the work that will contribute to the development of *Asphyxiation*. Still, it is worth examining the analysis that Reynolds has provided at the beginning of the score. It reads:

*Aspiration* has six sections of varying length, joined by a series of five solo violin cadenzas. The chamber orchestra is divided into a high (flute, clarinet, trumpet, and 2 violins) and a low (bass clarinet, bassoon, horn, trombone, viola, cello, and contra bass) groups, with a third (percussion and piano) that serves a generally articulative function.

The ensemble’s role involves two strata: the upper one entails a series of 5-note harmonies (carried by the high instrumental group), while there is an

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20. Aram Sinnreich, *Mashed Up: Music Technology and the Rise of Configurable Culture*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 124.

independently progressing lower register set of 7-note harmonies (carried by the low group). Double bars in the score indicate sectional boundaries, where the musical texture alters for the upper or lower stratum, or both.

Each successive harmonic entity is treated as a reservoir from which the ensemble part draws. They articulate the upper and lower strata. There is a trend of constant descent in register for the harmonic blocks, so that the ensemble sonority moves gradually from its highest to its lowest register. Although the ensemble is frequently marked at very low dynamic levels in order to maximize the degree to which the soloist is clearly heard, the ensemble is, nevertheless, essential to the impact of the whole. It should be a kind of “magic carpet” upon which the soloist rides.

The solo violin part has two aspects as well. Its primary line threads through the ensemble strata, with a continuing tendency to rise, from its lowest to its highest register. This slowly evolving linear continuity is frequently interrupted. Interjections may be rapid and aggressive intrusions or more elegiac in character. They parallel, on the local level, the function of the five cadenzas that interrupt the development of the long basic line.<sup>21</sup>

The division of the six ensemble sections, which alternate with the five violin cadenzas (for a total of eleven sections) can be easily perceived by any listener. Yet Reynolds’s division of the ensemble into two groups, which are defined by both their range and their harmonic identity, is completely lost on me as both a performer and a listener. Additionally, the “trend of constant descent in register” from the ensemble is not apparent as a structural element of the work. I am not suggesting that this division of the ensemble and its downward progression is not present, I simply cannot perceive it in the context of the entire work. The same could be said for the registral identity of the solo violin line. The first cadenza alone traverses the entirety of the violin’s range. In fact, the motion from high to low and back again seems to be the most obvious characteristic that Reynolds exploits in this section; even on a purely visual level, the cadenza gives the impression of a “registral rollercoaster” (see fig. 2). His insight towards the “interjections” is illuminating; the idea that these interjections function as a

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21. Reynolds, *Aspiration*, performance notes.

microcosm of the overall structure of the piece is interesting on a conceptual level, however it assumes that the violin cadenzas interspersed throughout the work are, in fact, viewed as “interruptions.” As a listener and performer, I do not find this to be the case. Rather, the endings of both the ensemble sections and the violin cadenzas feel like logical points of demarcation. Although they lack any sense of traditional chord structure or discernible tonal center, they still function in a cadential manner. Reynolds’s comments regarding *Aspiration* clearly hold validity. It is, after all, *his* work. However, they are based on his own individual perspective as a composer. For this reason I would suggest that, my own individual observations, based on my perspective as a performer, are equally valid.

At the fundamental level, I view the overall structure and material within *Aspiration* to be built upon the concept of transformation. This is evidenced throughout the work, in many different ways. The five cadenzas, as they relate to the entire work, create an ongoing transformation of character from one to the next. Each has its own unique stylistic features, which, when placed in the context of the entire piece, suggests a journey through which the soloist must travel, both on a technical and emotional level. Viewed individually, each cadenza goes through a transformation of its own material, which has a tendency to increase in complexity. Perhaps the most insistent method through which transformation is depicted is (as mentioned earlier) Reynolds’s use of interjections. The act of interrupting the musical line is in itself a form of transformation. The fact that Reynolds asks for the character of the line to be unchanged is perhaps the central challenge for the performer to overcome. For me, this is one of the essential struggles one must “aspire” to overcome throughout the

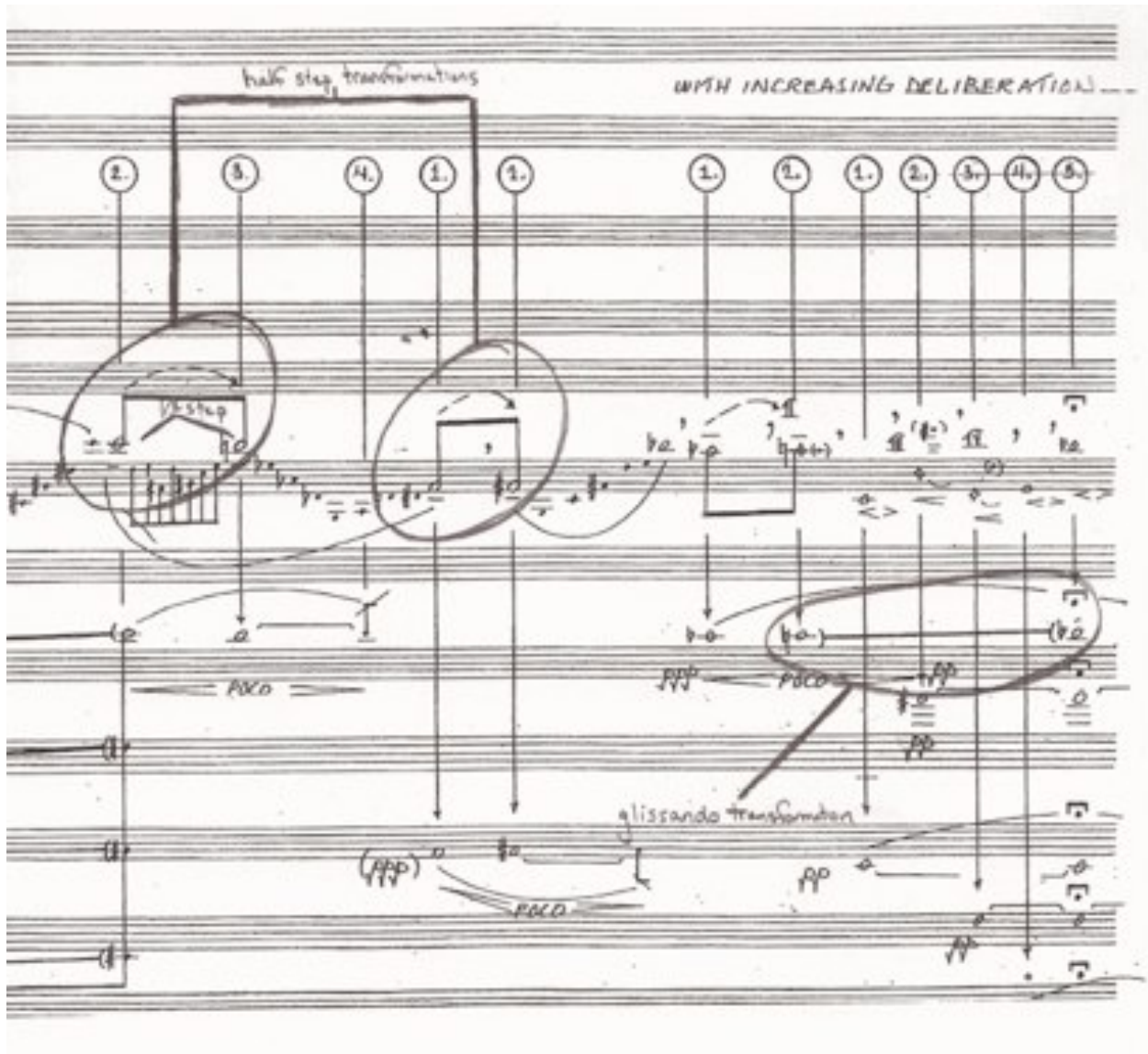
piece. On the “local level” (to use Reynolds’s own term), there are several other techniques used that display transformation. One of the most prevalent is change through half-step motion. This occurs throughout the entire piece in several different contexts. In its basic form, this is simply the progression from one note to the next by semi-tone, yet this motion is frequently impeded by rapid gestures of notes between them or by breath marks which break up the line. Another example is the motion from one note to the next via glissando. This is frequently utilized to accomplish half-step motion, but not always. Regardless, the glissando is clearly an element which transforms a note from its initial execution until it has become something altogether different. It occurs both in the solo violin line as well as throughout the ensemble. There is also a tendency for members of the ensemble to “pick up” individual notes from the solo violin line and carry them forward, transforming them through a shift of timbre. Examples of all of these “local level” transformations can be seen in figure 3.

### ***Asphyxiation***

One of the notable features of Roger Reynolds’s compositional style is that his works are rigorously planned on a structural level through the use of mathematical based strategies and proportional relationships. One of the notable features of my own compositional style is that my works are structured based on experiential knowledge and intuitive principals. These are radically different approaches to composition, from both a philosophical and practical standpoint. However, since *Asphyxiation* is meant to co-exist with *Aspiration*, I have made an attempt to create a pre-compositional formal structure for the work.



Figure 3. Excerpt, from the end of the first cadenza of Roger Reynolds's *Aspiration*, depicting various "local level" forms of transformation.



"Asphyxiation," in both its literal and conceptual identity, is the driving force behind the entire piece. Just as Reynolds utilized the title of his work *Archipelago* to aid in the creation of its formal structure, I have used both the literal meaning and metaphorical connotations of the word "asphyxiation" to inform and inspire the structure for my own work. For me, imagining the experience asphyxiation invokes a feeling of panic, which increases in intensity over time. I imagine this increase in

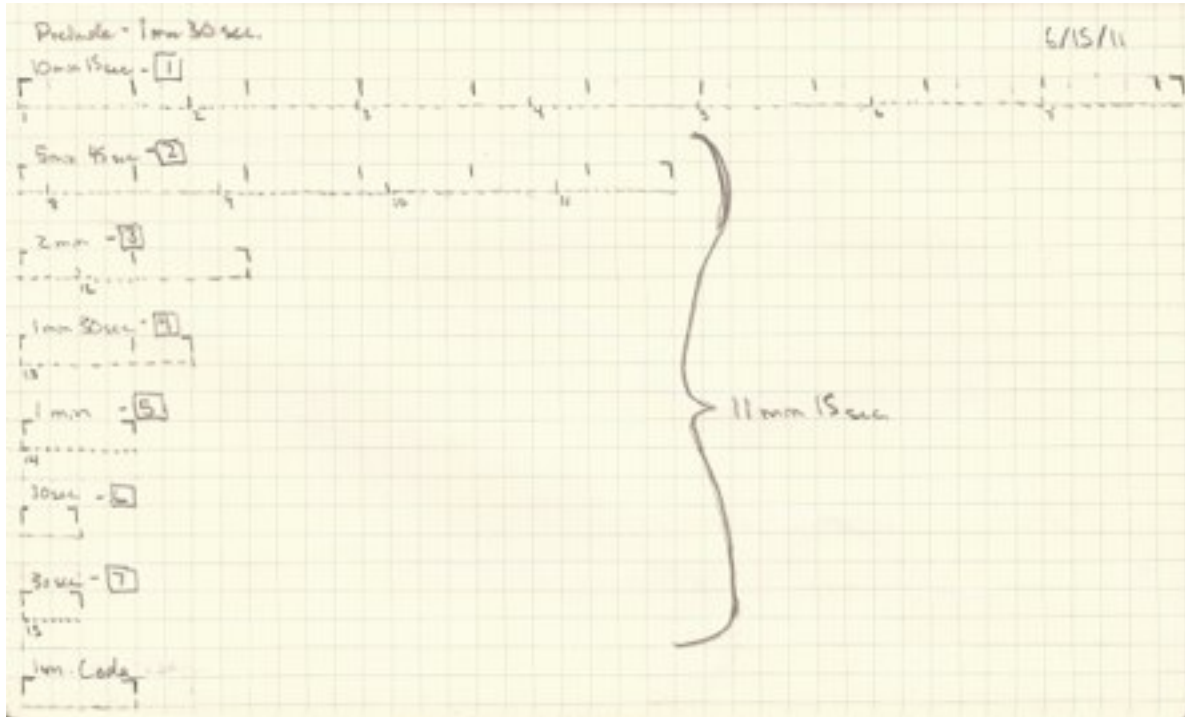
intensity occurring exponentially, rather than linearly. This feeling of acceleration along a non-linear path is part of what I want to project in my composition. Reynolds has noted that “the character of the form must appropriately reflect the composer’s intent. Whether the composer is reaching for a primarily expressive, conceptual or combined effect, the aggregate impression left by the strategies he uses must nourish his ends. Naturally, such a judgment is based both on what the mind grasps and also what is *felt* where conscious thought cannot securely venture.”<sup>22</sup> Given that my “intent” is to create a sense of increased urgency throughout the duration of the work, I have created an overall structure based on a retrograde of the Fibonacci series, in which each section of the piece gets shorter and shorter as the piece progresses (see fig. 4).<sup>23</sup> It is a representation of an increase in, and shortening of, breath. There are seven of these major sections, plus an additional introduction and coda. The total duration of the piece will be 24 minutes. This general structure has further divisions that will help define the overall form of the work. First, the entire piece can be divided into sixteen equal sections of a minute and a half each. The fact that there are sixteen subdivisions is not significant, however, this period of ninety seconds will act as a sort of unit of measurement which delineates the beginning, mid-point, and ending of the piece. Additionally, the first major section of the piece (with a duration of ten minutes and fifteen seconds) is nearly equal in duration to the remaining six sections (totaling eleven minutes and fifteen seconds). From this standpoint, the work can essentially be

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22. Reynolds, *Form and Method*, 21.

23. These sections relate to the Fibonacci although they do not follow it exactly. I have distorted the relationships of the sections to one another in order to exaggerate the perception of overall acceleration.

Figure 4. Preliminary sketch of structural divisions for *Asphyxiation*.

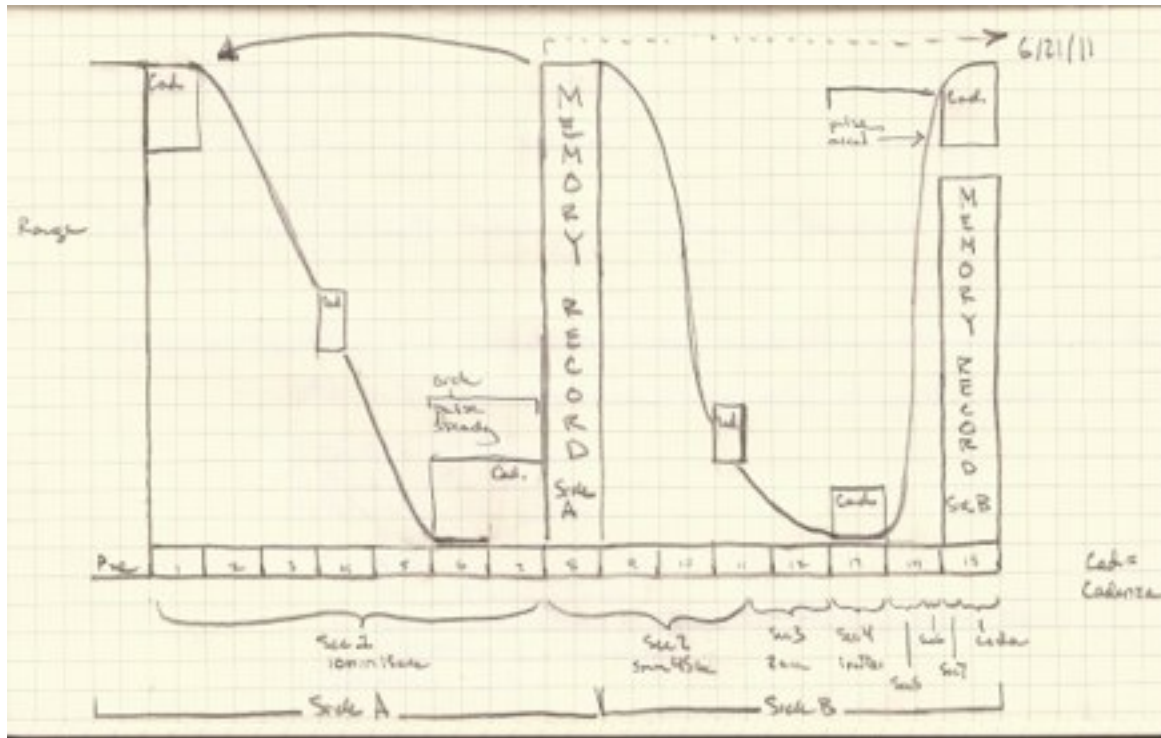


thought of as having two halves. Thinking of the work divided into two relatively equal parts has caused me to begin to conceptualize the work as a metaphor for a vinyl record with an “A side” and “B side” (see fig. 5). One of the central aspects that I am interested in exploring with *Asphyxiation* is that of memory as it relates to both my own piece and *Aspiration*. Reynolds himself has noted that “the remembered model, the link to an earlier experience is essential to formal impact,” and that “return, that experience of familiar material reappearing, is a critical element in effective form that cannot be discarded without unacceptable loss.”<sup>24</sup> The conceptualization of “the work as an album,” has led me to the idea of including an actual record as part of the composition. I will create my own sample of *Aspiration* by making a recording of myself playing the first cadenza, and then transferring this recording to vinyl. The record will then be

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24. Reynolds, *Form and Method*, 15, 21.

Figure 5. Preliminary sketch for the overall structure of *Asphyxiation*.



played from within the ensemble, occurring at the midpoint of the piece as well as at the conclusion. This will allow the listener to hear a literal memory of the past and will help to further define the relationship between my work and *Aspiration* while allowing me to display the concept of “the remembered model” on a formal level that will be easily perceived. Additionally, based on Reynolds model of registral transformation in *Aspiration*, I have conceptualized a path for the solo violin’s register to follow. This proposed motion is generally an inversion of that which Reynolds has drawn upon in his work, although the entirety of its shape occurs twice throughout the piece, and at the second iteration, quickly returns to where it began.

In the same way as its overall formal structure, *Asphyxiation* will draw its musical material from both *Aspiration* and the concept of “asphyxiation” itself. Reynolds, in a general discussion of form, writes that “each detail is ideally as characteristic of the

whole as the impact of the work in its entirety. . . The local even anticipates the macro level in some way just as the overall form invites its detail.”<sup>25</sup> With this in mind, one might view the central motivic element of *Asphyxiation* as the manifestation of “choking” in all its different forms. Regarding it as a metaphorical motive perhaps more than a sonic motive, it offers a wealth of inspiration to build upon. It is my intention for the musical material within the piece to maintain a tendency of transformation towards “choking.” This will be achieved through the utilization of glissandos, dirty unisons,<sup>26</sup> overpressure of the bow, bow placement, an abrupt cutting off of sustained resonance, and of course though the use of interjections. Throughout *Aspiration*, Reynolds’s interjections create a sense within the soloist of always needing to “catch up.” These interjections will continue to take on a transformative nature when placed in the context of my own work. As the work progresses, there will be a tendency towards these interjections becoming more frequent and complex. At a certain point, they will begin to take over the material of the piece.

As previously discussed, *Aspiration* requires that a certain amount of the piece’s identity be provided by the soloist themselves. With *Asphyxiation*, I plan to utilize this technique to an even greater extent. Generally, graphic notation is not an uncommon feature of my music (though it is almost always used in conjunction with traditional notation) and I find that in many situations, it is a better way to translate my musical ideas than regular notational methods. While the ensemble portion of *Asphyxiation* will be strictly notated (with little room for deviation), the solo violin line will be composed in

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25. Ibid., 3.

26. I use this term to indicate a non-specific interval of less than a half-step between two notes played simultaneously, which creates a sense of “beating” due to the small differentiation in frequency between the two notes and the conflict that occurs between them.

a way which, through the use of graphic notation and improvisation, will allow it flexibility in its content and identity.

Despite my extensive pre-planning process, I still feel that there needs to be room for the piece to proceed intuitively. I think that perhaps this is one of the things that distinguishes performer-composers from those (like Reynolds) who view themselves strictly as composers. As a composer, the only real control you have over your work is in the notes you put on the page. After that, things are in the performer's hands. For this reason, I feel that many composers frequently tie up all their emotions and, no pun intended, aspirations in the score itself. Yet for a performer-composer, particularly in instances where they perform their own works, the composition may never reach a final point of completion. As was suggested earlier, the listener's "dimensional experience" of "a true composition" is also applicable for the performer of that composition. In a situation where the performer is also the composer, there is an opportunity for this experience to influence the work in the exact moment at which it occurs. Yet regardless of whether one agrees with this argument, the fact remains that I, as a performer-composer, have explored and experienced the landscape that *Aspiration* has to offer; this has resulted in the work leaving an indelible mark on the development of both my skills as a performer and my compositional sensibilities. Thus, the path that *Asphyxiation* will travel is inevitably a continuation of where *Aspiration* has already taken me.

## **Explanations**

I am hesitant to engage in conversation with Reynolds regarding *Asphyxiation*

and its relationship to *Aspiration*. This reluctance is based, at least in part, upon my initial experiences with him. Given his attitude towards *the distance between us*, I fear that he will disapprove of the intent of *Asphyxiation* and fail to see the impulse from which it was created. Reynolds has argued that that “material that is audacious, strongly referential, even appropriated, attracts attention to itself, often rendering form impotent or virtually irrelevant since the maintenance of its identity—the identity of the material—is an overriding concern.”<sup>27</sup> I strongly disagree with this sentiment. I view the material of a work and its relationship to the material of other works (and to a greater extent, its relationship with all works) as precisely part of what helps to create and define its identity. Regardless of which statement you choose to believe, the fact remains that *Asphyxiation* will forever be indebted to *Aspiration*. Given Reynolds’s stance, I suspect that he will take issue with my piece, but whatever opinion he chooses, it is entirely out of my hands. Although no one likes to be judged or criticized, I feel no need to seek his approval. Therefore, were I to explain *Asphyxiation* to Mr. Reynolds, I would feel no need to describe it differently from the details I have just discussed. This, of course, could change as the piece progresses, but I don’t see any reason to discuss the work differently with him than I would with anyone else.

## **Experiences**

My career as a composer has, from its beginnings, always been tied to my life as a performer. My earliest compositional efforts were in a pop and rock idiom, which has a long history of the composer also acting as the performer. When I began writing

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27. Reynolds, *Form and Method*, 5.

“concert hall” works, they were always written with the intention of performing them myself. This has always seemed like the most natural and logical thing for me to do. As my compositional career has progressed, there have certainly been works that I have written for other musicians that I will never play (although this is only because they are written for instruments that I cannot play), but this has never gotten in the way of wanting to create works specifically written for myself. There are several reasons that I enjoy and continue to write music for myself. To begin (from a very practical standpoint), I am always available to perform my own works. This creates a form of instant gratification, which is always appealing. I can conceptualize a rhythm, gesture, or entire piece, and then immediately hear the result. I attribute this as to why so many of today's composers seem to enjoy the sequencer function of notational computer programs; it allows them to instantly hear that which they've just created. Of course, computers can offer little in terms of nuance in performance style, and are frequently unable to accomplish what the composer actually has in mind. This leads me to the another reason I enjoy writing for myself: I always know what I want. Musical notation is, in some ways, very flawed in what it can convey. It is the best thing that we have, but it will always be a translation of a composer's intent. While I notate even the works that (thus far) are played exclusively by me, there are certain elements of the way I play that simply cannot be notated. This is not to say that this is the only way which one of my pieces should be played, but it is the way / would do it. Perhaps overall, it is an issue of trust. When I perform a piece of my own, I don't have to worry about the performer misinterpreting my notation, not putting in enough effort, or making mistakes. If things go wrong, I have no one to blame but myself. Finally (and I can't say that I'm



necessarily proud of this point, but it is nonetheless true) playing my own music is easier than playing someone else's. It takes far less effort to perform a work I've written and internalized throughout the compositional process than it does to try and realize another composer's vision from scratch. I of course still devote plenty of time to learning works by other composers, but there is a level of ease to the learning process when working on a piece of my own.

## **Preparations**

Preparing to play the Reynolds for the first time was a daunting task. As I stated earlier, I had far less time to prepare the work than I would have liked. Additionally, it required me to attempt to grasp completely new ways of conceptualizing time, which I still feel that I've yet to master. The second time I performed *Aspiration* was much easier. This is not to say it wasn't hard, it was just less difficult than the first time I approached the piece. I find this to be the case for most pieces; the second time is always easier. However, on the second occasion I performed *Aspiration*, I was also given the task of performing several other new pieces as part of a multi-hour marathon concert, which added to my level of anxiety. Being able to balance *Aspiration* along with the rest of that program makes me optimistic that I can manage *Aspiration* and *Asphyxiation* together. But honestly, I'm not entirely sure how to prepare for the task of playing both these works on the same program. Given the ease with which I tend to learn my own pieces, I feel that performing *Aspiration* will be the more challenging of the two. Yet one of the things that I've learned in the last few years (and even more so in my preparation for the DMA examination process) is that, in order to accomplish

much of anything, the scheduling and planning of my time is of the utmost importance. I suspect that this will be true of my preparations for performing the Reynolds and my own work as well. Making a plan of what needs to be learned, allocating the proper amount of time in my schedule to accomplish learning that material, and revising that plan as I go along will be essential in allowing me to successfully perform both works on a program. The other thing in which I firmly believe, although it is seemingly in direct contradiction with my previous statement regarding planning, is Parkinson's Law, which states that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion."<sup>28</sup> If I have three months to prepare the program, I will use as much of that available time as possible; but if I only have a week to learn it, I can probably manage that too. For example, the idea of being given seven days to sum up a year and a half worth of research seems pretty absurd when you stop and think about it, yet here we are.

## **Future**

*Asphyxiation* is not yet completed. There has been a great deal invested in the planning leading up to its composition, but there will inevitably be developments and changes based on the acquired knowledge and experiences that occur between now and its premiere. And even after that point, there will still probably be changes. As I stated before, the very act of responding to these questions will inevitably influence the manner in which I conceptualize the piece as a whole, and may very well change the entire direction of the work. It is difficult to know what the end result will be until it is done. It is like asking me to predict the future. Regardless of the amount of time that

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28. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Parkinson's Law," last modified August 22nd, 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Parkinson%27s\\_Law&oldid=446174079](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Parkinson%27s_Law&oldid=446174079).

one puts into the creation of writing *any* piece of music, it will still always go through a period of evolution. Aside from the actual composition of the work, this evolution period includes the preparation of parts, the rehearsal process, the performance, and even reflection on the performance after it is completed. These things cannot be known in advance. At this point I have done the research—the job now is to see what can result from it.

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