
Andrew Tholl

An investigation into the
artist's work and his
relationship to the
concept of the
“performer/composer”

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The Concept of a Performer/Composer

I have come to the conclusion that I do not like the term “performer/composer.” This is not to say that I don’t think the term 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 the creation of the term was to try 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, I find that it excludes a great deal of what they do as musicians. This is certainly how I feel about myself as a musician. While the term “performer/composer” is an accurate description for some of what I do, I feel that it only covers a small portion of my musical activities. One could then focus a discussion on this specific portion of work that I do, 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.

This paper will be divided into three major sections. The first will discuss my history; I find it difficult to understand who I am as a musician without the knowledge of where I came from (musically speaking). The second will look more specifically my wide ranging activities as a musician. Here I will focus in on several examples of my own works as they relate to my other activities as a musician. Third, I will look at a selection of other artists whom I relate to and for whom the simple “performer/composer” label doesn’t seem to apply.

A Brief History

I began playing the violin when I was three years old. My father was a trumpet player and, ideally wanted me to become a French horn player but, as we all know, French horns can't be played by three year olds. As a substitute, I was given violin lessons to begin my musical training with the intention that when I was big enough to play a French horn, I would switch. Fortunately for me, that switch never happened.

It was also around this time I was given my first record.¹ The record was the Clash's *Combat Rock* and it was given to me by my uncle, the younger brother of my mother. One might think that this is an awfully young age to introduce a child to punk rock (although *Combat Rock* is perhaps the least punk album the Clash ever recorded, with perhaps the exception of *Sandinista*) but I had been particularly drawn to the song "Rock the Casbah" which was being played on the radio frequently at that time. I was known to sing along while riding in the car with my mother, despite the fact that I had no idea what the actual words were (and didn't really discover what they were until I was in my teens).

While these two stories may seem innocent enough, I feel that together, they are a microcosm of the path my life would end up following. The division between the musical minds of my mother and my father could not be more different from one another, and I ended up inheriting traits from both of them. My mother brought me up in the world of pop music. Her favorite recording artists at that time were Prince, James

¹ In truth it was a cassette tape, but for the purposes of this paper I will refer to all "albums of recorded works" as a "record" regardless of the specific format in which it may have been released.

Brown, The Talking Heads, Janet Jackson, and Madonna. On the other hand, my father can barely stand to listen to recorded music due to the fact that he finds it to be an inaccurate recreation of the experience of live music. But on those occasions where he played recorded music, it was strictly classical. And this was how my musical education began. I would listen to Springsteen, and U2 in the car with my mother on my way to my violin lessons where I would play Mozart and Vivaldi. This was my musical world until probably the age of 10, when other forces began to work their way into my mind.

Music Television, or MTV as it was most commonly referred to, began broadcasting on August 1st, 1981.² While I cannot remember a time in my life where I was not playing the violin, I also can't remember a time when MTV didn't exist. I feel that this has had a profound effect on the way music has shaped my life. Ten years after it began, MTV was the number one source for musical information for those of my generation, and it was frankly unavoidable. In 1992, film director Dave Markey released his documentary *1991: The Year Punk Broke*. As the title suggests, 1991 was the year that punk rock³ broke into the mainstream. A significant contributor to the popularization of this music was the mainstream success of Nirvana. This worldwide success would have been impossible without MTV. There is a saying that everyone who heard the Velvet Underground were immediately provoked to get a guitar and start a band, and I think the same thing can be said for Nirvana. It was at this time that I felt that the violin was a bit too limiting and to correct this, asked for a guitar and started

² Wikipedia contributors, "MTV," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MTV> (accessed December 16, 2010).

³ Although by this time punk rock had gone through many progressions beyond original punk rock artists such as the Sex Pistols, The Ramones, and the Clash; still, for many bands the "punk" spirit remained.

playing it in addition to the violin. This is probably the point that I started composing music. There had never been any outlet for me to write music as a violinist; violin doesn't lend itself terribly well to the singer/songwriter tradition, and I didn't know any other kids who knew how to read music enough for me to really write anything for them. The guitar however, was made for writing songs. So like many other teenagers at that time, I sat in my bedroom writing songs. Yet this was always in addition to my activities as a violinist. I very much felt like I was leading some sort of double life. There was the classical side and the rock side and the two were never allowed to meet. This is one of the central issues that I have felt throughout my life; the musical world expects musicians to do one thing very well. While the idea of a performer/composer certainly existed at this time, there was nobody around me that ever suggested it as an option. It is still a very new idea and people still don't understand it.

1994

Throughout time there have always been a few central dates that become markers for certain musical shifts. Bach's death in 1750 marked the end of the Baroque era. 1945 and the end of World War II is frequently cited as a marker for an overall change in compositional style. 1969 is marked by the dichotomy of peace and love at Woodstock and the murder of a Rolling Stones fan at Altamont. 1977 is frequently cited as the birth of punk rock. 1981, as previously mentioned, is when MTV went on air - creating a profound shift in the way music was both consumed and received. These are of course all generalizations, but they make it easier for us to relate things to one another through history. In my opinion, 1994 is the next big cultural marker. This is perhaps not the case for everyone, but is at least the case for me personally. It was the

year Kurt Cobain died, several landmark albums were released,⁴ and the film “Pulp Fiction” was released.⁵ There are many other significant cultural events which occurred this year, but there is no need to discuss them here. The point in bringing this up is that, when I retrospectively look back on my life, this year seems like a significant marking point. In my mind, I divide my childhood into two parts: before 1994 and after. There are many factors that contribute to this personal division point, but perhaps one of the biggest factors is that, in addition to keeping up with violin and learning guitar, I started to learn to play drums as well. And if you can play guitar and drums, you can probably manage to play electric bass too. At this point, I had all the elements you needed for a rock band, so I started one.

I suppose the moment one becomes a “performer/composer” is the moment that they play their own music in front of an audience. The first time I played anything I had written in front of an audience was probably around 1995. I had started a band with a drummer and another guitarist. Some of our songs just used two guitars and drums, and for others the guitarist and I traded off on bass duties. There are, unfortunately no surviving recordings of this band. I wish I had the opportunity to go back and listen to these songs today. I have very little recollection of them, but I do know that they were profoundly influenced by “grunge” music as well elements of surf rock, rockabilly, noise rock, and the Riot Grrl movement. These were the things I was listening to in my day to day life, and they clearly evidenced themselves compositionally. While the output of

⁴ Among them Nine Inch Nails “The Downward Spiral,” Weezer’s “Blue Album,” and Pavement’s “Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain.”

⁵ While this film is not a musical event and a subject that need not be discussed at length in this paper, it is this author’s opinion that the non-linear formal structure of the film was a revolutionary idea for society at large and made an impact across all forms of art. Also, it single handedly sparked a revival of 1960’s surf music.

this band was minimal, I do think it is significant that even from this early point in my life I was clearly interested in the combining of seemingly diverse musical styles.

Late High School/Pre-College

Through most of my career in high school, I continued to lead separate and distinct musical lives. I made the decision to transfer to a high school thirty miles from my home and commute for the purposes of being able to play in a better high school orchestra than what could be offered at my local high school. I played in more bands. I began playing drums in the high school jazz band. All these musical activities however remained separate from one another.

When I was eighteen I experienced my first real taste of both musical and personal freedom. I had just graduated from high school and was accepted to the Henry Mancini Institute, a summer program with a mission of providing real world performing experience to young professionals. However, as its namesake suggests, the festival dealt heavily in the integration of jazz and film score styles. The majority of the musicians at this festival were both older and primarily jazz musicians. It was at this festival that I received my first experience with free improvisation. I had always had an interest in jazz and had done a little experimenting with it though out high school⁶ but hadn't ever really known it was possible to just start making music and to simply listen to those you are playing with. It was also at the Mancini Institute that I first heard Vinny Golia. Vinny has since become an integral part of my development over the last several years, but I'm not sure that ever would have happened if I hadn't seen him perform that

⁶ I had, as previously mentioned, played drums in my high school jazz band so I was quite familiar with the style, but had done only a little in terms of melodic improvisation on the violin.

summer. Seeing Vinny play allowed me to realize that there was a possibility of relating to music in a completely different way, and I think that was always in the back of my mind as I started to begin my college career.

College

My pre-CalArts college career consisted of degrees in violin performance from Arizona State University (undergraduate) and the University of Michigan (graduate). In both places, I was very fortunate to have teachers who recognized my excitement in new music and encouraged me to follow that path. The schools themselves however were less encouraging. While I recall expressing interest in studying composition while at Arizona State, the program was not really set up to allow such a thing. University of Michigan seemed only interested in allowing those who were planning to be career composers to study with their composition faculty. This resulted in me having to express that side of my musicianship in other outlets.

Paper Tiger Trio

While I played in several bands throughout high school and in my early college years, the Paper Tiger Trio is the first one that I really feel proud of. I also think that this band marks the moment when all my activities began to cross-pollinate and relate to one another. The band was made up of myself on drums (frequently doubling with analogue electronics and guitars) a bassist, and a guitarist (who also doubled on keyboards, electronics, and theremin). The objective of the ensemble was to operate like a jazz ensemble while sounding like an experimental rock band. We would compose very vague “heads,” which usually consisted of no more than a chord

progression, and we would use those as a starting point for improvisation. This certainly isn't a unique concept for a band, but given the climate of the Phoenix music scene at that time, we did stand out from the rest of the groups in town. While we were trying to merge a rock sound with a more "jazz" performance practice, we were also heavily influenced by composers such as John Cage, Pierre Schaeffer, and Steve Reich. We frequently used seemingly non-musical sounds, created loops as a basis for rhythmic structures, and used tight-knit interlocking patterns. Despite the fact that the band has been almost completely inactive for the last 5 years⁷, I still think about the concepts the band worked with frequently when composing.

The Teeth

When I moved to Michigan to begin my next degree, the Paper Tiger Trio more or less ceased its activities. My compositional creativity was then transferred to The Teeth. While The Teeth were essentially a punk rock band,⁸ we spent hours meticulously crafting every moment of a song. One of our big influences was John Zorn's band Naked City; the album *Torture Garden* in particular fascinated us. Almost every song on the album clocks in at under a minute, and we found that frequently the act of remembering one of the songs could last longer than the song itself. Time became an important element when writing songs with The Teeth, and it certainly carried over into my later compositions as well. The Teeth had an unspoken rule of never notating any of our music, but to understand it well enough to have been able to if we desired. This led to us frequently analyze our songs after their creation to better

⁷ This will hopefully change very soon; the band is scheduled to play again in early 2011.

⁸ We utilized a standard guitar, bass, drums, and vocals instrumentation.

understand our own compositional process. We utilized compositional techniques such as mixed meters, polyrhythm, bitonality, and metric modulation.

My Music and its Interconnectivity

The previous discussion has given an overview of my early background as a musician as well as my early compositional output. While this overview is certainly not entirely comprehensive of all my activities as a musician, it should serve to highlight many of the major factors that have helped to contribute to my unique voice as both a composer and performer. I will now switch the discussion to focus specifically at my compositional work from the last four years and its relationship to both my previous work and my other activities as a musician.

As a musician, I work as a soloist interpreting others works, as a composer writing for others, as a hired hand playing for film scores and pop records, as a member of a string quartet specializing in new music, as a member of another string quartet which primarily works in an educational context, as a rock musician, as an orchestral musician, as an improviser, as a teacher, and of course as a “performer/composer.” I feel that there is a strong connection between these endeavors and that their relationship to one another is what makes my music what it is.

To begin this discussion, it is sensible to start at the beginning of my compositional catalogue. ...*still trying to make ends meet*... is a work for solo violin and was the first real “concert hall” piece I have written. But its inception was born 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. But every time I walked into the practice room, all I really wanted to do was write music. This was the same feeling of conflict felt in my youth between keeping my life as a violinist separated from my life as a band musician. How can I be writing music when I 'm supposed to be learning the music of others? The result was this piece. It was essentially written in a single sitting, with the violin in hand, improvising. This is a truly a piece that I feel could not have been written by someone other than a violinist, and I feel that it is the first time I really started utilizing and developing the kinds of extended techniques other composers had been asking me to perform for years. Part of the textural/harmonic language is directly related to the impression that lingered in my memory of a series of pieces by guitarist Thurston Moore.⁹ In this way, it was my experience as a consumer of music that also played a role in the creation of my own work. The works of Thurston Moore's are performed entirely on guitars and rely heavily on the use of harmonics. The beginning of my work is perhaps an attempt to take a moment of Thurston Moore's piece and freeze it in time.

The same relationship of *...still trying to make ends meet...* to the Thurston Moore recording can be seen in several other pieces that I have written. For example, *my memories will never be an accurate representation* is in many ways a direct response to my relationship with the Naked City *Torture Garden* album. The work is divided into two sections, which one might consider the piece and the memory of the piece. The second section contains many of the same rhythmic elements, structure, and pitch relationships, but has been transformed through the use of harmonics and an

⁹ These pieces were part of the score to the film "Heavy."

increased tempo, creating what can be thought of as a “ghost” of the original. Additionally, the entire piece takes less than a minute and is full of angular intensity, which is directly related to my experiences playing with The Teeth. With my string quartet, *hope and optimism never got me anywhere*, the inspiration came from a recording by the D.C. punk band Q and not U whose “Busy Lights, Busy Carpet” begins with two electric guitars panned left and right with a hocketed rhythm. This led me to think of a string quartet with the two violins placed on the outer edges of the ensemble in an effort to try and recreate this stereo effect in live performance. This experience occurred while in school at the University of Michigan, yet it took me nearly another four years before I wrote the first note of the quartet. I’m not sure why this is the case, but I am grateful for the fact that I was able to spend several years playing other composers music with the Formalist Quartet before attempting to write my own. While the experience of playing in the quartet has been rewarding and worthwhile all on its own, it has also served as its own form of compositional research. How many other composers have had the experience of playing stacks of new string quartets before writing their own? It is a rather unique position to be in.

My works frequently contain a narrative history of my life. It is my personal life experiences that become the inspiration for a composition's creation. My violin duo, *the distance between us*, is about the shared experiential relationship between myself and my friend Martha Walvoord. Both of us are violinists, and at the time the piece was written, both of us had recently moved across the country from one another for work and career opportunities. When speaking to one another on the telephone, it struck me that even though we were both separated from each other by extreme distance, we

were still sharing the same experience of being alone in a new city. This concept was evidenced in the duo through the use of the same exact melodic material in both parts; the difference between the two parts was in both the rhythmic structure and physical distance between the performers. While the piece works on a level of its own, it contains an added level of significance for me in that I cannot help but remember that experience. *i'll never be younger than i am today (for andrew tholl)* functions much in the same way. In the original program notes for the premiere of this piece I wrote:

I feel old. Rather, I feel like the things that I have accomplished with my life are substantially less than they should be according to my age, and this makes me *feel* old, or at least as if time is running out. I am 28, about to finish school, unemployed, and in about 4 weeks will probably be homeless as well. This is not a plea for sympathy, I'm just trying to show you how things seem from my point of view. Does this make me a pessimist? Probably. "So do something about it" you might say. Well, I have...I've written this piece and it's all about the feeling and the experience I'm going through.

That may be as good an explanation as any I could give as to how composition serves a function of my life's personal narration. It is, admittedly, a bit over the top, but the overall sentiment remains true. Now I realize it may have been somewhat narcissistic to dedicate a piece to myself, but it is completely a piece written for me. Additionally, since this piece is about the passage of time, getting older, and ultimately death, I view it as a bit of a requiem. It is in some ways like writing my own obituary.

Another concept that I have been exploring heavily in my compositions is what I might describe as extreme intensity. The first work of mine to explore this concept was *brutal music no. 1*. As the title implies, the piece examines brutality from several different standpoints. The entire piece is loud and aggressive, with the intention of being confrontational towards the audience. When I perform the work, I face the

audience straight on rather than turned to the side as violinist normally would. A large portion of the piece is made up of non-pitched material. While there are written notes, it is also a collection of shrieks and scratches. Furthermore, the work explores the extreme limits of what is physically possible for the performer. The first time I performed the piece, I nearly fell down at its conclusion and my bow arm hurt for hours. This piece began the creation of what is an ongoing series of works exploring these concepts. The second in this series, *brutal music no. 2 (it's not what you say, it's how you say it)*, was written for trombonist Matt Barbier, at his request. I would not have written a piece like this for anyone. I have a relationship with Matt Barbier beyond that of the usual composer because I am a performer as well. I know his playing and his personality because we have spent time performing in ensembles together. I have never written a work for a person I didn't know. When writing for someone else, I always take that person's personality into consideration. Another example of this is *hitting things won't solve your problems (but it might make you feel better)*. This piece was written for pianist Danny Holt, and it was specifically requested that it be scored for his individual set up of piano plus percussion. Due to this unique instrumentation, there may never be another performer who will attempt to play this work. For this reason I made perhaps an even stronger effort to write a piece that Danny would enjoy and would play to his strengths. Danny is stimulated by groove oriented, highly complex rhythmic structures which is exactly what I gave him. This has challenged him to the extreme limits of his rhythmic sensibilities.

As I continue to develop my voice as a performer/composer, I am constantly striving to push the sound world of the violin as an instrument to its extremes. However,

my initial interest in this concept was sparked by my collaboration with composer Lisa Coons. In her work, *Collage for Mixed Media*, my role as a violinist was, at certain points in the piece, to emulate the sound of a turntable. This was perhaps the first time I was ever asked to make such extreme un-violinistic sounds, and it opened up a whole world of possibility. This led me to commission Lisa for a new work for solo violin that might allow me to explore these ideas further. What I received was her *Neurosis Sketches*, a collection of nine very short pieces¹⁰ inspired by neurological disorders. Because of the relationship we had previously developed, the score is at times, intentionally vague. Rather instead the final project was developed through discussion and reference to her earlier work. The aftermath of working on these pieces with Lisa is that I was left with a new musical vocabulary to explore alone. This has manifested itself in several pieces¹¹ as well as in my role as an improviser. It is something that I am still currently exploring in my music and feel that there is still a great deal left to discover.

Interconnectivity in Other Artists

As I stated in the introduction to this paper, there are artists for whom the term “performer/composer” very accurately describes their practice¹²; that is to say, those whose work as a performer and composer can’t be separated from one another. Yet there are many other musicians whose work reaches far beyond the simple “performer/composer” designation. I will now briefly discuss a select few who have

¹⁰ Lisa Coons is influenced by Naked City every bit as much as I am and the band became a collective point of reference between the two of us in our collaborations.

¹¹ *brutal music no. 1, I'll never be younger than I am today (for andrew tholl)*, and *our arrangement will never be mutually satisfying*.

¹² Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, and Philip Glass all spring suddenly to mind.

created careers that I feel I can personally relate to and who seem to embody this sense of interconnectedness within their work.

Jim O'Rourke

While Jim O'Rourke is the one person I will discuss here that I've not met personally, I have always been somewhat jealous of the career he seems to have built for himself. His efforts have ranged from through composed instrumental works,¹³ to guitar improvisations, to electronic laptop compositions, to singer/songwriter albums. He has had a whole separate career as a record mixing engineer¹⁴ and for a brief period was the fifth member of Sonic Youth. While he is a certainly a performer/composer, he is also so much more. He has commented that "the whole basis of almost everything I'm 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."¹⁵ With this as his mission, it is no wonder that he is as successful as mixing engineer and remix artist as he is as a composer; there is clearly a related goal between all his creative work. It seems that O'Rourke has faced very little opposition or criticism for working in so many different avenues of music. I feel that part of the reason for this is that he has found a way to be perceived as a rock and jazz musician rather than as a "performer/composer." Traditionally, this perception

¹³ He holds a masters degree in composition from DePaul University

¹⁴ Working with artists such as Stereolab, Wilco,

¹⁵ 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.

of background will determine how the musical community regards an artist, regardless of the validity of the statement. Part of what I feel needs to change in the future is the breaking down of these perceived barriers, including the notion of a “performer/composer.”

Arthur Jarvinen

Arthur Jarvinen may have embodied this total connectedness in his life’s work more than anyone else I can think of. I use the term “life’s work” rather than musical life because in the case of Jarvinen, I feel that there was very little separation between the two. In an interview with Libby Van Cleve, Jarvinen stated:

So basically, what it all gets down to for me is it’s all composition. It doesn’t matter if you’re writing a ting-ting-ta-ting jazz head, or a twenty-four-hour piano solo like I’m doing now, or doing a piece of physical poetry or performance art, or doing a painting or, many cases, even preparing a meal. Basically, on some level it’s all composition and many of the same rules and the same concerns and the same issues are there at stake.¹⁶

Jarvinen seems to have approached all aspects of his life from a compositional standpoint. In the same interview, he continues to say that “for me, it’s only possible to do what I do as a composer because I’m also a player, because I’m also a publisher, because, because, because. It all kind of goes together.”¹⁷ I feel that Jarvinen’s music is what it is, because of the relationships he built between one aspect of his life and another. Pieces were written with certain instrumentations because he was a member of the Ear Unit. Compositional concepts were developed because of his life as a performer of other composer’s music. His love for Captain Beefheart manifested itself

¹⁶ Arthur Jarvinen, interview by Libby Van Cleve, Yale University, November 12, 1997, p. 39.

¹⁷ Ibid., 50.

in his own compositions. For Jarvinen, there seemed to be no hierarchy of any specific kind of music being better than any other, and that was apparent in all of his work.

Caleb Burhans

Caleb Burhans is the one musician whose career thus far might most resemble mine. We have a striking number of similarities. To begin with, we are the same age and are both primarily violinists and composers. We have both reached out to additional instruments¹⁸ as a means of both better expressing ourselves and as a method of furthering our careers. Both of us are also equally comfortable performing in a variety of musical contexts, be it “new music,” improvisation, or in a non-classical (rock) situation. As much I we may all like to think of ourselves as unique individual snowflakes, Caleb Burhans is essentially the East Coast version of me. I have even on previous occasions been called in as a substitute for him when he was unavailable to play with one of his regular ensembles. He states in his biography that “his compositions benefit from the synergy of writing for people he plays with, and his performances of other works draws from his insights as a composer.”¹⁹ I cannot help but think that at least part of an explanation for all these similarities has to do with the cultural climate of the world during the time we were growing up. I believe that my generation has grown up during a time where it has rapidly become more and more acceptable (and perhaps encouraged) for musicians to branch out beyond one area of specialization. It is difficult to determine when this shift began, and in fact I believe it is still shifting.

¹⁸ Caleb has established himself as a countertenor and also utilizes guitar and piano as an instrumental outlet.

¹⁹ Caleb Burhans, “Biography,” Caleb Burhans, <http://www.calebburhans.com/bio> (accessed December 15, 2010).

Conclusion

What then is the solution to this problem towards the notion of a “performer/composer” is? While it is a relatively new term which I think the musical community is only just now beginning to understand, I feel as though it may have already become outdated and inaccurate. Personally, having been labeled a “performer/composer,” has created a sense of pressure within me to conform to what that term suggests.

What words then, can we use to discuss musicians with such a wide range of activities? I would like to suggest the term “multi-focus musician.” It is an incredibly open term and perhaps asks more questions than it answers, which is part of the goal. It allows for a musician to individually define what their many focuses will be. Rather than being defined as this or that, it allows for an artist to carve out their own individual perspective towards how they view the relationship of their work to all other aspects of their lives.

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