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Musical Rhetoric and Sonic Composing Processes

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Musical Rhetoric and Sonic Composing Processes

by

Kyle D. Stedman

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to Margo, who partnered with me through writing marathons, bad moods, cluttered desks, long conferences, and endless drives between Orlando and Tampa. She never stopped speaking truth into me and reminding me how good I am at this whole teacher/scholar thing. And she filled our home with music, the best writing support of all.

I also owe a debt to the fifteen composers who took the time to talk to me about their work, as well as all the composers over the years who have translated their musical instincts into words through interviews. My ears have changed because of all of you; I hear things differently now.

I’ve also been buoyed by everyone at the University of South Florida: the wisdom of my committee and professors, the zany friendship and camaraderie of my fellow graduate students (especially my officemates in The 257), and the persistent patience and kindness of the English department staff.

Finally, a special thanks is owed to the two people who taught me about the field of rhetoric and composition and convinced me to listen to what it was whispering to me: Twila Yates Papay told me that I was equipped to be a writing professor long before I thought of that as an option, and the late Jim Slevin showed me that this path is one that fulfills my intellectual, personal, and ethical goals.
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ABSTRACT

This project is a study of musical rhetoric and music composition processes. It asks the questions, “How does the nature of music as sound-in-time affect its rhetorical functions, production, and delivery?” and “How do composers approach the task of communicating with audiences through instrumental music?” I answer these questions by turning to the history of musical rhetoric as practiced in the field of musicology and by interviewing composers themselves about their composition practices—approaches that are both underused in the rhetoric and composition community.

I frame my research participants’ responses with a discussion of the different degrees to which composers try to control the eventual meaning made from their compositions and the different ways that they try to identify with their audiences. While some composers express a desire to control audiences’ emotions and experiences through the use of forms and careful predictions about an audience’s reactions to certain genres and influences, other composers express a comfort with audiences composing their own meanings from musical sounds, perhaps eschewing or transforming traditional forms and traditional performance practices. Throughout, I argue for the importance of considering all of these perspectives in the context of actually hearing music, as opposed to taming and solidifying it into a score on a page.

These composers’ insights suggest the importance of understanding musical rhetoric as an act based in sound and time that guides meaning but can never control it.
They also suggest new ways of teaching English composition courses that are inspired by the experiences and practices of music composition students. Specifically, I argue that English composition courses should better rely on the self-sponsored literacies that students bring to classrooms, stretch the ways these courses approach traditional rules of composing, and approach digital tools, collaboration, and delivery in ways that mirror the experiences of music students.
INTRODUCTION

Play this clip at http://tinyurl.com/strauss-intro (Strauss, Till, perf. Berlin)

I want to let this musical epigraph sound alone. Just as a textual epigraph can
serve the subtle, poetic purpose of artfully guiding a reader’s attention, I want this clip of
sound to guide you to wherever it takes you. I want it to speak however it chooses, and I
want you to hear whatever you hear.

But I admit that I also want to add to this sound, rushing in to interrupt it with my
own words and claims. I want to contextualize it, telling you that it’s the beginning of
Richard Strauss’s Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks, a fourteen-minute, one-movement
orchestral work composed in 1894 and 95. I want to tell you some of the stories of the
prankster Till Eulenspiegel who haunts so many stories of German folklore and whose
exploits are narrated instrumentally in this piece, explaining that Till’s last name means
“owl mirror,” a name probably derived from the proverb “Man sees his own faults as
little as a monkey or an owl recognizes his ugliness in looking into a mirror” (Heninger).

And at first it seems to me that giving you that much is sufficient for you to
understand the clip in the proper way, whatever that means, but then I realize that there’s
more. I want you to know about the recording: how it is from a 1931 recording that
Strauss himself conducted and how that recording was converted to MP3 and uploaded to
archive.org with a Creative Commons license. I want you to consider how much the
definitiveness of a sound has to do with a composer’s intent or an encoder’s digital choices. And then I can’t help but ask you to consider how the quality of the recording affects what it says to you. Would a recording digitally captured in a contemporary studio, without the pops and warbles of the 78 RPM record and the low quality of the MP3, have changed your impression of its meaning? If so, how bad could the quality get before something—anything—changes how it means? Would a biographical note be more helpful—say, the fact that Strauss’s father, with whom Richard rarely heard ear-to-ear, was known as a genius on the horn, and it is the horn on which you first hear a theme that seems to echo Till’s playful spirit? What could that possibly mean? Or is contemporary criticism from other composers more useful to an understanding of the piece’s meaning—say, that French composer Claude Debussy wrote of this piece that it “might almost be called ‘an hour of original music in a lunatic asylum.’ . . . One wants either to shout with laughter or to shriek with pain” (Fisk 205). But of course, you heard only the first of its fourteen minutes (Debussy was exaggerating about it lasting an hour); can a piece’s meaning really reside in one fourteenth of its content? If not, how much do you need?

Complicating factors is Strauss’s initial refusal to guide the meaning of the piece for his audiences. After its first performance, he was asked to explain which of Till’s exploits were here musically depicted, and he “declined, saying he left it to his hearers to solve the problem, which was in accordance with his usual practice” (“Portray in Ballet”). Perhaps, then, the piece’s meaning only dwells in its delivery as an abstract collection of noises, in itself. But wait, is the audible the only way to experience that essence? Perhaps you’ll better understand the musical moves—and thus the meaning?—
of the piece if you study the relationship between the sounds you heard and this
collection of straight and squiggly lines:

Figure 1: Strauss, *Till, IMSLP*

Or if that doesn’t speak to you, perhaps the following will be clearer—at the very least as
a way to see the entire fourteen minutes of the piece visualized, giving you a context for understanding the first minute.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Audacity

Or perhaps my first impulse was the better one: to let the sound stand on its own.
But I can’t help but wonder—if you return to the top of this page and listen to the clip again, will it still sound the same? Will it *mean* the same? What if later on you download
an mp3 of the entire piece—either for free from archive.org or for ninety-nine cents somewhere else—and listen to it for a few days. Would its meaning stay the same in any meaningful way?

How odd that musical communication is so changeable, more like watching for messages in the clouds than reading a book, even though music and books were both composed by people.

**Why a Project on Music and Sound?**

The rhetoric and composition community is increasingly attuned to the bass thump of sound and music playing in the distance, enamored perhaps by the realization that even a single one-minute clip of sound both 1) communicates and 2) can’t be tied down to any single, stable meaning. In one of the field’s earliest sustained looks at these topics, a 1999 special issue of *Enculturation*, guest editor Thomas Rickert and Byron Hawk bring music into the realm of rhetoric and composition through the angle of Socrates and Nietzsche:

> Recall that Nietzsche understood Socrates’ deathbed wish that he would have learned to play a musical instrument as a form of recantation from the rational rigor of philosophy. How are we to understand this except that music is itself already a form of social transformation, a politics of the uncanny, the unsaid, the unthought. And writing this politics is precisely a writer’s work. As music composes us, newly and differently than we were, we too recompose ourselves as we write these musics.

Later, Cheryl E. Ball and Hawk also claim issues of the sonic for the field in their letter from the guest editors to the 2006 special issue on “Sound in/as Composition Space” in
Computers and Composition. They write that “a multiliteracies approach that incorporates attention to audio is possible within composition studies” (263). And most recently, in the introduction to a 2011 special issue of Currents in Electronic Literacy on Writing with Sound, Diane Davis writes:

> [E]very text is at the very least part musical score—even in a printed text, the synesthetic event of persuasion depends to a large degree (larger than is usually acknowledged) on tone, style, beat, rhythm—and static. To write with sound, to make “music,” with traditional musical instruments, with a turntable (or a turntable app), with found sounds, with the voice, with a piece of chalk on a chalkboard—is to engage in a performance of the inscription that relies very explicitly on noncognitive affective appeals.

Each of these introductions draws attention to the unique reasons that the study of sound—especially the study of the composition of sound—should be done from our unique disciplinary location. Rickert and Hawk remind us that ours is a field that studies the politics of difficult-to-define movements and identities, issues that are wrapped into any study of sound. Ball and Hawk draw attention to the fact that our understanding of multiliteracies falls short when it comes to issues of the sonic. Davis situates our understandings of the performative and the affective as perfectly situating us for commentary on the sonic. And at the 2011 Computers and Writing conference, Hawk made an even more basic call for our attention to sound: just as literature departments are primarily interested in the study of written texts, so are music departments primarily interested in the study of musical texts (and, I would add, their performance). It’s up to
us, he said, to focus on these texts’ composition, whether the texts are made of words or sounds.

To some extent, we’ve taken up these calls for attention to the sonic. Kathleen Blake Yancey’s 2004 CCCC chair’s address “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” titled with a distinct nod to music, adjures the field to move beyond text, though much of her address focuses on the visual in new media as opposed to the sonic. More recently, Cynthia L. Selfe has called for a crucial reworking of composition pedagogies to include multimodal work with a focus on sound, claiming that “the history of writing in U.S. composition instruction, as well as its contemporary legacy, functions to limit our professional understanding of composing as a multimodal rhetorical activity and deprive students of valuable semiotic resources for making meaning” (617). Often, the field takes up this call by focusing on the sounds of discursive text—that is, the ways writing and speaking hold inherently musical qualities that deserve attention alongside the words’ discursive meanings themselves (Elbow, “Music”; Johnson). Other work has delved more specifically into music from one angle or another: its uses in the classroom (Sirc, “Proust”; Sohn, “ABC’s”), its implications for rhetorical practice (Clark; Koehler), its uses to create ambience (Rickert, “Music@Microsoft”), and at times, even its service to us an example of an affective, indistinct kind of rhetoric (Katz; Murray; Rickert, “Language’s Duality”). We also have no lack of sources outside of traditional rhetorical studies to help us dig into the social practices and artistic possibilities of sound itself (Attali; Kelly, Sound; Miller; Schafer) and its reproduction (Stadler; Sterne).

What we don’t have enough of is attention to how composers of sound describe their work. We analyze texts and consider their rhetorical effects, but rarely do we turn to
composers themselves and ask them how they think about issues of audience, influence, invention, arrangement, and delivery—all issues our field is particularly well suited to understand. Because, as Rickert and Hawk claim, “music composes us,” music composition is a notably odd rhetorical situation for a composer to guide! The composer crafts an experience knowing full well that its meanings and purposes will escape her control the moment it slams into the bodies of listeners, whispering highs to the microscopic hairs in their ears and burbling lows to their bowels, pushing their feet to movement and their minds to mystery. This project is an invitation to composers to pull out a guitar and sit for a while at the campfire of our scholarly conversations, inviting them to share the ways they understand what they do. I see this as an invitation that should be offered to all those who work with sound; however, as a musician and music student, the area of sound studies I’m most qualified to enter is the musical. Therefore, after considering in the first chapter the wider questions of sonic composition in general, I move quickly into the arena of music—not because music composers are any less “rhetorical” than the sound designers of videogames, movies, software, architecture and other immersive experiences, but because I speak the language of musicians better. I situate this move to talk with composers as following the genealogy of think-aloud studies (Flower and Hayes), especially in its less positivistic, more story-driven iterations, as in Janice Walker’s work with the Learning Information Literacy Across the Curriculum group (LILAC Group).

Notably missing among our burgeoning discussions of sound and music are citations from the fields of musicology and aesthetics. I began work on this project believing that discussions about the rhetoric of music and the intersections of music and
language were relatively few, but I’ve found this is only true when we stay within our own field. Outside our disciplinary walls, these topics have a rich history that continues to be discussed regularly (e.g. Bonds, *Wordless*; Burrows, *Sound*; Hamilton; Kivy; Meyer; Sharpe; Swain). Perhaps our reticence to cite this work is due to the tendency of musicologists to use musical terminology that outside audiences don’t understand, relying often on scores and technical discussions of modulations, harmonic centers, rhythmic variations, leading tones, and so on. Or perhaps it reflects a misunderstanding of what scholars *do* in musicology and the philosophy of music. Consider the entry on *musicology* in *Grove Music Online*, a standard database of the field, which supports a very wide-ranging definition of just what it is musicologists do. The entry first defines two narrower perspectives on musicology that people sometimes have before describing a third perspective:

the belief that the advanced study of music should be centred [sic] not just on music but also on musicians acting within a social and cultural environment. This shift from music as a product (which tends to imply fixity) to music as a process involving composer, performer and consumer (i.e. listeners) has involved new methods, some of them borrowed from the social sciences, particularly anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, sociology and more recently politics, gender studies and cultural theory. (Duckles and Pasler)

Composition experts can easily see here some of the same trends that we have experienced in the last fifty years, with our multidisciplinary attention the composition process expanding into (and beyond) a variety of critical perspectives. Studies in the
philosophy of music are similarly wide-ranging. Grove describes three groups who contribute to this discipline:

(a) philosophers developing cosmological and metaphysical systems in which each subject and type of phenomenon, including music, is assigned its proper place; (b) philosophers treating music as one of the arts within their different philosophical systems of aesthetics; and (c) musicians – composers, performers, theorists, and critics – drawing on, and thus contributing to, philosophy to explain the foundations, rationale and more esoteric aspects of their theories, practices and products. (Goehr)

Again, the connections to our work in rhetoric and composition are clear: like us, music philosophers consist of practitioners who, in the broad sense, are teasing out the epistemological underpinnings of their practices. And as a communicative art, music offers a practice that fits comfortably within our disciplinary focus on textual and visual rhetoric. One purpose of this project, then, is to begin to draw attention to some of the most fruitful intersections between these various disciplines in hope that scholars will begin a familiarity with each other’s work.

The question still remains: if so many good reasons exist to discuss sound and music from a rhetoric and composition angle, why do we not do so more often? Focusing only on one aspect of these issues (historical approaches to musical rhetoric), Rodney Farnsworth asked this question in his 1990 article for Rhetoric Society Quarterly, “How the Other Half Sounds: An Historical Survey of Musical Rhetoric During the Baroque and After,” claiming that “a whole area of rhetorical theory [the musical] has been omitted from courses, research areas, and dissertations” (207) in rhetorical studies. In the
years since, I see little evidence that many rhetoricians have taken up Farnsworth’s call for action—but why? The answer is tied up in the nature of sound, as a time-based experience that we relate to in fundamentally different ways than we relate to words and images, which we can hover over, looking back and forth however and whenever we choose. Steven B. Katz suggests that it is in the nature of certain experiences (the affective, the sonic, the musical) to resist study in the ways that scholars are accustomed to study them. He writes, “affective experiences, like subatomic phenomena, do not lend themselves well to visual study, to referential description, to spatial modes of reasoning” (43). More recently, Joddy Murray also reminds us that discussions of the nondiscursive in our field tend to focus on parallels between visuals and words, representationally and with distinct, definable purposes, making the visual easier to study than the slippery sonic. He writes, “rhetoric and composition has taken up the non-discursive through visual rhetoric, yet it does so by primarily privileging the discursive elements of image and ignoring the non-discursive elements (not to mention the rhetorics derived from the other senses)” (57). While Murray seeks to free discussions of the image from these text-like constraints, I turn to sound as a mode that lends itself even more to neglected areas of nondiscursive meaning. In the realm of music, we have the added problem of music’s non-representationality. In philosopher Susanne K. Langer’s words, “Pictures have visual models, drama has a direct prototype in action, poetry in story; all may claim to be ‘copies,’ in the Platonic sense or in the simple Aristotelian sense of ‘imitations.’ But music, having no adequate models, had to rest on the indirect support of two non-musical

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1 The exception is the loosely connected group of (mostly graduate student) scholars focusing their attention on the sonic, their presentations peppered through the programs of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Computers and Writing conference, and the Rhetoric Society of America conference.
aids—*rhythm*, and *words*” (253). When we listen to a minuet or a waltz, forms of music that are tied in our minds to specific kinds of dances, “we can take the music and forget the dance far more easily than we can take a painting and forget what it portrays” (256). Taken together, Katz, Murray, and Langer score an orchestral characterization of sound that is ever-changeable, tied to emotions, proudly nondiscursive, and proudly nonrepresentational. No wonder that we don’t better understand sound—*understanding* isn’t something that sound offers to us. Instead, we *feel* it, we *experience* it, we *associate* with it. And these are things that the Western intellectual tradition has stood against for hundreds of years.

**Methodology**

Chapters three to five represent the findings from a two-pronged qualitative study of music composers: semi-scripted interviews I conducted with professional and amateur composers and with undergraduate music composition students. With non-students, I sought participants informally, following the leads of personal connections and the suggestions of friends with ties to various arts communities. Because of the nature of the data I share—subjective, not objective; story-based, not numbers-driven—I’m comfortable with this method of identifying participants. As Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba remind us, “*Purposeful sampling and emergent design are impossible to achieve without interaction*” (102; italics in original); I wanted to find people with a variety of experiences, so my interaction as researcher was necessary, not something to structure out of the research. In the end, I conducted phone or face-to-face interviews with eight non-student composers, supplemented by email interviews with two more composers who preferred to discuss these topics asynchronously. Their experiences vary
widely: two (Daniel Crozier and Stella Sung) are composers-in-residence in college music departments while still actively composing music for concerts around the country. Three are known as both composers and authors, having written books for the popular press (Jaron Lanier), academic press (Dmitri Tymoczko), and an influential blog (Greg Sandow). One composes music for film, stage, and church settings (Ronald Owen), and one composes sound effects and music for videogames (Tom Todia). Three occupy the dual world of amateur composing and studies in rhetoric and composition, either as professors or graduate students (Scott Whiddon, Matt Gomes, and Joe Schicke). I use the real names of all of these non-student composers, a decision that all agreed to on their IRB forms. This follows the nature of our conversations: they mentioned nothing private or potentially harmful, and in fact, most would appreciate increased exposure to their words and compositions.

For the five students I interviewed, however, I took a different approach to naming: I gave each a pseudonym to protect their identities as much as possible. Like my non-student participants, these students weren’t discussing private or potentially harmful information with me, and I initially gave them the option on the IRB form to choose to be known by their real names or by pseudonyms. Yet as I proceeded, I decided to treat them all equally, assuring them equal anonymity, even though not all asked for it. This is partly due to the nature of their school: all five are students in the same music program at a small liberal arts college in the South, where protecting the identity of any of the students is difficult enough without “outing” one or more of them. Again, not that I perceive that any of these students would experience a backlash of any kind were their identity known,

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2 My study was approved by the University of South Florida’s Institutional Review Board as file # Pro00001518.
but I want to respect the power relationship inherent on a college campus. Their grades, and therefore their futures, are in the hands of others, and it therefore seems wisest not to give any hypothetically vindictive professor, administrator, or classmate any grounds to tarnish the names of my participants. As is advised in Heidi McKee and James E. Porter’s “The Ethics of Digital Writing Research: A Rhetorical Approach,” I find that sometimes researchers have an ethical responsibility to take even more steps backward than IRBs require.

I met with these students individually on their campus to give them a sense of comfort and to avoid asking them to travel anywhere else. I identified participants by visiting four sections of music composition classes (each taught by the same professor), where I participated in the work of the class that day, briefly described my project, and gave students a chance to contact me later or sign up right away for a focus group on issues of composition. With this contact information, I emailed everyone who signed up with an invitation to my focus group, but no one showed. (Music students are notoriously busy with practices and lessons, so I didn’t take it personally.) I then followed up with individual emails asking for individual interviews (which I originally planned to be framed as opportunities to tell me more about the issues that came up in the focus group), and five responded. I met with three of these five students twice: once earlier in the semester and once later to hear about the progress on their work and to hear samples of actual music that they were willing to share with me. I also attended the student composition recital at the end of the semester.

My underlying methodological stance is based on the “rhetorical nature of research activity” described by Patricia Sullivan and James E. Porter in *Opening Spaces:*
Writing Technologies and Critical Research Practices. That is to say that I’ve attempted throughout my study’s formulation, analysis, and delivery to draw attention to my role as rhetorical molder of the information I present. In practice, that means that chapters three to five show me at times being surprised by my participants’ answers, at times quoting transcriptions of my own comments alongside my participants, and at times transcribing the words of my student participants as poetry to draw even more attention to my role as translator of spoken sounds into static words. It also means that my transcripts rely on a model of narrative analysis, with its focus on stories, interviews as discursive acts, temporal organization, and contextual analysis (Garson).

One way these critical research practices affected the shape of this project is in its evolution over time. My interviews were initially implemented with a focus on four areas, all of which are issues that I perceived as relevant both to music composition and studies in rhetoric and composition: influence/sources (how they see their relationship to the music they listen to, and if/how they purposefully refer to it in their own music), content/form (how their use or disuse of established forms affects the nature of what they want to say in music), affect/emotion (what techniques they use to affect the emotions of their listeners), and digital spaces (how they use or avoid digital composition tools). As the core of the loose conversations I had with these composers (in that I tried to ensure that each participant mentioned these four areas), these topics indeed surface regularly; however, they are not the only topics that my participants mentioned. An initial plan to write a single chapter on my non-student composers’ answers, to be organized around these four points, blossomed into two chapters that better reflected the range of topics that emerged. Thus, chapter three now focuses on the confluence of issues

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3 See the introduction to chapter five for more details on this choice.
of influence and audience (something I didn’t ask specifically about, but which seemed to linger in the minds of everyone I spoke to), including a discussion of emotion at the tail end, while chapter four uses the rhetorical canons as a framework to explore how composers manage the practical issues of composing. This focus on the canons includes my original topics of content/form and composing in digital spaces, but it also allows space for composers to discuss their invention process, stylistic choices, use of scores (one kind of “memory”), and attitudes toward performance.

These two chapters are also notable for how they present the responses of my research participants alongside published interviews with composers in a parallel way, giving the words of both sets of data equal weight. This was another unplanned decision reflecting the changing nature of the project. I initially planned to stick mainly to what my participants told me, while reading the occasional book of interviews with composers as background research. But what I found as I continued reading was that both sets of interviews—those I conducted and those I read—complemented each other in important ways. I found that while there are many published books of interviews with music composers (Banfield; Bordowitz; Chase; Fisk; McCutchan; Perlis and Van Cleve; Smith and Smith; Zorn), relatively few focus specifically on the composing process itself. Instead, many of these books offer composers opportunities to discuss issues of interest to them: their thoughts on musical trends, on various performers, cultural analysis, and so on. Ann McCutchan’s *The Muse That Sings* is a notable exception; it’s no accident that I rely on her work more than others, given her focus on the creative process. My interviews, focused as they were on issues related to music composition itself, filled a gap in these works. Yet on the other hand, the nature of a semi-scripted, conversational
interview means that on some topics, it was sometimes hard to find quotations that could be easily communicated to an audience who wasn’t at the interview with us. That is, a composer might tell me about her invention process in a way that was interesting but hard to characterize efficiently in a transcript. In these situations the edited (and occasionally indexed!) words of composers from published collections helped fill out the issues I found needed to be discussed. In short, I intend the inclusion of both sets of interview data to be a mutually honoring move. Just because an interview was published in a book doesn’t mean it’s any better or more authoritative than an interview conducted with me. And just because I wasn’t the one to ask the questions in published interviews doesn’t mean that the responses there don’t fit the context of my discussion.

**Arguments and Organization**

This project can be read as roughly fitting into two parts: theoretical explorations of the intersections of sound, music, and rhetoric (chapters one and two) and practical explorations of those principles as explained by composers themselves (chapters three, four, and five). The melody interwoven throughout all of this is my focus on music as organized sound, as opposed to music as experienced through its visual representations (as score, waveform, or written explanation). As seen in the beginning of this introduction, the parts of me that are comfortable with definitions and logocentric certainty struggle against this focus on the nondiscursive ever-movingness of sound, yet I persist in focusing on music-as-sound. I argue throughout that our understanding of music as one instance of sonic rhetoric is hampered by our tendency to diminish sound, to tame it into something visible. Instead, this project is a call for considerations of what it might look like to conceive of musical meaning and musical rhetoric more from a
phenomenological perspective, considering what it means to experience sound more than understand it. My focus on music composers is thus an exploration of what I see as the paradoxically impossible and well-established task of trying to communicate with listeners through the fluid medium of sound—impossible because sonic messages defy composers’ attempts to control the meanings made from them, yet established because the oral history of rhetoric has dealt for centuries with just these issues of sonic uncertainty (though with the fixity of spoken words helping the meaning to be more certain than with music).

Chapter one delves most thoroughly into these issues of sound-as-sound, beginning with sound’s nature as time-based and delivered, and moving from there to a consideration of how music-as-sound draws our attention to issues of music’s comprehensibility, form, associative nature, and emotional possibilities. From that base, chapter two moves into the arena of musical rhetoric as practiced historically and more recently in studies of musicology and communication. Here, I argue that musical rhetoric too often is approached from a print-based instead of a sound-based perspective, and that a musical rhetoric is needed that more closely aligns with Burkean identification, a formulation that honors the flexible fluidities of music-as-sound. How musical rhetoric actually plays out in the real world is the focus of part two, where I first argue that composers’ descriptions of influence and audience tie the two topics together in sounded music more than in written language (chapter three) and then use the canons of rhetoric as a starting place to explore the ways music-as-sound both supports and breaks free of traditional approaches to the canons (chapter four)—as I said, based on the explanations of composers themselves. Chapter five recounts the compositional stories of my
composition students on issues of form, influence, musical communication, music composition courses, invention, computers, and performance. Here is where my history as a scholar of written composition is most evident, as I take the opportunity of these students’ responses to make various pedagogical arguments for English composition courses that are based in the experience of multimodal composition described by these students.

Staggered between chapters are brief personal interludes that explore my own history with sound, music, and recording. I include these as evidence of the ways sound blurs the boundaries between the personal, the scholarly, the logical, and the poetic. As the author of this project, my personal stories shape the experience of any reader, whether I draw attention to them or not. Instead of muting them, then, I choose to let them sound as a counterpoint to the melody of the more traditionally academic chapters.
CHAPTER 1: MAKING MEANINGS FROM SOUND AND MUSIC

a latin translation of the word “person” is “being of sound.”
as human beings we communicate with each other and with
the greater universe through sound vibration. it is, thus, the
essence of our collective being. all sounds reverberate with
meaning. every sound vibration has an effect, and every
sound connected with every word we speak, in every
syllable, is connected to its eternal meaning, its eternal
reverberation.

Saul Williams (21)

Hear the world around you
without identifying sources.

Free from names, sounds reveal mystery.

Not only birdsong and rhythms of the rain,
but the hum of human actions
and the din of our inventions
heard without names
in a grand mosaic
reveals the spinning mystery of all
music.

Bruce Adolphe (21)

In Philosophy in a New Key, Susanne K. Langer claims that the meaning of poetry
is communicated more through its sounds than in the meaning of its words. This is
because “though the material of poetry is verbal, its import is not the literal assertion
made in the words, but the way the assertion is made, and this involves the sound, the
tempo, the aura of associations with words” (260-61). And because sounds are so crucial
to poetry’s meanings, she claims that these meanings are inherently untranslatable.
Outside of their sounded form, they would cease to mean the same way.
Part of me resists Langer’s characterization. I turn to the epigraphs beginning this chapter, and I dwell on the poetry of the discursive meanings of the phrases these writer-composers used—Williams’s startling assertion that “all sounds reverberate with meaning,” and Adolphe’s that “sounds reveal mystery”—and I appreciate them for what the words themselves say. But Langer is also right that the way these lines are said (whether silently in my head or read aloud) adds something to their meaning, to their effect on me. Put together, these two selections seem to mean even more. After all, can sounds both “reverberate with meaning” and “reveal mystery”? What if the same voice read both epigraphs in sequence, without pausing to mark the transition from one to the other—what would they mean then?

I begin this project with these questions to draw our attention to a basic, but often-ignored point: that music is made of sounds. Often, thinkers trying to understand the ways music means (myself included) will skip straight to musical scores and recordings without slowing down to consider what its soundedness has to do with how it affects listeners. Therefore, before I discuss the nuances of musical rhetoric in chapter two and share the stories of my research participants in chapters three to five, we have some preliminary ground to cover. At the core is the question of how music, as an organized series of sounds, communicates with audiences. These are questions that have been raised before, often by philosophers of music and aesthetics seeking answers to what musicologist Joseph P. Swain calls the “ancient paradox of musical semantics”: the problem that “music seems full of meaning . . . yet no community of listeners can agree among themselves with any precision that comes close to natural language about the nature of that meaning” (45). Because our task in later chapters is to examine the down-
and-dirty ways that composers go about creating those meanings, it’s worth our time to first consider the more abstract answers other thinkers have found, even without the important benefit of actual practice composing sounds. We should proceed with caution, then, wary of the easy comforts of logocentrism even as we consider fluid, shifting concepts like sound. Indeed, my overarching argument in this chapter is that by conceiving of music as organized sound that is expressed in time—as opposed to seeing it as a score, a text, an image—we can better understand the kinds of things instrumental music can communicate: emotions, associations, and the untranslatable. And more exciting yet, by shifting our ideas about music toward the sounded, we’re naturally challenged to consider the sonic possibilities of our textual writing as well, considering how time and sound play into our experience of any kind of text, whether discursive or not.

As we work toward the end of this project, then, we’ll move from the big picture into the careful focus of day-to-day composing activities. That trend plays out in the small scale within this chapter as well. Before we discuss the details of musical rhetoric in the next chapter, we’ll need to consider the associative, language-like, and emotional nature of musical meaning, but before that we’ll zoom out to consider how we comprehend certain sounds as music at all, and backing up further, how sound affects us, as a time-based stimulus to our senses.
Sound

I’m interested in the possibility that meanings always carry traces of something like sound—that is, an eventlike energy that works on the body, potentially stirring feeling, even inciting movement.

*T.R. Johnson (267-68)*

David Burrows writes, “[Seeing is like touching, hearing like being touched; except that the touch of sound does not stop at the skin. It seems to reach inside . . .”](Sound 21). Stop and consider how those words affect you in different ways, depending on the mode in which you encounter them. If read silently, you can imagine your mind reaching out and touching the words, painting an invisible brush across them, back and forth, with your line of eyesight. Maybe you “hear” a voice reading them in your mind, creating a mini feedback loop between the toucher and the touched. If you know me, maybe you hear my voice reading the words. But still, you’re the agent, the one deciding when to start and stop reading. You can read the quotation backwards, if you like: “Inside reach to seems it.” Read the words aloud, and you’re still primarily the toucher of the words, though perhaps the experience of the words is different. Now you feel the sound in your throat, resonating in your body cavity, bouncing against the walls—but again, you’re still in control. But now visit [http://soundcloud.com/kstedman/burrows-quote](http://soundcloud.com/kstedman/burrows-quote) and listen to the words. They repeat a few times, in different voices, in different speeds, and with different music, decisions that you had nothing to do with. You sat there as the sound of the words and music touched you, and the only way to get away was to turn off the speakers, click stop, or walk away. But imagine that the words were being spoken at you by a live person in the room who could thwart your attempts at escape—say, by following you and yelling louder and louder as you moved from room to room, perhaps
locking yourself in your car in an effort to eliminate some, but never all, of the sound reaching out to touch you.

Sound is the agent. It approaches us whether we like it or not.

This implies two central points to my discussion. First, sound is experienced in time. Yet from a subject’s point of view, we tend to experience sound/time as less like a timeline and more like ocean waves that move around, past, and through us. Sound waves move toward us, rising and falling like water, with beginnings and endings characteristic of our knowledge of time. Second, to talk of sound is to talk of its delivery. Though countless scholars and technicians have found ways to visualize sound waves, from the balanced elegance of a classical musical score to the spikes of sound editing software’s waveforms, these images themselves are not sounds. Those images don’t “approach us” the way the sounds they represent do—close your eyes, and they’re gone from your senses’ perception. The inescapability of sound—when you’re in the same room and physically capable of hearing it, of course—is a central part of its delivery. And of course, to talk of delivery is to talk of rhetoric.

**Sound and Time**

We need to structure time and fill it with meaning. But in our complex, demanding, multidimensional lives we may also need to acknowledge that heteronomy of time—the fluctuating variety of rhythms, motions and emotions—which is found in music, but also in subjectivity.

_Eva Hoffman (187)_

Burrows puts the problem of analyzing and understanding sound and time succinctly and poetically:

There can be few human activities less conformable than music to grasping and scrutinizing. The physical nature of sound—invisible
oscillations diffusing through the atmosphere—is part of the problem.

Another is the notorious difficulty of grasping the “flow of time.” Music is like an ongoing experiment in pushing change as far as it can coherently be taken; by its very nature it challenges and frustrates the need to place things, fix and locate them—as for that matter does all motion, like that of an arrow in flight. (Sound 97-98)

Sound’s movement through time makes it difficult to grasp. If we want to analyze a sound, we either need to memorize it as it passes or hear it played over and over, either by recording and replaying it or by repeating the action that caused the sound. R. Murray Schafer tells us that “There is nothing in sonography corresponding to the instantaneous impression which photography can create” (7). Of course, this emphasis on analysis shows my logocentric heritage, my inherent comfort at discussing texts that sit still and allow me to observe them, with me as the only mover and agent. Like us, sounds move inexorably forward through time, but unlike us, they’re not tied to a corporeal body that situates them firmly in one space. What would it mean to break free of our pathological need to anchor ideas and content in the visual world?

Perhaps this was the experience of preliterate societies whose reliance on transitory spoken language gave them an inherently different relationship to words and meaning than mine—a relationship that, according to Walter J. Ong, I can never fully understand, given that “a literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the word is to purely oral people” (Orality 12). These preliterate minds must have been able to dexterously manage and organize time-based material in everyday life, granting greater import to sounds that pass by than we might today, knowing as they did that they can’t
simply be replayed or reread later. To be steeped in orality is to be responsive to time.

Rhetorician Steven B. Katz even uses the concept of time as the glue that holds together his claims about emotion, language, and orality:

Perhaps time, and all it stands for, is the basis of the experience of language as sound, emotion a lump of time caught in the throat. Perhaps it is through time that we can know the affective experience of language as an indeterminate flux and flow. Perhaps it is in time that the essential unity, the oneness that oral cultures experienced in sound, exists. Perhaps we have not lost it. Perhaps it is still in the music of language. (176)

Katz’s anaphora—his repetition of perhaps, an oral technique that reminds us of speeches and other oratorical settings—drives home his point: that the time-based nature of language is inherited from its oral roots and can lead to similar affective responses when hearing or reading language. The work of the composer of sound—whether composing a physical space’s sound design, an art installation’s aural presence, a videogame’s sound effects, or a song’s melodies and harmonies—can thus be described as an exercise in manipulating time, grabbing hold of aural stimuli and repeating them, varying them, adjusting them so that listeners without the benefits of those in preliterate societies can become familiar enough with the sounds to hear when they continue in the same way and when they change unexpectedly. In music, this is the chief purpose of form. But in the sound design of non-musical spaces (lobbies, cathedrals), time is sometimes used in the opposite way, as sounds are composed or manipulated (through wall and floor materials) to create a sense of timelessness, whether echoed or muffled, whether calming or arousing.
In the discussions of sound and music that flow throughout this dissertation, I find that the nature of sound in time is paradoxically the most obvious and most difficult aspect of the rhetoric of sound. In one paragraph, I’ll argue that music is an experience centered in time, that to glue its waveforms to the page in a score is to analyze a completely different thing altogether than a sounded piece of music, but then in the next paragraph I’ll jump omnisciently from one point to another in a piece, as if it were something written, not sounded. Not that the desire to conquer time is itself problematic; the desire to travel through time, to master it through technology or omniscience, is natural and neverendingly appealing. But I fear that when we default to visual, spatial metaphors and paradigms when considering music and sound, it’s something like a time traveler who refuses to go home, bouncing back and forth, in and out of time, never accepting the warm arms of a fully embraced present, with all of the frustrations of the now and uncertainties of the future that this implies. To work with sound, then, is to be present and to draw others’ attention to the present.

Delivered and Accidental Sounds

Delivery, I say, has the sole and supreme power in oratory. 
Cicero (3.56)

Twinned to sound’s presence in time is its nature as a sounded experience. Whether purposefully made or chanced upon, sound-as-sound shares certain qualities: physical qualities like attack, length, quality, and variance, along with cognitive qualities like associations and emotions that we attach to the sounds. But the meaning we make of those sounds relates in part to our perception of their purposefulness. That is, a sound that I think was sent my way to mean something affects me in a way that accidental sounds do.

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1 I’m grateful to Charles Yu’s novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* for the idea of a time traveler who pathologically avoids his home time.
not. There are also sounds that hover intriguingly between these ends of a continuum: ambient noises that were purposefully delivered but which don’t enter my conscious notice; whispered messages that catch me when I’m dozing, and which I therefore equate more with a bee’s annoying hum than a person’s willed message; cacophonous combinations of sounds (say, an airport’s voices, engines, and music) that may be meant to say something to me but which are unintelligible in the mix. I mention these possibilities of sound’s delivery to draw attention to the extent to which a listener’s perception of a sound is guided by her perception of its purpose—that is, the extent to which it seems to have been delivered willfully, in which case it becomes imbued with some degree of content.

The degree to which an audience perceives that a sound was willfully delivered affects the meanings made from that sound. Even the most disjointed, sample-filled, glitchy musical performance reflects a composer’s will in ways that a random urban street’s soundscape does not. Without the lens of the will, “symbolization becomes a behavioral display, much like the aquatic antics of an otter or the hunting prowess of a lion” (Murray 142), both of which can be beautiful but which lack a rhetorical purpose. Perceiving how unwilled actions or objects affect me is not to say that they affect me rhetorically, only that they affect me at all. I can be moved by things other than communication.² And we’re surrounded by sounds more or less willed all the time: whistled notes as opposed to accidentally loud breathing; elevator music played through a small speaker as opposed to the clack of heels echoing down the hall. (Of course, the

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² I realize I’m taking a more phenomenological tack than a materialist one here. I see these approaches not as fundamentally incompatible, but as a different way of focusing on musical-rhetorical events. That is, my focus is on the composer’s purpose, the audience’s perception of that purpose, and in a roundabout way, the composer’s perception of the audience’s perception of her purpose.
sounds of breathing and clacking can also be willfully ordered, moving them into the realms of rhetorical purposefulness.) And when willed sounds are sounded, they are delivered, which implies the beginnings of communication. At its simplest, this might mean the communication implied by a twig purposefully snapped—a sound willfully delivered—to get a friend’s attention in the woods. (A twig snapped accidentally still communicates—and differently to different listeners—but as an unwilled sonic message, it falls outside my composer-centered range of analysis. The “accidentally sonic” needs further study, but not here.) Or more richly, a delivered body of sonic messages is communicated through a Skype conversation: the opening sounds the software makes to signify a caller is trying to get another’s attention, the other sounds played to signify a successful connection, and then the sounds of both/all communicators as they breathe and speak at each other, all accompanied by the hurried sound of the keyboard and mouse clicks that signify an upcoming communicative event. This mélange of sounds combines to deliver a rich communication event to the participants, which includes but goes beyond the discursive messages spoken in words. The sounds of the software, the computer, the rooms, and the participants’ bodies all add to the ambient messages being delivered together in this series of orchestrated events.

Philosopher Andy Hamilton discusses historical attitudes toward heteronomous music, which was composed for particular purposes, and autonomous music, which has “freedom from direct social function” (68). That is, music—and, I would add, any consciously designed or situated sound—is sometimes put to specific, heteronomous purposes, as for a church service or a play, or to shape the reception of a space or piece of software. But sometimes, sounds are autonomous, sounded accidentally or for the
pleasure of sounding them. Of course, listeners can attach meanings to any sort of sounds, heteronomous or autonomous, and in that way they function rhetorically, even if they weren’t willfully designed that way. Sound’s meanings are often serendipitous, an unexpected, random noise bringing something to mind that wouldn’t have come otherwise. Yet autonomous sounds—and the word autonomous draws my visually biased mind to picture a lone statue in a deep wood, standing autonomously without any other support or meaning or attendants—for all their communicative potentiality, still lack the craftedness that makes me attend to sounds that are more heteronomous, more designed for a specific function, more certainly drenched in possible meaning.

This is what I mean with the word delivery. Accidental, autonomous sounds, as much as they may speak to listeners, were never delivered in the rhetorical sense. The shape and timing and quality of their soundings were never crafted by a rhetor.

My interested in willed sounds is perhaps clearest in the context of speech—one specific kind of willed sounding. Though relatively rare, it’s true that unwilled speech can communicate meanings and identifications with listeners. If one is heard talking in his sleep, whispering words at the end of a coma, muttering words as a symptom of Tourette’s Syndrome, or even unwittingly talking to himself, the hearer of these words makes meaning from them, composed partly from the discursive content of the words spoken, partly from the qualities of the voice speaking them, and partly from the listener’s understanding of the situation. But words understood to be spoken purposefully are attended to differently. Listeners who perceive that they are being spoken to proceed from the assumption that meaning is present, even when it’s not immediately understood (as when the listener has a hearing problem, or if the speaker mumbles, or if the two
speak different languages). And that good-faith attitude in willed meaning affects the entire rhetorical situation, even giving the speaker the faith that her communication will be heard in a particular way. This is exactly the situation in a concert situation, a situation characterized by the audience’s “faith that generates a continuous search through the flow of events for everything in it that will confirm that interconnectedness” (Burrows, *Time* 106).

When speech is delivered, it always communicates more than its discursive meaning; Cynthia L. Selfe reminds us that it “conveys a great deal of meaning through pace, volume, rhythm, emphasis, and tone of voice as well as through words themselves” (633). This is why poets give readings, and it’s why novelist Orson Scott Card insists that audiobooks are the ideal way for his works to be experienced. It’s why Katz muses that perhaps “it is only when reading is performed semiotically, interactively, and orally, that the meaning of a written text is wholly understood” (211). The soundedness of words, the experience of hearing them delivered aloud along with all their intriguingly beautiful baggage, changes what they mean to listeners and how they are responded to.

From here, it’s only a quick flip of the record to get to music. For in the same way that words can be scanned on a page or heard delivered aloud, in time, along with the “great deal of meaning” that Selfe describes, so too can music be read as a score, its implied sounds imagined just as words’ sounds are imagined when silently read, or heard delivered as sound, in time, along with a “great deal of meaning” that is lost through purely textual approaches. In some ways, music is just one kind of willed, organized sound among many.
Music

When I was twenty, I came across a definition of music that seemed suddenly to throw light on my groping toward the music I sensed could exist: “the corporealization of the intelligence that is in sounds.”\(^3\) It was new and exciting and to me, the first perfectly intelligible conception of music. It was probably what started me thinking of music as spatial—as moving bodies of sound in space, a conception I gradually developed and made my own.

_Edgard Varèse (Perlis and Van Cleve 103)_

Writing in 1788, music theorist Johann Nikolaus Forkel dismissed European music from the early 18\textsuperscript{th} century—the flowering of the Baroque era—as too hard to understand, and thus unsuitable for rhetorical communication. He writes of the time, “Music was not yet of such a nature that it permitted a coherent musical rhetoric to be abstracted from it” (qtd. in Richards 265). That’s not to say that Baroque composers weren’t using rhetorical principles, as they certainly were. James H. Jensen even says of the era that “rhetoric was so much a part of people’s intellectual baggage that our understanding of rhetorical intention and effect is fundamental to any consideration of Baroque art” (47). (More on musical rhetoric in chapter two.) But regardless of what composers were trying to do, Forkel’s point draws our attention to the audience’s role in any sonic communication. Having grown up in a new generation, perhaps he didn’t “get” the music composed fifty, sixty, or seventy years earlier, much as someone in the 1980s might not grasp the subtleties and meanings of music from the 1910s and 20s. His temporal/spatial context affected his understanding of the musical/rhetorical possibilities of an earlier age’s art. This is nothing new to students of rhetoric; we know how crucial an audience’s comprehension of a rhetorical message is to its overall meaning. But

\(^3\) Perlis and Van Cleve note in footnote 49 (422) that “This definition is from the mathematician and philosopher Josef Hoene Wronski (1778-1853).”
Forkel’s incomprehension leads us to questions that are especially crucial to a rhetoric of sound and music. For instance, to what extent does an audience need to comprehend the layers and movements of sound and music if they are to achieve the meaning-making that the composer-rhetor wishes them to achieve? Is comprehensibility “one of the most important qualities in any rhetorical art,” as musicologist Mark Evan Bonds claims (Wordless 72)? Can sonic arts that strive for the incomprehensible, the uncertain, and the cracked (cf. Kelly, Cracked Media) still be analyzed rhetorically, or analyzed for the rhetorical concerns of their composers? I see two main ways for us to consider these questions: cognitive analyses of what our minds can comprehend in the flowing time of music, and formal analyses of how composers use musical forms to help their listeners understand the facets of their pieces through varied repetition at multiple levels.

**Comprehensibility and Cognition**

The basics of any theory of aural cognition are simple: we’re surrounded constantly by noise, but some sounds (speech, music) we mentally separate and conceive of differently. When I stop to listen, I hear the flowing air from my ceiling fan, the rattle and click of my keyboard, the drone of a plane passing by, the computer’s unending quiet whine and its occasional scraping sound, the sounds of my own body (the slightest ringing in my ears, the rumbling of my bowels), a car passing, the creak of my chair, my own breath. But when I click the play button on my computer’s audio player, I hear sounds that my mind organizes differently than any of the above. In contrast to all the noises around me, here I hear *music*; “tone, stress, rhythm, rhyme are aural *gestalten*” (Katz 204) that allow my mind to conceive of them as a single whole: this song. Whole branches of cognition studies have focused on these psychological questions of musical perception, ranging from collections of scientific/academic studies (Patel) to multiple
popular press books on music and cognition (Jourdain; Sacks; Ball; Mannes; Levitin),
though it’s outside the scope of this project to bring all of these studies into the domain of
rhetoric in one all-encompassing embrace.

According to Robert Jourdain, the work of musical cognition developed rapidly in
the twentieth century: “First came acoustics, the science of sound itself; then
psychoacoustics, the study of how minds perceive sound; then musical psychoacoustics, a
vast discipline scrutinizing every aspect of musical perception and performance” (xiii).

Studies performed under the aegis of these sciences help the rhetorician understand how
listeners understand sonic messages—first, how they distinguish between them at all, and
second, how they grasp the different moves within a single piece of organized sound or
music. That is, once my brain comprehends that the sounds coming from my speakers are
music and the truck rolling past is not part of that music, it is still tasked with a dizzying
set of classification tasks: in classical music, the identification that this is the melody, this
is the first introduction of the theme, this is the sound of an oboe cutting through the
sound of the strings; in pop, the identification that this is the verse and this is the chorus.

Based on how I classify these different aspects, I’ll compose new mental expectations of
where the piece might go, shaping my understanding of its meaning based entirely from
how much I cognitively grasp of what has already come. A rhetoric of text deals
somewhat similarly with issues of cognitive decoding and classifying, but on an entirely
different scale. Distinguishing text from other visual cues is a cleaner job than
distinguishing the mess of sounds that come to us in any moment, and then distinguishing
the parts of musical sounds that somehow cut through the swaths of surrounding
ambience.
Comprehensibility and Form

The cognitive aspects of comprehensibility can then be taken one step further when we consider how sounds that are certainly music are then understood, in all their flowing-through-time complexity. One aspect of the composer’s task, arguably, is to compose music that, despite its rushing past in real time, is graspable—not just as an example of music, but as music that has comprehensible parts and comprehensible meaning. Traditionally, in Western art music, this has been achieved through musical form. That is, instead of writing music haphazardly from beginning to end, moving from one theme to another in random order, composers often have fit their work into molds that prescribe a certain amount of recursive returning to established musical ideas, to be modified more or less depending on the purpose of the piece. A rondo form follows an ABACADA pattern, establishing a main theme (A), moving into other material (B), returning to the main theme (A), moving into some other new material (C), returning to the main theme again, and so on. Sonata form generally establishes initial musical themes, develops them (that is, changes them slightly without completely introducing new music, allowing listeners to hear the relationship between the original and developed themes), and then returns to the original themes in a new key. Strophic songs repeat the same underlying music with different lyrics sung over it (just as most pop songs do today). The theme and variation form establishes a basic musical element that is then varied repeatedly in different ways. All of these forms involve some manner of repetition,

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4 The term art music contrasted with the term popular music is sloppy, I know. I mean no inherent disrespect to popular music. The word art here brings to my mind museums—music that, like a painting, was purposefully composed in order to be studied in depth by musically educated people in controlled spaces, not for airplay. I still think Lady Gaga and Eminem are perfectly capable of creating artful music in the sense that it is aesthetically pleasing. Art music is also more precise term than the usual term classical music, given that musicologists use the word classical to refer to a specific historical period of music between the Baroque and the Romantic eras.
recursively returning musical material to our ears instead of letting it drift away without comprehension, allowing messages to sink in and expectations to be built—which subsequently allows the possibility of counter-messages that break our expectations. And of course, musical form serves a similar purpose in contemporary popular music: the standard radio form of verse/chorus/verse/chorus/bridge/chorus/chorus allows quick learning of new songs for singing along in the car or dancing in the club; the twelve-bar blues form gives guidance both to improvising musicians and to grooving audience members.

In short, form is the answer to the cognitive problem of comprehensibility. I may say to myself, “How shall I make sure that my listeners understand something of what I’m trying to say? Music flows so quickly by them, and it’s unlikely that they’ll remember the significance of a musical moment that they heard a few minutes ago!” The simplest answer: use a form that strategically repeats key moments in the music, allowing the messages to sink deeper into their memories, and thus into their understanding of the music’s meaning. Returning briefly to speech, it’s not an accident that repetition is one of the key differences between oral and written discourse. Phrases that sound fine out loud (the ubiquitous “at this time” comes to mind) suddenly seem bulky and extraneous on the page (where “now” will suffice). Within certain limitations, we accept bulkiness and repetition out loud because it helps us latch onto meaning as words fly past us in time. What are most rhetorical figures but stylized forms of small-scale repetition, designed for the ear?

One objection to any discussion of form in music appears quickly: to contemporary music composers, the forms I mention above are rather old-fashioned.
Twentieth century art music saw composers striving to break any and all kinds of boundaries, including boundaries of form (a change that not coincidentally mirrored the increasing ubiquity of recorded music). But listeners still can easily get lost, especially those without the expertise of training to help them know what forms to listen for. Many of today’s composers find themselves trying to achieve a balance that allows for the cognitive and musical importance of form while allowing room for individual creativity that pushes against those formal boundaries—the need “to reconcile the conventional with the individual, the stereotypical with the unique” (Bonds, Wordless 29). For any rhetorical or artistic communication to be read as having good style, it needs to be both comprehensible and surprising. In the musical sphere, Jourdain writes, “The trick is to find just the right balance between reinforcing tonal centers and violating them” (105). Leonard Meyer suggests two reasons why this tension between the known and unknown persists so strongly, at least in music. On one hand are composers themselves, who “by their very nature as creators and makers, regard the traditions and styles which they inherit from their predecessors as a challenge—as a more or less fixed, recalcitrant material, whose resistance to change and modification the true artist delights in overcoming and conquering” (69). But on the other hand is Meyer’s view on the deeper nature of how musical meaning and emotion are communicated to audiences: by expectations not being met. We expect a recapitulation of the original theme to come . . . we expect the huge beat of the melodic trance chorus to return . . . we predict a melody line to go up, as it has so many times before . . . we’re sure that the next chorus will be in the same key as the previous one . . . and our expectation is thwarted. Meyer’s great insight is that this thwarting of expectation leads both to emotion and meaning—that is,
we feel an emotional twinge (surprise, excitement, regret, shock, conspiratorial laughter),
but we also are led to ask what this unfulfilled expectation means in the context of the
song. We will be led to introspection, and “meaning will become the focus of attention,
an object of conscious consideration, when a tendency or habit reaction is delayed or
inhibited” (39).

The problem of form—in music, writing, or any rhetorical communication—is
that focusing on it begins to make it seem that the form of a work is the work itself. It’s
easy to forget that meanings must be delivered to us, that the nature of any delivery
necessarily changes how a work is received and what it means.

Musical Meaning

Why do we give short shrift to music and other sonic
phenomena? . . . Do we . . . distrust music for being
simultaneously ephemeral and potent, i.e. for affecting us
strongly without our being able to pinpoint how and why?
Or, conversely, do we ultimately think it is less important
because it cannot easily be made symbolically
determinable?

Thomas Rickert (‘Music@Microsoft’)

Once sounds are noticed, once they’re perceived as being purposefully directed at
us to understand, and perhaps even having been organized into musical forms to aid our
understanding, where does our understanding come from? Understanding of a sort
certainly does come, as listeners widely agree that music means something to them, even
as they may disagree about the nature of the meanings. Rickert points out that these
indeterminacies have often led to a sort of “distrust,” a sense that the nondiscursive
nature of musical meaning is less worthy of study because of its unfixed, subjective
nature, because “it cannot easily be made symbolically determinable.”
Analyzing music from a rhetorical perspective means embracing these uncertainties. It means diving into the weird ways that music is and is not like language, the ways it does and does not guide our emotions, and the subsequent conclusion that much of musical meaning is wrapped up in the associations we bring to it as listeners. In chapters three through five I consider these problems from the position of composers, who often have something they want to say but no certainty that listeners will understand their messages. Yet they continue composing anyway, hinting that there is something much more important going on in music than simple comprehension.

**Associations and Music as Language**

One of my favorite albums is *The Earth is Not a Cold Dead Place* (2003) by instrumental post-rock group Explosions in the Sky. I’ve grown attached to it partly because of the music itself, but partly because of what I’ve added to the music. An example: the second track on the album is “The Only Moment We Were Alone,” a ten-minute piece that alternates between quiet and crashing moments. Soon after buying the album, I began imagining a story to go along with the music, taking the evocative title as a lead to imagine that the different intertwining melodies represented different statements of love and fear by two people having a brief conversation before an inevitable separation. So at one point, where one “voice” seems to be expressing doubt and uncertainty, I’m particularly moved when the other voice erupts in a volcanic wave of joyfully distorted guitar sound, which seems to me to say, “I could never, never, never leave you.” Whenever I hear that moment in the song, I think about more than simply the sounds and structures of the song but also the meanings I’ve consciously added to it.

I realize it sounds somewhat trite to write these invented, yet real reactions out in words (at least they sound that way to me, when compared with the experience of feeling
them, of meaning them in real time), but that’s part of my point: there is some extent to which instrumental music speaks in ways similar to language—or perhaps it is better to say that listeners hear messages in it. In my Explosions in the Sky track, I hear meaning that is hinted at by the composers in their title but which is mostly supplied by myself. If someone heard this piece and pictured a plane looking for a place to land in an African jungle (a story I hear when I listen to the 2nd movement of Rachmaninoff’s 2nd symphony), they could surely support their idea with the changes in the music as it progressed in time. Beyond being kairotic and culturally situated, musical meaning is associative, latched necessarily onto the imagination and interpretation of listeners.

This issue of associative meaning is engagingly explored by Elisabeth Le Guin’s “A Visit to the Salon de Parnasse,” a whimsical yet serious chapter that follows the narrator as she travels through time to an intimate salon to discuss musical performance and rhetoric with musical theorists of the 18th century. Written as a dialogue, yet with most of the luminaries speaking quotes from their published work, Le Guin in a sense performs a scholarly dialogue about, among other things, the issues of musical meaning that I discuss here. At one point, for example, this exchange occurs between Madame de Staël, an 18th-century writer and regular at Parisian salons, and Le Guin’s narrative self:

DE STAËL. It is my view that the kind of pleasure produced by an animated conversation does not precisely consist in the subject of that conversation; neither the ideas nor the knowledge developed there are its principal interest.

ME. In other words, in a sonata you suggest that our pleasure does not come from what we find upon the printed page: not from its subject—
that is, its tunes; nor from any harmonic ideas; nor from its rhythms.

What then shall we attend to? Have we not rather run out of possibilities, musically speaking? (27)

Intriguingly, the answer Le Guin and her interlocutors suggest to this final question is that the “principal interest” in a piece of music comes from the associative meanings created by listeners in the embodied act of hearing it performed (or performing it oneself). In the dialogue, this is suggested by a story immediately told about the shifting meanings of musical pieces: “[My teacher] Häring, in the same composition that seemed to present me with a storm, believed he recognized a battle, or, where I found a cry of longing, heard an amorous approach, and so on—this seemed natural to me, for those meanings were much too arbitrary to be authoritative” (27-28). The teller of this story about differently interpreted musical moments (and, it seems, Le Guin) finds this shifting attachment of meaning to musical texts to be part of the reason to listen to music in the first place, and a reason to be involved in musical communities.5

I raise these issues here because they are fundamental to any discussion of sonic rhetoric. A composer working in sound or music lives in the tension of a paradox: A) every change in the way a sound sounds will change the meaning of the sound, and B) to a large extent, that meaning cannot be controlled, regardless of how much the sound is tinkered with. In other words, sonic composers have everything and nothing to do with what their products mean. That doesn’t mean they haven’t tried: composers of instrumental music have played with the concept of “program music” to a greater or lesser extent over the centuries. Hector Berlioz’s Symphonie Fantastique (1830) was

5 For an example of students being taught to consider the associative power of music in their multimodal compositions, see Crystal VanKooten’s “A New Composition, a 21st Century Pedagogy, and the Rhetoric of Music.”
famously accompanied by composer-written notes directing listeners in how to interpret the story of a young man told in each of the five movements (including the sound of the protagonist’s decapitated head bouncing down the steps). More recently, John Corigliano’s *Symphony No. 1* (1990) was performed and published with detailed notes by the composer describing how each movement is in honor of a friend who died from AIDS, a framework that helps listeners interpret the sounds of an off-stage piano (for instance) as representing the memory of Corigliano’s late piano-playing friend.

But what is the nature of musical meaning? Is it simply narrative, the way I’ve been discussing it? This seems the most natural sort of meaning, as listeners create the stories they hear or composers write out the stories they want to be heard. Or does music communicate something more or different than that? If so, then our understanding of sonic rhetoric needs to be broadened to include the different affordances brought about by compositions in sound.

One thing is certain: my habit of creating musical meaning when listening to Explosions in the Sky and other instrumental music would not have been respected by many musical thinkers throughout history, especially in 19th-century European Romantic music. Bonds points out that these practices of adding narratives to music after the fact “represents the antithesis of all the German Romantics stood for” because to do so “denies music's true essence and its capacities for subtlety and fluidity” (*Wordless* 174). He also quotes an earlier voice on this subject that hearkens to the coming cultural agreement on this topic: Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, whose *Phantasien über die Kunst* was published in 1799, the year after he died:
What do they want, these timorous and doubting sophists, who ask to have hundreds and hundreds of musical works elucidated in words and yet who cannot acknowledge that not every one of these works has a nameable meaning like a painting? Do they strive to measure the richer language by means of the weaker and solve with words that which disdains words? Or have they never felt without words? Have they stuffed their hollow hearts with only descriptions of emotions? Have they never perceived in their souls the mute singing, the mummer’s dance of unseen spirits? or do they not believe in fairy-tales? (qtd. in Bonds, *Wordless* 176)

Wackenroder reflects the then-changing preference for the shifting meanings of music, compared to the (relatively) fixed meaning of music with words. And his lens for discussing unfixed meanings is a common answer to what music can mean: emotions.

**Musical Emotion**

Even if we have to grant to all the arts, without exception, the power to produce effects upon the feelings, yet we do not deny that there is something specific, peculiar only to it, in the way music exercises that power. Music works more rapidly and intensely upon the mind than any other art.

*Eduard Hanslick (qtd. in Sharpe 5)*

To the extent that the language of rationality is elevated as the highest universal good and the key to ethical life, music and affect have been held in suspicion and tightly controlled.

*Thomas Rickert (“Language’s Duality” 157)*

Emotion. It’s the most commonly cited phenomenon heard whenever musical meaning is discussed. Everyone agrees that music has something to do with emotion, but few agree on how that relationship functions—say, whether music *induces* emotional states in listeners (Cooke), if it merely *invites* us to contemplate emotion (Langer), if it
contains emotional messages (Sharpe), and so on. It would be impossible here to walk a fair distance down each of these paths (or even down the path distinguishing the overlapping terms emotion, affect, and feeling), so I want to ground this brief discussion with a reminder of how emotion relates to communication in general, whether in music, image, or text. To get there, two quotations, both from rhetoricians. The first is from Katz, whose project is in many ways a reminder of the musicality and emotionality of any communicative act: “The affective experience of language is not only created through referential meaning but also through sound” (127). The second is from Joddy Murray: “because mentality itself relies on affectivity to operate the brain, emotions are integral to all brands of thinking: critical or creative, social or personal, even objective and impartial” (84). Taken together, we find the wisdom that both sounded and thought language is always imbued with emotion. There is no experience of language, discourse—or, I would add, music—that isn’t in some sense affective.

From that big-picture perspective, the details of how exactly emotion functions in music are overshadowed by the powerful thundercloud that music’s affective qualities are one facet of the emotional qualities of all communicative acts, even those that are entirely within our minds, when we talk to ourselves by thinking in language. Therefore, I see my discussion of emotion in music as a gateway to Katz’s and Murray’s points, as a demonstration of how emotion is sometimes piggybacked onto rhetorical messages in one of many possible modes (the sonic), told to help us better understand how it piggybacks onto messages in any mode. With this larger purpose lingering in the back our minds (along, of course, with the emotional resonances of that purpose), we can proceed despite
Kingsley Price’s conclusion that “the seeming emotionality of music is an absolute, unfathomable mystery on a par, almost, with the Trinity” (41).

As I explained above, Meyer is perhaps the most-cited voice among those who claim that music leads listeners to feel emotions, though he cautions that perhaps we feel them with less intensity than we might feel unmusical emotions. He claims that we expect musical emotion to be only temporary, a knowledge that affects our enjoyment of it. A free fall through the air, he writes, is inherently different from “a parachute jump in an amusement park” (20). Or in Burrows’s words, “Music’s virtualness buffers its participants: it is safe for intensity” (Time 86). Listening to music thus becomes a safe experience of considering how emotions work, letting its variances in melody, rhythm and timbre suggest feelings to us that we don’t necessarily have to embrace fully in the moment. The sounds surround and enter us, but without always touching the parts of us triggered by our strongest reflexes of joy, sadness, or terror. In Langer’s words, these emotions are “presented directly to our understanding, that we may grasp, realize, comprehend these feelings, without pretending to have them or imputing them to anyone else” (222).

This is a messy space for a composer of music to enter. By shaping musical possibilities, she molds both the real—in the form of sounded vibrations that have real effects on bodies and feelings—and the unreal, in the sense that she is dealing to some extent in the “amusement park” of the listening experience. That is, when she composes fast-paced music that many identify as having to do with fear, it’s unlikely that her listeners will actually feel afraid, unless she plays it at a haunted house or as the score for a scary movie. To some extent, she can predict the kinds of musical moves that will
evoke certain reactions, especially among listeners in her own culture, but she will never fully control the associations that will come to the mind of listeners as they identify with her musical rhetoric—indeed, she can never even control where and when her music will be delivered in the future. (Very quickly, even the phrase “her music” begins to sound suspect.) For instance, a frightening piece of music that she designed for a traditional orchestral performance might be recorded by someone else and used in a scary movie, or it might be played live by actor-musicians in a haunted house. On the other hand, its score might be dissected in a music composition classroom, her harmonic and rhythmic moves analyzed and contrasted with those of other composers while students learn from the modeling of their professors to silently contemplate the piece without moving their bodies or showing signs of felt emotion.

Despite these walls of uncertainty, there is some degree to which musical emotion can be dissected in terms of the building and release of tension. Tension is an imprecise word when talking about sound or music, of course; we’re tempted to say that we simply know it when we hear it. But in general, musical tensions come from changes, either sudden or gradual, in the harmonies, rhythms, and melodies of a piece. And because music is often built with some kind of form to aid its comprehensibility (as discussed above), those moments of tension can often be predicted. The simplest example of this might be in the instrumental electronica in a nightclub, which often builds noticeably and predictably toward an explosive, synthesized climax; the dancers know it’s coming, so they know how to move their bodies accordingly. But those expectations in tension-
building can also be thwarted. Meyer’s 1956 Emotion and Meaning in Music is still regarded as a classic today in part because of the elegance of his two-pronged proposition: first, that “Affect or emotion-felt is aroused when an expectation—a tendency to respond—activated by the musical stimulus situation, is temporarily inhibited or permanently blocked” (31), and second, that this shift in expectation leads both to musical emotion and musical meaning. That’s because as our emotions are affected by our arrested expectation, we’re pushed to ask, “What does this change in my expectation mean here?” When tension in music works well—when I understand something about what a piece means (which I hope coordinates somewhat with what others understand about the piece, though I can’t count on that)—the effect is a coordination of emotion and meaningfulness that Joseph P. Swain dares to call “inspired” (37). Walking down a path from Kenneth Burke’s work, Peter Elbow lands on a strikingly similar description of what makes a piece of writing feel “successful” and “satisfy[ying]”: “Successful writers lead us on a journey to satisfaction by way of expectations, frustrations, half satisfactions, and temporary satisfactions: a well-planned sequence of yearnings and reliefs, itches and scratches. This is a central insight from Burke” (“Music” 626).

These ebbs and flows of tension, proceeding both predictably and unpredictably, are perhaps the closest we can get to discussing emotion in music. And there’s something good about that. I sympathize with Langer’s claim about the real “strength of musical expressiveness: that music articulates forms which language cannot set forth” (233), as with the poetry that begins this chapter. There is something freeing in accepting the impossibility of describing musical effects in discursive language, typed into this word

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6 And there will always be composers who purposefully eschew our expectations for tension at all. I’m thinking of the second movement of John Corigliano’s oboe concerto, which, in the composer’s words, purposefully “avoids a climax” and “deals in non-climactic simplicity.”
processing software. Seemingly in agreement, Swain discusses the two trends that writers-about-music tend to follow—to discuss strictly the things that can be objectively observed or the writer’s subjective reactions to the music—without siding entirely on one side or the other (65-67), and thus allowing some space for music to speak its own meanings apart from the efforts of critics.

Importantly, these heard-but-never-accurately-described meanings are part of music heard, but not necessarily music read as a score. It follows that a rhetoric of sounded music embraces the confluence of emotion and meaning without trying to contain it or give any sort of final word to the matter. Again, this is the nature of sounded music—a point that is made exceptionally well by Thomas Rickert. Discussing the start-up sounds for various Windows operating systems, he writes, “[R]hetoric is not conceived as an agent-initiated, linear achievement, whereby a rhetor (or technological stand-in) pursues the desired, usually cognitive, goal—a change in belief, a call to action or decision, the achievement of praise or blame, and so on. Rather, rhetoric here is tied to experience, particularly the modulation of mood, i.e., our affective ground tone” (“Music@Microsoft”). Or, using Burke’s terms, rhetoric is identification (“Rhetoric”). And identifying with someone means sharing (or at least contemplating) emotions with others.

**Conclusion**

As we’ve seen, a sound’s meaning is wrapped up in a number of dimensions: how it moves through time, whether it is perceived to be willed, how it differentiates itself from surrounding sounds, what form it takes (and how that form is interpreted by a listener), what associations a listener has with it, and what concomitant emotions are
perceived or aroused by the sound. These dimensions overlap as they rise and fall in comparative volume, with one mattering more than others at any given moment or in any given work. This too is one of sound’s qualities: it resists a single level of analysis. Sound pushes into unexpected rooms, resisting any attempts to tie it down.

In fact, one of the few places where sonic theories should be rejected is when they attempt to rein in sound’s possibilities. I have in mind those like eighteenth-century thinker Eduard Hanslick who say that “The theme of a musical composition is its essential content” (qtd. in Langer 237)—that is, those who refuse to walk down the messy path of this chapter in favor of saying that music is simply its own message, as if that answered anything. Langer rebuts this view well, calling it a “silly fiction of self-significance” that has somehow “been raised to the dignity of a doctrine” (237). Martha Woodmansee’s work on the origination of authorship in mid-eighteenth-century Germany helps us hear Hanslick’s view in context. As publishing brought writing increasingly into the public’s life, the upper classes increasingly leaned on the construction of elite “geniuses” who could stand above the massive amounts of published texts. Art grew to be seen as less “rhetorical,” in the sense that its function was less a part of its heteronomous functions, and instead was seen as more “aesthetic,” making its own autonomous statements as the outpouring of an Artist’s soul. Though Woodmansee’s focus is generally on written art, these changes apply as well to music of the period. That is, when Hanslick claims that music essentially means itself, he does so as part of a larger cultural shift away from music’s rhetorical functions in cultural life and toward music’s stand-alone, aesthetic qualities—a shift that we still feel the effects of today. In the context of my project, he shuts out discussion of all the things that music can do and say
and mean to audiences in favor of a focus on the work itself. Forgivable in his day, similar views today, if expressed without a recognition of the messy, polyvocal nature of any musical message when heard by an audience, become highly problematic.

I prefer the angle of Burrows, once again. He claims, “[t]he fact remains that living the sound itself, in all its sectors and over all its time spans, is the root of its musical meaning” (Sound 89). At first, this sounds similar to Hanslick’s music-means-itself stance. But instead of focusing on the work, Burrows turns us to ourselves as listeners, as people who “liv[e] the sound itself,” letting it wash over us in time and say things to us that it perhaps has never said to anyone else before.
CHAPTER 2: CONTROL AND IDENTIFICATION: COMPOSING AND UNDERSTANDING MUSICAL RHETORIC

Haydn's music enters our ears quite smoothly, for we have a sense that we are hearing something that is easily perceived and already familiar to us; but we soon find that it is not that which we had thought it was or which we thought it should become. We hear something new and are amazed at the master, who knew so cunningly how to offer us, under the guise of the well known, something never before heard.

_Theodor Ferdinand Arnold (qtd. in Bonds, Wordless 138)_

Writing in 1810, Theodor Ferdinand Arnold was one of the first biographers of Austrian classical composer Joseph Haydn, who had just died in 1809. In a passage preceding the epigraph above, Arnold calls Haydn a “clever orator” for his ability to use music to move his listeners from what they know to what they do not yet know. That is, Haydn’s music often sounds familiar, using forms that we expect, before it surprises us by turning in a new direction. Yet that turn is done in a way we might call “persuasive,” proceeding to the unexpected by steps so the audience will accept and understand it.

As an introduction to the rhetoric of music, Arnold’s thoughts take us far into the complexity of a musical-rhetorical situation. At one end is the composer, shaping musical messages in ways that will seem “smooth” to us, “easily perceived and already familiar.” But then there is the audience reaction: “we find that it is not that which we had thought it was or which we thought it should become.” In a sense, Haydn tricks us—but in a sense, we as the audience trick him. For no matter how he presents his music to us, no matter how much rhetorical skill he implements, he can’t know what the music might become.
once it enters the bodies of his audience in time, what it might begin to mean. In a recursive cycle, Haydn does his best to predict his audience’s reactions just as the audience does its best to anticipate what the composer will do or say next, but the meaning is never solidified. The art of rhetoric draws the parties together, identifying themselves with each other, but without a core, solidified sense of what the musical text means.

This chapter explores this multifaceted, slippery concept of musical rhetoric, considering it first from the composer’s perspective as an art of persuasion and identification and then from the audience’s side as a tool of musical analysis. From the composer’s side, we’ll see that rhetors in any medium make decisions about what kind of relationship they want to have with their audiences. Will they try to control the reaction of their audience as much as possible, drawing them step by step toward an inevitable conclusion, or will they engage in a looser rhetoric that invites participants to draw their own conclusions—or even further, will they ignore the audience altogether? I’ll show that the legacy of rhetoric as control is what passed from classical rhetorical contexts into the hands of European musical thinkers who first codified the connections between music and rhetoric in the West, despite the model of sophistic, Ciceronian rhetoric that was also available. Then from the audience’s side, we’ll see that rhetorical analysis has often mirrored the atomistic, narrow view of rhetoric as control. I’ll instead advocate for a broadened rhetorical analysis that better reflects the multifaceted nature of music as organized sound as discussed in chapter one. This rhetoric stems from Burke’s concept of rhetoric as identification, instead of merely persuasion.
In a sense, then, this chapter is a defense of the application of rhetoric to music—an application that we’ll see is not universally accepted. It is also a history, albeit a selectively short one, and a philosophical inquiry into the phenomenology of musical meaning. It is finally a roundabout sort of introduction to the remaining three chapters of this project. When I discuss the explanations composers give about their compositional activities and thoughts, I do so with this foundation of musical rhetoric in the back of my mind: the assumption that composers approach audiences with an array of rhetorical purposes in mind for how they want to be heard, and that audiences in turn hear those messages with a beautiful array of disparate interpretations.

**Composing Musical Rhetoric**

The sound outcome of a stylus hitting a large scratch in a record has a predictable popping effect. However, it is not known how the tone arm and stylus will react to the physical collision with the scratch. Will it, for example, simply hit the scratch and carry on playing, or will the indentation in the vinyl cause the needle to jump its groove?

_Caleb Kelly_ (Cracked Media 86)

As I discuss rhetorical composing (in music or not), I’m working from a framework that assumes composers may approach their work with a variety of goals for how their audiences will react to their messages (see Figure 3 below):

- **Controlled interpretation:** The composer tries to control the audience’s interpretation of his work as much as possible. This is the realm of classical persuasive oration in a courtroom setting, where the rhetor attends to every detail of his composition and delivery in hopes that the audience will agree with him as much as possible. In a musical sense, we see the goal of controlled interpretation
when a composer hopes to evoke a very specific series of emotions in his listeners, in hopes that they will experience them as distinctly as possible in the way he plans.

• **Variable interpretation:** The composer recognizes that her audience cannot be controlled to any perfect extent, yet she still crafts a message designed for what she knows of the rhetorical situation, hoping to guide them in the desired direction. This is the world of the sophistic *dissoi logoi*, a genre of rhetorical exercise that presents multiple sides of an issue, giving some space to the audience to make an unpredicted, but not altogether unguided decision. In music, composers express the goal of variable interpretation when they expect that listeners will hear different meanings in their work and accept that variance as inevitable.

• **Experiential interpretation:** The composer composes an experience for the sake of the experience itself. He may or may not expect an audience to experience the work he composes, but he doesn’t care one way or the other. In the case that audiences will experience the work, he expresses no desire to control their experience at all, instead wanting to create something for them simply to experience. This is the arena of personal writing, experimental forms of multimodal compositions made of both discursive and nondiscursive messages, and “art for art’s sake.” Though these experiences can still be called *rhetorical* in the sense that audiences will hear personalized meanings in any composition that they perceive to be willfully composed, from the composer’s perspective they are devoid of rhetorical intent.
Figure 3: Composer's Goals: How Audiences May Interpret Their Work

A Legacy of Control: Classical Rhetoric and Baroque Music

By considering differing attitudes toward composerly control in classical Greece and Rome, we can observe some of the roots of present-day approaches to musical rhetoric. As an oral art, classical rhetoric inherently dealt with communication that was based in time, that was inherently tied to the affective and the associative, that was heard in different ways by each listener. Rhetoric teachers’ responses to these issues trickle down to the approaches to musical rhetoric practiced in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe—the Baroque Era in musical history—and even to today. Central to this discussion are the different kinds of control composers can expect to wield over how audiences interpret texts, and how the aims we perceive a text as fulfilling (poetic aims,
rhetorical aims) shape our assumptions of what kinds of control are possible. As we will see, sonic rhetorics straddle these boundaries, reminding us of better ways to conceive of rhetorical approaches to the arts—especially music.

I want to start with the Sophists, whose attitude toward composing seems to include a comfort with relinquishing some degree of control over the final meaning of their messages.¹ From what we know of them, the Sophists relied on an epistemology that accepted and even valued the shifting nature of meaning with each oratorical performance, whether in a poetic, expository, or persuasive setting. (This is the middle circle in Figure 3.) That is, they didn’t hold to the dividing line between rhetorical messages (which we imagine as controlled by rhetors so as to effectively persuade audiences) and poetic messages (which we imagine as allowing personal, experiential interpretations). One account of this sophistic view is from Steven B. Katz, who contrasts the “formalistic, rationalistic epistemology” of Plato and Aristotle, whose increasing reliance on print led to a logocentric way of understanding (83), with the older, more fluid understanding of the Sophists, whose epistemology “links poetry and rhetoric in sensuous oratorical prose” (85). In other words, not only were the Sophists blending the rhetorical and poetic, they were also doing so in a world of sound, with all the transience, attention to time, and emphasis on affect that a sonic rhetoric implies. “Unlike Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle,” writes Richard Leo Enos, “the sophists and pre-Socratics closely identified with their oral, poetic heritage and assimilated emotivism into their understanding of rhetoric rather than severing the connection” (64-65). Perhaps the

¹ I say their approach “seems to” emphasize variable meanings because of the relatively few sophistic texts we have today. My swift characterization of them here relies on the work of other scholars who have teased out an epistemology from what we do have, though these interpretations should not be seen as ultimately correct.
Sophists were leaning on their cultural tradition of Homeric poetry, which was more than simply art for art’s sake, poetic in the flimsily aesthetic-only way that we sometimes think of it today, but which was instead “the instrument for the establishment of cultural tradition,” an instrument with a “functional purpose” (Havelock 71). From a contemporary perspective, we might say that pre-Socratic approaches to discourse blurred the boundaries between a composer’s rhetorical and a-rhetorical (or strictly poetic) goals for audience interpretation. When even poetry had a rhetorical, “functional purpose” to it, the boundaries between the middle and right-most circles in Figure 3 dissipate.

This acceptance of variable interpretation extended beyond just the pre-Socratic era, though. It’s also possible that in his influential (but lost) treatise on delivery, Aristotle’s student Theophrastus purposefully moved away from his teacher’s separation of rhetoric and poetics. Theophrastus scholar William W. Fortenbaugh even goes so far as to surmise that Theophrastus’s work on delivery may have been “an inclusive work that discussed voices and motions appropriate not only to orators but also to musicians, actors, and rhapsodists” (283). Fortenbaugh also gives evidence for which parts of Cicero’s advice on delivery in De Oratore were most likely to have been influenced by Theophrastus, a genealogy that would make sense, given Cicero’s sophistic-leaning approaches to rhetorical interpretation (i.e. his firm landing in the center circle in Figure 3), as evidenced by his decision to explore his views on rhetoric through a lengthy dialogue that lacks the always-rightness of Socrates in a Platonic dialogue or the dry recitation of truths in an Aristotelian treatise. Katz puts this point best: “De Oratore is
thus a literate version of a true sophistic controversy: all sides of the issue are explored, resulting in uncertainty regarding one's position and nobody really wins” (116).

Consider the difference between this kind of work and the directions given to students of rhetoric by Quintilian in his *Institutio Oratoria*, about 150 years after Cicero wrote *De Oratore*. Quintilian set out to give the Roman Empire a complete set of instruction in rhetoric, from the necessities of early education and good character to detailed specifics about how to compose, memorize, and deliver speeches. Reading through the details of his instruction today, I’m struck by the completeness of the advice, leaning on but expanding beyond the organization and suggestions given in Cicero’s *De Oratore* and the more detailed *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. For instance, when Quintilian writes about delivery in Book XI, chapter 3 of the *Institutio*, he includes every conceivable piece of advice on how a speaker should comport his voice (its volume, quality, clarity, pauses, evenness, naturalness, and tone) and his gestures (directing the use of the head, eyes, eyebrows, lips, neck, hands, fingers, and legs), along with specific instruction on clothing—“The toga itself should, in my opinion, be round, and cut to fit, otherwise there are a number of ways in which it may be unshapely” (XI.3.139), and so on. The impression is that the rhetor must exert as much control as possible over his text, using *every* possible means of persuasion at his command, expertly performing an expert text that will produce the exact desired effect in an audience; this is the left circle in Figure 3. And in a rhetorical situation like this, the connection between rhetoric and poetics that may have seemed so natural to the Sophists becomes strained. After all, the person delivering a text for entertainment value (as an actor in a classical play) is hoping for a very different kind of audience reaction than the rhetor arguing his case in a court
with a very specific desired outcome. Perhaps this is part of why so many classical works on delivery compare rhetorical delivery to an actor’s delivery, but usually with a warning that rhetoric demands something different—in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and *Institutio Oratoria*, something more restrained, more guided, like water pushed through a controlled aqueduct instead of rushing haphazardly down a river bed. In Sander M. Goldberg’s overview of classical delivery techniques, he points out that Quintilian “urged greater restraint in delivery because by his day too much technique, too much of what actors did, would sound insincere, waste time, and thus be fatal to the requirements of persuasion” (59)—those requirements being the need to convince an audience to agree with the rhetor, of course.

Yet later applications of rhetoric to music leaned heavily on Quintilian’s model of rhetorical control (left circle), rather than on visions of rhetoric that allowed for more variability in audience reaction (middle circle). After a complete manuscript of Quintilian’s *Institutio* was discovered in the basement of a monastery in present-day Switzerland (Conley 112), his text became one of the foundational sources for rhetorical education in Europe, especially after its first printing in 1468, with over a hundred printings to follow throughout the sixteenth century (Kirkendale 95). The educated classes thus were learning rhetoric with increasing attention to details and control throughout the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries—attention that naturally trickled into the mindset of music composers more and more as time continued. Musicologist Mark Evan Bonds argues that it wasn’t until the early 18th century that this musical-rhetorical perspective had suffused throughout the listening public’s understanding of music itself, as people began hearing music as a “wordless oration whose purpose was to move the
listener” and as “a language in its own right, independent of any verbal text” (Wordless 4). In a sense, then, rhetoric and poetics continued to be joined. European artists and critics of the 17th and 18th centuries regularly drew attention to the connections between rhetoric and the arts, seeing in both rhetorical and poetic communication an opportunity for “instruction” of the mind/soul in one way or another. H. James Jensen sees this rhetoric-focused theorizing as the heart of all the writing on emotion done in this period: “The passions to which the means of art first appeal are therefore of great importance, as are the devices that do the appealing and manipulating, and from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century treatises on the soul and on the arts, because of their rhetorical orientation, all evince great interest in the passions: what they are, which ones to strive for, and how to raise them” (66-67). And of course, arousing the passions is a common claim made about the purpose of music, such as in the Bonds quote above: the telos of a musical oration is “to move the listener,” bringing her to an emotional state she wasn’t in before. This fits with the 17th- and 18th-century goal of much art and rhetoric: “to control the feelings of their audience,” eliminating uncertainty and randomness in audience reactions (Cameron 33).

Rhetoric and music, then, were joined just as European music was entering an unprecedented period of complexity and sophistication: the Baroque (roughly 1600 until Bach’s death in 1750). And that pairing was perpetuated with the goal of exerting a Quintilian-like control over the audience’s reactions. It was in the Baroque period that “analogies between rhetoric and music permeated every level of musical thought”
Dietrich Bartel lists as many as thirteen major publications in Europe on music and rhetoric between 1599 and 1788, the most-cited remaining the 1606 publication of Joachim Burmeister’s *Musica Poetica* and the 1739 publication of Johann Mattheson’s hugely influential *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, which laid out an extensive plan for how musical structure paralleled oratorical structures. Mattheson’s book is both guide for the composer and analytic tool for listeners trying to understand the details of music’s effect on them through rhetorical/musical analysis. Contemporary scholar James Van Horn Melton specifically applies Mattheson’s work to the era’s preoccupation with audience, connecting Mattheson to the essayist Joseph Addison in England (who influenced Mattheson’s work a great deal) and writer Abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos in France, all of whom saw the audience as performing a critical part of any artistic or rhetorical endeavor:

A work of art was to be judged by how it moved its audience, not merely by its “objective” internal structure. By subordinating the formal properties of a work to the response of its audience, Addison, Dubos, and subsequent eighteenth-century critics legitimized the role of the public as an aesthetic tribunal. Public judgment—what Addison called “the taste of the town” and Dubos called the parterre—and not the metaphysical maxims of classical poetics ultimately determined whether or not a work was beautiful and pleasing. (Melton 89)

Surely this kind of cultural context would strongly affect how any composer wrote. A piece would need to be considered not simply for things that we often value in art

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2 For the best overview of musical/rhetorical studies from a rhetorician’s perspective, see Rodney Farnsworth’s “How the Other Half Sounds: An Historical Survey of Musical Rhetoric During the Baroque and After.”
today—formal elements of internal structure and sense that seem to reside “in” the piece itself. Instead, anything successful about a piece would be due to its success before audiences, who would need to be both catered to and surprised. Indeed, one reason Haydn (who owned a copy of Mattheson’s treatise) is analyzed by contemporary musicorhetoricians is because of his intriguing play with audience expectations, a fluency that grew from his career as a composer for ever-different audiences in the theater, the intimate salon, the royal palace, and eventually the English concert-going public.

Because of this preponderance of thinking on music and rhetoric, a number of contemporary publications by musicology and aesthetics scholars dwell on the musical/rhetoric connection (Beghin and Goldberg; Bonds, Wordless; Cameron; Jensen; Sharpe), often with a (surprising, to me) line about how studies in rhetoric “have largely disappeared from most educational and philosophical system [sic]” (“Rhetoric and Music”). These publications thus often try to better understand the thinking that went into making music in an era when rhetorical training was universal (at least for those who were allowed to seek formal education). For example, the introduction to a recent edited collection (with chapters written mostly by musicologists) on rhetorical analyses of Joseph Haydn’s work includes this defense of the musical study of rhetoric:

The amalgam of precepts, exercises, models, and clichés that we call classical rhetoric nevertheless endures. It may pass in or out of fashion, becoming more or less prominent in the theory and practice of art, but it invariably remains too useful to ignore. For artists, rhetoric may suggest ways to compose and to perform; for audiences, ways to respond; and for critics, ways to understand the phenomena of composition and
performance. At the very least, rhetoric provides a vocabulary for making communication explicable—and not just verbal communication. (Beghin and Goldberg 2).

It’s notable that an entire collection on Haydn’s rhetoric is possible, given his status as a standard example of Classical-era music, the period following the rhetoric-pervasive Baroque. This testifies to the enduring ghost of rhetoric in music studies: that even as publications explicitly making the connection between the two areas dwindled in the 18th century—Mark Evan Bonds claims in *Wordless Rhetoric* that rhetorical models were generally replaced by organic, Romantic models of authorship by 1850—composers continued to consult the older books and work in a tradition of concert music that first flowered in an era of rhetoric-centered education. Philosopher R.A. Sharpe puts this view well: “Music continued to possess the expressive predicates established through rhetoric, and it continued to develop until the resources of tonal language were exhausted” (79)—that is, until 20th-century concert music purposefully threw off the shackles of connections to older ways of thinking, itself a community-driven rhetorical move.

Whether discussing speeches and music that allow variable interpretations (the sophistic view) or strive for controlled interpretations (the Quintilian-based and Baroque view), these views are tied together by their focus on audience. That is, both of these views of rhetoric are rhetorical at all because they focus on the effects of a composition on an audience, as opposed to a strict focus on the formal features of the work itself, represented in Figure 3 by the right circle. From a phenomenological perspective, music can be read as less rhetorical when it is composed more as an expression of the internal, emotional state of an Author—audience be damned—than as a message designed to
move an audience in some way (even when the details of that effect are unpredictable).

That’s not to say that this a-rhetorical music doesn’t have rhetorical effects; like our encounters with any object or event, there is a material sense in which rhetorical purpose seems to reside in anything at all. But from the composer’s perspective, the question of how much control the composer has over the meaning made from the music shifts dramatically as attitudes about what music (and art in general) are designed to do. Indeed, the rhetorical focus on audience in the arts would perhaps not be so striking if our concept of the composer (in any medium) had not changed so dramatically in the Romantic era, from a person wielding a craft situated among a community of other craftspeople to an individual channeling unique genius. Quite naturally, these shifting attitudes about authorship applied to those writing music as well as text. (See the conclusion of chapter one for my brief discussion of the economic shifts in Germany affected views of authorship, following Woodmansee’s work.) Joseph P. Swain, for one, has noted the relatively recent development of the author-function in his book on music and language; he contrasts the individual authorship view, which continues to hold sway in 20th- and 21st-century music, with that held in the time of Josquin des Prez, a well-known Renaissance composer from the 15th and 16th centuries:

The dictum that every composer must create an individual style to establish credentials as Artist is so widely taken for granted in the modern world that it is worth emphasizing how recently the Western community has demanded this kind of originality. In earlier days, composers didn't worry about that sort of thing; if anything, their attitude was the opposite. If one was talented enough to make music like Josquin's, so much the
better. The trouble was, no one was that talented: the technique of
Josquin’s personal syntax posed too high a hurdle. (120-21)

In days before mass distribution of individual artists’ works, the identity of the composer
mattered far less than the fact of audiences receiving products that worked for them,
whether they were composed by Josquin or someone else writing in his same style. But as
Swain points out, the different levels of skill naturally drew attention to some individuals
more than others, and when increased literacy and changing distribution models for text
and music gave even more attention to those individuals, their personal expression began
to seem more important than the judgment of the audience. The onus of interpretation
was no longer on the composer, who was previously understood to be the one responsible
for making his work comprehensible to audiences. Instead, beginning around the time of
Beethoven (the bridge figure between the rhetorically minded Classical period and the
upcoming Romantic period), music “was heard within an entirely different, non-
rhetorical framework, one based on the idea that music reflects a form of truth that we, as
listeners, must strive to comprehend” (Bonds, “Rhetoric versus Truth” 111).

My hope here is for a composer-centered musical rhetoric that breaks down the
dialectic between controlling an audience’s reaction and ignoring it, one that more fully
embraces the guided ambiguities of my middle circle. But before we get there, I want to
explore how the controlling impulse has played out in contemporary musical-rhetorical
analysis, how the legacy of Quintilian and Mattheson have affected the way we discuss
rhetoric and music today.
**Understanding Musical Rhetoric**

Turning from the composer’s rhetorical approach to an audience’s perceived rhetorical messages can be tricky step to take. Messages sent often don’t line up with messages that are perceived, making it impossible to say how “rhetorical” a given text is without a consideration of both how much the composer was writing for an audience and how much the audience perceived that something was being said. In practical terms, this means that an audience may create meanings out of any music that they hear as being willfully created by a composer, regardless of if that composer was purposefully trying to control their emotions (the Baroque, left-circle approach) or was eschewing any appeal to audiences (the Romantic/Modern, right-circle approach). Even though composer Milton Babbitt’s 1958 article “Who Cares if You Listen?” argues for composers to work completely outside the influence of popular musical taste, listeners will still react to his music with feelings, thoughts, and meanings—regardless of how educated they are in the complex, unorthodox moves he makes in his pieces.

It’s with these thoughts in mind that I turn from the composition of musical rhetoric to its analysis. The lines between the two often overlap, but I see the key turn as the difference between the attitude a composer has toward his audience and the meaning an audience can make from a piece of music. Therefore, it’s in this section that I talk more of approaches to musical-rhetorical analysis, a discussion that sometimes lines up more or less with my three-circle approach to composerly attitudes. That is, when a listener perceives that a composer was composing in a controlling, Baroque style, an analysis is appropriate that identifies and classifies those musical-rhetorical moves—and indeed, this is the direction of most discussions of musical rhetoric. However, I argue
here for an expanded view of what rhetorical analysis of music can look like, one that moves beyond the identification of rhetorical sections and figures and into identification between humans experiencing the flow of musical meaning through their bodies in time.

**The Surgical Transplant Approach to Rhetoric**

Applications of rhetoric to music like Mattheson’s can come across to contemporary readers as remarkably rules-based, with his extremely detailed prescriptions of oratorical *dispositio* to musical form and rhetorical figures to musical figures. While there’s nothing inherently wrong with detailed instruction in rhetorical effectiveness—especially in pedagogical contexts like Quintilian’s and Mattheson’s—I fear that rhetorical analysis can all too easily seem like an exercise in identifying the structures of a text along with its stylistic figures, and nothing more. Thus, the question “What do we mean by rhetorical music?” hinges on the question of what we ultimately mean by *rhetoric* itself. And many of those who write about music and rhetoric characterize rhetoric far too atomistically.

My concern is essentially this: that the terminologies of rhetoric can quickly become a scientific scalpel used to cut into the heart of texts so as to classify and understand them perfectly as a sum of discrete parts, as if *narratio* and *epanalepsis* were a coronary artery and plasma cell to be cut out, analyzed, and transplanted to a new body with the expectation that they’ll function in the same way there. Doing so isn’t necessarily wrong; it is a valid method of analysis to study rhetorical moves, classify them, and apply them to new situations. I know that fluency with classical rhetorical terms and figures can be a path-breaking introduction to composition for those who feel that their compositions will never achieve rhetorical effectiveness. (I’ve used them myself in classes to great effect.) But rhetorical analysis of music can also go further.
To explain what I mean, I’ll give a few short examples, all of which are insightful, incisive, and—to my eyes—rather cold. In musicology, Ursula Kirkendale has published an extremely detailed reading of Bach’s *Musical Offering* that paints it as directly inspired (especially in its arrangement) by Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*. Kirkendale bemoans that the lack of rhetorical training in today’s students leads to a sad state where “Bach's instrumental music has come to be regarded (and performed) as ‘abstract,’ its rhetorical basis and function no longer understood” (131). In my terminology, she is frustrated that the legacy of Romantic authorship has trickled down to her students’ views on how music was composed; she sees students assuming music was written from the perspective of the right circle in Figure 3, the a-rhetorical side. Her lengthy analysis moves back and forth between Bach and Quintilian, using the two to explain confusing aspects of the music. She is extremely detailed in her analysis, showing the highest levels of scholarship in her search for parallels between the two works. For example, passages like this are common:

After *magnificentia*, Quintilian considers only two further qualities: *iucunditas* (attractiveness) and *evidentia* (palpability). The former he rejects as a typical quality of the *narratio*, for it is equally suitable for all parts of the oration (IV.ii.63). . . . Could Bach have made the *evidentia* more palpable than he does in this canon? The *theme regium* rises from key to key like reliefs on a triumphal column which twist higher and higher and can be seen from all sides until their figures transcend the

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3 A caveat: the critiques that follow are less frustrated diatribes than expressions of a discomfort. I hope this can be an exercise in bridge-building, not bridge-destroying. That is, I hope musicologists and communication scholars can learn more about contemporary discussions of rhetoric as practiced by rhetoric scholars, and I hope that we in rhetoric can begin to notice the rich body of work in musical rhetoric practiced outside our discipline.
limits of human eyesight. By the fourth repetition almost every note is chromatically altered, fitting perfectly Quintilian’s statement that *evidentia* can be achieved “ex accidentibus” (VIII.iii.70). (Kirkendale 108)

Kirkendale’s work in this regard is superb, as she catalogues an impressive array of Quintilian’s terms that seems to be present in Bach’s work (although Bach, unfortunately, is not around to ask if that is indeed what he had in mind). However, following Quintilian as she is, Kirkendale seems to see rhetoric as a list of techniques used to achieve oratorical excellence—nothing more or less. Quintilian’s *evidentia* is evidenced in Bach’s piece; therefore, rhetoric is present.

Along similar lines and more recently, Jasmin Cameron ends an excellent book chapter on music and rhetoric with a detailed rhetorical analysis of the Crucifixus movement from the *Missa Paschalis* of Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679-1745)—a task that Cameron approaches with a carefulness that I appreciate, mentioning often the trickiness of applying classical rhetoric to any musical text. She begins by labeling parts of the score with classical *dispositio* terms, struggling to find the best place to pinpoint where exactly the *narratio* and *confirmatio* should begin, following Mattheson’s guidelines. She then relies on Bartel’s work to identify a non-exhaustive list of fifteen rhetorical figures found in the piece, including *noema*—defined at *Silva Rhetoricae* as “An obscure and subtle speech” (Burton)—which she sees in the piece as follows: “a *noema* is described as a chordal passage that appears within the context of a contrapuntal section or piece of music. The responsorial imitation of the lower three voices in bar 5 might be described in this sense as a *noema*. However, this is not a strict *noema*, since not all the voices participate in the homophonic texture” (63). Similarly, she describes *aposiopesis* in the
piece: “this silence, considered to be representative of death, occurs in all parts on the first beat of bar 11” (64). Cameron describes the difficulty of this application of rhetorical terms due to the overlapping and contradictory ways that different theorists applied rhetorical terms to music, a struggle that leads her to consider the different ways contemporary theorists describe musical forms and their effects. Yet despite her warnings and her wisdom, I find her work to have much the same effect as Kirkendale’s: readers are left wondering why it matters that these figures can be identified in a piece of music. Again, rhetorical analysis seems not to go much beyond the application of terminology.

A term was surgically cut from rhetorical tradition and carefully reintroduced into musical analysis. Both Kirkendale and Cameron run the risk of making “the mistake of treating musical rhetoric as rigid prescriptions rather than flexible creative tools,” a mistake rhetorician Rodney Farnsworth describes the bulk of scholarship on musical rhetoric making between 1900 and the 1960s (220).

In communication, a field with a tradition of studying musical rhetoric that goes back at least to James R. Irvine and Walter G. Kirkpatrick’s “The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations” (1972), one leader in the field has been Deanna Sellnow, (occasionally publishing with Timothy Sellnow). Relying on philosopher Susanne K. Langer’s work, she engagingly explores the interrelation between music and words, including in her analysis both lyrics set to music and the words composers write to describe instrumental works, as in the detailed program notes accompanying John Corigliano’s Symphony No. 1 (Sellnow and Sellnow, “John”). But here again, the surgical transplant impulse runs high, as Sellnow classifies rhythm, melody, and harmony as having certain kinds of meanings attached to them, depending
largely on their intensity and release patterns. Tempos can be “fast/driving” or “slow,”
while meters can be “changing” or “consistent” and beats can be “syncopated” or “duple
or triple” (Sellnow and Sellnow, “Illusion” 402); similar observations are made about
how a given harmonic or melodic pattern is more or less “symbolic of release” (405).
Thus, part of Bruce Springsteen’s *The River* is described as having a musical style that
uses “primarily intensity patterns such as faster tempi, driving rhythms, modulating
harmonies, full instrumentation, and a rock style,” a collection of traits that “is more
likely to convey joy, excitement, and anticipation than sadness, suffering, and
frustration,” traits found in the lyrics (Sellnow, “Rhetorical” 54). And in “He Thinks
He’ll Keep Her,” Mary Chapin Carpenter uses a “conjunct melodic line, mostly
descending lines, and returns predictably to a long-held tone at the end of each stanza,”
elements that, as in Springsteen’s work, contradict the message of the lyrics (Sellnow,
“Music” 74). According to Sellnow’s reading, these musical and lyrical messages don’t
line up—assuming, of course, that the musical messages communicate with that much
stability.

As in Kirkendale and Cameron, I find myself asking the classic “So What?”
question—but Sellnow offers an answer, albeit a problematic one. In a surprise turn, it
seems that Sellnow’s work is generally framed as an exegesis of how one can use music
most persuasively—say, to express social or feminist critiques. In other words, she seems
to be teaching the burgeoning composer how to use music in ways that will create the
most persuasive combinations of music and words. “Rhetorical Strategies” ends with one
of these advice paragraphs: “Performers of popular music might also consider
strategically shifting their stories and styles to maintain or broaden listener appeal over
time. It seems crucial for popular artists to consider the impact of their music on at least two audiences. . . . To attain new audiences, however, performers may need to offer an ambiguous emotional message to which listeners can identify via the musical score” (60). Similarly, “The ‘Illusion of Life’” reminds her audience (which I perhaps pessimistically assume does not assume many music composers or performers) that “using congruent linguistic and aesthetic patterns for a controversial message might reduce the chances for attaining broad listener appeal” (411). And “Music as Persuasion” suggests that composers should use inviting music to “systematically persuade [listeners] to accept an alternative perspective” that they might not initially take to heart (81). As a reader, I’m left with a new tool in my box of analysis—that exploring the disjuncture between textual and musical meaning can lead to fruitful understandings—but I’m also left with the unexpected advice about how to make music appeal broadly and how to wield it to convince conservative audiences to consider progressive politics. It’s as if Sellnow were saying, “I’ve cracked the code of how music affects audiences! Come and apply that code to your own music—transplant it into new bodies—where it can work for you, too!”

**Broadening Our View of Rhetoric**

What’s wrong with these analyses? Isn’t that what rhetoric is—a series of techniques to help rhetors invent, arrange, embellish, memorize, and deliver compositions that are kairotically effective—techniques that we learn by identifying them in existing effective texts? In some ways, yes, and there’s nothing inherently wrong with analyzing texts along these lines. But problems remain, both from a musical perspective and a rhetorical perspective. Or instead of problems, I should say opportunities, other places that we can take our analysis, fueled by the nondiscursive nature of music.
From the musical side, Ruth Hacohen is one of the most reasonable voices of the many that responded in raucous critique and praise to Kirkendale’s article about Bach’s reliance on Quintilian. Hacohen questions some of Kirkendale’s basic assumptions, rooting her critique in the differing nature of music and language: “Like other analogical readings of music, [Kirkendale] does not take account of the fact that artistic works can abide by contradictory paradigms and models and can be the site for conflicting social and cultural orientations, having meaning for audiences far apart in time and context. . . . [A] work of art cannot be pinned down by adherence to reductionist methodology” (23). Hacohen draws our attention to the nature of music, which though it can (and should) be discussed analytically, drawing apart its individual parts in order to understand their effects, is still fully able to be “contradictory,” messy, playful, and ambiguous—and indeed, these qualities are some of its chief powers. Dwelling in the contradictions and multiple meanings of music seems to me quite different than the surgical transplant approach, wielding rhetoric like a scalpel that can divide elements until they are quantifiable and clear.

From the rhetorical scholar’s perspective, in a much-cited 1984 article in *Rhetorica*, Brian Vickers also takes issue with applications of rhetoric to music, criticizing Baroque figures like Burmeister and Mattheson themselves but also more indirectly questioning the validity of the attention given to them in the musicology literature. In short, he questions how far rhetoric can be applied to music, given the fundamentally different nature of the two disciplines. He writes, “Even the most dedicated student of rhetoric will ultimately have to admit that in dealing with music we soon reach the limits of rhetoric, for we reach the limits of language” (Vickers 41). He
closes by relying heavily on Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* for her insights into the different syntax and semantics of discursive, linguistic texts and nondiscursive imagery and music. Vickers’ analysis helps me see more precisely what my issues with the surgical transplant approach are: I’m not only against reductionist views of rhetoric, I’m also for views of music that honor its ability to say many things at once, to be contradictory, to be associative in different ways for different listeners, to fully embrace the sophistic, Ciceronian vision of rhetoric—all approaches that Langer’s work extols and Vickers’ work furthers.

But as it proceeds, even Vickers’ critique begins to feel constrained in its treatment of *rhetoric* (if not of music). Like musical-rhetorical surgeons, he too seems to have a small view of rhetoric’s possibilities and function, a view that gets smaller and smaller as the final page of the lengthy article continues:

[Rhetoric] is a highly systematised linguistic discipline that can combine finite forms of rhetorical figures with an infinite combination of meaning. . . . Rhetoric, like language, can never—and probably never wants to—escape from the constraints of significance, that interplay between the sign-system of the individual and that of society which constitutes our shared, negotiable but still ultimately agreed and exchanged meanings. . . . There, perhaps, is the final difference: it may hope for insight, but rhetoric is inalienably about communication, and can only use words, and meanings. (44)

To Vickers, rhetoric is ultimately about *intelligible* communication (a view I discussed in the previous chapter), while music is ultimately about the untranslatable and the
unspeakable. This view hearkens back to Renaissance and Enlightenment views of music and rhetoric, when “the first duty of the composer was to make his work intelligible,” when “the function of music was essentially to furnish the listener with archetypal images of human moods and passions in view of creating in him specific psychological effects” (LeCoat 158). Here even Vickers seems to exclude from rhetoric the particular wonders of music, that it “articulates forms which language cannot set forth” (Langer 233, emphasis in original). He ends with rhetoric behind the closed door of the surgery, while music is free to expand freely beyond it.

But what if instead of intelligible communication, rhetoric were more about effective communication—even when the desired effect is for audiences to feel discomfort or confusion in unpredictable ways? What if the art of rhetoric were less a collection of figures and techniques for persuasion and more an ever-shifting, undefined collection of considerations for how to connect the minds and emotions of one person with another’s, not with exact transmission of data but with playful extensions of discourse, image, and sound that are received, changed, and recast in a new form? This is more like the rhetoric of the sophists and of Cicero than of Aristotle and Quintilian. It’s a rhetoric that involves both listening (Ratcliffe) and silence (Glenn). It’s a rhetoric that takes advantage of one of music’s few universals in its endless cultural varieties, according to ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl: “to provide some kind of fundamental change in an individual's consciousness or in the ambiance of a gathering” (468). It’s a rhetoric that delights in the “covibrancy” discussed by David Burrows:

When I say to someone, “Let's stop off for coffee and maybe a roll,” I give my present flesh and blood situation a tentative and shadowy extension.
Like the pseudopod of an amoeba, this extension could take hold and establish a new situation toward which the present one would then flow. By my act of addressing him, I will my listener to extend his situation in the same direction, working out of our covibrancy in the sound of my speaking voice; something similar would happen if I were to take him by the elbow in order to turn him toward some sight of interest. (Sound 44)

It’s a rhetoric that Joddy Murray expounds on beautifully in *Non-Discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multimodal Composition*. He reminds us that the “value” of a nondiscursive text is that it “thrives and derives its meaning-making from the complexity and ambiguity of its medium,” while a discursive text *reduces* ambiguity “as it goes along” (5). Langer (whom Murray as well relies heavily on) makes a similar claim about *music*, but Murray takes the step of extending this sort of power to rhetoric as well. To Murray, the language-as-communication model doesn’t have to be the only model; we need a shift “from exposition to disposition: from the desire to master to the desire to ‘be.’” Writing images, then, leaves open the question ‘What does it mean?’ and substitutes the condition of being with language” (52). This emphasis on being echoes Langer’s earlier point that “To understand the ‘idea’ in a work of art is therefore more like having a new experience than like entertaining a new proposition” (263). Nondiscursive texts emphasize the experiential, the sharing of states of being, the option of seeing rhetoric as a way of communicating wonder and sitting down and playing around in it for a while (Covino). This all starts to sound unscientific very quickly, which I’m sure is part of the reason why scholars tend to latch onto the simpler aspects of rhetoric, the parts that are classifiable and classified. When rhetoric itself is broadened, we’re forced to ask, “What,
then, makes something *rhetorical* in the first place?” or “How can rhetoric even be practiced, if it’s all tied up with personal connections and being and even silence?”

**Burke, Music, and Identification**

Suppose you are a musician—and of a sudden, a likely theme occurs to you. You awaken—and there it is. And somehow it is like an unopened bundle of possibilities.

*Kenneth Burke (“Anaesthetic” 540)*

Kenneth Burke’s reframing of rhetoric as identification provides an elegant solution to the problem of how to expand our analyses of musical rhetoric. In Burke we see a broadening of rhetoric far beyond the controlling aspirations of the surgical transplant approach into an appreciation of how composers in any medium can communicate with goals of human connection and identification, but without trying to exert a perfect control over what meanings audiences make from our messages. That is, Burke’s rhetoric frees us from thinking that musical communication must follow either a controlling, Baroque model or an audience-ignoring Romantic model. He opens a space for composers to enjoy the middle circle, to willfully identify with audiences who won’t all agree on the associative and affective meanings they find in a piece of music. Or regardless of what composers do, this space allows listeners to see in rhetorical analysis an opportunity for discussing the ways they subjectively identify with a piece of music. Burke’s definition of rhetoric in *A Rhetoric of Motives* begins to open this space: rhetoric is “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (*Rhetoric* 43, italics in original). The ways music is or isn’t a “language” relying on “symbolic means” is up for debate—but surely music “induces cooperation,” drawing composers, performers, and listeners into a state of consubstantiality and reciprocal identification.
Backing up a bit, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke makes an intriguing statement about art in general: “Art is a means of communication. As such it is certainly designed to elicit a ‘response’ of some sort” (235-36). At first, this might sound like the Quintilina/Baroque approach to composing musical rhetoric, the view that musical-rhetorical figures could be surgically transplanted into a piece of music to control the “response” desired from an audience. But Burke’s later expansion of his rhetorical thinking in *A Rhetoric of Motives* adds something more to our understanding of the nature of the “response” brought about by art. Here, he expands the scope of rhetoric beyond a persuasion to action—as in didactic, overtly rhetorical art—into a persuasion to attitude, when the audience’s thinking is changed in some way after the identification-creating communication occurred. Burke specifically sees this persuasion to attitude as opening up the field of rhetoric to artistic arenas: “Thus the notion of persuasion to *attitude* would permit the application of rhetorical terms to purely poetic structures; the study of lyrical devices might be classed under the head of rhetoric, when these devices are considered for their power to induce or communicate states of mind to readers, even though the kinds of assent evoked have no overt, practical outcome” (*Rhetoric* 50). Notice that he doesn’t throw out all the scalpels of rhetorical analysis, still including “the study of lyrical devices” and how they function on audiences. But with the heart of his endeavor switched from rhetoric as a dictionary of effects to pick and choose, as in the surgical transplant method, to a means of achieving identification between individuals who fundamentally don’t understand each other, rhetorical analysis moves from a study in scholarly classification into a means of people learning to understand each other through nondiscursive means. The focus changes. No longer do I ask, “Which of Quintilian’s
figures does this composer seem to have employed here?” but instead, “What kind of connection does this composer seem to want to achieve between herself, the performers, and the audience? What specific aspects of her work are designed to make that happen?”

And even more importantly, this switch turns to myself: “How am I affected by the moves in this music? Where do I identify with the sounds being sent my way?”

Indeed, this application of Burke’s rhetoric specifically to musical identification would probably come as no surprise to Burke. Much of his work, all the way back to *Counter-Statement*, was dedicated to reimagining how literature—a supposedly pure poetic form—does far more than it seems to, achieving its effects through rhetorical principles. And though much of his writing is about poetry and literature, Denise M. Bostdorff and Philip K. Tompkins have shown convincingly how many of the ideas presented in *Counter-Statement* had their genesis in Burke’s music reviews written during his stint at *Dial* in the 1920s and as music editor from 1927-29, a project taken further in Joel Overall’s insightful mapping of Burke’s later reviews for *The Nation* onto the rhetorical principles that appear in *Permanence and Change*. Burke’s musical analysis naturally led to his philosophic and literary analysis, which therefore lends itself just as easily back to musical analysis.4 According to Bostdorff and Tompkins, “As Burke perceives it, music *is* a language, but very different from the type to which we are accustomed. He elaborates this idea by claiming that even supposedly ‘pure’ music seems to tell a story. . . . For Burke, musicians arrange language in order to produce a particular impression upon an audience to the same extent that these writers use literary language to achieve such an aim” (243). As a person for whom music was central to his thinking and

4 Farnsworth complains, “I, of course, wonder why such a profound rhetorical thinker [as Burke] wasted so much critical space and time on literature rather than music . . . ” (223). The answer, I think, is that even his work on literature was part of a larger project that already included music in Burke’s mind.
much of his early writing, he saw in both language and music an opportunity for exploring his career-spanning themes: in the words of Jeffrey Carroll, “how communication energizes, or makes possible an aural reality, those forms in everyday display and deployment that are at once in tension with human conditions like unity and division.” Indeed, beyond the in-depth analyses of Burke’s relationship to music in Bostdorff and Tompkins’s, Overall’s, and Carroll’s articles, others have found Burke’s theories particularly amenable to analyses of musical rhetoric. Gregory Clark draws extensively on Burke’s notion of rhetoric as identification in “Virtuosos and Ensembles: Rhetorical Lessons from Jazz,” in which he reminds us that Burke “reconceived rhetoric in terms that rely heavily on aesthetic experience” (32). Bump Halbritter also focuses on Burke’s application to music in “Musical Rhetoric in Integrated-Media Composition.”

Read as the writing of a music lover, even _A Rhetoric of Motives_ begins to seem positively musical, with its small attention to musical examples and metaphors: using the title of Richard Strauss’s _Death and Transfiguration_ as an example (14), calling the Freudian psyche a “concerto of principles mutually modifying one another” (38), referring to a lecturer on music’s use of silence (67), considering the rhetoric of the refrain in popular songs (68), referring to the classical arrangement of an oration as like the arrangement of a symphony (69), referring later to the “connotations or overtones of the poetic image” (85), and so on.

What, then, would a Burkean musical-rhetorical analysis look like? What does it mean to describe the ways I identify with a piece of music, its performers, and its composer? Such an approach would surely annoy some music critics who try so hard to keep discussions of music as objective as possible, focusing solely on the formal aspects
of a piece as opposed to emotional, subjective reactions. There is surely a space for these analyses, but with my broadened, Burkean rhetoric in mind, they feel ever insufficient.

I find a first step in this direction in the final pages of David Burrows’s *Time and the Warm Body: A Musical Perspective on the Construction of Time*. Though Burrows doesn’t approach music from the perspective of rhetoric in this book (not even using the word *rhetoric* once, according to a Google Books search of the text), he does embrace the subjective aspects of listening, especially as a time-based experience. He performs a brief “processual analysis” designed to share a mediated description of what certain moments in a Bach cello piece mean to him as they occur. He acknowledges that it would be tedious to describe each moment of the piece exactly as they affected him in time, but he still draws our attention to the value of putting the writer about music somewhat in the place of a listener who experiences music in time, as opposed to the more common approach of the analyst who always is assumed to have an omniscient knowledge of exactly what will happen when in the score. In Burrows’s words, he is “indulging the desire to have it both ways, with immediacy nesting within omniscience” (111).

The effects of this processual analysis on me as a reader are strikingly suggestive for the student of musical rhetoric. Burrows focuses first on a surprising note, a C natural that isn’t one of the notes one would expect, given the modality of the notes that came before it. “I reach out to this note,” he writes, “as I do to all the others, with whatever I know that might locate it and make sense of it. I bring to bear on it whatever of relevance the hypothesis says about the schemas of key and meter, about genre and form, about the timespan layers of figure, phrase and so on as they have unfolded in this piece up to this point and as I expect them to unfold from here on to the end” (113). How Burkean he
sounds in this passage, focused as it is on the communication of a “state of mind” to a listener! But it bears repeating that the meaning Burrows ultimately makes of this unexpected note is based for him on all the kinds of knowledge he brings to bear on it, knowledge that marks him as a musicologist for whom “schemas of key and meter” are easily discerned and discussed. For the listener without this training, the Bach piece, and perhaps even that C natural (though it may pass by without notice), are wrapped in a different set of meanings. Perhaps the untrained listener’s meanings will be more associative (“This reminds me of a piece I heard in church as a child”) or emotional (“This section sounds lighter and happier than the darker, slower section preceding it”). These meanings, whether from Burrows or anyone else, do rely on a listener assuming there is something worth hearing, something worth finding in the music, but these meanings do not rely on the composer’s hope (or lack of hope) that I will discern a particular meaning in the listening.

**Conclusion**

In the introduction to this chapter, I quoted an early claim that Haydn’s rhetorical prowess was most evident in the ways he carefully led listeners into unexpected musical spaces, guiding them to surprises by gentle steps instead of dumping them into the unexpected, where they would surely dislike the jolt. In this way, Haydn exemplifies a boundary between the left and middle circles of my Figure 3: he has an experience he wants to guide listeners to with a degree of control, and he knows we will best swallow the unexpected when we’re taken there gradually. But Haydn also seems to understand that listeners will never follow his lead exactly. After all, he was “composing for real
people whose experience of music had more to do with sound than with symbol” (Beghin and Goldberg 6).

Joel Overall’s analysis of Burke’s reviews for The Nation draws attention to Burke’s observance of the same phenomenon in the music he was reviewing in the 1930s. That is, Burke also saw how increasingly avant-garde composers attempted to ease their way into listeners’ ears without scaring them off completely. Overall writes, “For Burke, secular conversion can take place when a classical composer slightly distorts one aspect of the audience’s ‘piety’ while keeping most of the other elements in place. . . . This slight shift in the audience’s perspective allows them to accept change while clinging to their own ‘piety’” (444). Burke saw modern composers adapting to the needs of audiences just as Haydn had adapted to his: allowing them to accept new musical ideas slowly, without boxing their ears with a clash of music that might lead them to cover their ears. These composers had to take these careful paths because of the nature of music-as-sound, time, and cognition that I explored in chapter one. And these paths are rhetorical.

The musical rhetoric I advocate is one that shifts attention away from the formal qualities that guide audiences’ thoughts as they ride the wave of music, directing us instead to the experience of the wave itself, an experience of mystical musical identification between composer, player, and audience. From that starting point, we can move into the same situation from composers’ points of view, examining their various explanations of how they manage their identification with audiences: by controlling, gently guiding, or ignoring them.
**INTERLUDE 1**

At first, I didn’t get that the tapes at Wal-Mart were tapes. Encased in long, plastic handles that slid noiselessly into their slots on the shelf, they seemed to be some recording technology I hadn’t heard of yet—CDs? What did a CD look like?

But I had heard Kriss Kross on the radio. All eleven-year-olds had. I had to have their tape and learn their words and dance their dance. So, looking up at the tall stack of white and clear plastics, I pulled one out of the slot. Holding it by the long handle, I could tell that there was indeed a cassette inside, just like the Beach Boys and Mannheim Steamroller ones my parents listened to. It was just wrapped in a hard frame with a tail, like an overeager hug that had stuck that way. I stumbled quickly to the counter and bought it with a wad of ones and quarters.

Two months later, the tape wouldn’t rewind. I hit eject and pulled out the cartridge, the crumpled, slippery tape bunched and jammed into the player. I pulled harder, and the tape snapped.

Then, two things. One: since it was broken, I pulled the rest of the tape out, wanting to see how much of it I could pile in a sort of demon spaghetti on my stained bedroom carpet. How odd, I thought, that so many intestines lived in so many layers of plastic: the cassette body itself, then the case for the cassette, and then the long, white handles at the store. It was torturous and fascinating to pull it out, like picking at a scab.

Two: I told Mom I wanted to go back to Wal-Mart to buy another copy of my Kriss Kross tape. And I wanted to go now.
You can’t just walk in here whenever you want, I yelled at Mom. Even though it was no use now, I continued to hunch, kneeling on the bed, hovering my walkman-sized tape recorder over the clock radio’s speaker without ever getting close enough to touch it.

I was only getting your laundry, she said, annoyed. She glanced at my clock radio, where the final lines of Vanessa Williams’s “Save the Best for Last” were playing. But now, the recording was ruined, the sound of the door opening (probably) and the sound of my yelled response (certainly) ending up on the tape.

Without asking what I was doing, she closed the door.

My favorite thing about singles were the instrumental and remixed versions on the B-sides. Remixes seemed impossible: this was obviously the same version of the words being rapped, but the music underneath it was different. But how could you take part of a recording out of another part?

I knew where the sounds on the tape came from: the tightly wrapped intestines inside the plastic body. By now, I had experimented with snipping parts out of old, unwanted tapes and using Scotch tape to reconnect the dangling ends. I knew I could cover the copy-protection tab and tape over any store-bought tape I wanted. I knew I could speed tapes up by holding down the pause button halfway.

But changing the beats underneath the words on a song? This was a new magic, blacker than any of the tape-violence I was acquainted with. And I would do anything to have it.
After moving to Virginia the summer before sixth grade, I sometimes wrote letters to friends who were still in San Diego. But as time passed, it got harder and harder for us to hear each other, as if even text handwritten and mailed over a distance can be fogged by static.

Once I wrote to a friend and in passing, I said that I like to make remixes. I still didn’t know how to make remixes like on my cassette singles, but I had my own method:

1. I tape a song off the radio. Say, Beck’s “Loser.”
2. In the left side of the boombox, I put the Beck tape. On the right side, I put a tape cued to a blank spot.
3. I start recording Beck onto the blank tape, listening carefully for any moment that makes me think of anything else, my finger touching the pause button, ready to push.
4. When I hear a possible connection—say, when Beck says “Stock car flaming with a loser at the cruise control” and I think I might have a sound effect of a car on my sound effects tape—I pause both tapes, remove the playing tape, and put in the car engine sound effect tape. After cuing up the sound effect, I dub it briefly onto the new recording.
5. Then I put the Beck tape in and start dubbing it again, until the next moment I think of an addition. The effect for later listeners is (hopefully) that the song was temporarily interrupted with a fun surprise.
6. Repeat.

My best remixes were the ones that jolted the most—crunching and slamming unexpected quotations and arrhythmic disturbances into the flow of the original.
I remixed unemotionally, focused on my task. But whenever I listened to the finished product, I felt a joyful sort of power. I couldn’t believe that I was able to so cleverly mess with this song that was so popular and that no one else had messed with ever. I thought I should be on the radio, sharing my remixes with the world.

After I told my friend that I like to make remixes—the only person I had ever told—he wrote back, telling stories about his own life and his new middle school and all the videogames he had that he knew I wanted to play. Toward the end, he wrote one paragraph that only lasted for one sentence: “What’s a remix?” Amazed that he didn’t know, I put the letter on a pile, having no words to answer him.

* 

Only children like hearing their own voice on recordings. Timothy E. Hullar says adults don’t like it because “Bone-conducted sound reaches the cochlea directly through the tissues of the head.” I think it’s because we’re afraid of doubling ourselves, especially if our double feels just a bit off. Children don’t have this fear because they already live with imaginary playmates in their minds, ready to hear them even when they can’t see them, love them even when they don’t seem quite right.

Soon before I moved to Virginia, my friend Kevin and I spent an entire afternoon recording ourselves on his tape recorder. We made voices, gave ourselves nicknames (I think I was K-Splice or something, and he was JFK, for “Just for Kevin”), told bad jokes, sang along to tapes of Weird Al, and generally had a lot of foolish fun with the microphone. Knowing it would probably be the last time we hung out before I moved, Kevin carefully dubbed me a copy of our masterwork (which took up both sides of a blank tape), to treasure and play when needed.
I never bothered to listen to it again until ninth grade, by which time Kevin was a pothead and I a showoff. I couldn’t get more than a couple minutes in, disgusted—literally disgusted, with a gross feeling in my stomach—that I could sound so childish, that I had saved a copy of myself being that way.

* 

Dana wanted a funny recording of herself just like the rest of us, so she got one.

First, I told her to hold the microphone up to her mouth and talk to me about anything she wanted. I hit record on the clunky rectangle of a karaoke machine and informally interviewed her, making mental notes of phrases she used. Her hair was cute in two braids, and I was impressed at how naturally she was able to talk in these weird circumstances, but I wasn’t supposed to like her so I didn’t.

After she recorded herself, I told everyone to leave, and I started editing her words into something she hadn’t said, just as I had been doing with recordings of all my friends over the summer. At one point, talking about the food when she lived in Germany, Dana said, “It was really, really good.” I cued up the final tape, hit record, and said into the microphone, “How’d you like doing your dad last night?” Hit the pause button. Cue up the recording of her voice. Unpause. “It was really, really good.” And so on.

But because I wasn’t supposed to like Dana, I wanted to go further, to embarrass her. (By this point, I was a showoff.) And I knew if I needed someone to be prank called, I could count on Seung, who had 3-way dialing and could make his voice sound like a woman’s. He called Dana’s house for me while I listened in, silently recording the conversation as Seung pretended to sell a long-distance plan to Dana’s father.
When we gathered to hear the final version of the tape, knowing that I had performed the analog magic of making her say things she hadn’t said, Dana caught the one moment where I had quickly included her father’s voice from that prank call. I had hoped it would glide by in the confusion of the quick cuts. But there was her father’s voice, awkwardly saying, “I travel . . . frequently” in response to Seung’s insistence that he buy a new long-distance plan. Even though only that one line of her father’s voice made it into my final cut, it shone out, like the sonic equivalent of a spotlight—a foghorn, or an evil whisper.

That was my dad, she said.

No, no, it wasn’t, I replied. My friends, the ones who told me I shouldn’t like her, pursed their lips and bounced their eyes around the room. They were all in on the joke.

Yes, it was him. That was his voice. How did you get it?

I’m telling you it wasn’t his voice. And you’re missing the rest of the thing—Matt, can you rewind it?

Dana eventually moved away. When she visited a year or two later, I decided to drop by the house where she was hanging out. (I was less showoffy by now.)

My friend met me outside. Dude, he said, she doesn’t really want to talk to you. Like at all. You should just go home.
CHAPTER 3: COMPOSERS ON INFLUENCES AND AUDIENCES

Was there ever a time when composers volunteered to explain so much of their music?

*Joseph P. Swain (125)*

Alex Ross begins his history of twentieth-century music *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* with stories of Richard Strauss, a composer who struggled in the early years of the twentieth century to escape the shadow of 19th-century composers without shrugging off their influence altogether. At times, Strauss’s music seems to emulate the harmonies of Richard Wagner, the giant of late-19th-century German music, but at times he seems to break free, carving out his own artistic space. Ross contrasts Strauss with Gustav Mahler, a man Strauss described as his “worthy adversary” (Ross 34). Both men followed each other’s work in the post-Wagnerian concert world closely, seeking ways to devise new musical voices while still responding to their audience’s desire for the familiar. Yet the two never quite agreed on how best to respond to the past—ignore the influence of older composers, or consciously reflect and adapt them?—and in doing so, how much to cater to audiences. “Mahler accused Strauss of selling out to plebian taste” (Ross 34), while Mahler tried to push the limits of what tonal music could achieve. Ross begins his book with the stories of these two men for a very specific reason: “The split between them forecast a larger division in twentieth-century music to come, between modernist and populist conceptions of the composer’s role” (34). In other words, Strauss and Mahler embody the questions that haunt any creative work since the turn into the twentieth century. How much can I push aside my
influences and still retain an audience for my work? How much should I embrace the voices of the past? Should I eschew any notion of audience at all?

With this creaking hinge on the topics of influence and audience, these questions are clearly relevant to studies of rhetoric. Whether in writing with text, sound, or images, whether in digital or analog spaces, a rhetor’s eventual message is governed by her choices with relation to her influences and her predictions about her audience. As I conducted and read interviews with composers, I found that these issues of influence and audience continued to come up, like a pulsing bass line underneath every conversation. Furthermore, the topics were intertwined. In a context of alphabetic writing, influence and audience often feel like separate issues. In a writing class, I might walk students through an invention exercise in naming conscious and unconscious influences on their work, and I might present an entirely separate lesson on discovering the needs of a given audience. But in music, it’s difficult to talk about one without the other. As a composer of music, the figures I see as my musical forebears—Renaissance polyphonists? Beethoven-esque symphonists? Stravinsky-esque neo-classicists? Schoenbergian serialists? Cagean post-contemporarians?—has to do with the audience I hope to attract. Put another way, art music today can sound downright weird to the uninitiated, and composers working seriously must place themselves on a continuum somewhere between liberally embracing all the many colors of possible sound combinations and conservatively fitting their sounds into something more like what the everyday consumer thinks of when they think of “classical music.” And composers’ choices about which influences to accept, which musical genealogies to inhabit, leads naturally to musical decisions about how to cater to the audience implied by those choices about influence. If I choose to write a piano piece
in the 19th-century style of Chopin, I need to make moves that will speak to students of Chopin. If I choose to build a minimalist piece on the 20th-century minimalist foundation of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, I need to know that those fans will be listening to my work, affecting what they hear and therefore what I emphasize. The associative nature of sounded music also means that those audiences will hear traces of my influences including and beyond what I meant to imply—a fact that is both a lovely comment on the unpredictability of the musical experience and a terrifying uncertainty for the composer to get used to.

That focus on the composer’s perspective is the rhythmic drive to this chapter, presented through quotations both from published interviews and interviews I conducted with professional and amateur composers. After first considering the nature of conscious and unconscious influences on a composer’s work, I discuss three overlapping aspects of composers’ attempts to predict audience response: first the complexities of composing for multiple audiences in different times and spaces, then the differing ways composers expect audiences to respond to music that sounds either familiar or avant-garde, and finally the meanings and stories that composers expect audiences to hear in their work. To ground these discussions in practice, I conclude the chapter by recounting my participants’ discussions of scoring music for film, a setting where audiences are guided both subtly and overtly, where the musical message can alternately be tied to the action on the screen or seem to stand apart from it, saying its own things. The interview data presented here tends to be much more big-picture than the details of daily composition tasks presented in chapter four, which much more specifically addresses the writing processes of composers through the lens of the rhetorical canons. Though the lines
between chapters three and four aren’t always clear—for example, the invention process is heavily influenced by considerations of audience—this division allows me to honor the nature of my interviews, which almost always included discussions of both the theoretical and the practical.

Humming in the background of this chapter is my three-circle structure from chapter two, but with modifications. There, the circles represented the extent to which composers try to control their music’s meanings, whether by hoping to completely control the audience’s understanding of the music (left circle), guide them to a place of understanding that is both directed and uncertain (middle circle), or ignore the audience altogether, putting the onus of interpretation on them, instead of on the composer himself (right circle). Here, I would expand the meaning of the circles to include the composer’s comfort with being misunderstood. In the left circle, I would place moments where the composer really, really wants the audience to get the “correct” interpretation of the music—not only (as in chapter two) where the Baroque-era composer is trying to make his audience feel happy by including appropriately “happy” musical-rhetorical moves, but also where a contemporary composer includes program notes or a title that direct the audience to understand the story she wants audiences to understand. And of course, there are also times when composers don’t have a single correct “interpretation” of their music in mind (center circle), or when they don’t care what the audience thinks (right circle).

As with Strauss and Mahler, no composer fits comfortably into one of these roles at all times. At times, their music shows definite influence from the past (and to each other’s work), but at times they successfully seem to move toward genuinely innovative
musical languages. And their audiences responded: sometimes showering them with love and ticket sales, and sometimes scoffing.

**What We Collect: Specific and Subtle Influences**

You know when I started writing music I thought, “Everything I write has to be absolutely new and original.” And my bubble was burst after a little while when I realized that somebody had already done that, in some form or another before me. So in a lot of ways, we’re re-creators of material that we’ve heard before, that’s been presented before. And we do it with our own compositions with our own voice, which adds originality to it.

*Ronald Owen*

I always have some Bach in the car. And on my iPod.

*Stella Sung*

I start with some composer-guided thoughts on influence before diving thoroughly into the ways composers consider audience in the next three sections. When I say *influence* I include a wide range of related topics, including issues of originality (Ronald Owen’s early days as a composer trying to sound “absolutely new and original”), everyday listening habits (Stella Sung’s insistence on having J.S. Bach in her car and on her iPod), and the fuzzy line between accidental and purposeful citation of previous works. Inescapably, what we listen to affects the music we write, and this lived musical context affects our new creations in both purposeful and subtle ways. But of course, we don’t listen to all music in the same way: some lingers in the backgrounds of our lives (in commercials, shopping malls, the car near ours with its window down, television and film scores), while some we actively pursue through live performances and recordings.

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1 Any interview quotations cited with a page number are from published interviews; if no citation is evident, then the quotation is from an interview I conducted—something I also try to make clear in the sentence(s) surrounding the quotation when possible. It will quickly become clear that I rely a good deal on Ann McCutchan’s *The Muse that Sings: Composers Speak about the Creative Process*. While many collections pull together the words of composers past and/or present, I have found none that focuses as much on the creative process itself as McCutchan’s book.
This lens of what we encounter versus what we pursue came out of my conversation with Daniel Crozier, a contemporary orchestral and opera composer. He was telling me about his listening habits and how they affect his composing, and how surprised he is when people tell him that they hear the influence of jazz in his work:

And for me it’s pretty much been classical [that I listen to every day]. And you know in high school and everything, and college, I heard a lot of music, popular music too, and that’s in there—it’s gotta be in there. Even though it wasn’t what I wanted to concentrate on, but I couldn’t help hearing it. I thought some of it was okay. Fine. So that’s in there too I’m sure. But I’ve never collected jazz or listened to jazz as a hobby or anything. So when people say, “Oh, jazz,” I don’t know where it’s coming from.

Composer Profile: Daniel Crozier
The day I visited Daniel Crozier’s office at a small liberal arts college where he serves as associate professor, his students couldn’t stay away. They regularly knocked, dropping pieces off and picking up assignments. But Crozier didn’t mind; he greeted each with his full attention, inviting them to step inside and tell him what they’ve been up to.

During our conversation, Crozier’s face regularly lit up, his eyebrows raising. But overall, my impression was of a calm, thoughtful person who spoke slowly, thinking through his words before he spoke them. In this, it wasn’t hard to see that he is nephew of Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood fame.

When I asked him what work he was most proud of, he mentioned his second opera, With Blood, With Ink (1993), as the piece that had done the most to advance his career, though his style has evolved since then. He’s most proud of his orchestral works Capriccio (2004) and Ballade: A Tale After the Brothers Grimm (2006) along with his solo piano piece Winter Aubade (2009) and the chamber piece for oboe and strings Masque (2010).
I responded that I liked the distinction between what we *collect* and what we only occasionally hear in the course of a day. Crozier replied, “And I guess the stuff we actually collect is the *primary* source material making our own musical personality. But the other stuff I guess can’t be discounted or avoided entirely. Once you’ve heard something it’s in your mind.”

Content creators of any style deal with constant decisions about how much to attend to the works we collect. When I write a short story, I struggle to construct a plot that stands apart from the decades of science fiction reading I’ve done; when I write a literary essay, I want to sound exactly like Dave Eggers without sounding anything like Dave Eggers; in my academic work I strive for the friendly-yet-confident voice I’ve found in the writing of Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, Amy E. Robillard, Lynn Z. Bloom, and others. But in these written genres, it’s arguably easier to shape my own voice from the voices in my mental “collections” than it is in musical genres, given the millions of possible adjustments I can make to change the texture of a text in a listener’s ear: vocabulary, word order, punctuation, and all the different syntactically valid ways to communicate the same idea. In standard notated Western music, only twelve notes are available as raw material. Yes, they are stacked into unimaginable kinds of harmonies, but the chances are high that someone else has created a relatively similar chord and placed it in progression with another relatively similar chord. The same goes for melody and rhythm, both of which offer a shocking array of options, but which still, generally, are likely to lead to something that a well-traveled ear could compare to other published works. When music is played, issues of influence seem to hover nearer to the composer’s and listener’s ears than they do for the textual. That is to say that it is easier for me to
write sentences that I and audiences judge to be fresh and without clichés than it is for me to write music that feels fresh and without clichés.²

Writing studies and composition theory have helped dismantle the notion that we can completely name everything about how we are influenced. Mary Ann Cain’s article “‘To Be Lived’: Theorizing Influence in Creative Writing”—focusing on creative writing but applicable to any other genre of composition—reminds us that in general, “composing processes themselves are assumed to be transcendent, sealed tight against influences that are not chosen or accepted by the writer,” an assumption that “positions writers as powerfully able to choose who and what will influence their work but, at the same time, leaves them wide open to influences that, in a word, have chosen them; this happens whether they want it or not, whether they even know it or not” (236). Similarly, work on intellectual property, plagiarism, and remixing has questioned our ability to escape influence. As Kirby Ferguson claims in his popular online video series and blog, “everything is a remix.” Clearly, we’re affected by more than what we choose or what we collect. As Rebecca Moore Howard writes about patchwriting, “When I believe I am not patchwriting, I am simply doing it so expertly that the seams are no longer visible—or I am doing it so unwittingly that I cannot cite my sources” (“New” 91).

Composers of music aren’t immune to these subtle influences, as Crozier’s story of others hearing jazz in his music reminds us. (And because influences are perceived by listeners, the question of if his work really contains those influences is unimportant. People heard jazz, so jazz was in some way present.) Our musical culture surrounds us in ways that permeate our musical understandings, affecting both how we compose and how

² I can’t help but suspect that this is at least partly a quality of sounded communication in general. Is it harder to make a spoken speech sound original than a written speech? See Malcolm Gladwell’s “Something Borrowed” for an engaging exploration of originality in both music and speech.
we react to the compositions of others. How we are influenced changes how we listen, as audiences. For example, Crozier and I also discussed the ways that “accidental influence” has shaped how his students hear music: he told me that when he plays Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* (1913) for students, “they’re not shocked by it the way people were when they first heard it.”3 Today’s students aren’t alarmed by the piece because they’ve heard music like it before, whether or not they think of themselves as liking twentieth-century concert music. Crozier said, “It’s not so strange, even though it might not be what they collect. They’ve heard things like it, and through film music or through all kinds of things. It’s part of their consciousness. Their musical consciousness.”

That musical consciousness can be purposefully plumbed, explored, manipulated. Our influences aren’t always subtle or accidental; at times they are purposefully used to add new layers to our own expressions. Part of Cain’s pedagogical solution to the “contradictions” of influence—the fact that developing creative writers tend to both read canonical works and see themselves as uninfluenced by them (237)—is to assign them to create a textual remix that blends a Hemingway story with their own words (though Cain doesn’t use the word *remix*). In so doing, the students ideally begin to see elements of Hemingway’s prose that had crept into theirs while also creating an equal space where his status as a literary god can be dismantled through purposeful appropriation. (Something similar perhaps happens to our evaluation of canonical writers when we read *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* or any of the host of remixed classics.) Some music composers have taken similar approaches to previous works, deciding to embrace their influences, even to the point of occasional direct quotation—a move that composer and author Jaron

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3 Alex Ross’s book quotes Gertrude Stein’s description of the *Rite*’s premier. In the midst of a near-riot, apparently one man’s “cane came down and smashed the opera hat the other had just put on in defiance. It was all incredibly fierce” (82).
Lanier reminded me “has been going on forever.” One composer who embraces quotation is Claude Baker, who in this published interview sounds very much like a composition theorist:

> Pieces don’t magically spring forth in full armor from our heads; they come from a wellspring of different sources. Whether we acknowledge those sources or not, whether we’re aware of them or not, is almost inconsequential to the process. Try to name a composer who hasn’t at one time in his or her career shown the influence of someone else. Stravinsky’s most popular piece is probably *Firebird*, even today, and his debt to Rimsky-Korsakov is enormous. (McCutchan 80)

But like a composition instructor who doesn’t want his students to rely so much on sources that their own ideas become hidden, Baker continues with, “There’s the danger, of course, of making your music sound too much like the work that provided the initial spark” (80). In music as in writing, we need to find a balance: acknowledging our inevitable reliance on the past, not being afraid to quote and remix our influences when they serve our rhetorical purposes, but also exerting a creatorly manipulation of these influential pieces to show our will at work—even if those manipulations, in the most Foucauldian frameworks, are nothing more than originality-free soups stewed from the ingredients we’ve previously ingested. Baker even goes further, saying that “the irony here is that I think when I use musical borrowing, I am actually more original than I would be if I were not using borrowed elements,” a process that lets him “give greater vent to my imagination by using as a basis of a section or a piece a quotation that is

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4 For more thoughts on the interrelated nature of much creative work throughout history, see Rebecca Moore Howard’s *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators*, especially the chapter on “Historical Models.”
salient to what I’m trying to accomplish, either programmatically or even structurally” (81).

And as I mentioned above, our influences affect our audiences. However, the connection between influence and audience can be messy, given the varied listening experiences and predilections of any individual. One voice that draws attention to this confluence is John Zorn’s, cross-genre composer and editor of the five-volume series of books *Arcana: Musicians on Music*. In one published interview, he drew attention to the ways that he is influenced by a wide variety of music: “All of my projects draw upon a wide variety of musical influences. Everything I’ve learned has gone into everything I’ve written. I don’t say, ‘OK, now I’m not going to pay any attention to the influences of surf music and world music, and I’m just going to do jazz and klezmer.’ You can’t think that way” (McCutchan 168). Zorn’s musical world seems made up of both accidental and purposeful influences: he can’t escape the influences of the music he collects, but on his recordings, some of his influences tend to come out more than others depending on the moment. The avant-garde string quartets of his past are drawn to the front in “Forbidden Fruit,” his surf rock past is evident in “Batman,” and his love of lively, irreverent percussion permeates “Sebastopol.” But the audience for this work will never simply be those interested in Zorn’s musical forebears. That is, my parents love surf rock but would be shocked by “Batman” and much of the other pop-culture-soaked compositions alongside it on Zorn’s *Naked City* album (1990). It seems to me that his music is less for the audience that has the same influences as he does, than it is for the audience for avant-garde music. Similarly,
I’m reminded of Aaron Jay Kernis’s four-movement piece *100 Greatest Dance Hits*, an unusual piece for the string quartet and guitar that evokes classical art music sensibilities blended with salsa, radio ballads, and disco. Indeed, one reviewer of a recording of Kernis’s piece writes, “The popularity of and resistance to Aaron Jay Kernis are each easy to understand. Kernis offers a dual kind of familiarity that will either delight audience members or set them on edge, according to their preferences and preconceptions” (Manheim). It’s insufficient to point out that composers choose how to reflect their audiences without also pointing out how those decisions inevitably affect audience reactions.

**New Audiences, Near and Far**

If music could be translated into human speech, it would no longer need to exist.

* Ned Rorem (Fisk, x)

Ned Rorem’s famous point about the untranslatability of music says something about the directness of the musical experience—the feeling of transcendence that overcomes listeners. However, one of the unspoken warrants of his syllogism is that for music to speak to anyone at all, listeners often must have some degree of understanding of the basic musical language used by composers. Audiences won’t be transported to an untranslatable experience of identification by music that distracts them with (what seems to them) its oddness or incomprehensiblility. Music composers know this, complicating their ability to predict the reactions of their listeners, who may or may not “get” the music to a greater or lesser degree. In this section, I merge what we know about composers’ attitudes toward audience in written and sonic genres. My simple point is that
the centrality of the delivery of music to the entire musical enterprise necessitates an expansion of our theorizing about audience beyond that done in writing studies.

It’s fair to say that studies in rhetoric and composition have been intensely interested in audience at least since Walter J. Ong’s “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction” in 1975 and Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s landmark “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy” in 1984. The interest has continued: for example, “Audience Addressed” and two others by Ede and Lunsford from 1996 and 2009 form the backbone of the 2009 edited collection Engaging Audience: Writing in an Age of New Literacies. This collection’s title hints at a major reason for this continuing surge of interest in audience: the affordances of digital media lead to new relationships between content creators and audiences, along with the development of new literacies. We continue to consider audiences addressed—the actual group receiving communication—and audiences invoked—the moves composers make to shape an audience to hear a text the way she wants it to be heard—but we now also consider the new category of “audience interacting” that the editors of Engaging Audience describe as being “collectively” discussed throughout their book (Weiser, Fehler, and González ix). These digital settings for new considerations of audience are often notable for their digital delivery, the ways that audiences are increasingly called on to interact with content or experience it as a sound or video file—both deliveries that rely on notions of time that have more common in music than with traditional print text.

These considerations of audience, both traditional and digital, map well onto studies of music composition. As a phenomenon primarily experienced as sound in time,
music practically is always designed to be *heard* (audience addressed), while writers of
text sometimes must be reminded of their eventual audiences. As a deeply associative
form of communication, music also affords composers a space to invoke reactions
through memory and sensual interaction, at times composing musical allusions with more
or less subtlety to guide listeners to the place they hope listeners will go (audience
invoked). And more than ever, music audiences are becoming interactive participants in
the music they hear, both in the sense that they can create music with traditional and
digital tools but also in that they are sometimes invited to participate in concert contexts
in new ways (audience interacting).

Yet the study of audience in a musical context is also quite different from a
writing context. In music, more than in writing, talk of audience often has to do with the
questions of influence and musical genealogies I’ve already discussed, wrapped up in the
unpredictable nature of associations that come instantly to mind in response to sounds but
sometimes remain distant in response to text. For the composer of music, the author’s
audience is *never* a fiction. Prior knowledge also changes the listening act considerably.
The extent to which music is comprehended and appreciated by audiences is related to
how well they understand the moves made in a given genre of music. As concert music
has grown increasingly split in the last hundred years over questions of how best to
reinvent the forms and definitions of music, the comprehension (and enjoyment) of a
given audience often has much to do with audience members’ familiarity (and sympathy)
with a given style, technique, or form—including the purposeful eschewing of any
previously used style, technique, or form. If I’m familiar with the twelve-tone technique,
I know something about how to listen to a piece that’s been composed with that method;
if I’ve studied Stravinsky’s neoclassicism, I’ll be more appreciative of a piece that makes similar moves; if I’ve read an interview with composer Lois Vierk about her “exponential structure” form (McCutchan 156-57), I better comprehend what I hear.

Also, as an art arguably more concerned with the development of artistic meaning than communication of precepts and ideas, music has divided composers into camps that care more or less about the reaction of an approving audience. One of the most infamous cases against audience consideration is composer and mathematician Milton Babbitt’s 1958 essay “Who Cares if You Listen?” in which Babbitt argues that composers should continue to push the limits of experimental music without worrying about public reaction, treating “contemporary serious music” more like the work of advanced scholars in math and physics, which no laypeople expect to understand. Babbitt’s argument stands in contrast to composer Elliott Carter’s, who in the same year warned that “the composer, in spite of all, does write for a public,” and that if composers didn’t keep that in mind, “the familiar, delayed public acceptance that has greeted so many contemporary works” may be “delayed forever” (252). Yes, composers in any context deal with this question of the importance (or not) of public response. But the writer of text is faced with the demands of audience to a lesser degree than the composer of music. Even the novelist or poet who knows that she will be expected to give public readings of her work can rest in the knowledge that her work will primarily be experienced silently, privately, by a host of individuals reading her words on their own. The composer of music knows that she is creating a piece that will be the backbone for a public experience, to be displayed openly to simultaneous masses primed for critique, exposed to the delight of the masses or her shame.
Or so it would seem. Unfortunately, as we’ll see, the nearness of audience to composers’ thoughts is varied and complex. One fundamental aspect of the rhetoric of music is that audience consideration resists the binaries that scholars like me try to impose. There is never simply “the audience”; there is the host of possible audiences, near and far, feared and craved, imagined and encountered, addressed and invoked. As an extended example, consider the varied thoughts on audience from one volume: Ann McCutchan’s *The Muse That Sings: Composers Speak about the Creative Process.* (McCutchan, who interviewed each of these composers, didn’t specifically ask these composers to comment on audience; these comments all came up naturally.) I came to these interviews wanting to know if composers thought about audience as much as I expected they would. More specifically, I wondered where individuals might stand with relation to my three-circle model from chapter two—caring deeply about audiences comprehending their musical messages, ignoring audiences altogether, or somewhere in between. Though I’ll try to separate these “sound bites” into two sections, it quickly becomes apparent that those I’ve lumped together rarely see eye to eye, as is evident from the bolded headings I’ve applied to each quotation. First, those who value composing for audiences:

- **Players matter /** Steve Reich: The way to get audience approval is by making sure that musicians enjoy playing your piece (16).
- **Audience is secondary to solidity /** John Corigliano: “It’s not that I think music should exist for no one. It should be played, it should speak to people. But there is an architectural solidity about a symphony or a concerto that I feel very comfortable with, knowing what those notes can be made to do when necessary” (34).
- **Music as communication /** Dan Welcher: “Writing music, like writing words, comes out of a need to communicate with people. It’s not an inner need to just express into the void. I don’t like that motivation in other artists—I think a new piece has to be something that you want other people to ‘get’” (88).
• **Music as comprehensible** / Fred Lerdahl: “I wasn’t interested in composing by private codes. I wanted to compose by methods whereby somebody could hear everything, where the basic kind of organization was cognitively transparent” (109).

• **Compelling central ideas** / Shulamit Ran: “First, I look for an idea in sound that seems like an appropriate central idea for the piece. I want it to be compelling enough to draw the listener in, to make them want to stay with it” (117).

• **Communities deserve communication** / Christopher Rouse: “I’ve never believed in composing or painting or writing as simply a form of masturbation. I’ve always been a little suspicious of somebody who creates only ‘so I can express myself.’ That’s part of the equation, but an artist has to realize that he is at that same time expressing himself as part of a community and has an obligation to provide something worthwhile to that community” (124-25).

• **Audiences make their own meanings, but based on composer’s intention** / David Lang: “Having written an opera, the kind of piece where you tell people what to feel every moment, I now like working on a piece where so much goes on that your musical gaze wanders from place to place. The composer hasn’t pre-chewed it for you” (223). “Music happens in the will, the level at which a listener can detect the composer’s intention” (224).

Notice a few things about these clips. We see practical advice on how to get audience approval from Reich, implying that audience approval is inherently something worthwhile. This becomes much more direct in the comments of Welcher, Lerdahl, and Rouse, even going so far in Ran’s composition practice that considerations of what an audience will like is part of the most basic genesis of her piece. Corigliano doesn’t seem to go quite that far, agreeing that audience approval is a good thing, though less important than a piece’s “architectural solidity,” perhaps another way to say its artistic form.

Complicating things even further are Lang’s points: that music works best when a composer’s intentions are comprehended by an audience, though sometimes his intention is clearly for the audience to make its own mind, not to be so directed. Heard together, these interview excerpts leave me more confused about audience, not less: we hear an ideal of audiences being lovingly cared for, even when that care comes in the form of
giving them a new experience of some kind. Burkean identification is a helpful concept here: considered from these composers’ perspectives, musical rhetoric seems less like persuasion, a one-way message designed to shape the thinking of an audience, and more like two-way identification between composers whose choices are governed by attention to both message and audience, and audience members whose listening can be both passively guided and actively varied. Though these composers seem to be in the left and center circles of my model, none of them go to the extremes of the right side, where audiences are ignored altogether.

However, some in the next group get close:

- **Logic for self trumps logic for audiences** / William Bolcom: “A work has a kind of logicality, but this logic reveals itself as you’re working. That doesn’t mean I try to make my pieces logical for other people. I try to make them logical for me, under the assumption that if my work makes sense to me, it will make sense to somebody else. It doesn’t always, at first. Maybe sometimes it never does! Some things make sense to me that won’t make sense to anybody else, ever” (24).

- **What’s better for the piece is what’s better for the composer** / John Harbison: “One of the things that almost all composers discover as they go along is that their musical world becomes more private and more peculiar. There’s less willingness to take in the rest of the world, but at the same time the increasing ability to absorb solitude ensures that one’s train of thought holds firmer” (48). “You’re not working for the audience who doesn’t have enough time to really learn the piece, and you’re not working for the critics, for God’s sake. You’re working for yourself and whichever members of your community will live with your music at a substantial level. . . . More and more I’m choosing what to do on the basis of whether it’s something I want to do, not on the basis of whether I think it’s a better thing to do” (49).

- **The composer’s goal is to be original and personal** / Daniel S. Godfrey: “One of my life’s lessons is that my music will be better if I don’t attach myself to the end product in terms of how audiences or colleagues respond or how it’s going to affect my career. The only way one can free oneself is to be in the moment of composing” (103). “If what we have to say has meaning for future generations, they’ll listen. If it doesn’t, they won’t. We’re not avatars of culture, deputized by God to educate the public. . . . [T]he most profoundly original music, coming from the deepest part of the individual, will have the most universal appeal, will resonate with the broadest possible audience” (104).
• **It’s okay if no one gets it** / John Zorn: “I’ll skip pitches, play around. . . . I do this to amuse myself, and if it amuses someone else, that’s an added pleasure. Maybe nobody will be amused; maybe nobody will know! Maybe nobody will care even if they *do* know! But it makes me feel stronger about the piece” (169).

In this group, there are again few perfectly clear commonalities, either within these responses or contrasted with the first group, though some general trends are evident. Both Bolcom and Zorn seem amused (as opposed to bothered or annoyed) that the subtleties of their moves might never be perceived by audiences. Harbison complicates the issue of the “ideal audience” when a piece of music is going to be played by someone else, emphasizing the importance of the music’s (and composer’s) relationship with the players over its relationship with any wider group. (Imagine the team of producers and instrumentalists for a pop radio hit saying the same thing: that a piece’s success depends on the composer—whoever that is—being proud and the team enjoying the music, ignoring eventual customers completely.) Godfrey does seem to hope for an audience, but his path there is less direct: audiences are found not by catering to their needs—by attending to the *stasis* and *kairos* of a rhetorical situation, we might say—but by making music that comes from “the deepest part of the individual,” an artistic integrity that will eventually, he is confident, lead to acceptance by audiences. All four of these voices are marked by a focus on themselves as creative individuals, free in some ways from the need to focus on an audience as either the arbiter of judgment or the focus of composition.
This dialectic is probably no surprise to composition scholars who have been steeped for years in the writings of Peter Elbow (the writer who I find myself thinking of most often when reading published interviews with composers). Switching attention between self and audience is the core of much of Elbow’s early advice to young writers: in *Writing with Power*, he encourages them to engage in a “dialectic of attention,” attending at times to audiences and at times to self. In an email interview with me, composer and author of *A Geometry of Music* Dmitri Tymoczko spoke of a similar dialectic, dividing audiences into “near” and “far” audiences:

I think notated concert music is inherently a minority taste. Just like lots of people aren't into Quantum Field Theory, lots of people aren't going to want to put a lot of time into understanding the complexities of sophisticated music. One thing I think a lot about is the difference between the “near audience” (the specialists in your field, the people who decide prizes and performances and awards) and the “far audience” (who may exist in another time or place, and who...
may be somewhat idealized). I think that the danger is that the “near audience” gets corrupted or confused, and it becomes impossible to satisfy both at once.

The confusion Tymoczko mentions comes about when, say, an academic culture of music develops that takes music so far from the kinds of things that the far (perhaps “popular”) audience appreciates: comprehensibility, immediate emotional satisfaction, and so on. In this way Tymoczko sounds similar to Babbitt, both of whom agree that there is a place for music that is not popularly enjoyed. Yet he also takes a fundamentally different angle from Babbitt, as Tymoczko’s vision of multiple kinds of audiences is more tempered than Babbitt’s call for unhampered boundary-pushing. This distinction between the near and far is a separation that I find helps expand and deepen Elbow’s scheme: it seems that a rhetorically minded composer of music moves her attention between not just self and audience but between self, near audience, and far audience. In music, I imagine a rapidly shifting attention between the three, alternating at different moments in the piece.

A brief example from my own (very limited) composing experience: in my senior year of college, I composed and conducted a brief piece for string quartet, “Fantasy on the Themes of Koji Kondo,” based on music from the Legend of Zelda videogame series. In most moments in the piece, I wrote what I knew would “sound good” (which perhaps means cinematic, striking, and beautiful in this setting). But there were other moments when I decided to go with my gut desires for the piece even when I knew it might not be appreciated by those in the audience. For instance, in one section of increasing tension, the cello, viola, and 2nd violin repeat a variation of the “dungeon theme” they had just played, while the 1st violin shoots suddenly and dissonantly into one of my favorite Zelda
melodies, the “Gerudo Fortress” theme. The Gerudo theme in many ways didn’t “fit” there, and I wasn’t at all sure that in the musical chaos the audience could even pick it out. But in a move Elbow might have appreciated, I decided to follow my personal inclination over that of my audience: that melody and its associations in the game signified the kind of chaos and uncertainty that I wanted the piece to have at that point. From there, the intensity climaxed in a legato section that followed all the rules I had been taught in composition class, thus satisfying the concerns of my audience. But really, “my audience” was a complicated issue. The audience who I especially wanted to like my work at its performance in the student composition recital represented my “near audience” (students and especially professors in the music department, whom I wanted to impress). In addition to carefully crafting a musical atmosphere that I thought would sound comfortingly cinematic, I catered to this near audience in moments when my harmonic decisions included the “right” kinds of chords in the “right” sequences, such as when I returned to the home key for the final recapitulation of the main Zelda theme and when I used the “right” kinds of leading tones and suspensions as I moved these chords along. At the same time, part of me was dreaming of my far audience, who I imagined as fans of Zelda music. I wondered if (with a bit more rehearsing and a better conductor) I might be able to record my rearrangement and share it with the community at OverClocked ReMix (ocremix.org), a popular site for sharing videogame music rearrangements. I knew that this audience would probably care less about if I had followed the “rules” of composition. They would be more interested in which themes I had chosen from which Zelda games, how I had woven them together, and how recognizable those themes were after I transformed them. Though some classical
composers play tricks like repeating a melody line backwards or inverted—a move that, on paper, my composition instructor might have loved—I knew that this far audience of Zelda-lovers wouldn’t perceive such gimmicks, and thus wouldn’t value them in the same way. Furthermore, if I had worked in tricks like this (assuming I was skilled enough to pull it off well), how much could I trust that even my near audience would pick up on it? How much did I really know and trust the different groups of people exposed to my piece of music? (And how much was it even mine, given its obvious reliance on previous melodies?)

My point is that I considered audience reactions to every step of my musical composition with a thoroughness that I rarely do for my textual compositions, both because I knew it would be performed for a group I knew and because I hoped it would be performed for a group online that I didn’t know as well. After composing that piece, I find I sympathize with both sets of bullets above from composers discussing audience. At some moments, I gave all my attention to communicating clearly with my audiences near and far, but at others I was content to ignore them. When dealing with music, our thinking about audience needs expanding. Tymoczko’s near/far framework is helpful, but it’s only the first step.

**Knowing and Trusting Audiences**

Continuing this line of inquiry, then, what if I had given my near audience much less attention in my *Zelda*-themed string quartet? That is, what happens when composers move toward the right circle, leaving the task of interpretation more in the hands of listeners, to either get or not get it? To some extent, this is a question about my attitude toward my audience: how much do I trust them to understand my work, or even to *want*
to understand my work? This is a question that has more to do with composers’ perceptions than audiences themselves, I suspect. I may compose trusting that my audience will put the effort into understanding the more difficult parts of my work—or I may cynically expect that they won’t put any work into understanding my music at all, that I have to spell it out for them (to use a logocentric metaphor). Yet my conversations with composers taught me that generalities about audiences never work in every situation. Audiences love being surprised, but they love the comfortable, the recognizable as well. They are predictable and unpredictable, loving both surprises and comfort.

Tymoczko addresses an audience’s approaches to music with a surprising analogy to food: in the conclusion to *A Geometry of Music*, he writes:

[The avant-garde composer . . . faces an audience less tolerant than the audience for paintings, but more tolerant than the audience for food. It is quite possible to develop a taste for atonal music, and as a result there are more fans of atonal music than there will ever be for Atonal Food. But at the same time, developing a taste for atonality often involves a significant investment of time, and it is not for everybody—meaning that avant-garde music will never be as popular as avant-garde painting. Atonality is neither so abrasive as to die out completely, nor so attractive as to achieve widespread acceptance. (392)]

I agree with Tymoczko’s fundamental claim here—that some audiences will put the effort into understanding difficult material while others won’t—but it begs a practical

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5 In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke writes “Food, eaten and digested, is not rhetorical. But in the meaning of food there is much rhetoric, the meaning being persuasive enough for the idea of food to be used, like the ideas of religion, as a rhetorical device of statesmen” (173). I like the idea that Tymoczko’s “atonal food” is also “a-rhetorical,” as its meaning is harder to understand—or to stomach.
question: how much can I really hope that my audience will be populated by those willing to put in that “significant investment of time”? Part of the answer comes down to how much I know my audiences, which, as in writing, can often be generalized about to some extent without complete control over where my work will heard or read. My interviewees varied in how much they seemed to know and trust their various audiences, including their ability and willingness to try to understand difficult work.

Crozier, for one, trusts (or at least hopes) that his audience will take the time necessary to understand the nuances of his music:

I think one time Ned Rorem wrote, somewhere in his writings—he wrote a lot about composing—one place he said that we write music that we ourselves wish to be an audience for. You know, something we want to hear. The thing that I want to hear or that is satisfying to me as an audience member is something that I’ve worked on a long time. So it may not be accessible the first time an outside audience hears it, but I’m hoping that they will, after listening for a long time, find more and more in it. You know, I want there to be things that they find immediately, and I want it to be satisfying on repeated listenings. Always a little more to find. Music with depth enough for that. But that’s attractive enough to make them want to come back.

This kind of trust seems to me something that is particularly a challenge in the serious concert music world, especially when compared to the concerns of composers of, say, text or images. The confused reader begins skimming or skips ahead to the next section, or even turns to some other text that makes more sense; the confused viewer of visual art
can walk on (if in a museum) or quickly flip a page or click forward. This reader or viewer can take pains to better understand these texts through well-established patterns, by learning the original context of the piece or composer, studying the genre or movement it fits into, reading select commentary on it, “entering” the text with marginal comments and reflective freewriting, and so on. But all of those presume that the audience wants to take the time to engage in the piece. Further, the written or visual text can be broken down, taken in chunks, analyzed out of order, and in some cases scribbled on, cut up, etc. The listener of a confusing concert piece of music is comparatively helpless to help himself understand it—especially if he is in a traditional concert hall hearing the piece performed in real time for the first time. The whole piece must be digested in the moment, with no listener control over what order to hear the piece in, or to slow down or speed up relatively easier or harder parts. In the case of live music, the most the music’s composer can hope for is that the confused listener will seek out a recording and listen to it over and over, if one exists; with no recording, multiple listens may only be possible if the listener returns to the next night’s performance (if there is one). Rhetorically speaking, the music composer has more of a need than composers in most other modes of communication to make her meaning known, and known on the first encounter. And yet what we hear is the opposite: music that is increasingly difficult to understand, both because of shifting cultural values and listening habits and because of the increasing difficulty of much serious music. That’s not to dismiss Crozier’s faith in his audience; in many ways, we were talking about the ideal situation, the position that he most hopes his audience will fall into. And in fact, he answers this problem with his ideal formulation: the music is “deep” in the sense that it delights listeners both on initial and
repeated listens. Instead of composing music that is brazenly confusing or familiar to a popular audience—or at least, *his* popular audience, which is certainly more educated with the moves of art music than a Top 40 radio station’s audience—he wants his music to be initially enjoyable, with a hidden layer of ideas that are evident with further study, like vitamins hidden in a brownie.

Complicating things, Lanier spoke to me about audiences’ innate desire for the easy-to-digest, their willingness to be satisfied even by work that doesn’t push the limits of creativity, a view that sounds relatively distrusting of a popular audience. He said:

One of the things that I think is really a challenge of this era is to differentiate meaning from novelty. Because a lot of people, if they hear something novel or striking, they sort of feel like that’s what they were here for, you know? That they were looking for some sort of kick, or dose of novelty that’ll get them through the dullness of life or something like that. And I think there’s something we can do that’s much greater than that.

In many ways, this is the problem that his book *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* addresses: Lanier’s disappointment that our abundance of digital tools tends to be used more for inanity than for complex, meaningful creative work. Yet despite this distrust of audience’s willingness to seek out the complexly meaningful, he also seems willing to help his listeners get there. He wants to give audiences work that is “much greater than” the simple “novelty” of popular culture, helping them see how much humanity is actually capable of. This attitude doesn’t map easily onto my three-circle framework, as Lanier both wants some degree of comprehensibility (otherwise how could they understand and
be inspired by the complexities of his work?)
even as he questions Crozier’s basic
assumption that they will put the necessary
effort into understanding what is not readily
apparent.

In her conversation with me,
composer Stella Sung specified some of the
sources of this cultural need for the novel,
placing it as a symptom of our super-
saturated media landscape. But her tone
toward these changing audience expectations
seems generally respectful, framing the
audience not as something completely to be
trusted or distrusted:

We have so much that
competes for our time. So
much media everywhere that,
people are sort of expecting
this. They’re sort of figuring out—they’re like, “You know, if I’m gonna
go to a concert, what else am I gonna do?”

There are of course other aspects; there are the purists. And I love
just hearing a chamber music concert or orchestra concert with nothing, no
special effects or anything, just the music itself. But I think that that is

Composer Profile: Jaron Lanier
I met Lanier when he came to Central Florida for the premier of his new
work for orchestra and choir “Song for Amelia” with the Bach Festival
Society of Winter Park. We spoke in
the pews of an echo-filled historic
chapel on the campus of Rollins
College while the orchestra on stage
warmed up.

In our conversation, and at two public
talks he gave on campus while in
town, Lanier focused on issues of
music: what it was like to compose for
this traditional orchestration (as
opposed to the world music of his
albums Instruments for Change and
Proof of Consciousness), his collection
of rare musical instruments, and his
wide-ranging hopes for the future of
musical expression.

But he could have just as easily spoken
about issues related to his status as one
of the earliest visionaries in computer
science, including his status as coiner
of the term virtual reality and recent
author of You Are Not a Gadget: A
Manifesto. These broad interests seem
to linger just out of touch as he speaks,
his eyes moving quickly across the
ceiling as he searches for the right
words.
becoming fewer and farther between in terms of the concert experience. I think more people, at least they’re looking for some kind of a visual, whether it’s large screens or whether it’s something else, something else in the hall, whatever. But we’re just, technology has shaped and changed our lives so much that people’s expectations are just so different than the concert experience.

Composing with this audience in mind means, essentially, giving them what they want—that is, finding artistically meaningful musical statements that also provide visual content beyond the traditional image of the relatively static orchestra and the back of a conductor waving his arms around energetically. (Sung has begun exploring this changing dynamic in her own music; see below.) Like Lanier, Sung acknowledges that audiences are looking for new experiences, but she seems to see that less as a problem than as a challenge. She knows her audience, but she seems to think they’ll be more likely to embrace her work if it fits into these changing expectations for what a night out entails.

Composer and writer Greg Sandow, a self-described “big fan of our current digital culture” wrote some about these issues in an email interview with me, issues he regularly discusses in depth at his blog at www.artsjournal.com/sandow. In his email, he dreamed about orchestras using digital tools for streaming music, relying more heavily and wisely on social media, and composers using “digital production in concert music” to create orchestral sounds melded with “all the techniques of pop production.” But intriguingly, when talking about his own music, Sandow wrote, “My compositions are curiously classical, for someone who keeps talking in public about how combining genres is the trend of our time.” Like Sung, he envisions work that caters to the needs of digital
natives, yet he retains a subtle reservation about changes as expressed by his abiding love of older classical music trends (though he blends the old with the new relentlessly, to my ears). His comments challenge me to consider the ways that today’s audiences are both conservative and avant-garde, often gravitating toward conservative music but also toward creative presentations of that music.

In my interview with stage and film composer Ronald Owen, I heard a distrust in audiences to respond to avant-garde music, but a trust in their gut-level responses to the traditionally beautiful. Owen seems to see music with a strong tie to the past as the only music likely to find a paying concert audience:6

Composer Profile: Ronald Owen
Owen and I talked at a loud lunch counter in a small Cuban deli, eating Cuban sandwiches, black beans, rice, and maduros. My recording of our conversation is filled with the door slamming, the constant background chatter of orders being made and picked up (in both Spanish and English), and our comments about one dish or another.

I like to wonder what music Owen would score to a film of our conversation. He has scored films set in Ecuador (End of the Spear) and Africa (Open Secrets), along with stageworks set in Ancient Rome (Ben-Hur) and modern America (Requiem for a Young Man). Would our conversation be set to the sounds of Cuba or to his signature style of layered, slow, melodic string parts? How might he have imagined the emotional needs of his audience being met in the “drama” of our lunchtime chat?

Like all of the composers I spoke with, Owen seemed eager to talk about the issues I brought up; he clearly had been thinking about many of my questions for years. It took us a long time to get through our food.

[T]here are many brilliant composers from the past who live now and exist now who write music that is more intellectual in its design. And the composers are brilliant, and they have certain patterns and structures that are complex that they use. But that type of music does not appeal to a

6 It’s outside the scope of this project to dive into research on classical music audience habits, but a good start is the National Endowment for the Arts’ 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (Williams and Keen).
large amount of people, which is important to note, I think. It could be
great music, it could be great music in a lot of different ways. The
composer could be creating a sound that’s very unique, finding different
instruments, different intervals, different registers. . . . But it may not be
appealing to a large number of people. That’s why throughout the United
States, and even in Western Europe, you go to concerts, and what do you
listen to? You’re listening to the same things that you’ve been listening to
for the last hundred or two hundred years.

His comments aren’t a dismissal of new forms of music, but a dismissal that of the idea
that new forms will ever find a popular audience. In the context of this conversation
about trusting audiences, I would say that Owen’s trust is in the well-crafted, traditionally
crafted pieces themselves, with a trust that these works will naturally find an audience.

I then commented to him that a popular concert music series in our town doesn’t
very often play atonal composer Arnold Schoenberg, which seemed to support Owen’s
claim (though I recognize the incredible cost difference to produce a 20th or 21st-century
piece of music as compared to an 18th or 19th-century piece). Owen replied, “Why don’t
they have Schoenberg? Because the music doesn’t appeal to people. Emotionally.”

Wondering if this implied the existence of a universal, ideal audience, one that always
responded “emotionally” to traditional forms of music, or at least to music that relies on
tonality, I mentioned that I’d done some reading about cognitive responses to music.
Some of this work, I told him, seemed to imply that our minds can only hold so much
information at a time, a limitation that is reinforced when music makes discernible
patterns that we can hold together in a single gestalt. He replied,
That’s very interesting because it’s an important conversation. And it basically gets back to what is a beautiful sound, what is an ugly sound, what is beauty in music. What is dissonance in music? What makes you feel good, what makes you feel bad, what makes you feel tense? And you could say that all those things are trained—we grow up and we hear those sounds, actually before the time we’re born. And there are certain sounds that bring us pleasure. Some people might say that there is even a universal aesthetic that exists and that a major third, or a major chord, is going to be more beautiful than a minor chord. Or a major seventh chord produces a certain feeling as opposed to a regular seventh chord, which is a completely different sound.

Owen doesn’t quite take the step of claiming that this “universal aesthetic” is always true, with his “some people might say” added to the observation that major chords may seem more “beautiful” than minor chords, in general. But he then seems to refine his position away from assigning specific emotions to given modes, telling me that one chord “produces a certain feeling” without naming the feeling—a step away from the surgical transplant approach practiced by Enlightenment-era musical rhetoricians, who were very comfortable saying that a given chord, mode, melodic fragment, or rhythm would produce a given emotion in a listening audience.

This is the ever-present irony of today’s concert music world: we both live in the past and push it aside. Whether that affects the possibility of cogent musical communication with today’s audiences remains to be seen. But what about those composers who live more solidly in the center circle—those who want to guide audiences
toward some sort of meaning, but with a sophistic uncertainty about the exact meaning they’ll eventually make?

**Audiences Finding Meanings**

Owen commented on how the forms of music affect a composer’s relationship to his audience. Along the same lines, Lanier mentioned the forms of music, but in a far more abstract sense. Lanier told me, “So another definition of music is it’s the form of expression that’s, if you like, pure form and not content. Although of course it can have content. But the core of music is about form.” But if music is often content-less, how can it communicate to audiences? And how do composers understand the kinds of things that are communicated to audiences? As he often does, Lanier looks to the future for an answer. He said, “I’m of the belief that in the long-term, one of the big trends of the species is an increasing ability to communicate using form as opposed to traditional symbolic content. Because I think it ultimately brings you closer to reality. But that’s another, that’s almost a philosophical question.” Communication without symbolic content; composers and audiences who understand each other from the shaping of form that means nothing but itself, that doesn’t refer to any Platonic ideal but is simply itself, and yet is communicable, and thus able to be deployed rhetorically. How do composers manage these uncertainties? It’s clear that at least some of the time, they don’t bother with “managing” them at all, if that means “controlling the meaning audiences will make.”

One answer that makes sense given music’s form is that given by both Sung and Crozier: composers can simply embrace that audiences will make their own meanings. (This is fundamentally more rhetorically optimistic than Stravinsky’s famous claim that
“music, by its very nature, is essentially powerless to express anything at all” [Fisk 280].) Surely many composers of text would subscribe to a reader-response view of meaning that embraces the post-structuralist view of readers creating meaning on their own, but this view must grow less prevalent in genres that are more expository in nature. (I’ve never encountered a professional or technical writer who would smilingly say, “Oh, my audience can make its own meanings from my documents—no big deal!”) Yet even in the most abstract poetry, readers still encounter guidance toward intended meanings in the form of words that suggest at least a direction toward meaning; readers are not left completely in the dark about what the writer is telling them.

Encountering a completely abstract piece of music is different: Symphony No. 4 or Minuet in G minor or Opus 72 communicates no translation of musical form into discursive understanding. Instead, composers—and audiences—make do with what they have. And what they have is the sounds themselves, the form without content.

I asked Sung about this issue with regards to The Circle Closes, her thirty-minute orchestral work that premiered in 2009 and which is notable for its unique use of singing

Composer Profile: Stella Sung

Like many contemporary composers, Sung wears a number of hats: as an orchestral composer, she serves as composer-in-residence for the Orlando Philharmonic and the Dance Alive National Ballet. And as a professor, she teaches composition courses and directs the Center for Research and Education in Arts, Technology, and Entertainment (CREATE) at the University of Central Florida.

Her work pushes boundaries yet remains accessible, at times merging electronics, lighting, dance, and crystal meditation bowls with traditional orchestral instruments—sometimes for the stage, and sometimes for film.

Sung graciously accepted my request for a phone interview without knowing anything about me, even inviting me to visit her CREATE facility to see the cutting-edge work there. My impression was of a thoughtful, composed, and powerful mind, blended with kindness and a sense of humor. I’ve already decided to make sure I attend her next premier with the Orlando Phil.
crystal bowls and its multiple lighting effects that change throughout the piece. I told her early in our interview that I had watched a video of its premier, saying, “I know hearing the piece, I found myself coming up with a story for it almost accidentally! But I’m curious how much in mind did you have a specific story? Or is it much more general than that?” Partly, I was responding to a point Sung had made in an interview clip that played before the video of the performance that I watched, where she said she didn’t know where the title came from. In her interview with me, she said that *The Circle Closes* is “much more general.” Before saying more, she first described two instrumental pieces that were more programmatic (i.e. tied to narrative content) and less abstract: *Rockwell Reflections*, based on visual images, and *Lincoln’s Battle*, a piece that folded the themes of two of Lincoln’s favorite songs into a piece that Sung says is “not only about the battles that he faced in the Civil War but also his personal battle with depression,” a meaning that is communicated solely through music. Then she contrasted those pieces with the abstractness of *The Circle Closes*, which she described as “really very abstract. The only thing was that there are basically two sections, joined all together into one large, thirty-minute piece. But there’s two sections, so the formal design is basically with this very active first part and then a much more tranquil second part, almost a yin and yang kind of piece.” We then spoke a bit about the use of the singing bowls, potentially a source for whatever meaning her audience would leave the concert with. About the bowls, she said, “Well, I like to come up with something a little different, you know, but

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7 Is it worthwhile to tell the story I heard in the piece? I imagined that I would tell it to Sung, but when the moment came, I decided not to. Better to stay silent, I think, and let listeners hear their own stories.  
8 The video with this interview and the complete premier performance, allowing listeners to see the effect of the lighting design and crystal bowls on stage, is available at “The Circle Closes – Final Audio Mix” at [http://vimeo.com/14496790](http://vimeo.com/14496790) (Mills).
whenever you do something different there’s always a risk, there’s always a challenge. Some people will get it and some people will not.” She then continued:

My idea with this piece basically was more, just—it’s an abstract piece! One thing I had in there was the idea for a fate motive, which of course is not a new idea. But every so often you’ll hear these three hammer-blow types of things that come in. So other than that, there really isn’t any particular story, even though people have told me, as I think you mentioned, that they formed their own story, because it sort of seems cinematic or something. So people have sort of put their own ideas into it. But that’s good! That’s exactly what I would like to have, is that people put their own ideas in there, or their own experience or whatever. You know, whatever they want. Or not!

Her turn toward “But that’s good!” surprised me, as I was expecting her to say something about her fear that the audience would misunderstand this “fate motive.” But instead, she lives in a composing world that fully expects audiences, with only the smallest amount of guidance from her, to create their own meanings from the music. This expectation is also more evidence tying together influence and audience as I have earlier in this chapter: she can only have this expectation of audiences creating this meaning because she knows that as a composer following the influences of her chosen genre and performance venue, her audience will expect to create meanings in this way. This uncertainty about how audiences will understand a message is a fundamental reality of any rhetoric, given the impossibility of ever communicating exactly, but it is especially central to musical rhetoric, inhabiting a sonic space of nondiscursive form. Again, Burkean identification
seems especially appropriate: rather than persuading her audience, Sung is identifying with them in a way that is both mystical and tangible.

Crozier also expressed a comfort with ambiguous, nondiscursive meaning in his works, even to the extent that he worked this factor specifically into one of his pieces that I heard performed soon before our interview. The program notes Crozier wrote for *Fairy Tale*, a fifteen-minute orchestral work composed in 2002, gave these tantalizing hints about what the piece meant—which is another way of saying what message it was designed to communicate to audiences. They are worth quoting at length:

> It was a strong interest in opera that led my purely instrumental music in this direction. The music of the great operatic literature, it seems, reaches well beyond the function of simply enhancing a drama on stage. Our perception is that this music can somehow “become” the story that it tells, effectively taking it over, and expressing the drama in its own terms with a heightened sense of dramatic sweep and a good deal of emotional specificity. It is the music that essentially controls our experience as we are drawn into the dramatic world of a fine opera.

While it may be problematical to speak of abstract orchestral music in such terms, music that exists apart from any explicit program or extra-musical reference does, I believe, have the capacity to carry on an independent sort of narrative, expressed using its own particular kind of syntax. In this spirit, *Fairy Tale* strives to create what might be called virtual, rather than concrete, narrative. We might even refer to it, after Mendelssohn, as “an opera scene without words” whose personae appear
as musical ideas. As in other forms of drama, interest comes as a result of the way these characters relate to one another in the context of an overall plot, the way they may be transformed by the sometimes intense nature of their interaction, and the larger intensity curve that emerges as part of the process.

Which tale is told here? It seems less entertaining to know this for sure than it is to imagine. The imagination was where the magic of these stories sprang up for us when we first knew them, and it is there that, given a little nostalgia and inspiration, we may rekindle their magic later on. (“Program”)9

Crozier relies on the language of discursive rhetoric here: even “abstract music” can “have the capacity to carry on an independent sort of narrative, expressed using its own particular kind of syntax.” But unlike discursive narratives, this music isn’t tied down to specific messages and narratives. This is Lanier’s “form without content,” the enactment of what it might feel like to hear a story or speech read to us in another language that we don’t understand. But here, Crozier believes that we do understand—or at least that we can, with a certain amount of guidance. I find the presence of these program notes intriguing but telling: would Crozier be satisfied with the audience’s reactions if they were simply given the title *Fairy Tale* but no hints at the possible stories underlying them? And what if the title didn’t hint at a narrative meaning to the text?

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9 This program also included the premier of Lanier’s “Symphony for Amelia,” and the program notes include Lanier’s explanation of that work.
I asked him that question: what does an audience do when they’re not guided to some predetermined meaning? He replied by telling me more about his concept of musical characters:

I sort of feel like the musical ideas can become like characters in a sense, in the way that they interact, what happens to them, the way they change by the end, by virtue of what they’ve been through, just like characters in written drama or theatrical drama. I think—that’s how our mind perceives them, I think, if they have enough profile to resonate with us, and we remember them. But that’s what I’m trying to do here, is send my musical ideas on a journey that hopefully is gripping for the listener. You want to have some suspense about what happens here.

I asked, “When the ideas are going through things like characters, would you say that you imagine them as actually people going through things? Actual—like a person who is, you know, climbing up a mountain, or running away from danger—or do we have to personify it that way? Could it just be a musical idea itself?” He replied:

For me it really is the music idea itself. But I think what happens is, they are having an emotional progression of a kind that happens when things happen to a character, say. So I’m not thinking, “Oh, this musical idea is someone running away from something threatening.” But it might be the emotion one has when one sees that happening. So I’m not thinking a concrete program, but I’m thinking the emotional effect one gets from those experiences. It’s like an emotional journey instead of a literal one.
This surprised me. I expected him to be thinking of a specific story, even if he didn’t tell anyone about it, perhaps as a mental model to hold onto. But instead, in the moment, Crozier seems much more comfortable with the subtly indefinable than I imagine I would. Perhaps this is what composer Lois Vierk describes in a published interview as “multiplicity,” a term she says she learned from Mel Powell: “To me this meant that a piece could be doing more than one thing at a time” (McCutchan 155). *Fairy Tale* could be doing as many things at a time as there are listeners, delighting in its multiplicity all the while.

**Musical Emotions and Film**

Music is *doing* something to everyone who hears it all the time. It is an art which reaches the emotions easily, often (always?) ahead of intellectual awareness. In the film *Jaws*, a melodic motive in the bass arouses our fear of the shark each time we hear it, whether or not the terrifying creature appears before our eyes.

*Arnold Perris (6)*

An intriguing testing ground for the confluence of influence and audience is the world of film music (chosen in part because at least three of my research participants have scored music for film). In a film, the extent to which the music “says something” relies on both the musical influences it relies on, the musical influences perceived by the audience (whether or not the composer meant them to be there), and the music’s relationship with the visuals and action on screen. Composing for film is rhetorically complicated; the context shapes the kinds of messages the composer can construct. As Owen told me, “When you’re working with film music, for the vast amount of people who are watching a film, there are certain sounds that people identify with certain types of emotions. So you’re normally not going to be writing a romantic scene necessarily in a
minor key. You know? You’re not going to be writing a romantic scene with extremely fast music.” Like Crozier when discussing *Fairy Tale*, Owen reminds us that part of what is being communicated in a film is emotion. As discussed in chapter one, philosophers of music have disagreed about just how music relates to emotions—whether the emotions of the composer while composing, or the emotions meant to be felt by listeners, or abstract forms of emotions to be analyzed instead of felt, or representations of the relative speed and power of emotions surging physically through bodies as carried by hormones and neurotransmitters, or something else entirely.

Despite this (fitting) ambiguity about the relationship of emotion to music, composers talk about emotion a lot. Often, like Crozier, emotional meaning is key to what is being expressed: Dan Welcher says, “I’m always looking for a mood, for an expression of feeling” (McCutchan 93); Daniel Godfrey says, “When I start a piece, there’s a kind of sentiment, a body of affects, or a configuration of feeling, that I’m compelled to express” (McCutchan 101); and Vierk says that “the way I feel emotionally has nothing to do with the way the music comes out. . . . I think the music comes from a place other than where my immediate emotions originate” (McCutchan 158). This makes sense in a linguistic world without referents: take away the signified, and the signifier can’t represent ideas and narratives, only the emotions that surround ideas and narratives, like a man experiencing memory loss who recognizes a familiar memory but can’t quite put his fingers on what *exactly* it means. In the best classical music concerts, I find myself actively constructing narratives throughout, with the up and downswings of emotional messages as the texts against which I test my stories. That could easily be because of the sheer amount of instrumental, orchestral music I hear in film and
television scores. I’m entirely used to hearing music relate the emotional context of what I’m seeing; I grew up passively learning this mode of musical communication. It’s so natural to me that I quickly fall back on this pattern when listening to abstract music, as when listening to Sung’s *The Circle Closes*. I use this technique especially when I want to retain the meaning of the work: at one performance of Brahms’s *Requiem* I felt annoyed at myself for how little I had retained of the work at previous performances, so I purposefully set about constructing a drama in my mind that expressed the relationship between the soloists. (It was a devastatingly sad tale.)

But those are moments where I make a non-filmic piece of music *feel* filmic because of my participation in the audience. From the perspective of composers actually working in film, the multivocal nature of a film’s meaning (as communicated through the vision of its director, writer, producer, artistic director, and so on) leads both to a directness and indirectness in the amount of control a composer has over what his music means. On one hand, the music’s meaning can be relatively unambiguous, reflecting obvious meanings that are happening on screen. Owen described this, saying, “Basically writing music for film is about how to sustain a certain kind of emotional response from the audience, in a particular scene. It’s more than that, but that’s basically what you’re doing. You’re creating music that’s sad, you’re creating music that’s happy, you’re creating music that’s romantic, you’re creating music that sounds quote-unquote patriotic.” Put this way, film music seems rhetorically direct: the composer wants the viewer to feel a certain way, so he relies on as many established methods as possible to guide that experience. This directness can even give composers a sort of permission to try new things. For example, artist Björk’s explains on her website how her score to the
avant-garde film *Drawing Restraint 9* was a freeing experience in how she was able to focus entirely on a certain style, instead of feeling the need to be as artistically complex and multifaceted as she might on her own albums:

> when i do my own music, i obviously am very very very deeply concerned that the music i do, that the root is from me, the trunk is from me, the branches are from me - that it's not borrowed from anywhere else. now that i'm doing music that's set in japan, [film director, writer, and co-star Matthew Barney] wants the music to be based on original ancient japanese music. i kind of got a license to go a lot further in basing something on something that musically already exists, than i would ever do for my own albums.

For an artist like Björk, who pushes the boundaries of electronica, pop, glitch, and concert music, the single-authored album (like the scholarly monograph) requires a degree of variation and creativity that isn’t necessary in the world of film, where the music is less part of the central message. Yet complicating the nature of a film score’s relationship to its audience, the various voices that combine in the multiauthored space of film can also be lived out for the composer as a kind of restriction. As Sung told me, “As the composer, your job is to serve the film. It’s not about you, it’s not about your music particularly. I mean, for most of us—maybe John Williams is the exception. But still, even then, he has to do what Spielberg and Lucas want. His music has to serve the film—otherwise, it doesn’t do anything! So we sort of take our voice and sort of pack it away and do what is right for the film.” It was the same when I talked to writing professor, musician, and composer Scott Whiddon about his score for the documentary *Rothstein’s*
First Assignment: he said, “When you’re writing something as a group, you always give something up for the greater good, I learned. I ended up talking to my students about that quite a bit.”

Whiddon and I spoke over the phone about the overlaps between his multiple roles: as writing professor, band member, and film composer. Our conversation was especially notable for the ways it brought together the issues of influence, audience, communication, and emotion that I’ve woven throughout this chapter. When scoring the documentary film Rothstein’s First Assignment, he was particularly concerned about how he would be influenced by previous films set in Appalachia, a concern directly tied to the messages the film sent to viewers:

There’s a million movies about Appalachia. Documentaries, new films, whatever. And I love many of them. And the problem—I could be shooting myself in the foot here, so please forgive me—I don’t mean to sound snotty. Ok? They all sound exactly the same. . . . So I immersed myself in that Digital Archive of Appalachian Music, just stuff I grew up
on, for months, buried myself in that. But I also realized that we weren’t going to play “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” for forty minutes.

It’s a dark story so what I wanted to do—I’m a big fan of like soundscape and texture guys, like Brian Eno. So I wanted to do stuff with textures. And I wanted, when I first sat down to talk with [“textural manipulator” Duane Lundy] about the project, on the recording end, I said, “I want it to be Brian Eno in Appalachia.” We may use a dulcimer, we may use a banjo, we may use a violin. So I said, “I don’t want it to be all bluegrassy, I want to have those textures but I want it to be darker, and soundscapy, and let’s do some things with sound design and post-production. And make it, a little different. And a little itchier.”

And then he talked about how these issues of film related to issues of audience and what music can say:

Someone who’s watching this documentary is likely already sensitive to Appalachian or poverty issues. Probably. Alright. So there’s that audience. And you know, it’s a total dice roll. They’re probably the kind of person who would watch a Sundance film as opposed to a Jerry Bruckheimer-things-blow-up film. Right. And if they’re watching an Appalachian film, they probably know [hums “Dueling Banjos”]. They know that! So let’s use some of these reference points, these signifiers, the long tail if you will, and let’s throw a little something different in the mix. Let’s use static—like radio static. Let’s use the studio as an instrument to chop up and splice these old tunes and just make them a little darker and a little
more brittle and edgy just so it pushes the audience—you’re sitting in a chair for fifty-six minutes watching a movie, I would like you to feel a little uncomfortable at times.

This is far from the comfort with audiences making their own interpretation that Crozier and Sung described. Or at least, it’s directing them to a specific limitation of the kind of interpretations available to them, like walking them into a room with dark lighting and saying, “You can make whatever meaning you want, but you have to stay in this room.” It’s my middle circle, the sophistic relationship to an audience who you’ve guided along but without telling them exactly what to feel.

And Whiddon’s path to that relationship with his audience is through his expectations about his audience’s influences—what music they have heard before that is set in Appalachia. He makes strategic guesses about what they already know and then bases his musical decisions on that knowledge: yes, he’ll use some of the instruments associated with that space, but he’ll also push the limits of what they’ll expect. Perhaps this could be reframed as a question of Whiddon’s near and far audience. His near audience is the audience watching Rothstein’s First Assignment, an audience whose attention will be mostly focused on the narrative of the film itself, with a peripheral, occasional mental glance at the music itself. But his far audience is perhaps the critic of film and film music, the ones who specifically focus on the music as both an artistic vision of its own and as a crucial element of the film’s overall effectiveness. He trusts that his near audience will find enough familiar material to “get it” (when they think about the music at all), and he hopes that his far audience will appreciate the details of his craft that led to his desired emotional impact: feelings that are “a little darker and a little
more brittle and edgy” than other Appalachian films, even if it makes watchers “a little uncomfortable at times.”

My participant Tom Todia, an instructor of interactive audio courses and videogame sound designer, told me that his experience creating sounds for videogames—both the music and the effects—is remarkably similar. Like Whiddon, he wants to subtly guide users to a place of discomfort, relying on his predictions about what sounds will produce what effects in them. For instance, when telling me about the game he was currently working on, an underwater diving game, the sound is specifically designed to trigger the Western cultural memory of music from *Jaws*:

> So we rely on movies in sound design a lot, cause we all grew up watching movies, so they were laughing at first, cause I said, “I have to have a lot of dissonant cellos in this game, even if it’s not obvious.” Because of *Jaws*—it’s an underwater game, and there’s sharks in the game trying to eat you as you play. So I said, “Even if we obviously don’t steal the melody from John Williams or anything like that, there has to be that essence and connection to what everyone remembers,” which is lonely cello and then what? The French horn comes in right before the bite happens.

I replied that it was remarkable how a movie from the 1970s could so pervade culture that it was possible for contemporary videogames to use those associations, perhaps without users even realizing what was happening. Todia responded by humming the first two notes of the *Jaws* theme, saying, “Two notes on a cello and right away you get nervous! The hair on the back of your neck—especially if you were a child, like I was—we’re probably a similar age—I didn’t go in the ocean, and I lived in Miami, for almost two
years! After I saw *Jaws* one. And there was no connection to it, but the fear.” He acknowledged that to some extent these connections are cultural, but he also expressed a wonder in the ways that musical interpretation even seems to transcend cultural boundaries: “Single, noble instruments like trumpet, and big major chords and things are just going to sound triumphant and victorious, even if you don’t know anything about music, which has always fascinated me.” In sum, when Todia or Whidden purposefully rely on these kinds of sounds, they’re pulling on specific influences to create subtle atmospheres for their audiences, an effect that can work even at a purely emotional level, devoid of any symbolic content or conscious association.

In the next chapter, we turn to the host of individual choices that lead to those kinds of emotional impacts in any piece of music, whether for film, concert, or downloaded from iTunes. Beyond the questions of what composers’ goals are for how their audiences will make meaning from the influence-laden music they hear, we’ll ask what steps they make through the rhetorical canons to achieve those goals.
CHAPTER 4: THE CANONS OF MUSICAL RHETORIC

Our disciplinary insistence on the printed page, if it persists unchecked, will slowly bring us out of step with our students, our institutions, and the broader culture of which we are a part. . . . The development of rhetorics that might assist us in confronting (and shaping) these shifting conditions is only a small step toward that change, but it is an essential step.

Collin Gifford Brooke (23)

Any composing process involves a dialectic between large- and small-scale concerns. My concerns about my audience, purpose, and *kairos* shift rapidly to concerns about the actual shape of my composition—what form it will take, how to embellish its various parts, and how best to deliver it. Composing effectively requires attention to the big picture and to the details, a divide that roughly corresponds to the previous chapter and this one. I see neither chapter as more important than the other, and it would be overly simplistic to assume that the order of these two chapters implies a standard order, that composers *first* consider the big picture issues and *then* get down to work. Composing processes are far more recursive and unpredictable than that. But I do see these chapters forming a partnership, where the issues in each should be seen as lurking quietly below those in the other.

One main difference between the two chapters is that I’ve organized this chapter around the traditional canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. When I interviewed my participants and took initial notes from published interviews, I didn’t have the canons in mind. But when I decided to frame their responses
in terms of these classical terms, which frame the concerns and practices of rhetors, I found the fit surprisingly apt. This organizing pattern serves two purposes: first, it insists that musical rhetoric has a deserved place within the history of rhetorical inquiry. Second, using the canons allows me to enter a sustained conversation with Colin Brooke’s 2009 book *Lingua Fracta: Towards a Rhetoric of New Media*. Brooke devotes one chapter to each canon, imagining it both in the context of what he calls an ecology of practice and as a particular way to understand new media rhetoric, and in so doing to “reclaim” the “vitality” of the canons (30). His investigation is wide-ranging and open-minded—it reads as an example of what he would call proairetic invention (see below)—and leaves a great deal of room for the particularly musical angle I map onto the canons. After all, part of what makes new media texts unique is their ability to blend time-based experiences (sound and video) with the static qualities of text and visuals; therefore, much of what makes new media texts worthy of study per se is common to musical texts. However, while many of Brooke’s points can be applied easily to my investigation of a rhetoric of sound, the fit isn’t always exact. At times, I’ll expand on his points, and at other times I’ll move in another direction completely, either ignoring or briefly referring to Brooke’s work. In that, I treat *Lingua Fracta* as a heuristic, an invention tool that helps me organize and understand my thinking—and more importantly, the thinking of composers themselves, whom I intend to take center stage here.

**Invention**

When I asked Daniel Crozier how his composition process begins, he told me this narrative:
What I do is sit down and work with my ideas at the piano and get up and pace around and think about it. It’s about 50/50 doing those two things.

What I’ll do is get some ideas to work with, and I’ll work for a while, to think about how they might fit together in a form, that kind of thing. See what they seem to want to do. And what kind of potential they could have later. How they could be transformed, and things like that. And I’ll think about that and I’ll pace around and think about how things work together and how they relate, but I work out a lot of the details at the piano, a lot of the harmony and counterpoint. Things like that. [...] Some people do all that at the desk, they work out those things at the desk. But I like contact with the music.

Consider the ways Crozier’s process reminds us of the invention process in any medium, yet with crucial differences revolving around issues of time. Like many others, Crozier begins with a mix of play and reflection, much like an artist who splashes color on a canvas to get a feeling for what combinations might be useful and then stands back to consider the potential meanings of those combinations, or like an essayist who freewrites a number of impressions and feelings and reactions before considering how they might fit together in a structure of some kind. But working with the tool of the piano, this early process has a speed that is perhaps lacking in many other kinds of early compositional play; that is, Crozier’s skill at quickly improvising different melodies and harmonies on the piano allows him to hear a comparatively fleshed-out version of his composition very early on in the process, with less of the “wait and see if this works” feel than a composer of, say, video or writing must endure. Consider also the sense of agency he gives to his
early ideas: he plays with them to see “what they seem to want to do.” Again, this parallels the kind of give-and-take that composers in many mediums experience, but in his realm of music composition, he can enjoy a degree of speedy testing in the moment. After all, a novelist might describe a character’s path as following “what he seems to want to do,” but that path takes many hours to execute and then reflect on, while Crozier can “ask” a given theme if it would prefer to go one way?—no, not that way—then this way?—that’s better, but what about—yes, that fits its character. Right there, in real time. Crozier also describes the choice that faces every music composer: where to work. While he prefers “contact with the music” at his piano, he realizes that many others work out many of the details of a piece away from the music, “playing” drafts in their minds as they fill in notes on a score—and of course, for composers not writing for the concert music world, the relationship between the music and a prepared score can be vastly changed or non-existent. (See the section on Memory below for more on scores and notation.)

Following the words of composers, my claim in this section is that in the (using Brooke’s term) ecology of practice of musical rhetoric, invention is a swiftly recursive act that both thrives within boundaries and delights in throwing them away. I also believe that an exploration of how composers explain their invention purposes and techniques can shed light on composition processes in any genre or mode, including how we teach it. After all, much of composition studies over the last fifty years has focused on invention techniques, based in part on the belief that our students can be taught to attend to rhetorical situations and discover the purposes for composing that often lurk just below
their conscious understanding. Many of us believe that as a craft, a techne, rhetoric can be taught, even in its inventionary phases.

When working with music (or any ostensibly “artistic” medium, as opposed to the more obviously rhetorical arts), this belief becomes more controversial: can anyone create effective music, in the same way that we hope anyone can write an effective rhetorical message in text? Eighteenth-century Europeans, some of the first to heavily apply rhetorical principles onto music, didn’t always think invention was within the purview of what could be taught at all: one of the central tenets of 18th-century musical-rhetorical composition theory was that “The process of ordering, elaborating, and shaping ideas in an effective manner can be taught—this, indeed, is one of the basic premises of the discipline of rhetoric—but the process of creating these ideas cannot” (Bonds, *Wordless* 81). Part of my purpose is to refute this claim by discussing the paths composers take as they invent music.

Intriguingly, Brooke’s perspective on invention parallels the words of many professional composers’ thoughts on inventing music, casting the discussion as one of following or ignoring limitations. Following Roland Barthes’ work in *S/Z*, Brooke contrasts hermeneutic approaches to invention—which examine possibilities with an aim to classify and limit—with proairetic approaches that instead have “a focus on the generation of possibilities, rather than their elimination until all but one are gone and closure is achieved” (86). This feels to me something like the mindset of the composer of a collage who ravenously reaches for more and more content (text, image, audio, or video) to juxtapose, in search of new connections and new possibilities for meaning and communication. The proairetic and hermeneutic approaches are often both present in
writing classrooms, when follow the script of get-it-all-out (through freewriting, etc.) and then look-for-useful-connections—though when considering new media texts, according to Brooke, we should give more attention to the proairetic than we tend to. Brooke’s focus on strategically generating possibilities through invention is a hallmark of conversations with composers about their process, who often describe a time of playful experimentation at the piano in wide search of ideas; therefore, a rhetoric of music must attend heavily to the proairetic. But the purposes and occasions for composing often demand hermeneutic angles as well, as composers also describe the importance of establishing limitations on their work by choosing keys, key signatures, instrumentation, and so on. A rhetoric of music considers the invention possibilities of both free-ranging idea-creation and limitations. Indeed, in a book chapter on the rhetoric of jazz, Gregory Clark writes, “[I]n jazz, innovation is born out of the aesthetic resolution of problematical opposites—freedom and discipline, virtuoso and ensemble, invention and order, private and public” (42). The musical enterprise leans heavily on this dialectic.

**Invention as Ignoring and Creating Limitations**

Crozier sitting at the piano is a typical way that composers describe how they begin to work; composers so often mention that they begin by improvising at the piano that it’s hardly worth quoting them all. Further expanding that theme of proairetic invention, Lois V. Vierk describes a similar path even when writing for instruments she doesn’t play, explaining in an interview with Ann McCutchan, “When writing a new piece, I need to start from the sensuous, visceral sound itself. I need to hear and feel what the instruments can do. . . . I like to get together with players face to face and improvise sounds.” This play with sounds then moves to drafting on paper, but still with a proairetic, freewriting feel: “After that, when I take pencil and paper, the physical sounds
will still be ringing through me. I’ll sketch maybe 100 pages or so, depending on the piece. I try not to censor anything I write” (McCutchan 152). Joan Tower even goes so far as to try to hold back the hermeneutic impulses of invention in favor of this physical, sensuous proairetic kind (though she doesn’t use those terms): “I’m a very hands-on person. I start with an idea, two notes, four notes, and then I start sculpting it. I distrust precompositional thinking, because it can never be all-inclusive; it forces you by definition to think about one thing at a time” (McCutchan 57). Instead of “precompositional thinking,” then, Tower prefers what we might call “compositional thinking”: a process of meaning-making that happens in the real-time act of making music, sounding it out, recursively testing possibilities. Dwight Andrews describes a similar process:

What I try to do, and I am not always successful, is take small musical ideas, a series of maybe three, four, or five notes, and try to understand its essence. I try to understand what this five-note series is about, and once I do, I can begin to say, “What are my possibilities?” In other words, I always try to totally exhaust an idea before I go to the next idea. I try to see what my possibilities are, what is implied in this idea that can spin out the next one. What happens if I juxtapose this five-note idea with maybe a rhythmic series of equal dimensions? (Banfield 146)

Considering the nature of music as moving through time, this proairetic process makes a good deal of sense: to allow audiences to catch musical themes and memorize them before they go away, music often relies on a series of repetitions and recognizable transformations; therefore, a process like Andrews’s that seeks to fully explore these
possible transformations, that seeks “to totally exhaust an idea,” serves the rhetorical needs of a composer in sound.

But that doesn’t mean that there aren’t limitations. John Corigliano is correct to point out that the limitations imposed by a composer are “so staggering, so arbitrary” (McCutchan 35)—decisions like the length, organization, shape, speed, rhythm, key, instrumentation, orchestration, and mood of a piece. But at the same time, these “staggering” limitations are often described by composers as crucial to their composing process, allowing them to wall off a few of the endless musical possibilities to focus deeply on one area—say, by choosing to write a one-movement, ten-minute piece for string quartet and oboe soloist expressing a sense of joy in sadness. Each of these words closes a door against one possible direction the music could go, but it then opens up a freedom to focus completely on what can be done in that room. I see this process of conscious limiting as akin to the work any artistic or rhetorical composer must make, depending on which *topoi* are most appropriate in a given rhetorical situation, or choosing on a general subject and color palette for a painting or photograph. Sometimes those limitations begin more abstractly: Libby Larsen begins with “the more mystical questions of proportion, tempo, tessitura, and texture. Those are much more mystical than pitch or rhythm” (McCutchan 147)—but eventually, even decisions on pitch and rhythm must be made, forming a compositional space in which to refine and produce. In Sebastian Currier’s words, “I do limit the number of possibilities or alternatives before me. It’s like being in a maze and marking off the pathways you’ve quickly found to be fruitless, so you may devote your attention to a few of the most promising routes” (McCutchan 231). For many composers in the twentieth century, those boundaries have
come from predefined systems or forms, such as Schoenberg’s infamous twelve-tone
serialism technique, or often from self-created systems such as Vierk’s “exponential
structure,” a mathematical system in which “[t]he first section of the piece . . . would be x
number of seconds long. The second section would be, say, .9 times x, the next section
would be .9 squared (or .81) times x, the next would be .9 cubed (or .73) times x . . . and
so on” (McCutchan 157). However, many of today’s composers prefer working within
frameworks that are less academic and more perceptible by audiences. For many others,
the early decisions are dictated by the terms of a commission, which often affects a
commissioned work directly (when an organization asks for a particular style of work or
a particular instrumentation) or indirectly (when the composer knows that a particular
strength of the commissioning group can be played to by writing for that player or group
of players).

Freely exploring, but returning to a path. Opening every door, and then closing
some. A rhetoric of music is a rhetoric that values the turn between these two practices.
What guides the composer’s decisions in both of these tasks is also familiar to
rhetoricians, especially those training composers in using invention techniques: the
rhetor’s purpose.

**Purposes for Composing**

The big decision is why you are writing this piece, and that
question you have to answer at the start.

*John Corigliano (McCutchan 38)*

Libby Larsen describes a specific and personal purpose for composing music:

“I’ll tell you what keeps me composing. It uses all of my brain, at least all the brain that I
can get in touch with, to try to understand how to communicate” (McCutchan 144).

Another way to put Larsen’s point is that underlying her actual techniques at inventing
music is a personal desire, a self-motivating need—in her case, a need to experience the engagement that comes from sustained attention to a difficult, but possible task. But besides this personal motivation, her comment is notable for its emphasis on communication, an aim she describes in practically rhetorical terms, as she tries to discover the available means for persuasion. Invention can thus be motivated by both personal and rhetorical purposes. Surely it affects one’s invention strategies when a primary purpose is to do a task that is self-motivating, as opposed to expressing an internal emotion or wanting to specifically affect an audience in a specific way. As I’ve read published interviews with composers, over and over they say things like my research participant Matt Gomes: “I wanted to be seen as creative, as someone who was taking his music in new directions. But I think I discovered pretty quickly [laughs] that this was a difficult task to perform! People have done a lot of things, a lot of different things.” That struggle to both be creative for the self and to “be seen as creative” leads composers in various directions during the actual composing process.

Other reasons for composing varied. On the expressionist side is Crozier, who told me that in his orchestral piece *Fairy Tale*, his goal is to “send my musical ideas on a journey that hopefully is gripping for the listener. You want to have some suspense about what happens here.” This focus on creating an experience for listeners parallels my participant Tom Todia, who composes both music and sound effects for videogames. Todia said that “in sound design, the whole purpose of sound design is to give someone an experience that they’re connected to.” Joe Schicke, a rhetorician and musician I spoke with, also emphasizes the need to provide an experience for the audience, but he also characterizes each experience in the context of the other music surrounding it—in his
case, as the leader of a band crafting set lists. For instance, his instrumental piece “Rondo” has an “emotion of urgency” to it: “And it’s like, the song was written—it’s a utilitarian thing—I needed a song like this in the set list, I needed a quick, fast, four-minute energy punch. So I wrote this tune, and it definitely has an urgent feeling in the melody. It’s a really quick melody. It has almost a desperate feel to it.” These are the most rhetorical of purposes, as a craftsperson makes decision about what will fit the needs of the audience best at a given moment. The takeaway seems to be that a rhetoric of music must acknowledge the possibility of all kinds of purposes for composing, from the inspirational to the practical, from the internally to the externally motivated.

**Arrangement**

It’s as though we can’t talk about organization except through the spatial dimension.

*Peter Elbow (“Music” 628)*

The nature of musical composing threatens to erase the boundaries between the canons, in some respects. The invention process, as I described above, is often intimately tied to decisions about the limitations imposed by the rhetorical situation, naturally tying decisions about what to communicate to the shape of what is communicated—a topic traditionally included under the heading of arrangement. Similarly, some of the parallels between music and language break down when distinguishing between arrangement and style. In the simplest of terms, in an oration or essay, arrangement is often described as a consideration of the order in which different sections should be presented for the desired effect and is associated with forms like the sections of an oration, while style pertains more to the choices made about how to shape individual sentences and is associated with
figures and tropes. Yet there are difficulties applying these two canons cleanly to the music composition process.

For the sake of this chapter, I view musical arrangement as pertaining to when a selection of music is heard in time—rhetorical decisions about if musical themes, large or small, should go here or there in the score, if they should be heard early or late in the piece, if they should come before or after these other themes. This means that my discussion of arrangement includes questions of musical form, which are generally questions of when certain types of musical moves (repeats, variations, and so on) are heard with relation to other musical moves. I’ll distinguish these issues of arrangement from issues of style, which I’ll define as questions of how a given piece of music should sound, regardless of when it is heard. This allows me to discuss issues of style that are traditionally placed there, such as the many figures of rhetoric that have been applied to various melodic ornamentations, while also including under style the issue of orchestration, which involves the question of how a given series of notes, once it’s been invented in a certain way and placed in a certain point in time, ought to sound—what timbre it should sound with, and thus what instruments it should be played on, all of which affect the kinds of meanings that this musical message will communicate.

**Arrangement as Form and Development**

I want to start by investigating the claims about the meaning of arrangement made by two composers. My research participant Jaron Lanier began our conversation by bringing up ontological questions about what music actually is, a discussion that ties directly to rhetorical choices about form. (I discussed part of this quotation in chapter three in my discussion of audiences making meanings, exemplifying the overlapping concerns in any composing activities.) He said:
So another definition of music is it’s the form of expression that’s, if you like, pure form and not content. Although of course it can have content.

But the core of music is about form. And that’s very interesting. I’m of the belief that in the long-term, one of the big trends of the species is an increasing ability to communicate using form as opposed to traditional symbolic content. Because I think it ultimately brings you closer to reality.

But that’s another—that’s almost a philosophical question.

He’s right: it is a philosophical question, but it’s also a rhetorical question. In some ways, Lanier is wrestling with questions of our options when communicating, and what sorts of things can be said when “traditional symbolic content” is missing. Music thus becomes important as arguably the nondiscursive form that audiences can most accurately understand. Investigating how music works is in some ways a step toward investigating how the future of communication will function, according to Lanier. Intriguingly, Lanier’s comments parallel those made fifty years earlier by Edgard Varèse, French avant-garde composer:

> Possible musical forms are as limitless as the exterior forms of crystals. Connected with this contentious subject of form in music is the futile question of the difference between form and content. There is no difference. Form and content are one; take away form, there is no content. And if there is no content, there is only a rearrangement of musical patterns, but no form. (Perlis and Van Cleve 104)

Though I want to avoid rehashing hundreds of years of musical aesthetics here—much of which revolves around the so-called split between the aesthetics of form and the
aesthetics of expression\textsuperscript{1}—I do want to acknowledge that Lanier and Varèse, as composers well acquainted with the craft of communicating meanings through nondiscursive form, can guide our discussion of the rhetoric of musical arrangement. In fact, I find their comments about music strikingly reminiscent of discussions in rhetoric circles about the inseparability of form and content, of medium and message, of design and copy. Consider Steven B. Katz’s description of the rhetorical effect of Cicero’s \textit{De Oratore} itself, as a performance whose implied message transcends yet includes its spoken content:

The dialogue of \textit{De Oratore} also shows that any attempt to analyze and interpret the unity of style and content must inevitably fail—and that that failure is that unity’s success. For if Crassus had succumbed totally to his listeners’ desire for an analysis and interpretation of his “technique” of rhetoric, he would have been forced to separate form from content, meaning from performance. Thus, Cicero succeeds precisely because Crassus fails. (116)

In other words, Cicero writes a character who is unable to completely explain every aspect of his craft, yet who at the same time demonstrates effective rhetoric. Music—even without words—works in much the same way, always retaining a degree of unexplainability among its implied meanings. And as in Cicero’s work, that inability to explain the full communicative power of sounded music is tied to its nature as formal content that requires performance to mean most effectively. (Again, this conversation

\textsuperscript{1}Andy Hamilton’s \textit{Aesthetics and Music} dwells helpfully on these traditional perspectives for some time in chapter 3, “The Aesthetics of Form, the Aesthetics of Expression, and ‘Absolute Music,’” including how they fit into Kantian and Hegelian philosophies.
threatens to bleed into another section, touching inevitably on our discussion of delivery, below.)

How then do composers decide the order in which they will arrange their different pieces of music, knowing that this arrangement is crucially part of what they are saying at all? Before Beethoven, the answer for many was easier: a musical rhetor could simply adopt a preexisting musical form and write content that fit into that form. This explains the question every student of Western art music asks at some point about why Haydn wrote more than one hundred symphonies, Mozart over forty, and Beethoven only nine: in the context of his time, Beethoven was dedicated to blowing the doors open on what forms could do, not content to simply use the existing forms. For today’s composers, it’s also expected that new music not follow a traditional, classical form—or if it does, that it only be done with some degree of irony.

One practice-based answer to questions of formal arrangement is to focus on time, an approach I like for its focus on music-as-sound. I’m following the explanation of composer Hale Smith:

   I will think in terms of a precise period of time—be it five minutes, ten minutes, twenty-five minutes, thirty minutes, or whatever. Sometimes I will think in terms of seconds. Of course, if I am writing for film or television, I think in terms of tenths of seconds. All of this becomes part of the conception. I think of that block of time as the musical equivalent of a piece of marble or stone that a sculptor would use. The piece grows naturally to fit into this block of time, with its own proportions and
everything. That is one reason why I say I don’t think academically, that I don’t think in terms of the traditional academic forms. (MLIC 77)

The rhetoric of “traditional academic forms,” as Smith calls them, is a rhetoric of comprehensibility, a rhetoric that values finding different ways to repeat and develop material so as to both keep an audience’s attention and help it remember the key melodies, harmonies, and rhythms that make the main themes distinctive. But Smith works in another form: a rhetoric of time that values fitting a musical message into a chunk of time that has been specifically set aside for it, into which the piece “grows naturally,” like foam expanding to touch all the edges of the space into which it’s been sprayed. And because musical form is in some ways inseparable from its content, this usage of time naturally affects the nature of the piece itself; in Smith’s words, it “becomes part of the conception.” That’s not to dismiss the usefulness of those traditional academic forms; just as in political speeches, many of the same forms that have proven effective for thousands of years continue to “work” on audiences.

Traditionally or not, one word that I heard repeatedly in interviews with composers is development. In a traditional sonata form, the “development” is the second part of the form, when the musical themes introduced in the first section (and repeated, to help them stick) are then adjusted—perhaps played in a different key or changed in some other way to vary their emotional effect. But the term is often used more generally to describe any moment where previously introduced material is developed into something else. The nature of musical time requires composers to develop material in a way that has parallels to textual rhetoric but is in fact quite distinct to music, whether one is working in traditional forms or not. For in music, a single section of music can be transformed in
any number of ways, far beyond the kinds of transformations that are available with text: a melody line can be ornamented, sped up or down, reharmonized (that is, playing a different combination of chords along with the same melody), inverted, reversed, played with different instruments (or voices), and on and on. And unlike when communicating with words, those transformations are still legible; they still make musical sense, in a way that backward words do not. The decisions about how different pieces of music are developed—or in rhetorical language, how they are arranged—have a great deal to do with what a piece says. This includes the rare piece of music that eschews development altogether, such as John Oswald’s album *Plexure*, a production he describes as “music concentrate (twelve songs, twenty-four subtracks, a thousand references, thousands of hooks) in which the prominence of any particular reference is diluted” (Oswald 12). In Oswald’s music, the fact that nothing repeats itself says something.

Consider the storytelling approach to development described by Crozier, as he talks about his orchestral work *Fairy Tale*: “There were a couple of ideas, sort of one complex of ideas that changes over the piece and they recombine in different ways and appear in different contexts and all that. And, grow. And change. And experience things. And are sort of morphed by the end so that what we sort of feel is like a cathartic experience, I feel like, by the end.” To Crozier, the development of musical material is far from random or purposeless. Its development parallels the development of characters in stories—not specific characters, but the kinds of changes characters must go through in general, with the specifics filled in (or not) as audiences wish. We’re invited to experience that change in the themes much as we experience the changes in stories. In this way, the musical material is still *developed* in a way somewhat like the traditional
sense of musical development, but with a storytelling, programmatic purpose behind it that differs from the traditional meaning given behind absolute music’s development. That tells us something about musical rhetoric: that there’s a slipperiness to meaning that changes both with the purposes of the composer and the meanings created by the audience. Composer Olly Wilson also describes a different kind of development than the traditional view, which he summarizes before describing his own process:

The development is not necessarily always creating something that is transformed from the beginning to the end, so that the end becomes a more complex statement of the first event. It might be the kind of structure in which a lot of fragments come together and shape something in the middle, so there is a sense of development, but it is not necessarily development in a Beethovenian sense. (Banfield 138)

Here we see more of a middle ground: Wilson describes development as a crucial part of his musical arrangement process, as do many composers, but with his own fingerprint added to the mix.

Fred Lerdahl goes so far as to say that “developing material” is one of his key “commitments,” even when he’s working within the loose constraints of the “expanding variation form” he developed:

So when I’m composing this way, I don’t plan pieces from beginning to end. What I’m committed to is a process of developing material. I just know I’ll go along using a set of techniques. In any particular case I won’t know what the piece is until it works its way through. I usually have a sound image early on of what a piece is, and what it expresses, but I often
don’t know until I’m well along what it’s going to look like as a whole.

(McCutchan 110)

Unlike other composers who talk about beginning with a “shape” in their minds of what the piece will look like, Lerdahl’s development extends both to his musical material, which is developed through varying changes applied to given themes, and to his process, which allows the shape of the piece to “develop” in his mind as he continues working on it. In this way, by working with a structure of sorts but allowing himself to break that structure, Lerdahl creates for himself a compositional middle ground. In a published interview, he says, “It’s not a top-down way of composing at all. It’s very intuitive. I’m a formalist, but I use an open-ended formalism that allows me lots of fantasy2” (McCutchan 110). This is a balance that composers in any medium must find, of course; even in a lengthy piece of writing like this dissertation, I both work within accepted forms (five chapters, traditional length, headings and subheadings, mostly composed of blocks of text) and forms that somewhat challenge conventional forms (callout boxes, images, links to sound files). Perhaps Lerdahl’s subtly defensive posture—his implied, “Yes, I use forms, but I swear that I’m creative with them!”—comes from the “attitude of implicit disdain in musical scholarship toward the study of convention” that Mark Evan Bonds describes. Bonds finds that music scholars tend to focus on “qualities of novelty and innovation” instead of how forms are used and transformed (Wordless 51). In fact, Bonds’s larger project in Wordless Rhetoric is to develop a “general theory of form” that finds a middle-ground to this paradox: “how to reconcile the conventional with the individual, the stereotypical with the unique” (29).

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2 The word fantasy in a musical sense has a specific meaning, referring to a piece that doesn’t fit a prescribed form in the way it is ordered, contrasting it with formal pieces like a sonata or rondo.
So again, as in our study of invention, we find that musical rhetoric embraces paradoxes between the individual and community. This aligns well with Brooke’s project in *Lingua Fracta*, which often seems to draw our attention away from closed-off, strictly logical conclusions about the function of the canons and instead toward expansive understandings that better fit the unfixed nature of new media texts. For example, he refashions arrangement as *pattern* in a new media rhetoric, seeing pattern as a concept that refuses to be stationary and tied-down. For Brooke, the new media tools used to create patterns “open up a number of possibilities that take the canon of arrangement beyond the sequentiality of print texts” (112). I see musical rhetoric as taking that emphasis one step further, but without abandoning the helpfulness of the traditional approaches to musical arrangement, development, and form.

**Style**

Elaboration [Style] itself is roughly twice as easy [as disposition/arrangement]: hence it requires little instruction. For one encounters a path which has already been prepared, and already knows for certain where one wants to go.³

*Johann Mattheson (14.32)*

Brooke’s project of envisioning a decentered rhetoric of new media extends into style with a discussion of *perspective*. Unlike traditional visual arts that give the illusion of a single viewer looking at a scene from a single perspective, new media texts in Brooke’s formulation “help us move from the abstracted, single perspective of the reader of a static text or the viewer of a painting to the multiple and partial perspectives

³ Mattheson’s translator chose to name the canons using English words that sound much more alike to the original Latin, using “disposition” (Latin *dispositio*) for what I call *arrangement* and “elaboration” (Latin *elocutio*) for what I call *style*. I follow my terms both because they fit what I have heard most often (but not always) in contemporary rhetorical studies and because Brooke uses them, making my reliance on his book more seamless.
necessary for many forms of new media” (114). A rhetoric of new media—and I would add, of sound—assumes that audiences engage with texts from multiple “angles” (a visual metaphor that doesn’t quite capture the multiplicity involved). Brooke explains that this multiple-perspective view falls under the heading of style because it resists our tendency, inherited from centuries of Aristotelian stylistics, to conceive of a base-line of plain, clear, style-less expression which has then had various tropes and figures added to it ornamentally—the “surgical transplant view” I respond to in chapter two. If composers and audiences come to texts with a true variety of perspectives, then their experiences of texts and meaning-making are so diverse that any discussion of style as ornamentation breaks down. In this, I follow Katz’s work on the epistemic music of rhetoric:

“Contemplative philosophy and socially active rhetoric are unified in the style and arrangement of the text. Art is necessary to make ideas/reality apparent to the senses” (119). That is, all ideas that are then communicated are “styled” in one way or another; there is no style-less discourse. Indeed, “Poetic style is necessary given the human condition” (Katz 89).

But I’m not claiming that style isn’t a valid area of study, just because it suffuses all communication. Composers still make decisions about how much to artfully pay attention to the details of how a given sentence or measure should be written or sounded. From a musical perspective, style is a both/and: style applies to how every note sounds, including its instrumentation and harmonization, but it also describes the art of ornamentation. In a very real sense, composers really do practice the conservative sense of style—that is, they use musical figures to embellish a melody that has already been established as an original, a base-line on which to elaborate later. Indeed, many of the
musical forms explored in the arrangement section above revolve around the assumption that established lines of music will be ornamented and generally messed around with on a repeat—and in the Baroque and Classical eras, those ornamentations were simply expected of performers, not even written out. But as Brooke reminds us, style is more than ornamentation; it’s also the purview of all decisions about how notes will sound at any given moment. So a rhetoric of sound that follows Brooke’s rhetoric of new media emphasizes a union of both the traditional and multiple-views theories of style. Every choice about what a sound should be like is rhetorically situated, but we also group sounds together into gestalts that allow the concept of normal and ornamented to have more footing here than it does with words.

As seen in this section’s epigraph, Mattheson’s view of style-as-ornamentation led him to see style as fundamentally easier than arrangement. He imagined a composer had already written out a practically finished piece of music and then needed ways to give short ornamentations to various melodic phrases, like a trill, mordent, or brief pause. But even those details can be delicate, crucial aspects of the musical message: Crozier told me that “it takes a lot of concentration if I’m going to really work on something. And if I’m working on details I really have to have concentration.” Perhaps to Crozier, style is just as difficult as arrangement, regardless of what Mattheson thought. I see this emphasis on the cognitive attention needed for detail work as an intriguingly different perspective from composer Dan Welcher’s, who says, “I can orchestrate without having to be absolutely fresh, because I treat it as a craft, like woodworking” (McCutchan 89). Orchestrating—the process of deciding which instruments will play which notes in a piece of music—is certainly detail work, too. Yet Welcher takes a view more like
Mattheson’s, that it’s something that can be done with less attention. These attitudes towards the relative importance of style in all its forms continued to crop up in the words of composers in multiple settings.

**Style as Orchestration**

Orchestration is a ripe area for hearing varying perspectives on the composition task, as some composers treat it as a fundamentally important part of composing for orchestras, while others lessen its importance or even hire others to make orchestration decisions. In popular music, a similar continuum exists surrounding cover songs and remixes, which are often seen as less creative than original songs, reflecting our society’s emphasis on Romantic Authorship. (One of many possible exceptions is DJ culture, where the remixer and record spinner is often lauded as a creative musician in his or her own right.) To approach these issues, I want to consider two narratives on the topic of orchestration: a conversation I had with Ron Owen, a composer who insists on doing his own orchestration, and the details surrounding the composition and orchestration of a contemporary film score. In keeping with my theme in this chapter, I find that these narratives both expand our perspective (to use Brooke’s term) on orchestration and musical style. Once again, the lesson is that musical rhetoric defies boundaries or attempts at codification within its multiplicity of practices.

Owen and I spoke about style in the context of comparing traditional orchestral pieces (his preferred instrumentation) with newer and electronic forms of music. Though we didn’t use the word *style*, we spoke about the attention to detail that goes into an orchestral arrangement that will be played by live players as opposed to scores played electronically by computer notation software. (The next section on memory will treat the rhetoric of notation more fully.) Owen emphasized that “there’s nothing like getting
[players] together and playing through some of the music. You hear the difference between an up-bow and a down-bow, the difference between playing it legato or playing it detached. The difference between marcato and spiccato, and things like that. You can never duplicate that electronically.” Those details aren’t simply window-dressing to Owen; he sees them as fundamentally part of the message he sends musically, much of which centers around creating an aesthetic of beauty for audiences to experience. He continued, “And what we’re losing to electronic music is we’re losing a lot of beauty and a lot of nuance that I think is essentially creating good and memorable music. Because it all tends to sound the same.” In other words, the style, the “nuance,” is an irreplaceable part of what makes music “good” at all. In a rhetoric of music, perhaps the style is both an ornamentation to a basic musical line and a fundamental part of how a musical text achieves the nuanced communication that it does.

I responded to Owen by thinking out loud about how that nuance translated into different genres; after all, his musical world is seen as fundamentally old-fashioned to many, especially those who are excited about harnessing digital tools and nontraditional instruments for music. I said:

I like what you say about using nuance. I’m thinking of, there’s a website, or actually a program a friend of mine downloaded. He was really excited cause it made it really easy for him, on his laptop, without a synthesizer, to make hip-hop beats. So you say, how long do you want the loop to be, how many measures, how many beats are in the measure, and where do you want this to go, what kind of sound. So he’s making this—and there’s a sense in which he really did make it. And in one sense it’s really cool,
that he could use this tool to come up with something that he really likes. It speaks to him, at least in some way. But in another sense, it sounds exactly like what anyone else who happened to do that with that program, while using the same sound samples that anyone else. . . . And unlike what you’re saying, where it then would get translated to its final, symphonic form, this is the final form! You can’t translate it anywhere else.

Essentially, I was thinking out loud about issues of style as aided by digital tools or as built in “manually” with the hand of a practiced composer. As I pointed out, there’s a real sense in which my friend’s easily crafted music is rhetorically effective, as it does what he wants it to: mimics the hip-hop genre’s rhythmic conventions in pleasing ways.

But Owen’s response made me consider other ways to think about musical rhetoric:

Well, not to say anything derogatory about hip-hop, but that’s much more basic than something symphonic, where you’re using strings, percussion, woodwinds and brass, maybe harp and maybe voices. There is, that kind of combination provides you with an infinite number of sounds compared to a drum kit, a bass guitar, whatever you’re using, a keyboard, things of that nature. [. . .] I mean, you’re talking about nuance and music. In my opinion, probably the greater composer/orchestrator would be Ravel. Because when you listen to his works, the orchestral colors that he can achieve, through the techniques that he uses are unmatched by anybody. I think. He is, was an absolute master at that. I mean, I would call his music and orchestrations exquisite. Just absolutely exquisite. You know, when
the strings are playing, in their tempo, he knows exactly where they sound the best. The ranges he put them in, and where to put the flutes, and it’s just, he’s an absolute master at that.

The way he contrasts his own work with hip-hop reveals the importance of viewing musical rhetoric through the lens of multiple perspectives, as Brooke advises with new media texts. No one could justifiably claim that hip-hop is rhetorically unsophisticated; its complex layering of spoken meanings with complex studio production results in music that is as powerful, beautiful, and meaningful as any other. But to Owen, whose skills are with traditional orchestral instruments, the sophistication of musical style lays in the complexity and aptness of its orchestration, as Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) is famous for. He fundamentally views music’s potential for complexity and power differently than a hip-hop producer might—who might describe Owen’s compositions as out of date or even ignorant of the possible values that complex studio production might add to his pieces. Again, style emerges as something that fundamentally changes different listeners’ experiences of hearing music, but without any better/worse hierarchy being possible.

Another example of varying perspectives on orchestration is seen in the rhetoric surrounding the original motion picture soundtrack for TRON: Legacy (2010), which got a lot of press attention. Scored by electronic music duo Daft Punk, the score blends traditional orchestral music with ambient beats and synth leads. In the soundtrack’s liner notes, Steven Lisberger, writer/director of the original TRON (1982) and producer of the sequel, seems desperate to emphasize just how important this score is: “Daft Punk has increased TRON: Legacy’s bandwidth, adding depth to the low end, the Soul, and expanding the high end, the Spirit. . . . [T]his is ‘Tronscendency.’” Many other pieces
written about the score also use the fact of the orchestra as an icon of “tronscendency”—a
trend that shouldn’t be surprising, given the trend of non-orchestral musicians to
collaborate with orchestral instruments to give a sense of cultural clout to their work,
such as Metallica, Ben Folds, and the Video Games Live tour. Listen to the inherent
respect for the orchestra in Daft Punk member Thomas Bangalter’s comments in one
interview, “This project is by far the most challenging and complex thing we have ever
been involved with. . . . Coming from our background of making electronic music in a
small bedroom, and ending up having our music performed by a 90-piece orchestra, with
some of the best musicians in the world” (Stanley). Like Owen, he seems to see the
sophistication of orchestration as one of the highest musical points an artist can
achieve—even an artist famous for electronic music like himself.

But it’s interesting to contrast this emphasis on the orchestra with the practices of
much film scoring. Often, a composer writes a bare-bones score—including the melodies,
harmonies, and rhythms that should be in the final product (its invention and
arrangement)—which is then fleshed out by an orchestrator, who, depending on what the
composer provides, may decide which instruments should play which notes and who will
also add musical notations for phrasing, dynamics, and other articulations (its style).

TRON: Legacy is no exception to this standard practice: the liner notes of the soundtrack
album first give credit to Daft Punk—“Music Composed and Produced by Thomas
Bangalter and Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo”—but then, after a space break, the top of
the long list of others involved with the score is given to “Music Arranged and
Orchestrated by Joseph Trapanese.” To some extent, then, Trapanese is the one whose
skill really allowed the “tronscendency” that is spoken of so highly to work in the film’s
score, since he made many (or perhaps most) of the day-to-day decisions about how Daft Punk’s music should be played by the orchestra. He would be the primary person to decide on the different sound qualities of violins and violas, if a brass line should be played by horns, trombones, or both, whether timpani were the best way to find the percussive sound necessary at a given moment, how dramatic a crescendo should be in a crucial scene. Of course, it’s not clear exactly how much control Daft Punk had over these issues; in one interview, Trapanese explains that Daft Punk was insistent that the score be recorded at Air Lyndhurst Studios in London because “They were convinced the brass there, and I also think the acoustics of that particular room make a difference and I think they were right.” President of Music for Walt Disney Pictures Mitchell Leib added, “It was about the brass, it was also about the string players and their attack, their particular attack, the kind of strokes that Daft Punk and Joseph [Trapanese] had in mind” (Bentley). Perhaps, then, the electronic duo was intimately involved with both the decisions about what music to play (invention and arrangement) and how it should be played (style).

However, this is often not the case. Film composers, busy with multiple projects, often leave the detail work to others. Owen even describes how he signed two separate contracts when scoring the music for the film *End of the Spear*: one as composer and one as orchestrator. He insists on orchestrating all of his compositions, describing this as the “labor of realizing the creative ideas” in the music; he thinks orchestrators get far less credit than they deserve. This raises interesting questions about the nature of composing and its relationship to rhetorical communication. Who, after all, is ultimately speaking when such a variety of people affect the ultimate delivery of a piece of music? Touching
on these questions of performed music’s polyvocality, David Burrows, writing about
Henry Purcell’s musical setting of a Dryden dramatic poem, asks, “Is this Dryden's voice,
or perhaps that of the character in Dryden's play? Purcell's? The present performer's, or
that of the original singer in 1692? The listener's voice?” (Sound 73). In the context of
contemporary film music, I would add, “Is this the composer’s voice, as he sketched out
his original intent, or are we hearing the orchestrator’s voice? Or is the music being
primarily shaped for listeners by the conductor? Or perhaps the recording engineers, or
even the creative team behind the film itself or the packagers of the soundtrack, who
surely affect the contexts in which we imagine this music saying something?”
Orchestration is one of many contemporary music recording and distribution practices
that complicates questions of authorial voice—or, in Brooke’s language, of forcing us to
consider the different perspectives people will have on questions of what music means, of
who is “speaking” its messages, and how it will eventually sound.

Memory

When I hear the word memory, I think of computer memory, in terms of hard
drive space and RAM. With computers to store, archive, organize, and provide interfaces
for our information, why talk about human memory at all, and why include it in study of
rhetoric? After all, the canon of memory is almost certainly the most neglected in
contemporary practice, both because of the changes in writing technologies—both analog
and digital—and, according to Brooke, because of the underlying epistemological shaky
ground of presence/absence that memory practices draw uncomfortably to our attention.

In musical composition and practice, however, memory surfaces in a number of
ways, both obvious and subtle, forcing us to pay more attention to its many rhetorical
possibilities. Central to much musical performance, for example, is the traditional sense of memory: humans memorizing music before playing it for others. Performers in many genres are simply expected to memorize incredibly long and complex pieces of music. When improvising, the sharpness of the performer’s memory is also crucial, as successful improvisers draw on a complex set of useful memories of possible ways to respond to a real-time musical situation—say, should he walk up a scale (if so, which one?), or jump from note to note? But beyond performance, composers daily manage issues of memory when deciding how and if they should notate their music on paper. They must ask themselves, in what situations is it better to teach a performer or ensemble a piece of music directly, through personal guidance and step-by-step instruction, and when is a score necessary—and when do traditional scores fail? How do the possible tools used to make scores affect the music’s composition and eventual meaning—and how different is it to write notes onto a piece of paper or play them directly into notation software through a MIDI keyboard? Where does the memory of the computer augment or detract from the memory of the composer? These are rhetorical concerns for the composer in that they affect the music and its delivery, with memory acting as a sort of transition between composition and performance that will affect the music’s final effect on its audience.

Consider the many uses of memory in one example from composer Eric Whitacre, whose virtual choir has garnered a great deal of national attention. As I write this, singers around the world can participate in the third generation of the virtual choir: singers set up their webcam and microphone, put on headphones, and watch a video of Whitacre conducting his piece “Water Night,” a video that shows a line of the choral score, lyrics to sing to that melody, and Whitacre conducting the piece. As the song progresses
visually on screen and with the rest of the choir heard in the headphones, individuals can sing along, recording video and audio of their own performances to upload to the site. The recordings of everyone who participates will later be joined together into a massive, distributed choir of thousands of voices. This entire production is possible because of the various kinds of memory at play. Singers demonstrate a blend of muscle memory (how to produce beautiful notes), memory of this song specifically, and memory of how to respond to conductors’ cues, all while they rely on the digital memory of their computers, which will remember everything faithfully in the video file they upload. The interface of the guiding video they watch also displays a representation of a sort of memory of the music via the score, the choral sounds it plays, and the video of Whitacre conducting. Beyond new users’ participation, memory was a crucial aspect of the piece’s composition: on his website, Whitacre reminisces about the composition of this piece in 1995, when he was at a turning point of considering not to continue pursuing life as a composer. After being convinced that he should stay on this path, he recounts that “I got home, opened up my book of Octavio Paz poetry, and started reading. I can’t really describe what happened. The music sounded in the air as I read the poem, as if it were a part of the poetry” (Whitacre). Whitacre’s piece is thus an embodiment of Paz’s poem’s published form, itself a sort of memorial to the thoughts Paz chose to recount. And when the Whitacre of 2011 recorded video of himself conducting the piece, he was enacting a memory of a past experience of composition, all while the digital memory of his computer captured his performance for others to watch. In short, attending to the issues implied in the canon of memory can heuristically suggest a host of topics that the skilled rhetor must decide on.
Memory as Score

I understood issues of scoring, notation, and live performance better after I heard Jaron Lanier perform on the *khene*, a traditional instrument from Laos. Throughout Lanier’s *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*, he describes MIDI music—a system for digital music that relies on translating exact code into exact sounds—as a metaphor to describe the ways that our practices using computers can hamper human creativity. He expresses concern that “The whole of the human auditory experience has become filled with discrete notes that fit in a grid” (9). Later, he writes:

Outside of hip-hop, digital music usually comes off as sterile and bland. Listen to a lot of what comes out of the university computer music world, the world of laptop-generated chill-out music, or new-age ambient music, and you’ll hear what I mean. Digital production usually has an overly regular beat because it comes out of a looper or a sequencer. And because it uses samples, you hear identical microstructure in sound again and again, making it seem as if the world is not fully alive while the music is playing. (135)

My first reaction to this excerpt was skeptical agreement. *Agreement* because I’ve heard plenty of digital music that sounds lazily un-creative, but *skeptical* because I’ve also heard exciting music that has “an overly regular beat” or relies on samples; amazing things can be made from standardized beginnings. But then, on the weekend when I met Lanier to talk about his compositions, he gave a lecture after the premiere of his piece

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4 It’s a productive coincidence that the *TRON* films also describe the world of the computer as the “grid.” I assume that in that score, the blend of digital and orchestral instruments for the score is meant to echo the discrete, exact, digital perfection of the grid seen in the film, while the orchestral elements reflect the journey of the human bodies that travel there. This is a divide that much of Lanier’s work draws together as well.
“Song for Amelia,” and I heard him play the *khene*. And that was when I realized what he meant about the stifling influence of MIDI.

While playing, Lanier closed his eyes, rocked back and forth, and pushed out a flurry of notes that would defy any attempt at scoring—and which practically defy the word “notes.” It was certainly music, but it was also improvisatory, unrepeatable, and breaking the boundaries of Western tonality. The effect is barely worth describing in words, given the nature of the sounds—and to my ear, even watching the video at http://youtu.be/x59qhN5xzhk (rollinscollege) is less striking and attention-grabbing than hearing the sounds cut through the air in person. These notes could never be represented as a score or faithfully parsed and “explained” by any musical analysis software.

And Lanier knew the complexities of symbolizing live, voiced musical sound in the bars of a score more than anyone. Lanier’s student assistant, Ted Henderson, talked to me about his role with the score of “Song for Amelia” and the nature of the scoring process. First, Lanier recorded a MIDI version of his piece using the program Logic, essentially playing all of the orchestra’s notes, one part at a time, on a MIDI keyboard that recorded the exact timing and sound of Lanier’s playing. (Imagine first playing the violin part into the computer, replicated with a tinny, digital replication of a violin’s sound, and then playing the viola’s part over that, and then playing the cello’s part over that, and so on.) On this part of the process, Henderson commented:

   The way that we worked together was he created a Logic MIDI file—it’s actually ironic, *as hell*, considering his book, because we used these very mediums to create this! *But*, the whole way through, Jaron was constantly
filling my ear with complaints about how faulty the program was. So it’s not like he did it willingly. He did it because it was necessary.

Henderson’s job was to take that scaled down recording (the MIDI file) and produce a written score that could be given to players, allowing them to practice and perform the piece. To do so, Henderson ran the MIDI file through notation software, which was able to detect the exact pitches that were played but could only automatically detect a broken shadow of Lanier’s intended rhythms. That is, the computer was smart enough to know exactly how many instruments were playing at any given moment, exactly what notes they were playing (A? A-sharp?), but not the length of the notes (could be an eighth note or a dotted sixteenth note). Henderson then worked laboriously through each measure in the notation software, adjusting the automatically created score to turn it into something that could then be read and faithfully recreated by an orchestra. At times, this led to a surprising number of translations between the music’s composition and delivery. For example, to score one free-sounding clarinet solo, Lanier first recorded himself improvising on the clarinet and then played his best approximation of that improvisation into Logic with the MIDI keyboard. Henderson then fed that MIDI file into the notation software, where he adjusted the note durations to best match the MIDI sound he was listening to, which led to a printed score that another clarinetist practiced and played in a way that approximated the improvised feel Lanier had in mind. On this process, Henderson said:

I mean, the music on the page, some of the rhythms are simplified, but it is gonna be technically exactly as it should sound. So in fact, in the transferring process, I’m sure that little bits got changed, but what else can
you expect, when you use mediums, what else can you expect? And I
know that Jaron doesn’t have a problem with those changes, I’ve
discussed all of them. He knew what he was getting into, he knows these
programs better than anybody.\footnote{As I mentioned in Lanier’s composer profile in chapter three, he is primarily known as a pioneer of
computer science. The back flap of \textit{You Are Not a Gadget} says he “has worked on the interface between
computer science and medicine, physics, and neuroscience.” Henderson is right: Lanier really \textit{does} know
these programs better than anybody.} So, he knew what he was getting into
when he signed up for the project. And he knew that we were going to
have to use these programs.

In such a situation, one begins to wonder what the use of scores are at all; why not simply
encourage the clarinetist to improvise in a way that seemed best to her at that moment, as
the music might indicate in a Baroque-era score or jazz chart? The answer is complex,
but it surely has something to do with the prerogative of the Romantic Author to guide
each part of his Composition in the way that he sees most fitting, as well as the
expectations of contract musicians who are often much more adept at interpreting
complex scores than at improvising. (See my section on Delivery below for more on
improvisation, a technique that blends the canons of Memory and Delivery.)

As a rhetorical canon, then, memory in the form of scoring allows a functional yet
incomplete way of “storing” a lived, breathed, musical expression in the hopes that others
will be able to breathe life back into it through performance. It’s up to individual
musicians and conductors to decide how much the music-as-sound has to do with the
notes on the page, sometimes taking plenty of liberties and sometimes interpreting as
strictly as possible. If a composition is seen as primarily realized in its score, as a Platonic
ideal of what the piece is “supposed” to be, then alterations to that score can potentially
“ruin” the piece when it’s played. This could be seen in both the small scale and large scale: the audience might gasp if a well-known portion of Beethoven’s fifth symphony were played in a major instead of a minor key, or if a minute of it were replaced by the theme from *Star Wars*, but critics familiar with the piece might even gasp if only one of Beethoven’s marked crescendos were played as a diminuendo. But especially in today’s post-Cagean climate of questioning historically accepted practices of composition, the traditional score is sometimes completely reimagined or done away altogether.\(^6\)

For example, composer Meredith Monk expresses an ambivalence about scoring that I’ve heard echoed in various ways by various voices:

> I use notation as a memory device after I’m happy with the overall structure of a piece. . . . Notation is something I’m struggling with right now. I’ve always been very skeptical of it, and now that I’m getting older, I’m having to cope with the problem of how much I’m leaving to other people. How much can you really get from looking at a piece of paper? It’s so sketchy in relation to what we’re doing, especially the vocal work. . . I don’t know how you would notate some of the vocal work, and I don’t know if I want to or not. I’m struggling with that right now because I do want to pass my work on. . . . In Western culture, paper has sometimes taken over the function of what music always was. I feel that my music is between the barlines: what is really happening is underneath the page, and I don’t know how to deal with that. (Smith and Smith 188-89)

\(^6\) For an engaging set of examples of how composer Roger Reynolds has reimagined the traditional score, see his image-filled *Form and Method: Composing Music*. 
Monk’s comments serve as an important reminder that scores serve as a tool of memory both in the short term, as performers can rely on a score to save time on memorization, and the long term, as they allow a composer to “pass [her] work on,” establishing a work in a sort of cultural, lasting memory. We might say that the tension here is between a view of the true music abiding in a score that can then be realized later on—a view Monk clearly wrestles with—as opposed to a view of the true music occurring only in performance, in the lived, physical action of sounding. Composer Donal Fox expresses this latter view:

I found that I could sit down with very competent, totally trained musicians from both the classical and jazz worlds and improvise in an ensemble setting music as complex as, and at times more interesting than, all that music which is elaborately notated. So I began questioning this overly cerebral, left-hemisphere control over materials, which is almost a justification for this type of art. For me, music is sound, and if it is not happening as a sound source, I don’t care if you have a fancy score or no score. It either moves people or it doesn’t. (Banfield 323)

My first impulse is to cheer: here is a composer praising the importance of music-as-sound that I’ve trumpeted throughout this project. But then I consider the voices that describe the score as an important inventional tool, as the technology that allows some kinds of compositions to happen at all. After all, composing music in long form requires holding an extraordinary amount of material in one’s memory at once. Knowing how one section is developed and orchestrated and how that section interacts with dozens of other
sections is taxing mental work that only gets harder the longer the piece goes on.\footnote{Apparently, the difficulties of this mental work led Aaron Copland to believe that women were unfit for long-form compositional work. Joan Tower tells this story: “In the 1940s, Copland was asked why there were no great women composers, and he said it was because they couldn’t think in long forms. Well, Da Capo [Chamber Players, a group Tower founded] did a concert of his music on his eightieth birthday, and I asked him, ‘Do you have a different opinion now?’ He didn’t answer” (McCutchan 60). The enduring gender (and racial) disparity among contemporary composers is an area much in need of further study.} This is part of why Owen emphasized that his habit of handwriting his scores is the way he is able to produce music in the first place:

I sit at a piano with a large board, just lay it down, it’s about four feet, four and half feet long. I spread my manuscript paper out on that, and I use a pencil with a good eraser. And that’s it, you know? Now most people don’t do that anymore. . . . I think if a composer is serious, if this is the composer’s career, and I was encouraging the composer, I would say that they would have to do both.

The implication is that if students don’t know how to use both pencil and computer, their compositions will suffer. But Owen’s point also reminds us of the rich connection between notation and technology; whether old or new, notation could not exist without communication technology in one form or another.

\textbf{Memory Technologized}

There is a ten-year-old boy (not a student) who comes over to my house every week or so and plays his music for me. He has a MIDI sequencer at home, and his pieces are all polished and notated with his print software. I don’t discourage him for doing that, but I also point out that there’s no substitute for having plain, awesome musical chops: having a great ear, being able to perform well on an instrument, and having a huge, encyclopedic knowledge of music. Composers should know everything.

\textit{John Adams (McCutchan 72)}
Unless music is simply composed and memorized, all other aspects of musical memory involve using tools, whether traditional tools like pencil and staff paper or digital tools like software for notating music and recording MIDI demos. This focus on the tools of memory echoes the importance of tools for all aspects of the musical enterprise, from composition to notation to publication to instrumentation to amplification. Even the way that vocalists refer to their voice as their “instrument” implies a cyborgian view of the body hosting a tool for musical use, which must then be cared for and tuned up just as a violin or oboe must be maintained. Analyzing music composition from a rhetorical perspective brings this technologized aspect of memory to the forefront, following admonitions from our field that the meaning of a message is intimately tied to the technologies that guide its composition and delivery. Indeed, this is part of Brooke’s guiding goal for *Lingua Fracta*: he writes in his “coda,”8 “In our discipline, it is still commonplace to think of technology as one specialization among many, an attitude that I have critiqued elsewhere and find less and less viable as time goes on” (197). Technology, digital or not, is encoded into the way we create and transmit musical meaning.

Furthermore, this integrated attitude toward technology in music was echoed by my research participants, who I found were generally accepting of technological changes in the music composition process. In some ways, this surprised me; I expected to find more frustration with the changes brought about by notation software, perhaps paralleling the many concerns expressed in the writing studies community when word processors...

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8 I’m always impressed by how often musical terms like *coda* work their ways into labels for the organization of print-based works. I’m intrigued by the possibilities of taking the metaphors of music even further as organizational terms for writing. What would it look like to follow a textual recitative with a textual aria? Or to organize an essay like a sonata, with clearly marked theme, development, and recapitulation sections?
became increasingly popular and available. But even those who prefer to work primarily with pencil and paper (Crozier and Owen) seemed to accept the shift to digital notation happily, not expressing any serious problems with the technique—although they chose not to use it.

The “computer as tool” metaphor came up multiple times. Scott Whidden, for example, told me:

I see me sitting down with an acoustic guitar or me sitting down with a sampler or me sitting down with a computer and a bunch of noises—they’re the same thing. It’s just another tool. It’s just another way. . . . To solve this problem in my head, I need a screwdriver, right? I need a hammer. Or I need a—it’s just another tool. . . . There is a song and all I’m doing is trying to scrape away the residue to try to make the song come to life. And whatever I can use to do that.

Like Whidden, Stella Sung seems to downplay the use of a computer, having adapted it into her process—she writes first drafts of pieces directly into notation software. She told me:

Well I think it’s a matter of what works best for each person. . . . I think since I did my first orchestral score by hand, the old fashioned way—you know my masters’ thesis was by hand and without using pen and ink, and vellum paper, and had use a ruler and line up, it’s just very, very tedious. So on one hand it’s nice cause it’s your calligraphy, and it’s your score, you know it’s your manuscript. On the other hand for practical purposes I would not write an orchestral score any more if I had to do it by hand. It’s
just way too time and energy consuming. So for me, the computer is a
great tool. And some people will think it kind of hinders them or hampers
their creativity, and I think it’s just a matter of what works best for each
person. I think it’s nice to have your own manuscript, and I usually have
my students do at least something by hand, but in my opinion it would be
a little old fashioned of me to insist that they write everything by hand and
bring in only manuscript paper.

Sung’s comments are notable both for her practical approach to a topic that some see as
an emotional issue and for her description of what’s better about having a handwritten
score. There seems to be a sense of individual expression and identity that is infused into
a handwritten score; according to Sung, that’s when it becomes “your score, you know
it’s your manuscript.” But on a computer screen, where everyone’s musical handwriting
is standardized into the same calligraphy, she implies that some ephemeral quality of the
individual is lacking. The parallels to word processing are obvious here: no college
teacher expects students to turn in handwritten essays, due to the speed and legibility
offered by word processors. Yet I wonder how many people still find the personal touch
lacking in standardized fonts?

My research participant Matt Gomes studied music composition as an
undergraduate student before beginning graduate work in rhetoric and composition, and
he describes himself as having experienced music teachers who were more insistent on
handwritten scores than Sung is:

You know, for me I always kind of started notating on the computer, that’s
how I started notating music, is on the computer, so. That was, for me, I
never had a real issue with that. I had some instructors who didn’t want us
to do that, that didn’t want us to write at a computer. You know they
preferred us to write at a piano, and then transcribe it. But I never really
took that advice, because [laughs, unintelligible], I was a lot faster on a
computer! So that’s where I did most of my writing.

Of course, music can be written out even without computer technologies, just as essays
can be written without word processors. And access to that technology changes both the
speed with which composers can work and, perhaps, the kind of individual expression
that is present in a score. One semester, Gomes experienced this firsthand: “But there was
one semester when I didn’t have a computer, so I had to write everything by hand. It was
awful, actually, because I had to take an arranging class that semester, and so my scores
had to look, like perfect.” Gomes experienced what seems like a shift in values, where the
qualities of one set of technologies (the perfect legibility of the software-produced score)
became expected in another (his handwritten work).

And in a recursive move back to the problems of what scores mean, once written
down, Gomes’s comments about his technology use naturally moved him into a
discussion of scores. He seemed to loosen up more when talking about this, as if
expressing his frustrations at his own experience handwriting scores opened him up to
discuss frustrations at the wider issues of scoring in general. On the topic of music
notation, he said:

Well I think it holds us back from a lot, I think it holds us back from the
idea that people can make music outside of the text! And that’s the part of
my education that I think I’m resistant to, the emphasis on that text, the
emphasis on being able to read music, the emphasis on being able to play particular kinds of instruments. . . . Because I think—it’s still the dominant way of representing music textually is by staff paper, by that sort of set up, so you would write it down on a staff. I mean, when I look at that, all I see is a bunch of prison cells. You know? [Laughs] Those bars, they’re caging in this music.

Following the lead of Derrida and his followers’ critiques of logocentrism in other areas of discourse, Gomes finds the same cultural problems at work surrounding notation—or, in the terms of this chapter, in the textual tools and strategies we’ve devised to combat problems of memory when composing and presenting complex messages, especially when we want someone else to present our messages for us. Gone is any of Sung’s desire for a personalized manuscript, and in its place is an emphasis on the music as delivered, freed from any technology that supposedly solidifies it on the page or screen.

Indeed, Gomes also touched on the connection between notation, technology, and the eventual delivery of a piece. Speaking of the scoring process, he said, “I mean it does, it did have an impact on the way that I thought instruments could perform, right? So if I’m writing for violin or piano, I wrote these like insane lines on the computer, and then I’d have this expectation that the players would be able to play those things, and also like in my recital I had to chop a few, but rearrange a few of the lines.” That is, a focus on the technologies of memory can become so much a focus that the final delivery becomes forgotten, or at least less attended to. And as we’ll see, the delivery of music is in many ways the part that matters the most.
**Delivery**

Indeed, it matters less what sort of things we have composed within ourselves than how we utter them, because people are affected according to what they hear.

*Quintilian (11.3.2)*

In his attention to refraiming the canons for the world of new media, Brooke describes a rhetorical delivery that is shaped by *performance*. Delivery as performance focuses on the act of performing/delivering itself, as opposed to the idea that delivery is simply the means by which ideas are perfectly communicated from sender to receiver. Indeed, all content is shaped by its delivery, however invisible that performance seems to be. “Particularly in the case of delivery,” Brooke writes, “we must consciously resist the impulse to reduce that canon to a transitive, instrumental process of transmission” (177).

A protection against Brooke’s warning is found in musical rhetoric, where the nature of the “transmission” itself resists any attempts to simplify meaning into content that is perfectly understood. In fact, this single fact of music’s indefinable meanings has inspired countless publications (ancient and contemporary) in aesthetics and music studies as people try to put their finger on what music means. In musicologist Joseph P. Swain’s words, “The ancient paradox of musical semantics is simply this: music seems full of meaning to ordinary and often extraordinary listeners, yet no community of listeners can agree among themselves with any precision that comes close to natural language about the nature of that meaning” (45). Philosopher Susanne K. Langer insists that this is a strength of music, not a problem (as I suspect Brooke would as well), writing, “What is here criticized as a weakness, is really the strength of musical expressiveness: that music *articulates forms which language cannot set forth*” (233). Musical performance is thus the situation where nondiscursive, yet meaningful communication is distributed to
audiences, not as perfectly understandable meanings, but as forms that associatively participate in the minds of the audience to create multiple meanings through multiple processes.

How do composers manage this bizarre, yet somehow natural exchange from a rhetorical perspective? What light does the nature of musical delivery/performance shed on our understanding of the rhetorical act? Two areas of delivery that came up repeatedly in my interviews were collaboration and improvisation, both of which offer specifically musical angles to the art of delivery. Yes, writers also collaborate, but it is in the staged arts that it reaches new levels of interest for the scholar of rhetoric. A speech can be performed collaboratively, but with far less of the nuance available to performers coming together with multiple instruments to share a musical vision that was either created by them or by someone else. These issues came up commonly in my interviews: how composers write for particular players, how they view their interactions with others (as co-creators, or as merely the means to the end of the inspired auteur?), and how the reality of playing music with others changes the nature of musical meaning.

Improvisation also surfaced as a distinctly musical rhetorical move, whether the improvisation stems from jazz or other genres. Improvisation also has a tidy way of tying together the artistry of the other canons: individuals (often in collaboration with each other) invent an experience in real time that nevertheless follows the loose arrangement (harmonic and rhythmic changes) of the piece. They then try both to stay within the asserted style and surprise the audience with interesting jumps away from it, all while relying on memories from countless hours of practice of what kinds of scales would work in a given, live situation.
Performance as Collaboration

When I spoke to Lanier, it was in a crowded, bustling chapel where he was about to hear the first rehearsal of his piece for choir and orchestra “Song for Amelia,” a nerve-wracking uncertainty that came up repeatedly in our interview. He said:

I mean you know what’s funny about this, is I haven’t heard how this thing really came out as a real piece of music yet, so, in a way, I almost feel like saying, “Let’s see if it really is good first.” I mean everyone here seems to think it’s okay, so it’s good. But I mean I personally haven’t really heard it as its real thing yet, so. It’s possible that everything I tell you is about how to do it badly, you know? [Laughs] Until we hear how this thing came out.

His emphasis on the performed piece as the “real piece of music” is a worthwhile reminder for students of musical rhetoric, especially those accustomed to poring mainly over scores and merely “playing” the music in their heads as they read it. No matter how technically and formally brilliant a piece is, its quality and meaning are difficult (if not impossible) to ascertain until it is delivered as a musical oration. Yet this piece for orchestra and choir could only be experienced in reality through the coordinated effort of literally hundreds of other people. Earlier, in the section on invention, I mentioned the speed with which a composer can instantly hear and respond to the sounds of a composition by playing the piece (or a reduced score) on the piano; however, even that benefit of music can only go so far. To truly experience what a piece will mean in delivery, it often has to be sounded collaboratively.

Owen said something along the same lines in a quotation I shared above, emphasizing the importance of hearing music played, in the context of a discussion of the
nuances available to a composer for live musicians as opposed to a composer who works in electronic music. He said, “There’s nothing like getting them together and playing through some of the music. You hear the difference between an up-bow and a down-bow, the difference between playing it legato or playing it detached. The difference between *marcato* and *spiccato*, and things like that. You can never duplicate that electronically.”

Owen has heard thousands of string players bow something legato or detached; he’s surely not surprised by the effect each has and can predict with some degree of certainty which he prefers (another area where the canon of memory bleeds into the canon of delivery in studies of musical rhetoric). Yet he stills insists that there is “nothing like getting them together and playing through some of the music.” Composers often seem to speak of the delivery of music in this way, giving it an almost mystical, difficult to describe prominence. Of course, performers don’t always do what you hope they will. For example, in an email interview, Greg Sandow told me that in his pieces, many of which blend concert music with jazz and rock sensibilities, “I've had to grit my teeth when people with no sense of rhythm try to play jazz sections,” and, “In the Elvis variation in the Mahler piece, I mark the accompaniment to be played like a rock & roll backbeat, and on two occasions musicians haven't known what that means, let alone how to feel it.” Yet these collaborative blunders don’t stop Sandow or any other composers from creating music for performance; no composer that I know of has turned to privately writing music with no expectation of it ever being played. In his book *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener*, composer Roger Sessions looks at this issue from the performer’s end, wrestling with the tension between mechanically reproducing the notes on a score and invigorating them with his own style. He concludes
that all excellent performances must have both “fidelity, not so much to the text as to the music as expressed in the text” (which assumes that the performer has an impression of the music lurking behind the text) and “conviction as animated by the musical nature of the performer.” Without these two, “it is hardly music” (qtd. in Fisk 331). The assumption is that music’s musicality, its sense of artistry, can only be achieved in performance, which often involves the collaboration of a performer who somehow takes on a teaspoon of credit for “composing” the piece, if composing dwells in any act that leads to the eventual sounding of a piece of music.

In fact, the messy, collaborative nature of performing music is an attractive part of the nature of composing for some, as they begin to see how a piece comes together in new ways when played live. Libby Larsen’s story of collaborating with the Cleveland Quartet is one of my favorite on this score:

For instance, I wrote a piece for the Cleveland Quartet and then went to work with them. We spent the entire time as if we were in a painting studio, coloring the phrases this way and that. We all got to explore a lot—it was marvelous! In a sense we were all composing. The quartet members were part of the process, as they should have been. The piece itself was still being made, even though it was fully realized on paper. It’s like rehearsing a play: how many ways can you say a particular line? Chamber music gives everyone the opportunity to explore what they know how to do and apply it to a piece of music. It also allows a piece of music to show players what they can do. (McCutchan 146)
Larsen’s vision of composing is clearly larger than some, as she gives credit to the players for fulfilling and completing her early idea of what the finished text should sound like. I find her comparison to rehearsing a play especially intriguing. Many times I’ve had the experience of reading a play at home only to later be amazed to hear how much more vibrant and emotional the lines become when performed. Seen this way, music seems less and less to even exist until heard; after all, a play’s meaning can be understood quite well on the page, even if in performance a vibrancy and immediacy is added. But music on paper lacks a play’s basic meaning until it is heard. Composer Shulamit Ran turns to the metaphor of fire to help explain this dynamic: “The impact of performers on my work is very pronounced. I can think of all sorts of examples where knowing the performer inspired how I was going to make a piece. Even the way that I perceive the relationships between players in an ensemble determines things. It offers fuel for the fire; it makes the sparks fly” (McCutchan 120).

But not everyone agrees when collaboration should begin. Joan Tower, for instance, tells a story in a published interview about taking her first orchestral score to another composer who didn’t notice how “vulnerable” and “nervous” she was as he proceeded to tell her the many ways she should improve it. Now, she says, “I don’t show my music to anyone until after it’s been premiered” (McCutchan 57). I also asked Crozier if he shares his work with others as part of his compositional process, given that his students work in an extremely collaborative environment. He seemed uncertain about how to answer:

Not usually until the end. It’s funny how I try to keep it hidden until the end. Now some people, if I’m working at home and my family’s around,
they might hear something—but they don’t usually pay that close attention. But it’s a little bit, I don’t know, it’s somehow a little bit of a *private* thing, the working process. Because you don’t want people to hear something that’s not the way you want to present it yet.

In some ways, I find this attitude continues to put the emphasis on the delivery of the music as the crucial element: by reserving the complete, finished delivery for a formal performance, Crozier and Tower both exert a control over how the work will be heard, and thus how it will eventually mean. Larsen and Ran’s emphasis on the creativity and importance of co-creating with performers—something that Tower’s and Crozier’s habits don’t necessarily preclude—also emphasizes the heard nature of music, though with less of an emphasis on authorial control. Of course, authorial control is challenged even more when composers purposefully work in places for performers to create a new text at each performance.

**Improvisation**

Rhetorician Gregory Clark makes a connection between collaboration and improvisation that my research on composers supports. At the end of his thoughtful chapter on the ways studies in rhetoric can be inspired by jazz practice, Clark eventually says that improvisation is one of the most important lessons rhetoricians can learn from jazz. He writes that improvisation “offers a starting point for thinking about resolving the conflict of individual and community in ways that conventional terms of rhetoric don’t allow” (44). After all, a jazz soloist is both taking off on a new, unexpected direction and also fitting that solo into the collective net of the tune the combo as a whole is playing; both individuality and collective identity are crucial. And in a mysterious way, audiences are invited to participate in both that individuality and collectivity, perhaps more in
improvisatory music than in any other. It is here that Burke’s rhetoric as identification returns most noticeably, as musical messages become the means by which soloist, combo, and audience begin to identify with each other in a sensual, conversational manner. Improvisation can also be said to tie together the canons of memory and delivery, as I mentioned above: performers take all the memories they’ve developed of how certain styles and harmonies could go and implement them into a performance in real time. Composer Luciano Berio makes this connection explicitly in a published interview, saying, “Jazz improvisation . . . is based on the rapid extraction of musical modules and instrumental gestures from the great reservoir of memory, and it is also based on speed of reaction to one’s partners and to oneself—it’s somewhat similar to the rapid reflexes involved in the act of speech” (Fisk 434).

Writing about Haydn’s improvisatory music, where classical keyboardists would have been expected to improvise with stylistic ornaments and extended measures, musicologist Tom Beghin asks a question that has threaded its way throughout my project, “How can a composer respect the performer's right to improvise, vary or alter passages, while remaining in control of his own agenda, or the overall intended effect of the piece?” (157-58). I believe jazz improvisation—and indeed, many other forms of improvisatory music in the last one hundred years—begins to answer Beghin’s question. Composers can lay out a vision for a piece that allows spaces for improvisation and then write it out in a way that leaves spaces for those with the “chops”—the rhetorical memory—can be trusted to take over. Beghin asks the logical question that in effect says, “How can the composer exert control?” Jazz improvisation answers, “It’s not the control that counts—it’s the performance.” Composer John Zorn might add that this focus on the
performance is also a way of honoring the musicians: “You don’t tell a great improviser what to do—they’re going to get bored right away” (McCutchan 164). And this excitement of the performers is surely likely to make the performance better, even if this comes at the lessening of the score’s importance.

Furthering Clark’s connection between rhetoric and improvisation, composer Earle Brown connects an ever-different, unpredictable delivery of his music with its communicative function, perhaps implying that uncemented music is more like real conversations, which never go the way we expect. Comparing his aesthetic to Jackson Pollock’s, he says:

I have felt that the conditions of spontaneity and mobility of elements with which I have been working create a more urgent and intense “communication” throughout the entire process, from composing to the final realization of a work. I prefer that the “final form” which each performance necessarily produces, be a collaborative adventure and that the work and its conditions of human involvement remain a “living” potential of engagement. (Chase 300)

His “collaborative adventure” parallels Brian Eno’s formulation of composing being more like gardening more than architecture, an art that requires a composer to have a grand vision for the exact final product. Instead, Eno says that in both gardening and music, “what one is doing is working in collaboration with the complex and unpredictable processes of nature. And trying to insert into that some inputs that will take advantage of those processes, and as Stafford Beers said, take you in the direction that you wanted to go” (Eno). Again, I return to Beghin’s question about how a composer like
Haydn can control his musical communication. Eno’s answer might be, “Control? I never claimed to control how my music would be performed—or how you experienced it, for that matter. All I’m interested in is planting some seeds.”

My research participant Scott Whiddon connected this practice of improvisation—of helping the seeds of a composition grow—to the rest of his life, encompassing his work in a local band, as a film composers, and as a writing teacher:

I think a good band knows the songs, but when they get up on stage and they realize something isn’t working they better have their chops honed enough so that they can improv their ways in and out, and especially out, of things that come up in a live situation. I think great teachers, they know their chops, they know their scales, and they know their content. And they have a lesson plan going in, they have their set list, but to see, in that moment, there isn’t that connection, something’s not happening, there isn’t that energy, the set isn’t going well, then you can improv and do another way or rethink what’s going on on the fly, and that takes a lot of time and a lot of practice. And luckily my work life, my teaching, and my other life, doing music, in a pop band, doing a film score, I get to practice that all the time. Doesn’t always work. [Laughs]

Whiddon’s connection draws us to an important lesson that literacy scholars have known for years: performing music feels like performing teaching because life is performative. That is, we both consciously and unconsciously choose what aspects of our identities (or our memories, in this canon-based context) to perform in any given situation, putting on
one set of behaviors when we’re literally on a musical stage and another set when we’re leading a classroom.

**The Future of Performance**

I want to end this section on delivery with two quotations from research participants who discussed the changing nature of performance. They’re joined by a host of other voices who wonder how traditional musical performances are changing in the face of digital media. These fears are especially strong in the concert music world, where a young base of music fans often feels distanced by the hundred-year-old traditions of the classical music concert. But instead of hashing out all those arguments and frustrations here, I want to focus on the concerns of the composers I spoke with.

Stella Sung and I spoke a good deal about her piece *The Circle Closes*, which blends light design and the use of four crystal bowls with a traditional orchestral piece of music. (See chapter three for more details on that piece.) She tied that artistic decision to a trend she sees in the nature of performance in general:

> I think more people, at least they’re looking for some kind of a visual, whether it’s large screens or whether it’s something else, something else in the hall, whatever. But we’re just—technology has shaped and changed our lives so much that people’s expectations are just so different than the concert experience. And the big question is for the orchestras—which are sort of traditional, catered traditionally to audiences that are older, maybe more educated, quote-unquote—it’s harder! I think the orchestras are having a very difficult time. . . . Many of them have closed, or shut down, many are looking at budget cuts all over the place, looking at what is
going to bring them closer to, what is going to bring audiences to their concerts. So. And it’s hard! It is.

In the context of this chapter, I read Sung’s heartfelt points about changes in performance practices as another voice in support of the importance of live music. In an age where recordings are increasingly easily distributed (a whole other area we could easily discuss in this discussion of delivery), the rhetorical choices that go into the composition and delivery of a musical text are worthy of the close attention that a concert hall is so well suited for.

Unless it isn’t. I also find myself haunted by the point Greg Sandow made to me about an untapped connection between traditionally live and traditionally recorded music:

I guess another frontier we haven't penetrated much is the use of digital production in concert music. Of course this is standard in pop. Music is created, produced for recording. In classical music, it's almost always produced for live acoustic performance. I'm surprised that more classical composers haven't created pieces for recording, using all the techniques of pop production. The most prominent case of someone doing this is Michael Gordon, in his album *Light is Calling*. The whole point of that album was to produce it like a pop record. I think it's stunning. And, as I said, I'm surprised that more composers haven't done it.

As rhetoricians considering the impact of digital technology—including various forms of ever-easier, ever-cheaper recording—we need to remember the ways that delivery changes in the face of technological change. Many in our field have attended to this wisely, but there is still more work to be done, especially as we consider the changes
from a composer’s point of view—especially those composers who work in fields where live delivery is the standard. Perhaps, as Sandow suggests, this implies that composers can fold the eventuality of delivery-through-recordings into the whole of their composition process, deciding like Michael Gordon to produce their orchestral pieces “like a pop record,” using some of the tricks available there that can’t be produced on a stage. Perhaps it means that more composers will follow the steps of those like Gabriel Prokofiev, whose *Concerto for Turntables and Orchestra* was released on a CD with the five-movement concerto followed by eleven remixes of the concerto composed by various DJs and producers. In a world of increased options, then, the musical rhetorician’s choice must be how much to rely on traditional models of delivery and how much to adapt.
INTERLUDE 2

My parents kept their stereo components—all old, from the 60s and 70s—in an antique cabinet. I pulled them out so often to look at the connections in back that the cabinet shelves were scraped clean of finish, inscribing over time a scratched arc like a sunset, or an expanding sound wave.

Eventually I realized that the audio-out jack from the TV could be connected to the audio-in jack on the cassette player. I hooked it up, precariously balanced on a ledge next to the TV, and plugged in a set of headphones.

With this setup, I could grab anything that came out of the TV’s speakers, capturing it on tape like a salmon-hungry bear poised next to a whitewater river. I made one tape of TV theme songs—something my sister had done years earlier but without the fidelity I was now able to achieve. I was the best ever. I filled up an entire tape of the music from Final Fantasy III, meticulously cuing up different areas in the game and fading out artistically at the end of each track. I began grabbing my favorite lines of dialog from movies to later splice into the introductions of songs on mixtapes for friends.

I don’t ever remember explaining myself to my family. But I must have said something, dashing to the TV and yelling at people to let me change the channel at 2:59 because Duck Tales came on at 3 and I would be damned before I missed that theme song again.

*
When will you stop listening to so much mainstream stuff? asked my friend’s brother when he saw me wearing yet another Smashing Pumpkins t-shirt during tenth grade. I didn’t have an answer. I wanted to listen to everything, to be like the guys in *High Fidelity* and know the ins and outs of thousands of songs. The perfectly crafted mixtape was a holy pursuit.

But in musical selection, I always went deep, rather than broad. I spent money on yet another twenty-five-dollar bootleg import of Smashing Pumpkins concerts rather than the indie band that my friend and his brother whispered quietly about at lunch, afraid someone might hear, leak news of the band to the mainstream media, and thus ruin them forever.

And instead of *High Fidelity*, when I thought of movies with music I loved, I thought of those moments of warm wonder when music folded unexpectedly into the narrative, stealing attention away from the actors. In *The Wizard*, when Real Life’s “Send Me an Angel” accompanies a montage of the teenage trio hitchhiking through the American West. In *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, when the future-people wearing heavy drapes for robes and huge sunglasses worship Bill and Ted with their soaring air guitar. In *The Goonies*, when Mikey’s speech imploring Andy not to ride the bucket is accompanied by a gently descending synthesizer lead over a tentative orchestra.

I never ran home eager to play five new records that I had just bought. I put *Mega Man 3* into the Nintendo, got comfortable, and listened to the changing rhythms of every level’s background music, over and over and over.

*
Try it again, said my friend Matt. But *e-nun-ci-ate* this time.

It annoyed me that he felt like he had to give me directions, but I let it go. I once again pushed and held *record* on the Yak Back—a small, one-recording-at-a-time digital recorder for kids in the 90s—that we had stolen from my brother’s room. Holding the Yak Back to my mouth, I carefully said, What is this backwards? and then let go of the button.

Then I pushed *reverse*, and heard the same sentence played backwards.

Push it again, he said, we’ve got to hear it enough times to get it right. I paused, angry, but then I pushed *reverse* again. We listened to the sentence in reverse five, ten times, its rhythms sounding ever more inhuman, as if it the machine were taking something from me every time I heard my own voice played that way.

When I felt like I had the backward sounds firmly in my mind, I held *record* again. This time when I spoke into the microphone, I tried to replicate the sounds I had just heard. I tried to talk backwards.

No no no, said Matt, grabbing the Yak Back from my hand and turning his back on me. Without even listening to my attempt, he held *record* and recorded his own impression of the backward sentence. Then he turned around and hit *reverse*.

The sound was amazing: a distorted, imperfect, but recognizable sentence: “Whaaaat . . . isthids. BECKworrrrrdsz.” A reversed, and then reversed again, version of my original recorded question. It worked: Matt had spoken backwards. This was something humans could do. The results weren’t usable in actual conversation, of course. It was like we had put a fruit roll-up in the washing machine and then found it was still edible—awesome, but so what? But it had been done.
And Matt was smiling. He had been the first one to do it, that was why.

*

Over and over, I listened to the introduction to Mary J. Blige’s *What’s the 411?* album. The track pretends to be Blige’s answering machine, which is filled with the voices of famous hip hop stars and producers calling her and leaving crazy messages, all with a phat beat underneath.

Eventually, I recorded my own version, complete with sounds I recorded of a phone dialing a number and getting the machine. I then had all my friends record a silly message or two using different voices—but this time it was *my* pretend machine, not Mary J. Blige’s. I put it all together over the instrumental track on Kriss Kross’s “I’m Real” CD single.

When I listened to it, I felt like a little girl hosting a tea party for her dolls: surrounded by imaginary people who were all focused with laser levels of complete attention on *me*.

*

The other day, my wife and I were listening to one of her old Ben Folds Five albums, and one track came on that is just a recording of Folds’s father leaving a message on the answering machine, played over a track of music.

I always used to skip that track, my wife said. She looked over at me, driving. But I bet you’ll love it.

I’m sure I’ve never played Mary J. Blige or my old “answering machine” tape for her. But I smiled, impressed at how well she knows me.

*
There were a couple years in college when I nearly fell asleep at every music recital I attended. And I went to a lot of them, as part of the grade for my music lessons. When my nodding grew dire, I would dig my nails into the skin on my hands, trying to keep myself awake without drawing blood and creating another scar on my hand like the one from that Broadway show I nearly slept through in high school.

A few years after graduating, I attended an organ concert, terrified that my old sleeping habit would return. Organ sounds, as varied as they are, quickly dull into a milky musical haze that drips half the room into sleep. I like to imagine an organ concert where strangers finally give up and lean their heads on each other’s shoulders, laps, grateful for a collective giving up on social conventions.

But this concert was different. The organist played Philip Glass’s “Mad Rush,” a mind-numbing, thirteen-minute, repetitive piece that somehow latched onto my attention like no organ sounds ever had before. As the piece moved from raucously loud to quietly droning moments, over and over and over, I felt like I was on drugs, literally leaning forward with my mouth open, shocked at the sounds.

Two years later, I still remembered the experience and instantly insisted on buying a used CD of Glass playing the piece on the piano when I found it in a used record store. Though not as outlook-changing as hearing the piece live on the organ, “Mad Rush” still delivered. I listened to that track more than any other.

Recently, I finally bought the sheet music so I could play the piece at home on the piano. I practice it two or three times a week, obsessed with losing myself to the repetitions, the utterly sublime boringness of the thing in its entirety.
But I’ve found that it’s harder to listen to the CD, now that I’ve practiced it on the piano. I always know what’s coming next. I think, “Oh, this is the medium section coming up . . . now. Oh, and the bass is going to imply a minor chord this time . . . now.” It’s not an adventure any more.
CHAPTER 5: STUDENTS UNDERSTANDING AND MAKING MUSIC

Introduction

[O]ur understanding of those factors that contribute to teaching and learning musical composition is still limited.

*Margaret Barrett (196)*

[M]usical experimentation tends to discontinue as students reach middle school age. . . . In sum, there is a concerted movement from process-oriented learning (where students have a voice and say in their own learning) to product-oriented learning (where students are being told what to play and how to play it).

*John L. Vitale (24)*

Early in my college career, I misjudged a musical-rhetorical situation. As a newly declared double major in English and music, the piano faculty gathered in an office to hear me play a piece of my choosing, hoping to get a sense of my skill. To me, the decision was easy: I would play “The Force Theme” from my piano book of *Star Wars* music. I hadn’t had lessons for three or four years—I was only taking lessons now because they were a free perk of declaring a music major—and my lessons had never been from teachers who emphasized classical music. But that was fine, I figured.

As I sat down and announced what I would play, opening my book to the correct page (the black and white score facing a glossy photo of Luke Skywalker looking wistfully at the double suns of Tatooine), I immediately could sense that I had done something wrong. My teacher quickly said, “Oh, we don’t need to hear that,” as she stood up and closed the book on the piano. Another teacher looked awkwardly at the first,
paused, and asked me, “How long have you been playing?” And without anyone saying
why, my show-them-what-you’ve-got session dissolved into a words-only interview.
When I left, I knew I had been some kind of a disappointment, but I wasn’t sure why.

By the time I graduated, I understood. Though this department occasionally
encouraged the playing and practicing of non-classical music—the strong jazz program,
the occasional Broadway song or rock piece at a student recital—it existed primarily to
teach the history and practice of composing and performing Western concert music. By
bringing in Star Wars, I was implying both that I didn’t know about the accepted canon
of piano music and that I didn’t care. The piano faculty gathered excitedly to hear each
new piano student because they were eager to find a new serious student of piano, the
kind who had prepared for college-level study his whole life, who had all of Bach’s
inventions memorized. I wanted lessons as a way to reset my brain after hours of writing
essays and reading Chaucer, so I could pound out piano versions of tunes by The
Smashing Pumpkins and Pink Floyd in the rehearsal rooms at midnight. My misread of
the situation was never explained to me, but through the process of attending classes and
recitals over the years, I slowly grew into the discourse conventions shared by the
department. I found that I could stretch the strict canonical boundaries in a number of
acceptable ways—say, by playing the harshly atonal (yet canonized) piano music of Béla
Bartók at recitals. But the boundaries could only be stretched in predefined directions,
like being in a room with thousands of doors, some of which were secretly locked.

This chapter focuses on undergraduate music students enrolled in music
composition classes precisely because I find this process of acculturation to discursive
norms so compelling a topic. Unlike the composers discussed in chapters three and four,
the participants in this chapter are relatively new to the composition process. They are transitioning into a knowledge of the grammar and rhetoric of musical communication, as they practice the individual skills required for notation and voicing alongside the situational skills of knowing how to invent and arrange pieces in particular genres for particular audiences. Locked in the room with thousands of doors, many of them are still trying to decide which they may open, which they ought to leave closed, and which to chop into pieces.

I focus on five students who were enrolled in a composition practicum course in a traditional music department at a small liberal arts college in the South.¹ This course is worth two credits instead of the usual four at their college, and composition students repeat it as many times as they choose. (One of my participants, Ben, took it each fall and spring during his four undergraduate years, a common practice.) The professor of this practicum, Dr. Goodwin, meets with small groups of students weekly. Their instruction includes careful study of the scores and recordings of various kinds of concert music, but the focus is on the students’ work, both their responses to various prompts—to write perhaps a short piece for brass quintet or a piece with a single instrument that conveys an assigned emotion—and their work for the end-of-semester composition recital. Students aren’t required to participate in the recital, but they’re encouraged to, and many spend much of the semester workshopping the pieces they hope to eventually share there with the rest of the department. I visited each of these sections early in the Fall 2010 semester, participating informally in the conversation of class for the day. Five students eventually

¹ I’ve given pseudonyms to all five students and to their composition teacher. To protect their anonymity, I purposefully avoid describing them with identifying features. That is, it’s not an accident that I don’t include descriptions of students’ appearances, like Russell Durst’s physical description of the girl with “eyes that seemed to register her feelings” (24); instead, I prefer to focus on their words.
accepted my offer to meet once, and I met with three of them a second time to hear some more of their work as it had progressed. I also attended the composition recital at the end of the semester, where two of my five participants presented their work (out of the ten pieces performed that night).

Why Students?

In a discussion of musical syntax, musicologist Joseph P. Swain writes, “The constant, if unconscious, thought that not just anybody could bring off what is put before our eyes and ears is an essential part of the aesthetic effect” (38). Audiences cram in to performance and display spaces, hoping to be amazed, brought into a sublime space that is beyond their understanding. In many ways, music composition students are apprentices of these effects in audiences. They study specialized techniques and workshop the emotional resonance of peers’ pieces in hopes of achieving the effect Swain speaks of: an awed audience that sees the finished work as an achievement that they couldn’t “bring off” on their own.

But art is changing. More than perhaps at any other time in history, professionals compete with amateurs whose skills with easily accessible, easily masterable, easily distributable software allow them to achieve their aesthetic effects even without the training of professionals. Whether we choose to critique this amateurism or praise it, we can’t ignore it; the nature of the relationship between creator and audience is fundamentally in flux. I see young composers in traditional music composition programs as straddling these changing notions of what art is, who gets to create it, and who will listen. Some come to composition courses with their eyes set on the work of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, hoping to achieve for others the sublime effects they have experienced listening to recordings and concerts of this canonized work. But others arrive
steeped more thoroughly in the music of singer-songwriters, electronica, and metal, music that seems both more accessible to listeners and more possible to create well than the classical masterworks they’re exposed to in their college classes. Underlying this entire chapter, then, is the lingering issue of how the values students bring to composition class clash with the values they find once they arrive. This has also been the focus of much scholarship in composition and rhetoric: the question of how exactly teachers of writing can and should value the work students do outside of class—their self-sponsored literacies—as opposed to introducing them to new grammars and rhetorics that may ignore what they already know (e.g. Shannon Carter; Sternglass; Roozen; Bronwyn Williams). That is to say that even as I explore the experiences of a small set of students, the disciplinary concerns of my field are never far from view. These questions are always present: How do these music students’ experiences—learning traditional forms, navigating influences, taking classes, preparing performances—suggest new ways of understanding English composition students’ experiences? And how do those experiences suggest I adapt my English composition pedagogies?

Of course, many of the concerns these students told me echoed the issues I’ve already discussed in chapters three and four: thinking about audiences, influence, and the canons of rhetoric. This overlap is partly due to my interview questions, as I asked similar questions in all of my interviews, and partly due to the natural overlap between the concerns of students, professionals, and amateurs making music. Therefore, I make an effort here to draw attention to where the students’ voices offer something different—where they sounded the most studenty. That is, I focus especially on the concerns of students: the composition pedagogies they experience, their fears and hopes as relative
newcomers to the field, their mishaps as they learn the commonly accepted discursive
moves and canonical texts in a department that primarily teaches classical/concert music,
and so on. In that, I fit into some of the growing discussions in the musicological
literature about the experience of music composition students and the undertheorized
pedagogies used to train them.²

**Format and Organization**
Because my purpose in this chapter is both to understand the particular situations
of music composition students *and* to suggest cross-disciplinary pedagogies inspired by
their situatedness, I use callout boxes throughout this chapter to draw attention to
pedagogical implications for writing classrooms. These boxes suggest various ways of
reading this chapter: readers can successfully ignore them and return to the boxes later,
skip the main text in favor of my pedagogical suggestions alone, or hop happily between
them. I hope this privilege of moving through time, as it were, will be seen as a particular
feature of static, visual rhetoric, a feature that would be lost were this chapter voiced
aloud in time (though perhaps much else would be gained).

Mirroring the trajectory of chapters three and four, I move here through two main
sections. Section One, Students Understanding Music, focuses on the overlapping issues
of form, influence, and the language-like qualities of music. From there, Section Two,
Students Making Music, gets increasingly practical, exploring the stories students told me
about their composition course, their invention processes, their reliance on digital
technology, and their attitudes toward performing their work.

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² Mandy Lupton and Christine Bruce’s “Craft, Process and Art: Teaching and Learning Music Composition
in Higher Education” is perhaps the best recent piece categorizing and responding to scholarship on music
composition classes in college settings.
**Why Verse?**

A final note: when I report long quotations from my student participants, I present them in a verse form that I haven’t used in previous chapters. In this, I’m following a practice that came to prominence in the work of sociologist Laurel Richardson and has such been explored in a growing number of articles (especially in journals like *Qualitative Inquiry*, e.g. Glesne; Maréchal and Linstead; Lahman et al.). In her collection of essays *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life*, Richardson describes a number of reasons for depicting interview transcripts in verse, the most persuasive of which is her point that “In the routine work of the sociological interview, the interview is tape-recorded, transcribed as prose, and then cut, pasted, edited, trimmed, smoothed, and snipped, just as if it were a literary text, which it is, albeit usually without explicit acknowledgment or recognition of such by its sociological constructor” (140). In other words, *all* transcripts of voiced interviews are the result of the collaborative construction of the transcriber (me); presenting them as poetry reminds the readers of this unavoidable fact, as the lines of verse jolt them away from imagining that they’re reading a perfect textual representation of a sounded event. This reminder of speech-as-sound also reflects the emphasis throughout my larger project on the importance of sound and music as *themselves* (not simply visual representations of sounds), carrying their own particular ways of knowing and acting. Notice how Garance Maréchal and Stephen Linstead describe poetic transcripts in their article “Metropoems: Poetic Method and Ethnographic Experience”: “[S]uch a poetry in the moment could perhaps deploy a discipline that is very much derived from a specific activity and seeks to embody the rhythms, time, and space of that activity” (70). Poetry draws our attention to the “rhythms, time, and space” of spoken language, all aspects related to its existence as sounded. Perhaps in the beauty
of the poetic rhythm suggested by line breaks and indentions, readers create in their minds a more “accurate” depiction of what my conversation with participants was really like, though it comes paradoxically through a medium that unavoidably bears the mark of my interference.

Within the rhetoric and composition community, I see this decision as following the disciplinary footsteps of Katherine Kelleher Sohn’s award-winning book *Whistlin’ and Crowin’ Women of Appalachia: Literacy Practices since College*. Describing herself as following the guidelines published by Wendy Bishop, Deborah Brandt, and D.E. Walls, Sohn explains that when transcribing the dialect of her Appalachian research participants, she “decided to regularize all nonstandard verbs and to leave in idioms and colloquialisms. To preserve the dignity of these women, we changed some of their nonstandard language (*she doesn’t* for *she don’t*; *it wasn’t anything* for *it wasn’t nothing*)” (18). When a reasonable reason exists—in Sohn’s case, to give her participants the honor of being presented as intelligent speakers, free of any prejudice that readers might bring to dialect transcribed as such—it is acceptable academic practice to adjust interview transcripts into standard written English. I see myself as taking that permission to adjust transcripts one step further, adjusting not the words but the enjambment. In fact, this kind of transcription led me to be far more precise transcribing words like *um, like,* and *you know,* which in chapters three and four I often removed from transcripts to aid in readability, following Bishop’s point that “there is no reason not to default in an interview transcript to an informal, but lightly edited presentation of speech” (qtd. in Sohn 18). But in the context of verse, these filler words begin to feel more meaningful, as they are part of the experience of sounded voice that I represent through verse.
Though my original plan was to present all my transcripts as poetry, whether students or not, my work in chapters three and four increasingly drew on published interviews with composers with whom I never spoke. Those published interviews always removed filler words and presented interviewees’ words as prose. Thus, it seemed to put an unjustifiable distance between my own interviews and published interviews to display only my own transcripts in verse, especially because part of my methodology was specifically designed to level the field between these interviews, to present them as parallel, not in a hierarchy. I also only use verse transcripts here when the prose transcript is of a length that it would require a block quotation. For shorter excerpts, it seemed unnecessary to break the visual design of paragraphs for small quotations, or to break up the readers’ flow with either line breaks or slashes to indicate where I would put line breaks, were I transcribing these words in verse. I hope what results is a blend that draws attention to my involvement in the transcripts and to the sounds of spoken language (so different than written language!), while not sacrificing readability and flow.

**Students Understanding Music**

**Form (or, Following the Rules)**

The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.

*David Bartholomae (623)*

Central to the undergraduate student experience is a series of decisions and experiences that gradually train the learner how things are done in a given context—which rules are solidly followed, which are broken, and what justifications are given for either. In writing classes, these concerns vary from broad, generic structural decisions to
lower-level concerns with punctuation, style, and citation standards. The music student is similarly faced with broad issues of structure, form, instrumentation, genre, and even the question of what counts as “music” in different contexts, along with lower-level concerns with harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic decisions in each measure. And often, these lessons in how to do musical discourse are discussed in the context of “the rules”—the patterns that music scholars have observed in centuries of classical music literature and which are taught in various courses for music majors.

My participant Libby expresses what I suspect is a common view among students: that writing music doesn’t need to be tethered down by “theory rules”: “I don’t really like all the theory rules—it’s like my least favorite thing is to be held down by rules, I’m a very spontaneous person and I like the creativeness of it and I don’t like having to do, ‘No parallel fifths, no parallel octaves.’”3 She goes on to describe how one of her friends takes the opposite tack, making rule-based decisions about which chords should follow others and filling in the rest of the music from that rule-based beginning. Libby says, “And I have never done that in my life. Basically because I’ve, I always learn by ear, so that to me is just a backwards way of thinking but for her it’s the forward way of thinking.” She has tried the rules out; in Bartholomae’s language, she has tried to speak the “language” of accepted music-writing practice, but in general, she doesn’t find them compelling enough to attend to (at least consciously) in her writing. Though she doesn’t

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3 The “no parallel fifths or parallel octaves” rules she mentions involve how to write the relationship between one or more voices that play at the same time. The guideline given music composers for centuries has been that if two voices or notes are a fifth apart (say, if the cello is playing a C and a violin is playing a G) or an octave apart (if the cello plays a low C and the violin plays a high C), those two notes shouldn’t move in a parallel way that maintains the same interval. That is, they shouldn’t both move up one step or down one step at the same time, as this can make the relationship sound hollow, missing out on some of the possible harmonic richness. Though this is a very old rule, it persists: when I took music composition, my teacher couldn’t believe that Howard Shore chose to orchestrate one of the main themes from The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring using parallel octaves.
say so, I can’t help but wonder if this distrust of as-of-yet-unmastered guidelines is the
natural condition of any artist or communicator who is learning new, professional
guidelines for how to approach any task that can also be approached as an untrained
amateur. I’m reminded of the drawings I did as a high-schooler with no training, many of
which I loved, but which were produced without any of the technical expertise available
through further training. But when I tried to formalize that interest through a cartooning
class and with various books about how to sketch, I felt those rules to be stifling,
unnecessary. Contrast Libby’s position with Claire’s, who recounts the story of writing
an invention for piano and “doing it according to the strict, Baroque” rules. She had
surely practiced these rules over and over in the required music major theory course on
counterpoint, the art of interweaving more than one melodic line gracefully. But in her
composition class, Claire was advised to play around with breaking those rules a bit:
“Then, when Dr. Goodwin told me it didn’t have to be like that, and made it more free,
for today’s style, then it kind of stumped me. I was like, ‘Oh! Now I don’t have rules!
[Laughs] To follow.’ So that sometimes, too much freedom makes you second guess
yourself.” In Chapter four, I discussed professional composers’ attitudes toward
limitations, including the common view that limitations can create a healthy space for
experimentation. While in some ways, Claire’s comments echo that perspective, I also
hear in her voice a bit of a yearning for simply and clearly defined rules. And
intriguingly, like Libby, her decision is couched in her attitude about her own identity as
a composer: Libby describes herself as a “very spontaneous person,” which keeps her
from wanting to use traditional rules, but Claire begins “second guess[ing]” herself
without them; she adopts an identity of careful apprenticeship, stepping through a new world of composition that is often confusing, while Libby adopts a more carefree manner.

To fill out these student attitudes toward rule-breaking, I want to share two more parallel stories from student composers. Miles can generally be described as more like Claire in that he takes a conservative attitude toward following the guidelines as opposed to dismissing them. But his tone seemed different: while Claire’s desire to follow musical rules came in part from a fear of making a wrong move without them—the “rules as safety net” position, we might say—Miles described himself as following rules because they are an important part of his apprenticeship. To him, rules offer an exciting challenge for him to accept and respond to with as much perfection as possible—the “rules as challenges to overcome” position. For instance, he told me about a piece he had worked on in his composition class that was consciously modeled on J. S. Bach’s 2nd Brandenburg Concerto, using a solo trumpet and the key of F major, as Bach’s piece does. I asked if he had folded in any contemporary moves—say, if he were referencing the older style but commenting on it somehow with something newer. His response is telling: “When it comes to styles, I don’t, like—I’m eclectic but I don’t like mixing styles. If I want to write in a Baroque style it will be Baroque through and through. If I want to write in a Classical style, same thing—Romantic etcetera. I’ve never written a piece that incorporates radically different compositional techniques or styles or devices or anything like that.” This feels like a very studenty thing to say, in the best sense of the word. Heard in one light, this dedication to following predefined styles hundreds of years after their inauguration could feel old-fashioned, and the most cynical reader might even wonder if it’s possible to make contemporary artistic statements by unironically adopting
the forms of the past. I’ve heard author
David Shields make this point about the arts
in general: that after we experience
groundbreaking work that threw open the
doors of possible forms—he mentioned
Joyce and Woolf in literature, Picasso in
painting, and John Cage in music—it’s not
possible to say something new within forms
that pretend the ground-breakers were never
there. But heard another way, Miles sounds
like the ideal student (as does Claire, with
her tentative attempts to learn the basics), in
that he wants to learn the ground rules
thoroughly before ever breaking them. I say
things like this all the time to my students,
that I want to them to learn tried-and-true
methods for structuring their paragraphs and
sentences, which will allow them to know
what they’re doing when they later on try for
more stylistic pizzazz. But considering the
different ways of hearing Miles’s statement
makes me wonder how much attention I
actually give to “learning the basics,” or if I

Gaming the Rules
These varying perspectives on the
rules suggest complex possibilities for
English composition classrooms. What
would it mean to allow students to
identify the degree to which they want
to practice following models and how
much they would like to make artistic
statements in a given assignment?
Even better, how can we prepare them
to identify those purposes on their own
for future assignments and messages
composed outside of class?

One way is to assign the same exercise
twice, with different attitudes toward
rules identified each time. For
instance, students could write a memo
to an employer once with an emphasis
on following the generic requirements
of most memos, with everyone
explicitly understanding that the goal
is to treat the assignment as an
exercise in following strict guidelines.
But then a memo could be written that
emphasizes the “art” that is possible
and appropriate within the genre. That
is, the class could determine which
qualities of something as simple,
everyday, and routine as a memo make
it stand out—with respect to style,
tone, mood, and design—and then
purposefully stretch those rules.

I like the genre of memo for this
assignment specifically because it
feels so “inartistic,” in the way we
commonly use the word today, but it
could also be adapted for writing for
blog posts, personal essays, video
journals, manifestos, and so on. The
key is the (always overlapping)
distinction between following the
guidelines for a genre as strictly as
possible and making a consciously
artistic statement within that genre.
demand touches of the beautiful, the relevantly artistic, right away. I hear something defiantly proud in Miles’s comments, especially when he continued a couple minutes later to talk about the things he’s learned, here in his junior year: “If I tried to write a piece in Mozart, you know, a couple years ago, it might have parallel octaves or parallel fifths or something. Or voice leading would be wrong, the progression would be not quite what he would do. Or I’d have a 6/4 chord just randomly in the middle of the piece, you know. But now I know that’s a no-no. I’m much more careful.” He’s proud of his accomplishments, and rightfully so; those technical details are indeed part of the flavor of music from various historical time periods, and they make his attempts at recreating that feel all the more exact.4

This is where form meets purpose in any rhetorical framework. The degree to which one adopts the forms of the past is guided by the message one is hoping to communicate. For Miles, the message seems to be directed toward his teacher and classmates, and is along the lines of, “I want to demonstrate my mastery in these earlier forms, trying as hard as I can to get every detail exactly right.” But for Ben, another of my student participants, the music he writes for class is sometimes written for that purpose but more often is written for the larger-scale artistic purpose of making a point that has never been made in that way before. (Libby’s comments earlier also align with this attitude, though perhaps with less honor given to the rules.) The context of my conversation with Ben was a piece he was writing in the bossa nova style, in which he

4 Many professional composers talk about going through a phase of learning basics before “finding their voice.” One of many possible examples is from minimalist composer Philip Glass, perhaps the living composer of concert music with the most recognizable sound. Glass says, “Well, then I just wrote music like my teachers. I didn’t do anything interesting for a good few years. I wrote like all my teachers did, but that’s not a bad way to learn music. It’s the way that artists learn to paint—you just copy” (Smith and Smith 125). I’m also reminded of an informal discussion I had with linguist and fandom scholar Robin Reid, who praised fan fiction precisely on the grounds that it was derivative. “All artists begin by making derivative work!” she exclaimed. “It’s the way we work toward mastery!”
was straddling the desire to sound like Antonio Carlos Jobim (father of bossa nova music) without “plagiarizing” him. Thinking partly of the conversation I had had with Miles the previous week, I asked Ben, “When you pick a form like that—‘Okay, I’m gonna write a string quartet,’ or ‘I’m gonna write a bossa nova piece’—do you find yourself trying to push against the limits of that form?” He replied, “Definitely!” and I added, “Or do you try to stay within it and do it ‘right’?” He replied:

No no no.
Pushing the limits.
For sure!

Because when you think about it,
bossa nova’s a very old style,
and string quartets have been written for centuries,
so there’s really no point in trying to do it for—I mean

I’m not writing this piece for a theory class,
is the way that I’m thinking.

If I were writing it for a theory class
and doing a part-writing assignment,
sure,
then I would stay in the boundaries
and try to make everything . . .

right,

compositionally. But,
no, the whole idea when you’re writing something
in a medium that has already used plenty,
I think, is
to try
and do
something new in that medium.

One distinction I hear that no other participant made (though they may have thought it) is the distinction between the purpose of music written for a “theory class” versus a composition class. Seen this way, Miles seems to be treating his composition course as
another branch of a theory class, though with some freedom to create his own assignments instead of only completing those made by a professor. Ben, on the other hand, says that “the whole idea” of his work in composition classes is to “do something new in that medium” (or genre, which is perhaps a more exact word here).

He referred again to the underlying purpose of composing as we continued the conversation: I mentioned the possibility of trying to compose something specifically in the style of a Beethoven string quartet, for example. “And it feels like a very different kind of aesthetic,” I said, “a different kind of purpose.” Ben agreed, acknowledging that a composer’s purpose can change from piece to piece:

Yeah.
And there are composers who do that.
And I think there will be a time in my life where I will have to call on that kind of skill.

Like for the film composition thing because I’m gonna have plenty of directors saying,

“Oh, make this sound like *this* piece of music,”
or,

“Make this sound like Brahms,”
or whatever.

But at the same time,
I always try to add my own flair to everything, ‘cause I think that’s like the whole point of becoming a well-known composer one day is that flair, that personal like you know little tinge that you put into everything.
Ben is consciously working toward an end goal of being a “well-known composer,” and he sees a characteristic they have—their “own flair”—and seeks to emulate it. Miles is the only other of my five student participants who expressed a desire to continue professionally as a composer (though I didn’t specifically ask everyone), and his approach seems equally suited for a professional career. That is, he’s learning his “chops,” which composer John Adams says is the one thing that there’s “no substitute for,” because “Composers should know everything” (McCutchan 72).

**Influence**

Yeah ‘cause I would listen to classical, and I love classical music and I love classical violin sonatas, I just, I don’t know, I wasn’t . . . inspired by any of them, really.

*Libby*

A discussion of students’ attitudes toward rules also bleeds into a discussion of student attitudes toward contemporary atonal music. As discussed in chapter three, whether composers are students or professionals, the question of how much to push the boundaries of traditional musical sounds, in this era of anything-goes, surfaced regularly in my interviews and reading. After attending the student composition recital at the end of the semester, I noticed that many student pieces quite naturally stay on the tonal side of things, sometimes even tending toward the very simple patterns of popular music, with their repetitions of simple chordal progressions overlaid by pretty melodies. It was there in the recital that I started to understand the advice that Dr. Goodwin had given Claire and Ben to push the boundaries of the rules more than they were used to doing.

But I think advice to break rules often means moving beyond what we know will produce a safely pleasant sound and into the dangerous realm of decisions that may sound jarring or unnatural—effects that, well controlled, have been used by composers for over
a hundred years, but which could always lead to unexpected results from audiences.

However, while music that pushes into atonality is common in contemporary concert music, it often hasn’t trickled into the purposeful listening behaviors of students (even if it subtly present in the background of the movies they watch). Thus, many find themselves in a situation where they affirm the importance of unusual music while not listening to it at all. A telling example is in my discussion with Miles. As we talked about his decision to strictly follow the rules of a period, he moved into a discussion of what it meant for other composers to break rules altogether. At first, I thought he was going to praise these new music composers:

That’s the unique thing about
the modern age,
the contemporary composers, is
there’re only rules
if you want there to be,
rules.

And uh so you’re
I think we’re freer now with composition
than we’ve ever been.
You can have some, you can,
if you choose to you can follow strict rules of
voice leading,
counterpoint,
part writing.
Or no rules!
Just write something that sounds completely
random,
atonal,
obscure.
There would probably be a substantial group
that will hail it as a work of art.
Or whatever.

“Yeah, there always is.”

So.
But I am,
I’m not an atonal composer,
I don’t like atonal music.

I don’t see the point in it,
to be quite honest.

Until the “Or whatever,” Miles seems to be praising the open-mindedness of twentieth and twenty-first century trends in concert music. The word *freer* in particular seems to imply a positive tone toward these developments. But eventually, Miles moves toward the opposite side, revealing that he doesn’t particularly like or listen to atonal music. I responded by agreeing with him. I often find myself loving the idea behind something but not its execution—a position that some atonal composers (Milton Babbitt, for example) don’t mind at all, as they see music less as something to be *enjoyed* affectively and more something to be *considered* intellectually, like the complex equations of scholarly mathematics journals.

So as individuals more acquainted with listening habits that value affective enjoyment, what *do* students listen to—at least the small, unrepresentative sample of students I talked to? And how do their listening habits affect their composing? In the context of writing studies, I’m reminded of Ann E. Berthoff’s point that students more naturally understood how to read and write complex arguments when they “had heard two or three sermons every week of their lives.” She continues, writing, “Argument was the air you breathed, a hundred years ago” (341). Can students who listen primarily to popular music adapt to the rigorous expectations of scoring complex, contemporary concert music, music that both acknowledges a connection with the Western classical tradition and artfully breaks away from it? And if not, do they even care?
One thing that my participants helped me understand is our lack of language when discussing our influences. Consider my participant Rose: a guitarist and singer-songwriter, she listed her musical influences as including jazz, rock, metal, blues, classical, and industrial (in that order). But she insisted that the music she writes is more than just an amalgamation of what she’s heard—it also includes what she’s been taught as a music major in a traditional department:

So a lot of my music is kind of like singer-songwriter type, but it’s unique in the sense that I bring actually the training that I had here and just you know through lessons that I’ve had, since I was playing since I was twelve.

And I bring that technical aspect in so it’s kind of interesting;

it’s like a technical, with a not too—like, you know, too—
it’s kind of subtle, it just kind of sneaks itself into the music but also being like emotional, too.

Though she doesn’t quite say it, the implication Rose gives here and in the rest of her interview is clear: formal musical training brings “technical” know-how, while her other influences model how to be “emotional.” In the rest of our conversation about influences, her specific examples never came from the traditional canons of guitar literature—classical guitar, jazz guitar, and so on. Instead, she described how when jamming with friends she was surprised to find herself playing music that sounded like Tool, or Tori Amos, or Porcupine Tree—all favorite artists whose work has influenced her in ways she has only begun to understand. But how those artists work their way into her music is a mystery. Hearing herself play music that was surprisingly like her favorite work, she told
me, “I wouldn’t know it, it’s almost like subconscious until I was jamming in the moment.” Categories she uses like “technical” and “emotional” aspects of music are hard to pinpoint, raising as many questions as they answer.

Claire also struggled to put her influences into words, a bit surprised by the idea that she even had musical influences. When I first asked her if she “tried to sound like x” in her compositions, she described how at first she felt so new to composition (after switching over from being a performance major) that she didn’t think about influence as much as trying to find her own style. With a bit of uncertainty, she finally said, “I don’t know who my influences are really. I’d say I have a lot of classical influence.” I responded, “Do you listen to a lot of classical music?” She said:

I do.
I do!
I listen to a lot of electronic music too.

And I work on that,
I’ve always worked on that.
You know this was new,
the composing with instruments,
I was used to doing it with like computers,
‘cause we—my husband and I work on stuff together.

So.
Um, that was new.

But yeah!
I guess a lot of electronic music has been influencing me too.

Sometimes when I listen to it, I’m like,
“Oh, I want to try to interpret that to more piano or classical.”
Because sometimes that IDM music,
it does have a very classical appeal, you know?
It’s very melodic,
it has really nice lines,
and answering back,
the question and answering back with the, the, you know, music.
I like all that!
So I could say that’s my influence.

Claire seems to be composing her answer in real time—a natural technique when trying to decide what one thinks about something that hasn’t seemed particularly important or pressing in the past. Like Rose’s thinking about technical and emotional influences, Claire is struggling to define the question of exactly what it means to be influenced by classical or electronic music, what labels can be faithfully applied. In Claire’s case, she lands on the qualities of melody and “question and answer,” qualities that are indeed central to classical fugues and any number of orchestral forms.

The above quotations from Rose and Claire also highlight a trend I saw in four of my five participants: the move from quickly mentioning how much they love classical music before swiftly going into much more detail about their other musical passions.

Rose loves metal and singer-songwriters, Claire loves melodic electronic music, Libby loves what she calls “slow music” by artists like Regina Spektor and Damien Rice, and

Playing with Influence
An English composition class is an ideal place to practice playfully engaging with our influences, helping students like Rose and Claire put their influences into words.

Possible short assignments could include:

• Acknowledging the weight of the past, by writing, drawing, or singing something and then working with a group to tease out all of the different ways this “original” piece was a result of past influence.
• Throwing off the past, by taking those acknowledged influences and strategically avoiding them in a new composition.
• Swallowing the past whole, by writing something that is overloaded with influences, both obvious and subtle—and yet still making a coherent, rhetorically effective point.
• Playing with the knowledge of different audiences by purposefully inserting subtle inside jokes or allusions (whether verbal, visual, or aural) that complement the meaning of the communication for certain audiences. This can be a fun mini-assignment to nest inside another class presentation assignment, leading to discussions about who got the subtle references, who didn’t, and why that matters.
Ben dabbles in 90s electronic music. (Miles alone described classical as his primary listening, a claim backed up by his multiple clear references to pieces that he knew like old friends.) For example, after telling me that he began listening to classical “standards” like Beethoven and Brahms in high school, Ben segued into his interests in electronic music:

I’m also,
I write,
just for fun,
sort of as a side,
I write like MIDI-style music, you know, just kind of ambient music and beats and things of that nature.

Beats, but I don’t use loops, as most people do,
at all—

it’s all original material.

And um, so yeah,
I’m actually heavily influenced by a certain number of electronic musicians who I think are really like at the top of the game, like this guy from the early 90s called Aphex Twin.

I responded that I had only recently discovered (and loved) Aphex Twin, which led Ben to gush more about how that artist had “laid the groundwork” for future music, how he was ahead of his time, and so on. Though I didn’t notice anything odd about this discussion during the interview (caught up as I was in my personal enjoyment of having someone to discuss Aphex Twin with), on returning to the recording I find this passage brings up more questions than it answers. Why does Ben insist that he composes electronic music only “as a side”? It’s true that the rest of the compositions Ben
mentioned fit either into the broad world of contemporary concert or jazz music, both genres that he would have many opportunities to practice and hone in his college department. As a future film composer, does he feel that those genres are where he will most likely make his living, while his electronic pieces are less weighty or complex? Or does he feel that in the context of the department, his electronic work wouldn’t be as well received (an issue I discuss below)? And if it is something he does on the side, why does he have such an insistent ethic of musicianship surrounding his work in this genre—never using the pre-recorded loops that someone else created, but only composing electronic sounds from scratch? Surely this comes from a desire for full artistic control, for a wish to be the sole creator of music that carries his name. Though it’s hard to know where I’m reaching too far, I believe we can at least say that Ben’s composing is a result of a complex blend of diverse influences, contextual decisions about when to employ those influences, and a personal ethic that guides those decisions. Returning to my other participants, they clearly work within a similar matrix of influences, contexts, and ethics that guide them—sometimes voiced and understood by themselves, as when they purposefully try to mirror

**Influence, context, and ethics** pair up neatly with a consideration of past, present, and future. That is, how does the work I’ve been exposed to in the past and the rhetorical situations I experience in the present affect my decisions about what I will and won’t compose in the future?

I see this as a heuristic for students to use when analyzing the trends they make in their own writing—perhaps as a reflective letter accompanying a portfolio of work. They can ask themselves, “What **influences** have I found myself regularly relying on? In what **contexts** have I most enjoyed the writing I’ve done, and when have I felt stifled? Beyond the standards for academic ethics, what **ethical** codes for composing have I developed in the past—decisions about what topics I will or won’t discuss, what kinds of sources I will or won’t rely on, and what kinds of styles I will or won’t use?” And of course, the next question is always, “Which of these patterns are helpful, and which deserve to be questioned?”
the melodic lines of favorite classical pieces, and sometimes lingering below the level of consciousness, only surfacing in the context of a jam session or some other means of letting musical material flow freely, perhaps without the hindrances of notation and scores.

Finally, it’s also worth briefly noting that part of being a student in any context is the process of learning a literature—or, put another way, of discovering works that can grow into an influence, either through the slow process of subtly acquiring the sensibilities of an influence or through purposeful study. I experienced this as a student in a music composition class: I decided I wanted to write a string quartet, a form that seemed manageable (only four lines of music, not an entire orchestra’s worth!) yet with beautiful possibilities. I told my professor I wanted to study some well-known quartets before I began, and he recommended those of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel—who, luckily enough, only wrote one quartet each—along with the six quartets of Béla Bartók.5 I found recordings of these pieces and listened to them repeatedly, sometimes reading along with scores borrowed from the music library. But the influence of those quartets—the first I had studied with any depth—on my own piece is mysterious. I don’t remember feeling any particular debt to Debussy or Bartók when I made my musical decisions, but then again, how could I not have been influenced? I do remember being surprised at some of what was “allowed” in these canonized works—for instance, how enticing I found Debussy’s and Ravel’s use of pizzicato (plucked strings, instead of bowed), how unusual

5 It’s intriguing to wonder why he chose these three composers to recommend. Is it because he knew my own sensibilities were decidedly modern, so he avoided the quartets of more traditional composers like Beethoven or Brahms? Was it simply because he had heard me perform piano works by Debussy and Bartók at student recitals? Or was he subtly trying to influence me in the direction that he thought students needed to go, learning twentieth-century works because the 18th- and 19th-century masters were so much more emphasized in both the university and the wider U.S. culture?
some of Bartók’s instructions were (say, to pluck the strings so hard that they snapped back and slapped the neck of the instrument), and how much sound these four instruments could produce when instructed to play loudly. But how indeed do we measure influence? Surely not like a cake, which we can say is composed of this exact percentage of flour, this exact percentage of butter, and so on. But if not like that, how?

I smiled when I heard Libby tell a story that reminded me of my own past as a music student: “Well, I listened to a lot of violin sonatas before I began my composition. Just because I was new to composition, new to the form, you know. I just wanted to listen to as many as I could before I started working on it.” But like me, her main influence came not from the traditional violin sonatas of the classical canon, but from the one piece she heard that stood out as different: “And one that really stuck was the violin sonata by—the blues sonata, I can remember exactly who it’s by. It’s on my

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6 Libby may be referring to Maurice Ravel’s Violin Sonata No. 2, which is commonly referred to as “the blues sonata.” Composed in the 1920s, it purposefully adopts the blues style for the classical genre of the violin sonata. I find it a happy coincidence that Ravel probably served as inspiration for Libby just as it did for me when learning to write for strings; as an early twentieth-century impressionist, he embodies both a strong break from Western musical tradition and a beautiful, rich musical sensibility that contrasts with the harsher, more discordant music that was developing at the same time.
iPod. But it’s a very blueee-sy—it just brought a whole new—I didn’t even know the violin could sound like that, so that’s why I really liked it. It was very jazzy, and I like jazz.” But when it comes down to how this piece actually influenced her own violin sonata, Libby seems to be as uncertain as I was. I told her, “It sounded like they were doing something in the violin sonata that you don’t think of when you think of a violin sonata,” and she replied:

Exactly.
That’s what I liked about it.

Yeah ‘cause I would listen to classical,
and I love classical music
and I love classical violin sonatas,
I just,
I don’t know,
I wasn’t . . .

inspired by any of them,
really.

I didn’t know how to put that into my own style.

So when I heard a different one that had a bluesy sound to it,
I was like,
“Oh!
There are other options!”
So I brought it into mine,
my own style.

She then went on to tell me that her own sonata wasn’t particularly jazzy or bluesy or inspired by the blues sonata, but by the music she loves: the “slow music” of Regina Spektor, Damien Rice, and other singer-songwriters. After being indirectly given permission to compose in the way that she wanted, she proceeded to compose a piece that fit her own sensibilities much more closely than she might have otherwise done without the discovery of the blues sonata. I have to wonder if that permission had been explicitly
or implicitly given by her composition professor already, and if so, if it took the weight of
history and the cultural importance of a recording on iTunes to solidify that permission
into something she could move forward with. The linguistic concept of the “heart
language” seems appropriate here: we can learn languages beyond those we were raised
with, even developing the ability to thrive with them, just as a student can learn to
function within a classical world even if she has grown up loving other forms, styles, and
moves. But when we return to our heart language, something else happens that is hard to
put into words, but which is common in music.

What Music Says

In *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination*, Robert
Jourdain writes about how stories work:

In storytelling, suspense is created by leading a character from initial
safety to increasing peril. A good plot wavers back and forth between
relative security and danger, returning to complete repose only at the
conclusion. There are moments of extreme tension as bullets fly, but these
do not last long, lest the audience become too accustomed and lose its
sensitivity. The story’s drama lies not so much in the extremes of great
tension and repose as in the experience of passing between them. Like a
roller-coaster ride, what matters is not how high you go, but how far you
dive. (105)

Jourdain then connects these aspects of storytelling to music—in his context, to the ways
composers play with harmonies, moving from one structure of harmony to another,
finding “the right balance between reinforcing tonal centers and violating them” (105).
Overwhelmingly, my student participants reinforced this view, often describing their compositions as stories and as connected to movies—the most story-centered music that most contemporary young people encounter in this post-opera age. And what’s more, these stories are often the stories of emotions; to these students, music is a way to describe the experience of moving in and out of emotions, as if in a movie. If it’s possible to generalize what my participants think music “says,” it’s this: that it tells stories of rising and falling emotions.

For example, speaking about the performance of one of her pieces in the composition recital, Claire specifically drew attention to the story-like quality of her instrumental piece:

I thought it went very well.
I thought it,
    it carried the mood,
    it kinda had a story within it—

And that’s what I like within pieces:
    something that kinda, has a story,
    that can change moods [unintelligible]
    and come back

    to where it was at the beginning, kind of have a closure.

Miles also connected stories to emotions:

And I think music being a language
    should be able to convey
    the story on its own!

Now.
Of course, you’re not going to know, say, the characters’ names,
you’re not going to know the towns they visit or,

what exactly,
    you know,
    exactly,
precisely
what they’re doing!
But.

You get an idea of the emotions
(going back to the emotions).

Rose and Ben also connected music to storytelling, focusing more on its movie-like nature—for Rose, with imaginary movies guiding her composition process, and for Ben, with film scores as a hopeful future career goal that in some ways influences much of his current work. How then do these student composers tell stories with their music? What techniques do they use to make their narratives clear to audiences hoping to understand and be moved by the ever-moving, ever-shifting music?

Claire hints at one answer in her quotation above: the strategy of recursively returning to patterns and themes, allowing the experience of same-but-different to echo the nature of life. Her explanation explicitly links recursive patterns to storytelling, as in the “there and back again” model of so many stories—and in the ABA form of so much music. Indeed, Claire told me that one of her pieces took on a rondo form—an ABCBDB pattern, with regular returns to a repeated theme interspersed with journeys in other directions—because of the emotional story she wanted to tell audiences:

The form kind of came
as I started working on it?
It came to more of a rondo form?

So, you know, the beginning was there and it—
and then there was a new section,
but then it went back to the beginning,
and then there was an even newer section,
and then it went back to the beginning.
So that rondo form.

But always back to that
melancholy state,
you know?
Where you’re kind of trying to
break away from it,
but then it always comes back down to,
stuck in the melancholy. [Laughs]

This is of course a particular kind of recursive story: one where a meaning is suggested apart from discursive content, as if readers had heard a story about someone unable to escape a “melancholy state,” felt emotions about it, and then had the content of the story erased from memory, leaving them with the emotions alone. Or put differently, it’s as if Claire is giving listeners an invitation to imagine their own story that seems to fit the framework she has suggested. Libby describes a similar process when she expresses her preference for “circular compositions and choreography,” her tendency to “end it the same way I began.” She doesn’t explain her desire for this closure, but it seems likely that it parallels Claire’s motives: to communicate that sense of returning to an earlier state that echoes in so many of our stories and emotions. Much is expected of the listeners to these recursive, instrumental pieces: if they are to hear this music as a story, they must hear the culturally conditioned cues for the different kinds of emotional states, understanding that a minor key and slower rhythm is more likely to express sadness than a major key with a fast rhythm. They must also make the choice to hear this music as a story, moving beyond attention to the forms and interactions between the notes and actively construct their own meanings from the associations they have with these kinds of sounds. To an alien visiting Earth, it might seem like a lot of assumptions to make.

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7 As I describe in chapter two, I think this kind of musical-rhetorical analysis can go too far and often has in scholarship on musical rhetoric. A certain move never unequivocally means something else in instrumental music, as some of this work sometimes suggests. But still, that’s not to say that no associations between music and moods exist, especially within a culture.
But as Ben told me, perceiving meanings in musical moves is a natural assumption of many composers. Ben insisted that many composers are telling stories with their music, that this is a normal way to approach composing:

Well I still think that pieces like that
that have nothing to do with being coupled to any other media,

I still think—
that’s just it, I still think the composers
are still doing the same thing in their mind.
They are basically running—
the way I think a lot of times when I write pieces—
is you just sort of play a scene out in your mind.

You know?

You might be thinking about a certain interaction or something,
but
you play it out as the music is playing.
And every time you hear the music you sort of rerun that scene—

at least that’s the way I think about it.

I think a lot of composers do.

Counter to this perspective is the weight of German Romanticism, for what it’s worth (potentially not at all, depending on who you talk to), as I discussed briefly in chapter one. According to musicologist Mark Evan Bonds, as instrumental music began to be seen as “the most demanding and mysterious, and thus the highest and most rewarding, medium of artistic expression” (Wordless 163), any explanation of music that focused on its storytelling quality began to be seen as taking emphasis away from the sublimity and complexity of the forms themselves, seen as simply themselves, not as representations or guides to any external meaning. Indeed, to retroactively imagine a story that seems to fit the music being played “represents the antithesis of all the German Romantics stood for” (174). However, this Romantic emphasis on “absolute music” was never totally
dominant, and countless composers continued to compose “program music,” named for the program handed out at concerts describing the story a piece of instrumental music is meant to portray.

At least among my participants, absolute music held little sway. Miles is especially helpful here, as he was the only one to actually use that phrase (though the rest clearly side with him on many of these points through their emphasis on stories in instrumental music). I’m especially drawn to the following quotation because it once again ties emotions into this conversation of what music communicates and how it tells stories; like my other participants, Miles seems to think of musical messages, emotional messages, and stories as fluid perspectives on the same musical experience. The following lengthy quotation came in response to my question about what composers of instrumental music can say, and what he tries to say:

For me writing
writing absolute music is very difficult.

I never understood the term absolute music because I don’t see how anybody, even Mozart, or whatever they call absolute music, can be written by someone without them having or thinking or trying to input, any sort of, message or emotion or, you know, whatever I just don’t—music without emotion is not, it—there’s no such thing!

I don’t think.
So, in a sense I think all music is program music, to an extent, depending on how you define it. But um,

I, like I think everybody, have a range of all emotions inside me, you know? And I guess it just depends on the mood I’m in as to which one I want to express in the music.

Notice how Miles elides the difference between a discursive message and an emotional message. He says he doesn’t understand how anybody could write absolute music, and I expected him to say, “Because I hear a story in every piece of instrumental music,” but instead he in effect says, “There’s no absolute music because every piece of music has emotions, and those emotions are the program, the content of what is expressed.” It’s worth noting how easily Miles moves from story/content talk into affect/emotion talk. There is precedence for this; some proponents of absolute music call even for an appreciation of music that lies outside of “vague requirements of emotional expression” (Scruton). In other words, Miles is likely using our conversation about absolute music to react to all the things absolute music is supposed not to do: communicate stories, communicate emotions, refer to the outside world, and so on. Still, he moves right from this discussion of emotional meanings into a discussion of music as language, and the kinds of stories that could be told. He then went on to talk about how music obviously couldn’t give specific semantic content (though not using that term), but that he’s okay with that, since it’s not what music is for: “We don’t send music-grams to people to tell them where we’re going to be Saturday night. That’s what English is for, whatever
language you speak. Music is more for edification. For refreshment. The soul, as Bach said.” The whole conversation had a sense of unity, as we moved freely between these interrelated topics of meaning, emotion, and stories—which, at least in writing studies, I wonder if we too often consider as disconnected from each other. In another conversation, Miles described music as a “recess,” a metaphor that makes the same point: “The point is, it just pleases your senses! It’s not so much academic as it is. . . . It’s like a recess, really! On the playground.

It’s like taking a break from academia or something.”

On one hand, these discussions about “what music says” aren’t particularly different from what can be found in my interviews with professional composers or in the literature on musical aesthetics and philosophy. But on the other hand, I’m focusing on stories to tease out a quality that feels particularly studenty: the connection of

### Meaning, emotions, and stories.

Or more precisely, meaning that eschews traditional discursive meaning for meaning that communicates and/or elicits emotions (it’s sometimes difficult to explain which) and tells stories that don’t need the reference points of characters and settings to mean.

This trifecta suggests Steven B. Katz’s work in *The Epistemic Music of Rhetoric*, a book that emphasizes how readers construct emotional meanings from any text that are to some degree always layered onto the discursive meanings contained in words themselves. These emotional ups and downs become an ever-changing, self-created story about what the work means. But how to use this perspective in class?

First, to acknowledge its existence. English composition instructors can do much to suggest the emotional stories readers will create in response to anything they write. In groups, students can respond to any piece of writing by adopting the persona of various possible readers (a Muslim cleric; a white, suburban middle-schooler; a radical feminist; an earlier version of themselves), expressing the emotions that a reader might have at any given point in the essay, perhaps even using color-coded highlighters (digital or analog).

Then, individuals “wearing” those personas might tell the story of their emotional responses, focusing on the moments the text changed their perception and how that affected the way they would think about this piece in the future.
musical stories to movies. At the risk of overgeneralization, four out of five of the students I interviewed seemed to be of traditional college age, and all were certainly under thirty. Today’s young adults were raised in a media-centric environment, where movies were not just watched and discussed but were also a central ground for participating in collaborative meaning-making activities: through various kinds of online posts, with images and avatars on social networking sites, by making and sharing and watching videos mashed up from movies and television shows, and so on. For a generation that often doesn’t listen to classical music as part of its primary listening, these young people are most likely to hear traditional instrumentation on a TV or movie screen. Orchestral music heard _apart_ from the screen is the oddity. Instrumental music is automatically connected to storytelling.

Therefore, it’s not surprising to hear Rose say she composes with a movie scene playing in her mind, even if the movie never existed:

I always think of like a movie scene.
(Isn’t that weird? I don’t know!)

I always think of like, not necessarily a movie that has already happened—

maybe it could be a movie already happened—

but like a scene in my head that like, I’ve always wanted to hear music to and there wasn’t originally in the film?

Or like, or um, Or something that I could like see being like a movie, portrayed like instrumentally.
And it’s not unexpected to hear Ben (who, admittedly, is studying to be a film composer) tell me that music in film plays the role of the narrator in a written story:

It acts as the narrator almost.
The music acts as the narrator
that is lost through movie
that you would have in the book.

It kind of tells you what you,
what’s going on behind the scenes mentally
in certain characters’ minds.

And as the verse quotation from Ben I used earlier in this chapter shows, he sees this “narration” happening even when music isn’t tied to films: in his words, “the composers are still doing the same thing in their mind.” How unsurprising this should be to us—that the media our culture surrounds us with affects our basic grasp of what a medium does, what it expresses.

**Students Making Music**

By my senior year of college, my double major had shifted to an English major and music minor. I audited a composition course in the fall of that year, and though I was writing my honors thesis and thus didn’t give my music the time it deserved, I remember our class well. Early on, class time was often spent listening to music while reading copies of the scores—the symphonies of Rachmaninov and Prokofiev. But as the semester went on, and the students increasingly had content to share, we spent most of class time discussing each other’s works-in-progress. The atmosphere was laid-back and non-judgmental. Even when I only had the very early measures of my string quartet roughed out, the professor sat at the piano to play the bottom two voices while I struggled through the top two. My classmates were quick to say what they liked, but I remember we didn’t quite know what to say when we didn’t like something. However, our professor
was a master of gently making suggestions that echoed the vague feelings the rest of us had, helping us all find words for our critiques.

When I visited composition classes for part of this research project, some things had obviously changed. Instead of one section of composition meeting together throughout the semester, these courses were smaller, with students meeting in groups of only four or five students in a more intense workshop environment. Additionally, computers had become a central compositional tool, second in importance only to the piano (and just barely). One group I visited met in the music department’s computer lab, where each station is equipped with recent versions of notation software and MIDI keyboards. Some students worked at these stations, while others were quick to pull out their personal laptops, where they would open their most recent drafts in their software, hit play, and stand back so we could crowd around the screen to watch the notes glide by as the computer played them, with its best digital approximation of the sounds of strings, winds, brass, percussion. Though I had a laptop throughout college, its battery was never strong enough to whip it out whenever I liked without a plug, and it was so heavy I only took it with me when necessary. These were thin, light machines with surprisingly nice speakers and the fanciest versions of notation software like Finale and Sibelius. I felt old.

This section of the chapter considers what my students told me about some of these details: what their classes are like today, what they actually do to get a piece of music out onto the page or screen, how they rely on computers, and how all of that translates into performance.

Composition Courses
My research participants take a class that should sound familiar to English composition instructors, with its professor-as-coach model and heavy focus on peer
review. Ben was particularly proud of the detailed attention he had received in his practicum course, especially the attention that is possible over time, as he takes practicum over and over with the same professor, Dr. Goodwin. He said, “You know, if you take a practicum but with a different composition professor every semester, they don’t have as much of a reference point for the work that you did before and they’re not watching you grow necessarily in the way that Dr. Goodwin’s been able to watch you grow. And it’s kind of a cool thing to foster that relationship between the two people, the student to the professor.” Many of us in writing studies dream of this kind of relationship with our writers, wondering what kinds of growth we could coach students into if we had a full four years to work with them, instead of the more typical fifteen weeks. Ben clearly valued this personal aspect of his relationship with Dr. Goodwin, saying of him, “I think he believes strongly in the private tutor as a composer/student type thing. He had plenty of them when he was younger, so sometimes there’ll be two or three kids in the class, and half the time, you know like maybe the other student didn’t bring anything in? So literally you’re just getting a private lesson on whatever you brought in, the whole time.” What Ben doesn’t mention is that even in a situation where one student’s work is receiving the most attention, the other students are learning from the nuts-and-bolts conversations about the work, forming opinions and testing them against the experiences of the professor’s experiences and the gut reactions of the student-composer. Ideally, at least, this listening is extremely active.
Of course, depending on how skilled the student-composer sees his peers, he may value the opinions of his classmates more or less. Ben noticeably didn’t mention the advice or expertise of the others in his practicum, as he sounds almost wistful about the days when other students don’t bring anything in. On the other side of the spectrum is Libby, who reminded me that the musicians performing her work in the student recital (more on that below) are usually peers—other students who she has shared countless classes and rehearsals with, and who may even be classmates in her own practicum section. Her attitude of equality with performers and a willingness to take their suggestions, both in and out of class, reminded me of the particularly even playing field of Mentoring Relationships

Ben’s comments on the long-term mentoring he receives from his instructor remind us that we work within institutional boundaries that we often can do little to change. But beyond a major initiative to require a writing seminar to be taken four times with the same professor, what can we do?

Perhaps writing programs can initiate programs that support long-term mentoring relationships between students who take a professor’s composition class, someone with whom they regularly share their writing in multiple genres in low-key conferences, throughout their college career. (Individual departments and programs would of course need to discover what sort of incentive professors might have to enter these mentoring relationships, especially in these days of funding shortfalls.)

And as Libby reminds us, peer mentoring can also be crucial for developing composers. In addition to a robust writing center, we need to create spaces where student composers can comfortably collaborate with peers whom they trust and know. Music students have an advantage over many other majors in this respect, in that they work in close quarters with other music students from the very beginning of their college careers, through a (seemingly never-ending) schedule of rehearsals and recitals, while students with other majors often don’t feel this sense of camaraderie until their junior year, if ever.

Again, this is a structural issue that is hard to recommend broadly for different institutions. Perhaps existing student clubs and organizations could serve as sites for creative academic collaboration, pursued through a campus-wide initiative to encourage existing ecologies of students to engage with each other in new ways. The nodes on student networks are rich; perhaps they could be used for more purposes.
classroom situations, as contrasted with the professional composers I spoke with. Telling me about one collaboration with players who were rehearsing one her pieces, Libby said, “When they did that, when they had their suggestions to my compositions, like, ‘I know you said you wanted it loud right here, you have forte, but I feel like it should be a little quieter.’ And I agreed! [Laughs] Why not?” I love her lighthearted “Why not?” which emphasizes her equal position of power among others in the program; of course a beginning composer should take advice from the other beginners she’s surrounded with. While professionals have the option to work in collaboration with their players, it represents a break in the traditional concert world hierarchy, where composers are generally afforded a power and control not given to players.

But perhaps the most difficult part of the composition class experience for me to judge is the experience some reported of feeling locked in, expecting that their work had to fit into the mold of classical music expectations. This is tricky ground to walk—for any composition instructor, not just in music. On one hand, I believe in the importance of valuing students’ interests and literacies; too much work in composition studies has drawn attention to this imperative for me to ignore it. But on the other hand, part of the academic coach’s role is to guide students outside of their expectations and comfort zones and into a new understanding of how their abilities can be adapted for different situations. With that tension as our context, let’s walk carefully through the experiences of two of my participants’ comments.

Rose, for one, approaches her practicum sessions with a mixture of joy and fear—joy at getting this chance to grow in her skills and fear that she’ll be perceived as crazy, simplistic, or dark. Part of the disconnect is that her work outside of class is always
paired with words, music she describes as fitting into a singer-songwriter genre. But when she enters composition class, a new hat goes on, and she only writes instrumental work there. She doesn’t color this as a negative at all—her tone sounds positive, as if she’s testing out wearing a new coat that she’s not used to—but it leads to feeling out of her element when in class:

> When we’re in class I’m like,
> “Ok, is Dr. Goodwin gonna like,
> [Laughs]
> think I’m crazy?”
> or like kinda, I mean,
> I don’t—
> I feel comfortable with him,
> so I don’t think that so much,

I kinda just think okay. Like in class,
I do get nervous,
I’m like,
“Um, are the rest of the people gonna be like,
‘Why so simple?’

or whatever.”

Realizing that it sounds as if she’s criticizing Dr. Goodwin, she quickly backs away after saying that she worries what he’ll think, explaining that it’s not just his opinion she worries about, but the rest of the class’s as well. Explaining herself further, Rose clarifies the difference she sees between people “appreciating” her work and really getting it, on the deepest levels. Speaking of her peers in the practicum, she says:

They would probably *appreciate* the music that I had,
and I know that they would!
Because they’re smart people in composition class.

But I don’t know if, like,
they would be like,
*ready* to like
to hear like
how deep the music would be,
because I deal with a lot of,
the song topics deal with a lot of things
that a lot of maybe people won’t talk about,
and things that are not—
not necessarily

depressing—
but things that aren’t necessarily the happiest.

She doesn’t want to be perceived as overly dark—and when she does deal with dark material, she fears that the others in her class—students who I imagine as workshopping cheerful, major-key pieces for flute or clarinet—simply won’t understand.

Rose spoke a lot during our conversation about how her singer-songwriter pieces outside of class are written for a specific communicative purpose: to comfort people who have experienced the similar tough things that she has experienced. (Contrast that kind of end goal with the technical expertise that Miles expressed so much pride in. Both seem to judge a piece’s effectiveness and success on vastly different grounds.) The idea that her listeners in class

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### Getting Personal

How can we encourage students like Rose, who want to bring their personal and dark compositions into class but fear that others won’t get it? And how can we make spaces for students like Claire, whose passion for our subject falls outside the specific areas we explore in a class?

Through the wide lens, it means that we may need to reorient our fundamental assumptions about what our students come to class knowing. Instead of empty heads needing our knowledge, they come with a complex ecology of literacies and interests that our classes should value and strengthen with rhetorical principles.

Through the close lens, it means 1) using heuristics and conversations to help students tease out their skills and interests that are most ripe for exploration in an academic context; 2) using students’ voices to help shape guidelines for inclusive discourse to be used whenever anyone (including instructors) responds to each other’s work; 3) deliberately introducing models of composition (both student and professional) that break societal boundaries of what is expected in an “academic composition”; and 4) assigning small assignments designed to help the class identify, name, and investigate the assumptions of any discourse community (like a composition classroom).
wouldn’t be able to understand her experiences leaves her in a state of self-doubt—at least it did when I spoke to her, early in her career as a student.

After speaking to Rose, I was intrigued to hear variations on this theme of uncertainty echoed in my conversation with Claire. Perhaps I led her into it (a question that I find constantly arises when talking to research participants): I mentioned vaguely that in my conversations with other students, I noticed that a lot of them didn’t seem to compose in the same genres that they listened to outside of class. Claire responded:

Well I think because they’re forced, at the school, also

[Laughs],

to focus on classical.

So they,

I bet if they had the choice,
to do more what they wanted,

I bet they wouldn’t do that as much.

“That’s interesting.”

Click that on,

and they would probably say,

“Oh, I’m going to write a guitar song,
and implement this style into it!”

Yeah!”

But it’s not really accepted here that much,
I don’t think.

Her tone was more disappointed than angry. I didn’t get the impression that she was trying to change this attitude toward the non-classical, or even that she found her education in classical styles to be inadequate. But this part of our conversation helped me better understand when Claire, who seemed so timidly uncertain if her current work would be good enough for the end-of-semester recital in time, lit up with excitement when talking later about the possibilities for videogame music—the tools used, the different kinds of rhetorical needs demanded, her experiments in the genre. It wasn’t that
Claire didn’t like the class she had, it was that she came to class passionate about one kind of composing, and she found another kind there instead. And I think that the “kind” of composing extends beyond simple musical genre, as if there were a single set of guidelines Claire was asked to use in class to make something sound “classical” and if there were a corresponding set of “videogame” sounds. In the right setting, an oboe and piano piece could be a lovely fit for a videogame. This is an issue of fit between the rhetorical situations into which Claire wants to speak—the ever-shifting, intriguing-yet-repetitive, electronically mediated, context-dependent rhetorical situation of videogame music—as opposed to the rhetorical situations into which her composition class slotted her—the solidified, score-dependent, insistently analog, formalized rhetorical situation of a concert performance situation.

**Invention Processes and Emotions**

Georg August Griesinger, one of classical composer Joseph Haydn’s early biographers, described Haydn’s invention process: “Haydn always composed his works at the keyboard. ‘I sat down, began to improvise \[phantasiren\] depending on whether my mood was sad or happy, serious or playful. When I got hold of an idea \[Idee\], my entire effort was to realize it \[auszuführen\] and sustain it \[souteniren\] in keeping with the rules of art’” (qtd. in Sisman 288; brackets in original). We see this 18th-century master composer choosing an emotion, letting it dictate a musical “idea”—a theme, a grouping of notes, a melodic fragment—and then focusing energies on working and reworking that idea. The picture is one of free improvisation that slowly moves toward self-selected limitations: working with *this* emotion, playing around with *this* musical idea. Chapter four explored some other points that professional composers have made about the invention process and the utility of limitations. But here, I want to focus on an aspect of
invention that ties together both Haydn and my student participants: that these early, arbitrary decisions can be guided by an attention to emotion.

Early decisions about how to limit themselves were crucial to all five participants, and this language always involved a discussion of emotion. Claire begins her composition process by looking up a mood in the dictionary to get a fuller picture of how to portray that emotion in the music with her musical choices, and Ben uses his chosen mood to limit his early processes: “I usually try to pick an emotion in my head, and then set the harmony and the rhythm somewhat to that emotion.” Miles also spoke about limitations, but with an emphasis on the emotional character of his composition as opposed to the intellectual task of how it will be structured. In the context of a discussion about the emotions in music, he said, “I don’t first look at the rules or a set of rules to determine what I want to do, I figure out what I want to do and then decide what rules will best help me write in

### Emotional Purposes

One reason that these students all tied invention processes to emotions is that their practicum professor Dr. Goodwin assigns numerous small assignments asking them to compose short pieces that express a given emotion. This instruction clearly struck home, as all five students continued to talk about emotional limitations even for work written outside of the class environment.

I can hardly overstate the effects this affect-focused pedagogy could have in English composition classrooms. We should encourage students to express their messages in such a way that they effect changes in their audience—logically, thoughtfully, and also emotionally. That doesn’t mean I want lots of maudlin sentimentality as they try to affect people’s emotions with overly dramatic pathos. However, I do want them to feel free to give readers a sense of exultation, of quiet horror, of frustration at inanity, at self-doubt in their own conflicting opinions, and so on.

Imagine the impact of English composition if our students went on, like my music composition student participants, to begin their writing in various spaces with the question, “What do I hope my audience will feel after reading this essay? Or watching this video? Or scanning this report? Or experiencing this web design? Or hearing this audio piece?”
the style I want to write in.” I take his “I figure out what I want to do” as (at least) a
determination of what emotions he wants to communicate. This was also echoed in
Libby’s discussion of her process, which begins by playing around on the piano to decide
on a key: “And my key was d-minor, and it helped because it was so sad sounding? But
in a serious kind of way. It wasn’t, you know, a very—it was slow but it still had power
to it. And it had a little mystery. If I had to put an emotion or whatever feeling, I guess it
would be like mysterious, kind of.”

For Libby, it’s natural to affect the emotions of audiences by joining the power of
music with the visual power of dance. As a dancer, she had recently composed a new
piece of music for piano and violin that she had also choreographed a dance for, which
she performed at the composition recital—and when I spoke to her, she was in the
process of once again composing a piece for both music and dance, but with different
instruments. Perhaps by breaking outside the usual mold of the composition student, she
had spent more time reflecting on her process than some of her peers, and she thus was
better prepared to think them through out loud for me.

One of my favorite parts of Libby’s process is her refreshingly simple motivation
for doing this piece at all: “So what I did—I played the violin in middle school, which
also influenced me because I love the violin, and I quit the violin because I was so into
dance. But I’ve always loved the instrument—and I decided to do a violin and piano
sonata last year. And I wanted to create a dance to it.” She expresses herself with a sense
of agency that I sometimes wish my students (and I!) showed: a sense of, “This is what I
wanted to express, so I expressed it!” Yes, that attitude can go too far, drifting into
simplistic, unexamined reasons for composing, as if everything just plain happened
without any thought behind it. But sometimes I wish my students would more often think, “I have a history with this tool, and I have a skill that I’m working on in my other classes, so I want to put those together to make a new statement here in this context.”

After this initial decision, Libby was faced with the inventional problem of how to structure her process: should the music come first, or the dance? This is where she ran into her main problems, which she talked about at length: “Most of the time I’m pretty quick, I’m pretty self-motivated, so I thought it would be kind of fun and easy, just to, you know, throw the dance together with the music. No, it’s way harder.” Instead of simply working in order, she found the process to be constantly recursive, as a musical decision had repercussions on the dance, and vice versa, over and over. She found she had to constantly think of the future, considering not just what she was composing in the present, but also where it was going, a process that she compared to writing poetry or essays: “So it’s the same thing even writing poetry: if you write one stanza, how is it going to lead into the next one? Or what

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**Literacies, Old and New**

Libby’s story of composing music and dance reminds us that composing multimodal texts requires us to both lean on the skills and literacies we’ve learned in other contexts and be willing to reshape those literacies in unexpected ways.

Composition classes should thus be safe places to practice creative blends of established skills (Libby’s dancing) and new possibilities (her music). Students who have taken the time to think through their technical skills and deficiencies can design for themselves, through a series of small assignments in guided inquiry, assignments that will require the intersection of their established and developing skills.

For example, the student who feels like a failure in writing but excels at video editing could design an assignment for herself that requires both skills—say, an online manual that moves between written exposition and video demonstrations. Or the student whose writing skills are superb but who has never tried producing an audio essay can design an NPR-style piece that blends his comfort with producing a solid script with the new area of digital audio production.
pattern, or iambic pentameter, or whatever you want to use. Same thing. And I feel like even writing an essay for a class you go through that process of, ‘OK where is this going? Should I just write and then like clean it up?’ The key, to her, is where it’s going to end: “But I think you’re always kind of thinking toward the ending in some way, in the arts. Like, ‘Okay, where’s the dance gonna end?’” The end of a dance, after all, is often the moment of highest impact, the moment the audience will remember as they leave the concert hall. Libby discovered through her process of composing that ends are present even in beginnings, that the emotions of performing are present even in the first stages of composing.

Taken together with my earlier comments about emotional connections to invention, Libby’s recursive strategy of cycling her attention through different aspects of her composition suggests a broad focus on the affective needs of audience, composers, and performers. Hearing the ways she spoke of her ever-shifting feelings toward her work reminds me of the emotional work of composing, a process that can blend in unexpected ways with the feelings of performers who play (or dance) the work and the feelings of audiences who join in by identifying with the sounds they experience.

**Computers and Composition**

When I took music composition in 2002, computers played only a minor role in the composing activities of me and my fellow students. I had a university-issued laptop onto which I downloaded a clunky, free version of notation software, but I primarily used it simply to input the notes I had already scribbled down on paper, occasionally sitting there for a while to write a few measures straight onto the screen so I could instantly play them back and make sure things sounded the way I imagined. (This was especially important when I wrote for the viola’s alto clef, which I wasn’t familiar with.) There was
a computer lab on campus with MIDI keyboards connected to better versions of the software, but I never felt that I had the time to learn this new system, and much of my composing was done in my dorm room on my cheap electric keyboard. When it came time to share the individual parts of my string quartet with the players, I printed a copy of the full score and manually cut each line out (one for violin 1, one for violin 2, etc.), reglueing it onto another sheet before photocopying it. I treated my laptop fundamentally as a desktop back then as well, leaving it in place unless I had to project a slideshow somewhere on campus; I don’t ever remember seeing a laptop with notation software in class.

The computers were one of the first things I noticed when visiting composition classrooms for this project in Fall 2010: students not only had laptops (as most did when I was in college), but they had them out, constantly fiddling with their pieces in their notation software even up to the minute when they played back their progress to the class. In one class, the professor suggested that a piano part be played an octave or two up for four measures, and the student quickly highlighted the notes, bumped them up, and we all listened to what it sounded like in both possible places. Revision was quick, playful, painless. Students’ opinions still differ on how fundamental the computer is to the composition process—that is, if they would even be able to do their composition work without one. Miles, for instance, explained to me that he never starts working in front of the computer (which, as a skilled pianist, must be easier for him than for some other students), but he also noted, “When I get an idea in my head I immediately put it on the computer,” reminding us that even when the computer is seen as more of a notation tool
than a composition tool, it has become a crucial aspect of the invention process for contemporary students.

When discussing computer technology, both in terms of notation software and electronic music, the students tended to make points similar those made by many of my non-student participants in chapter three and four. That is, they happily accepted notation software as a time-saving tool (as did Stella Sung), and Ben’s comment about electronic music simply being a “new palette” parallels Matt Gomes’s and Scott Whiddon’s views on the subject. With that ground laid, I want to briefly consider two areas where students’ responses seemed especially studenty, and therefore as worthy of additional comment here: notation software as an educational tool and the experience of being a laptop-carrying student in the twenty-first century.

Picture the most stereotypical image you can of a conservative, classical music composition instructor: old, white, male, crotchety. He insists on drilling his students on the basics of notation over and over—issues of time signature, dynamics, phrasing—all devices that a classical composer relies on repeatedly. Imagine, then, his response to hearing Libby tell me about her attitude toward notation software like Sibelius:

Notating is always . . . interesting
for me,
‘cause I didn’t really write music before!
So, I’ve just—
I use Sibelius in order to
listen to what I write
and to properly notate it.
If I don’t know how to write a rhythm,
it’s a really great way of just,
figuring it out.

And it’s quick.
I use it as a reference, more.
I hate the sound
of the electronic pitches
and everything.

“I know!”

I just did the oboe piece, and like,
“Ugh, is this how an oboe sounds?
No. Why . . . ?”

It’s so annoying.

But at least you can hear it.
Without having to sit down and *play* your piece,
you can hear it objectively,
like played *to* you,
which I always like because I’m not a great pianist—
I can’t play the piano, so.
I like being able to listen right away. [. . .]

I think it’s very helpful for our generation to have that
electronical dependence almost,
because it does make everything so much more accurate
if you think about it.

Like I was just writing in 6/8
and didn’t even realize
that I was putting quarter notes instead of eighth notes!

*[Laughs]*

I was like,
“Oh my gosh!”
I didn’t even realize it.

So that definitely helps when you have Sibelius
or any other program
to help you notate it.

Our traditionalist instructor would certainly agree with Libby on one of her points: the
oddly inexact representation of instruments when notation software plays back what has
been written on the screen. But while that dislike would lead our traditionalist to turn
away from software altogether, Libby experiences it as more of an annoying but
necessary aspect of her reliance on the tool to help guide her through even the most basic
issues, like what kind of notes to use when writing in a 6/8 time signature. And I suspect he would writhe with anger at hearing this, perhaps saying, “Well, she’s not following the correct order of skill acquisition! She ought to have learned her piano skills better, and known her rhythms better, and been a veritable master of all the details before she turned to the task of creating an actual composition!” But Libby’s experience with the software—and, I suspect, many other students’—throws this traditional order on its head. Why wait for fundamental skills to be developed before composing when those skills can be developed by composing? The point worth making here is that she has learned the basics of music composition craft in the context of meaningful activities that matter to her. What a better model for learning, in which a student integrates acts of composition into her daily life by working on pieces she cares about, as opposed to distant skill-building exercises that feel unconnected to anything she wants to express.

Figure 4: Miles playing his pieces for me on his laptop
I saw even more of how computer technology blurs the edges between the students’ everyday activities and schoolwork when I met with Miles a second time, where he played me some of the work he had collected on his laptop (Figure 4). He played for me a variety of pieces, ranging from the playful to the serious, from the stylistically exact to the experimental, and from the public to the personal. I was impressed at a number of things during this session: the sheer amount of sketches that Miles keeps a record of, the ease with which he navigates the program (slowing down the tempo, jumping quickly between measures, and so on), and even the natural ease with which he pulls out the laptop and instantly begins working, without any bother with plugging in or waiting for the operating system to boot up.

The implication is that Miles lives a life where his composing tool is always available. The ease and nearness of this tool must inspire him to see the world compositionally, with any new situation, conversation, thought, or sound serving as possible inspiration for a new musical sketch. In a sense, it acts like a visual artist’s sketch book or a writer’s notebook (which Geoffrey Sirc calls “an actual writer’s single most important need” [“Resisting” 517]), yet with two crucial differences: its ability to play those sketches back to the sketcher and its easy-to-revise format. This gives Miles the power of portable, continual tweaking usually reserved for the wordsmith using a word processor. The parallels don’t stop there: as with works written on a word processor, Miles can choose to email digital copies of his work to friends and professors for outside advice, or he can keep his work private, wrapped in the warm embrace of his backpack or snuggled on his lap. Though recordings of analog, performed music can also be passed around digitally, creating a good recording requires a lot of extra equipment,
and once laid down, the tracks are harder to adjust. But working in notation software makes sharing, tweaking, and revising music a relatively painless and swift process, especially when everyone’s software uses the same file types—at least it seemed that way as I sat in a room listening to Miles’s work. He lives in a technologically enhanced world where his public and private identities are expressed through the same tool.

One last note on computers: when I spoke to Rose about notation software, she said she rarely used it because it took so much time to type or play everything into the computer.

Going over my transcripts later, this surprised me; after all, many composers talk about notation

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**Stretching Software**

Instead of learning musical basics first and then composing, notation software allowed Libby to learn the basics by composing. Consider the ways that the tools built into our word processors could help our students see issues with their writing in the context of assignments they care about. Microsoft Word’s grammar check could be playfully explored by asking students to write several sentences that result in the green squiggly line, which could then be either fixed in new sentences or explained away as not really a problem. Searching a document for common problems (perhaps overuse of the passive voice, found by searching for various forms of “to be” verbs) also harnesses technology in simple, natural ways.

Miles reminds me of the importance of encouraging students to use a writing notebook of some kind—but instead of a paper notebook, preferably a notebook with portability, revisability, and shareability. He challenges me to consider how I can use computer technology to encourage students to be continually reflective, constantly considering how everyday thoughts and experiences can be reshaped and analyzed in various genres of writing. Perhaps the future of this will be through mobile phone messaging; students could use their phones to send thoughts to themselves or others (a required number each week) via Twitter, or sent to an email address that saves them in an Evernote account.

Rose relies less on notation software because she knows she won’t need someone else to perform her music. How might we ask our students to compose writing that will be “performed” by someone else—say, another classmate—to playfully refigure the different rhetorical stances required? Oral presentations of material prepared by a classmate are an obvious first step, perhaps done with or without consultation with the “content composer” and the “deliverer.” But digital delivery options could also easily be devised.
software as a significant time *saver*. But on reflection, I saw that other composers save time by using software as compared to writing it out by hand. Rose, on the other hand, is comparing writing music out to not writing it out—to simply learning music by playing it through enough times that it’s memorized. And in Rose’s context, as someone who sees herself primarily as a band member and singer-songwriter, that makes sense—after all, she’ll be the primary person performing her music. But of course, students often aren’t the ones to perform their work, which leads to a host of instructive moments for the composition instructor.

**Performance**

At the end of each semester, students are encouraged but not required to deliver their compositions at a recital, either performing their pieces themselves or sitting to the side, standing to receive applause after fellow students perform the piece. Yet in a world where music is increasingly heard through recordings distributed digitally, the world of the live performance must feel ever-more odd to each class of students that passes through the college’s concert hall. Even music students who have been trained to take the stage, who perform their work at least once a semester, must feel the tinge of anachronism between their music listening practices and their music delivery practices.

Many of my participants’ responses to my questions about the recital were exactly what we might expect—a blend of uncertainty and confidence about the upcoming performance. For instance, Ben told me that he always tries to have something on the recital program, while Claire laughed while telling me, “I definitely don’t want to perform something I’m not happy with. So if it’s something I feel comfortable with, and I’m happy with, then definitely. But as of right now, I don’t see anything being
performed in a recital yet.”

But even those categories of fearful and confident seem inadequate in the face of the complexity of actually talking to composers. Miles, for instance, surprised me: as a junior in his fall semester, and as a student with a clear passion for serious concert music, he had never yet had a piece played at the recital, even though he had had four opportunities to do so in previous semesters. Yet his explanation reminded me of some of his underlying values: “I like to say that if I do finish my work in time, I wouldn’t necessarily have a problem with it being on the recital, but that’s not my goal, for it to be on the recital. My goal is to be completely happy with my finished work, which usually requires time greater than what’s allotted to have your, at the recital.” As an adherent to the aesthetics of form—a label I’m giving him; he calls himself a “stylist”—Miles values the consistent excellence of the piece on paper more than he values the more rhetorical dictates of the aesthetics of expression, which would value the effect the music has on audiences most highly. It’s inexact to call this anything like “fear of failure.” It’s much more like a desire for control and perfection over an artistic statement, the view of a Romantic Artist more than a rhetorical scriptor, using Barthes’s term.

Yet performance is a situation where control has to be given away, especially when collaborating with other players and, in other ways, with audiences. Libby had interesting comments on this as well; she seems practically eager to give up control to collaborators and audiences, perhaps a side-effect of her history as a dancer. But it’s not as simple as giving away control, as Libby clearly gains something from this musical transaction as well:

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8 At least in the semester I spoke with these students, Ben and Claire were both mistaken: at the composition recital six weeks after I conducted the majority of my interviews, Ben didn’t showcase any new work, though Claire did.
I feed off of the musicians.

I’ve totally fed off of them during the live performance of it, so it’s all about communication—that’s what I love about dance is, you’re affected by your environment so much.

I guess you’re performing in front of a whole bunch of people, and they’re dead silent because it’s a slow song and they don’t know to clap for something.

That’s a whole different environment than if you’re at a competition with your whole team there supporting you, clapping you the whole way through, you’re going to probably do a lot better. In the sense of, you know, performing at your best and giving a lot more energy.

The energy that you get from the audience is how you dance.

Yet even as she enters into this Burkean identification with the audience through dance, she enters a similar situation when her music is performed. That is, according to Libby, musical audiences are also free to make their own interpretations:

I like the ambiguity of it?

I like it when the audience maybe takes a different step than I thought they would?

It’s always surprising to see like—I’ll ask my mom, “How did you think that sounded?” because she does not like minor, she likes very major happy sounds—and I said, “Well, what did you think about my composition?” And she said, “I thought it was lovely! It was a little sad, but, I got it, you know.” And so as long as they get something from it

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I don’t care if it’s what I’m looking for or not, I just want them to get something out of it.

I think every choreographer wants someone to at least respond. And even playwrights you know, they want you to take the play in a different way than they originally set out to say. Maybe it was a political statement but maybe someone took something very personal, from the play, which is a great thing! Like, it’s always changing!

She went on to specifically draw connections between music and dance:

If you watch a dancer, you could . . . you kind of like try and find out what they’re feeling, what the dancer’s feeling. But when its music, it’s all about you.

So when you’re, when the dancer is dancing to music, you have both of it going on. What is she feeling and what am I feeling in response to that? It’s a whole play-off, question-answer-type thing. So I really like that about it.

To Libby, performing dance and performing music are situations for guiding audiences, but not controlling them. Furthermore, she is guided by the audience’s response to her, resulting in a swift, ever-changing give-and-take that both fuels and feeds from the audience. No wonder she likes performing: constructed this way, it’s so unlike other kinds of composition, which require so much waiting—waiting for the composition (an essay, a painting, even a recording) to be perfected, shared, and then responded to so long after its creation. When rhetoric is sounded for live audiences, so much more is made possible by the perception of immediate feedback.
Beyond the recital, some students have found other ways to deliver their work. For instance, as I described above, Rose writes much of her music for a coffeeshop crowd, to give people, in her words, a sense of “I’m not alone in this.” She also spoke more about recording than any of my other participants, describing her home recording sessions with a friend who is helping her produce an album of songs. She seemed to be thinking out loud what the difference was between her live shows and her recording sessions, questions that touch on our disciplinary discussions about the changing nature of delivery in a digital age:

You know, I was thinking about this the other day, like,
   “Man, what if I make a mistake on the album?
    Oh well, they could hear me perform.”
But I’m like, no,
   I shouldn’t think that!
   Because the record is like what they’re gonna go away with,
and, you know, I try to think,
   “How many times have I really seen a band live
   versus how many times I’ve listened to their album,
      like in the car,
      this and this.”

But, you know, I would think
   in the performance atmosphere
I’m so much freer,
   even compositional-wise—
      I’ll like put in stuff,
      I’m not—I don’t—
      I’m freer with time,

whereas you know when you’re recording you know
   you have to be,
   everything is precise,
   and everything be perfect.

But performing, I like—
   maybe that’s the nature of me improvising all the time
      because I had to learn it,
      and stuff,
and it’s different,
I think it’s different than recording.

Because she’s writing in popular music genres, she expects people to engage with her music the same ways she does: by listening over and over to recordings, and by attending shows where they can expect to hear improvised differences between performance and recorded text. On one hand, that emphasis on the primacy of recordings puts extra pressure on her to perform to perfection on the recording, but then she seems to back away from that, realizing that the freedom of live improvisation has value too. Of course, the way she values live performance comes from a completely different genealogy of performance than that showcased at the composition recital, where pieces that have been written out and practiced are performed with the most careful fidelity to the score as possible, (hopefully) sounding the same way if they were played repeatedly. The values implicit in delivering a musical text are thus at odds in the two situations: in a coffeeshop, the audience expects to be engaged and perhaps even participate in some way, so they listen with an ear toward what affects them emotionally, perhaps also for those moments where they hear the unexpected if they already know the performer’s work. But in a concert hall, the audience is led to consider the forms of the music, how it fits together, where and when (and perhaps why) the changes in tempo and key and dynamics take place, and how exact and perfect the performance is. It seems telling to me that I didn’t read any professional composers discussing performances in informal, coffeeshop-like spaces, nor did many mention the process of recording and the epistemological questions it suggests about how we come to know a piece of music’s true essence (whatever that is).
I also thought of the changing nature of musical delivery when Claire spoke to me about the possibilities of composing music for videogames. Perhaps unwittingly, she has stepped into a centuries-long debate about the nature and quality of music created for a use beyond pleasure in itself. As the concept of the Romantic Artist increasingly flourished in 19th-century Europe, music composed for church services and plays began to seem less purely artistic than music composed simply for concerts, an attitude that persists today in the attitudes of many concert composers toward film composers—and more recently, videogame composers. Claire’s comments show none of this historical disdain (expressed with an enthusiasm that comes in part from my sharing that I’m a fan of many videogame soundtracks):

So:
in the long run these people are making so much money for writing a minute?

So my whole thing is,
I’m trying to work smarter,  
not harder.

Even though I enjoy writing pieces,  
and I will do that for my own fun when I graduate.

But the whole, making money with it?  
I see making videogame music  
as a wonderful outlet,  
for staying home,  
for being a mom,  
and making music,  
where you write a minute of music  
and you get paid really good money for it.

Of course videogame music is more financially stable than composing into the  
traditional concert world scene: it’s music for use. Played in loops, it adds atmosphere to  
game spaces. It signals the emotions players should feel when exploring different areas.  
It’s church music for an increasingly post-church society. And like Rose’s  
acknowledgement of the differences between live and recording spaces on how she  
composes, Claire’s dream delivery space is a space that allows her to compose in her  
chosen ways: with an efficiency that allows her to compose as a rewarding profession,  
not necessarily as an all-consuming lifestyle.

**Conclusion**

In the end, interviewing students is in many ways like interviewing composers in  
any mode: they all give answers that refuse to be neatly categorized or align well with the  
thoughts of their colleagues. But when dealing with music-as-sound, this polyvocality is  
what we should expect. Some will always hear traces of musical rules in the music that  
influences them, and others will focus more on how the music makes them feel,  
regardless of the forms used to get there. Some will always feel that the guidance they get  
in class helps their own skills blossom, while others will feel stifled. Some will find in
live performance the lovely, unfixed sort of meanings they have been striving to communicate, while others will continue to see performance as simply an expression of a true text that lives on paper.

Looking back at my own experiences woven in with these student narratives, some of my own thinking seems particularly studenty to me now. I laugh to think at how little I understood what a classical music department was like when I thought John Williams’s *Star Wars* music would be just as accepted as Bach’s, but I’m also proud of the path I took to weave my other geeky interests (the *Legend of Zelda* videogames) into my senior year composition for string quartet. I composed my influences, but without thinking too hard about what my meanings were. At the time, I just wanted to hear my own versions of the music I loved sounded, there in the concert hall, on strings played by friends. I wanted that glimmer of recognition in the ears of audience members who got it, who realized that high and low cultures were being strangely and strategically tied together in ways that were sometimes clear and sometimes densely convoluted. It was that moment of connection, that moment of live identification between me and others, that I wanted to happen. And that desire, as emotion-tinged and undefined and nondiscursive and vague and studenty as it was, was thoroughly rhetorical. That’s the nature of composers’ music delivered: it draws people together into a shared focus on the present, and that feels good.
CONCLUSION

Play this clip at [http://tinyurl.com/strauss-ending](http://tinyurl.com/strauss-ending) (Kempe)

Again, a musical epigraph. But this time, I *will* be content to let it speak for itself, mostly. It’s enough to say that this is another recording of the same piece that opened this dissertation, Richard Strauss’s *Till Eulenspiegel*, this time conducted by Rudolf Kempe for a CD released in 2006 instead of by Strauss himself. Instead of the beginning of the fourteen-minute work, though, this is the ending.

Listen to it with the weight of this project weighing on it. That is, listen to it as a sound artifact, as something you can comfortably bring your own associations and emotions to. Feel free to like it or dislike it. Feel free to focus on its forms, create a story to go along with it, or let it play in the background while you focus on something else. If you like, consider the possible influences and audiences Strauss weaved into the piece, or imagine how he relied on each of the five canons when composing this piece.

But mainly, just listen to it. Sometimes, listening is enough.
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