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Still

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

by

Kyle Johnson

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2020

The dissertation of Kyle Johnson is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2020

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2008	Bachelor of Music, University of Maryland College Park
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Still

by

Kyle Johnson

Doctor of Philosophy in Music

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Roger Reynolds, Chair

Still is a 75-minute music-cinema work that experimentally weaves electronic music, narrative, documentary, and contemporary composition. The work's four threads, Peril, Dilemma, Transition, and Glory, each ask moral and psychological questions in distinctive, novel aesthetic languages.

<center>**Memorandum**</center>

<center>**1.**</center>

 Art is great for three reasons.

<center>*Artworks are a window into the worldview of their creators.*</center>

Not necessarily in any way that could be explained, but when I hear a piece, I want it to resemble

and reflect the composer. When I look at a painting, I want to see how that painter sees the

world. I want through their work to see them, to understand them, for the duration of the viewing

experience to feel the world against myself as they feel it against them. That's what I think

matters about art in the end, that it's an opportunity to understand someone and their perspective

in a profound way, and that we can build deep networks of connection across individuals, across

cultures, and across time. I'll never meet him, but when I listen to his masses, I get Palestrina.

When I hear a Palestrina Credo, I hear at first a an individual alone and exposed but standing

themselves up against already hundreds of years of tradition. Then, four important words later,

that individual is enveloped and supported by a community built on that culture. I hear in their

harmony a worldview that prizes structure, that connects everyone and everything to higher

power and purpose.

<center>*Art is an adventure. It's an audience loaning to the creator authority over reality's laws.*</center>

Which they can rewrite completely, which they can reweight towards an area of interest, which

they can respectfully leave in place. And even leaving them as-is the creator can hold that unused

authority over the audience in an act of domination. So art is an exciting, wonder-full,

intellectually active place because the audience can't take the rules for granted. "I grew up in a

track home in suburban San Diego. Its not that all the houses looked the same, its that I could

<center>1</center>

walk in to any one of them and know exactly where all the bathrooms were." The thrill is in the potential to create anything different.

But that can also reflect meaningfully on our actual circumstances and world. Because

Art is confessional.

The triangular relationship between an artist, an artwork, and its audience provides the plausible deniability necessary for an artist to publicly unburden themselves of intense emotion. It is an opportunity to say how I really feel without even having been in the room and then afterwards plausibly claim to have been just kidding. It is an opportunity to find out how someone else really feels without having to feel embarrassed for them. It is the opportunity to dwell on the things that matter most, but which I'd never raise in polite conversation because I'd never want to bore others with the trivialities of profound anxieties. It makes me wonder what Palestrina was like in, like, real life, as he ate dinner. Was he a basically normal dude who saw music as his opportunity to unembarrassedly revel in what he saw as the transcendent? Or was he eating his pasta shouting praise to the almighty between each bite? Or, most darkly, did he show up in my history textbooks because he carefully cultivated an external image of genius connecting through music God and mortals but in private ate his lasagna with feet on the table watching tv. I am not personally a huge pasta person and I guess whether or not I'm a basically normal dude is beyond the scope of this essay.

2. Regarding *Still*.

Medium

I wanted to make a film because I wanted something I could get perfect. I thought that my art should be honest, not pretentious. It needed to be genuine, but most importantly it had to feel right.

I began thinking about my work in terms of rightness shortly after I arrived at UCSD and, to me, a piece feels right when it flows organically from me. Whether it flows from my body via improvisation or performance, or intellectually from my own experience, it has to be particular to me, not generic. It needs to have all of the annoying rough edges sanded off. It need not be perfect, but any imperfections that impede or water down the core momentum of the work need to be removed.

I thought then that every piece I was proud of said something. Or, in every piece I thought I was proud of, I had said something. Or, every piece should be me saying something *the only way I could have said it.* It has to be right.

And so I turned to the practice of recording and the opportunities of fixed media. In the end, I thought, every moment of a film would be under my control. At the very least because I could remove anything that wasn't right, though more optimistically I was counting on the power of the computer to subtly reshape whatever material I had towards rightness. Different from writing a score, where perfect rightness would always be thwarted by collaboration and live performance, this seemed to be the ideal way to get things just how I wanted them.

Anyway, this was back in 2015 and as I write this essay's first draft I still haven't finished *Still* so obviously that was a pretty stupid way of looking at things but nevertheless it is why I wanted to make a film. (Editor's Note, penultimate draft: getting ever closer!)

Threading

Still employs a simple narrative idea that I have employed in all of my larger works. *Still* is composed of four separate threads which are each in their own world. First, I asked myself about what should form the conceptual framework for each thread, considered independently. What was each thread about? Or what do they sound like? Or what do they look like? And how does each thread evolve from beginning to end. Then, to plan *Still*'s formal layout, these independent threads were woven together in time. For example, the piece begins with a scene from *the Peril* thread, then two scenes from the from the *Transition* thread, five scenes later the audience is introduced to the *How To* thread.

This threading seems like a generally good idea because 1) it helps hold an audience's attention *variety-spice-life/leave them wanting more/meanwhile, back at the ranch…* and 2) it's a technique that tries to bring about a sense of wonder and mystery, of active searching by an audience as they try to explore and understand the intellectual geography of the artwork. Thread A and Thread B are placed next to each other in one piece and I think an engaged audience member almost inevitably starts to wonder why. What is their relationship to each other? Nothing? Will A and B later connect in some way? Does one thread comment on another? Am I not getting it? Is their nothing to get? The hope is that it's "Who dun it?" but richer, deeper.

For the threading idea to work, it is important that each thread have an identity and iconography that is substantial enough that any new portion of the thread is easily connected to the previous portions. That identity can be formed in many different ways, including with

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musical texture, narrative story, color palette or philosophical topic. The identity of each thread can always be called to mind, and so even though each thread is not physically present in the piece at all times, its ideas and identity are intellectually present, and so the threads can weave. A single scene, song, movement can't work as a thread on its own, then.

Still*'s Threads*

Still has four threads, *Peril, Transition, Consequence,* and *Glory*.

Peril

Peril *is a thread that contemplates the anxiety of hypothetical anguish.*

I haven't yet lost a finger, but I have scraped my knee. Is it twice as bad? Two hundred million times as bad? Better? It's about losing your footing as you were stepping back, you know the ground is back there and that your head is moving towards it, but you really have no idea how bad it can be, even in the worst case, where at the end you reach to the back of your skull and feel the mushy bits. It's about the fact that while I have felt sad and stressed out, I've never reached towards a loved one two hundred yards away as we both hurtle toward the earth thirty seconds after our airliner exploded into a million pieces. Is it…*way*… worse?

In *Still*, I created a character portrayed by the actor Mary-Glen Frederick to serve as a proxy for the audience as the audience and I contemplate these concerns across the six scenes of *Peril*. I wanted to both explore how these concerns feel, and also to address the concerns more analytically with language (English) and so the six *Peril* scenes take different approaches. That these different looks, like a basketball team presenting different defenses to their opposition on successive possessions, have a slightly destabilizing effect is a pleasant side effect.

The more visceral moments come with Mary Glen's character alone in a secluded hotel room. The room was shot on location in Julian, California at a roadside motel that I selected for its distinctive, dingy, but not desperate appearance. Its cement brick walls are nicely maintained and painted in a less than chic purple. The interior of the room visually communicates the accurate sense that the motel is safe, reliable interior, but that all sorts of danger lurk just beyond the cement brick walls.

The initial conception was that we would see Mary Glen in the room. We'd see visual cues of her character's concern crescendo and then quickly fade away, only for an explosion of movement to startle us and end the scene. We'd hear her anxiety, taking the form of an electrical buzz, not clearly identified in the film but: imagine the electronics of an old tv buzzing as they decayed. The buzzing in the dingy hotel room would start in the background, sounding just like it might in real life, but as the metaphor became clearer to the audience the buzzing would be brought into the sonic foreground. The sound of the buzzing would ebb and flow as it darted around the surround space. Mary-Glen and I shot the hotel room scenes with these initial conceptions in mind, but before I had done any concrete compositional work beyond those conceptual plans.

In post-production, as I reviewed the footage we shot together I found my attention repeatedly drawn to Mary Glen's eyes and especially her blinking. I was so captured this that I decided to compose the aural component of these scenes in strict coordination with her blinking. I organized structural time and created sonic rhythmic gestures around those blinks, some of which were full blinks some only partial.

For example, an analytically minded viewer might notice this organization in the second shot of Mary Glen's second scene "To be in trouble. Actual crisis. Danger. Really could go

either way." Mary Glen blinks eight times in the eight second shot, an aspect of her performance which I think convincingly suggests the anxieties described above. Blinks 1 and 2 are each accompanied by simultaneous subtle gesture with the reverberated engine sound that is frequently heard in these scenes. At the same moment as Blink 1, the engine sound is given a subtle volume accent, and at the same time as Blink 2 the sound is given a more substantial volume accent while its pitch is quickly bent up-down. Blinks 3-6 are not coordinated with any musical gesture which I intend to give the sense of a small calm before small storm. Blinks 7 and 8 are incorporated into a gesture with the audio and video editing that ends the shot, with Blink 7 occurring at the same time as the voiceover text "Should," Blink 8 occurring simultaneous to "be" and the shot cutting at "fine." It's not that I've defined a rigorous approach to how exactly each blink should be treated, instead I treat each blink, throughout all of her scenes, as an opportunity to create a new audiovisual gesture or decoration. By doing this, I hope that the audience experiences a subtle but powerful connection between the audio, visual, and textual elements. Her performance, my audio composition, and the rhythm of the video editing, all flowed from an unconscious process driven by her (admittedly, acted) anxiety.

The success I found with this approach motivated me to see this as a key goal for all of the post production work I did on *Still*. If any scene seemed unsatisfactory, seemed to need a touch of something, I would play the scene back over and over to see if there was some small element that continued to capture my attention. I'd then seek out a way to give that small detail more weight, perhaps that meant presenting it more prominently through simple amplification, perhaps through repetition, maybe imbuing it with a structural significance (the detail in question would begin and end each relevant scene), or putting it in communication with another element. I think this approach substantially improved many scenes, and I hope that for the audience it's a

window into my worldview. To see *Still* is to understand that I care about "the anxiety of hypothetical anguish," sure, but in a deeper, less-easily-articulable-in-language way, its to see how her blinking connects with me.

The most analytic, reasoned, and explicative approach taken in the *Peril* series is a monologue that Mary Glen performs towards the beginning of the film's third chapter. Her character lays out, in language I intend as not didactic but pretty clear and explicit, the concerns that motivate her. She does this directly to camera. To emphasize her sense of precariousness, her quiet, very subtle performance, framed by the A-camera so that she's seen as small, occupying only a small part of an already small room. She's closed herself inside that room to protect herself from everything that could lurk outside, but she's is intermittently impacted by loud and chaotic sound materials from the outside.

The *Peril* thread ends two scenes later (though Mary Glen appears later for a brief cameo). Having established the pattern that these sorts of scenes end in her explosive motion, and hoping that the audience will feel proud to have recognized the pattern and this time properly steeled themselves against the coming startle, I instead explode the sounds of the outside, distant passing motors into a choir of time stretched motors and microtonal brass.

Like the rest of the electronic music in *Still*, I composed this explosion in the Reaper DAW. I first chose to work in Reaper, a Digital Audio Workstation first released in 2006 that's functionally analogous to Pro Tools or Logic, because of its flexible approach to track types and scriptability which helps me quickly experiment with new ideas. To start work on the final Peril scene "*Still, still, still.*", I created a plausible first draft of the music, then cut a video draft to that music, then proceeded to compose the music to completion adjusting the video as needed. The explosion is generated from two audio samples, the distant motor and a single horn sample found

on the open source sound library freesond.org. The act of composing this scene, then, required deciding when each sample begins, choosing how much each sample is time stretched, and then drawing pitch, amplification, and spatialization envelopes for the roughly forty tracks in the editing display that those samples occupy. Sometimes the drawing of an appropriate envelope is relatively simple (pitch: A4, then D5), sometimes complex (A4 glissing to D5, but slowly at first with a wiggle in the middle), to very complex (A4 glissing to D5, with the wiggle and with pitch vibrato that widens over the course of the note).

The compositional process is iterative. I begin with a very general idea ("What if the moment the distant truck passes lasted forever?"), and make a few very provisional attempts at realizing that idea in the computer environment ("let's try a timestretch algorithm, or perhaps different truck recordings cascading over each other, or a truck recording into a very long reverb") until there is a glimmer of potential. Then I play it repeatedly, try to address what sounds dumb and create more of what sounds cool, and a few years later it's still got issues but then they're about mixing instead of pitch choices so hey that's progress!

Transition

Variety is the spice of life in artwork because it decreases the possibility of the audience anticipating what comes next. It encourages active, searching audiences to think "well if that is possible, what else could happen in this universe". And the impacts are efficient. They're more than linear. An artistic act that increases the space of possibility also suggests many other nearby possibilities that an audience must assume are now in play. If, by surprise, we saw Jerry Seinfeld at his actual breakfast table eating his actual breakfast, surely it's possible that in a subsequent

scene we would see Julia Louis-Dreyfus, or Jason Alexander, or maybe we see Larry David in his own car.

Many of my previous pieces have sought to expand their own space of possibility by similarly including fact alongside fiction and trying to problematize the space in between. This has proven to be a useful tool not only towards wonder-full and intellectually active goals, but also in art's confessional realm. If we know that within a given piece's walls lie true things and fictional things, surely there could also be false things, and if the piece lies maybe there is also space to slip in a few things the author actually believes but would never want to put their non problematized definitely sincere name to.

So I headed, a few times, to Deland, Illinois to film my very cooperative grandfather and not-cooperative-but-also,-like,-she-didn't-object-or-anything, grandmother. I wanted *Still* to explore impermanence, and visiting their home of 52 years, built long ago by my grandfather right next door to my his childhood home, as they considered whether it was time to move to an assisted living facility (Industry should rebrand such that the world "facility" is not necessary!), seemed like a worthy frame. I wanted to draw out how stable their lives had slowly become (same ice cream, same chairs, same dance club once a month, same complaints about that dance club the day later, same discussion topics as dementia slowly took hold) at the moment just before biology was going to demand that everything change. Though our family's not the sort to dwell on this sort of thing, they were also representing a genetic-geographic impermanence as they would be the last of our family to live in the part of central Illinois that Madden's had called home for seven generations.

Like the *Peril* thread, the *Transition* thread presents a variety of looks to its audience. The facts of their situation are important to the larger point the thread is trying to communicate,

so a handful of their short scenes are straight documentary. My grandpa introduces himself and, when not interrupted by an overhead flock of geese, situates the audience geographically. More subtly, we sit with them on their so-called porch as they chat and argue over the details of the history of their belongings and we see my grandpa introduce the same book to camera three or four times.

In order to thoroughly fill the space between fiction and documentary fact, *Still* includes a small handful of scenes that are less matter of fact and more emotionally poignant but nevertheless are still basically straight documentary. My grandfather takes a short walk down to the nearby creek and while my edit emphasizes his repeated use of the phrase "back in my younger days," no further artistic liberties are taken. My grandmother is seen in their basement, discussing what's left of their treasured dance club and whether there might not be some merit to the idea of a new home.

Two scenes set in the evening on their porch start to bend the bounds of reality and set up *Still*'s concluding scene. In a scene of my grandmother sitting in her easy chair taking her evening pills, we again hear her discuss some possibly positive attributes to moving. Throughout her stream of consciousness monologue, she's constantly itching and massaging various parts of her body. I try to emphasize that constant subconscious scratching to gently pull the scene away from reality and towards fiction. Twice, we leave the stream of consciousness monologue to see an extended passage of scratching slowed to being nearly still.

In a later scene of my grandpa alone in his own easy-chair, I emphasize his own patience and serenity by drawing the scene further yet away from straight documentary, sonically by including a highly processed big band standard, and visually with an edit that emphasizes his lack of motion. I take a Glenn Miller hit, and slow its samples so dramatically that it frequently

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sounds completely frozen. The timbral connection to big band is present, but any melodic or rhythmic identity is obscured in the processing. Visually, I cut to see him breathing but completely still except for one look to another room, and one look directly to camera.

The direct eye contact, the big band sampling, and the traversal between reality and creation anticipate the film's final scene. The scene begins with straight documentary of my grandfather entering his bedroom for some recreational trumpet practice. "Being a musician's a hard life," he comments to camera. He speaks for awhile and then plays a lick from "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," suddenly accompanied by an original recording. We're transported to their cherished dance club, but both it and the music are substantially changed.

In both visual and aural domains, I've again grabbed background items that continued to command my attention and forced them into the foreground. Visually, the edit emphasizes the not-break-neck pace of the dancers and highlights the awkward I contact different dancers make with the camera (in fact cell phone footage shot by my mom, thanks!). Aurally, I draw forward the lead singer's diphthong in "couldn't bear it with*out* you," to compose a surreal vocal cadenza that diverges wildly from the source material. Again the composition took place in Reaper and with a very limited sample vocabulary. I iteratively composed the new cadenza melody using the single "ou" sample, setting pitches and volumes in time. The cadenza leads musically back to the source and the visual processing simplifies until the film ends.

Consequence

Before I began working on *Still*, I had dipped my toe back into performance in a basic way by reading prepared texts for early versions of my *Talker* project, discussed later. Though

Talker would later become more elaborately performative, at the time I was simply just reading and did not intend to develop the practice into anything more.

I knew I wanted *Still* to address some logical dilemmas I thought we all faced as well as some ethical shortcomings I thought I was observing in others, and I thought those ideas could only be communicated the way I wanted through language (English). So I imagined a series of songs where a nightclub singer would speak-sing texts that addressed these topics explicitly while supported musically by solo percussionist. The first song would be about how nearly all of our knowledge is delivered through trusted intermediaries (can I marshal any direct evidence of global warming? I cannot.), the second about a tension we feel towards loved ones (I'd happily devote every waking moment of my life to them, but they would hate that), and the final about an inability to follow through on their beliefs to logical conclusions (I was, at the time, at least, frustrated by how many animals my dog obsessed parents were willing to eat).

I wrote these texts, casted an actor to portray the nightclub singer, and set a shoot date with the actor and the percussionist Fiona Digney. The actor didn't read music, and in any case I wasn't sure how much of the text I wanted sung and how much spoken, so I spent some time in the studio creating a demo recording with my own voice and midi drum set. And again the compositional process was iterative. I would record a take of my own performance of the text, listen back, then make a revised take. As I experimented with different affects across different takes, I found the takes moving with increasing speed towards a very intense declamation. I pursued this intensity for two reasons, it was compelling on its surface, attention catching, convincingly conferring an intensity on the confessions of ideas the author actually believed. It was also sufficiently over the top and from some angles naïve that I thought it might create a question in the audience's mind of whether the song was perhaps just an ironic joke.

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I finished composing the vocal speech-singing via this iterative recording process, setting the declamation, rhythmic vocabulary, pitch contours during speech and pitch choices for the occasional sung passages. Then, I fleshed out the skeletal drum part I had written, defining the drum vocabulary and language with the midi drum set I mocked up in Reaper.

I was pretty happy with what I had recorded, and also unsure of how I could communicate the vocal ideas to the non-musician actor I had planned to work with, and so I decided I would perform them accompanied by Fiona myself. I created a score and arranged to have it projected behind the camera during the shoot so that Fiona and I could read during the performance, hopefully undetected by the audience. We recorded the three songs over a five-day span with the help and camera operation of Hunjoo Jung and Dr. Thomas Hagan. The recording sessions were simple, we would do as many takes as we could manage before my voice and our energy gave out, and after putting tougher the base edit of each song I experimented with various bolted-on enhancements, text on screen, ironic section titles, b-roll borrowed from contemporary worship music, volumetric lighting overlays.

In the end, I rejected all of these additions for not flowing organically enough from their source material. Instead, I recorded multiple layers vocal commentaries on the original, a distant, disorganized, pitch multiplied Greek chorus. Fiona has a commentary chorus of her own, with processed samples of her playing appearing based on delay intervals and the opening and closing of a series of gates.

In summary, the *Consequence* series is the most straight forward of all of the threads in *Still*. Two musicians play music, with a bit of it fed back to them at a delay, with lyrics that say what the singer believes about things he cares about. There is no visual flair, not even steady handed framing (with due respect to the thread's cinematographers: composer Hunjoo and

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systems biologist Thomas), and in its sincerity I hope it turns heads to wonder whether there was really a joke after all.

Glory

The final thread to appear in the film is *Glory*. *Glory* was the first thread conceived and was originally planned as the sturdy background of the entire work. The status of *Glory* changed substantially over production of the film, and now it serves as a strange counter balance to the rest of the experience. The other threads all include substantial amounts of language (English), they all appear and disappear throughout the entire work, their scenes are all on the order of five minutes, and they focus visually on people. *Glory* breaks all of those established patterns, only arriving to the work in the penultimate scene and occupying fourteen minutes.

It breaks the previous patterns in order to make a surprising late expansion of *Still*'s space, a hopefully unexpected and rewarding increase in wonder. I created this section using Reaper, a wind sound generating instrument that I created in Pd, and a sample library of flute and vocal sounds I created with the flutist Rachel Beetz and the baritone Jonathan Nussman. I configured the Pd instrument to take inputs from Reaper about parameters such as center pitch, pitch volatility, the number of voices, their spacing in terms of pitch, and the width of controlling band pass filters. So composing the wind components of the scene entailed drawing many envelopes across the duration of the scene. Because the pd instrument was much more parametrically complex than the other aspects of *Still*, I decided to commit to certain sections as I composed, recording the output of a certain segment to a file and then composing on from that point. For example, if I wanted to change the opening passage, I could start over on that passage, but at this point I can't slightly adjust one of the voices louder or softer.

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Mastering and ideal conditions

The current version of *Still* is mastered based on cinema specifications. It assumes a quiet listening environment with substantial speakers, quieter than most television listening environments and speakers substantially more powerful than laptop speakers. Whether I would use this palette in a future project is a question I've asked myself but not decided. Having the dynamic range that the cinema specification offers clearly makes for better art in the ideal listening environment, but is it realistic for me to think that much of my audience will experience these ideal situations?

3. Notes on Two Other Pieces

I'm not really much of a talker.

is, what I hope will be, a life-long multimedia performance project. In every version, I perform a set of multimedia songs accompanied by electronic audio and some sort of video display (projection, television, computer display). Since the first version in May of 2015, I've done about two performances a year. Which songs are included in each performance changes over time, the total duration of performances changes, sometimes dramatically, and my performance of the core songs has evolved and improved substantially since the premiere. Part theater, part electronic music, part cinema, and part philosophy, the I think of the *Talker* project as an experimental remix of cabaret, television, and song.

Formally, *Talker* remixes the 1920s cabaret with contemporary television. Like the cabaret, it's a set of modular songs, some allegorical, some abstract, some narrative, presented intimately and adapted and reconfigured for each performance. Like television, it aims to transport audiences to vast distant worlds via cinematic techniques and creates new imaginative worlds via digital manipulation.

Some of the material in the work takes the idea of song remix further, using popular songs as source material to do actual remixes. I bend, break, and disassemble, these things I love and admire, to invent new creations that are plugged in to the power of the original source material.

In every iteration of *Talker*, I employ the same threading approach as in *Still,* just on a per performance basis. Many songs connect to form larger narrative arcs, some songs stand

alone, and many are brought forward from pervious *Talker* versions so that the project carries with it its own accrued history.

Just like its cabaret inspiration, *Talker* aims to deliver big, concrete ideas even as it is disguised in flashy abstraction. Those ideas have evolved over time as my interests and perspective have changed, and also are calibrated to match the performance context.

Arrangements of Songs with Titles That Begin with the Letter "M."

is the solo violin and tape piece that made my adult self want to become a composer. It is the first piece of music (that I composed, not contributed to as a collaborator, without video or text) that I feel says something interesting. It is a work which required all of my other UC San Diego activities to create.

"M." is a collection of avant remixes of "Mack the Knife" (Weill), "Memories" (Lloyd Webber) "The Way We Were" (Bergman, Bergman, and Hamlisch), and "Man in the Mirror" (Ballard and Garrett). The avant-remixes are radical elaborations of the selected source songs. Though the original melodies always underlie the new music I compose, the source material is so decorated, so ornamented, so recontextualized that the newly created musical language dominates. Only at key moments is the source clearly heard, and so a listener is constantly searching aurally for something that feels graspable and familiar but that remains just out of reach.

This approach reconfigures the composer-arranger-interpreter-listener relationship and places the music in conversation with popular aesthetics. Similarly, the electronic components hijack popular Top 40 production tropes hopefully towards more ineffable ends. Some elements are pre-recorded and fixed. 808 samplers, for example, are redeployed on flights of chaotic

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fancy. Electronic kick-snare patterns are dissolved into decadent excess. In each case, the

electronic elements are in an uncanny valley between beats for a radio hit, and experimental

ecstasy. And the performed music is composed in an emotionally strident, surreal juxtaposition

to those electronic elements.

4. Sufficiency

To close, thoughts on *Sufficiency*:

It is important to me that my artwork connects with civilians, not just other composers also waiting for their piece to be played at an academic conference. To be worth doing, it needs to be heard by real people really listening.

How to cause that to happen is not always clear.

But what is clear is that one of the necessary conditions is that the work be in some sense finished. Maybe just for that day, or just enough to get a version on vimeo for an application, but audiences of interested, eager civilian listeners do not pass through my studio and so nearly finished drafts on my computer do little to help me achieve the above goal.

At the same time, our world is an extremely competitive place. We are lucky that standards are incredibly high. In a crowded field of great artists, which is the situation always as far as I can tell. 'Hey that was pretty cool' is not enough to get your name selected. So even leaving aside trivialities like the value of self-expression and self-fulfillment, each tiny improvement towards wonder and rightness could serve the base, careerist goal of getting selected and getting the work in front of people.

But.

Those people don't always hear in my work what I hear. What is in the moment important to me about what I'm hearing is not always the thing that is important to them. Which is fine! I want them connected to the sweep of the experience, not also to be annoyed that the volume envelope was drawn too subtly for a particular vocal phrase. So there are many situations

where the so-called tiny improvements are completely irrelevant to any audience member's experience of the work.

This is the *sufficiency* dilemma: I want my work to be wonder-full, I want it to be right, and I want it to be heard. So at some point I need to decide its wonder-ful enough and right enough. Sufficient.

It's easy to look at *Still* five years later and say, well, that obviously took too long. And it did. Its more pernicious than simply being two years closer to the grave finishing it than I should have been, it's that I'm way, way, way better at everything I do now than I was then[i], and so it's a Frankenstein of great post-production moves working around naïve production choices. It's reworking the form to address the absence of a key scene because the actor flaked in 2016 when I thought I had to beg to get UCSD graduate actors to show up for 90 minutes when, as a professional video producer in 2020 I now know that I can post an add on Backstage.com and have (literally) 200 seasoned professionals willing to crawl across broken glass to spend six months on the role. It's, subconsciously, probably, trying to get materials made from 2016 interests to adhere to 2020 aesthetics. It's inefficient!, it's not ideal!, there is no logical conclusion!, I could be doing this forever!

But that's talking about spending the past two years working on it. I'm not presently addressing working on it for the next two weeks, which is obviously utterly necessary.

When is it time to render and upload? When is it time to be brave and put it in the world? When is the work completed *sufficient?*

Deadlines work best. All of the times I've been most successful achieving the above goals have been because of external deadlines. But, absent external deadlines, I'm proposing the following internal deadline going forward:

I must complete the work when I'm still the author. When I'm working on my artwork, I'm an artist. When I'm working on past-Kyle's materials, I'm an archivist.

Gotta focus on good enough to be an artist, I guess.

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Kyle Johnson

June 2020

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