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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

A Mess of Things

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Adam Tinkle

Committee in charge:

Professor Anthony Davis, Chair
Professor David Borgo
Professor Anthony Burr

2011

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2011

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Mess of Things

by

Adam Tinkle

Master of Arts in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Anthony Davis, Chair

A Mess of Things is a new documentary music-play conceived, composed, written, directed and performed by Adam Tinkle. It combines documentary audio of the creator's family, especially his grandfather, Ben Seltzman. Debuted April 1 at the Experimental Theater in the Conrad Prebys Music Center, the piece was audio and video recorded and a documentation is on file in the Mandeville Special Collections Library, UCSD.

The text attached is an artist statement describing the genesis of *A Mess of Things*, including the creator's process of collecting the documentary audio for the performance, conceiving its form and crafting many of its sections and components. The statement focuses on the creator's efforts to forge a hybrid aesthetics combining radio art, experimental music and direct storytelling.

A Mess of Things: Artist Statement

I first began making sound recordings of my grandfather in 2008. I wasn't recording for any particular purpose, certainly not for something as specific as the music theater piece that would start to take shape in my head two years later. A few disparate reasons for my starting to record him stand out to me now. In a number of musical projects that I had been working on at the time, I had begun using and manipulating found sound and recordings I had made, particularly of social environments and of the stories and natural speech of my friends. I had carted my laptop around to various places, recording in mono off of its onboard microphone since 2004, and incorporated the low-fi results into a number of types of pieces, usually employing these speech fragments interjections or as non-sequiturs within the flow of a musical piece—not as primary material for the work. In 2008, I finally bought a portable, handheld stereo field recorder, and suddenly the audio capture of the world became easier, faster, less obtrusive. With this new tool, I was excited to collect larger corpuses of audio and make use of them in a manner more logical and interconnected than I was able to with awkward one-off recordings and low-fi samples.

While my new field recorder induced in me a documenting fever, a seemingly never-ending family drama roared a couple of hours away on Long Island. My grandfather, Ben Seltzman, had moved out of the house where he had lived for 50 years in 2005, and was amid a frenetic cycle of organizing and scattering the collection of things he had managed to save. His life revolved around making plans to rebuild his machine shop in a rented garage, or in a new place he wanted to buy, or in the five large storage units where most of his collections sat silent. An inventor, tool and die engineer

and general handyman, Ben has all of his inventions, the heavy remnant of a life's work in these storage units, but everything is in pieces, and he talks not only about reconstructing them or making new designs, but just as much about documentation, the eventual autobiography he would write if he could reconstruct every invention and take color photographs of them. My mother and aunt, who see him repeatedly injuring himself and putting himself at risk (as well as spending huge amounts of money in the storage units) want him to divest of all or most of it. Despite the constant worrying and disagreement about what would happen to Ben's things, everyone agreed about needing to document: if he could just tell his stories and take some representative photos of whatever is at hand, he could stop pointlessly churning through the collection.

Initially, I suppose I had had three purposes in recording him. First, to please my family and hopefully get to the work of preparing some conventional remembrance of him as patriarch and forebear, a document of the sort that has spawned a whole industry of the recording of the elderly. Second, it seemed for a time as though Ben himself might actually be interested in preparing proper documentation of his inventions and sculptures, and that continually arriving at his door with my recorder in hand might push him to reassemble them and present them a little closer to the form they had when functioning. It soon became clear to me, however, that this wasn't realistic, that his churning through the storage wasn't bringing him any closer to this oft-stated goal. Third, I hoped that perhaps his voice and words could find its way into my music in the form of a "sample" or "found sound"--more as tantalizing, half-explained words (in the manner that North Adams, MA band the Books use speech samples) than as linear storytelling.

The initial corpus of audio recordings comes from a long weekend I spent at my grandfather's apartment with my aunt at the end of 2008. Still basically in the mindset of recording my grandfather, his stories and his inventions for posterity, and thus to smooth the process of his divesting, I had planned to try to sit down to do conventional interviews, as well as a few video interviews where he would show the camera some of his inventions and items in his collection. From the outset, it was clear this wasn't going to work. In general, emotions tend to run high in my family, especially when dealing with the topic of Ben and his things. I had had a conversation with my aunt in advance, telling her that my job of documenting would be much easier if she would be able to resist the temptation to yell or interfere with my grandfather's storytelling, but, ultimately, through a combination of her interference and my grandfather's reticence to actually commit the final word to tape on most of his still broken and piecemeal stuff ("It's not ready yet!"), what I was able to capture instead was much more of a verité representation of my family's interactions. What came to the foreground immediately were not any particular stories about Ben's items, but rather a constellation of thoughts, feelings and debates between him and my aunt (whose views align, I think, pretty smoothly with most people's) about the "stuff." Suddenly, without intending to, I had captured all sorts of material about possessions, the remembering they enable, their role in one's life history, the need to document and externalize memories, ideals of beauty and worth, clutter and cleanliness, inheritance and work.

I immediately began to code my audio, time stamping notable events and transcribing pieces of texts I thought I might use in some future project. My initial reaction, though, was of disappointment with my grandfather's digressions, my aunt's

interruptions, and everyone's failure to stay "on topic"--the topic I then had in mind being my grandfather's life and his work. Each of the next several times I saw him (which were increasingly few, after I moved to the west coast that summer), I made sure to have my recorder on hand, and turned it on when he went into storytelling mode. What I found in listening back, though, was that whenever he told stories of the past, the topic inevitably turned to his "stuff," and usually to the struggle to divest, organize, document, clean up, complete his projects, rebuild his machine shop and start new projects, or to whatever purpose he had in mind for it on that particular day. In short, the story I was in the middle of recording was just as much about his present life as about the vestiges of his past. In this way, the piece began to assert what it was about long before I could give it voice.

During the spring of 2010, I began to make sketches for such a piece, and share them with small groups of students and professors in workshop contexts. I took primary inspiration from the medium of radio (especially contemporary radio productions like *This American Life* and *Radiolab*), but I wondered how my musical training and interests in electro-acoustic sound and recorded media could be turned towards more narrative ends. This interest in radio narrative dovetailed with another major musical influence: a North Adams, MA-based duo called the Books, whose music draws samples from the whole universe of audio culture, from lectures and books-on-tape to soundtracks from anonymous home videos. Having had the opportunity to meet the band and produce a concert of theirs on campus in 2006, I learned about their working method, which consists of clearing out thrift stores of their unlabeled and unique-looking audio and video tapes, exporting the contents to digital and painstakingly coding and labeling

everything, all before starting to think about composing music that might include some of these found sounds. Long before I had any sense of materials or subject matter, I became convinced that I could find a way to split the difference between the narrative-first approach of radio and the textural, freewheeling, concrete poetry and collage aesthetics of the Books.

The central problem seemed to be that the strong sense of a narrative object common to radio production seemed to come at the expense of musicality, and vice-versa. Yet, despite this seeming trade-off and the wide aesthetic gulf that resulted, I was attracted equally to both these approaches to documentary sound. But what exactly defines the boundaries of documentary sound, if it can embrace sounds of such different sources as, say, a voice on an enigmatic and unlabeled tape and a carefully recorded interview with a celebrity?

Documentary seems to refer first to the act of capture, of documentation, but secondarily to the truth-value, the actuality of something that occurred. Both the Books and radio documentarians deal primarily with the sound of the human voice speaking: both styles center around the recording and subsequent audio manipulation of natural language. The sound of speech is a continuing preoccupation throughout the legacy of American experimental music, mined by both the founders of the Experimental music movement (e.g., Cage, Lucier, Ashley and Reich) and present-day composers. Speech and vocality contain the messiness and complexity of the world as it is, and as such, serve as potential antidote to composing in the formalized lattice of Western pitches and harmonies. Human speech contains a semiotic richness and texture that both seems to exceed the possibility of notation and questions the composer's usual mastery over sound.

Here, I think, lies the point of connection between the contemporary revival of radio documentary and the American experimental music tradition. Both seek a ballast of authenticity, of a "realness" that is imminent in the sound of a real person speaking. This authenticity is then often valorized and invested with an authority that structures our unexamined understanding of genre, implicitly questioning the truth content of "fiction." The initial sourcing of documentary material in "reality" ensures that the final product is "authentic," regardless of the amount of careful manipulation performed by the artist.

As I started to make sketches for this potential piece, I strived for a balance of music and words, layering multiple copies and fragments of Ben speaking and attempting to locate them within a musical context evoking clutter and antiquated mechanical technologies, using a modular synthesizer to try to make sounds similar to power tools. In the first sketch, I exclusively mined one long interview and pulled out chunks of two different rambling descriptions of inventions he had made in the 1960s. The sketch was bookended with Ben saying "It was in 19.....62," locating the contents in a past of distant remembrance. Through looping, quick cuts between audio clips, removal of conversational context and lots of repetition, I obscured any sense of linear narrative and a lot of the specific meaning of what he was talking about. Moreover, when I recorded this interview, he was brandishing photographs which helped to locate and specify his words. Shorn of this context, the words were emptied of specific referent: "It starts *here*, then it goes down slowly, slowly, till it comes to *here*..."

The critiques I received were united in telling me to focus more on editing the voices in a way that would seem more natural and conversational, not relying so heavily on the tools of vocal sampling to create a dense fog of layered voices. Early listeners also

agreed that the music ought not to be so foregrounded. Though I played the piece for a mix of sound artists, theater artists and musicians, it seemed that most people wanted to hear the materials I was using contextualized as radio, not as experimental music. That is, they wanted to hear voices undistorted, unimpeded by other sorts of sounds, voices, in short, whose semantic content would be more important than their sonic content.

I on the other hand was not at all sure where in the spectrum between narrative radio and experimental music I wanted the work to fall. I enjoyed the ring of truth to the voices in radio documentary, the audible texture and complexity in the natural speech of the interviewees on tape. I liked the stories told as well, and missed the element of story in most experimental music. Pieces that hone in on a voice so intently with the aim of extracting its music (as in, for example "It Will Rain" (Steve Reich) or "I am Sitting in a Room" (Alvin Lucier)) leave little room for context, development, and revelation of new information--all the mechanics of narration. The aesthetics of radio on the other hand demand both a clarity and an unremitting narrative march that would tend to exclude most of the sorts of manipulation and play that mark the use of recorded voices in American experimental tradition.

Taking my early critics' advice, I endeavored in the next version to tell more of the story, introducing the listener to elements of the entire story arc as I then imagined it: the workshop in the basement, the moving out, the storage units, the internal struggle over how to get rid of any of the stuff. I retained the abstract approach to sequencing, where story elements may come out of the order in which they occurred and meaning is conveyed more through accumulation than linear narration. I wanted my work to have something of the formal diversity of opera: "recitatives" where the narrative is pushed

forward, but also points where musical composition, though tied more or less to story, overwhelms the exigencies of narration. In my next ten-minute sketch, I began with clearly comprehensible individual voices and end with a pile of simultaneous voices which threaten one another's comprehensibility. Thus, I created a form where voices with semantic content provide initial context and locate the threads of a story, while in the last section the voices' functions more and more as sonic and musical texture. In retrospect, I think, these strategies were as much the result of listening to the non-linear, Joycean operas of Robert Ashley (my strongest influence at the time) as it was of a failure on my part to truly deal with my audio corpus in a systematic way. For a long time, finding a linear path through the very digressive and scattered conversations eluded me, but I justified the disordered presentation as more "true" to such material, unifying form and content under the heading of clutter.

At a certain point, however, with greater distance from the home where I had grown up (like my grandfather's house, it was plagued by disorganization, half completed projects, clutter, and a "problem" basement), and with the insights about my own habits that accompanied living by myself for the first time, a larger piece started to crystallize in my head. I began thinking of it as a story about hoarding as a generational curse, a dark side of inheritance that doomed my mother to dealing with her father's untidied archive, and which would probably doom me to do the same for my mother. Meanwhile, the untidy archive that was my collection of audio recordings began to loom and threaten my ability to make sense of and with it. Though I had absorbed and agreed with the critiques I had received on my sketches for the piece, I had a lot of trouble finding a story that

would sustain interest in a long-form piece. I wondered whether splaying out the story more evenly across three generations might help it take shape.

I interviewed my mother with this thought about inheritance foremost in my mind, but our interview wound up being much more useful for simply providing a chronological account of the accumulation of my grandfather's stuff, the transformation of his house and basement, his traumatic and life-changing move-out and his resettling in apartments and filling of storage units. Where before I had had Ben's scattered reminiscences, musings and tirades on these topics, I barely knew their sequence and had no sense of an outside perspective on much of it. Going back to my mom's interview and coding it, I was struck by the similarities and discrepancies between her version and Ben's versions of events. In painstakingly overlaying their two tellings of the same events, I finally found a clearer framework for why and how I might use the simultaneous voices I found so compelling in Robert Ashley's music to my own ends. (In an added psychoacoustic bonus, it seems that it's much easier for people to parse two simultaneous voices of different genders and timbres, and thus in two different frequency ranges.)

In starting to work with my mom's interview and absorbing her linear perspective on Ben's life, I gradually discovered that the narrative skeleton for the piece was far simpler than I had thought. Ira Glass advises aspiring radio producers to simply tell the story as it occurred: first this happened, then this happened, etc. In my urge to make radio art somehow *different*, experimental, I had pointedly ignored this bit of advice, but it returned full force when I began to use my mother's linear telling as a guide to lay out the chunks of Ben's voice, which I had been previously interleaving and shuffling about for months, groping about for the right resonances and correspondences to emerge.

What's more, in December, four months before the piece was to be performed, I found an ending, or more accurately, an ending found me. Ben came to visit me in California, and, as always, I had my recorder ready. But in sharp contrast to every other conversation I had ever had with him, on tape or off, he didn't want to talk about his glory days of inventing, or about his plans for remaking his machine shop or documenting his collections or his strategies, always stymied and rarely even started, for divesting and getting organized. He just seemed tired, seemed to finally acknowledge that while the storage units were an albatross, that he lacked the wherewithal and energy to break free, and that even though he knew he ought to, that he couldn't get rid of the things that "mean so much" to him. Listening back to this interview, I realized again that moving chronologically would again be the right choice, that to end with anything other than this expression of fatigue and uncertainty, of energies grinding unwillingly to a halt, would be untrue to the story.

Months of coding, listening and re-listening led me to the other great epiphany I had about using simultaneous voices, causing a few more sections of the piece to come into focus and take the shape they would retain through to the current draft. I had, I realized, recorded Ben telling some of the same stories twice. It's held as truism that the elderly repeat themselves and wear down channels and canyons of memory where the thing repeated flows again and again. This seemed especially true of my grandfather, who had a large but limited repertoire of old vaudeville jokes and routines from which he'd draw a few dozen every time I'd see him. But then I realized that I had *twice* captured him telling the same long story about contemplating suicide, and making a sculpture called the *Treadmill to Oblivion*, to leave his "two daughters something to remember me by,"

the construction of which became so all-engrossing that he "forgot all about suicide."

Lining up the two tellings in Logic Pro, my digital audio workstation, I was stunned at how similar, at the level of sequence, word choice, phrasing, and cadence, the two were. I created a composite (ca. 21:30-26:30 in the current draft), where on important words and phrases that he had twice articulated in nearly the exact same intonation, the two voices were edited to line up. I wanted listeners to understand that they were hearing two separate tellings and by extension, to feel something about memory and reminiscence, not to mention to centrality of the *Treadmill* to Ben's character. Again, in finding a specific, content-determined *reason* to feature simultaneous voices (which had been a feature of my conception of the piece from the outset, often without my really knowing why), I solidified major sections of the fixed-media component of the piece.

By a month prior to opening, I had a half a dozen large sections which, taken together, essentially contained the story as I wanted to tell it. The narrative seemed comprehensible without being coercive. A number of perspectives get aired, sometimes simultaneously, and since there was at this point no overt narration, all the voices seemed to have equal weight, equal potential truth-value. I hoped that this would give listeners a sense of swimming in different voices, of having to make choices about what to tune in to, and that this in turn might somehow place the listener in an ambiguous, active relation to the material. In contrast to documentary presented with a guide, an author, a director, I wanted listeners to feel the same sense of sorting through an excess of mutually contradictory material that I myself felt in confronting my sonic archive (and that I think my family feel in confronting Ben's archive). Yet I felt that through careful mixing, I had done so in a way that gave listeners the best possible shot at remaining engaged with

what the voices said, and not drowning in voices that stop signifying and become merely vocal texture. In my months of intense work on the central, fixed-media, documentary component of the piece, I had pushed aside both the issues of music and of theater, in what I had conceived from the outset as a piece of music-theatre: a performance, not a document.

I can trace this idea of wanting to make a music-theater *performance* with documentary elements to a couple of principle sources. In the first place, my work has been primarily as a musical performer: I am continually compelled to perform my music live and usually find that act both easier and more gratifying than working in fixed media or notated composition. Yet I have strained for a long time at the limited resources for direct communication and storytelling available to me as an instrumentalist. As a songwriter and, long ago, as an actor, I found some partial fulfillment of this urge, but my ideas about combining my work as a musician and composer with story and narration crystallized most strongly around the medium of radio. This ought not be too surprising, since radio is the principal site in our culture where documentary sound, spoken performance and music intersect. Yet experimental theater and music provided equally strong influences, leading me to question radio's narrative conventions and experiment with a variety of ways of joining performance to fixed media recordings.

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of seeing Ira Glass, producer, host and lead journalist on the popular NPR program "This American Life," give a couple of live performances. Seated at a desk with a microphone, a stack of paper, a couple of CD players and a mixing board, he struck the pose of a radio personality from the classic heyday of the medium. Somehow, despite his being a performer who is always heard and

rarely seen, his physical presence in performance was thrilling, engaged and intense in the manner of a committed musical interpreter. Glass would introduce a story, prepare his audience to meet the characters, and, with a dramatic flourish of one hand on the mixing board and another on a CD player, the voices of the story's protagonists were brought into sudden being, their physical absence transcended and bridged by their sonic presence. On the other CD players were more edited snippets of interviews, along with moody background music that would undergird moments of emotion and intensity and serve as a formal divider between edited sections. Along with his delivery at the microphone, unfailing casual and natural-seeming, Glass' simple, minimal engagements with the basic technologies of sound playback provided the only physicality in the performance. Large sections of documentary audio were played back with no activity or interference on Glass' part. At such times, the audience, though co-present with the radio personality, might as well have been listening in at home. Yet I found these to be the moments when I was most transported, via the theater of the imagination, to other times and spaces. Visual input and performative excitement are in no way preconditions for audience interest. It was the hybrid nature of this performance, by turns acousmatic and traditionally theatrical, that provided a rich and shifting canvas.

For me, Glass' performances breathed new life into the documentary medium, suggesting that documentary needn't be synonymous with document, artifact, the past frozen into solid, fixed imprints. Documentary, as with any fixed media form, necessarily is about and is made up fragments of the past, technologized memories. Glass' *performing documentary* (performing as gerund, like "storytelling," poised between present-tense act and fait-accomplis) directly thematizes and confronts an audience with

the willed action of contending with the past and bringing it out from archive/memory/latency into the time-flow of the present. I wanted my performance to enliven the hearing of this past, just as the DJ or host of a radio show who curates the playing back of songs, interviews or commercials is the guarantor of a presence in and as broadcast. Like a radio host, I wanted to bring "the outside" into the theater, gathering and curating fragments of the past and of other people's voices to create a hybrid of the intimacy of solo performance and the worldliness of documentary.

While Glass's performance greatly influenced my own ideas about radio-as-performance, there were many things about Glass' aesthetics that I found troubling and annoying. I found the usage of music on the show trivial and emotionally coercive, closing the frame of signification around one certain interpretation: a lone guitar picking out ambiguous, moody chords mirrors the individual intention and narrative perspective behind most features on the show, while setting relatively static and content-less scenery over which stories progress. I wanted to tell stories with music as a partner to words, and with the performative spectacle of someone playing music as a visual center in an auditory medium. Perhaps I was inspired in this direction by seeing the Books play. They too have documentary sound ready at hand on samplers in live performance, and they are uniquely successful at creating music that works with their speech samples, providing a dynamic and colorful soundscape in which speech or music might eclipse the other at any moment. However, their verbal poetics fell short, for me, of true storytelling. The meaning it generates rarely rises above the humor and surprise inherent in collage, often relying on the trick of making something or someone sound absurd by placing them out of their context. *This American Life*, by contrast, overdetermines interpretation with

perhaps too much context. I decided that my project would aim to show that sound documentary could be *performed*, that this performance component could be an artistic variable in creating the world of the piece. Finally, I wanted to explore how musical accompaniment could be used non-coercively in such a context.

In Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, a solo performance for one character, reel-to-reel tape player and a tape recorded by that character in the past, I found a dramaturgical setting for the playing back of recorded voices that sat a little nearer to Glass' performances. In this piece, much of the drama and interest comes from the interactions between the character we see on stage listening and reacting to the material and sonic remnant of his past. The words on the tape have the power to move present-day Krapp to stormy emotions, especially the violent desire to remember, to hold on to memory, but also to intentionally forget--when Krapp comes to one section in the tape, he furiously fast-forwards to omit a portion of the discourse. Even more than in Glass' performances, in which the audio is carefully edited beforehand, Krapp's actions in relation to the recorded medium and to the technology that enables it--playing back, rewinding, omitting, pausing--are laid bare for the audience and become a source for drama. The emotions Krapp feels when encountering the trace of the past are emotions I have felt in my process of making this work. "Raw" audio encountered in this way has a power and immediacy that can be dulled by excessively clever and careful sonic manipulations. Krapp's dramatic encounter with the past is felt by the audience in the same present tense that the audience shares in the performance of Beckett's play. Contrast this way of hearing with other works that incorporate both documentary sound and live performers, for instance Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, for tape and string quartet. Before we hear the

recorded voices, the live instrumentalists have already played the melodies in the contours of the phrases these voices are about to speak. The audience is thus immediately conscious of the fact that these voices have been pre-digested by the composer at some intermediate point in time--after the recording but before the current performance. Though the documentary element is "enlivened" by the presence of bodies playing instruments, the encounter with the moment the voices inscribe their trace on the recorded medium is again relegated to an artifactual past. It is doubly past: first recorded, then digested by the composer.

To *perform* with documentary sound, this double pastness is an almost unavoidable consequence, if one wants to cull, to edit, to come to the audience prepared--unlike Krapp, who we see is unprepared for the tape he sits down to play, experiencing the listening to it as a series of surprises. Yet I was determined to fight the *impression* of this double pastness, the frozenness and digestedness imposed on the encounter with the documentary trace. I conceived of my piece at one point as a conversation, set in the present moment, between the recorded voices and myself. From this perspective, any presence of my voice on the tape was a problem, since I wanted to maintain an illusion that while only my body was present, the other voices heard on the tape were in dialogue with me in the present, like on-air callers on a live radio program. However, continually removing my own voice from my tapes required that I cut the tape into ever smaller pieces, often with awkwardly sharp edits to ensure that my voice couldn't be heard. As it began to sound more and more artifactual and artificial, I decided to take a different tack--simply to try to speak some of the things I said on tape, in time and rhythm with my

voice on the tape in my effort to elide the temporal present of the performance and the recorded moment.

With all this in mind, and while simultaneously editing the audio of my grandfather, I began to write short fragments of text, vaguely metric and perhaps poetic, in response to the various themes and emotions raised by working with the documentary sound. In short, allusive bursts, I began to more directly define my position in and to the story I was editing, and though this writing came in fits and starts, it became clear to me months before opening that I had stumbled on the narratorial voice for the piece: digressive but distilled, explaining nothing, never, in fact directly referencing the documentary audio or directly engaging "what you're about to hear" in the conventional voice of the radio announcer.

Around the same time, I began to keenly realize that all the attention I had been paying to words was coming at the expense of the music. Unlike in my sketches, I had decided that no fixed media music would be in my piece; it would all be performed (otherwise, what was my body doing on stage?). Thus, since I had been working so intently at the computer for months, the edited sections of documentary sound in my piece had hardened into tightly constructed blocks, and any music I played with them sounded trivial if not distracting. The only music that seemed to find a natural place in the piece was an introductory song that I had chiseled out of some of the free writing I had been doing. The conventional semi-strophic form immediately suggested to me melody and accompaniment, and formed an early keystone in my development of the final sequencing of the piece:

Hi! Hello and welcome to the outset

Of a project
 Envisioned
 In a workshop
 In a basement
 Of a bunker
 In a suburb
 Of a city
 Has no serial number
 No patent applied for or pending
 Welcome to the outset
 Of a concept
 Making sketches
 Needing something that starts with an "a"
 A pencil, a
 Blank book
 Whose fate might be to be filled
 With distances, measures, thicknesses and widths

Welcome to the outset
 Of a drawing
 Starts in the head, then in the eye and between the fingers
 Then in the hands, the arms
 The two un-permitted additions out back
 First crowding out the lawn,
 Then covering it/ With a haul/pulled from curbs

Hi! Hello and welcome to the outset of collecting
 Starts in the street, then into the car
 A week in the driveway
 Then, thanks to the chain-hoist
 It lands with a thud
 Bottom of the stairs
 It lives in the dust
 Has no serial number
 No chance of finding it quickly
 You start by the stairs
 Then clearing a path
 Then something reminds you
 Of a project
 You'd started before and then couldn't muster
 resume it today!
 forgetting the looking
 for whatever the thing--
 You'll jot when you remember
 In a notebook you left upstairs

I liked these words as introduction because they didn't introduce the characters or
 the course the narrative would be taking, yet strongly alluded to the themes that would
 come out in the documentary section. Still, most of my text didn't lend itself so easily to

song and it wasn't until a lesson with Prof. Anthony Davis that I honed in some ways to make music permeate the performance. First, by blurring the borders of comprehensible language in the fixed media sections, I could allow Ben's voice to become available for musical and not just textual manipulation. I returned to the sampling techniques I had not used since my early sketches, repeating and decontextualizing, looping and reordering brief fragments of speech and allowing looser constellations of meaning and evocation to cohere around them.

Working in the SuperCollider audio programming language, I ran selected epigrammatic fragments Ben's speech through granular resynthesis to mash adjacent phonemes together but leave the overall speech contour in place. Or, depending on the parameters I applied, I could make a brief fragment gradually accelerate or decelerate from original recorded speed to speeds so distorting that they made parsing words difficult. The fragments I selected seemed to distill certain aspects of the story into poetic brevity: "It was in nineteen...", "I've seen lots of inventions, one of the smartest I've ever seen...", "Gears and bearings and chain and motors and everything." With pitch, pitch-to-noise ratios, speed and other sorts of distortions serving as independently manipulable variables, I could repeat these few fragments over, creating gradual shifts in their comprehensibility and distortedness. With these materials, I began to create interlude fragments which, as in my second sketch, might create alternating sections of narration and musical development out of the same source material.

Throughout the process of creating these musical interludes that shifted from comprehensible speech to distorted vocal texture, these epigrammatic textual keystones resounded heavily in my ears. I began to incorporate these fragments into my texts and to

deliver those texts over the musical sections. Allying my own texts with these musical interludes helped the form of the piece take shape, and even when I didn't deliver my texts over these distorted voices, it started to make more sense to accompany all texts with some sort of music, whether fixed media or on prepared electric guitar. Thus, even the most prose-like of my texts became songs of a sort. Both the music created from processed recorded voices and my own live performances interrupted the linear flow of narration and events and froze the progressing story to dwell on the wider constellation of associations and themes. Finally, I was able to define two basic types of material in the piece, which would alternate back and forth. While the more radiophonic portions with one or two undistorted voices would push the story forward, telling the events more or less in the sequence they occurred, the more musical portions and sections featuring my own texts would disrupt this flow. With this binary structure in place, I had finally settled on a satisfying middle course between radiophonic and musical aesthetics.

One untidy thread running throughout the process concerned the visual dimension of the performance. Many early listeners commented that they'd love to see the clutter and inventions constantly under discussion in the recordings. I had resolved early on, however, that nothing of that sound-world would be visually represented in the performance. One of radio's greatest powers is that it is a theater of the imagination. Listening acousmatically to voices and situations, I find that allowing myself to fill in the omitted visual details engages me more actively than can cinema: sometimes a sound can imply a visual image that is far more powerful than anything that can be created through stagecraft. *Krapp's Last Tape* demonstrates this brilliantly when, all of a sudden, a few fleeting, referential words on the tape cause the Krapp we see to gaze intensely out past

his little room. We can't see what he sees, but we see how completely the sound transports him. I too have felt exactly this sort of total sensation of transportation via acousmatic sound. I worried that by showing everyone the clutter of Ben's world, they would be less compelled to follow his or my clues towards actively rendering it in their own minds. In the sections of my piece with the most visual description, I decided that the lights should be off, encouraging a shut-eyed listening that often comes along with more intense visual imagining.

Yet I did want my piece to feature some element of projection and visually compelling performance, beyond my own speaking and music-making on the stage. As with my texts, I wanted to widen the constellations of meaning, alighting on trails of association for which the narrative storytelling would serve as an anchor. With such a direct and centered presentation of Ben's story, I was sure that well-chosen semi-abstract imagery could conjure some wider reflection. Some images had stuck in my mind that I wanted to link with the story I was telling, images of nature which would counterbalance the claustrophobic, overcrowded world of the audio recordings. Meditating on the piles of paper that Ben has and can't seem to throw away, I staged an armada of several hundred origami paper boats, quickly coming down a stream and then going down a huge waterfall. Inspired by a local woodpecker that makes bizarrely regular grids of holes in oak trees in which to cache acorns, I filmed these holes and the hoarding woodpeckers in extreme close-up, letting the camera eye pore over this organization scheme which struck me as so like my grandfather's bureaus, shelves and drawers. Walking through the woods, I came upon a massive cache of state park owned dumpsters, trash cans and assorted refuse. Amid a natural preserve, a dump of dumps--what a perfect place to stage Ben's

anguishing sorting out of waste and that which merits keeping. Attempting to bring the outside into the theatre, I tried to find and create scenes in nature that would resonate with the narrative, but also open it up to less coercive reflection. As with my corpus of documentary sound, these outdoor videos have a messiness, an excess of information that I feel make them a more interesting subject than anything I could stage as "visual aids" for my narrative.

Ultimately, this gets to the heart of my aims in creating *A Mess of Things*. On the one hand, I wanted to tell a story that would compel my audience and keep them engaged with the characters over the course of an hour. Yet I also wanted to leave the meaning and interpretation of the story as open as possible by repeatedly inserting discursive stumbling blocks and diversions from the forced march of narrative continuity. I hoped that by connecting Ben's socially proscribed behaviors with natural imagery and poetic, personal digressions, I could push my audience to question and engage what they heard, troubling the received notion of hoarding and reconceptualizing it as a limit-case of a more universal urge towards keeping, and documenting. Reality television (the program "Help, I'm a Hoarder" weighs especially heavily on conventional representations around this issue) is, like "A Mess of Things," a borderline case where documentary materials meet the narrative intentions of an outside constructor of representations. Resisting the impulse to flatten a complex of practices termed "hoarding" from pathology and taboo, I aimed instead to use Ben as a test case about the complexity of the relations between the subject and the objects that surround and define us.

This attempt to provide complex and contradictory representations that resist easy categorization is a major thread that connects all the elements of my process: usage of

textured and unpolished documentary materials, the attempt to stage the hearing of those materials as undigested and raw, and the insertion of discursive wrong turns and diversions through original text and video all work towards this aim. This seems to me the only ethical way to make stories about real, living people. While I have many thoughts about my grandfather and the questions his life raises, I have no take-home message for my audience. It seems to me that the best gift I can give my audience is a condensed experience of my own process of questioning, ordered and edited to elicit the richest and most condensed experience.