

ABSTRACT:

Title of dissertation: CREATIVE PLACEMAKING IN
THE RECITAL SETTING

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This dissertation outlines my three dissertation recitals and recording project, which explored themes of community building and creative placemaking when developing commissions and programs for a classically trained cellist. contains elements that explore the notion that the music we hear is only a fraction of our takeaway when we attend a show. The venue, the collaborators, how it is rehearsed, the score notation, who can participate, and the audience expectations can all have an effect on our experience attending and performing recitals. Curation and programming that aims to inherently strengthen connections between performers and audience, audience and audience, and performers and performers is an exciting path forward for cellists. This examination of hierarchical factors with the existing classical music concert format is a step forward towards more community-oriented recital presentations.

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING
IN THE RECITAL SETTING

By

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Preface

The ethos of my dissertation project is rooted in community building and placemaking. I have been to hundreds of recitals in my academic career, all of which have included many memorable musical moments that I will cherish forever. I have studied and performed the classical canon for over twenty years, and it was instilled from a young age that learning the music to the best of my ability was the only priority in making a recital successful; other considerations were unexplored. As I got older, I began to see the shortcomings I personally felt when attending classical music concerts that had nothing to do with the music: the space felt too formal, the seating was set up with everyone facing the same direction, we had to be still, quiet, and always paying attention for long periods of time, and there seemed to be an inherent distance between the art that was being performed and the audience. For my dissertation, I saw an opportunity for a safe space to venture into curation that included improvisation, leveling use of space, audience participation, radically inclusive sound making, and performance art. Through these means, I wished to explore all the possibilities for what a cello recital could be for audience members and performers beyond the music.

Dedication

To my family, friends, professors, and the wonderful University of Maryland community.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my friends, family, mentors, and collaborators who made this dissertation project possible.

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Introduction

I have been to many recitals where beautiful art was shared, but I did not necessarily feel connected to those around me in a shared experience. How can we explore how human connection can happen during a recital? My three programs, the first of which was also a recording project, were wildly different aesthetically but all had elements challenged the default settings of classical music performance, or social norms that are baked into the classical music performance practice. My hope was to facilitate Creative Placemaking through these recitals. Creative placemaking is described as influencing and strengthening the social character and quality of a community through integration of the arts, culture, and design activities.¹ Outside of the music content, I explored the role and impact that the space, collaborators, rehearsal process, score notation, participants, and the audience expectations have on recitals. For this dissertation, I played the role not only as a cellist and interpreter of notated music, but also played additional roles of community organizer, performance artist, and improviser. This dissertation project included five commissions for cello and various instruments aimed to infuse these elements lacking in our practice in classical music performance. I also reimagined existing works to include some of these aims.

Each program but one was designed to take place in a non-traditional concert space, allowing for an inherently different perspective and experience for both performer and audience. These programs aimed to examine and break down the perceived fixed

¹ “Creative Placemaking” National Endowment for the Arts, Accessed May 7, 2024.
<https://www.arts.gov/impact/creative-placemaking>

hierarchy of the stage, instead allowing people to roam and discover sounds up close and far away on their own. The feelings achieved at a concert are not bound solely to the music, and there is still room to explore past the inherent limitations of a concert hall and the associated expectations. This is not to say the concert hall model is not a great vehicle by which to experience music and art. However, there is an abundance of room for further exploration on what is possible for cellists, and for those who attend these concerts.

Chapter 1

Program 1: *Stick Season* (World Premiere)

Performed March 12, 2024 9:00pm Wakefield Bandroom
Recorded March 13, 2024 12:00–4:00pm Dekelboum Concert Hall

<i>Stick Season</i>	J. Clay Gonzalez (1993)
I. Dusk	
II. Cold Air	
III. Cold Water	
IV. Quarry/Snow	
V. Campfire	

Program Note

Stick Season, written by J. Clay Gonzalez, is part cello concerto, part immersive soundscape that invites professional musicians, hobbyist musicians, and community members to make sound together to create an immersive depiction of stick season: the dark, wintry time between the last leaf falling and the first snow. Based on a model started by J. Clay Gonzalez with the *Regenerate!* Orchestra in Michigan, sound makers of all levels assemble for conversations about mindful listening, sonic meditations, and a site-specific performance at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. In this piece, non-musicians are brought into the music-making process by playing parts that feature banging forks with glasses, whistling, pouring water, rubbing stones together, and breaking sticks. Parts are also available for campus singers, guitar players, and other instrumentalists to join in the experience. These soundscapes blend with lush orchestral textures and a flashy solo cello part to create a one-of-kind listening experience. This

gathering of a UMD-wide orchestra puts placemaking at its core, and asks the question, “what if we rebuilt the orchestra...with human connection as the foundation?”

Introduction

As an artist, I am passionate about the community and civic potential of the orchestra; its structure gives us a wonderful opportunity to bring people together around a shared creative experience. However, almost every orchestra requires at least a basic understanding of music notation and command of an instrument to participate. The ultimate exclusion in the classical music field lies in who gets to make sound during the concert; the inherent value is that only voices with highly specialized training are considered worth hearing. This first dissertation recital, entitled *Stick Season* after the focal piece of the same name, is a bold revocation of this system of exclusion, with voices of all backgrounds valued equally.

Stick Season, was an exploration of default settings in the performance practice of the performing symphony orchestra. An additional objective of the project was to provide an opportunity for musicians and members of the University of Maryland community to participate in a large-scale improvisation and mindful listening experience. The entirety of the recital program was a fifty-minute cello concerto entitled *Stick Season*, composed by J. Clay Gonzalez for cello and orchestra. The concerto was split into five movements that all explore different wintry sound worlds that mimic the natural world: Dusk, Cold Air, Cold Water, Quarry/Snow, and Campfire.

I wanted to commission Gonzalez specifically because of the inspiring and extensive work I have seen him achieve through his own community orchestra, the *Regenerate!*

Orchestra in Michigan.² Additionally, I have always been inspired by how his orchestral writing is inherently welcoming, accessible, and inclusive for all involved. Gonzalez is the founder and primary composer for this community orchestra, and their mission is to foster placemaking and spark genuine human connection within his Southeast Michigan community through communal soundmaking. Notably, *Regenerate!* welcomes anyone wanting to participate, regardless of their musical training. Gonzalez composes large orchestral immersions that include “anybody” parts, or those that do not require someone to play an instrument or read music, and the result is mesmerizing. He writes and arranges lengthy sound immersions for the people who register for any given concert he is organizing.

In October 2022, I began conversations with Gonzalez about a commission for cello and small chamber ensemble titled *Parables*.³ This project was exciting as a chamber work, but in December 2023, Gonzalez and I ultimately pivoted the commission to be larger in scale because he attended Monson Artist Residency in Monson, ME, and it energized him to write something more orchestral and inspired by the Maine winter season.⁴ While the programmatic decision of the piece being about winter was not developed until the late stage of writing, the piece was conceived to involve audience participation and occur not on a concert stage from the beginning. I have not yet encountered works that exist in a cello recital that invite the audience to move freely around the musicians in an installation lens; my goal was to introduce this to our canon.

² Gonzalez, Clay. “The Regenerate! Orchestra.” Accessed April 30, 2024. <https://www.theregenerateorchestra.com>.

³ Gonzalez, Clay. e-mail conversation with author. October 21, 2022.

⁴ Gonzalez, Clay. e-mail conversation with author. December 28, 2023.

Since Gonzalez specializes in writing aleatoric orchestral immersions, we decided on an improvised cello concerto for cello and immersive orchestra to be the medium and form for this work.⁵

Recruitment

Recruitment for the forty-person orchestra required for *Stick Season* began on January 3, 2024 through direct outreach and a structured recruitment campaign.⁶ The goal was to recruit music students as well as students outside of the School of Music. I emailed department heads directly and put out a notice in the campus newsletter through the assistance of the Arts For All office.⁷ After a six-week recruitment period, 45 UMD students, staff, and alumni from the Departments of Music, English, Data Science, Chemistry and Biochemistry, and Biology signed up to participate in the project, which included two workshops, a concert, and recording session.

Found Percussion: “Anybody Parts”

The instrumentation of the ensemble is determined by who wants to participate. Anyone who asks to join is given a part to play. For the participants who do not have formal music training, the composer created “anybody” parts. Parts are also available for campus singers, guitar players, and hobbyists to join in the experience. These “anybody” parts are a crucial aspect to the soundscape.

⁵ Gonzalez, Clay. e-mail conversation with author. December 28, 2023

⁶ Thompson, Josh. e-mail conversation with author. January 3, 2024.

⁷ Kier, Craig. e-mail conversation with author. January 24, 2024.

The use of found percussion in this concerto was instrumental in allowing participants who do not read standard western notation or play an instrument to meaningfully add to the musical soundscape. Found percussion, ordinary objects that facilitate the inclusion of everyday sounds into a soundscape, was paramount to the whimsical aleatoric soundscapes depicting the depth of winter.⁸ In the first movement, Dusk, the score instructs performers to use jangly objects, such as keys and forks and either shake them or dangle them on string to hit against mugs. In the second movement, Cold Air, participants are instructed to whistle and hum. In the third movement, Cold Water, participants pour water and quietly read poems, creating ambient word texture. In the fourth movement, Quarry/Snow, participants rub and hit rocks together. In the fifth movement, Campfire, participants sing and break sticks, imitating a campfire song around a crackling fire.

Rehearsal Process

For the rehearsal process, I wanted to provide a structure for students from all disciplines to connect, improvise, and share in a comfortable, encouraging environment. For the two rehearsal workshops, I provided food and drinks, as well as name tags for everyone. We also provided personalized folders and had strategic breaks in the middle of rehearsal for socialization. When the participants arrived, they were met with their music folder as well as a large selection of props that they would be using in the piece

⁸ Jennifer Stock, "The Art of the Commonplace: Found Sounds in Compositional Practice." PhD diss., City University of New York (CUNY), 2014, 11.

(fig. 1, fig. 2). Depending on the part, participants played with jars, forks, buckets of water and mugs, stones, jangly objects, whistles, and sticks. Typically, when rehearsing for a recital or performance, the main goal of meeting is coming together to rehearse the music. Instead, the personalized folder, use of everyday objects, name tags, and strategic meal breaks made a more personalized, community-oriented experience.





At the first rehearsal, the first thing we did as a group was play an etude written by Gonzalez, *Maryland Etude* (fig. 3). This was a short etude to get used to the notation system and get the group to improvise together, opening our ears before beginning *Stick Season*. This etude also acted as a leveling moment for the entire orchestra; no matter anyone's background, everyone improvised knee pats and finger snapping and shaped

sounds together. It aided in us setting up the space for sound making without hierarchy.

Everyone seemed invested in this experimental orchestra starting with the first moment of rehearsal. We then dove into two full rehearsals of fruitful sound making and improvising before the premiere of the piece.

PART ONE

MARYLAND ETUDE

0:00 { rest } 0:10
0:00 { } 0:10
0:00 { } 0:10

ROOM
A

CELL
1

Fingers: so

0:10
0:10
0:10

Snap your fingers over and over.

0:20
0:20
0:30

ROOM
B

CELL
2

Hands on lap:

0:20
0:20
0:30

Pat your hand on your thigh, over and over.

pp < *f* > *pp*

0:30 0:40 0:50 0:55
0:40 0:50 1:00 1:05
0:50 1:00 1:15

1:25
1:35
1:45

End of piece.

Reflections

The experience of organizing this orchestra was an experience I will never forget; it was a group of people who decided to fully invest in a community-center improvising orchestra. This experience was valuable because it does not just involve one kind of person; instead, a unique group of individuals from all around campus were asked to build something beautiful together. It was exciting to see everyone get to know each other and try something new. When we all gathered in the band room for the night of the show, the feeling was electric. I believe this was, in part, due to several different student communities around UMD gathering to create something truly unique together. I received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the performing students and audience members, many of whom expressed they were energized and inspired by the performance. This gathering of participants from across campus was more energizing than I ever could have imagined, and I am forever grateful for the experience we had together.

Chapter 2

Program 2: the spinning of the moon over this small field

Performed April 5, 2024 7:00pm Room 1230

O Frondens Virga.....Hildegard von Bingen
(1098-1179)

***Note to audience:** at any time throughout the show, feel free to join the folks making the rubber band web. They'll show you how to do it! When you're finished adding to the web, wave over someone to tap you out. Hopefully everyone will add a band by the end.*

Interlude: Three Solstice Songs - Earth Song

***Note to audience:** you'll find the lyrics in your program, but singing along is of course optional. Feel free to sing, hum, or just listen along.*

The Evergreen..... Caroline Shaw
(b. 1982)

- I. Moss
- II. Stem
- III. Water
- IV. Root

Intermission:

grab some tea, and we'll sing more summer songs:

Three Solstice Songs - People's Song & Sun Song

Sugarbush..... Madeline October Wildman
(b. 1997)

***Note to audience:** throughout the entire duration of this piece, feel free to come up to any water bowl and toss in rocks and coins.*

the spinning of the moon over this small field..... Nadine Dskant-Miller
(b. 1994)

World Premiere

old place..... Nadine Dskant-Miller

Three Solstice Songs in canon..... J. Clay Gonzalez

- Earth Song
- Peoples' Song
- Sun Song

Introduction

This recital was a multi-piece, free-flowing program of works. The works have themes pertaining to changing seasons, transformation, the stretching of time, cycles, and our finite time together: an overall dark, winter theme. To contrast, I programmed *Summer*

Songs, a collection of folk songs about summer, composed by J. Clay Gonzalez. These songs were sprinkled throughout the recital, acting as interludes.

When I conceived of this show, I knew that I wanted visual movements to enhance the symbolism of the musical contents of the program, rather than simply performing a straightforward recital of pieces. Every piece other than *The Evergreen* called for various numbers of extra sound makers. I needed at least fifteen volunteers to implement these various performance art movements and sounds throughout the recital, so I employed the help of two collaborators from the University of Maryland School of Music: Nailah Harris and Guzal Isametdinova. We met to discuss my plans for having at least fifteen performance artists who would carry out various movement and sound art actions throughout the recital. The various actions included building rubber band webs, shaking dried peas in a jar, plucking a homemade rubber band box instrument, singing in a choir, and carrying a rubber band web out of the concert hall. Through the assistance of Harris and Isametdinova, I wrote out a detailed “performance art cheat sheet,” which could easily be understood and followed by fifteen recruited students through a brief explanation and just one rehearsal of the program. This tactic of not having extensive practice greatly increased my prospects of recruiting fifteen extra people. These students attended just the dress rehearsal, avoiding numerous rehearsals while and gaining an experience to perform outside of their primary instrument.

Audience Participation

As seen in the program, this recital contained notes for optional audience participation throughout the show. For example, for one of the singing interludes, the audience was

told in the program, “Feel free to sing, hum, or just listen along.” For the entire recital, they were also encouraged to join making the rubber band web. Before performing *Sugarbush*, I spoke to the audience to instruct them to plop stones into the water buckets. For the piece *old place*, I walked the audience through a vocal improvisation in which that they could participate. During the intermission, the audience was invited to do an informal singing circle while the rubber band web continued in the middle. The recruited performance art students sang alongside the participating audience members without hierarchy; the goal of the intermission was to act as a community-centered installation. Participation in the installation was optional; audience could also witness with tea and cookies. The snack and drink table available throughout the entire show aided in the event feeling welcoming and casual. I took great care in crafting what actions would fall on the recruited performance artists versus in what the audience would be invited to partake. The overall aim was to never rely solely on the audience for any integral aspect of the recital, but rather to empower the audience to participate through having fifteen people on the “inside,” ready to be extroverted in their actions so the audience would feel comfortable participating if they desired.

Fluxes Influence

This recital program explored the use of performance props, such as found objects and readymades. This recital included cassette players, a bull horn, rubber bands, produce boxes, produce bands, house lamps, metal clothes hangers, mason jars, dried peas, bowls of water, rags, and coins. The use of these every day, affordable objects is inspired by the work of John Cage (1912-1992), Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), and the Fluxes art

movement. Particularly, the notions associated with Fluxes include thinning the space between art and everyday life through audience participation and reimagining and giving artistic significance to everyday common objects.⁹ I was inspired to include an everyday object in my recital, so my primary prop in the recital was the rubber band. A simple rubber band could symbolize yielding, stretching, and a cyclical nature, and the musical themes that are compelling to me in the pieces of this program, in addition to winter, are themes of seasons, continuity, cycles, and an inherent desire to return to a neutral state. Through some inspiration and workshoping with members of Chicago-based performance ensemble Suburban Piano Quartet, I determined that the main non-musical act of the recital would be a rubber band web installation to be built on stage next to the musical performance for the entire duration of the recital.¹⁰ This seemingly simple rubber band web began when I started the first work, and the recital would end when the rubber band web was paraded out of the hall during the last work. The rubber band also added an element of communal building to the building action. To ensure this value was present, I decided to always have three or more people building the web together, a symbol of community, resulting in a Fluxes sculpture made in real time to mark the time of the recital.

O Frondens Virga Translation

O blooming branch,
you stand upright in your nobility,
as breaks the dawn on high:
Rejoice now and be glad,

⁹ Yukio Hasegawa, “Performativity in the Work of Female Japanese Artists in the 1950s-1960s and 1990s” 340.

¹⁰ Clay Gonzalez, Text message to author, March 20, 2024.

and deign to free us, frail and weakened,
from the wicked habits of our age;
stretch forth your hand
to lift us up aright.¹¹

I began the program with *O Frondens Virga (Oh, Blooming Branch)*, a plainchant melody composed by Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1178). Works of this nature are typically performed alongside a singular drone note; Hildegard is considered ahead of her time for the way her melismatic melodies flow freely and her uniquely progressive connection between her music and her text.¹² The text of this particular composition invokes images of a blooming branch at dawn with heavy connections between nature and Mary.¹³ I was drawn to start the program with this work because of its quality that comes from a single melody with a drone accompaniment; it was a fitting meditative opener. I recorded drones as well as my own improvisation onto cassette tapes, which were played during the performance to provide the foundation over which I played the melodic material. The recital began with *O Frondens Virga*. Throughout the six-minute work, the volunteers, both audience members and recruited performance artists, began rising to their seats and gravitating towards a massive pile of rubber bands spread around me.

¹¹ von Bingen, Hildegard. *O Frondens Virga*. (1151), text translated by Beverly Lomer, 2014, <https://www.hildegard-society.org/2014/10/o-frondens-virga-antiphon.html>.

¹² Hempel, Elysia, and Elisa Koehler. “The Unwritten Chapters: Perspectives on Female Composers.” (2018). Incomplete footnote citation;

¹³ Campbell, Nathaniel M. “O Frondens Virga.” International Society of Hildegard Von Bingen Studies, October 11, 2014, www.hildegard-society.org/2014/10/o-frondens-virgaantiphon.html. If this site is not stable (ie it is possible for the admins to edit it), then you need an access date

Earth Song Program Note

Risin' up, risin' up
Risin' up today
Risin' up, risin' up
Risin' up today
The sun will rise again

After finishing the last phrase of *O Frondens Virga*, I turned off the cassette players, and sat down to play the first Summer Song interlude, Earth Song, on my cello. After finishing the phrase, a planted choir of fifteen performance artists sang Earth Song as I moved to join my string quartet for the next work. The choir sang Earth Song in canon for a few minutes, fading away as the quartet began the first bar of Caroline Shaw's *The Evergreen*.

The Evergreen Program Note

One day in January 2020, I took a walk in an Evergreen Forest in British Columbia, Canada. I found myself slowing down. My steps were slower, less frequent. I stopped trying to get to my destination with any real intention or speed. Eventually, I stopped moving altogether. I looked and listened and felt and smelled and breathed. Like a thousand creatures before me, some also human, I paused and wondered and thought, "There's wisdom in those trees." This piece, the Evergreen is my offering to one particular tree in that forest. For the soft moss that covers it, for its strong stem that reaches up, for the gentle chaos of dripping water that surrounds it, and for the roots below, ever seeking and nourishing and building.

Program Note by Caroline Shaw

As we sat down to perform Caroline Shaw's new textural string quartet, *The Evergreen*, the rubber band web had quadrupled in size, since four people had worked on the web since the beginning of the recital. The very inspiration for the use of the rubber band prop initially came from the opening of the second movement of *The Evergreen*, Stem. The first ten bars are a single B \flat played in unison by the entire quartet, with members taking

turns tuning the B \flat down or up a quarter tone before returning back to the unison pitch. This pitch bending caused a thin, wavering sound that imitated elastic stretching. The rubber band web continued throughout the piece, and in the climax of the final movement, three performance artists left the web, picked up rubber bands off the ground and, in a coordinated diagonal line, slowly performed improvised stretching movements for about a minute before returning to web installation. The intent with these actions was to create a climactic ending to the first half of the recital.

I chose *The Evergreen* due to Shaw's tender exploration of texture throughout the four movements of her work. Shaw uses ostinato, minimalist repetition, and space and rest in a way that allows for the listener to take in the work in an unhurried and meditative way. Finally, her use of aleatory writing makes the piece come alive; this is a string quartet that belongs just as much in a dance studio or theatre as it does in a concert hall, and it works well with extra staging and choreography.

Sugar Bush Program Note

Sugar Bush celebrates the sparkle of late winter as it is revealed through the seasonal practice of tree tapping. Maple syrup comes as the first foragable food of the season, an awakening of the world and the senses during a time most often associated with hibernation and death. This piece revels in this contradiction, inviting audiences to heed the tree's invitation to grow, thaw, persist, and awaken.

Program note by Madeline October Wildman

I commissioned *Sugarbush* in Fall of 2023 from my composer, bassoonist, and poet friend Maddy October Wildman. I expressed to her that I wanted a work with audience participation through mindful sound making and that I was interested in works involving symbolism and nature. Because Maddy October Wildman is an accomplished poet and

tree scholar, she proposed a piece about late winter tree tapping acting as a symbol for our own awakening after a long winter, a theme that spoke to me immensely. Maddy Wildman had the idea for the audience to participate by making the sound of tree sap dropping in buckets. We experimented with sounds for a few months before discovering that plopping coins and stones into a shallow bucket of water with a rag lining the bottom perfectly imitated the sound of tree sap dropping. This piece is performed with a timer, and the musicians improvise with cells of musical material that exist in their respective time brackets, all while the cello plays a somber solo. *Sugarbush* was part recital piece, part sound installation with performers spread around the large room, and part audience participatory playground.

the spinning of the moon over this small field Program Note

carry you through the wide night with the strength of stems all tough and fibrous
and not even the slightest brittleness no cracking here no tense

only tending and winding and winds pushing over the willow stem of autumn into
willing night — full into silver bright winter they wait for the moon to set over
buds that wait for the steam to rise from the light from the flight of wings turning
over to the south

wing away my bright, my night, my sight, as the cycle in spring is a grass blade
pushing through the plate of ice that forms a soil
a crack in the layer of gentle holding that forms the spinning of the moon over this
small field, deep and wide

my time in the waving weeds into frost-light into winter to seeds to under-light
to the lowness of the field, how she freezes first before the tide comes in how she
tightens her hold on the bulbs of garlic how they sprout just before the snow
comes how they wait under there until this moment in the city with the dry leaves
still holding on as the new ones push under and out and through and the new buds
shimmer slightly in the new cold wind

how she waits so quietly for the sun to come back over the hill into night into day
into night into day into night into day into night into day into night into day into
day into day into day into day into day into day into day into day in today in today
in today in today in today into day

Program note by Nadine Dyskant-Miller

the spinning of the moon over this small field is a new work by farmer-composer Nadine Dyskant-Miller, which I commissioned in Fall 2023. I first commissioned Dyskant-Miller in 2016 because I was drawn to her connection with the farming practice and bringing it into her sound making. I have always admired Nadine’s ability to create nature influenced textures with her use of minimalist drones, aleatoric repeated cells, spoken word texture, and found percussion. In *the spinning of the moon over this small field*, she employed these techniques to create a chaotic sound world—sometimes screaming, sometimes barely audible—that acts as a foundation for folk tune melodies above which the cello can sing. One of her found percussion items in this work included fifteen mason jars filled with two to four dried peas to create a thin ambient low timbre jingling sound. Another found percussion included small, thick cardboard boxes with produce bands (from Dyskant-Miller’s farm in Massachusetts) wrapped around them, creating a plucked pitched makeshift instrument.

old place Program Note

Since Dyskant-Miller was making the trip to Maryland, I programmed another piece of hers, *old place*, composed in YEAR HERE.. This piece draws heavy inspiration from Pauline Oliveros’s (1932-2016) sonic meditations. *Old place* is essentially the entire audience singing any pitch on any vowel, duration, or volume while the cello plays a

short modal melody. The cellist repeats this brief melody over and over, transposing and starting it on a new pitch they hear an audience member sing. Additionally, the singing audience can join the cello and sing the modal melody for a while before returning to their improvised singing.

Three songs for summer solstice Program Note:

Earth Song

Risin' up, risin' up
Risin' up today
Risin' up, risin' up
Risin' up today
The sun will rise again

Peoples' Song

Havin' joy havin' day
Havin' joy havin' sorrow
No more songs of yesterday
No more of tomorrow *clap*

Sun Song

The summer pulls me down
And away from you

The last piece on the program was a collection of three solstice songs by J. Clay Gonzalez: Earth Song, Peoples' Song, and Sun Song. These songs can be sung individually or simultaneously in canon. Throughout the recital, I introduced each song individually between large works. Additionally, the intermission acted as an audience participation sing-along where audience members were invited to sight-sing the songs.

For this last work of my recital, I began playing the Earth Song melody on the cello, with the choir and audience joining. I then walked around the hall and cued small groups at a time to sing Earth Song in canon or Peoples' Song, essentially an improvised sing-a-long directed by a cello player. All three summer songs can be sung in different combinations: individual, all together layered over each other, and any of the individual songs can be sung in their own canon. I then transitioned all the performers slowly to Sun Song, which can be sung at any speed and without any coordination that results in an expressive amalgamation of an Eb major cloud. The choir then all grabbed onto the rubber band, forming a circle. Metal hangers were then hung onto the web, clashing with each other to make aleatoric wind chime sounds. The fifteen performers paraded out the hall and walked far away, causing a natural diminuendo as I improvised to their choir sounds, ending the recital.

Chapter 3

Program 3: *Listening From Darkness*

May 10, 2024 7:00pm Leah Smith Hall

Listening From Darkness.....Michael Malis
(b. 1988)
Listening for Bells..... Harriet Steinke
(b. 1993)

Introduction

Listening From Darkness is a program of two 30-minute works: *From Darkness We Awaken* by Michael Malis and *Listening for Bells* by Harriet Steinke. Both pieces rely heavily on improvisation, empathy, and deep listening; the two pieces strike different but complementary tones. Steinke's *Listening for Bells* explores recursive textures through improvisation, leaving much to the performers, while *From Darkness We Awaken* has sections of completely open improvisation. Both pieces feature the cellist taking several solo improvised moments while being supported by the ensemble.

While each piece has its own life, each complements the others by offering a unique glimpse of possibility for human connection. This happens by employing musical improvisation and spontaneity, allowing inclusive music making in a recital setting, and celebrating active listening in our practice as classical musicians.

Listening For Bells Program Note

Harriet Steinke's *Listening for Bells* explores textures and musical peaks through improvisation, leaving much to the performers through the choice of minimalist cells. It is a thirty-minute through-composed work that acts as a "musical sandbox," communal, playful, bright, searching, gritty, and open-ended. Its playful, childlike joy has a payoff as both the performers and the audience find themselves buzzing as they listen for, and eventually hear, "bells."

From Darkness We Awaken Program Note

The outward exuberance of *Listening for Bells* is complimented by Malis's *From Darkness We Awaken*, which strikes a moodier and more introspective tone. This thirty-minute through-composed work was written as Malis was preparing to become a father. The piece features prepared piano alongside the core ensemble, and has an expressive language created by through a dense thicket of otherworldly sounds, cascading horizons of resonance, and knotty spiraling rhythms. It blurs the lines between improvisation and composition, asking the players to bring their emotional cores to bear in this introspective work.

This third and final recital explores repertoire that melds free improvisation and contemporary chamber music. This is also a traditional concert program of all improvised music in my dissertation because I feel that playing improvised music can bring together communities of performers in a different manner than music without aleatoric writing. There are social implications of studying and performing improvised music that benefits both audience and performer; scholar and pianist Vijay Iyer argues that performing music

extemporaneously is a wholly different experience from performing written-out material.¹⁴ Furthermore, the singular difference of improvised music over composed music is the feeling of a shared sense of time. Iyer additionally describes improvisation as “the real-time interaction with the structure of one’s environment.”¹⁵ In my experience performing in a free improvisation setting, it involves a higher level of deep listening and heightened senses on stage. This can result in a more vulnerable and collectively felt experience for both performer and audience member.

¹⁴ Iyer, Vijay. “Improvisation, Temporality and Embodied Experience.” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2004): 159–173. In footnotes you need the precise page numbers where the central argument is stated, not the full page range of the article (the full page range goes in the bibliography)

¹⁵ Iyer, “Improvisation, Temporality and Embodied Experience,” 159–173. Give the exact page where the quote came from

Chapter 4

Default Setting Considerations

In addition to the aims of the repertoire selection, this dissertation was also an experiment to challenge classical music performance's default settings that effect the experience for all involved. Default settings in classical music are the parts of musical presentation that are integrated into most performances. This can include venue, dress code, audience expectations, and more.¹⁶ For each of my dissertation recitals, there was no prescribed dress code; the result was a beautiful display of individuality that added palpable energy. Two of the three recitals took place in a non-traditional concert hall, imitating a third place gathering rather than a concert hall. The inherent qualities of third spaces: leveling, welcoming, accessible, and inclusive for all involved, makes for a new kind of recital — a paradigm shift to allow the music to be accessed in a new way.¹⁷ Within each space, I felt it was important to explore alternatives to the fixed-audience seating that is traditional to the concert hall, as well as to challenge the expectation of silence, stillness, and full attention from the audience. Classical music concert goers are often not a part of the music making process. Through this alternative to fixed seating, I wanted to embrace the audience as part of the work rather than mere witnesses.

¹⁶ J.Clay Gonzalez. "Regenerate! Building a Music for a Time of Disconnection" Accessed May 9, 2024. <https://www.jclaygonzalez.com/harvard>.

¹⁷ Ray Oldenburg, *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories About the "Great Good Places" at the Heart of Our Communities* (Da Capo Press, 2002) 25.

Conclusions

Through this dissertation project, I pushed the boundaries for myself in imagining what a cello recital could look like: I organized a campus-wide sound immersion, conceived of and engaged in performance art with my colleagues for the first time, and performed—as a western classically trained cellist—recitals of music that lives in the liminal space between contemporary classical music and free improvisation. The final result was an experience where the performers and audience members would leave the experience having a greater connection to place, their fellow community in attendance, and an aesthetic experience that blends life and art.

I wanted to give an opportunity for myself and my colleagues to perform outside of their niche instrument discipline: playing found percussion, singing in a choir, or engaging with performance art. I explored a world where I am not only a concert cellist, but also an artistic curator, community organizer, grant writer, improviser, composer, and performance artist. These recitals were an experiment to challenge default settings in our classical performance field that may have an effect on the audience experience. The hope was to provoke new feelings of connection and discovery by reexamining how a cello recital can look, sound, and feel through repertoire, space, and who is invited to participate. Finally, I hope I have inspired other artists to reexamine the way in which their art engages with the world outside of the music notes themselves.

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