

A SCENE WITHOUT A NAME: INDIE CLASSICAL AND AMERICAN NEW  
MUSIC IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

WILLIAM ROBIN: A Scene Without a Name: Indie Classical and American New Music  
in the Twenty-First Century  
(Under the direction of Mark Katz)

This dissertation represents the first study of indie classical, a significant subset of new music in the twenty-first century United States. The definition of “indie classical” has been a point of controversy among musicians: I thus examine the phrase in its multiplicity, providing a framework to understand its many meanings and practices. Indie classical offers a lens through which to study the social: the web of relations through which new music is structured, comprised in a heterogeneous array of actors, from composers and performers to journalists and publicists to blog posts and music venues. This study reveals the mechanisms through which a musical movement establishes itself in American cultural life; demonstrates how intermediaries such as performers, administrators, critics, and publicists fundamentally shape artistic discourses; and offers a model for analyzing institutional identity and understanding the essential role of institutions in new music.

Three chapters each consider indie classical through a different set of practices: as a young generation of musicians that constructed itself in shared institutional backgrounds and performative acts of grouping; as an identity for New Amsterdam Records that powerfully shaped the record label’s music and its dissemination; and as a collaboration between the ensemble yMusic and Duke University that sheds light on the twenty-first century status of the new-music ensemble and the composition PhD program.

Combining archival and digital research, reception history, interviews, and fieldwork, I uncover the flows of cultural and economic capital that govern how classical and new music operate in the present day.

*To the joy of family*

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## INTRODUCTION

In a December 2007 press release, New Amsterdam Records proclaimed a bold mission: “To provide a haven for the young New York composers whose music slips through the cracks between genres.”<sup>1</sup> Newly launched, this record label proposed to represent “music without walls, from a scene without a name.” But among the journalists and critics who received this notice, careful readers might have detected a puzzling inconsistency. The release announced the creation of an accompanying website in order to “foster a sense of connection among musicians and fans in this ‘indie classical’ scene.”<sup>2</sup> Was it a scene without a name, or an indie classical scene? Such rhetorical ambiguity would become typical of New Amsterdam’s attempts to simultaneously transcend genre boundaries while positioning itself in the market.

And what exactly is—or was—indie classical? This dissertation offers several answers to that question, examining the phrase’s many meanings and practices. More importantly, indie classical offers a framework for understanding the web of relations through which American contemporary music coheres. This study foregrounds the social in new music, as comprised in a heterogeneous array of actors, from composers and performers to journalists and publicists to blog posts and music venues. I opened with a

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Swartz, “New Amsterdam—label launch at J Pub HC,” 6 December 2007. I am grateful to Steven Swartz for providing me with this and seventeen other New Amsterdam press releases.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

press release to underscore that new music is both a cultural sphere and a market, one in crucial and oft-overlooked mediators structure the relationship between composers and their world.

My study represents the first in-depth discussion of indie classical, a significant subset of new music in the twenty-first century United States. I see this dissertation as offering three contributions to music scholarship. First, I demonstrate how a musical movement can emerge, gain prestige, and establish itself in American cultural life; this study reveals the processes and mechanisms through which indie classical *became* significant. Second, I take seriously the role of performers, administrators, critics, and publicists—figures often treated as passive intermediaries—and show how they fundamentally shape the practices and discourses of new music. Third, I offer a model for analyzing institutional identity and understanding the essential role that institutions—including record labels, ensembles, arts presenters, and universities—have played in the history of indie classical.

This dissertation traces a network of diverse and mobile actors within and beyond new music, following them as they travel geographically, virtually, and between genres, media, and reception. Each chapter considers indie classical through a different set of practices, while telling a single story about a subset of new music in the present day: Chapter 1 examines indie classical as a young generation of musicians; Chapter 2 studies indie classical in relation to New Amsterdam Records' institutional identity; and Chapter 3 analyzes indie classical as formed in a collaboration between the chamber ensemble yMusic and Duke University's composition program. Combining archival and digital

research, reception history, interviews, and fieldwork, I uncover the flows of cultural and economic capital that govern how classical and new music operate in the present day.

### **Assembling the Social**

This study contributes to a growing scholarly literature that examines music, as Tia DeNora writes, “in the act of articulating social structure.”<sup>3</sup> Instead of focusing on music in the context of broad social developments, DeNora encourages an emphasis on the micro-social, or the web of relations through which music flows. Georgina Born has similarly advocated an analysis of new music that foregrounds the “weaving and spinning of musico-social relatedness.”<sup>4</sup> Following Born, I interrogate two orders of music-making: “the politics of music’s diverse institutional forms” and “the politics of the social relations of musical practice.”<sup>5</sup>

One potential disciplinary perspective on the micro-social is actor-network theory, a methodological toolkit that challenges notions of a broadly unified society by studying how associations among variegated actors are constructed and maintained.<sup>6</sup> Eric Drott

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<sup>3</sup> Tia DeNora, “After Adorno,” in *The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music*, ed. John Shepherd and Kyle Devine (New York: Routledge, 2015), 344.

<sup>4</sup> Georgina Born, “On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (March 2005): 30. See also Born, “The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production,” *Cultural Sociology* 42, no. 2 (2010): 1–38.

<sup>5</sup> Born, “On Music and Politics: Henry Cow, Avant-Gardism and its Discontents,” in *Red Strains: Music and Communism Outside the Communist Block*, ed. Robert Adlington (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 63.

<sup>6</sup> Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); John Law and John Hassard, eds., *Actor Network Theory and After* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1999); Annemarie Mol, “Actor-Network Theory: Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 50, no. 1 (2010): 253–69; and Mol, *The Body Multiple* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

and Benjamin Piekut have recently incorporated actor-network approaches into musicology in order to interrogate assumptions about genre, agency, and power.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on their work as well as tools from actor-network theorists including Bruno Latour, John Law, and Annemarie Mol, I seek out what might be called a “actually existing indie classical”—to gloss on Piekut’s study of “actually existing experimentalism”—and examines the relations that emerge among the heterogeneous actors to which the phrase has referred.<sup>8</sup>

Actor-network theory informs my study of the relationship between the local and the translocal. Recent scholarship has underscored the politics of new music’s transnational movements during the Cold War, emphasizing how funding from United States and European governments helped to keep the American avant-garde economically solvent.<sup>9</sup> I instead examine translocal movements within the United States. The network of artists and institutions that I investigate maintains some international presence but favors tours within the United States over transnational connections.<sup>10</sup> I trace indie classical as it travels from New York to Minnesota and North Carolina, and in particular

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Drott, “The End(s) of Genre,” *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 1 (2013): 1–45; and Benjamin Piekut, “Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 11, no. 2 (September 2014): 191–215. See also Emily Dolan, “Musicology in the Garden,” *Representations* 132, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 88–94.

<sup>8</sup> Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Emily Abrams Ansari, “Aaron Copland and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 5/3 (2011): 335–64; Amy Beal, *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Felix Meyer, Carol J. Oja, Wolfgang Rathert, and Anne C. Shreffler, eds., *Crosscurrents: American and European Music in Interaction, 1900–2000* (Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung, 2014); and Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> In particular, New Amsterdam has cultivated partnerships with the Apples & Olives festival in Zurich, and participants in the indie classical scene have ties to London institutions such as The Barbican.

the interactions of the translocal group yMusic with local institutions such as the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Duke University. These movements foreground the complex politics of the social, institutional, and local.

My focus on institutions allows for an orientation towards the micro-social. Their creation and preservation is predicated on overlapping networks, both internally—among composers, performers, and administrators—and externally—with music critics, funding sources, and audiences. The institutional network that I outline evolved out of downtown and experimental music scenes that have been examined by Tamar Barzel, Michael Dessen, Tim Lawrence, and George Lewis.<sup>11</sup> My work is informed by institutional histories of new music, including Sasha Metcalf’s study of the reception of Philip Glass and how the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s programming of Glass’s operas attracted new audiences, a strategy that foreshadows the work of New Amsterdam.<sup>12</sup> In its analysis of how the social and cultural formations of an institution create enduring artistic

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<sup>11</sup> Tamar Barzel, *New York Noise: Radical Jewish Music and the Downtown Scene* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015); Michael Dessen, “Decolonizing Art Music: Scenes from the Late Twentieth-Century United States” (PhD diss., University of California at San Diego, 2003); Tim Lawrence, *Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973–1992* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); and George Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Sasha Metcalf, “Institutions and Patrons in American Opera: The Reception of Philip Glass, 1976–1992” (PhD diss., University of California at Santa Barbara, 2015). See also Louise Chernosky, “Voices of New Music on National Public Radio: *Radio Net*, *RadioVisions*, and *Maritime Rites*” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012); Andrew Dewar, “Handmade Sounds: The Sonic Arts Union and American Technoculture” (PhD diss., Wesleyan University, 2009); Martin Iddon, *New Music at Darmstadt: Nono, Stockhausen, Cage, and Boulez* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); René Levine Packer, *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jann Pasler, *Writing Through Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 318–62; and Joshua Plocher, “Presenting the New: Battles around New Music in New York in the Seventies” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2012).

discourses, Georgina Born's ethnography of IRCAM represents a strong precedent for my exploration of New Amsterdam and yMusic.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, my approach is indebted to recent studies of the politics of social relations between composers and performers of new music.<sup>14</sup> Following the work of David Chapman and Robert Adlington, I examine the ensemble as a crucial actor in new music: a collaborator with composers and an institution with its own internal politics. But I also foreground the everyday importance of the musicians I study. Rather than analyze scenarios in which performers such as Cathy Berberian play extraordinary or exceptional roles in the construction of musical works, I look to the ordinary setting of a university residency, in which the sonic and social identity of yMusic informed music written by Duke student composers. In such a scenario, conventional hierarchies between composer and performer are disrupted, less because of the particular exceptionality of the ensemble's members than because of their status as professional musicians visiting a graduate program.

## Prehistories

I used to be somebody who wrote new music. But, how do I explain it? There's a sort of ossified new-music scene that privileges certain things that are no longer relevant to a new generation of composers...New music, as I think of it, is

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<sup>13</sup> Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Adlington, *Composing Dissent: Avant-Garde Music in 1960s Amsterdam* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Adlington, ed., *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor, "Collaboration and the Composer: Case Studies From the End of the Twentieth Century," *Tempo* 240 (April 2007): 28–39; Branden Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2008); Kate Meehan, "Not Just a Pretty Voice: Cathy Berberian as Collaborator, Composer and Creator" (PhD diss., Washington University of St. Louis, 2011); and Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*.

something apart from what I do....A piece of music that you might find written at a traditional university setting, played in a traditional concert hall, receiving traditional types of funding from major foundations that have been funding the same groups for the last fifty years.

Judd Greenstein, November 2005<sup>15</sup>

In 2005, composer and New Amsterdam founder Judd Greenstein strongly rejected the concept of “new music.” Indeed, the early ethos of indie classical rhetorically repudiated an academic culture that its participants associated with the phrase. But “new music” has historically referred to many streams of contemporary music, carrying their own shifting sets of signifiers in distinct cultural contexts. Although the term is often associated with a lineage of European avant-gardism that stretches back through Theodor Adorno’s 1949 *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, I instead turn towards the broader lens that new music has represented in the United States in late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: an art world closely tied to the apparatus of classical music, one that often invokes ontologies of the work concept, notated music, and established roles of composer and performer.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Judd Greenstein, quoted in Stephen S. Taylor, *The End of New Music* (Brooklyn, NY: American Beat Films, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentnor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). This post-Adorno critical definition of new music—one that explicitly foregrounds new music as embodying a specific ideological position—still carries significant weight. In lectures given at Harvard and the Darmstadt Summer Courses in New Music in 2012 and 2013, musicologist and journalist Michael Rebhahn emphasized this particular definition, differentiating between a “New Music” encompassing “the field of activity for artistically ambitious composers, who are fed up with skillfully executed variations of material and are totally interested in contributing to an aesthetic discourse” and “Contemporary Classical Music,” which he categorizes as Anglophone and describes as “for those who do not see any difficulties in the three-step-archetype *production-delivery-realization*, for those who are not really interested in contributing to an aesthetic discourse.” Michael Rebhahn, “No Problem! Approaches towards an Artistic New Music,” 2013, <http://hgmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Rebhahn-Lecture-Harvard.pdf>, 14; see also Rebhahn, “I Hereby Resign from New Music,” 2014, <http://www.goethe.de/mmo/priv/10734133-STANDARD.pdf>.

The definition I use for “new music” in this dissertation is closer to Rebhahn’s definition for “contemporary classical music,” but it is descriptive rather than prescriptive, and without his implicit condescension. Composer Joan Arnau Pàmies makes a similar distinction as Rebhahn between “new music” as “under the umbrella of modernity in a critical manner” and “contemporary music” that “does not have to be in dialogue with modernity.” See Joan Arnau Pàmies, “New Music Is Not (Necessarily)

The roots for this pluralist conception of new music date at least as far back as its definitional status in 1980s New York. In a 1989 column, *New York Times* critic John Rockwell looked to the broadminded annual series New Music America to conclude that contemporary music had come to represent “any composer of music that is new...Elliott Carter as well as John Cage, John Harbison as well as Philip Glass, Miles Davis as well as George Lewis, Guns ’n’ Roses as well as Talking Heads.”<sup>17</sup> In the twenty-first century, new music often stands as an umbrella term for a similar set of cultural practices, though it refers less often to Guns ’n’ Roses than Rockwell might have hoped. Such a “descriptive” or “broadminded” definition is also utilized by major institutions such as the grant making organization *New Music USA*—founded from the 2011 merger of the American Music Center and Meet the Composer—and its online magazine *NewMusicBox*, whose editorial statement describes it as “dedicated to the music of American composers and improvisers and their champions.”<sup>18</sup>

And despite Greenstein’s 2005 protestations, this definition is also invoked by his colleagues. In a 2009 podcast conversation with Greenstein and composer Nico Muhly, violist Nadia Sirota said that:

I grew up around the Boston new-music scene as it was in the ’80s and ’90s, which is to say super modernism-focused, and to be somebody who was for the cause of new music meant that you really, really appreciated atonal, post-tonal music...I grew up knowing that Philip Glass was a bad composer and never having heard any of it in my life. So that was the kind of environment that I was involved in...New music, I thought, was a specific style of music: I didn’t really understand that it meant “new.” Like, recently written. So me discovering what

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Contemporary Music,” *NewMusicBox*, 13 June 2016, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/new-music-is-not-necessarily-contemporary-music/>.

<sup>17</sup> John Rockwell, “New Music America Still Won’t Be Pigeonholed,” *New York Times*, 5 November 1989.

<sup>18</sup> NewMusicBox Staff, “Who We Are,” *NewMusicBox*, 28 April 2011, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/about/>.

new music meant for me, and what new music meant for my generation, is something that was happening all during my late teens and early twenties.<sup>19</sup>

Sirota offers two definitions and suggests that in maturing artistically—and encountering her generational cohort, as I will discuss in Chapter 1—she moved from a “modernism-focused” and prescriptive conception of new music that excluded minimalism and towards a pluralist and descriptive conception.

Although the “descriptive” definition of new music that I use in this dissertation is mostly accepted among practitioners in the world I examine, the historical period that “new” might encompass remains a source of ongoing debate. The online radio station Q2 Music, for example, hosts an annual “new-music countdown” in which listeners can vote for their favorite works to be played in a broadcast. Prior to 2015, online users could nominate works written in the last hundred years. In response to complaints about the “oldness” of a definition of new music that stretched back to *The Rite of Spring*, however, in November 2015 Q2 instead offered a poll to vote on “What Does the ‘New’ in ‘New Music’ Mean To You?” Following the survey, Q2 redefined new music, for the countdown, as works composed in the last twenty years. But based on the survey’s results—see Figure 1—it is clear that there is little agreement within this community as to the temporal limits of new music.<sup>20</sup>

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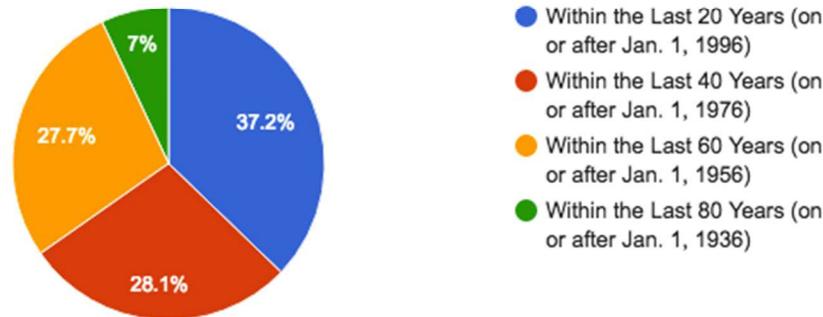
<sup>19</sup> Nadia Sirota, “Podcast 1, Pt. 1 (6\_22) Edit,” New Amsterdam institutional archives. When New Amsterdam first officially launched in 2008, it released a series of “Bourbon Roundtable” podcasts in which musicians discussed current album releases; in this podcast, Sirota, Muhly, and Greenstein were conversing about the violist’s 2009 New Amsterdam record *First Things First*. New Amsterdam has redesigned its website several times, and these podcasts are no longer accessible online.

<sup>20</sup> See “Q2 Music’s 2015 New-Music Countdown,” *Q2 Music*, 1 December 2015, <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/q2-musics-2015-new-music-countdown/>.

## What Does the 'New' in 'New Music' Mean to You?

Voting closes Monday, November 30 at 8 pm.

Thanks for your vote! We'll open up voting for our 5th new-music countdown on Tuesday, Dec. 1.



**Figure 1: Screenshot taken 6 June 2016 from WQXR, “Vote: What Does the ‘New’ in ‘New Music’ Mean to You?” *Q2 Music*, 5 November 2015, <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/vote-define-new-new-music/>.**

In my dissertation, I register indie classical’s rhetorical distance from a particular idea of new music—the “ossified” tradition and the “super modernism-focused” music to which Greenstein and Sirota respectively refer, not unlike what Susan McClary attacked in her landmark 1989 critique of the American avant-garde—while also underscoring its institutional closeness to the world of new music as a whole.<sup>21</sup> And though Greenstein

<sup>21</sup> Susan McClary, “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition,” *Cultural Critique* no. 12 (Spring 1989): 57–81. My conception of institutional nearness is indebted to David Brackett’s examination of the distinction between postmodernism’s purported erasure of distinctions between “high” and “low” and how actual production and consumption of contemporary music operate in practice. Brackett writes that “the reciprocal influence of economic and technological determinations with musical style has not merged the spheres of ‘high’ and ‘low’ musics, even though it may have created shifts in production and consumption across the musical field that have affected the delimitation of these spheres. In fact, it is only possible to contend that the musical categories associated with ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture have dissolved if one ignores several aspects of contemporary music production and consumption.” David Brackett, “‘Where’s It At?’: Postmodern Theory and the Contemporary Music Field,” in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 207.

once distanced himself from what he called new music, his positioning has softened in its iconoclasm; in 2016, the composer's official artistic biography describes him as "a passionate advocate for the independent new music community...active as a promoter of new music in New York and around the world."<sup>22</sup>

I orient my study of indie classical within the specific history of new music in the United States. The composers in this dissertation studied at elite institutions such as Yale and Princeton, whose graduate programs were structurally indebted to the work of Milton Babbitt and a Cold War constellation of academic institutions once frequently labeled as "uptown." But the uptown ethos is one against which indie classical self-consciously rebels. Greenstein's cohort instead rooted their own institutional, aesthetic, and social lineage within the history of "downtown," and in particular the work of composer-led minimalist ensembles founded in the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> Greenstein's colleague Missy Mazzoli, for example, has said that the precedents for her instrumental band Victoire included "the

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<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.juddgreenstein.com/about/>.

<sup>23</sup> As deployed in the world of new music, uptown and downtown were typically linked to the layout of Manhattan, with "uptown" associated with Columbia University and academic composition, and downtown associated with the loft scene in neighborhoods like SoHo. But this loose dichotomy—one that closely resembled Michael Nyman's distinction between avant-garde and experimental composition—was often rendered geographically ambiguous, with uptown extending out to Princeton University and downtown extending as far away as San Francisco. See Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Critic Kyle Gann frequently deployed this binary in his writing for the *Village Voice*, and also kept it in use on his blog in the era in which indie classical arose; see Kyle Gann, *Music Downtown: Writings for the Village Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and, for a representative blog post, Gann, "Downtown Music and Its Misrepresentations," *PostClassic* (blog), 8 March 2005, [http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2005/03/downtown\\_music\\_and\\_its\\_misrepr.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2005/03/downtown_music_and_its_misrepr.html). In his essay "There Have Never Been Walls" (see below), Greenstein implicitly critiqued Gann's belief that an uptown/downtown binary continued to strongly structure musical life in the twenty-first century.

Philip Glass Ensemble, the Steve Reich Ensemble, and Meredith Monk Vocal Ensemble.”<sup>24</sup>

An equally essential precursor is the new-music collective Bang on a Can. Composers Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, and David Lang produced the first Bang on a Can Festival in 1987, a marathon concert in downtown Manhattan that became an annual event and has continued to the present day. Through the 1990s, the organization professionalized and significantly expanded, launching its own All-Stars touring ensemble; presenting concerts and marathons in partnership with Lincoln Center; and founding the People’s Commissioning Fund, which pools small donations to subsidize new work. Journalists and critics often associate Bang on a Can with the world of downtown, but it also played a role in breaking down perceived boundaries between uptown and downtown. In its first marathon, the collective programmed the music of Steve Reich next to that of Milton Babbitt, a strategic move to place themselves beyond such stylistic divisions.<sup>25</sup> As Wolfe told an interviewer for a Lincoln Center program brochure in 1995,

When David Lang, Michael Gordon, and I found ourselves in New York in 1986, we didn’t see an exciting outlet for our music. Things were very polarized—academic music uptown, with audiences filled with new music specialists, a very critical atmosphere, and everyone in tuxes, and downtown, another uniform, black t-shirts and another serious pretention. Neither side was really fun, and there was a whole new generation of composers who didn’t fit in anywhere.... So we decided to make a happening. As a joke, we called it the First Annual Bang on a Can Festival. We didn’t think there’d be another one. We put pieces together that

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<sup>24</sup> Missy Mazzoli, interview with author, 10 November 2015. Similar ensembles such as Orkest de Volharding, established in Amsterdam in the 1960s–70s by composers including Louis Andriessen, also served as an important precedent; Mazzoli studied with Andriessen in Amsterdam, and the composer was also a role model for the founders of Bang on a Can. See Adlington, *Composing Dissent*.

<sup>25</sup> See also William Robin, “Imagining Community at Bang on a Can’s First Marathon,” *NewMusicBox*, 22 June 2016, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/imagining-community-at-bang-on-a-cans-first-marathon/>.

were really strong and belonged to different ideologies or not to any ideology, defying category, falling between the cracks.<sup>26</sup>

Bang on a Can has consistently foregrounded this “post-ideology” identity, developing a rhetoric that represents a strong precedent for the one adopted by Greenstein and New Amsterdam. And though Bang on a Can, like the institutions I examine, distanced itself from “academic” music, the spirit of its founders was also rooted in their experiences in graduate school at Yale in the early 1980s.<sup>27</sup>

Bang on a Can, however, was only one significant participant in a broader shift in the 1980s and 1990s towards the populist and pluralist in new music. As the Cold War cultural and economic apparatus for the arts unraveled, the world of uptown music fell into decline; in a 1991 *New York Times* article, critic Allan Kozinn described major losses of funding among uptown institutions including Speculum Musicae, the Group for Contemporary Music, and Parnassus, as granting organizations demanded that the ensembles market their music and attract larger audiences.<sup>28</sup> Programs such as Meet the

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<sup>26</sup> Julia Wolfe, quoted in program brochure, Bang on a Can All-Stars, Great Performers at Lincoln Center, 15 March 1995.

<sup>27</sup> In particular, Bang on a Can’s founders cite the unique culture of Yale in this period, one that developed from the professorships of composers Jacob Druckman and Martin Bresnick. At the time, Druckman represented a rare modernist composer who did not compose in a post-serial idiom; he also actively encouraged Yale students to cultivate professional connections and seek out performances of their music, which the Bang founders felt was distinct from the culture of other composition graduate programs. And Druckman’s relationship with the New York Philharmonic—as its composer-in-residence, he curated three major Horizons new-music festivals in the mid-1980s—informed Bang on a Can’s early ethos; Lang served as a Revson Fellow and Druckman’s assistant for the Horizons festival, and his dismay at the orchestra’s approach towards new music fueled his own desire to launch Bang on a Can. David Lang, interview with author, 19 January 2016; Michael Gordon, interview with author, 21 January 2016; and Julia Wolfe, interview with author, 28 February 2016. See also David Lang, “Jacob Druckman’s *Horizons*,” <http://davidlangmusic.com/about/writings/jacob-druckmans-horizons>.

<sup>28</sup> In response, uptown composers raised concerns about populism, maintaining an ideological position consistent with Milton Babbitt’s 1958 essay “Who Cares If You Listen?” In the article, Charles Wuorinen says that “the real problem is that we have reached the stage, under the impulse of cultural populism, where we are incapable of measuring or acknowledging artistic merit except in terms of commercial success. We don’t distinguish between the committed, passionate audience and the trend-seeking yuppie audience. We

Composer—established by composer John Duffy in 1974 under the purview of the New York State Council on the Arts—deliberately encouraged connections between new music and large audiences. Beginning in 1982, Meet the Composer began placing composers-in-residence with orchestras across the United States, funded by resources from the NEA, Exxon Corp., the Ford Foundation, and the Reader’s Digest Fund. By 1990, thirty-two orchestras had their own composer-in-residence, and the organization sponsored partnerships including John Adams’s work with the San Francisco Symphony and Jacob Druckman’s Horizons festivals at the New York Philharmonic.

Simultaneously, the downtown sphere—associated with small venues such as The Kitchen and Roulette, improvisers and minimalist composers, and a communal ethos—found mainstream support among larger institutions. The Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival programmed contemporary music by composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass, and Lincoln Center launched its multidisciplinary Serious Fun festival in 1987 to compete with BAM’s initiatives.<sup>29</sup> Organizations associated with uptown turned towards supporting composers more often associated with downtown; in response to the success of labels such as Elektra/Nonesuch, Composer Recordings Inc. started the imprint Emergency Music in 1992, which released Bang on a Can’s first albums. And following the chart-topping sales of Elektra/Nonesuch’s 1992 release of Henryk Górecki’s Symphony No. 3, several major American and European record labels took a new interest in contemporary music; Bang on a Can benefitted from these developments, recording two albums for Sony Classical and then releasing its live arrangement of Brian

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just count bodies and measure sales.” Allan Kozinn, “For Contemporary Music, Times Are Hard,” *New York Times*, 8 January 1991.

<sup>29</sup> Sasha Metcalf, “Institutions and Patrons in American Opera.”

Eno's *Music for Airports* on Point Music in 1998.<sup>30</sup> (Following *Music for Airports*, Bang on a Can established Cantaloupe Records in 2001, its own in-house label and a model for New Amsterdam.)

The shifts of this period laid an institutional and cultural groundwork for the “music without walls” ethos developed by organizations such as New Amsterdam. Indeed, in a 2008 essay titled “There Have Never Been Walls,” Greenstein not only cast his generation as—like Bang on a Can—beyond any purported divisions between musical styles, but also questioned whether they ever even existed in the first place:

It is well known that previous generations set up their ideological positions in the “for” and “against” camps, then lobbed compositions at one another over these well-established, yet artificial walls. Walls in the arts are only walls of perception, erected by the cultural context in which one is situated. While those walls can have deleterious effects on one's career, should one choose to ignore them they are not absolute. In New York, where I was born and live, people still talk about the uptown/downtown divide, which apparently pitted the academics, the serialists and post-serialists, the spectralists, and their people (the “uptowners”) against the radical avant-garde, the performance artists, the minimalists and post-minimalists, and their crew (the “downtowners”).

I lived downtown and went to school uptown for 13 years and recall no checkpoints in between, even after I began writing music. When the supposed barriers between these scenes started breaking down, people wrote about this as a radical gesture. Again, my friends and I wondered, how can you break down something that was never really there?<sup>31</sup>

Greenstein's essay strongly echoes the “post-ideology” rhetoric of Bang on a Can, while also offering an equally problematic and willfully naïve interpretation of the divisive culture that shaped new music in the United States in the late twentieth century. As he and his colleagues acknowledge in the documentary *The End of New Music* (see Chapter

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<sup>30</sup> See Cecilia Sun, “Resisting the Airport: Bang on a Can Performs Brian Eno,” *Musicology Australia* 29, no. 1 (2007): 135–59.

<sup>31</sup> Greenstein, “There Have Never Been Walls,” *MUSO Magazine*, February 2008.

1), the remnants of an academic culture associated with uptown did constrain their early compositional efforts. But like Bang on a Can, Greenstein's imagining of a world without boundaries was more prescriptive than descriptive, an attempt to perpetuate an ideology of genre porousness that would manifest in New Amsterdam's "music without walls."

The ethos as well as the institutional support of Bang on a Can was crucial to the forming of an indie classical generation; many young composers and performers found each other as colleagues at the organization's first summer institute in 2002. As an advocacy organization, Bang on a Can maintains a presence in new music: it has presented the works of Greenstein and his cohort in its marathon concerts, and Cantaloupe has released albums by younger composers such as Tristan Perich (*I-Bit Symphony*, 2010) and Caleb Burhans (*Evensong*, 2013) and as well as ensembles including Alarm Will Sound (six albums since 2002). In 2016, the Lang/Gordon/Wolfe generation and the indie classical generation are closely tied together: Bang on a Can's annual People's Commissioning Fund concert, for example, is presented on Greenstein's Ecstatic Music Festival. At the same time, they are explicit about their differences, as I address in Chapter 1.

The idea of "music without walls" latent in indie classical can also be understood within a broader history of encounters between classical and popular musics in the United States. Bernard Gendron has traced the shifting cultural hierarchies of the popular and the avant-garde in the twentieth century, pinpointing the 1960s as the era in which pop became culturally empowered and a "major player in the struggle for cultural capital," thus helping render the concept of high culture irrelevant; the "borderline aesthetics" that

he identifies in the 1970s and '80s serve as an ancestor to indie classical.<sup>32</sup> Several scholars have also considered the significant overlap among—or lack of strong separation between—artists working in popular and new-music idioms: Robert Fink has analyzed the embrace of rock idioms among postminimalist composers (including Bang on a Can's founders) as representative of a broader decentering of the traditional canon; Benjamin Piekut considers how punk icon Iggy Pop could once have been considered an experimentalist; Tim Lawrence sketches out the musical eclecticism of Arthur Russell as a key boundary-crossing downtown figure; and Elizabeth Ann Lindau identifies alt-rock band Sonic Youth as a central participant in what she calls “post-generic experimental music landscape.”<sup>33</sup>

Over the past decade, American music critics have frequently identified indie classical's “music without walls” and its forays into popular music as a fundamentally new development. Such dialogues between the vernacular and the avant-garde, however, are nothing new; treating these developments as unprecedented would ignore major figures from Rhys Chatham to Cathy Berberian, not to mention historically important and oft-overlooked pluralist musicians such as those working with and within the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 12 and 297.

<sup>33</sup> The rediscovery of Arthur Russell in the first decade of the twenty-first century—precipitated by the 2004 release of the compilation *The World of Arthur Russell* on Soul Jazz—accorded him a position as an identified predecessor of indie classical. *Cathedral City*, the 2010 debut album of Mazzoli's ensemble Victoire on New Amsterdam, includes a track titled “A Song For Arthur Russell.”

<sup>34</sup> George Lewis has shown how the hybridity of African American experimental musicians was often ignored or critiqued by writers who subsequently lionized the comparable boundary crossing of white artists such as John Zorn. As Lewis writes, “contemporaneous commentary on Zorn and other Downtown II artists celebrated this diversity of sonic and cultural reference in their work, even as comparable efforts by black experimentalists were being routinely condemned.” Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 508.

But I do take seriously—and critically—the narrative of “newness” that has formed around indie classical, understanding the location and reception of its participants within the worlds of classical music and new music writ large. The notion of “music without walls” was not simply a marketing tactic, but an aesthetic positioning steeped in the distinctive artistic biographies of its composers: Greenstein grew up writing hip-hop beats, which inform his rhythmically vibrant instrumental compositions; Mazzoli played in rock bands in high school and college, and has called her new-music group Victoire a “bandsemble”; and New Amsterdam co-director Sarah Kirkland Snider is best known for her song cycle *Penelope*, written for the indie-rock vocalist Shara Nova (formerly Worden).<sup>35</sup> The institutions I discuss in this dissertation explicitly emphasize relationships between new music and other genres: New Amsterdam describes itself as advocating for artists “whose work does not adhere to traditional genre boundaries”; yMusic splits its time between commissioning new instrumental music and acting as a back-up group for rock bands.<sup>36</sup> The phrase “indie classical” deliberately evokes indie rock, a fact not unnoticed by music critics: in a substantial 2012 article on indie classical in the online magazine *Pitchfork*, critic Jayson Greene wrote that “Lately, it’s become hard to even tell an indie rock musician and a composer apart.”<sup>37</sup>

Despite indie classical’s “music without walls,” it is clear that the musicians I examine do *not* operate outside the genres of classical and new music. Most studied in a university or conservatory, and many pursued postgraduate studies; the institutions that

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<sup>35</sup> She legally changed her last name from “Worden” to “Nova” in March 2016.

<sup>36</sup> See <http://newamrecords.com/about/>.

<sup>37</sup> Jayson Greene, “Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical,” *Pitchfork*, 27 February 2012, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/8778-indie-classical/>.

they founded are deeply connected to the world of Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, the New York Philharmonic, and the classical music reviews of the *New York Times*. My attempt to nuance claims of newness by providing a historical backdrop also echoes the informants that I interviewed, who have experienced a decade of intellectual growth since they first entered the professional world as youthful musicians with fiery and somewhat naïve rhetoric about the ossified state of new music. Composer David T. Little, for example, observed something of a generational amnesia when we spoke in 2015:

One thing I've come to realize is that the new music world has an incredibly short memory. There are natural cycles of activity, the ebb and flow of a scene, but I sometimes wonder whether each new cycle actually remembers, or is aware of, the cycles that preceded it. And so, we talk about something being “new”—and I remember, when we were starting out, that was the language we were using—“Oh, this is a new thing.”—but well, Glenn Branca. And John Zorn. And Bang a Can. I do think it was important for us to believe that it was new, on some level, but nothing exists in a vacuum.<sup>38</sup>

Indie classical was not unto itself radical or groundbreaking, though the rhetoric surrounding its newness was central to how musicians such as Little first defined themselves. Many precedents for the ethos and ideology of indie classical existed in new music; in Chapter 1, I will interrogate how this cohort of musicians constructed a specific genealogy and prehistory that allowed indie classical to emerge as an innovative development.

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<sup>38</sup> David T. Little, interview with author, 7 December 2015.

## Methodology and Sources

This dissertation brings together reception, archival work, interviews, and fieldwork. From August 2014 to February 2016, I interviewed sixty-two participants in new music, including composers, performers, administrators, critics, and publicists; all but three interviews were conducted in person. I obtained the complete digital institutional archives of New Amsterdam and Bang on a Can—not previously studied by any scholar—respectively encompassing 2,500 and 8,700 documents. I examined thirty-seven interviews conducted by and housed at the Yale Oral History of American Music project, and read fifteen major online and print periodicals that regularly covered indie classical.

My digital research traces the lives of musicians through their blogs, some of which were deleted, either purposefully or inadvertently, as artists updated their personal webpages; my citations thus frequently reference the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, which allows for the recovery of older online content.<sup>39</sup> I draw on social media posts from Twitter, including discussions in which I personally participated. I also attended a significant number of new-music concerts that took place in North Carolina’s Triangle area between 2011 and 2015.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, not long after I moved to the Chapel Hill area for graduate school in 2011, it became a hotbed for indie classical: university presenters Carolina Performing Arts and Duke Performances brought touring artists such as Gabriel Kahane and yMusic from New York; local groups including the chamber collective New Music Raleigh performed works by New Amsterdam composers

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<sup>39</sup> See <https://archive.org/web/>. For an introduction to the Internet Archive, see Jill Lepore, “The Cobweb,” *New Yorker*, 26 January 2015.

<sup>40</sup> The “Triangle” colloquially refers to the Research Triangle, a region of North Carolina that encompasses the cities of Raleigh and Durham and the towns of Cary and Chapel Hill. The term was originally coined to refer to the “triangle” of research universities in the area: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke University, and North Carolina State University. I lived in Carrboro, a town adjacent to Chapel Hill.

including Sarah Kirkland Snider and William Brittelle at club venues; and the North Carolina Symphony began presenting prominent young composers and commissioned orchestral music from Greenstein and Snider. I was not directly involved in any of these programming decisions, though they were certainly a boon to my research; I did, however, work for the North Carolina Symphony as scholar in residence in the 2014–15 season, writing program notes and giving preconcert lectures in conjunction with their programming initiatives focused on contemporary music.

In my final chapter, I draw on a two-year fieldwork project at Duke University, where arts presenter Duke Performances brought yMusic to collaborate with the music department’s graduate student composers. I was able to nuance my historical and mediated understanding of the indie classical developments that the ensemble represented with a grounded knowledge of the local culture that they were entering, and friendship with the North Carolina-based composers with whom they collaborated. The presentation of translocal artists in North Carolina meant that many of my interviews of New York-based musicians were, in fact, conducted in Raleigh and Durham: I spoke with Brittelle, Greenstein, Snider, the members of yMusic, and others while they were in town being presented by nearby institutions. This study foregrounds the importance of such movements for the sustenance of new music because they were made so clearly visible to me, as North Carolina seemed to transform into a regional hub for indie classical in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

My geographical distance from any presumed “center” of indie classical—New York, or perhaps more specifically Brooklyn—might provide a different perspective from that of a scholar “in the midst” of what she was studying. Although I am originally from

the suburbs of New York City, my relationship to indie classical as a whole developed from afar: I first discovered this music while attending Northwestern, in the suburbs of Chicago; I became further acquainted with this generation of composers, and frequently blogged about their records and streaming online concerts while living in Berlin (2010–11) and North Carolina (2011–2015). Once this project began, I traveled frequently to New York for research; I subsequently lived in Brooklyn for one year while writing, where I was literally a neighbor to one of my interviewees. But this dissertation did not involve the kind of immersive scene exploration—attendance of venues, careful attention to performer-audience dynamics—of studies such as Tamar Barzel’s *New York Noise* or Travis Jackson’s *Blowin’ the Blues Away*.<sup>41</sup> By the time I moved to Brooklyn, my research was almost complete. Before 2015, I had attended only a single concert at the New York club (Le) Poisson Rouge, an important venue for the indie classical scene.

In encountering indie classical through mediation—in recordings, reception, and online—I discovered a set of productive questions that might otherwise be overlooked. When focusing closely on the online world, for example, it becomes clear how a composer with an active blog can become a figure whose name appears frequently in the *New York Times*. The Internet allowed for a fluidity between composers and the press that benefitted the indie classical generation. A concert with only a few dozen people in the audience might be broadcast live online, capturing the ears of hundreds more, or be

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<sup>41</sup> See Barzel, *Radical Jewish Music and the Downtown Scene*; and Travis Jackson, *Blowin’ the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

reviewed by a critic in a major newspaper, gaining the attention of thousands.<sup>42</sup>

Mediation and geographical distance provide an understanding of how power is obtained and preserved: how music moves from the local to the national, and the social and economic capital obtained in that mobility.

Despite that geographical distance—and the fact that I had no close personal ties to these musicians before beginning this project—this dissertation represents, to a certain extent, “ethnography at home.” My privileged background is not dissimilar from many of the composers and performers I interviewed: I grew up in the suburbs of New York City; I spent two summers at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute, a music program that Muhly and Greenstein had attended before me; I studied music at an elite university.<sup>43</sup> I first made contact with the scene in 2009 while researching an undergraduate thesis on Muhly’s music, for which I conducted phone interviews with the composer and several of his collaborators including violist Nadia Sirota. I subsequently became “known” to many of these musicians as a writer—in 2009, I started *Seated Ovation*, a blog that covered classical and new music—and have avidly engaged with them on Twitter since 2010.<sup>44</sup> Because I am actively in dialogue with many of the figures I study on social media, my scholarly colleagues often assume that they are my close

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<sup>42</sup> David Chapman has similarly interrogated the disproportionate role of critics such as John Rockwell as gatekeepers in the context of downtown New York in the 1970s, where concerts with small audiences were covered by the *New York Times*. Chapman, “Collaboration, Presence, and Community,” 219–25.

<sup>43</sup> I interviewed Greenstein and Muhly about their formative Tanglewood experiences for a *NewMusicBox* article. See Robin, “From the Shed to the Stars: Reflections on the Boston University Tanglewood Institute,” *NewMusicBox* 17 October 2013, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/from-the-shed-to-the-stars-reflections-on-the-boston-university-tanglewood-institute/>

<sup>44</sup> See William Robin, *Seated Ovation* (blog), <http://seatedovation.blogspot.com>.

friends: the performative relationships exhibited online often appear “closer” than ones in person, or are at least rendered more visible.

My insider/outsider relationship to this scene is further complicated by the fact that I have worked as a freelance music journalist since 2011 for publications including the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *NewMusicBox*. I have primarily written about twentieth and twenty-first century music, and wrote profiles of yMusic for the *New York Times* in February 2012 and Muhly for the *New Yorker*'s website in October 2013.<sup>45</sup> This public presence has certainly shaped the interviews I conducted. Although none of the musicians that I spoke with were particularly difficult to access—many have email addresses posted on their websites—I am sure that, in some instances, their knowledge of my work contributed to their responses to my interview requests. During the actual period of dissertation research I tried to avoid writing professionally indie classical, as I did not want anyone to think that I was bartering *New York Times* coverage for scholarly interviews. But I occasionally navigated tricky boundaries between my status as scholar and journalist: after I interviewed publicist Steven Swartz, for example, he pitched me ideas for potential newspaper articles about his clients. (I had already corresponded with his firm, dotdotdotmusic, when I wrote about yMusic for the *New York Times*; see Chapter 3.)

Working as a professional journalist, however, offered me additional insight into the mechanisms through which indie classical became established. The flood of press releases into my email inbox—and the correlation between those releases and which musicians were most frequently reviewed in major periodicals—made clear to me the

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<sup>45</sup> See Robin, “Bridging Genres and Generations on the Fly,” *New York Times*, 5 February 2012; and Robin, “Nico Muhly’s Team Spirit,” 20 October 2013, *New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/nico-muhlys-team-spirit>.

fundamental but often overlooked role of the publicist in contemporary music. The relationships that I built with yMusic’s members while writing about them—and, likely, the gratitude they felt for receiving a profile in a major newspaper—may have made them more willing to let me sit in on their closed rehearsals at Duke. During my fieldwork at Duke, I felt at times like more of an “insider” than either the ensemble or the student composers: I had a preexisting relationship with the yMusic performers; I had already interviewed administrators and faculty, who knew me as a local graduate student and writer; I had friendships with several Duke composers; and I had a resident’s knowledge of the area.

My status as a public musicologist may also play a role in how this dissertation affects the world of new music. I have a significant number of followers on Twitter as a journalist and scholar, and primarily engage with musicians and critics on the platform.<sup>46</sup> Musicians I interviewed frequently expressed curiosity about “what I would find”; it is clear that participants in this scene care about what is written about them. I consider myself an advocate for new music, and hope that this dissertation will be relevant to both musicians and scholars. But I also feel more of a need to advocate for indie classical as a musicologist than as a journalist. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, these musicians received an enormous amount of attention from the press and maintain a robust publicity and marketing apparatus. But in conference presentations and in discussing my research with my colleagues, I have frequently encountered a suspicion towards this particular subset of new music, which often seems a reflexive response to the privileged background of the musicians and their problematic rhetoric about “music without walls.”

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<sup>46</sup> As of June 2016, I had slightly more than four thousand Twitter followers.

My academic advocacy for indie classical in this dissertation will thus take the form of complicating and problematizing that rhetoric—and carefully situating it within a network comprising the wide range of actors that have shaped indie classical—while also remaining sympathetic with the desire of this generation of musicians to construct their identity in the world.

### **Chapter Outline**

The three chapters of this dissertation consider indie classical through different but overlapping practices: as generation, as institution, and as collaboration. Chapter 1 focuses on the rise of a cohort of young musicians and how they constructed themselves into a generation, through shared institutional backgrounds and performative acts of grouping that I call “generationalism.” I trace the origins of indie classical in summer festivals, academic programs, and DIY concert tours, and show how club venues such as (Le) Poisson Rouge earned their reputation as a home for the scene. Indispensable to these developments was a new public sphere for classical music on the Internet, in which blogs and social media facilitated communication between critics and musicians that allowed the generation to be defined and championed by major publications. I interrogate the rhetoric underlying acts of generationalism—what these musicians believe they share in common, and what implicit values they reveal—and closely examine two prominent articles by music critics Allan Kozinn and Jayson Greene that assembled indie classical for mainstream audiences. Finally, I examine intergenerational citation: how the generation connected itself to past generations of American composers in a coherent genealogy, and how those older figures critiqued the young cohort.

Chapter 2 examines the institutional history and culture of New Amsterdam Records. First, I trace the origins of the record label and its business model. I then turn to analyzing the rise and fall of indie classical as a term: in 2007, New Amsterdam declared itself part of an “indie classical scene” and helped bring the term into popular usage, but by 2013 it had abandoned the phrase. I draw on Eric Drott’s conception of genre as a grouping in order to track the contested history and shifting meanings of indie classical—a debate that took place within the online sphere I examine in Chapter 1—revealing the power of New Amsterdam within the community that it attempted to define.<sup>47</sup> The chapter subsequently focuses on the label’s curatorial practices and two records, Sarah Kirkland Snider’s 2010 *Penelope* and Battle Trance’s 2014 *Palace of Wind*, to consider the implications of what constitutes a “New Amsterdam album.” Finally, I scrutinize the expansion of New Amsterdam as it sought a national market for its music and partnered with organizations across the country. Just as indie classical’s dissemination was challenged by its community, New Amsterdam encountered limits in its efforts to build translocally. When yMusic attempted to perform *Penelope* in a series presented by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra in 2013—while the musicians of the orchestra were themselves locked out in a labor dispute—the ensemble was accused of crossing the picket line and forced to cancel by the Local 802 musicians’ union in New York.<sup>48</sup> These translocal movements of new music maintain their own fraught politics that connect to broader tensions surrounding organized labor in the United States today.

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<sup>47</sup> See Drott, “The End(s) of Genre.”

<sup>48</sup> Robert Adlington examines similar political struggles between the labor formations of the orchestra and new-music ensemble in his study of 1960s Amsterdam; see Adlington, *Composing Dissent*. See also Michael James Roberts, *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock 'N' Roll, the Labor Question, and the Musicians' Union, 1942–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

In Chapter 3, I follow yMusic to North Carolina, in order to analyze its collaborations with PhD student composers in a residency at Duke University from 2013 to 2015. This chapter demonstrates how the identity of yMusic was manifested differently in each of its practices and interactions with Duke: I outline the early history of yMusic; trace the lineages of the new-music ensemble and university PhD program, two formations essential to the history of the avant-garde; and interrogate the specific culture of Duke's composition program and university presenter that fostered the yMusic collaboration. I then tease out the social and musical enactments of yMusic in the residency, examining how specific residency activities foregrounded characteristics associated with the ensemble; focusing on the implications of yMusic's unusual instrumentation for the Duke composers; and analyzing three works by Duke students that construct particular musical and social identities for the sextet. The success of the yMusic/Duke collaboration sheds light on the local circumstances that allowed indie classical to spread across the country.

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In *The Body Multiple*, an ethnography of atherosclerosis in a Dutch hospital, empirical philosopher Annemarie Mol proposes a shift towards examining objects as ontologically multiple, analyzed in their different yet interrelated practices.<sup>49</sup> Mol's work anticipated a broader ontological turn in science and technology studies. As Steve Woolgar and Javier Lezaun write, "the purpose of researching ontology, then, would not be to arrive at a

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<sup>49</sup> See Mol, *The Body Multiple*. Eric Drott has drawn on Mol's methods in order to reveal the multiplicities of genre in art music, and Piekut places Mol's ontological turn within a broader corpus of actor-network approaches that can be integrated into musicology. See Eric Drott, "The End(s) of Genre," *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 10n13; and Piekut, "Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques," *Twentieth-Century Music* 11, no. 2 (September 2014): 191–215.

better formulation of the reality of the world, or of the ways in which the world is real, but to interfere with the assumption of a singular, ordered world, and to do so by re-specifying hefty meta-physical questions in mundane settings and in relation to apparently stabilized objects.”<sup>50</sup> This dissertation grounds its response to a relatively hefty question in new music—“What is indie classical?”—in a close examination of the practices of new music in the United States. I write with an awareness that simply deploying the phrase “indie classical” can prove contentious. In weighing what to title my dissertation, I considered the possibility that publicly foregrounding the term would prove controversial, perhaps precipitating the kind of social media churn that I discuss in Chapter 2. The debate over what indie classical means, and has meant, has never truly died; my history of the term’s usage may only reignite question of its definition and utility. But I deploy the phrase with a self-consciousness and purpose: my study represents an intervention into a controversy in order to foreground indie classical’s multiplicity, and I hope to convince my informants and readers that it has utility *in* its multiplicity. In studying the practices of indie classical, we can arrive at a better understanding of how the world of new music works.

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<sup>50</sup> Steve Woolgar and Javier Lezaun, “The Wrong Bin Bag: A Turn to Ontology in Science and Technology Studies?” *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 3 (June 2013): 323. See also Mol, “The User’s Guide to the Ontological Turn,” <http://somatosphere.net>.

## CHAPTER 1

### Indie Classical as Generation

For decades, New York has been a composers' playground—or is it battleground? Modernists, hunkered in uptown music departments, developed early electronic tools. Minimalists sat on the floors of downtown lofts and attracted a patient public. Later, Bang on a Can renegades plundered and played for both camps. Now comes a roving band of entrepreneurial composer-performers who go merrily Dumpster-diving in styles of the past and of distant parts.

Justin Davidson, "A New New York School," *New York Magazine*, 20 March 2011

In a March 2011 article summarizing his experiences at three recent music festivals in New York City—Merkin Concert Hall's Ecstatic Music, the Park Avenue Armory's Tune-In, and Lincoln Center's Tully Scope—critic Justin Davidson (b. 1966) offered an analysis of a new generation of New York composers.<sup>51</sup> "This cornucopia of new music seems perpetually promising," Davidson wrote. "It bristles with allusions and brims with ambition—yet it somehow feels stifled by all that freedom."<sup>52</sup> His article opened by situating the latest entrepreneurs within a longer generational genealogy: first the uptown modernists and downtown minimalists; then the Bang on a Can composers, who resolved the previous dichotomy; and, finally, the merrily omnivorous current cohort. A collage of headshots accompanied the article, featuring nine composers: Paul Haas (b. 1971), Dan Deacon (b. 1981), Jefferson Friedman (b. 1974), Timo Andres (b. 1985), Missy Mazzoli

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<sup>51</sup> As this chapter focuses on the concept of generation, I will provide birth years for significant figures discussed.

<sup>52</sup> Justin Davidson, "A New New York School," *New York Magazine*, 20 March 2011.

(b. 1980), Tyondai Braxton (b. 1978), Judd Greenstein (b. 1979), Nico Muhly (b. 1981), and Valgeir Sigurðsson (b. 1971).

What made these nine musicians into what Davidson calls “an omnivorous generation of composers”? The difference in age between the youngest and oldest is fourteen years. They do not cleanly correspond to Generation X (typically understood as being born between 1966 and 1976) or Generation Y (typically understood as being born between 1977 and 1994).<sup>53</sup> Instead, this generation seemingly exists within its own history, part of a genealogy specific to a single city—New York (despite the presence of an Icelandic composer)—and a single historical narrative—postwar American new music.

What made these musicians part of the same generation was that Davidson has grouped them together as such. He was not the first to construct such a grouping, nor the last: considerations of “the young generation of composers” were fundamental to the establishment of indie classical in the worlds of classical and new music. In this chapter, I examine the origins of indie classical through the development of “young generation of composers.” I foreground groupings such as Davidson’s as acts of *generationalism*, constructions of an imagined cohort—never more than a minute subset of all the musicians born between the 1970s and 1990s—that share values, privileged backgrounds, institutional ties, and/or social connections. I trace the exchanges of social, cultural, and economic capital that facilitated indie classical’s early success, revealing the powerful

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<sup>53</sup> The birth years that correspond to the categories of these generations are not agreed upon in the literature. In my research, I have rarely encountered examples of indie classical musicians contextualized as part of Generation X or Generation Y; instead, they typically appear in articles focused on “Young Composers Under 40.” One prominent exception is yMusic, which named itself for the fact that all its members are part of Generation Y.

institutional intermediaries that allowed a small group of musicians to ultimately represent *the* young generation of composers.

Generationalism began with the composers themselves. As Greenstein said in 2005, “There’s a sort of ossified new-music scene that privileges certain things that are no longer relevant to a new generation of composers”; in a 2007 interview, Muhly told *New York Times* critic Steve Smith that “There’s a generation for whom the first chord in [Philip Glass’s] ‘Music in 12 Parts’ is totally, totally, totally an emotional moment.”<sup>54</sup> This chapter interrogates the rhetoric by which these composers constructed themselves into a generation, and shows the mechanisms through which that generationalism was accepted and disseminated by the press.

In considering the performativity of generationalism, I draw on the work of Benjamin Piekut and Eric Drott in incorporating the methods of actor-network theory into music studies.<sup>55</sup> As Piekut writes, a network “describes a formation not simply of connected things...but of differences that are mediated by connections that translate these differences into equivalences.”<sup>56</sup> This chapter scrutinizes the heterogeneous connections that translate the disparate ages of these composers into a generation: the summer festivals, DIY tours, documentary films, club venues, blogposts, interviews, newspaper articles, and social media exchanges that stabilized indie classical into an entity. As

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<sup>54</sup> Judd Greenstein, quoted in Stephen S. Taylor, *The End of New Music* (Brooklyn, NY: American Beat Films, 2007); Nico Muhly, quoted in Steve Smith, “Young Composer Finds His Fuel in Restlessness,” *New York Times*, 11 March 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Eric Drott, “The End(s) of Genre,” *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 1 (2013): 1–45; and Benjamin Piekut, “Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 11, no. 2 (September 2014): 191–215.

<sup>56</sup> Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 8.

sociologist John Law writes, “Thoughts are cheap but they don’t last long, and speech lasts very little longer. But when we start to perform relations—and in particular when we embody them in inanimate materials such as texts and buildings—they may last longer.”<sup>57</sup> What made the generationalism of indie classical durable—and ingrained in the cultural imagination of new music in the twenty-first century United States—is its strong textuality. As I will show, that textuality was diverse, encompassing both traditional forms of reception such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* and a new online world of blogposts and social media: these old and new media existed in a strong dialogue and generated an overdetermined rhetoric around this music. Davidson’s article was one of many texts that enshrined such generational groupings, which became embedded in the practices of indie classical.

Indie classical’s generationalism is a typical act of avant-gardism, a setting of boundaries and imagining of historical innovation central to the rise of many artistic movements.<sup>58</sup> The declarations of this young generation resonate with Drott’s definition

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<sup>57</sup> John Law, “Notes on the Theory of the Actor-Network: Ordering, Strategy, and Heterogeneity,” *Systems Practice* 5 (1992): 387. See also Drott, “The End(s) of Genre,” 12.

<sup>58</sup> It is telling that Davidson calls this new generation a “New New York School,” evoking the midcentury New York School of John Cage, Earle Brown, and Morton Feldman, as well as the Second Viennese School. “Generations” and “schools” are frequently invoked in music studies, but relatively under theorized as concepts. The classic sociological study of generations is Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” in *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge: 1956), 276–322; for two major subsequent studies, see Jane Pilcher, “Mannheim’s Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy,” *British Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 3 (September 1994): 481–95; and Alan Spitzer, “The Problem of Generations,” *American Historical Review* 78, no. 5 (December 1973): 1353–85.

Drott points out that, despite a prevailing modernist narrative that genre in art music declined in the twentieth century, phrases such as “tendencies,” “movements,” “schools,” and “aesthetics” represent the persistence of generic groupings in the discourse of new music: “communal patterns of musical activity, no matter how vocally they are rejected in the discourse of patterns music, reemerge in the form of a metalanguage that shapes the limits of this discourse.” Drott, “The End(s) of Genre,” 8. The composers surveyed here avoid the label of “school” and certainly that of “genre,” as I address in Chapter 2; instead, generationalism and invocations of a very specific notion of “the young generation of composers” provided

of the avant-garde as a “particular structural location within the social space of the artistic field” in which “rhetoric and self-presentation contribute as much to the articulation of a particular artistic position as do aesthetic, ideological and/or stylistic factors.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, as I will address, these composers attempt to claim for themselves a “post-ideological” identity that is itself suffused with ideology, and construct an aesthetic discourse that itself attempts to deny traditional forms of aesthetic discourses in new music: it is thus rhetoric and self-presentation that is foregrounded in the avant-gardism of indie classical, making it both continuous and discontinuous with the conventions of new music.

This chapter will trace the origin points of this generation’s musicians in summer festivals including Tanglewood and the Bang on a Can festival; examine how they rebelled against the academy (and made themselves known) in tours such as the Free Speech Zone; scrutinize their relationship to the new narrative of “classical music in clubs,” as epitomized by (Le) Poisson Rouge; assess a sphere of exchange between traditional media and the blogosphere that brought them into dialogue with the press; interrogate their generational rhetoric and values, and what indie classical implicitly includes and excludes; consider in detail two generationalist texts in the press that received significant attention; and finally, analyze intergenerational citations, exchanges between this generation and older generations of American composers. As a whole, this chapter reveals self-constructed history of indie classical, and the performativity of

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the framework for a metalanguage that constructed indie classical as the type of implicit genre that Drott describes.

<sup>59</sup> Drott, “Spectralism, Politics, and the Post-Industrial Imagination,” in *The Modernist Legacy: Essays on New Music*, ed. Björn Heile (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 42 and 44.

genealogy that has deeply shaped how this generation gained a strong foothold in the world of new music.

### **In the Berkshires**

One crucial point of origin for the “New New York School” is a three-hour drive from New York City: the Berkshire Mountains, the idyllic Massachusetts home of both the Tanglewood and Bang on a Can summer music festivals. In this section, I will briefly trace the role of these festivals in constructing a generation: Tanglewood in bringing together a powerful trio of indie classical musicians—Greenstein, Muhly, and Nadia Sirota (b. 1982)—and Bang on a Can in helping group a larger cohort of composers and performers.

Greenstein and Muhly first met in 1997 at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute, an elite summer music program for high school-age students. Muhly grew up in a small town in Vermont and in Providence, Rhode Island. Because both of his parents were artists, he traveled frequently; he spent a year in boarding school in Italy when his mother, Bunny Harvey, was a visiting fellow at the American Academy of Rome. By his teenage years, Muhly was drawn to the sacred music of the English Renaissance—he joined a church choir at age seven and discovered the works of Byrd and Tallis—the minimalism of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, and the operas of Benjamin Britten. Greenstein spent his childhood in Manhattan (his father is a lawyer, and his mother is a therapist); though he first started music by learning piano, by age twelve he was creating

hip-hop beats with a Casio and later a synthesizer, and began writing notated music in his teens.<sup>60</sup>

When they encountered each other at Tanglewood, the two composers felt a shared sense of musical purpose, as Greenstein recalled in a 2009 podcast conversation with Muhly and Sirota:

I don't want to be mushy about this, but I think it was really important, actually, to meet you. I didn't know any other composers, even being in New York. And to get that sense of, okay: Where we are all in this together is in the sense of "We can do whatever we want." It was a good thing to know—I felt that, but I didn't know if that was what other people felt.<sup>61</sup>

Though it might be unlikely that a permissive "music without walls" rhetoric actually existed in the imagination of Greenstein and Muhly when they were only teenagers, we see here the composers imagining an aesthetic generationalism that extended back to their first encounters in high school.

Sirota befriended Muhly in 2001 while both were freshmen at Juilliard, where they were set up on a "friend date" by mutual acquaintances.<sup>62</sup> Sirota grew up in Boston in a musical family: her father is composer and administrator Robert Sirota (b. 1949), who has served as director of Boston University's School of Music (1981–1991) and the Peabody Institute (1995–2005) and president of the Manhattan School of Music (2005–2012); her brother Jonah is also a violist and member of the Chiara String Quartet. In

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<sup>60</sup> In a 2011 *NewMusicBox* interview, Greenstein said that "For me, being a hip-hop producer was always something that seemed very on the table, even into my 20s. I still was writing beats; I still saw that as part of my identity. But eventually you realize what you're good at and what you're not good at, and the more you become good at something, the more—at least for me—it overtakes your creative space. The better I became at writing music, or at least the more experienced, I realize how inexperienced I was in other fields." Greenstein, quoted in Molly Sheridan, "Judd Greenstein—A World of Difference," *NewMusicBox*, 17 January 2011, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/judd-greenstein-a-world-of-difference/>.

<sup>61</sup> Greenstein, "Podcast 1, Pt. 2 (6\_22) Edit," New Amsterdam institutional archives.

<sup>62</sup> Nico Muhly, "Podcast 1, Pt. 1 (6\_22) Edit."

2004, Muhly arranged that Sirota and Greenstein meet each other at Tanglewood. Greenstein was participating as a fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center: he had attended Williams College for his undergraduate, spent a summer at the Bang on a Can festival, and just completed a master's degree from Yale.<sup>63</sup> Sirota had spent summers at Tanglewood as a child while her father worked as director of the Young Arts Composition Program at Boston University Tanglewood Institute (1980–1991). When she met Greenstein in 2004, Sirota was also a Tanglewood Music Center fellow; she had recently finished her bachelor's degree at Juilliard and was about to start a master's program at the school. Muhly visited them regularly and they had lengthy conversations about what they sought from new music, as Sirota recalled in the podcast:

Discovering what new music meant for me, and what new music meant for my generation, was something that was happening all during my late teens and early twenties: this entire period of time. It was exciting: part of the reason I feel like I'm such good friends with these people and I've wanted to work with these people so much is that we fleshed out these ideas so much, and really thought. They have considered, really aggressively, what it is they want to write, and I have considered really aggressively how to best perform, or best be an advocate for, all these different styles of music. I'm trying to be as broad as possible in my consideration, at least, and then figure out what it is I can be a good advocate for. So these [Greenstein and Muhly] are definitely two huge people in my life, in terms of going through that process.<sup>64</sup>

Here, Sirota extrapolates generationalism from an encounter between three musicians: it is her experiences with two close friends that allows her to imagine a larger generational world, one with aesthetic implications that I will address below.

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<sup>63</sup> Distinct from the Boston University Tanglewood Institute and aimed towards pre-professional musicians, the Tanglewood Music Center was founded in 1940 by Serge Koussevitsky as the Berkshire Music Center.

<sup>64</sup> Sirota, "Podcast 1, Pt. 1 (6\_22) Edit."

But before his second summer at Tanglewood and those formative experiences with Sirota and Muhly, Greenstein had already established himself as part of a generational cohort. In 2002, he attended the first Bang on a Can summer festival, located at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, a hour away from Tanglewood by car (it is known informally as Banglewood).<sup>65</sup> Since its initial 1987 marathon concert in downtown New York, Bang on a Can has expanded into a robust and diverse nonprofit that advocates for new music. It presents marathon concerts every year; launched its own All-Stars new-music ensemble in 1992 for national and international tours; has released albums on the record labels CRI, Sony, and Point Music; started the People's Commissioning Fund, which pools individual donations to fund new compositions; and created its own record label, Cantaloupe Music, in 2001. The collective's co-founders—Michael Gordon (b. 1956), David Lang (b. 1957), and Julia Wolfe (b. 1958)—serve as artistic directors, and also maintain a six-person staff and an office in downtown Brooklyn.

For the indie classical generation, the collective's most significant development was its first summer festival. As a planning document in Bang on a Can's archives shows, the organization had imagined an institute to mentor young musicians and build collaborative relationships between composers and performers at least as early as 1995: "Young composers sometimes need more than just a single performance; they could profit from a program that offers hands-on activities, feedback from established

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<sup>65</sup> The museum and festival are located in North Adams, Massachusetts, which is also a ten-minute drive from Williamstown, the home of Greenstein's alma mater Williams College.

composers, workshops with performers and intense discussions within a community of their peers.”<sup>66</sup>

The first cohort at the 2002 summer institute included Greenstein, Matt McBane (b. 1979), Missy Mazzoli (b. 1980), Tristan Perich (b. 1982), and Marc Dancigers (b. 1981), all of whom participated in subsequent album projects on New Amsterdam.<sup>67</sup> As a teenager, Greenstein was strongly influenced by Bang on a Can’s albums and marathon concerts; he interned for the organization in summer 2001, and subsequently worked as a copyist for Gordon and Wolfe and took composition lessons from them. He described the summer festival as where he “met this ridiculous number of people who are still part of my life.”<sup>68</sup> In a 2008 blog post, Greenstein wrote that

The first year’s Festival itself really laid the foundation for so many of the current elements of my musical life, both in terms of how I approached music thereafter, and in the people that I met and befriended....I think I can speak for most of the people who attended, it was a ridiculously important, perhaps seminal event in our lives. The relationships I made there are among the bedrock relationships of my musical life.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> “PLAN,” THREE-YEAR PLAN\_ADVANCEMENT, 5 October 1995, Bang on a Can institutional archives. Printed with permission from Bang on a Can.

David Lang describes the origins of the summer festival in his 2012 Yale oral history. See David Lang, interview with Libby Van Cleve, 19 July 2012, Yale Oral History of American Music: Major Figures in American Music: 185 w–y.

<sup>67</sup> Muhly did not attend the Bang on a Can festival, and in a 2009 blog post he noted his distance from what he called the “Bang On A Can Scene,” writing that “I’ve never been to Banglewood, I think that I am the only sentient being on earth not to have written a piece for the People’s Commissioning Fund...If the [Bang on a Can] Marathon is the Superbowl (or just The Marathon?) of the New York Music Scene, I must be playing a different sport.” Nico Muhly, “Scene But Not Heard,” *Nico Muhly* (blog), 29 July 2009, <http://nicomuhly.com/news/2009/scene-but-not-heard>. Muhly, however, has maintained a close relationship to David Lang, who wrote a keyboard part for the composer in his song cycle *death speaks* (see Conclusion).

<sup>68</sup> Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Greenstein, “Banging.”

In a 2015 interview, McBane described the 2002 summer as “a time when I felt like, ‘I found my people.’”<sup>70</sup> Before the festival, he had previously thought of himself as an outcast while studying at the University of Southern California (he graduated in 2002), recalling that “having a groove or any kind of regular pulse was so frowned on by my professors.”<sup>71</sup> But when he heard Greenstein’s beat-driven, postminimalist music performed at the festival, McBane believed he had found a colleague. The festival brought together musicians already sharing like-minded aesthetic concerns, and the organizers encouraged them to collaborate, form ensembles, and build their own institutions. In 2004, McBane founded the Carlsbad Music Festival, a summer festival modeled after Bang on a Can in his hometown of Carlsbad, California. He also started the ensemble Build and, in publicizing his group, may have created the term “indie classical” (see Chapter 2).

Bang on a Can subsequently represented a source of funding for these musicians: Greenstein, McBane, and others worked as copyists for the founders and in other odd jobs for the organization, earning extra income that helped subsidize their early careers in New York. And just as Bang on a Can provided a home for the cohort to gather, it also provided an older “generation” against which the young composers could differentiate themselves.

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<sup>70</sup> Matt McBane, interview with author, 19 September 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

### **In the Academy and on the Road**

In director Stephen S. Taylor's 2007 documentary *The End of New Music*, a shaky camera captures the voices of thirteen composers and performers as their two ensembles perform in a scrappy traversal of three cities dubbed the Free Speech Zone Tour.

Organized by Mazzoli, Greenstein, and composer David T. Little (b. 1978), the youthful musicians traveled from Manhattan's Knitting Factory and Brooklyn's Galapagos to venues in New Haven and Boston in November 2005. Riding in cars on highways between concerts, they describe their frustrations with the new-music world, their desire to communicate to an audience outside its limited academic purview, and their belief that the traditional concert hall is a stultifying setting. The Free Speech Zone tour served as one of the generation's "public debuts"; the subsequent film provided an opportunity for the musicians to contextualize and mythologize their performances, and represents a strong moment of generationalism.

"Michael [Gordon] said, 'You should go to Yale, study with Martin Bresnick: he'll help you find your voice,'" Greenstein recalled in interview. "I remember him specifically saying those words." While attending the master's program at Yale's School of Music in 2002–2004, however, Greenstein felt dissatisfied with what he perceived to be a conservative atmosphere. The maverick spirit that Lang, Wolfe, and Gordon valued in their Yale experiences in the early 1980s—Martin Bresnick (b. 1946) was relatively rare among composition professors of the time in that he taught the music of Steve Reich—seemed to have faded by the early 2000s. Greenstein studied with Bresnick, Aaron Jay Kernis (b. 1960), and Ezra Laderman (b. 1924); he said his Yale experiences

felt like “a step backwards in time,” a “space where things were pulled into the classical tradition.”<sup>72</sup>

Bresnick described Greenstein as “an interestingly ideologically-based composer,” with “a polemical position with regard to music history” and “a conscious desire to really push his position in the face of high modernism and let them chew on that.”<sup>73</sup> In the 2009 podcast, Muhly recalled Tanglewood conversations with Sirota and Greenstein involving “all these really serious arguments: modernism: uptown/downtown, Carter. You [Greenstein] were real iconoclastic at the time”; “I had my gloves off,” Greenstein responded. Sirota described Greenstein circa 2004 as “A composer whose work I liked who was like, ‘Fuck modernism!’”<sup>74</sup>

At Yale, Greenstein and fellow master’s student composer Patrick Burke (b. 1974) co-founded NOW Ensemble, a chamber quintet with an instrumentation similar to the Bang on a Can All-Stars: flute, clarinet, bass, piano, and electric guitar (played by

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<sup>72</sup> Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

<sup>73</sup> Martin Bresnick, interview with author, 18 December 2015.

<sup>74</sup> “Podcast 1, Pt. 1 (6\_22) Edit.” In an 2015 interview, cellist Clarice Jensen—a friend and collaborator of Muhly and Sirota at Juilliard, who founded the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME) and was an original member of yMusic (see Chapter 3)—recalled encountering a similarly anti-modernist Greenstein when they first met around 2006: “Judd was at Princeton, and we all had this great idea of making a new-music collective in the city. And then Nadia’s like, ‘Oh you’ve got to meet Judd, he’s doing this thing, it’s called New Amsterdam.’ And we went to Princeton and had beers—I think David Little was there too. He was! This is so long ago, I haven’t thought about this since it happened. My sister [Christina] and I, and Nadia, we were like, ‘This is so great, we should all work together! We’re in the city and we just started this group [ACME]. And Judd—I love Judd, but he can be really blunt. And he was like, ‘Well, what are you playing? Blah blah blah.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, I really want to do Elliott Carter’s Triple Duo.’ And he’s like—I don’t remember exactly what he said—but he said something like, ‘I don’t know why I would ever want my music to be played next to Elliott Carter.’ I was like, ‘Oh, okay.’ And then it was really awkward after that. And then we left, and it was sort of like, ‘I don’t know if we’re going to make our super happy music collective in New York City anymore.’ [laughs] He has very strong opinions—that’s why he started NewAm. It’s not like that ever turned into beef, or anything.” Clarice Jensen, interview with author, 18 August 2015. Clarice’s sister Christina worked as ACME’s publicist when the group was founded and subsequently started her own public relations and management firm, Jensen Artists, which represents composers, performers, and ensembles.

Marc Dancigers, a composer who also attended the summer institute).<sup>75</sup> The group's formation was partly inspired by the composers' experiences working with New Music New Haven, Yale's contemporary music series that presents works by students, faculty, and guest composers, with concerts performed by students of the School of Music. Burke said that

It's really wonderful in a certain way for composers: you automatically get performances if you're a composer at Yale. But it wasn't actually the best situation for anybody involved, because sometimes the composers weren't great about getting their stuff out on time, and the performers—some of them really wanted to do it, but some of them felt like, "Well, this is part of my rotation."<sup>76</sup>

Burke said that those frustrations led him and Greenstein to start their own ensemble; he cited Steve Reich and Musicians and the Philip Glass Ensemble as models, making explicit that NOW's institutional lineage belonged less to academia than to minimalism.

Mazzoli (b. 1980) started playing piano at age seven, began composing by age ten, and went to Boston University to study composition for her undergraduate degree (she also attended the Boston University Tanglewood Institute in 1998). But despite the fact that she played gamelan in a nearby group at MIT organized by Bang on a Can affiliated composer and clarinetist Evan Ziporyn (b. 1959), took African drumming lessons at the Berklee College of Music, and started her own bands in Boston, Mazzoli

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<sup>75</sup> The All-Stars' instrumentation comprises clarinet, cello, electric guitar, bass, and percussion.

<sup>76</sup> Bresnick and Jacob Druckman founded New Music New Haven in 1990, with the explicit goal, according to Bresnick, that "the performance of our composers should be one of the primary activities of the composition program." When Bresnick joined the School of Music in 1981, conductor Arthur Weisberg had already established a Yale Contemporary Ensemble, but the composer felt it did not serve the needs of the students: "Yale composers having their music played was very much like it is handled provincially in the rest of the country: they would have to scabble together whatever they could find. Even in the conservatories, it was difficult sometimes to arrange for concerts. If there was a new-music ensemble, it had its own identity and would naturally begin to move independently towards its own selection—and it would not necessarily represent the composition program; it was supposed to represent everything. Which was useless—not useless, but not useful to the composers." Bresnick, interview with author, 18 December 2015.

felt that the city represented a conservative environment for composers. She played in Ziporyn's gamelan ensemble at the Bang on a Can marathon at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2000 and described it as "an epiphany—I loved everything about that marathon." Shortly after graduation, Mazzoli attended the 2002 summer festival, which she called "life changing," particularly because of the colleagues she met there.<sup>77</sup> Mazzoli found the approach of Wolfe, Gordon, and Lang deeply appealing, in contrast to what she encountered in Boston:

It was just a model of how a life could be lived in music that was not stuffy...it wasn't about pretending like we were smarter than everybody else, which is what I hated about composition: creating this smokescreen of intellect around something that should be shared with the world. So they seemed to be after finding a broad audience, and it was about joy: there was a lot of joy of discovery in their music, which is something I felt like I lost in college.<sup>78</sup>

Mazzoli subsequently spent two years in Amsterdam on a Fulbright grant studying with Louis Andriessen, and began the master's program at Yale when she returned. She moved to New York after Yale and—inspired by Reich's and Glass's groups as well as Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble—founded Victoire, an amplified ensemble dedicated to performing her music, in which she played keyboards.<sup>79</sup>

Little had not attended Bang on a Can, but met Greenstein in summer 2004 when he was visiting Tanglewood. Little grew up playing drums in rock bands, and decided he wanted to become a composer after hearing Danny Elfman's score to Tim Burton's film *The Nightmare Before Christmas* in high school; he couldn't yet read music, and spent

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<sup>77</sup> Mazzoli, interview with author, 10 November 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Victoire was originally called Victrola, but changed its name in 2009 because of copyright concerns raised by Sony, which owned the parent company that originally created the Victrola record player.

hours studying interviews with composers in order to “try to find some guidance from what information I could find.”<sup>80</sup> He attended college at Susquehanna University, double-majored in percussion and composition, and formed a new-music ensemble with fellow students. After graduating in 2001, he spent a summer as Tanglewood Music Center fellow—working with Louis Andriessen (b. 1939), Osvaldo Golijov (b. 1960), and Michael Gandolfi (b. 1956)—and began a master’s degree at the University of Michigan, where he studied with Michael Daugherty (b. 1954) and William Bolcom (b. 1938). At Michigan, he founded Newspeak as an improvisatory trio in which he played percussion; in the wake of September 11, Little was interested in exploring the intersection of music and politics, which would become a central focus of his compositional career. He and Greenstein subsequently entered Princeton’s PhD program in composition in 2004, and roomed together.<sup>81</sup> Little described a pivotal dinner that fall, before a performance of Gordon’s multimedia work *Decasia* in Brooklyn. Greenstein, Mazzoli, and several musicians who had attended the Bang on a Can summer festival were present; as Little recalled, “That night I met many of the people with whom I would shape my artistic life.”<sup>82</sup> The three composers began brainstorming ideas for collaborations, which would result in the Free Speech Zone tour.

Free Speech Zone was named after an explicitly political work that Greenstein wrote for NOW Ensemble—a frenetic critique of so-called “free speech zones,” spaces

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<sup>80</sup> Little, interview with author, 7 December 2015.

<sup>81</sup> Greenstein said that he attended Princeton in order to study in a different environment than that of Yale: “What I needed was to stop being poked in the side every time I was trying to do something that felt broader than the classical world, and instead go to a place where anything went. And that’s what Princeton certainly proved to be.” Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Little, interview with author, 7 December 2015.

specifically designated for protesters when President Bush gave speeches—and the tour loosely allied its participants’ twin dissatisfactions with new music and national politics.<sup>83</sup> Greenstein and Little had campaigned for Get Out the Vote, and were dismayed by the results of the 2004 election. “After the election, we were incredibly frustrated and felt like we needed to do something,” Little said. “We decided to create a politically-charged concert tour with Newspeak and NOW Ensemble. I’m not sure what exactly we thought this was going to accomplish politically, but we knew we needed to do something, if only as a way of channeling our frustration.”<sup>84</sup>

The website for Free Speech Zone Productions—an attempt at creating a music collective following the tour, which was abandoned by 2008—describes the composers as “united in their belief that music can inform, provoke, and inspire change, and seek to present music that speaks directly to the human experience in an era marked by anger and fear.”<sup>85</sup> NOW Ensemble and Newspeak performed politically themed music by Greenstein and Little as well as Frederic Rzewski, John Halle, and Keeril Makan at the New York, Boston, and New Haven concerts; Mazzoli had not yet founded Victoire, but helped organize the tour and composed a work for Newspeak.

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<sup>83</sup> Greenstein wrote in a program note that “*Free Speech Zone* was written during a time of national upheaval, in the midst of an unethical war and the seemingly unbelievable reelection of a corrupt and dangerously irrational President.” See <http://www.juddgreenstein.com/free-speech-zone/>.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. Alex Ross described other politically oriented concerts organized by avant-garde musicians in a 2004 column; see Ross, “America the Baleful,” *New Yorker*, 8 November 2004.

<sup>85</sup> See <http://www.fszproductions.com/>. The website describes an attempted 2007 project titled “(In)visible: A Documentary Opera,” to be co-created by Greenstein, Little, and Mazzoli in conjunction with Taylor. It would focus on “so-called ‘invisible populations’ including immigrant groups, refugees, former prisoners, the homeless, the working poor, and countless other groups that are systematically marginalized and neglected.” This type of group-composed theatrical work is similar to projects created by the Bang on a Can founders such as *The Carbon Copy Building* (1999), *Lost Objects* (2001), and *Shelter* (2005). The project was never completed, likely because Greenstein turned towards focusing on New Amsterdam.

They were joined on their tour by director Stephen S. Taylor, who documented their experiences in *The End of New Music*. In the film, the composers and performers reckon with the complications of booking concerts, attracting audiences, and dealing with new venues as they discuss their frustrations with the current state of contemporary music. Mazzoli describes her dismay that she wasn't "taught practical things about what it means to really be a composer" at school, and questions what paths are available to composers outside of teaching in academia.<sup>86</sup> Little discusses his longstanding love of 1980s power ballads and that, until recently, he had felt constrained by the new-music world: "I wasn't *not* being true to myself, but wasn't letting everything out: I was filtering me, because of what was 'appropriate' in certain settings."<sup>87</sup> I will unpack some of these statements later in the chapter, with regard to the aesthetic positions that the composers stake out for their generation.

These chamber ensembles and their self-organized tours represented not only an institutional model outside of academia, but also a social setting in which the composers could explore musical paths that they felt were not accepted in their master's programs. Playing concerts in rock venues rather than recital halls appealed to the musicians because it seemed to represent a different cultural setting which might also attract a new audience. As NOW guitarist and composer Marc Dancigers said in the film, "The hope is that we'll reach people that we wouldn't have been able to reach if we put on this concert in a concert hall, or some sort of more stultified setting."<sup>88</sup> That eagerness might explain

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<sup>86</sup> Little, quoted in *The End of New Music*.

<sup>87</sup> Mazzoli, quoted in *The End of New Music*.

<sup>88</sup> Marc Dancigers, quoted in *The End of New Music*.

why the musicians appear to believe that performing in clubs such as the Knitting Factory—a well-established space for new music—represented a radical move.<sup>89</sup>

The tour also clarified that the overt partisan implications of Free Speech Zone, as an attempt at political resistance to the Bush presidency, were not necessarily effective.

As Greenstein explained,

I think we all just felt like we needed to do something, and I think we went in thinking that we were trying to make music that could be part of a political dynamic that would bring about change in the country. But an interesting thing happened, which is that it actually wound up being totally useless from that perspective, obviously, but very empowering for ourselves in different ways to become agents of change in the world of music. I don't think I would have felt as empowered to do the things I have done since, if we hadn't had that tour.<sup>90</sup>

The rhetoric and activities of the Free Speech Zone tour informed the world that these composers helped establish, and laid the groundwork for the institutional culture of New Amsterdam and ethos of indie classical that I will address in the next chapter. *The End of New Music* guaranteed that these ideas were not only developed, but also put on display for a larger audience than those that attended the Free Speech Zone concerts. That audience, as I will discuss, became even larger when the film became the subject of an article in the *New York Times*.

### **In the Club**

“I want to find a way to make it not feel weird to play at a place like this,” pianist

Michael Mizrahi (b. 1978) says in *The End of New Music*, after a concert at the Knitting

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<sup>89</sup> The film does not address the fact that these musicians, having also been a part of the world of Bang on a Can for several years, had already participated in at least one path for new music outside of academia.

<sup>90</sup> Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

Factory. “We’re basically classical musicians. I don’t want it to be like, ‘Look at us, we’re cool playing in this club, turn on some amps and now we’re rocking.’” In 2005, a new-music pianist felt odd performing in a club; within a few years, he would feel entirely at home.

New music in club spaces was not, in itself, a significant innovation: in previous decades, classical and new-music performers had gigged in storied New York venues including the Knitting Factory, CBGB, Tonic, and the Bottom Line. But musicians and the press heralded performances in these “non-traditional” venues as a significant development for this particular generation. In a 2011 *New York Times* feature focused on such “young, inventive and often populist composers,” critic Allan Kozinn wrote that the new scene “thrives in concert spaces that make a point of informality”; the title of his article was “Club Kids Storm Music Museums.”<sup>91</sup> Critic Brett Campbell, in a 2012 article in *San Francisco Classical Voice* titled “In the Indie Classical Lounge,” declared that “Young composers today are increasingly finding—or creating—outlets for their music in rock and jazz clubs, coffeehouses, and other alternative venues.”<sup>92</sup> “Playing in this club” became synonymous with membership in an indie classical generation.

As several historic New York venues closed or relocated in the first two decades of the twenty-first century due to gentrification and sharply increased rents in downtown Manhattan—the Bottom Line, Tonic, and CBGB shuttered, and the Knitting Factory moved to Brooklyn—new spaces including (Le) Poisson Rouge, Galapagos, Joe’s Pub,

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<sup>91</sup> Allan Kozinn, “Clubs Kids Are Storming Music Museums,” *New York Times*, 9 December 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Brett Campbell, “In the Indie Classical Lounge,” *San Francisco Classical Voice*, 3 July 2012, <https://www.sfcv.org/article/in-the-indie-classical-lounge>.

Issue Project Room, Subculture, Spectrum, and National Sawdust opened.<sup>93</sup> This section will chronicle the role of venues in the rise of this generation, focusing on the history and reception of (Le) Poisson Rouge; that club became a metonym for indie classical itself, one drawn on by major classical institutions seeking out new audiences.

By 2016, the two New York venues that the Free Speech Tour visited no longer existed. In 2008, the Knitting Factory moved from the Houston Street home in Manhattan where it had been since 1987 to a smaller location in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In 2014, Galapagos Art Space—founded in 1995 in Williamsburg and relocated to the Dumbo neighborhood in 2007—left New York for Detroit. The Knitting Factory had a strong legacy as a space for the “Downtown II” experimental improvisation scene centered on John Zorn, but was considered by some performers as an imperfect venue for the presentation of classical and new music. And to younger musicians, similar experimental venues such as The Stone, Roulette, Tonic, and Tap felt saturated with their own established artistic communities. Soon after graduating in with a bachelor’s degree from the Eastman School of Music and helping found the ensemble Alarm Will Sound, composer-performer Caleb Burhans (b. 1980) moved to New York in 2003 and started an instrumental duo, *itsnotyouitsme*, which would become one of New Amsterdam’s first recording artists. He had trouble finding performance venues: “We didn’t play a whole

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<sup>93</sup> For an examination of these clubs, their closings, and their implications for experimental music, see Tamar Barzel, “Subsidy, Advocacy, Theory: Experimental Music in the Academy, in New York City, and Beyond,” and John Brackett, “Subsidizing the Experimental Muse: Rereading Ribot,” in *People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz is Now!*, eds. Ajay Heble and Rob Wallace (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

lot for a while, that had a lot to do with no one ever hearing us: we used to play at some strange clubs that no longer exist, we didn't know what to do with our music."<sup>94</sup>

Burhans's cohort rented out churches, art galleries, and recital halls for concerts, but some felt that these were practical and utilitarian venues rather than the home for a new scene. As composer and New Amsterdam director William Britelle (b. 1976) explained,

There were a lot of church performances with the house lights on. I think people were feeling constrained artistically, often having just come out of music school—I just remember this sense of going to concerts from 2000 to 2005 and being more excited about getting a drink after than the show itself, even when it came to the music I was writing. Everybody was psyched to be hanging out and was really interested in community building, but there wasn't that—I hate to use this word—there wasn't this ecstatic energy about it.<sup>95</sup>

Beginning in September 2006, Greenstein curated a series at Gallerie Icosahedron in TriBeCa, but it was cancelled in January 2008 following a fraught relationship with the space's owners. In April 2007, Greenstein lamented the closure of Tonic on his blog: "Where are we supposed to play?...Tonic, the Knitting Factory, and Galapagos are different—these are the spaces that are now the backbone for the developing indie classical community. If they all go, I'm not sure what will rise to fill their void."<sup>96</sup>

One place that filled that void was (Le) Poisson Rouge (hereafter LPR), which opened in Greenwich Village in June 2008 in a space that formerly housed the nightclub Village Gate. In a *New York Times* article that previewed the club's opening, Kozinn

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<sup>94</sup> Caleb Burhans, interview with author, 18 April 2015.

<sup>95</sup> William Britelle, interview with author, 5 September 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Greenstein, "Tonic," *Judd Greenstein: Why?* (blog), 4 April 2007, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070704172734/http://juddgreenstein.com/why.html#tonic>.

mentioned LPR alongside Joe's Pub and Galapagos as examples of new venues presenting classical music outside the traditional concert hall. LPR's founders, Justin Kantor and David Handler, were graduates of the Manhattan School of Music and sought to create a site where classical musicians could perform in an informal setting, with revenue primarily drawn from food and drink sales (the initial motto was "Serving Art & Alcohol"). Ronen Givony curated the club's classical programming; he had founded the Wordless Music series in 2006, which presented double-bill concerts featuring prominent rock bands alongside classical musicians and new-music ensembles.<sup>97</sup> LPR became a hub for subsequent Wordless concerts; performances by new-music groups including NOW Ensemble and Burhans's *itsnotyouitsme*; and recitals by mainstream classical musicians such as pianist Simone Dinnerstein.

Critics and journalists praised LPR for its informal atmosphere, ability to attract young audiences, and post-genre ethos in which classical music, contemporary music, and pop could exist in a single space. In an article highlighting his favorite performances of 2008, *New York Times* chief music critic Anthony Tommasini (b. 1948) singled out a concert featuring the JACK Quartet at the venue:

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<sup>97</sup> The idea of Wordless paralleled New Amsterdam's "indie classical" mission as well as the label's goal of building audiences through breaking down boundaries between genres; as its website described in May 2016, "Wordless Music is devoted to the idea that the sound worlds of classical and contemporary instrumental music—in genres such as indie rock and electronic music—share more in common than conventional thinking might suggest... The goal: to bring audiences together, and to introduce listeners from both sound worlds to composers that they might otherwise not encounter, for a completely new concert experience. In so doing, Wordless Music seeks to demonstrate that the various boundaries and genre distinctions separating music today—popular and classical; uptown and downtown; high art and low—are artificial constructions in need of dismantling." See <http://www.wordlessmusic.org/aboutcontact/>.

An indicator of the quick success of Wordless within the new-music world was its 2009 partnership with Columbia University's Miller Theatre, a historical bastion of the avant-garde; one Wordless concert at Miller featured rock bands Destroyer and LOSCIL followed by the JACK Quartet playing music by Yale composer Jacob Cooper. In recent years, however, Wordless concerts have primarily comprised live performances of orchestral scores to accompany film screenings and presentations of rock musicians.

It is the latest addition to a roster of alternative clubs fostering enthusiasm for new music without regard to categories...I would never have expected to see a young crowd at a downtown nightclub erupting with whoops after performances of the four hypercomplex, cutting-edge string quartets by Iannis Xenakis. But in this setting these dense and kinetic works came across to this open-minded audience as just more hip, wild, out-there contemporary music.<sup>98</sup>

As established classical musicians increasingly turned to LPR to present album-release concerts and the venue continued to receive significant press coverage, larger institutions also looked to the club, and in particular the youthful audience it appeared to have cultivated. In fall 2009, Ensemble ACJW—a training group for young musicians established by a partnership between Carnegie Hall and the Juilliard School—as well as Juilliard’s Axiom Ensemble performed at the venue. For mainstream classical institutions, LPR represented a viable alternative to the traditional concert hall: as Juilliard dean Ara Guzelimian told the *Times*, “I keep thinking in biodiversity terms...It’s a very different organism. It’s more responsive, it’s more nimble, and it doesn’t take away from the larger organisms. The whole environment is healthier for having something like that.”<sup>99</sup>

This institutional interest reached its peak when the Metropolitan Opera presented performances at LPR in the 2012–13 season, tied to its new productions of Thomas Adès’s *The Tempest* and Nico Muhly’s *Two Boys*. By 2013, Muhly had become one of the most widely commissioned composers in the United States. Unlike his colleagues, the composer left academia after completing his master’s at Juilliard—where he studied with

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<sup>98</sup> Anthony Tommasini, “Classical Music That Dared to Be Different,” *New York Times*, 19 December 2008.

<sup>99</sup> Ara Guzelimian, quoted in Steve Smith, “Out of School, Into the Nightclub,” *New York Times*, 9 September 2009.

Christopher Rouse and John Corigliano—in 2004.<sup>100</sup> Between 1999 and 2008, he worked for Philip Glass as an editor, harpsichordist, and conductor; he had met Glass through the illustrator Maira Kalman, a friend of Muhly’s parents. In 2004, Alex Ross described Muhly in the *New Yorker* as “poised for a major career.”<sup>101</sup> Ross also mentioned Muhly to producer Valgeir Sigurðsson—whom he knew after profiling the Icelandic musician Björk—when Valgeir was seeking a classically trained musician for a Björk project. Muhly’s work with Björk represented his first major foray into writing arrangements in the pop world; Valgeir and Muhly subsequently co-founded the record label Bedroom Community, a collective of musicians who work in multiple genres and collaborate on each other’s albums.

Both his Bedroom Community work and his rock arrangements would become cornerstones of Muhly’s reputation as the quintessential “indie classical” composer. But he also found strong support in the institutionalized world of classical music. Muhly wrote works for the Chicago Symphony and New York Philharmonic in 2008 and 2010, and signed a contract with Decca Records in 2010. *Two Boys* was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera; in advance of its 2011 world premiere at the English National Opera, the *Daily Telegraph* dubbed Muhly “the composer the whole world is talking about.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Muhly attended a dual degree program in conjunction with Columbia, where he majored in English and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in 2003.

<sup>101</sup> Ross, “Ignore the Conductor,” *New Yorker*, 10 May 2004.

<sup>102</sup> Ivan Hewett, “Nico Muhly: ‘Wearing a Mask Frees You to Say Anything,’” *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 June 2011.

The May 2013 *Two Boys* concert at LPR was broadcast live in a video feed hosted online by NPR and featured excerpts from Muhly's opera with the composer accompanying vocalists on piano; Muhly also performed alongside two of his Bedroom Community collaborators, Sirota and folk singer Sam Amidon. In introductory remarks, Met general manager Peter Gelb expressed gratitude towards the club's management for "putting their downtown cred at risk by supporting the Met," and producer Elena Park said of Muhly that "Le Poisson Rouge is like his living room."<sup>103</sup> Placing Muhly's opera and instrumental works for Sirota together with Amidon's folk songs showcased the kind of "music without regard to categories" that Tommasini had extolled. In a *Times* review, Vivien Schweitzer wrote that "In true Poisson Rouge style, the event was eclectic and informal."<sup>104</sup>

LPR also became synonymous with the rise of new institutions such as Opera on Tap and Classical Revolution, which purposefully placed performances of classical and new music in bars and clubs with the hope that different atmospheres might appeal to new audiences. The venue became a metonym for several overlapping developments, among which the new-music scene was only one. In her 2013 dissertation, for example, Sarah May Robinson places LPR at the center of a new focus on chamber music performances in "alternative venues" in the twenty-first century.<sup>105</sup> But LPR was only the

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<sup>103</sup> Peter Gelb, quoted in Vivien Schweitzer, "Roving Downtown, From Opera to Folk," *New York Times*, 15 May 2013. Park can be heard introducing the concert in Anastasia Tsioulcas, "An Evening with Nico Muhly, 'Two Boys,' and Other Works," *NPR*, 22 May 2013, <http://www.npr.org/event/music/182267405/live-from-lpr-an-evening-with-nico-muhly-and-friends>.

<sup>104</sup> Schweitzer, "Roving Downtown."

<sup>105</sup> Sarah May Robinson, "Chamber Music in Alternative Venues in the 21st-Century U.S.: Investigating the Effect of New Venues on Concert Culture, Programming and the Business of Classical Music" (DMA diss., University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, 2001).

most visible of many spaces that housed the indie classical generation; less discussed was a network of rehearsal venues such as Manhattan’s DiMenna Center, not to mention musicians’ apartments.<sup>106</sup>

Though LPR was called his “living room,” Muhly has only performed at the club handful of times; indeed, when I emailed him to confirm a specific number, he replied “Not as many as you might think. I shouldn’t think any more than once a year since they’ve been open.<sup>107</sup> Many musicians with whom I have spoken consider it a flawed space due to acoustic concerns and the distractions of the bar and dining service that run continuously during concerts. On most nights of the week, LPR hosts comedy acts, DJ nights, dance parties, and rock bands; classical and new-music performances may represent its most visible programming, but are not the majority of what it presents. For the indie-classical generation, however, LPR represented an early and important signifier—a symbolic “living room”—even if it may not have been where they spent most of their evenings. As Sirota said of the venue, “It was a home for new classical music that was not a concert hall. It felt really community-oriented, and I think that first season I played like thirty times, or something, there. It was a cool moment: it’s really funny how inevitable all these things feel now, but they didn’t feel inevitable when they were happening.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> The DiMenna Center is owned by the Orchestra of St. Luke’s and opened in 2011 as a multi-use space dedicated to classical music, with recording, rehearsal, and performance facilities.

<sup>107</sup> Muhly, email to author, 23 June 2016. Printed with permission.

<sup>108</sup> Sirota, interview with author, 17 November 2014.

## Online

On 4 July 2007, the day that *The End of New Music* was to receive its premiere screening in downtown Manhattan, music critic Steve Smith previewed the film in the *New York Times*. Smith interviewed the Free Speech Zone composers about the documentary, foregrounded the political significance of the tour, and described how the musicians attempted to “forcefully reject the standard conventions of concert halls and academia.”<sup>109</sup>

A national readership that might not have had the opportunity to view the indie film thus encountered the perspectives of the musicians it depicted. A few days later on the contemporary music blog *Sequenza21*, writer Jerry Bowles posted Smith’s article, briefly discussed the film, and asked his commenters “Anybody seen the film? (I know you have, Judd.)”<sup>110</sup> Greenstein and Smith were both among the community of bloggers who commented on *Sequenza21*. Following Bowles’s post, a handful of commenters critiqued the seemingly narrow perspectives of the Free Speech Zone composers and the the provocative title of the film. Bowles himself added that “Well, the title does seem to be somewhat misleading. Something like—Can Three Young Composers Save New

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<sup>109</sup> Smith, “Rebel Composers On a Rock Tour of Sorts,” *New York Times*, 4 July 2007. Smith’s article also examined how the composers tempered that forcefulness in the years following the tour, and had begun to build bridges with mainstream institutions; the article concludes with Greenstein saying that “The main thing is understanding that you can actually take control over the way that your music is heard... Once you see that you had that power all along, then it suddenly doesn’t become ‘you versus the system’ anymore. It’s just you behaving as an adult, going out and making decisions in the world.” Greenstein, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Jerry Bowles, “Is This the End of New Music?” *Sequenza21* (blog), 11 July 2007, <http://www.sequenza21.com/2007/07/is-this-the-end-of-new-music/>. Bowles founded and edits *Sequenza21*, which at the time included a Composers Forum discussion page; twenty individual blogs hosted by composers and performers; and a Wiki platform in which musicians could create their own page and upload music samples. By 2016, however, *Sequenza21* had reduced its web platform to blog posts by a handful of writers (updated with significantly less frequency than in 2007), a calendar of upcoming events, and a corresponding Facebook page.

Music by Getting Down and Dirty?—might have been more on target.”<sup>111</sup> Composer Andrea LaRose responded, “how about ‘three young composers discover what many have figured out before them: the lure of D.I.Y.’”<sup>112</sup> Smith himself subsequently weighed in:

Perhaps the title should have been The Death of “New Music,” since the real idea is that the misery of the 2004 presidential election prompted Judd, David and Missy to cast off the concept of an aesthetic pursuit hermetically sealed against societal engagement, in favor of a more activist approach NOT JUST in terms of where to perform, but also WHAT.

I’ve received just enough negative feedback about that article—some typically anonymous, some not—to make me realize that this was one area in which my article most certainly fell short: Judd defined his usage of “new music” pretty clearly in the film, and I should have made a greater effort to report that. If I had the article to do over again, I’d try to make that point more emphatically.

Otherwise, I’ve been hearing both reasoned argument and supercilious snark about how this is just the “same ol’ same ol’.” Yes, well, maybe Free Speech Zone didn’t invent a new musical genre or reinvent the notion of touring. But the title of Stephen’s film is still, I think, an accurate depiction of the spark that motivated the 2005 tour.<sup>113</sup>

The iconoclastic perspectives of these young musicians—due to their depiction on film, the film’s subsequent depiction in the national press, and the press’s subsequent depiction online—caused a minor, if relatively typical, flare-up in the new-music world.

That bit of Internet controversy—one in which a music critic for a major national newspaper also contributed to the comments section of a specialty blog—demonstrates the ease of travel between print and online that was crucial to the formation of the indie

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<sup>111</sup> Bowles, comment on Bowles, “Is This the End of New Music?”

<sup>112</sup> Andrea LaRose, comment on Bowles, “Is This the End of New Music?”

<sup>113</sup> Smith, comment on Bowles, “Is This the End of New Music?” Smith clarified in a subsequent comment, “Hoo, baby, did I sound shrill up there! Let me hasten to add, it’s not the comments HERE that prompted my malaise, but rather messages I received privately and through my blog, which already had me questioning the job I did.” Ibid.

classical generation in the mid-2000s. In this section, I will scrutinize the materialization of what might be called the “new-music blogosphere,” a public sphere for contemporary music online; its relationship to traditional forms of music criticism; and how the fluidity between these worlds shaped this generation.<sup>114</sup> It was this exchange that facilitated the cohort’s transformation from a group of Tanglewood, Bang on a Can, and Yale alumna into a generation as understood by the press and institutional world of classical music. The blogosphere disseminated the ideas and ideology of these musicians—including their acts of generationalism—to the mainstream audience of the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*.

In the early twenty-first century, composers and performers started blogs to contextualize their music with their opinions, which joined web platforms including *NewMusicBox* (established in 1999 by the American Music Center), *Sequenza21* (founded in 2006 by Bowles), and *I Care If You Listen* (launched in 2010 by digital marketing consultant Thomas Deneuve). In 2003, the website *ArtsJournal* added specialty blogs to its news platform, and several focused strongly on new music:

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<sup>114</sup> For a study of the concept of the blogosphere writ large, see Christoph Meinel, Justus Boss, Philipp Berger, and Patrick Hennig, *Blogosphere and Its Exploration* (Heidelberg; Springer, 2015). Literature on the history of “blogospheres” has primarily focused on the “early” political blogosphere circa 2002–2004 and its role in shaping public discourse surrounding the Iraq War and media incidents such as Trent Lott’s 2002 resignation from Congress (often attributed to the tenaciousness of bloggers in investigating Lott’s controversial comments in favor of segregation at a birthday party for Senator Strom Thurmond). See, for example, Aaron Barlow, *The Rise of the Blogosphere* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007); Michael Keren, *Blogosphere: The New Political Arena* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006); Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); and Damien Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetoric: Attention and Deliberation in the Early Blogosphere* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).

The period under examination here might be called the “mature” blogosphere, in which new-music bloggers were most active between 2004 and 2011; since 2011, social media platforms Twitter and Facebook have replaced much blogging activity among composers, performers, and critics (see my Conclusion). Notably, several composer-bloggers including Greenstein and Darcy James Argue frequently commented about politics and engaged with political bloggers.

consultant and former *Village Voice* critic Greg Sandow speculated about the future of classical music and what he called “alt classical” (see Chapter 2); writer and *NewMusicBox* editor Molly Sheridan covered the relationship between audiences, technology, and contemporary music in a blog with the tagline “No genre is the new genre”; *Village Voice* critic Kyle Gann wrote about his generation of composers and the legacy of uptown and downtown; and publicist Amanda Ameer described her experiences in the classical music business and engaged in co-blogging exercises with Muhly.<sup>115</sup> Larger institutions such as radio also turned towards participating in an Internet new-music ecosystem, with the founding of online station Q2 Music (a subset of New York’s WQXR) and the classically focused NPR blog *Deceptive Cadence*.<sup>116</sup> Music critics—including ones who wrote regularly for prominent publications such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and *New Yorker*—maintained blogs of their own. With lively comments sections and bloggers who frequently cross-referenced each others’ posts, online commentary on new music became robust.<sup>117</sup> This public sphere participated in a broader digital classical music landscape. In a 2007 *New Yorker* article,

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<sup>115</sup> See <http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/>; <http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/>; <http://www.artsjournal.com/gap/>; and [www.artsjournal.com/lifesapitch/](http://www.artsjournal.com/lifesapitch/).

<sup>116</sup> These radio shifts are partially owed to NPR member station WNYC’s purchase of WQXR in 2009, which allowed for an increased collaboration between public radio and the classical station. The cross-genre new-music identity of Q2 is also informed by the longstanding work of John Schaefer at WNYC.

<sup>117</sup> This fluidity of exchange is similar to what David Chapman describes of the 1970s, when John Rockwell in the *New York Times*, Tom Johnson in the *Village Voice*, and Joan La Barbara in the *SoHo Weekly News* participated in the construction of the downtown musical community. David Chapman, “Collaboration, Presence, and Community: The Philip Glass Ensemble in Downtown New York, 1966–1976” (PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2013).

Ross described the recent appearance of hundreds of specialist blogs, writing that “Classical-music culture on the Internet is expanding at a sometimes alarming pace.”<sup>118</sup>

New-music composers and performers believed that blogs would allow them to reach a readership without the intervention of journalists or critics. In a 2009 post on his personal blog, Greenstein identified this shift as “a replacement of mediation-by-Media...with mediation-by-self”:

If you need a magazine to come interview you in order to have a public persona, it’s going to wind up being more cultivated and distanced than if you are talking directly to Your People through Your Website, or talking with your friends through a trusted quasi-3rd-party outlet. The kind of mediation that used to be necessary for artists to have a robust public life is not entirely gone, of course, but it’s severely diminished by the direct communication outlets that are now available.<sup>119</sup>

This mediation-by-self allowed composers and performers to develop their ideas, in a dialogue with one another that was also visible to the public. A relatively early adopter, Greenstein posted regularly on his blog between November 2004 and fall 2009: he discussed national politics, chronicled developments in the new-music scene, critiqued the culture of classical and contemporary music, and crafted a rhetoric that would inform New Amsterdam and its idea of indie classical.<sup>120</sup> Giggling musicians such as composer

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<sup>118</sup> Alex Ross, “The Well-Tempered Web,” *New Yorker*, 22 October 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Greenstein, “Feeling Good in a New Decade,” *Judd Greenstein: Why?* (blog), 15 June 2009, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091216134431/http://www.juddgreenstein.com/why.html#feelinggoodinane decade>.

<sup>120</sup> Greenstein only posted a handful of blog updates in 2010 and 2011; when he revamped his website in April 2013, he removed the blog section entirely, and older blog posts are only accessible through the Wayback Machine. He wrote in an introduction to the new website that “For the first 7 of those years, I used the basic HTML site to its fullest capacity, writing essays (which I will gradually migrate over here), making music available for download (most of which I have posted to my new Soundcloud page, also in development, and which will appear in widgets all over this new site), and generally maintaining a regular presence online. In the past couple of years, I’ve been too busy to write regularly, and the HTML uploading

and big-band leader Darcy James Argue (b. 1975) started blogs to have an online presence for their music, and subsequently became documentarians of the scene:

The thing about having a blog is: you should post updates. Since I was young and un-jaded and excited about moving to New York, I was seeing a lot of music—all of these awesome shows, and they're not really getting any kind of coverage. And I have a digital camera, and I have a blog, and so I could cover them. Why don't I do that? It got kind of obsessive for a while, of just really trying to document everything I was going to and everything I was listening to in New York, and trying to make some sense of it. I was going to indie rock shows, indie classical shows, jazz shows, trying to figure out, "So what is it that makes this thing work, and how can I talk about this music in a way that can, I don't know, explain what I like about it to people who are more narrow in their listening habits?" I'm not sure if I ever thought about it consciously that way, but subconsciously that may have been my goal for the blog, to justify my own listening and concert-going habits to the world.<sup>121</sup>

Vocalists Mellissa Hughes and Anne-Carolyn Bird wrote about their performing experiences, building community in the new-music world, and programming contemporary music.<sup>122</sup> Muhly—among the most prolific and widely read of the bloggers—advocated for the music of his generation, criticized the lack of support for contemporary music among major institutions, and lambasted the writing of professional

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and formatting that the site required was just enough of an additional hurdle to keep me from writing at all, except for very special occasions. Instead, most of my writing attention has been given over to feeding the 140-character Moloch." The "Moloch" is Twitter, and Greenstein suggests that the social media platform contributed to his decline in blogging; I will address this decline within the blogosphere more broadly in my Conclusion. Greenstein, "Website 2.0," *Judd Greenstein*, 19 April 2013, <http://www.juddgreenstein.com/website-2-0/>.

<sup>121</sup> Darcy James Argue, interview with author, 9 October 2015. In attending these concerts, Argue developed a cross-genre approach in his online writing that lent itself to the ethos of New Amsterdam, and he became one of the label's early artists. In interview, he said of participants in the indie classical scene, "I think for me as a jazz musician and a jazz composer, it really felt like all these separate musical streams were finally converging at the same time in the mid-2000s in Brooklyn...and I realize this is a highly subjective impression, I'm aware that's not actually the case. This convergence had been happening for a long time. But it really felt like, all of a sudden, 'Oh my god, there are all these composers like Missy Mazzoli, and Judd Greenstein, and Ted Hearne, and what they think is cool is the same stuff as what I think is cool!' And that was not an experience I had had previously with very many classical composers. There's the shock of, 'I can't believe you guys like disco records! When did this happen?'" Ibid. For Argue's blog, see <http://www.secretsocietymusic.org>.

<sup>122</sup> See <http://mellissahughes.com/> and <http://theconcert.blogspot.com/>.

music critics.<sup>123</sup> His irreverent and florid writing style provided a personal complement to his growing public persona, as he continued to receive commissions from major institutions.

Composer and blogger Timo Andres (b. 1985) followed similar institutional pathways as Greenstein: he attended Yale for undergraduate and graduate degrees, and participated in the Bang on a Can summer festival in 2009.<sup>124</sup> Nonesuch Records released Andres's first album, *Shy and Mighty*, in 2010; it received a strongly positive review from Alex Ross in the *New Yorker*.<sup>125</sup> In a July 2009 post, he described his fascination with the music of his contemporaries:

I was wondering because I've been listening to my "Colleagues" iTunes playlist recently, which is where I put my generation's music. I've got some newly-acquired [Judd] Greenstein and [Stephen] Gorbos, two of my favorites, and I realized that I liked their music better than almost any other "contemporary" music. It's worlds away from most of the pap that gets big commissions. And while it's really cool that I can link to free MP3's on their websites, I'd really like to be able to buy, say, an all-Gorbos CD in a store. (Naxos? You listening?) This guy has the right idea, but I still can't stop in at Cutler's and walk out with [Muhly's] *Speaks Volumes*.

What I guess I'm trying to say is that I hear something in the music of my peers that I don't in that of their teachers. Composers have been espousing the idea of

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<sup>123</sup> See, for example, a 2008 blogpost in which Muhly castigated the repertoire of the New York Philharmonic's opening night, writing that "You can't be a major orchestra and program like a youth orchestra"; and a 2009 post in which Muhly criticizes, line-by-line, a *New York Times* review of a concert of the indie band Grizzly Bear. Nico Muhly, "Sarah Palin's Favorite Soloist," *Nico Muhly* (blog), 7 October 2008, <http://nicomuhly.com/news/2008/sarah-palins-favorite-soloist/>; and Muhly, "Collabos," *Nico Muhly* (blog), 30 May 2009, <http://nicomuhly.com/news/2009/collabos/>.

Indicative of Muhly's online reach is his number of Twitter followers, significantly larger than any other composer of his generation. As of 21 June 2016, Muhly (@nicomuhly) had more than 77,200 followers; for comparison, Greenstein (@judgreenstein) had approximately 54,300 followers, and Mazzoli (@missymazzoli) had approximately 6,200 followers.

<sup>124</sup> Andres and five of his colleagues in graduate school at Yale formed Sleeping Giant, a composer collective modeled after Bang on a Can; it comprises Andres, Andrew Norman, Jacob Cooper, Christopher Cerrone, Robert Honstein, and Ted Hearne. Hearne has released three albums on New Amsterdam.

<sup>125</sup> See Ross, "Brazen," *New Yorker*, 3 May 2010.

“eclecticism” for a couple of decades, but I think it’s taken until now for that to really sink into the music in a meaningful and coherent way. Even when Big John [Adams] tries to do it, things like this come out (though, respect). But a curious mind like Alex Temple somehow assimilates and synthesizes [her] influences, instead of just dumping them in a misbegotten salad.<sup>126</sup>

I will focus in more detail below on the implications of the “naturalized” eclecticism that Andres evokes. Visible here is a clear construction of a “generation” out of Andres’s Yale colleagues and friends (and, significantly, one that is already shaped by the press; Andres became friends with Muhly after Ross wrote about them both in a 2004 *New Yorker* column).<sup>127</sup> This generation is mediated by composer websites and Andres’s iTunes playlist—but has not yet reached the professional caliber of releasing albums on Naxos and in record stores—and distinguished from the influence of older generations (which are granted an elder statesmen status, as he invokes “Big John” Adams).

Even as “mediation-by-self” appeared to render traditional outlets less necessary, blogs participated in a discourse with professional critics active in legacy media organizations. Some writers, such as Daniel Stephen Johnson, positioned themselves in an ambiguous sphere between fan and professional commenter.<sup>128</sup> (The smallness of the new-music world meant there were fewer “fan blogs” than in other genres such as indie

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<sup>126</sup> Timo Andres, “Gleaning,” *Timo Andres* (blog), 29 July 2009, <http://www.andres.com/2007/07/29/gleaning/>. Although he is several years younger than Greenstein and Muhly, Andres pointed out how he gradually evolved into a colleague of these older composers, a shift from his early undergraduate years to his professional status in 2016: “When I arrived at Yale [for a bachelor’s degree], the composition grad students were New Amsterdam! So they were the cool older kids who I looked up to and followed their career paths, and made me think ‘Oh, maybe this isn’t such a crazy thing to do. This could work.’ It was a very fertile environment... When you’re a little younger the age difference seems much greater—they seemed *so* old to me. And now, of course, it’s not really a difference at all.” Andres, interview with author, 9 January 2015.

<sup>127</sup> Ross, “Ignore the Conductor.”

<sup>128</sup> See <http://danielstephenjohnson.blogspot.com/>. Johnson also wrote liner notes for Muhly’s early albums, and has subsequently worked as professional critic for Q2 and *Musical America*.

rock). I oriented my own blog—Seated Ovation, which I started in 2009—from the perspective of a fan and non-professional critic, and frequently commented on developments in the world of contemporary music.<sup>129</sup> Looking back through the archives of Seated Ovation, it is clear that I was reinforcing the generational group-making already pervasive in the new-music blogosphere. An August 2010 post stated, for example, that:

In the past couple years, we have seen a wealth of full-length albums from the newest generation of composers. Since [sic], we have Corey Dargel's *Someone Will Take Care Of Me* [New Amsterdam Records], Timothy Andres's *Shy and Mighty* [Nonesuch], Nico Muhly's two upcoming albums [Bedroom Community], Ted Hearne's *Katrina Ballads* [New Amsterdam], and Tristan Perich's *I-Bit Symphony* [Cantaloupe]. Besides Nico, these are all names that have made waves in the classical world only relatively recently, and the increasing media devotion and intrigue into these new projects has given an almost disproportionate (but well-deserved) attention to a set of composers who haven't quite hit thirty.<sup>130</sup>

My version of a “newest generation of composers” was, in essence, synonymous with indie classical.

Two blogger-critics that focused substantially on this generation, however, were professionals: Steve Smith (b. 1966), in his work at the *New York Times* and *Time Out New York* and online with the blog *Night After Night*; and Alex Ross (b. 1968), with the *New Yorker* and online with the blog *The Rest is Noise*. Beginning in 2005, Smith posted concert and album reviews as well as news stories on *Night After Night*.<sup>131</sup> He mentioned and linked to the work of other bloggers such as Argue; advocated for new albums by composers including Muhly and Greenstein; and drew his readers' attention to nascent labels like New Amsterdam. Smith's blog made explicit the flow of information from

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<sup>129</sup> See <http://seatedovation.blogspot.com>.

<sup>130</sup> William Robin, “one bit, two bit, red bit, blue bit,” *Seated Ovation* (blog), 23 August 2010, <http://seatedovation.blogspot.com/2010/08/one-bit-two-bit-red-bit-blue-bit.html>.

<sup>131</sup> See <http://nightafternight.blogs.com/>.

musicians to critics. In January 2008, for example, he posted about an email that he received from Greenstein explaining that the series at Gallerie Icosahedron had been cancelled.<sup>132</sup> And Smith would review these same artists in *Time Out* and the *New York Times*: in this period, he was the only classical critic writing for the *Times* who maintained a blog. He contributed major feature articles for the *Times*—including profiles of New Amsterdam artists William Brittelle and Corey Dargel (b. 1977)—that focused on indie classical and constructed a post-genre image for this generation. In a profile of composer and singer-songwriter Gabriel Kahane (b. 1981), for example, Smith wrote:

At 27, Mr. Kahane is part of a musically omnivorous generation. Young classical composers like Nico Muhly and Caleb Burhans are not crossing over to pop idioms so much as they are ignoring stylistic boundaries outright.<sup>133</sup>

Smith also served a significant role as *Time Out New York* editor, where he solicited articles on musicians in the scene, including writer Olivia Giovetti's 2010 profile of Mazzoli.<sup>134</sup> (As of 2016, Mazzoli still utilized the article's headline, "Brooklyn's Postmillennial Mozart," as the top clipping in the list of press quotes on her website.) Mazzoli described Smith as Victoire's most significant early champion: "With his attention, other people started to pay attention. So without that, it would have been very hard to do a lot of what we did."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Smith, "When the Music's Over," *Night After Night* (blog), 28 January 2008, [http://nightafternight.blogs.com/night\\_after\\_night/2008/01/when-the-musics.html](http://nightafternight.blogs.com/night_after_night/2008/01/when-the-musics.html).

<sup>133</sup> Smith, "A Singer-Songwriter Ignores Musical Boundaries," *New York Times*, 24 April 2009.

<sup>134</sup> Olivia Giovetti, "Missy Mazzoli: The Stock of Brooklyn's Postmillennial Mozart Continues to Rise," *Time Out New York*, 15 February 2010, <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/opera-classical/missy-mazzoli>.

<sup>135</sup> Mazzoli, interview with author, 10 November 2015.

When Ross launched his blog in 2004, he already had an established career as a critical voice in new music. Ross had written reviews for the *Times* from 1992 until 1996—with a strong focus on contemporary music—before being appointed the *New Yorker*'s classical music critic.<sup>136</sup> Ross named his blog in anticipation of his in-progress history of twentieth-century music, *The Rest is Noise*, and he posted frequently about its genesis. The blogosphere offered Ross an opportunity to hear the work of composers and performers that classical music's institutional gatekeepers might otherwise have overlooked. As he recalled,

The Internet was, somehow, making visible and audible to me a lot more music than was being presented by the leading institutions—or even the established new-music venues....I could find out what a twenty-five year old composer was doing who hadn't been published, hadn't been recorded, but put an MP3 on a website...The thing about the blog was that it was interactive, so I was getting a lot of information sent to me, email mostly...I liked the immediacy of it: you don't have to go through certain checkpoints to reach me. A graduate program decides this composer is worthy of being included in their program, such and such fellowship anoints them, a publisher signs them: you could sort of cut through that.<sup>137</sup>

Because his columns for the *New Yorker* ran biweekly or monthly and addressed classical music writ large, Ross frequently used the blog as a platform to draw attention to new music that he could not focus on in print. He often discussed a younger generation of

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<sup>136</sup> Ross said that when he was hired by the *Times*, "it was understood that new music was going to be a big part of what I was going to do," because of his previous freelance experience covering it for other publications; he noted that though he was assigned to cover classical concerts as well, "I gravitated immediately towards new music." Alex Ross, interview with author, 16 December 2015. He added in an email that "The fact that I had been a composer of a sort (through my freshman year of college) may also have played a role." Ross, email to author, 27 June 2016. Printed with permission.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

musicians, one he had first examined in a 2004 *New Yorker* article that profiled several student composers including Muhly, Little, and Timo Andres.<sup>138</sup>

Ross's prominence as a critic meant that even an online listing of a concert on *The Rest Is Noise* could represent a minor coup for younger musicians. In a 2007 post, Ross first noticed New Amsterdam Records, and connected it to what he perceived as a major generational development:

It's great to see a young community of composers and musicians supporting each other. Nobody's playing the domineering genius (yet). On Friday I was talking to the veteran composer Scott Johnson, who commented that this latest scene has an appealing openness about it, an optimistic spirit. I think of it as pragmatism—music beyond ideology.<sup>139</sup>

Ross said that because he was so busy attending a wide range of classical and new-music concerts, he kept track of the scene more online than in-person: "I feel like part of my role that fell to me, at a certain point was, to just pass along...to spread the news about what's going on, especially beyond what is already known and widely talked about."<sup>140</sup>

Ross's awareness of these developments was crystallized in a 2007 *New Yorker* column, in which he described "more new music in the city than ever before" and wrote that "an exceptionally vital group of young composers is driving the proliferation."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Ross, "Ignore the Conductor." In interview, Andres said that he believed that Ross's article had helped him gain the attention of John Adams, who has championed his music, and producer Robert Hurwitz, who has released two of Andres's albums on Nonesuch.

<sup>139</sup> Ross, "The New Pragmatism," *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), 18 March 2007, <http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/03/18/>. Ross added in a subsequent email that "I understand pragmatism to mean not an elimination or fusion of ideologies but a mediation between them, an attempt at 'settling metaphysical disputes that might otherwise be interminable' ([William] James)." Ross, email to author, 29 May 2016.

<sup>140</sup> Ross, interview with author, 16 December 2015.

<sup>141</sup> Ross, "Club Acts," *New Yorker*, 16 April 2007.

Like other critics, Ross highlighted the fact that the musicians were working in a liminal space between genres: he declared that “many composers of [Christopher] Tignor’s [b. 1976] generation are erasing the lines between classical and pop,” pointed out the predominance of contemporary music in club spaces such as LPR, and examined in detail a Wordless Music concert.<sup>142</sup> And Ross foregrounded the Internet as a key space for this generation: “As they pontificate on blogs and Web sites such as *Sequenza21* and *NewMusicBox*, distribute music via MySpace pages and Internet radio, and post flyers for their shows, they act for all the world like unsigned rockers trying to make it in the city.”<sup>143</sup>

Finally, the online radio station Q2 strongly emphasized the music of young American composers. Dedicated to what it calls “dynamic and inspiring contemporary classical music,” Q2 was launched by the New York metropolitan area radio station WQXR, when the classical station was purchased by New York Public Radio in 2009.<sup>144</sup> Sirota curated a Q2 program that focused on music by her colleagues including Muhly and Greenstein, and wrote essays for Q2’s website;<sup>145</sup> Giovetti hosted a weekly show called *The New Canon* that featured online chat forums and addressed the questions of

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> See <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/series/q2/>.

<sup>145</sup> Beginning in 2014, Sirota also hosted the Q2-sponsored podcast “Meet the Composer.” The podcast has gained significant attention outside the world of new music—and, unlike the online-only Q2, was subsequently broadcast on WNYC’s terrestrial stream—and won a Peabody Award in 2016. Each episode profiles a single composer; Season 1 (2015) included John Luther Adams, Andrew Norman, Donnacha Dennehy, Caroline Shaw, and Marcos Balter; Season 2 (2016) focused on Meredith Monk, Ingram Marshall, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, Kaija Saariaho, and Muhly. See <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/programs/meet-composer/>. A 2016 *Kickstarter* online campaign to raise funds for Season 3 obtained \$32,500 in donations. See “Meet the Composer: Season 3,” *Kickstarter*, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/q2music/meet-the-composer-season-three/description>.

“Where does the line between classical and pop sit?” and “What exactly do we call the music being made now?”<sup>146</sup>

For a 2011 feature co-sponsored with NPR Music, Q2 asked online listeners to submit names of favorite composers under the age of forty for an upcoming eight-hour broadcast. But even in its call for suggestions, Q2 imagined a particular cohort closely tied to that of indie classical: “To get you started, here’s a list of a few notable composers under 40: Timothy Andres, Sufjan Stevens, Missy Mazzoli, Tyondai Braxton and Shara Worden.”<sup>147</sup> The website received over eight hundred responses and compiled “The Mix: 100 Composers Under 40,” a “crowdsourced selection of young composers.”<sup>148</sup> Though the final list was international in scope, it is notable that the three composers pictured at the top of the NPR page—see Figure 2—are Tyondai Braxton, Sarah Kirkland Snider, and Muhly, all strongly associated with indie classical.<sup>149</sup> And the image of the generation that the website painted was one explicitly “without walls”: “The 21st-century composer makes his home wherever he sees fit, uses a battery of electric guitars and

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<sup>146</sup> WQXR, “Kahane and Andres Rock Out,” *The New Canon*, *Q2 Music*, 6 June 2011, <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/137993-kahane-and-andres-rock-out/>.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> See WQXR, “Attention All New Music Lovers!” *Q2 Music*, 23 March 2011, <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/119602-attention-all-new-music-lovers/>; and Alex Ambrose, “The Mix: 100 Composers Under 40,” *NPR Music*, 17 April 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/23/135473622/the-mix-100-composers-under-40>.

<sup>149</sup> Braxton’s background is significantly different from the cohorts that I have discussed thus far: the son of composer and improviser Anthony Braxton, he studied at the Hartt School and first became known the leader of rock band Battles, which he founded in 2002 and left in 2010 to pursue solo projects. His orchestral work *Central Market*—released on a 2009 album on Warp Records—was premiered by the Wordless Music Orchestra at Lincoln Center, and he subsequently wrote music for the Bang on a Can All-Stars. Music critics Jayson Greene and Justin Davidson both place Braxton within an indie classical generation, in articles I discuss below; Davidson called *Central Market* “the quintessential opus of the New New York School.” Davidson, “A New New York School.”

drums in the same breath as a section of violins and violas, and performs for a rabidly dancing audience on one night and at a concert-hall subscription series the next.”<sup>150</sup>

## The Mix: 100 Composers Under 40

WQXR's Q2 Presents A Crowdsourced Selection Of Young Composers

April 17, 2011 · 8:00 PM ET

ALEX AMBROSE

FROM 

*This audio is no longer available.*



From left: Tyondai Braxton, Sarah Kirkland Snider and Nico Muhly were selected by Q2's audience as part of this Composers Under 40 crowdsourcing project.  
Courtesy of the artists

**Figure 2: Screenshot taken 6 June 2016 from Alex Ambrose, “The Mix: 100 Composers Under 40,” *NPR Music*, 17 April 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/23/135473622/the-mix-100-composers-under-40>.**

Readers criticized the narrowness of the project: one commenter on the NPR page, Aura Centrique, wrote that “This list is intensely New York centric... One could draw a social map that links all of these people to just a few networks, labels, and venues”;<sup>151</sup> another commenter on the Q2 site, Christopher McGovern, wrote that “I wish

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<sup>150</sup> Ambrose, “The Mix.”

<sup>151</sup> Aura Centrique, comment on Ambrose, “The Mix.”

you weren't limiting it to under 40-yr-olds. That's a bit discriminatory."<sup>152</sup> Indeed, for many commenters, the seemingly singular focus in the press and online on a "young generation"—combined with institutional opportunities and competitions often limited exclusively to "emerging composers"—fueled accusations of ageism. In a 2013 *NewMusicBox* article, composer Bill Doerrfeld (b. 1964) compiled data from 165 composer "opportunities" published on the website ComposersSite.com between November 2012 and April 2013 (including awards, performances, paid positions, residencies, and workshops), and found that 35% were restricted to composers at or below the age of forty; Doerrfeld wrote that "The moral of this story: in today's society you better make it as a composer before you turn 40."<sup>153</sup> The article received more than one hundred comments that debated the merits of specific institutional support for emerging composers. For many, the emergence of a "new generation" meant the marginalization of the old.

### **In the Cohort**

What is it that made Nico Muhly, Missy Mazzoli, Judd Greenstein, and David T. Little part of the same generation? Dozens of other prominent American composers, from Andrew Norman (b. 1979) to Tyshawn Sorey (b. 1980) to Ashley Fure (b. 1982), share similar birth years but were not labeled indie classical. We have already seen the institutional pathways through which these musicians traveled, the venues in which they performed, and the online sphere in which they engaged in dialogue. In this section, I

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<sup>152</sup> Christopher McGovern, comment on WQXR, "Attention All Music Lovers!"

<sup>153</sup> Bill Doerrfeld, "Ageism in Composer Opportunities," *NewMusicBox*, 5 June 2013, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/ageism-in-composer-opportunities/>.

interrogate the rhetoric with which this generation grouped itself. Returning to several threads that have been left unexamined thus far, I outline a few of the implicit shared tenets of the indie classical generation and illuminate what they might obscure.

In a November 2008 essay titled “What Is the ‘New New Virtuosity?’” Greenstein sketched out the values of what he called the “indie classical scene.”<sup>154</sup> For Greenstein, musicians such as Sirota represented a new kind of virtuoso who could both “play anything” and “negotiate the contemporary sound of a polyglot world, reflected in the compositions of younger composers working today.” He continued,

For younger composers working in this environment, ours is not an era of “influence upon” but, rather, is one of “incorporation into”; the chocolate chips, as it were, have been melted into the cookie batter. Unless we want them to still be chips—in which case, it’s a deliberate choice to leave them there!

This culinary metaphor is typical of the rhetoric of Greenstein and his cohort, one that deeply informs New Amsterdam’s concept of “music without walls”: the idea that their music “naturally” brings together multiple musical styles and “seamlessly” transcends boundaries.<sup>155</sup> As Greenstein describes,

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<sup>154</sup> The essay was written for the website of the MATA Festival, an annual New York festival of music by young composers founded by Philip Glass, Lisa Bielawa, and Eleanor Sandesky; Mazzoli served as festival director in 2008. Greenstein, “What is the ‘New New Virtuosity?’” *MATA Festival* (blog), 11 November 2008, <http://matafestival.org/2008/what-is-the-new-new-virtuosity/>.

<sup>155</sup> In interviews and on his blog, Muhly often utilized the physical structure of Tower Records as a metaphor for hierarchies of classical and non-classical musics that he believed were no longer relevant: “When you used to go into Tower Records, going into the classical music section felt like you were buying pornography. You had to open a secret door and you walk in and it was a different environment...It was a whole different ecosystem—literally. They were playing different music up in there and you really felt apart from the economy of the place, of the record store. You were in your own little bizarre Vatican city.” Hillary Weston, “Going Between the Notes with Nico Muhly,” *BlackBook*, 16 May 2013, <http://bbook.com/music/going-between-the-notes-with-nico-muhly/>.

This spatial metaphor was similarly utilized by Bang on a Can founder David Lang in a 1999 interview: “We like the people who live in between rooms, the music that we want to be with are the people who are lodged in the wall between pop and classical music, or in the stairway between DJs and jazz. There are people...it seems to me that if you want a composer who's really trying to do something interesting, you're

They [the new virtuosos] must be flexible and adaptable enough to understand the “feel” of a given passage that finds its roots in one of any number of other musics—much like a classical piano virtuoso must know what “dolce” means in Chopin, versus what it means in Brahms, and so on. If those distinctions, between composers from a similar era, represent an X axis of interpretive depth, and if the distinctions between different eras of composition—Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and so on—represent the Y axis, then today’s Virtuosos must also understand the Z axis, wherein the boundaries across genre and geography are similarly transcended.<sup>156</sup>

For Greenstein’s generation, the Z axis is the crucial development: the new performer must embody the ethos of the new composer, for whom genre is purportedly no longer an obstacle. In a 2009 blog comment, Muhly similarly remarked that:

Why is there such an obsession with the “crossing-over” discourse? Nobody is crossing shit. I speak only for myself here, but my music is a pretty direct representation of my musical interests, which, in my case, express themselves more like obsessions and tropisms. The fact that anybody likes it is, I hope, the result of the honesty of the project expressing itself through the way it sounds.<sup>157</sup>

This impulse resonates with the words of composers that I highlighted earlier in this chapter: Little’s declaration in *The End of New Music* that “I wasn’t *not* being true to myself, but wasn’t letting everything out: I was filtering me, because of what was ‘appropriate’ in certain settings”; and Andres’s assertion that the music of his colleague Alex Temple “somehow assimilates and synthesizes [her] influences, instead of just dumping them in a misbegotten salad.” It suggests that a wide range of musical influences manifest themselves naturally, organically, and “honestly” in the work of these

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not trying to fit into a bin that has an easy location. You're trying to find something that actually hovers around. We just did Music for Airports by Brian Eno. Brian Eno has bins in three different places in Tower Records, because his output is too diverse to be categorized.” Frank J. Oteri, “The Who and Why of Bang on a Can,” *NewMusicBox*, 1 May 1999, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/bang-on-a-can/5/>.

<sup>156</sup> Greenstein, “The New New Virtuosity.”

<sup>157</sup> Muhly was responding to a commenter who quoted an interview with John Adams, in which the older composer critiqued the music of this generation; see below. Muhly, comment on “Oh No! (An Administrative Note),” *Nico Muhly* (blog), 7 February 2009, <http://nicomuhly.com/news/2009/oh-no-an-administrative-note/>.

composers: conceptions of compositional artifice, musical quotation, or collage-like combinations of idioms are absent. Instead, musics of multiple places, times, and generic traditions are “baked” into the compositional language. For Greenstein, that “incorporation into” might include 1990s hip-hop, Fela Kuti, Bach, and Ravel; for Muhly, English Renaissance motets, Stravinsky, and Adams; for Little, heavy metal, musical theater, and Ives.

This attitude suggests that cultural omnivorousness—what Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern call “an *openness* to appreciating everything”—is manifested seamlessly in the process of creation: what is consumed as a listener flows directly into what is constructed as a composer.<sup>158</sup> For these figures, drawing together disparate musics does not require any intellectual justification or theoretical exegesis. Critical interrogation is absent and “honesty” is all that is necessary: questions of exoticism or cultural appropriation are not raised.<sup>159</sup> A composer’s openness, and ability to ignore boundaries that supposedly constricted previous generations, gives him or her the assumption that such genre “transcendence” can be taken on good faith. This is one reason why Muhly resists discussions of genre, and dismissed the term indie classical, as

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<sup>158</sup> Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, “Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore,” *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (October 1996): 904. Peterson and Kern’s study argues that a historical shift took place in the 1980s in patterns of cultural consumption among highbrows from snobbism to omnivorousness, suggesting a broader societal justification for the specific ideology of these composers.

<sup>159</sup> This resonates what Sumanth Gopinath identifies as one of the problematic legacies of Steve Reich’s assimilation of African musics: “Reich’s music appears to have been uncritically adopted by composers and musicians working within many musical styles...the hallmarks of Reich’s best known works—extended diatonic harmonies, groove-oriented repetition, rhythmic ambiguity, carefully blended instrumentation, and a vague sense of ‘otherness’—almost might be said to constitute a set of familiar codes that communicate an air of stylish, cosmopolitan detachment in the current global music market.” Sumanth Gopinath, “Contraband Children: The Politics of Race and Liberation in the Music of Steve Reich, 1965–1966” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2005), 351.

I discuss in Chapter 2; in a 2012 interview responding to the question of whether his music was “crossover,” for example, he said that

It’s so much more healthy to think about music as music and just worry about how to make it as communicative as possible...Don’t worry about what bin in the now-dead record store it would live, and spend your time making it awesome and making the players play it really, really well, and then the thing takes on its own glow.<sup>160</sup>

These perspectives resonate with what sociologist Shamus Khan, in his ethnography of adolescents at an elite boarding school, identifies as a central practice of the new elite in the twenty-first century United States: “feeling comfortable in just about any social situation.” As Khan describes,

Rather than mobilizing what we might think of as “elite knowledge” to mark themselves as distinct—epic poetry, fine art and music, classical learning—the new elite learn these and everything else. Embracing the open society, they display a kind of radical egalitarianism in their tastes. Privilege is not an attempt to construct boundaries around knowledge and protect such knowledge as a resource. Instead, students display a kind of omnivorousness. Ironically, exclusivity marks the losers in the hierarchical, open society.<sup>161</sup>

For this generation, radical egalitarianism is not only part of their tastes—what informs their music—but also their compositional aesthetics—what can be heard in their music—and how they frame their aesthetics—what is present, and performative, in the ways they talk about their work. And just as omnivorousness marks the new elite as distinct, these displays of “openness” were heralded by critics and helped lay the groundwork for the success of these musicians: what Kyle Gann (b. 1955) declared a “post-prohibitive”

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<sup>160</sup> Melissa Lesnie, “When Planets Collide: Nico Muhly’s Orchestral Pop Odyssey,” *Limelight Magazine*, 27 May 2012, <http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/Article/302373,when-planets-collide-nico-muhly-s-orchestral-pop-odyssey.aspx>.

<sup>161</sup> Shamus Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 16.

generation, Ross called “music beyond ideology,” and Davidson described as “an omnivorous generation.”<sup>162</sup>

Invocations of “naturalness” and “honesty” are also directly tied to an anti-academic posturing that suffuses the rhetoric of this generation. The origin stories of these musicians prominently feature academic settings that they found to be cloistered or confining: McBane at the University of Southern California, Mazzoli at Boston University, Greenstein at Yale. From these individual experiences, these composers extrapolate ideas about “the academy.” As Mazzoli says in *The End of New Music*,

As a composer, you go to school for composition. It’s rare to go to a place where you’re taught practical things about what it means to *really* be a composer. And for me, I couldn’t see myself thriving in an academic world. So what does composer do if they’re not teaching other people how to be composers? What does it mean to be active, writing composer in the world today? In a way, I feel that it requires a certain level of jumping ship.<sup>163</sup>

For Mazzoli, “school for composition” insulates musicians from “the world today.”

Academia is imagined as an Ivory Tower, implicitly identified with the legacy of Milton Babbitt’s essay “Who Cares If You Listen?” and the idea of the university as supporter of elite art music that lacks a social function.<sup>164</sup>

But it is another of Babbitt’s academic legacies, the Princeton PhD program that he founded in 1962, that Little, Greenstein, and other indie classical composers have

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<sup>162</sup> Kyle Gann, “American Composer: Judd Greenstein,” *Chamber Music Magazine* (January/February 2010); Alex Ross, “The New Pragmatism,” *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), 18 March 2007, [http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/03/the\\_new\\_pragmat.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/03/the_new_pragmat.html); and Davidson, “A New New York School.”

<sup>163</sup> Mazzoli, quoted in *The End of New Music*.

<sup>164</sup> This narrow image of the university resonates with David K. Blake’s point that “Both Babbitt and his detractors have consequently assumed that no other music exists within institutions of higher education. The debates over the university’s patronage of contemporary art music since ‘The Composer as Specialist’ have effectively disbarred public musics, especially popular music, from consideration as a part of university life.” David K. Blake, “*Bildung* Culture: Elite Popular Music and the American University, 1960–2010” (PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2014), 2–3.

found to be hospitable to their work. And since 2013, Mazzoli has taught as a lecturer at The New School’s Mannes College. New Amsterdam has sought university partnerships for its artists, and has released albums by tenured professors including Princeton composer Steve Mackey and Lawrence University Conservatory of Music pianist (and NOW Ensemble founding member) Michael Mizrahi. Indie classical musicians have received significant financial support from their alma maters: cellist and composer Jody Redhage (b. 1979) funded her 2007 record on New Amsterdam—the first album that the label released—with a \$15,000 Hertz Fellowship from the University of California at Berkeley; in 2009, Burhans received the Leonore Annenberg Fellowship from the Eastman School of Music, a two-year grant totaling \$153,000.

That these musicians have deep ties to an academy that they have critiqued is not surprising: it is indicative of the combination of rhetorical distance and institutional nearness that has defined indie classical’s relationship to both new music and classical music. But what does need critical nuance—and what can be dangerous in the discourse of these musicians—is that, despite the variety of musics that the university has historically supported, it is often constructed as a singular “type.” Academia is rendered a static object, unable to escape the influence of Babbitt’s model (which was never as widespread or singular as he or his critics might have claimed). The university becomes an Ivory Tower “Other” against which the careers of these composers can be productively contrasted, even as their actual careers rely on academic patronage.

This “anti-academic” stance also manifests in institutional practices that preclude aesthetic discourse or musical analysis. Concerts at clubs like (Le) Poisson Rouge do not typically involve program notes, and New Amsterdam albums lack analytical liner notes.

In a 2009 review of several recent albums of contemporary music for viola, *Los Angeles Times* critic Mark Swed (b. 1947) identified an anti-intellectual attitude:

The hipster in the bunch is Nadia Serota [sic], who plays solo viola music by fashionable young New York composers on *First Things First*. The disc is on New Amsterdam Records. At least I think they are fashionable young New Yorkers. There are no program notes, which are considered passé in downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn new music clubs these days. The drink menu is thought the place for description and intellectual rigor.<sup>165</sup>

This absence of analytical discourse is also tied to a generational narrative: that the music of these composers can seamlessly, and perhaps unprecedentedly, reach new audiences.

As Muhly said in 2012, “It’s so much more healthy to think about music as music and just worry about how to make it as communicative as possible.” In a 2010 interview,

Sarah Kirkland Snider said of the debut album of the NOW Ensemble that

Even with other so-called “hip” and “pop-influenced” ensembles I hadn’t heard music that explored the particular strains of sincerity and storytelling that NOW did. I was drawn to that and felt that it was music that a lot of people—regardless of background—could likely relate to and find meaning in.<sup>166</sup>

Here, Snider suggests that the inherent character and content of the music will reach new listeners, a conception of “naturalness” that suggest an unbroken flow from the

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<sup>165</sup> Mark Swed, “The Viola Sings Out,” 1 November 2009. Swed castigated the “Brooklyn scene” on several occasions; in 2011, he wrote that “Brooklyn is hopping with bopping young composers who play a mix of new music and pop that often winds up being static sugar-coated minimalism suitable mainly for chilling out or dancing in clubs that serve high-caloric cocktails.” Swed, “Composer: Missy Mazzoli,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2011.

In interview, Swed contrasted the current new-music scene with a divisive culture in New York in the 1980s, remarking that “In Brooklyn, everybody seems to love everybody...the music seems designed not to offend, to a degree: to give people what they want. I don’t think people thought so much back then as giving an audience what it wanted; it was giving it what you thought was really kind of interesting and forward-looking.” Swed, interview with author, 29 October 2015.

<sup>166</sup> Snider, quoted in Jayson Greene, “Label Profile: New Amsterdam Records,” *eMusic*, 26 October 2010, <http://www.wonderingsound.com/spotlight/label-profile-new-amsterdam-records/>.

omnivorous composer's music to the omnivorous audience's ears.<sup>167</sup> And just as an anti-academic posturing obscures these musicians' real connections to the university, this notion of communication erases the many mediators addressed in my dissertation as a whole: the institutions, critics, publicists, and administrators who have played central and transformative roles in the success of indie classical.

Such an ethos of honest communication can also obscure the privileged backgrounds of these musicians. In October 2009, composer Corey Dargel tweeted "Supremely depressed. Do multiple conservative grant rejections mean I'm doing something wrong or something right [?]"<sup>168</sup>; Muhly responded "quit feeling bad about grants. It's a bad way to behave. Just keep on writing the good music u already write and grants will call u."<sup>168</sup> But Muhly has never needed to apply for grants. When the composer was fourteen, fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi held a concert in his apartment to raise funds for Muhly to attend Tanglewood; at the soiree, Muhly played Stravinsky's *Petrushka* on the piano for choreographer Mark Morris.<sup>169</sup> By the time he left for college in 1999, Muhly was working for Philip Glass. He was "discovered" by Ross in 2004, and

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<sup>167</sup> Composer Isaac Schankler, in a 2012 essay written in the midst of a controversy over the term indie classical that I address in the next chapter, identified this optimistic belief in communication as a form of privilege: "In its resistance to clear genre identifiers, indie classical also reflects a fear of being labeled, which is in essence a musical embodiment of a cultural anxiety. It's a little like hipsterdom in this way; people are quick to apply the term to others but less likely to apply it to themselves. In contrast to Milton Babbitt's idea of the composer as specialist, indie classical composers believe that by rising above genre they can effectively communicate to anyone. By taking bits and pieces from genres without belonging to a genre, indie classical music shrewdly toes the line between appreciation and appropriation. And yet, it's hard to ignore the fact that it's still produced and consumed by a very specific audience. As a consequence, it's more than a little bit willfully oblivious of its position of privilege." Isaac Schankler, "Who Cares If You Call It Indie Classical?" *NewMusicBox*, 16 May 2012, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/who-cares-if-you-call-it-indie-classical/>.

<sup>168</sup> Corey Dargel, Twitter post, 14 October 2009, 12:41 PM, [twitter.com/dargel](https://twitter.com/dargel); Muhly, Twitter post, 14 October 2009, 7:11 PM, [twitter.com/nicomuhly](https://twitter.com/nicomuhly).

<sup>169</sup> See Rebecca Mead, "Eerily Composed," *New Yorker*, 1 and 18 February 2008.

John Adams programmed an evening of his music as part of a festival he curated at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall in 2007. By age twenty-six, Muhly had received a full-length profile in the *New Yorker*—written not by Ross, but by one of the magazine's staff writers—and a commission from the Metropolitan Opera.<sup>170</sup>

In obscuring the academic settings, institutional ties, and privileged backgrounds that have allowed this generation to flourish, the rhetoric of “honesty” and “naturalness” in “music without walls” runs the risk of misleadingly valorizing entrepreneurship. As Andrea Moore has documented, the promotion of arts entrepreneurship is increasingly common among music schools in the United States.<sup>171</sup> When careers of such “self starters” as Muhly, Greenstein, and Mazzoli are used as models for such programs—without necessarily telling the “full story” of their musical backgrounds—it can perpetuate false narratives of replicable success.<sup>172</sup> At the same time, in their framing of their work as fundamentally social and generational, indie classical musicians also belie entrepreneurship's worship of the individual.

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Andrea Moore, “Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 1 (February 2016): 33–53.

<sup>172</sup> Mazzoli was invited to Yale by the School of Music's Coordinator of Career Strategies, Astrid Baumgartner, to offer advice to students as one of “today's music entrepreneurs”; see Astrid Baumgartner, “The Mindset of Success: Four Pillars For Today's Music Entrepreneurs,” *I Care If You Listen*, 19 December 2013, <http://www.icareifyoulisten.com/2013/12/mindset-of-success-four-pillars-for-today-music-entrepreneurs-part-2/>. Greenstein is a member of the advisory board for the DePauw School of Music's 21st-Century Musician initiative, “a complete re-imagining of the skills, tools and experiences necessary to create musicians of the future instead of the past—flexible, entrepreneurial musicians who find diverse musical venues and outlets in addition to traditional performance spaces, develop new audiences, and utilize their music innovatively to impact and strengthen communities.” See <http://music.depauw.edu/21cm/>.

Economists David G. Blanchflower and Andrew J. Oswald found in a study that the shared trait among entrepreneurs is access to start-up capital such as family inheritances. David G. Blanchflower and Andrew J. Oswald, “What Makes an Entrepreneur?” *Journal of Labor Economics* 16, no. 1 (1998): 26–60.

## In the Press

As early as 2004, Ross signaled towards an exciting new generation; in the 2007 article, he grouped together a broad series of intriguing developments in the new-music world; in 2008, Smith situated Kahane, Muhly, and Burhans within captivatingly boundary-crossing community; by 2011, Davidson had proclaimed the advent of a “New New York School.” At what point do these developments and acts of generationalism actually cohere into a durable “new generation of musicians”? In this section, I will analyze two prominent and strong generational groupings, to show how writers assembled variegated actors and their activities into single frames. By the time that each of these critics—Allan Kozinn in the *New York Times* in 2011, and Jayson Greene in *Pitchfork* in 2012—describe these musicians, they recognized it as having already stabilized into a single generation of musicians with its own identity. It is *emerged*, rather than *emergent*: generationalism has been successfully disseminated by musicians and accepted by powerful intermediaries.

In a December 2011 *Times* article titled “Clubs Kids are Storming Music Museums,” Allan Kozinn (b. 1954) declared that “the world of young, inventive and often populist composers is exploding”:

These young composers may hold the key to classical music’s future, and the future they create might not be what you expect. Increasingly they have come to consider the machinations of the big-ticket musical organizations—and debates about how to get them to accommodate new music—as beside the point.<sup>173</sup>

Kozinn focused on the “alternative musical universe” that musicians such as Mazzoli, Greenstein, and Burhans created, one whose “complex ecology and hierarchy of coolness

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<sup>173</sup> Kozinn, “Clubs Kids Are Storming Music Museums.”

includes webs of composer-performer collaborations, circuits of preferred concert spaces and an expanding number of record labels.”<sup>174</sup> Photos of Roulette, Galapagos, Issue Project Room, and (Le) Poisson Rouge illustrated the article. Online readers could listen to accompanying music—which Kozinn described as “wildly eclectic, dogma free”—by artists including Mazzoli’s Victoire, Greenstein’s NOW Ensemble, Burhans’s itsnotyouitsme, and Sarah Kirkland Snider (her song cycle *Penelope*).

In a 2014 interview, Kozinn situated the article as a kind of culmination of his own personal history. In college at Syracuse University in the 1970s, he played guitar and cultivated interests in classical music, contemporary music, and rock (he has written two books on The Beatles). Kozinn described himself as “in roughly the first generation that had grown up with that kind of mixed background” of classical and popular music.<sup>175</sup> He felt that in the past, new music was marginalized in the mainstream: “When I grew up, the whole atmosphere around contemporary music was that people don’t like it. Musicians like it, and music critics like it, and certain loonies like it, but normal people just don’t like it.”<sup>176</sup> After school, he worked as a freelance writer in New York. With the omnivorous critic John Rockwell as his model—and eventual editor, when Rockwell hired him to write for the *Times* in 1988—he reviewed concerts in the classical world and downtown scene.

Kozinn’s identification of this new generation was informed by several decades of concert-going. He perceived the “Club Kids” as standing for an unprecedented

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Kozinn, interview with author, 11 November 2014.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

dovetailing of a strong mainstream interest in new music and a strong desire among musicians to cultivate connections between classical and rock musics:

You go to Poisson Rouge, or you go to some of the other clubs, and what you've got are these young kids—*young kids*, now they're in their forties, probably. But they grew up playing in rock bands, playing jazz, learning classical music, and to them, it's all the same. They learned about tone rows and they learned about minimalism, and they learned about electronic music and they played rock, and now they're writing their stuff and that's what's coming out... It's everything that I envisioned could happen when I got out of college, actually happening.<sup>177</sup>

Only a few months after Kozinn celebrated that “alternative music universe,” critic Jayson Greene (b. 1981) identified a similar musical phenomenon: “The new generation is pouring in: eager, collaborative, as invested in indie rock as they are in the nuts-and-bolts arcana of composition.”<sup>178</sup> In a February 2012 feature titled “Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical” in the online music magazine *Pitchfork*, Greene described an LPR concert featuring party-rock musician Andrew W.K. alongside the Calder Quartet, in order to elucidate what he called “business as usual for the small, but steadily growing, indie classical scene.”<sup>179</sup> This scene, according to Greene, encompassed ensembles with “stamped-up genre passports” such as yMusic, rock musicians including Radiohead’s Jonny Greenwood (b. 1971) and My Brightest Diamond’s Shara Nova (b. 1974), independent labels like New Amsterdam and Cantaloupe, composers such as Muhly and Mazzoli, and “a round-the-clock PR

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Jayson Greene, “Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical,” *Pitchfork*, 27 February 2012, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/8778-indie-classical/>. Founded in 1995, *Pitchfork* is among the most popular websites for coverage of independent and popular music. In 2015, it was acquired by Condé Nast Media.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

department.” Targeting *Pitchfork*’s rock-centric readership, Greene framed his article around this generation’s cross-fertilization: “For anyone trying to sort through genres to assign team jerseys, it’s a mess, and often a glorious one.”<sup>180</sup>

Greene traced the origins of the current generation back through the minimalists and downtown improvisers as well as Bang on a Can. His article also provided short introductions to notable recent records, including a collaboration between the Chiara String Quartet and electronica duo Matmos, piano music by David Lang, and *From Here On Out*, an orchestral album with the Kitchener Waterloo Symphony featuring works by Muhly, Greenwood, and Richard Reed Parry (b. 1977), a member of the indie band Arcade Fire. But he concluded on a dour note, critiquing the “freedom” that the new generation had cultivated and raising concerns about the positivity and collaborative ethos of the scene; this rhetoric echoes Davidson’s criticisms and became a common trope, which I will address in the next section. Greene quoted an interview he conducted with Bang on a Can founder Julia Wolfe, in which the composer remarked of her youth that “It wasn’t as friendly of a time...Now, from indie-rock guys writing for the concert hall to the concert hall writing for indie rock bands, it’s very open and much more liberating. But there’s something to be said for the tension, too.”<sup>181</sup>

Greene has a similar musical biography as Kozinn. He studied violin while pursuing an interest in rock criticism in college in the early 2000s, and spent three years working for the League of American Orchestras’ *Symphony Magazine*, immersing himself in classical concerts in New York. When he started working as a freelance writer

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

in 2007, however, Greene primarily contributed to pop-oriented publications such as *Pitchfork* and the web platform *eMusic* (which later expanded into the online publication *Wondering Sound*). While focusing on pop, indie rock, and hip-hop, he also felt a strong desire to bring classical and new music into spaces that might otherwise overlook it:

I was always very interested in the fact that I might be able to be a strange agent of introducing music to a publication that no one else was really trying to...it was an exercise in being the kind of critic I still hope to be, where I can write about music from high, low, whatever. I don't believe in those binaries at all, but to demonstrate that those binaries are not binaries at all, but rather just different languages, and that one person might be able to speak them.<sup>182</sup>

When LPR opened in Manhattan, Greene began attending concerts at the venue, but “found a lot of that music to be pretty empty...lacking connection to anything outside of itself. It's as if there were a couple of artists in the indie sphere, who were sympathetic to classical music because they had a background and the scene almost posed itself as a strange outgrowth or archipelago of those two or three musicians.”<sup>183</sup> He did, however, enjoy the music of Mazzoli and several other composers, and asked *Pitchfork* for the opportunity to write a regular column that would address the budding liminal space between classical, contemporary, and popular musics. But his editors did not believe the column would draw sufficient reader attention. Instead, Greene wrote the “Making Overtures” article to cover some of these issues and also, he said,

to sum up something about myself as a listener...I was like, “Well, you know, I'm a critic, I've been doing this now for years, what does it mean—does it mean anything that I listen to this? What kind of credible ear do I have? And this is a piece of my life that has no—I don't have a place to fit it in over here.” It seems as though, if I'm a critic, that this was a huge piece of my life, as my first job, as

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<sup>182</sup> Greene, interview with author, 24 November 2015.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

my first real immersion in any kind of world, I should be repping for it over here. And it was a way of bringing it into that world. It was probably the biggest thing I could do, because I was never going to get a column solely about indie classical music.<sup>184</sup>

There are several significant similarities between Kozinn's and Greene's articles, and how they construct stable generations from the actors they observe. Both texts are steeped in their authors' biography. These texts are not neutral explanations of musical developments, but informed by the particular tastes and listening habits of the critics. Greene and Kozinn were active observers of this music—before these articles, they contributed concert and album reviews of the musicians to major publications—and the texts stand as the endpoint of several years of thought on the subject combined with longer histories of concert attendance. The critics are intrigued by the scene they imagine because it resonates with their personal histories; they are drawn to something that they were each already, in a way, looking for.

Furthermore, both articles are written for mainstream, non-specialist publications with large readerships. Rather than discuss the generation among insiders—the language of blogposts and podcasts we have already seen—these features contextualize its music for preexisting outside audiences. Generations require legitimacy; here it is granted by the *New York Times* and *Pitchfork*. And both articles were themselves accepted as legitimate by prominent representatives of the generation itself. On her website, composer and New Amsterdam director Sarah Kirkland Snider (b. 1973) described Kozinn's article as “very smart and insightful...really the best essay of its kind I've

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

seen.”<sup>185</sup> On Twitter, Snider similarly called Greene’s article “excellent,” and it was positively posted by the Twitter accounts of New Amsterdam and the ensemble Alarm Will Sound.<sup>186</sup> This is the feedback loop of generationalism in operation: the language that Snider and her cohort utilized to describe themselves was picked up and rearticulated by Kozinn and Greene, and subsequently sanctioned by the musicians who had originally created it.

### Among Other Generations

John Schaefer: You’re not the first generation to have grown up with both [classical and rock music]. But you seem to be the first generation making this *kind* of music. Why do you think that’s happening?

Missy Mazzoli: I don’t know! I think that we have great role models. We can look at Philip Glass, we can look at Meredith Monk, we can look at everyone in the Bang on a Can collective. They have provided a great model for us to base our careers on, having our own ensembles from very early on.

“Missy Mazzoli: The Sound of Indie Classical,” *WNYC*, 15 April 2010

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<sup>185</sup> In the post, Snider also situated herself both within and outside this “scene,” writing that “It’s funny: I don’t think any composer wants to feel pigeon-holed to a style, genre, or movement. I have some music that fits right in the pocket of this ‘scene’ and other music that does not, and I never want to feel tied down to writing one or the other. But I am obviously happy to see the infrastructure and support for this music grow; it means that Music Itself is continuing to grow, change, expand, diversify. It doesn’t mean bad news for previously-sanctioned musical movements—modernism, minimalism, neo-romanticism, new complexity, whatever—those composers will continue to come up through the ranks and write their music and receive institutional support. It just means that composers interested in something slightly different will have a greater chance of surviving doing their art. Regardless of what you think of the music, it’s hard to argue that’s a bad thing.” Sarah Kirkland Snider, “PENELOPE in the New York Times: ‘Club Kids Are Storming Music Museums,’” *Sarah Kirkland Snider* (blog), December 2012, <http://sarahkirklandsnider.com/2011/12/penelope-in-the-new-york-times-club-kids-are-storming-music-museums/>. I will address Snider’s positioning and “pigeon-holing” within this community in the next chapter.

<sup>186</sup> Snider, Twitter post, 28 February 2012, 2:31 PM, [twitter.com/sksnider](https://twitter.com/sksnider). See Chapter 2 for a negative response to Greene’s article within the scene, which included my own pushback against the phrase “indie classical.”

In a 2010 feature for public radio station WNYC, John Schaefer—who, since 1982, had hosted the eclectic program *New Sounds*—asked Mazzoli to speculate about what was different about her generation of composers.<sup>187</sup> Rather than provide examples of distinctiveness, Mazzoli instead offered a genealogy. For the indie classical generation, such citations were commonplace. Indeed, we have already seen how the early minimalist ensembles and *Bang on a Can* formed both models and backgrounds for these composers and the institutions they founded. To conclude this chapter, I would like to interrogate the generationalism present in intergenerational citations: moments in which indie classical musicians refer backwards to older composers, and older composers themselves address indie classical. This intergenerational dialogue reinforced a specific identity for indie classical, and provided it with further cultural capital and the potential for historical canonization.<sup>188</sup>

Although Mazzoli’s appreciative reference to Monk, Glass, and *Bang on a Can* is typical, indie classical composers also constructed a strong sense of differentiation from earlier generations. As Greenstein wrote in a 2008 blogpost,

The work that the *Bang on a Can* generation did was amazing and necessary and wonderful, and it yielded some of the best music of the late twentieth century, but that time is over and the new era is one that does not even acknowledge those walls that they were knocking down.<sup>189</sup>

Or as Muhly said in the aforementioned 2009 podcast,

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<sup>187</sup> “Missy Mazzoli: The Sound of Indie Classical,” *WNYC*, 15 April 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125999066>.

<sup>188</sup> My conception of citation here is informed by how Piekut draws on Judith Butler to examine the performativity of experimentalism: “To quote Judith Butler, the normative grouping of experimentalism ‘takes hold to the extent that it is ‘cited’ as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations that it compels.’ Such is the two-way street of performativity.” Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 15.

<sup>189</sup> Greenstein, “Banging.”

If you take it back even another generation: a lot of the stuff that the sixty year olds, seventy year olds had to fight for, the generation below them grew up with. And a lot of the stuff that that generation, the Bang on a Can people, had to fight for: for instance, the way in which the Bang on a Can people incorporate non-Western musics and incorporate electronic musics into their output. That, for them was a bigger deal, than for in our generation. We're like 'Yeah whatever, you can do it or not do it.' I think there's a motion towards having a lot of these things feel a lot more casual. So for someone born in the very late '70s, or the '80s, in Nadia's case, we have a lot more flexibility without having to argue about it.<sup>190</sup>

Here, the postwar avant-garde is narrowed into a single historical strand and imagined as a series of boundaries being broken: the minimalists broke away from modernism; the Bang on a Can composers subsequently resolved the uptown/downtown binary while incorporating non-Western and electronic idioms. By the time that the young generation had arisen, there were no more walls, and subsequently no need for debate. This narrative is accepted and further disseminated by the press, as the quote from Justin Davidson's article that opened this chapter demonstrates.<sup>191</sup>

But this family history constructs its own set of walls. Despite the wealth of historical precedents of composers who similarly ignored genre—from Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson, to John Zorn and Anthony Braxton, to Arthur Russell and Pamela Z—the indie classical generation constructed a relatively limited ancestry. They situated themselves strongly within a lineage of *art music composers* rather than eclectic

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<sup>190</sup> "Podcast 1, Pt. 2 (6\_22) Edit."

<sup>191</sup> Greg Sandow described a similar generational narrative on his blog in 2009, connecting it to what he defined as "alt-classical" (see Chapter 2): "The minimalists also had something new to contemporary classical music—an avid audience. And then, after minimalism, we've had at least two generations of alt-classical music. In New York terms, you could define one by Bang on a Can (and maybe especially by the music that the Bang on a Can All-Stars play, even more than the music by the three Bang on a Can composers, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Michael Gordon). And you could define (or, better, typify) the other by naming Nico Muhly and the composers who founded New Amsterdam Records. And alt-classical work, like minimalism before it, has an audience outside the classical music world." Sandow, "Left Behind (2)," *Sandow* (blog), 20 November 2009, [http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2009/11/left\\_behind\\_2.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2009/11/left_behind_2.html).

songwriters, electronic music producers, or composer-improvisers. In order to be innovative in its “music without walls,” indie classical required this narrow genealogy.

Despite the implicit insistence of “music without walls” on breaking down hierarchies between high and low, these intergenerational citations are only relevant within a historical narrative of classical music. As I address in Chapter 2, it was within the worlds of new music and classical music that New Amsterdam was most successful, and in particular in the crafting of partnerships with universities and classical music presenters. Remaining “composers” in the historical tradition of Western art music allowed the indie classical generation to tap into institutional resources that were not necessarily available for musicians of the other genres upon which their music drew and transcended.

This genealogy is sensible and practical, clearly informed by the institutions in which these composers found a home. The Bang on a Can summer festival brought the indie classical generation in direct contact with their predecessors; for the 2002 program that Greenstein’s cohort attended, Steve Reich was a guest composer. Indeed, a strong intergenerational relationship already existed between Bang on a Can and Reich (b. 1936), Glass (b. 1937), and Monk (b. 1942). Michael Gordon sent Reich his music in the early 1980s, and Reich subsequently advocated for Gordon; around the same time, Gordon and Lang worked as copyists for Glass, and the composer later performed at Bang on a Can’s 1988 marathon concert; Monk’s ensemble has been presented at several Bang on a Can marathons, and the All-Stars have played her music. In the 1997 documentary *New York Composers: Searching for New Music*, director Michael

Blackwood interviews Glass and Reich about Bang on a Can, and they provide their own intergenerational citations. Reich remarks that:

The Bang on a Can performances...have been amongst the most interesting new music concerts of the younger or youngest generation of composers, actually all over America.<sup>192</sup>

And in reflecting on the Bang on a Can composers, Glass asks an intergenerational question that would become commonplace in describing the subsequent indie classical generation, a decade later:

One of the things I enjoy about this group of people is a taste for individuality in terms of language, which people are able to follow without being required to be part of a school. In a way, it was easy for us because we had a real enemy: there's nothing like having an enemy to energize the battles that we were fighting—it's like if you were a swimmer and you are in a swimming race and you push off from something solid like the edge of the pool, having something to push off from is very important. And, in a way, the music of our predecessors was a way to push off from. But when, in a relatively permissive atmosphere that we have today, where do you push off from? That's the question.<sup>193</sup>

Direct economic ties exist between this “first” generation of minimalists and the “third” generation of young composers: Muhly worked for Glass, and Mazzoli worked as Monk's personal assistant (2005–2006) and transcription assistant (2006–2007). Significantly, the three generations are frequently “bound” together for concert programming, reinforcing this historical lineage in prestigious institutional contexts. For a September 2014 celebration of the fiftieth birthday of record label Nonesuch, the Brooklyn Academy of Music brought Glass and Reich together onstage for the first time in forty years—after an infamous falling out that occurred between the composers in the 1970s—to perform Reich's *Four Organs* with Muhly and Timo Andres on keyboards and

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<sup>192</sup> Steve Reich, quoted in Michael Blackwood, *New York Composers: Searching for New Music* (New York: Michael Blackwood Productions, 1997).

<sup>193</sup> Glass, quoted in *New York Composers*.

Bang on a Can All-Stars percussionist David Cossin (b. 1972) on maracas (see Figure 4). For the series that Monk curated when she served as 2014–15 Richard and Barbara Debs Composer’s Chair at Carnegie Hall, a March 2015 concert included the Bang on a Can All-Stars, Mazzoli’s ensemble Victoire, and Sirota. And in 2017, Steve Reich will serve as Debs Composer’s Chair and has curated a Carnegie festival titled “Three Generations”: concerts will include music by Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), Reich, and Glass; John Adams (b. 1947) and Terry Riley (b. 1935); the Bang on a Can founders; and Bryce Dessner (b. 1976) and Muhly.



**Figure 4: Left to right: Philip Glass, Nico Muhly, David Cossin, Timo Andres, Steve Reich. Stephanie Berger, “Four Organs by Steve Reich,” *NPR*, 10 September 2014, <http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2014/09/10/347392860/philip-glass-and-steve-reich-at-bam-together-again-yet-still-apart>.**

I once witnessed such intergenerational citation at work. When Lang was Debs Composer’s Chair in 2013–14, he curated a series that included an April 2014 concert featuring Julia Wolfe’s *Cruel Sister* and Nico Muhly’s *The Only Tune*. An electro-

acoustic deconstruction of a folksong performed by musician Sam Amidon as well as Sirota on viola and Muhly on keyboards and electronics, *The Only Tune* draws heavily on Reich-inspired phasing techniques. I recognized Reich a few rows ahead of me at the concert at Carnegie’s Zankel Hall; following the performance, he was among only a few audience members who gave the work a standing ovation. After the concert, I spoke with Sirota and publicist Amanda Ameer and heard a fascinating secondhand anecdote: Reich had apparently teared up following *The Only Tune*, and, in conversation with Muhly and possibly Lang, had told the young composer that “I have my ensemble, David has the All-Stars, and you—you have Nadia!”<sup>194</sup> This is both a fascinating moment of intergenerational circulation of prestige, and an example of how generationalism reinscribes traditional composer-performer hierarchies, continuing to align indie classical with classical music.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that these generations closely bind themselves together, the older generations have voiced criticisms of the youth. I have already mentioned Jayson Greene’s citation of Julia Wolfe’s criticism of indie classical, that “there’s something to be said for the tension” that informed the upbringing of the Bang on a Can generation and is absent from the new cohort. Similarly, when I interviewed Lang in January 2016, I asked him how the new-music world had changed since he was a student:

I think young composers are, in general, nicer to each other than they were, and I think that’s really fantastic. I think there are a lot of the things that we innovated that seem to be alive and kicking, which is great. I do think we gained a lot from having to fight for these things. It really felt like it was controversial to do these things. It was controversial to say, “I’m going to be nice to people.” I remember when I was in my twenties and getting invited to a festival in Europe and going

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<sup>194</sup> I cannot remember whether Sirota or Ameer conveyed this anecdote to me.

and trying to talk to the other composers and having them be mean to me. That made me stronger. That made me more confident about myself, oddly enough. Because it was like, well no one's going to care whether or not you're successful but yourself. So, you know, fuck them. And I'm not sure that that wasn't great for me: I'm not sure I would have gotten to the place that I've gotten to if everybody had said, "Oh, everything you do is great. You go right ahead. We love you, you're fantastic."

And yet I'd rather live in that world, where everyone says that. That's the one thing I don't know. I don't know how much of the personality building was good for me. I'm sure young composers today all have their own problems and their own roadblocks that they have to negotiate, and those are shaping them in their own ways. My issues of the world I want to live in are very different from their issues, I think, because they really are getting along with each other...It's fantastic that that has changed. And yet I can repeat to you—I'm sure this is just human nature—I can't remember most of the nice things people have said to me, but I remember word-for-word every terrible thing that someone else has told me. I remember every nasty thing a more successful composer who didn't like me said to me as I was growing up. I remember them all; I'll never forget them. And they fire me—they fire me up. Even now, even people who have no careers, who are dead, who have lost out, that history has made their decision. But these people were above me, and they insulted me because they could. And I don't remember the nice things that people I love say to me every day! But these things, I will remember forever. And maybe that's just human nature, and maybe I'm just a megalomaniac, but I think that those things helped me become the person I am, for better or worse. So it's not always terrible if people make you fight. And I definitely felt like we had to fight.<sup>195</sup>

Wolfe and Lang both make clear that their narrative about the younger generation is deeply entangled with their specific biographies and the worlds that they sought to create with Bang on a Can. They also imagine that the world-making ideology of Bang on a Can—present in the rhetoric of the organization since it juxtaposed Reich and Babbitt in its very first marathon—was universally successful: that the young generation of composers has absorbed the lessons that the organization's founders wished to impart. These acts of intergenerational citation circumscribe an indie classical grouping, one comprised of nicer composers raised in a nicer world, out of a larger potential group of

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<sup>195</sup> David Lang, interview with author, 19 January 2016.

musicians. And even as they are steeped in the backgrounds of these composers, such remarks resonate strongly with the narrative that the indie classical generation has provided for itself. Indeed, it seems likely that the kind of stories that Lang told me and that Wolfe told Greene were also told to musicians at the 2002 summer festival.

The concern that an absence of difficulty or tension in the lives of these musicians might also yield less compelling music is raised by Davidson in his “New New York School” article:

These well-crafted but oddly familiar works display the virtues of facility, versatility, and curiosity, but they also showcase a group that seems disoriented by its own open-mindedness. Composers who could do anything somehow don’t.

Rules can be a crutch or a cage, but they can also act as stimulant. We idolize the radical who shreds the previous generation’s conventions, but every aesthetic revolution begets an ardent rigor of its own. The new New York School has a healthy distaste for tired conflicts and old campaigns. Despite their gifts and alertness to the moment, its composers seem muffled, bereft of zeal. What they badly need is a machine to rage against and a set of bracing creative constraints.<sup>196</sup>

The article received, as might be expected, widespread attention in social media and online. In a response on his blog, Boston-based music critic Matthew Guerrieri highlighted what he believed to be a flawed dialectical logic underlying Davidson’s critique: “Rage and constraint are aesthetic choices, not aesthetic necessities, and, like any aesthetic choice, it’s what you make of the choice, not the choice alone.”<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Davidson, “A New New York School.”

<sup>197</sup> Matthew Guerrieri, “If That’s Movin’ Up then I’m Movin’ Out,” *Soho The Dog* (blog), 22 March 2011, <http://sohothedog.blogspot.com/2011/03/if-thats-movin-up-then-im-movin-out.html>. Guerrieri also connected this aesthetic and generational debate to his personal biography, suggesting that an absence of a strong generationalism and opportunity among his cohort may have led him to stop composing in his youth: “I’m starting to think that I was, inadvertently, part of a kind of compositional lost generation. I didn’t notice this until I was out at Tanglewood last summer, reviewing the Festival of Contemporary Music. This one was intended as a complete survey of Tanglewood’s 70-year history. There was not a single composer born—like I was—in the 1970s. And I realized—of course there wouldn’t be. We were all trained to be the next generation of academics and gatekeepers, but the previous generation of academics and gatekeepers

Greenstein subsequently took to his website to respond—a rare occurrence, as he had mostly ceased blogged since 2010—and built on Guerrieri’s points, criticizing Davidson’s teleological narrative as one concerned more with the profession of classical music than the experiences of audiences:

Audiences for any music have always been invested in that music primarily for its emotional, spiritual, and social qualities, not its position in some historical trajectory. Audiences have real uses for music that are far from abstract. On the other hand, the people who are most invested in the historical, usually teleological narrative of Western Art Music are the people who have built careers around it, be they composers, performers, historians, writers, or administrators.

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What excites me, here, is that as I grow as a composer, I will be doing so in the direction of audiences who have an authentic emotional investment in my music, and who bring themselves as new listeners, detached from any historical baggage, to my work.<sup>198</sup>

Here, Greenstein perpetuates the rhetoric of “naturalness” and authenticity that I examined earlier.

But the strongest and most publicly debated criticism from the older generation originated, somewhat unexpectedly, with me. In a 2009 interview with critic Seth Colter Walls, John Adams worried that “there are a lot of young composers in their 20s and 30s who are very anxious to appeal to the same audience that would listen to indie rock. But

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were still around, holding ever tighter to those positions. That sense of aesthetic conflict—always dubious to begin with—was now, even worse, just going-through-the-motions office politics. And I found myself casting about for scraps. I was constantly second-guessing my own eclecticism (every call for scores I responded to, I always felt like Paul Newman trying to bribe his way into the poker game in *The Sting*: “That will get you first alternate, sir”). I began to resent when contemporaries had success (a truly squalid experience). I began to see opportunities as more important than the actual music. Finally, an opportunity came along, a last-minute concert for an ensemble I didn’t have a piece for, so I threw something together. It was far too difficult, and a pretty terrible piece to boot, and it was cancelled on the eve of the concert. I was pissed and depressed—I mean even more so—for several weeks, until I finally wondered just why I was doing this to myself. So I quit. I was immediately a happier person. I have never regretted it.” *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> Greenstein, “Golden Calf,” *Judd Greenstein: Why?* (blog), 28 March 2011, archived with Wayback Machine, <http://web.archive.org/web/20130627044726/http://www.juddgreenstein.com/why.html>.

they are creating a level of musical discourse that's just really bland."<sup>199</sup> Adams is a major musical influence on the indie classical generation, and has played a role in shaping their careers, whether in programming Muhly's music in his 2007 Carnegie Hall series or in his curatorial work as creative chair at Los Angeles Philharmonic since 2009. (Adams's son, Samuel Carl Adams [b. 1985], is a composer that has also been grouped within this generation.) In 2013, I wrote a *New York Times* preview feature in advance of the U.S. premiere of Adams's Saxophone Concerto; as a classical saxophonist, I was eager to have the opportunity to discuss a major new concerto for my instrument in a major publication. But I was also curious if Adams had maintained his position about young composers, and asked him about it at the end of our phone interview:

William Robin: In 2009, you gave an interview to *The Daily Beast*—to Seth Colter Walls—and you talked a little bit about your concerns about composers in their twenties and thirties—issues of dumbing down their music for a popular audience. I was just wondering if you had thought, at all, more about that issue.

John Adams: Refresh me, what I said?

Robin: You were concerned about contemporaries of composers like Nico Muhly and Caleb Burhans writing this kind of indie rock/classical crossovers or collaborations, and what that might mean for the future.

Adams: Well, needless to say, Nico's doing just fine, and I recently conducted a rather lovely piece of his with the L.A. Phil.<sup>200</sup> But I think what I was sort of grumbling about—and I know that I sound like Elliott Carter sounded like, when he talked about me—but that I was a little concerned with a certain kind of cultural naiveté amongst American composers. That we seem to have gone from the era of fearsome dissonance and complexity—from the period of high modernism, and Babbitt and Carter—and gone to, suddenly, these just extremely simplistic, user-friendly, lightweight—like music lite, L-I-T-E. And people are winning Pulitzer Prizes writing this stuff now. And I'm concerned about the sort

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<sup>199</sup> Seth Colter Walls, "How Obama Should Boost the Arts," *Newsweek*, 4 February 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/how-obama-should-boost-arts-82411>.

<sup>200</sup> Adams conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic in Muhly's electric violin concerto *Seeing is Believing* in October 2012.

of general cultural level: the cultural awareness amongst a lot of the young composers. They don't seem to read, they don't seem to know a great deal about history, and they're not even that aware of the repertoire. When I say this—and I can't believe it, because I sound like the old farts that I never wanted to be—but it is disturbing, because you know, if you read a lot of history, which I do, you see that civilizations produce periods of high culture, and then they can fall into periods of absolute mediocrity that can go on for generation after generation after generation. And the danger in this culture—and I need not say this to you, because we all know this—is just the way in which commercialism and marketing govern so many things. And what troubles me is how much prestige pop culture has in the United States. All of us who do what I do, we live with this kind of painful awareness that we're so marginalized as serious composers. But we do have some kind of audience. What I'm concerned with is that people who are twenty, thirty years younger than me are sort of writing down to a cultural level that's very, very vacuous and superficial.<sup>201</sup>

I was surprised by the vehemence of his comments, and recognized them as deliberately provocative and newsworthy. When my article ran in the paper in September 2013—after a discussion of the concerto, it concluded with excerpts from Adams's denunciation—the online response among the young generation was immediate and strong.<sup>202</sup> In a Facebook post that, as of 26 June 2016, had received 185 “likes,” 74 comments, and 31 shares,

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<sup>201</sup> John Adams, phone interview with the author, 6 August 2013. I excerpt the full interview transcript here, rather than what was printed in the *New York Times*, because there was some concern among musicians online that I misrepresented Adams's comments. As Muhly wrote in a *Reddit* “Ask Me Anything” forum in response to a question about Adams's critique, “But also can I just add that we should all leave him [Adams] alone. He stepped in it, but just remember that it's the paper and the paper is lies, or like, decontextualized things, and also that if anybody really thinks that way, that they have to wake up every day thinking that way, which must be REALLY exhausting.” Muhly, comment on “I'm the Composer Nico Muhly, Ask Me Anything,” *Reddit*, 16 October 2013, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/1ol63u/im\\_composer\\_nico\\_muhly\\_ask\\_me\\_anything/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/1ol63u/im_composer_nico_muhly_ask_me_anything/).

<sup>202</sup> I condensed and paraphrased his comments, so that the article itself read: “Despite the boplike licks in his new concerto, the 66-year-old Mr. Adams expresses reservations about the fad for pop sounds in younger composers' music. ‘We seem to have gone from the era of fearsome dissonance and complexity—from the period of high modernism and Babbitt and Carter—and gone to suddenly these just extremely simplistic, user-friendly, lightweight, sort of music lite,’ he said. ‘People are winning Pulitzer Prizes writing this stuff now.’ Acknowledging with a laugh that he might sound like a curmudgeon, he added, ‘If you read a lot of history, which I do, you see that civilizations produce periods of high culture, and then they can fall into periods of absolute mediocrity that can go on for generation after generation.’ On the subject of commercialism and marketing in new music, Mr. Adams said, ‘What I'm concerned with is people that are 20, 30 years younger than me are sort of writing down to a cultural level that's very, very vacuous and very superficial.’” Robin, “Classical Saxophone, an Outlier, Is Anointed,” *New York Times*, 18 September 2013.

Darcy James Argue accused Adams of inflicting hazing on young composers: “Why do you persist in acting like the high school bully who can't wait to dish out some of the abuse he was once on the receiving end of?”<sup>203</sup> On her blog, composer Alex Temple (b. 1983) pointed out the hypocrisy of Adams’s view by placing the composer’s comments next to 1989 remarks by Charles Wuorinen that castigated minimalism as “utterly unchallenging, unprovocative kind of music” and Adams’s own response to Wuorinen at the time that “To make arbitrary divisions between what is serious and what is outside the worthwhile realm is just too simplistic.” “Let’s make a pact,” Temple wrote. “If I ever become famous, and then use that fame to trash young composers rather than to support and encourage them, please just stop playing my music.”<sup>204</sup>

It is clear that in his intergenerational citations, Adams knowingly played the role of provocateur, perhaps seeking to singlehandedly re-create the world of his youth in which tough criticism purportedly created tough art. And the young generation responded in suit, providing an intergenerational response designed to delegitimize the aesthetic conflicts of Adams’s upbringing as a form of hazing no longer necessary in the twenty-first century.

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This chapter has provided both the history and genealogy of a cohort of musicians that—despite its relative narrowness of social ties, aesthetic agendas, and institutional backgrounds—became synonymous with “the” young generation of American composers. I have scrutinized the places and mechanisms through which that equivalence

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<sup>203</sup> Argue, “Dear John Adams,” Facebook post, 18 September 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/darcyjamesargue/posts/10153282247000105>.

<sup>204</sup> Alex Temple, “John Adams Rolls His Eyes at ‘Kids These Days,’” *Alex Temple* (blog), 18 September 2013; Donna Perlmutter, “The Growing Debate Over Minimalism,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 June 1989.

was constructed—summer festivals, DIY tours, club venues, and the blogosphere—as generationalism was translated from musicians into the press. This examination of indie classical as a generation reveals how this cohort found each other, constructed their identity and genealogy in dialogue with and in opposition to specific settings, and successfully obtained prestige from legacy media while imagining their own identity in new online spaces. In the next chapter, we will see how that prestige was leveraged into growing a record label, New Amsterdam, and helping indie classical travel outside New York.

At its most extreme, indie classical’s generationalism offered a narrative of triumphalism that the future of classical music would be “music without walls.” This rhetoric obscures the backgrounds of these musicians and the reality of their relationships to the academy: it renders invisible the very real cultural walls of privilege and elite training that allowed for the success of indie classical. And it can also marginalize alternative compositional voices that are less explicitly concerned with transcending genre. Media organizations such as NPR may have been wide ranging in their searches for musicians under the age of forty, but their image of a twenty-first century composer was one who “uses a battery of electric guitars and drums in the same breath as a section of violins and violas, and performs for a rabidly dancing audience on one night and at a concert-hall subscription series the next.” Indeed, even intergenerational critiques such as those of Adams and Davidson reinforced the narrative that indie classical was the central development of new music in the twenty-first century. In his castigation of “music lite,” Adams overlooked many composers that he himself had programmed at the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s Green Umbrella series—such as Zosha di Castri (b. 1985), whose music

centers on experimentation with gesture and timbre, or Andrew Norman (b. 1979), who draws together avant-garde techniques into a hyper-theatrical symphonic idiom—who bear no performative relationship to pop culture.<sup>205</sup> Rather than imagine alternatives to indie classical, such powerful figures gazed at a small, omnivorous cohort and canonized it into a generation.

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<sup>205</sup> The Green Umbrella series programmed Di Castri's *La Forma dello Spazio* in October 2011, and Adams conducted Norman's *Try* in May 2011; Norman has been commissioned for four major works by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and was appointed director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Composer Fellowship Program in 2015. See also Robin, "That Sweeping Sense," *New York Times*, 25 November 2015.

## CHAPTER 2

### Indie Classical as Institution

At first I was really suspicious, because I was just like, records? The record industry's going to die, we all knew it at that point already. Why would you have a record label? But he [Judd Greenstein] had a vision of it as this new form of a record label. The community was growing exponentially: everyone was starting a band, everyone had a concert series, everyone was starting a group... It was out of control and very exciting, but it was without a center, and New Amsterdam was one of those things that provided a gathering point for the community. All of the sudden, everyone's releasing albums on this label and everyone's going to their release shows, it focused things in a nice way at the time.

Missy Mazzoli, interview with the author, 10 November 2015

When New Amsterdam Records officially launched in 2008—under the directorship of Judd Greenstein, Sarah Kirkland Snider, and William Brittelle—it formed a center for a new community, one that it labeled “indie classical” in its very first press release. The record label constructed and disseminated a powerful identity that would reshape the scene itself. Through a close study of New Amsterdam, this chapter considers indie classical as an institutional identity and interrogates how the label has guided aesthetic, economic, and social practices within and outside the world of new music. After describing the origins and mission of New Amsterdam, I analyze three contexts in which the institution existed in the world: as constructing a brand that it labeled “indie classical,” which was contested online and ultimately abandoned by the label; as curating a sound, as exemplified in composer Sarah Kirkland Snider's song cycle *Penelope* and

saxophone quartet Battle Trance's album *Palace of Wind*; and as traveling in tours and institutional partnerships outside New York, with a focus on a tense encounter between yMusic and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. I thus present three practices of indie classical through the perspective of the record label: a disputed and incomplete genre formation disseminated online, a wide-ranging aesthetic that nonetheless reinforces a normative image of the composer, and a translocal labor formation in friction with classical music's unionized institutional culture.

New Amsterdam represents a particularly powerful actor that has bent the worlds of classical and new music around it. In tracing how the label constructed and disseminated an indie classical identity, this chapter reveals the power of a nascent institution within the community it attempted to represent. As a case study, New Amsterdam reveals how indie classical extended its network online, in print, and in new local contexts. This chapter foregrounds the multiplicity of heterogeneous actors that facilitated that extension: New Amsterdam's identity was constructed by publicists and composers, translated into press releases and blog posts and concert reviews, and transported outside New York via institutional intermediaries.

## **Origins**

The origins of New Amsterdam were both practical and ideological. Greenstein's NOW Ensemble sought to record its first album, and lacked an outlet for producing, distributing, and marketing a record. Given his close relationship to Bang on a Can, Greenstein had reached out to Cantaloupe, its in-house label, but they were not interested. He realized that:

No one will release our music, therefore there is a gap in the music world. And if it applies to us, it probably applies to other people. And it turned out that it applied to many people...it was born of the tangible needs of the people who were involved in its creation.<sup>206</sup>

As a subsidiary of NOW Ensemble's nonprofit structure, New Amsterdam was operational as early as 15 December 2006, when the label's website first appeared. In February 2007, New Amsterdam released its first album, cellist Jody Redhage's *All Summer in a Day*. An alumna of Bang on a Can's summer institute and freelance musician, Redhage had initiated a commissioning project while attending the Manhattan School of Music, asking thirty of her friends to write works for her voice and cello. She funded the recording of an album featuring nine of these commissions—including a work by Greenstein—with a \$15,000 Hertz Fellowship from the University of California at Berkeley, her undergraduate alma mater.

Greenstein was already crafting a specific ethos for New Amsterdam, one deeply tied to the perspective that he and his colleagues had developed on the Free Speech Zone tour, and which he had worked out publicly on his blog. A “music without walls” rhetoric is present in the earliest New Amsterdam materials; in a note accompanying Redhage's album, Greenstein wrote that

It's hard to say what kind of music this is. Is it what we might call “new music,” that nebulous term that applies to music that's written down but doesn't sound like old classical music? Is it an offshoot of the so-called “freak folk” scene, where a classically-trained harpist like Joanna Newsom can become a rock star? Is it something new and different and impossible to pin down?<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Judd Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

<sup>207</sup> Judd Greenstein, “Jody Redhage: All Summer in a Day,” New Amsterdam website, 11 January 2007, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070712195745/http://www.newamsterdamrecords.com/artists.html>.

Subsequent early releases included albums by composer Andrea Mazzariello, jazz composer and saxophonist Sam Sadigursky, and NOW Ensemble.<sup>208</sup> In 2007, there existed no mechanism to distribute New Amsterdam's albums to retail stores: Greenstein copied CDs in his parents' apartment, mailed them to music critics, established an online storefront, and programmed the artists at ICO Music, a series he curated in TriBeCa. Although New Amsterdam had not yet employed a publicist, major voices in the press were soon aware of the endeavor; the online network that I described in the previous chapter paid dividends. In the aforementioned March 2007 blog post, Alex Ross noted the arrival of the label and connected it to a new scene and generation that embodied "pragmatism—music beyond ideology."<sup>209</sup> For Ross and other critics, New Amsterdam represented an institutional instantiation of the open-minded philosophy already made visible on the blogs of musicians in the scene: New Amsterdam distributed both music and ("beyond") ideology.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Mazzariello's album *sexy/violent girls/war*, produced under the name massey, is the only early New Amsterdam album that was not also released when the label re-launched, so it is no longer in the catalog. When the label partnered with Naxos in 2009 and re-released its previous records for international distribution, Redhage decided to remove her album from the catalog and replace it with a new one that she was working on, *of minutiae and memory* (eventually released in 2011), because she was no longer confident in the quality of the first release. Jody Redhage, interview with author, 12 December 2015.

<sup>209</sup> Alex Ross, "The New Pragmatism," *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), 18 March 2007, [http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/03/the\\_new\\_pragmat.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/03/the_new_pragmat.html).

<sup>210</sup> Steve Smith also paid close attention to New Amsterdam before the "official" launch: he mentioned Greenstein's label on the blog for *Time Out New York* in May 2007; wrote about Stephen S. Taylor's documentary *The End of New Music* for the *New York Times* in July; and positively reviewed Sadigursky's album *The Words Project* in *Time Out* in August. The *Time Out* blog post and review are not longer accessible, but Smith cross-posted them on his own blog; see Steve Smith, "Songs of Praise," *Night After Night* (blog), 18 May 2007, [http://nightafternight.blogs.com/night\\_after\\_night/2007/05/songs\\_of\\_praise.html](http://nightafternight.blogs.com/night_after_night/2007/05/songs_of_praise.html); and Smith, "Words worth," *Night After Night* (blog), 9 August 2007, [http://nightafternight.blogs.com/night\\_after\\_night/2007/08/words-worth.html](http://nightafternight.blogs.com/night_after_night/2007/08/words-worth.html). Smith, "Rebel Composers on a Rock Tour of Sorts," *New York Times*, 4 July 2007.

Not long after Greenstein released the label's first albums, he was joined in his endeavor by Snider and Brittelle. Snider and Greenstein were close friends at Yale, and considered each other allies against an academic culture that they felt to be restrictive. Since 2001, Snider had directed the Look & Listen Festival in New York; in 2007, she was living with her husband, composer and Princeton professor Steven Mackey, in New Jersey, and working on the theater piece *Penelope*. Brittelle approached Greenstein at a NOW Ensemble concert in 2007: after studying composition in undergraduate at Vanderbilt, he had moved to New York to attend CUNY's Graduate Center and work with composer David del Tredici. But he was more attracted to the rock world in the city and dropped out of school to play guitar and sing in bands. After several years working as a rock musician, he blew out his voice, and, as he told me, "decided it was time to try to reconcile all my different musical interests into one sound. There wasn't really a place out there for my music that was preexisting, due to the post-genre/multi-genre nature of what I was interested in doing. So that's where the idea of forming New Amsterdam came in."<sup>211</sup> The trio met for a long evening of conversation over Thai food in New York City in March 2007, where they suggested ideas for the label and decided to combine their efforts as artistic directors. It was then, Greenstein said, that "New Amsterdam as a true entity was born."<sup>212</sup>

Drawing on their conversations, in a lengthy document likely written in April 2007, Brittelle outlined a "Brainstorm" of concepts for re-launching the label as a

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<sup>211</sup> William Brittelle, interview with author, 5 September 2014. See also Smith, "Agonized Return to a Voice and a Vision," *New York Times*, 29 July 2010.

<sup>212</sup> Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

partnership.<sup>213</sup> He had prior experience in the music industry, including booking concerts at rock clubs and working as a publicist. In the “Brainstorm,” Brittelle described having met with Bang on a Can managing director Kenny Savelson to discuss operational logistics. “I realized from speaking with him that we have severely overestimated the amount of income we can get from selling records,” he wrote. Cantaloupe had essentially broken even for most of its album sales, due to physical distribution costs and store mark-ups; Savelson suggested that physical CDs were more useful as merchandise at concerts than as products distributed to record stores. Although digital sales were on the rise, Brittelle wrote, “the overall theme from the meeting, which at first depressed me, was you don’t make money from selling CDs.” To raise awareness for the label and the existence of its roster, Savelson advised that New Amsterdam’s musicians tour as much as possible.

“I’m realizing that hierarchy and power are two things that really stifle creativity and don’t belong in the NAR [New Amsterdam Records] world,” Brittelle continued. “I really want to remain on a peer to peer level with our artists, I want to have a ‘we’re all in this together’ feeling.” The founders had bold plans for the structure of the label and its place in the new-music community, ones that deliberately evoked historical DIY

precedents:

a new record label model, particular to the composer-in-the-21st century situation. let’s be the most artist friendly record label in history. a label that focuses on the clearcut goal of allowing our artists the freedom to create and develop their ideas (and eventually make a living from doing so), a label that pays our artists as much as possible, and helps fund their projects. kind of an official and formally organized version of the CBGB punk scene (or any other collectively creative

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<sup>213</sup> “BRAINSTORM BRITTELLE,” New Amsterdam institutional archives. Printed with permission of New Amsterdam.

scene of the past 200 years).<sup>214</sup>

The “Brainstorm” also suggested establishing a robust website to act as the scene’s “home base,” with a storefront, blog (“talking about what alex [ross] and steve smith are talking about”), podcasts, and a community calendar. And Britelle recommended that the label function as a nonprofit: selling CDs did not create significant revenue, and their communal focus might help them more successfully seek out private funding. Income sources could include donations, album sales, and concert revenue. For its artists, New Amsterdam would provide a web platform, funding for CD production and distribution, support for tours, and access to in-house staff including a publicist, designer, and mastering engineer. The label would put together showcase concerts in New York and build them into tours once they established a strong national presence.

Designed by composer Tristan Perich, the label’s new website opened in January 2008 and featured concert listings, blog posts, an online store, and streaming audio. Intern Michael Hammond attended concerts in New York and wrote reviews for the website; he said that Britelle had “a vision of it being the alternative to *Pitchfork*, but for the indie classical scene.”<sup>215</sup> The site also functioned as a social media platform and web community, similar to more popular websites such as MySpace. Any musician could set up a home page with a biography, calendar of upcoming performances, and streaming

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid. In a subsequent document, Britelle expanded further on this communal mentality: “label should be an organization which creates the opportunity for the artists on the label the room and opportunity to develop their ideas, get their ideas to the public, and make money doing it. a totally non-competitive, non-hierarchical environment. all composers/performers with the same goal. when one artist achieves something, it helps everyone else along. starts in NY, music motivate the NYC base, get all students and our generation of classical composers involved and thinking ‘this is the place to be.’” Britelle, “loose thoughts,” likely dated 9 April 2007, New Amsterdam institutional archives. Printed with permission of New Amsterdam.

<sup>215</sup> Hammond went on to become New Amsterdam’s label manager. Michael Hammond, interview with author, 5 March 2015.

tracks. Greenstein described his desire to build a “social network” in an era in which micro-networks had not yet been eclipsed by major platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as the primary tools for social media.<sup>216</sup> The goal was to expand the initial cohort of New Amsterdam’s friends into a broadminded online community engaged with the label’s activities; as soprano and Greenstein collaborator Anne-Carolyn Bird described on her own blog, “This will hopefully become a central ‘meeting ground’ of sorts for musicians involved in this development of concert music.”<sup>217</sup>

For publicity, New Amsterdam hired Steven Swartz (b. 1956), an established intermediary in the new-music world. Swartz had studied composition with Morton Feldman at the University of Buffalo and worked as a publicist for the New Music Distribution Service label in the 1980s, subsequently spending sixteen years as director of publicity at the publisher Boosey & Hawkes. After leaving Boosey in 2006, he opened dotdotdotmusic, a boutique firm specializing in publicity for new-music projects; New Amsterdam was his first client.<sup>218</sup> In a fall 2007 article for *MUSO Magazine*, Swartz had identified the Free Speech Zone tour composers as a promising generation that epitomized the idea that the “style wars are over.”<sup>219</sup> He told me that, in comparison to his early career in graduate school—in which “we were all fighting proxy wars for our teachers: you were uptown, you were downtown, you were a neo-Romantic”—

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<sup>216</sup> Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

<sup>217</sup> Anne-Carolyn Bird, “Miscellany for January 8,” *the concert* (blog), 8 January 2008, <http://theconcert.blogspot.com/2008/01/miscellany-for-january-8.html>.

<sup>218</sup> Since 2007, dotdotdotmusic has expanded to three employees. Its clients have included composers Anthony Braxton, Bryce Dessner, David T. Little, and Missy Mazzoli; ensembles Alarm Will Sound, eighth blackbird, and Kronos Quartet; and festivals 21C Liederabend, Avant Music, and MATA.

<sup>219</sup> Swartz, “After the Style Wars,” *MUSO Magazine*, Autumn 2007. *MUSO* is now defunct; I obtained this article as a PDF from Swartz.

Greenstein's cohort appeared to lack aesthetic baggage.<sup>220</sup> Having cultivated connections with the classical world at Boosey, Swartz was a suitable member of the older guard to reintroduce New Amsterdam to the press.

The New Amsterdam directors crafted a new mission statement, which Swartz drew on for a December 2007 press release that announced the “official launch” of the label in January 2008. This re-launch, with the label now under the purview of its three directors, included the reissuing of NOW Ensemble's debut album and a new record from band *itsnotyouitsme*; the redesigned and expanded website; and a concert at the downtown venue Joe's Pub. The label received significant early press coverage, including an interview with Greenstein and NOW clarinetist Sara Budde on John Schaefer's WNYC program *Soundcheck*. Swartz attributed the success of the sold-out Joe's Pub concert to the press campaign, describing *Soundcheck* as “the perfect target for this listenership constituency.”<sup>221</sup>

New Amsterdam continued to obtain notable press coverage in 2008, including a central role in a feature on the NPR program “All Things Considered” and positive write-ups in *New York Times* articles by Steve Smith and Allan Kozinn.<sup>222</sup> Perhaps the most significant result of this attention was that it attracted Naxos—the largest distributor of

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<sup>220</sup> Swartz, interview with author, 6 March 2015.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> “A New Label for Music's New Blood,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, 29 May 2008, <http://www.npr.org/2008/05/29/90951497/a-new-label-for-musics-new-blood>; Smith, “Independent Labels Embrace a D.I.Y. Ethos,” *New York Times*, 19 December 2008; Allan Kozinn, “For New Music, Cross-Pollination and Big Crowds,” *New York Times*, 19 December 2008.

independent classical record in the world—to partner with the label for international physical and online distribution beginning in October 2009.<sup>223</sup>

The business model for New Amsterdam’s recordings, which the label calls “artist-friendly,” has changed relatively little since 2008. In the “Brainstorm,” Britelle envisioned a 50/50 split of proceeds from sales between the artist and the label. In 2016, the New Amsterdam artist contract stipulates that album sales are divided in an 80/20 split favoring the artist until costs for producing the album are recouped, and it then becomes a permanent 50/50 split between artist and label. Artists maintain ownership of their albums, and the label (and Naxos) acts as sole distributor.

New Amsterdam musicians typically record at their own expense—applying for grants from foundations such as the Alice M. Ditson Fund, Aaron Copland Fund, and New Music USA; seeking contributions from private donors or their own ensemble’s fundraising mechanisms; and/or utilizing crowd-funding platforms such as Kickstarter—so that the overhead for the label is relatively low.<sup>224</sup> This “pay to play” model is increasingly common in the economically precarious recording industry, in which independent and even major labels often no longer provide advances to their artists.

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<sup>223</sup> Hammond recalled in an interview that while he was an intern in 2009, “I came in one day and Judd and Bill were saying, ‘Oh we got distribution!’ It was this big deal.’ We’ve been with Naxos ever since. They distribute physical and digital: physical only in the U.S. and digital worldwide. It’s nice to not have to worry about that side of things, and just have a contact where if someone’s going on tour, you can work with individual locations and send them the tour dates and they can handle distributing. Obviously right now it’s a really tough time for physical distribution, so that’s becoming less and less of a relevant thing. But they’ve been doing business for years and years so they have a lot of great contacts around the country.” Hammond, interview with author, 5 March 2015. Darcy James Argue said of his first release on the label, the 2009 big band album *Infernal Machines*, that “I was just selling them at gigs and NewAm was selling them from their website. I was early enough that they didn’t even really become a proper record label until the fall of 2009 when they began to be distributed by Naxos and *Infernal Machines* was officially released.” Darcy James Argue, interview with author, 9 October 2015.

<sup>224</sup> New Amsterdam occasionally assists artists with loans for recording or in obtaining grants.

Rather than offering a multi-year deal to a musician, New Amsterdam works on a project-to-project basis for what it calls “premiere commercial recordings of new compositions, written and performed by highly-trained musicians with diverse musical backgrounds.”<sup>225</sup> Typically, a musician or ensemble submits an album to New Amsterdam for consideration by the label’s staff and artistic directors, as I will address below. If it is accepted, New Amsterdam will design the physical record and cover art; aid in mixing and mastering the release; organize local concerts and tours for the project with its concert presenter New Amsterdam Presents; sell the album digitally through the Bandcamp platform and iTunes and physically with Naxos; and provide the services of its in-house publicist.<sup>226</sup>

### **The Rise and Fall of Indie Classical**

For the January 2008 re-launch of New Amsterdam, the three directors prepared a mission statement for the label:

New Amsterdam Records was formed as a haven for the young New York composers and performers whose music slips through the cracks between genres. There’s an exciting scene that’s developed in our city over the past few years, as a set of strong-minded young musicians have taken their art in highly personal directions, speaking not just to the traditions that have spawned them but also to the varied musical culture in which they all live. They make music without filters, bringing the breadth of their listening experience and the love they have for many different kinds of music into their own playing and writing and producing. This is music without walls, but also without an agenda, and without an organizing principle. The records we sell will paint a certain picture of that scene without a name, without trying to give it one. We hope that New Amsterdam develops as

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<sup>225</sup> New Amsterdam Records, “About,” <http://newamrecords.com/about/>, 15 March 2016.

<sup>226</sup> In fall 2011, New Amsterdam switched from utilizing Swartz and Sarah Baird Knight of dotdotdotmusic for publicity to Jill Strominger, a publicist primarily active in the rock world. Strominger served as the label’s in-house publicist from 2012 to 2014, when she moved to Ohio and the label switched to using the large firm Big Hassle; she returned to New York and resumed her role at New Amsterdam in January 2016. (The label still continues to utilize dotdotdotmusic for specific projects.)

quickly and as broadly as the scene itself, capturing the best that people in it have to offer along the way, and touching the outer edges where musics meet.<sup>227</sup>

Though it initially intended not to provide its scene with a name, not long afterwards New Amsterdam offered one. In the December 2007 press release announcing the label's relaunch, Swartz drew on the mission statement (see Introduction) but also noted that:

To foster a sense of connection among musicians and fans in this "indie classical" scene, New Amsterdam is set to launch a new version of its website.<sup>228</sup>

In this section, I uncover the origins and contested dissemination of the term indie classical, as it became a flashpoint of controversy in the new-music world. By 2013, New Amsterdam had abandoned its use of the phrase, following strong objections from musicians and critics. By telling the story of indie classical's rise and fall as a term, I demonstrate how New Amsterdam's attempt to spread beyond an initial New York community exposed fractures within the scene itself. The story of indie classical's semantic drift reveals the power of institutions in a contested online public sphere. And it is a familiar one, in which composers invent pithy slogans to distinguish themselves in the musical marketplace—in dialogue with institutional intermediaries including the

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<sup>227</sup> "New Amsterdam press release—source material copy." This mission statement is strongly informed by how Greenstein first described New Amsterdam in a December 2006 blog post: "I formed New Amsterdam Records as a haven for the great artists I know who make music that slips through the cracks between genres. There's an exciting scene that's developed in New York over the past few years, as a set of strong-minded young musicians have taken their art in highly personal directions, speaking not just to the traditions that have spawned them but also to the varied musical culture in which they all live. They make music without filters, bringing the breadth of their listening experience and the love they have for many different kinds of music into their own playing and writing and producing. This is music without walls, but also without an agenda, and without an organizing principle. The records we sell will paint a certain picture of that scene without a name, without trying to give it one. I hope that New Amsterdam develops as quickly and as broadly as the scene itself, capturing the best that people in it have to offer along the way, and touching the outer edges where musics meet. And I hope that you enjoy the music that we offer." Judd Greenstein, "What I've Been Doing," *Judd Greenstein: Why?* blog, 15 December 2006, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20061218175304/http://juddgreenstein.com/why.html#secretlabel>.

<sup>228</sup> Swartz, "New Amsterdam—label launch at J Pub HC," 6 December 2007.

press—that resonates historically with Monteverdi’s use of “seconda pratica” and Liszt’s deployment of “program music.”<sup>229</sup>

Here, I draw on Eric Drott’s deployment of actor-network theory in interrogating the role of genre in new music. As Drott writes,

genre is not so much a *group* as a *grouping*. . . something that must be continually produced and reproduced. Genres, in other words, result from acts of assemblage, acts performed by specific agents in specific social and institutional settings. . . their legitimacy depends on how many people recognize them, take them up, and thereby reproduce the specific configuration of texts and contexts that they establish.<sup>230</sup>

In this section, I treat indie classical as a genre in order to trace its assemblage by specific agents, and its dissemination in the online world that I outlined in Chapter 1: until it fell into disuse, it was “held together” by the powerful institutional apparatus that New Amsterdam constructed, the press attention that the young generation attained, and the opportunities for discussion and controversy presented by the blogosphere. Unlike now-stable new-music genres such as spectralism or minimalism—whose definitions, if not quite fully settled, can be looked up in a textbook or in Oxford Music Online—indie classical represents an unresolved grouping, one only partially legitimized and differently

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<sup>229</sup> See Claude V. Palisca, “The Artusi–Monteverdi Controversy,” *The Monteverdi Companion*, ed. Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (London: Faber, 1985), 127–58; and Tim Carter, “Artusi, Monteverdi, and the Poetics of Modern Music,” in *Musical Humanism and Its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Claude V. Palisca*, ed. Nancy Kovaleff Baker and Barbara Russano Hanning (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon press, 1993), 171–94.

Mark Evan Bonds writes that “The aesthetics of program music provided a philosophical justification by which instrumental music—or at least a certain type of instrumental music—could participate in the “Music of the Future.” With “program music,” *Zukunftsmusiker* now had a convenient shorthand—a label, a slogan, in effect—to distinguish their repertory of instrumental music from that of the past.” Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 213.

<sup>230</sup> Eric Drott, “The End(s) of Genre,” *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 10.

reproduced. Approaching indie classical in its assemblage unveils the configuration of texts and contexts that cohered around it.

The story of indie classical's rise and fall provides a clear example of what Drott identifies as a key reason why genre appears marginal in new music:

the continuing instability of genre categories within this repertory is their furious denial within the aesthetic discourse of new music, which takes it as an article of faith that the only relevant context for comprehending a composition is furnished by the composition itself...the pressure placed on composers to distinguish both themselves and their works from rivals within this particular market of symbolic goods means that efforts at defining stable groupings are perennially undermined.<sup>231</sup>

For New Amsterdam, indie classical was not intended to provide a context with which to comprehend its individual albums and compositions, but a term to brand the label's identity and describe its innovations in the classical music market. When Greenstein and his colleagues became uncomfortable with indie classical as a stable grouping that seemed to represent a single aesthetic—to them, such sonic groupings falsely summarized their disparate voices—New Amsterdam abandoned the term.

The term “indie classical” used to appear occasionally in *Billboard* magazine, dating at least as far back as 1950, to refer to small-scale classical music record labels.<sup>232</sup> But its more recent definition—and its association with New Amsterdam's scene of composers, performers, and institutions—can be traced to April 2007. Both Greenstein and composer Matt McBane have taken hesitant credit for inventing the term: they are each fairly confident that they used it first, though neither is particularly enthusiastic to

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<sup>231</sup> Drott, “The End(s) of Genre,” 15.

<sup>232</sup> An October 1950 *Billboard* article, for example, describes plans for Phillips Industries to increase its activity in the recording business in the United States by “angling to buy outright one of the indie classical labels as an initial move into the disk business here.” “Philips Nears Expansion Deals in U.S., France,” *Billboard*, 21 October 1950.

publicly claim himself as its originator. (As of 2016, neither continued to use the term in his own publicity).

McBane had befriended Brittelle at the Aspen Summer Music Festival in 2000, and became close with Greenstein while attending the first Bang on a Can Summer Festival in 2002. After founding a festival in his hometown of Carlsbad, California, he moved to New York in 2006 and formed a group to perform his music. In an April 2007 press release for this new-music ensemble—which he emailed directly to Alex Ross—McBane wrote:

The Abstraction is a five-piece indie classical band...part of a growing scene in Brooklyn and lower Manhattan of musicians finding spaces between the genre cracks and enthusiastic audiences to meet them there. As such, it recently joined the newly formed New Amsterdam Records label that is creating a home for this scene.<sup>233</sup>

McBane told me that he did not at first have an entirely developed sense of what he meant by “indie classical.” He wanted a quick designator for describing the kind of music he made to a non-specialist audience as well as the press:

I had been frustrated with the lack of a decent genre name for the music Build [McBane’s ensemble The Abstraction, later re-named] and like-minded musicians were making. The existing options were “contemporary classical,” which lumped us in with music we had nothing in common with, and “new music,” which was impossibly vague. So I wanted to find a shorthand description of the kind of music we were making and how we were making it. In indie-rock and indie-film (although obviously those terms have long been coopted and beaten to death), the “indie” implies both a more artistic and hipper approach than their non-hyphenated brethren, and a social and economic model working outside of the mainstream organizations. So I came up with “indie classical” as a name for our genre for promotion and booking as we started out.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> McBane, email to Alex Ross, 16 April 2007. (McBane forwarded me this email; it is printed with his permission.) By the time that it released its first album on New Amsterdam in 2008, The Abstraction had been re-named Build.

<sup>234</sup> McBane, interview with author, 19 September 2015.

That same month, Greenstein wrote a blog post lamenting the closure of the music venue Tonic in downtown New York: “These are the spaces that are now the backbone for the developing indie classical community...If they all go, I’m not sure what will rise to fill their void.”<sup>235</sup> Greenstein has written extensively over the years about his specific definition of “indie classical.” In a representative 2010 comment, he described it as:

an ethos, a spirit of doing-it-yourself and controlling the production chain of our artistic output, in response to the generally hierarchical and highly limited/limiting world of classical/contemporary music in which our art has historically been presented.<sup>236</sup>

Although Greenstein did not desire indie classical to represent a specific “sound”—he believed the music of New Amsterdam was too diverse to be summarized by a term—he did not explicitly avoid the aesthetic implications of the phrase.<sup>237</sup> Primarily, the composer utilized indie classical to stand for a DIY institutional spirit, similarly to how “indie” had augmented “rock” in the 1980s to indicate a particular music-industry configuration.<sup>238</sup>

The re-launch of New Amsterdam marked a major development for indie classical’s dissemination. McBane’s press releases and Greenstein’s blog posts might have helped the term gain circulation among a small audience of readers and critics, but

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<sup>235</sup> Judd Greenstein, “Tonic,” *Judd Greenstein: Why?* (blog), 4 April 2007, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070704172734/http://juddgreenstein.com/why.html#tonic>. I asked Greenstein if he could locate any of his prior uses of the term, but he could not.

<sup>236</sup> Greenstein, comment on Colin Holter, “Overtaken by Alt-Classical,” *NewMusicBox*, 17 August 2010, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/Overtaken-By-AltClassical/>.

<sup>237</sup> In a 2008 essay, for example, Greenstein described a set of “values” of the indie classical scene: an emphasis on community, history, and a new kind of virtuosity that resulted from a rejection of distinctions between musical genres. Greenstein, “What is the New New Virtuosity,” *MATA Festival* (blog), 11 November 2008, <http://matafestival.org/2008/what-is-the-new-new-virtuosity/>.

<sup>238</sup> See David Hesmondhalgh, “Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre,” *Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 34–61.

the weight of a new institution with a well-connected professional publicist lent it significant cachet. Swartz's December 2007 press release was part of a broader media blitz for New Amsterdam, with a local and national focus. He first planned to send information to New York media outlets including daily newspapers, weekly magazines, and radio stations; and he would then focus on national publications "including major-market dailies, music magazines (classical and crossover), NPR, blogs, etc."<sup>239</sup> Among the objectives of that campaign was "Branding: launch label, define its identity in the marketplace."<sup>240</sup>

Swartz recalled a series of emails with the New Amsterdam founders in which they discussed appropriate terms to describe the label. He said that he advocated for indie classical specifically: "I thought that 'alt-classical' was very '90s, and that 'indie' didn't only refer to an aesthetic sensibility but to a structural one as well—that this is independent, and that was an important part of it: people making careers outside of the academic structure, the usual ladder."<sup>241</sup>

"Indie classical" entered the press conversation almost immediately. When Greenstein and Budde spoke with radio host John Schaefer on *Soundcheck* in January 2008, the broadcast began with the host questioning Greenstein about the term mentioned in the press release:

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<sup>239</sup> Swartz, "New Amsterdam: PR proposal," 3 December 2007, New Amsterdam institutional archives. Printed with permission from New Amsterdam.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Swartz, interview with author, 6 March 2015. Swartz's historicization of alt-classical tracks with the history of indie rock; as David Hesmondhalgh wrote in 1999, "'Alternative rock' is the term which has generally been used in the United States for what in Britain was known as indie or 'independent' rock or pop. Lately, the term indie has become more widely used in the U.S." Hesmondhalgh, "Indie," 58n13.

Schaefer: Let me ask you about this debut album of yours on the New Amsterdam record label, sort of being billed as “indie classical.” Judd, what does that mean?

Greenstein: Well, I like indie classical because, like everybody else, I listen to music that’s mostly indie in whatever genre it’s in, and I sort of think of indie classical as having nice connections both vertically and horizontally: horizontally, I mean to other indie musics out there, and then vertically also to the classical tradition. It’s a nice thing that people can relate to, if they’re fans of indie music or classical music.

Schaefer: The central tenets of indie music—whether we’re talking indie rock, indie classical, whatever, is a kind of DIY, do it yourself approach? Would that be fair to say?

Greenstein: Sure, I think so—it means an open field. You can really do what you want to do, and then trust that there’s going to be an audience for it, as long as you’re doing it in the right way.<sup>242</sup>

Indie classical became the first question raised of New Amsterdam by an influential and longstanding member of the new-music press; the term had done remarkably successful and quick work as a brand. And indeed, Schaefer became a main proponent of the term, grouping several of his curated radio programs under the title “indie classical.” As he told me,

As marketing terms go, this one annoys me a lot less than most. It says something—not about the music—but about the people making it, which I think is a fair thing for that name to do...it suggests a kind of working outside conventional, organized mainstream musical forms, whether that be record labels, concert halls, compositional techniques. It suggests this kind of enterprising, freewheeling, oblivious-to-boundaries approach to classical music, which, if someone had coined that term back in the ’80s you might have applied to Bang on a Can; and if someone had coined it back in the early ’70s, you might have applied it to the minimalists.<sup>243</sup>

And indie classical continued to spread as a term. Between 2008 and 2010, it was taken up by several major publications, including *Time Out New York*, NPR, and the *New York*

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<sup>242</sup> “The Now Ensemble,” *Soundcheck*, 8 January 2008, <http://soundcheck.wnyc.org/story/40359-the-now-ensemble/>.

<sup>243</sup> John Schaefer, interview with author, 2 December 2015.

*Times*, as a shorthand to refer to musicians who participated in New Amsterdam projects or explicitly blurred boundaries between classical and popular music. As New Amsterdam expanded, it continued to brand albums and concerts as indie classical: a poster described its May 2009 series Undiscovered Islands as “a full month of new indie classical world premieres and record releases”; an October 2009 press release from dotdotdotmusic advertised “fall shows spotlight label artists and co-conspirators from NYC’s ‘indie classical scene’”; and an August 2011 release referred to “New Amsterdam Records, the hub for the most inventive and prophetic in indie classical music.”<sup>244</sup>

Indie classical soon became a source of contention online. Among the many animated discussions that emerged within the classical and new-music blogosphere that I described in Chapter 1 was a focus on *naming*. In a 2004 *New Yorker* article, Ross proclaimed “I hate ‘classical music’: not the thing, but the name”; he feared that the genre designator alienated audiences, constructed a “cult of mediocre elitism,” and marginalized living composers.<sup>245</sup> In a January 2005 newsletter, Bang on a Can had asked for suggestions to “help us come up with a name for the kind of music that Bang on a Can plays, since we’re not so fond of the ones it’s been given so far,” and compiled eighty-three of the 221 recommendations on its website, from “Adventure Classical” to “Church Bingo Chance Music” to “Where-Are-The-Dancers-With-The-Garbage-Can-

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<sup>244</sup> See poster reprinted by Andrew Friscano, “Undiscovered Islands—An ‘Indie’ Classical Series in May @ Galapagos, Matmos in Princeton & More,” *Brooklyn Vegan*, 5 May 2009, [http://www.brooklynvegan.com/archives/2009/05/undiscovered\\_is.html](http://www.brooklynvegan.com/archives/2009/05/undiscovered_is.html); Swartz, “NewAm Archipelago series fall 09 FINAL copy,” 4 October 2009; and Sarah Baird Knight, “ymusic + itsnotyoutisme 3DM press release\_v3,” 31 August 2011, New Amsterdam institutional archives.

<sup>245</sup> Ross, “Listen to This,” *New Yorker*, 16 February 2004; reprinted in Ross, *Listen to This* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

Lids Music.”<sup>246</sup> For a June 2006 post on his blog *The Rest is Noise*, Ross jokingly suggested he had decided to rename classical music “Awesome Music”; echoing Ross, in September 2007, New Amsterdam mounted an artist showcase that it labeled “Awesome Music Live.”<sup>247</sup>

The closest terminological predecessor to “indie classical” was alternative, or “alt-classical,” popularized by Greg Sandow on his *ArtsJournal* blog.<sup>248</sup> He had employed the term regularly since 1997 to refer to contemporary music that appealed to audiences who might not ordinarily attend orchestral or opera performances, and first described New Amsterdam as “alternative classical” in a 2009 column in the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>249</sup> *Washington Post* critic Anne Midgette similarly utilized alt-classical in an October 2009 article to identify the trend of new ensembles that played in club venues, and were also increasingly programmed by mainstream presenters.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Bang on a Can, “Name These Tunes,” February 2005, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050215061041/http://www.bangonacan.org/namecontest1.html>

<sup>247</sup> See Ross, “Welcome to the Noise,” *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), 20 June 2006, [http://www.therestisnoise.com/2006/06/welcome\\_to\\_the\\_.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2006/06/welcome_to_the_.html); and Ross, “Awesome Cage Birthday Agenda,” *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), 5 September 2007, <http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/09/awesome-agenda.html>. In 2005, Ross also lightheartedly suggested that the music of the Look & Listen Festival—curated by Snider, and featuring New Amsterdam artists including NOW Ensemble and So Percussion—be labeled “Lower Midtown Music.” Ross, “Lower Midtown Manifesto,” *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), 13 April 2005, [http://www.therestisnoise.com/2005/04/lower\\_midtown\\_m.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2005/04/lower_midtown_m.html).

<sup>248</sup> Sandow appears to have first used “alternative classical” in a 1997 *Wall Street Journal* article in which he described popular contemporary music that had reached an alternative audience to that of classical music, including artists such as Philip Glass, the Kronos Quartet, Henryk Górecki, and Bang on a Can. Greg Sandow, “Pickin’ and Grinnin’ at Lincoln Center,” *Wall Street Journal*, 28 October 1997. He used “alternative classical” first on his blog in December 2007; see Greg Sandow, “Making a Living,” *Sandow* (blog), 5 December 2007, [http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2007/12/making\\_a\\_living.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2007/12/making_a_living.html).

<sup>249</sup> Sandow, “A Young, Hip, Classical Crowd,” *Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 2009.

<sup>250</sup> Anne Midgette, “Classical Music Are Experimental With New Venues and New Music,” *Washington Post*, 14 October 2009.

The invention of these genre designators reflected cultural anxieties about the state of classical and new music, and the purported need for an “alternative” approach; the desire for musicians and institutions to rebrand their work to reach new audiences; and also the basic fact that such acts of naming would generate controversy that could spread via social media. Proposing new terms provoked response, and resulted in debates as to their meaning and validity.<sup>251</sup>

And discussions over alt-classical frequently drifted into addressing indie classical.<sup>252</sup> In 2010, a blog post in *NewMusicBox* described alt-classical as contemporary

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<sup>251</sup> Another term proposed was “mixed music,” invented by composer Joseph C. Phillips Jr. on his blog in 2009 and subsequently theorized in his 2011 master’s thesis. As Phillips wrote in 2009, “mixed music: music that goes beyond the rigid definitions of a singular genre to organically fuse multiple styles into something completely different (think how children of mixed race couples are neither one yet both of the races of their parents)...Other terms for this type of composition in the classical world are alt-classical or post-classical, but I think my term mixed music best describes this trend in music because it can reflect many different hybrids of styles: from the jazz world (groups such as the Bad Plus and Darcy Argue’s Secret Society mixing the jazz and rock/alternative worlds; Robert Glasper’s work with Q-Tip, Kanye West, Mos Def, and Maxwell or Roy Hargrove playing with D’Angelo or most of MeShell Ndegeocello’s output all working the jazz and creative black popular music angle (sometimes with a decidedly Prince-ian eclecticism and élan); contemporary classical and pop or electronica (Nico Muhly or the new *In C Remixed* recording) or my own compositions with Numinous, which fuses elements from contemporary classical and jazz to other more popular forms.” Joseph C. Phillips Jr., “Mixed Music—Stylistic Freedom in the Aughts: Composer Salon Live,” *Numinous Music* (blog), 25 November 2009, <http://www.numinousmusic.com/the-numinosum-blog/mixed-music-stylistic-freedoms-in-the-aughts-composer-salon-live>. See also Phillips, “The Music Composition ‘Miscère,’ the History of Mixed Music and New Amsterdam Records in the Contemporary New York City Mixed Music Scene” (MM thesis, Stephen F. Austin State University, 2011).

Mixed music is significantly broader in purview than indie classical, and emphasizes the hybrid work of African American musicians that discussions of indie classical typically overlooked. In 2015, New Amsterdam released Numinous’s album *Changing Same*, inspired by Amiri Baraka. As of June 2016, Phillips is one of only two African American composers that have recorded albums with New Amsterdam.

In its metaphor of *mestizaje*, Phillips’s conception of mixed music also strongly foregrounds the “naturalness” of drawing together disparate musical genres that I discussed in the previous chapter. As he said in interview, “You are blending these influences, but it’s not trying to be any of them, it’s trying to be something else—just like with a mixed race kid, I was thinking, well, it is like that. Black, white, mixed: they’re both, but they’re neither, they’re their own thing.” Phillips contrasted mixed music with Gunther Schuller’s concept of Third Stream, which felt “forced” in its blending of genres. Instead, mixed music “seemed to me that people were just writing with these influences, but trying to make it become—it’s none of whatever they’re putting in, it’s what’s coming out.” Phillips, interview with author, 1 December 2015.

<sup>252</sup> See, for example, a debate over alt-classical that unfolded on the blog and comments of composer Matt Marks, who was himself responding to other discussions of alt-classical online. Matt Marks, “Pop-O-Matic

music that sounded like pop.<sup>253</sup> Commenters weighed in on both the validity of the term and the validity of its definition. Composer Christopher Cerrone described his “desire to shoot a fiery arrow in the face of the next person who uses the obscenely overhyped phrases ‘alt-classical’ or ‘indie classical.’” Greenstein himself clarified that “‘indie classical’ is specifically not about the sound of the music that I am, or anyone else is, making”; instead, he and New Amsterdam used it to “describe the approach to disseminating that music, and framing it for potential audiences.”<sup>254</sup>

In several chat forums in 2011 hosted by writer and critic Olivia Giovetti, the online radio station Q2 Music asked participants to reflect on appropriate terms for describing the new-music scene. In one, David T. Little—who, since the Free Speech Zone tour, had released an album on New Amsterdam in 2010 with his ensemble Newspeak—wrote: “I like ‘indie classical,’ as long as it describes how we do what we do, and not what it sounds like.”<sup>255</sup> For these powerful intermediaries, indie classical could summarize activity, but it should not summarize compositional output or musical style; Greenstein and Little desired a name that would not stick to the sound of their music in the way that minimalism had to that of composers in the 1970s.

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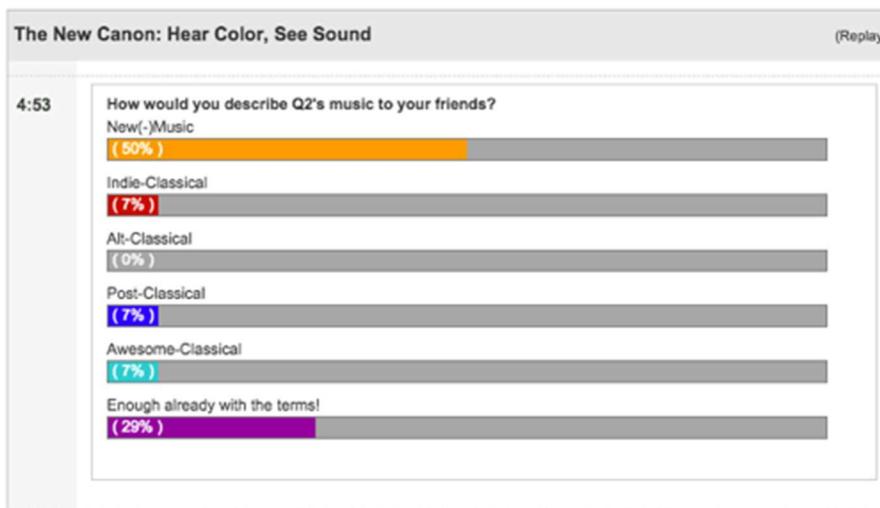
Trouble,” *Matt Marks Music* (blog), 28 April 2010, <http://mattmarksmusic.com/2010/04/28/pop-o-matic-trouble/>. See also a pushback against Sandow utilizing the term alt-classical in the comments section to his blog. Sandow, “Labels,” *Sandow* (blog), 25 November 2009, <http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2009/11/labels.html>.

<sup>253</sup> Colin Holter, “Overtaken by Alt-Classical,” *NewMusicBox*, 11 August 2010, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/Overtaken-By-AltClassical/>.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> David T. Little, quoted in chat forum, WQXR, “We Got Next,” *The New Canon*, *Q2 Music*, 9 May 2011, <http://www.wqxr.org#!/story/127811-we-got-next/>.

In another 2011 Q2 chat forum, listeners were polled as to their preferred term for how to “describe Q2’s music to your friends” (see Figure 3).<sup>256</sup> Although the poll does not reveal how many actual people voted in each category, it does register the presence of a debate: a preference for “new music” as an umbrella designator; support for “indie classical”; a lack of support for “alt-classical”; the use of “post-classical”; “Awesome Classical,” perhaps a continuation of Ross’s “Awesome Music”; and the desire for closure and an end to the process of naming (“Enough already with the terms!”).



**Figure 3: Screenshot taken 6 June 2016 from chat forum, WQXR, “Hear Color, See Sound,” *The New Canon, Q2 Music*, 16 May 2011, <http://www.wqxr.org/story/133750-hear-color-see-sound/>.**

As a graduate student and music critic, I had my own doubts about indie classical—until my dissertation research began in 2014, I was not aware that the term originated with Greenstein and New Amsterdam—and occasionally played the role of firebrand on Twitter, the popular social-media platform launched in July 2006. Twitter

<sup>256</sup> WQXR, “Hear Color, See Sound,” *The New Canon, Q2 Music*, 16 May 2011, <http://www.wqxr.org/story/133750-hear-color-see-sound/>.

had become an online home for the new-music world by spring 2010; I started an account in June 2010, @seatedovation, first to keep up with tweets by composers including Muhly and Greenstein, and then to voice my own thoughts. In December 2011, I tweeted “Just heard the words ‘indie classical’ and ‘alt classical’ come out of my speakers. Vomited a little.”<sup>257</sup> That tweet initiated a discussion with Greenstein, Swartz, Ross, and other musicians, publicists, administrators, and critics about the purpose and limits of such terms. In Appendix 1, I have placed all thirty-seven tweets in this discussion in order, compiled with social media aggregation platform Storify; here I will briefly touch on a few major points and participants.

In the midst of graduate school coursework—and perhaps overly concerned with issues of periodization and genre—I wrote that: “I’m okay with naming things, with 2 conditions: 1) specificity of meaning, 2) no implicit/covert values.”<sup>258</sup> In hindsight, the naiveté of my perspective is quite clear; is there any musical name that is both specific in meaning and absent covert values? The conversation on Twitter alternated between jest and seriousness: as an alternative to indie classical, Ross suggested “swingin’ on the flippity-flop”; New Amsterdam Records subsequently tweeted “I guess we should plant our flag. ‘New Amsterdam, the first swingin’ on the flippity-flop record label, thusly branded in 2011.”<sup>259</sup> On a more serious note, Greenstein wrote that “It’s not like we

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<sup>257</sup> William Robin, Twitter post, 12 December 2011, 5:51 PM, [twitter.com/seatedovation](https://twitter.com/seatedovation). Unfortunately, I do not recall what the circumstances of the tweet were, or where I heard the terms.

<sup>258</sup> Robin, Twitter post, 12 December 2011, 7:01 PM, [twitter.com/seatedovation](https://twitter.com/seatedovation). At the time, I was immersed in a seminar on Haydn with Mark Evan Bonds, in which we questioned the need for periodization and read Janet Levy’s work on covert values in music writing. See Janet Levy “Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings about Music,” *Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 3–27.

<sup>259</sup> Ross, Twitter post, 12 December 2011, 7:06 PM, [twitter.com/alexrossmusic](https://twitter.com/alexrossmusic); New Amsterdam Records, Twitter post, 12 December 2011, 7:11 PM, [twitter.com/newamrecords](https://twitter.com/newamrecords). In an email, Ross pointed out that “this silliness is a reference to a hoax list of grunge slang that people got it into the *New York Times* at the

have any control over whether people use terms to describe music. The choice is between terms we create or terms others do” and “We can't have these conversations divorced from the real world, in which people make up all kinds of nonsense when left to their own devices.”<sup>260</sup> Greenstein and New Amsterdam, of course, had significant control over “whether people use terms:” indie classical is the one that the label chose and introduced to the world. Snider clarified that indie classical was a term that New Amsterdam used from its origins to suggest “small, independent, DIY—which is an important distinction from the ‘alt’ barfness.”<sup>261</sup> The conversation died away less than three hours after my initial tweet.

But not long afterwards, the “scene without a name” received its strongest naming, in Jayson Greene’s February 2012 *Pitchfork* article, “Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical,” that I address in Chapter 1. Greene explicitly played up the connection between indie classical and indie rock:

the new generation is pouring in: eager, collaborative, as invested in indie rock as they are in the nuts-and-bolts arcana of composition. Lately, it’s become hard to even tell an indie rock musician and a composer apart.<sup>262</sup>

In his framing, Greene shifts indie classical definitively from a method of distribution informed by the institutional model of indie rock to a vaguely defined style of music

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height of the grunge period—another instance of a subculture expressing unhappiness with how the mainstream media labels them.” Ross, email to author, 29 May 2016. Printed with permission. See Rick Martin, “Grunge: A Success Story,” *New York Times*, 15 November 1992.

<sup>260</sup> Greenstein, Twitter post, 12 December 2011, 7:27 PM, [twitter.com/juddgreenstein](https://twitter.com/juddgreenstein); Greenstein, Twitter post, 12 December 2011, 7:32 PM, [twitter.com/juddgreenstein](https://twitter.com/juddgreenstein).

<sup>261</sup> Snider, Twitter post, 12 December 2011, 8:14 PM, [twitter.com/sksnider](https://twitter.com/sksnider).

<sup>262</sup> Jayson Greene, “Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical,” 28 February 2012, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/8778-indie-classical/>.

informed by the aesthetics of indie rock. He also tracks the origins of indie classical's mixture of rock and classical back through the downtown of the minimalists and Bang on a Can, constructing the term as a current scene with a historical lineage. New Amsterdam, mentioned only once in the article, recedes from direct focus. Greene said that indie classical functioned as an "effective shorthand for communicating to publications" why they might want to cover new music.<sup>263</sup> That Greene foregrounded the "indie rock" aspect of indie classical might also have resonated with *Pitchfork's* readership.

*Pitchfork* strengthened the grouping of indie classical by broadening it to encompass many artists—including rock musicians such as Sufjan Stevens—granting it a history, and consecrating it in a prestigious and popular outlet. Indeed, as of January 2016, the second-highest search result on Google for "indie classical" was Greene's article.<sup>264</sup> The article represented the belated realization of one of New Amsterdam's original goals; in April 2008, Greenstein had written an email to *Pitchfork* introducing New Amsterdam and explaining that "indie classical is our current choice for sub-sub-genre."<sup>265</sup> *Pitchfork* rarely covered classical or new music, and dotdotdotmusic had been trying to convince the outlet to address the indie classical phenomenon for several years.

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<sup>263</sup> Greene, interview with author, 24 November 2015.

<sup>264</sup> In June 2016, the top search result for "indie classical" on Google.com is an article on the website *ClassicFM* which describes indie classical as "where the coolest indie rock musicians turn their hand to classical composition, and where classically-trained forward-thinkers turn to the indie underground for inspiration." Because it was published in August 2014, well after the indie classical debates took place—and possibly also because *ClassicFM* is not necessarily within the purview of the new-music online sphere—it seems to have been overlooked as a possibility for re-igniting controversy. Daniel Ross, "10 Great Indie Classical Artists to Discover," *ClassicFM*, 28 August 2014, <http://www.classicfm.com/discover/music/best-indie-classical/#e11lfdp3L6wtyoWK.99>.

<sup>265</sup> Greenstein, "Pitchfork letter," 2 April 2008, New Amsterdam institutional archives. Printed with permission from New Amsterdam.

This strengthening, however, led to further social media contestation. Although many musicians—including the New Amsterdam directors—tweeted in favor of the article, a second debate emerged. The conversation quickly drifted from addressing the term to addressing the scene it described. I joined in, questioning the necessity of an article introducing the indie classical scene given that it had already been well-established by 2012. In response, critic George Grella wrote that “*Pitchfork* definitely getting in on the tail-end of this one, ‘indie classical’ is already the new Establishment.”<sup>266</sup> Composer Christian Carey added that “I find the danger in ‘Indie Classical,’ much as I like it, is that it keeps composers working in other styles out.”<sup>267</sup> In these responses, we see a blurring of indie classical as term, aesthetic, and scene, bound to a critique of the power that the new generation had gained in the world of new music.

And though it was invented and originally marketed by composers themselves, others attributed the term to critics or publicists; *Pitchfork*, which did not specialize in classical music, appeared as an outside interloper. Carey called it a “gross misrepresentation, but again seems to be a curation problem, not the artists’ idea at all”; composer Matt Marks, who had blogged about alt-classical in 2010, retorted “What are you talking about?? I woke up this morning and said to myself, ‘Today is a great day to go write some indie classical!’”<sup>268</sup> Writer Daniel Johnson questioned the broadness of how Greene had applied the term, criticizing him for using it to simultaneously describe

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<sup>266</sup> George Grella, Twitter post, 28 February 2012, 3:31 PM, [twitter.com/gtra1n](https://twitter.com/gtra1n).

<sup>267</sup> Christian Carey, Twitter post, 28 February 2012, 3:32 PM, [twitter.com/cbcarey](https://twitter.com/cbcarey).

<sup>268</sup> Carey, Twitter post, 28 February 2012, 4:39 PM, [twitter.com/cbcarey](https://twitter.com/cbcarey); Matt Marks, Twitter post, 28 February 2012, 4:42 PM, [twitter.com/mattmarks](https://twitter.com/mattmarks).

the sound of disparate musics and their means for dissemination, thus “grouping composers who have neither style nor cultural context in common.”<sup>269</sup>

But the strongest backlash to indie classical was yet to come. In May 2012, the Australian *Sydney Morning Herald* published an article by critic Harriet Cunningham about the “indie classical movement.”<sup>270</sup> Mentioned in the piece was Muhly, who had become the poster child of indie classical for many writers, as an established young American composer with an international reputation who also worked with rock musicians such as Sufjan Stevens and Björk. In response to the article, he tweeted “oh man what am I going to do about this indie classical shit. If another person says it I am gonna wet myself.”<sup>271</sup> Still unaware of indie classical’s origins, I subsequently tweeted “The thing is with indie classical: at least minimalism was coined by a critic/composer.”<sup>272</sup> In a subsequent blog post addressing the issue on *NewMusicBox*—titled “Who Cares If You Call It Indie Classical?”—composer Isaac Schankler mused as to why the label was “uniquely distressing,” writing that “A common complaint is that it

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<sup>269</sup> Daniel S. Johnson, Twitter post, 29 February 2012, 4:56 PM, [twitter.com/linernotesdanny](https://twitter.com/linernotesdanny). Greene told me that he was mostly unaware of the controversy; as a music critic who covers many genres, he knew that the online community that might respond negatively to an article about contemporary classical music was significantly smaller than ones that could react to discussions of hip-hop or hardcore punk. He said that “I was reporting on something that the vast majority of the readers of *Pitchfork* didn’t know existed, period. They didn’t have any opinions on whether I did it well or right, they were just interested in the idea that it was there.” Greene, interview with author, 24 November 2015.

<sup>270</sup> Harriet Cunningham, “Listen to This,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 2012. Cunningham wrote the article in advance of the VIVID Live festival in Sydney, which included performances by Muhly (his *Planetarium*, a collaboration with Bryce Dessner and Sufjan Stevens) and My Brightest Diamond; she connected these American musicians to such local developments as the Australian Chamber Orchestra’s ACO Underground series, which juxtaposed classical and popular music.

<sup>271</sup> Nico Muhly, Twitter post, 11 May 2012, 6:49 PM, [twitter.com/nicomuhly](https://twitter.com/nicomuhly).

<sup>272</sup> Robin, Twitter post, 11 May 2012, 7:29 PM, [twitter.com/seatedovation](https://twitter.com/seatedovation). I had in mind composer-critics Michael Nyman and Tom Johnson, both of whom have claimed that they first used the term minimalism in a musical context.

describes cultural practices—a certain DIY aesthetic and entrepreneurial spirit—rather than musical qualities.”<sup>273</sup>

Following the Twitter discussion, Muhly and publicist Maura Lafferty agreed to each blog about indie classical on their respective websites. Drawing on her professional experience—and what she perceived as the importance of artists creating a perfect “pitch” or brand—Lafferty considered the term appropriate and useful.<sup>274</sup> In response, Muhly strongly rejected the idea of branding:

I did a show in London that I thought was pretty great, and then online it was all indie classical this and indie classical that... Nothing is gained by that description, even if it makes the PR people’s jobs easier. It attracts haters and lumps people together in a way that belies how actual communities of musicians function.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Isaac Schankler, “Who Cares If You Call It Indie Classical?” *NewMusicBox*, 16 May 2012, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/who-cares-if-you-call-it-indie-classical/>. Schankler also attempted to identify musical signifiers of indie classical, including an engagement with pop; a pervasive optimism in its desire to transcend genre; and a sense of “privilege” that, in stepping past the issue of genre, composers believed that they might communicate seamlessly to new audiences.

<sup>274</sup> Maura Lafferty, “In Defense of ‘Indie Classical,’” *Maura Lafferty* (blog), 19 June 2012, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121026002011/http://mauralafferty.com/2012/06/in-defense-of-indie-classical/>.

<sup>275</sup> Muhly, “Hindi Classical,” *Nico Muhly* (blog), 21 June 2012, <http://nicomuhly.com/news/2012/hindi-classical/>. In March and April 2012, Muhly participated in concerts at The Barbican in London; on 16 March 2012, the premiere of his Cello Concerto with soloist Oliver Coates as well as the music of Mazzoli, Owen Pallett, and the 802 Tour, a project with artists from Bedroom Community; and on 9 April 2012, *Planetarium*, a collaboration with Sufjan Stevens and Bryce Dessner. I have not found any reception of these performances that refers specifically to “indie classical”; Muhly was likely alluding to a negative review of the March concert in the *Telegraph* by critic Ivan Hewett, who wrote that “I’d heard a rumour there was a new genre out there called ‘alt-classical,’ and last Friday I had my first knowing encounter with it.... The first thing I discovered about alt-classical is that it’s achingly hip. Every piece was greeted with ecstatic whoops from the young audience. In every other respect it was curiously indefinite, like a watercolour landscape smeared while still wet.” Ivan Hewett, “Nico Muhly Premiere, Barbican, Review,” *Telegraph*, 20 March 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalconcertreviews/9155281/Nico-Muhly-Premiere-Barbican-review.html>.

Muhly’s perspective on indie classical was also in line with his previous blogging, in which he strongly rebuked music writing that focused on the reputation or past coverage of artists (including himself) rather than the music itself. See, for example, Muhly, “Friends with Dogs, The Restaurant Industry and a Bad Review,” *Nico Muhly* (blog), 20 August 2008, <http://nicomuhly.com/news/2008/friends-with-dogs-the-restaurant-industry-and-a-bad-review/>.

In his blog post, Muhly dismissed “indie classical” on two fronts: he wrote that such buzzword terminology was itself meaninglessly limiting (he advocated, instead, that “musicians should be able to describe the universe in which their music exists”); and “indie” as a designator was questionable given his own participation in classical music’s institutional apparatus (at the time, he was preparing for the Metropolitan Opera premiere of his opera *Two Boys*, and had already released three albums on the label Decca). Muhly had gained significant press and institutional support from early in his career—when New Amsterdam launched in 2008, he had already received the *Two Boys* commission—and could afford to willfully misrepresent the role that publicists and journalists played in strengthening the position of his peers. He had experienced indie classical as a pejorative term leveled against his music; he did not need the brand, and could thus forcefully and publicly repudiate it.

Since the *Pitchfork* and *Sydney Morning Herald* articles placed the definitional weight of “indie classical” among critics rather than composers, Muhly could also attack the term without directly attacking his colleagues: he could chastise publicists and journalists rather than Greenstein or New Amsterdam, attributing “indie classical” to “PR people” rather than the musicians who first negotiated its meaning. And because Muhly may be the most widely publicized American composer of his generation—and participated in many additional interviews in advance of *Two Boys* at the Met—his blog represented a strong and enduring point of contention, seemingly standing as the definitive take on indie classical from the perspective of artists themselves. In subsequent discussions of Muhly’s music, journalists connected him to his dislike of the term,

keeping it in use but as a negative qualifier.<sup>276</sup> Indie classical had become a tarnished phrase, invented by critics and publicists to narrowly and incorrectly define a scene that did not need a name. As *The Guardian* headlined a blog post in November 2013, “Just don’t call it indie classical.”<sup>277</sup>

Since those 2012 debates, indie classical has faded from prominent usage, although it still remains in circulation.<sup>278</sup> New Amsterdam ceased publicly using the label in 2013; in November 2014, Greenstein told an interviewer that “‘Indie classical’ was a term we used a lot in the early days of New Amsterdam...since people started describing the music in reductive ways, I’ve been shying away from using that term, instead using

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<sup>276</sup> An August 2012 article for the *CBC* featured a graphic with a picture of Muhly next to the phrase “What the \*#@% Is Indie Classical,” and quoted Muhly’s Twitter and blog complaints. See Michael Morreale, “Indie Classical: New Label, or PR Hype?” *CBC*, 15 August 2012, <http://music.cbc.ca/#!/blogs/2012/8/Indie-classical-new-label-or-PR-hype>.

An interview about *Two Boys*, in advance of the Met production, opened with Muhly critiquing the concept of indie classical and declaring “It doesn’t get any less indie than the Met.” Hillary Weston, “Nico Muhly’s ‘Two Boys’ Brings the Internet to the Opera,” *Blackbook*, 5 November 2013, <http://bbook.com/uncategorized/nico-muhlys-two-boys-brings-internet-opera/>.

And in another article in conjunction with *Two Boys*, an interviewer asked Muhly his opinion about “indie classical” and he offered a similar response. See David Graver, “Interview: Nico Muhly,” *Cool Hunting*, 2 October 2013, <http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/interview-nico-muhly-two-boys>.

<sup>277</sup> Selim Bulut, “Just Don’t Call It Indie Classical,” *The Guardian*, 1 November 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/nov/01/neo-classical-nils-frahm>. Bulut instead described the music as “neo-classical,” apparently unaware of that term’s historical baggage.

<sup>278</sup> The last major discussion over indie classical on Twitter took place in November 2012, following composer Christopher Cerrone’s negative response to a *New Sounds* radio broadcast on WNYC, hosted by Schaefer, that grouped him among “New York Indie Classical” composers. Cerrone, Twitter post, 3 November 2012, 10:13 AM, [twitter.com/chrisCerrone](https://twitter.com/chrisCerrone); WNYC, “New York Indie Classical,” *New Sounds*, program #3392, first aired 23 November 2012.

‘post-genre music.’”<sup>279</sup> As Greenstein told me, “People were just using it to mean the sound, and we didn’t want to feed that fire.”<sup>280</sup>

The replacement of “indie classical” with “post-genre” suggests the maturing of an organization that no longer needs to actively “define its identity in the marketplace,” as Swartz originally put it. For New Amsterdam composers, “post-genre” is a reflexive term that is not meant to suggest a “new” genre, but allow the label to continue to represent, as its website described in January 2016, “highly skilled composers and performers whose work does not adhere to traditional genre boundaries.”<sup>281</sup> Former intern and current label manager Michael Hammond told me that “I think I prefer post-genre to indie classical, but I don’t use that when I’m talking to people: I don’t say ‘We’re a post-genre label,’ I say ‘We represent newly-composed music.’”<sup>282</sup> As Britelle described post-genre, “It’s not another genre, it’s ‘Let’s just stop having this conversation’ ... the movement is best served by some kind of term that undermines the notion of genre itself.”<sup>283</sup> That said, in 2015, Britelle expressed interest to me in writing a book that would focus on the idea of “post-genre” as an aesthetic current in contemporary culture. And though Snider preferred the term, she also raised qualms about the exclusionary implications of post-genre: “I imagine most composers would bristle at the idea that their music is classifiable by a certain genre. So to say that some music is ‘post-genre’ implies

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<sup>279</sup> Greenstein, quoted in Greg Salisbury, “A Classical Genre on the Brink of Change,” *Jewish Exponent*, 19 November 2014, <http://jewishexponent.com/culture/2014/11/a-classical-genre-on-the-brink-of-change>.

<sup>280</sup> Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

<sup>281</sup> New Amsterdam Records, “About,” <http://newamrecords.com/about/>.

<sup>282</sup> Hammond, interview with author, 5 March 2015.

<sup>283</sup> Britelle, interview with author, 5 September 2014.

that other music doesn't have a host of influences informing it, which isn't the intention. Like most shorthands, it's relative."<sup>284</sup>

The idea of post-genre echoes New Amsterdam's original "music without walls" ethos, but could easily present the same conundrum as indie classical: one could imagine post-genre gaining currency as a term, stabilizing a set of sonic associations, and becoming prescriptive, controversial, and weighted with fraught definitional status. Categorizing an attempt to de-categorize is ultimately a fruitless endeavor. The benefit of post-genre for New Amsterdam in 2016 is that the label has already spent nearly a decade defining itself, and no longer needs to brand itself as actively as it did in the era of indie classical. Post-genre instead reveals a consistency of values within the institution itself, one in which labeling and anti-labeling have existed in a productive contradiction since its origins, and in which a record label consistently tried, and ultimately failed, to control the specific message that accompanies the music it released into the world.

The decline of indie classical's cultural cachet is perhaps best reflected by a statement in October 2015 from producer Kate Nordstrum—who curates the series *Liquid Music* in St. Paul, Minnesota, a partnership with New Amsterdam—in which she described new-music violinist Miranda Cuckson:

She is an enthralling musician and wise practitioner, commissioning so much music for herself; she's really in control of her career and focuses. Even before I heard her play, I was inspired by the way she navigated the new music terrain. In many ways she's been a quiet leader in the "indie classical" movement. That phrase is no longer in vogue but Miranda actually does embody it."<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Snider, interview with author, 26 April 2014.

<sup>285</sup> Kate Nordstrum, quoted in "SPCO's Liquid Music Series to Present Miranda Cuckson in 'Sun Propeller,'" *Broadway World*, 21 October 2015, <http://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwmusic/article/SPCOs-Liquid-Music-Series-to-Present-Miranada-Cuckson-in-Sun-Propeller-20151021>.

But it is also important to note that any “decline” is one reflected among the central actors of New Amsterdam and its affiliated scene, and does not necessarily represent the reality of institutions or spokespersons tangentially or not at all related to it, who might not have followed the term’s controversies or taken after New Amsterdam’s abandonment. As New Amsterdam-affiliated artists traveled outside New York, “indie classical” certainly spread with them. When the University of South Carolina presented the ensemble yMusic in 2014, for example, it labeled the concert “Indy Classical Innovation.”<sup>286</sup> And the streaming service Spotify maintains a regularly updated, curated “Indie Classical: Composed in 21st Century” playlist that features a work by Greenstein as its opening track.<sup>287</sup>

In my interviews with composers, and performers, and administrators affiliated with New Amsterdam, I asked them what they thought of the label and similar terms such as alt-classical. Some were deeply skeptical of their efficacy. As violinist, guitarist, and composer Caleb Burhans—half of the duo *itsnotyouitsme* that had performed at the Joe’s Pub concert in 2008—said, “People need to have labels for record stores—oh, wait, record stores don’t exist anymore.”<sup>288</sup> Others thought terms were useful, but were wary of mission creep: Mazzoli said that “I think there’s a short jump to made from those labels and these super-annoying discussions about ‘bridging the pop and the classical.’ I hate

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<sup>286</sup> “Southern Exposure 2013–14 Series,” University of South Carolina, [http://www.sc.edu/study/colleges\\_schools/music/concerts\\_and\\_events/southern\\_exposure/southern\\_exposure\\_2013\\_14.php](http://www.sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/music/concerts_and_events/southern_exposure/southern_exposure_2013_14.php).

<sup>287</sup> See [https://play.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/51lgGoMbd6Oto4rcq2UOqn?play=true&utm\\_source=open.spotify.com&utm\\_medium=open](https://play.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/51lgGoMbd6Oto4rcq2UOqn?play=true&utm_source=open.spotify.com&utm_medium=open).

<sup>288</sup> Caleb Burhans, interview with author, 18 April 2015.

talking about music that way.”<sup>289</sup> Nadia Sirota told me that “At the end of the day, what you want is something recognizable. I find indie classical really frustrating for a number of reasons, but if it catches on, that’s great.”<sup>290</sup> No composer or performer that I spoke to said that he or she would purposefully continue to use the term: McBane acknowledged that he now prefers to refer to Build as an “instrumental band”; Mazzoli is comfortable identifying herself as simply a classical composer, feeling that it is the primary cultural tradition in which she participates.<sup>291</sup> Music critics John Schaefer and Allan Kozinn were content to continue using the term; they felt that labels were important to the profession of criticism, and that indie classical was a useful and evocative summary of New Amsterdam’s world.<sup>292</sup>

Indie classical was created by specific agents for the purpose of branding a scene to a mainstream press and new audiences, a purpose temporarily achieved because of the strengths of its sponsors and particular nature of its public sphere. Despite Muhly’s protestations, indie classical as a descriptor gained quite a bit for its scene; even though composers might protest the idea that the term suggested an aesthetic, its strong resonances with indie rock allowed critics such as Greene to introduce it to new audiences. Because it was originally defined by composers, indie classical could be

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<sup>289</sup> Mazzoli, interview with author, 10 November 2015.

<sup>290</sup> Nadia Sirota, interview with author, 17 November 2014.

<sup>291</sup> McBane, interview with author, 19 November 2015.

<sup>292</sup> Indeed, since Kozinn left the *New York Times* in 2014 and moved to Maine, he has newly reengaged with the term as classical music critic for the *Portland Press Herald*; in a May 2016 review, for example, he defined indie classical as “a corner of the new-music world in which young composers and performers who are comfortable in both pop and classical music blur the lines.” Kozinn, “Concert Review: Classical? Pop? Both, from Jherek Bischoff and Mirah at SPACE,” *Portland Press Herald*, 10 May 2016, <http://www.pressherald.com/2016/05/10/concert-review-classical-pop-both-from-jherek-bischoff-and-mirah-at-space/>.

accepted by other musicians as a valid term, but one whose definition had to be circumscribed—to refer to a means of distribution, not a sound. But because it was promoted by publicists and accepted by journalists—with its origins obscured—indie classical could *also* be dismissed as outsider PR jargon. Because it had *both*—the support of insider composers who advocated for it, and a means to distribute the term to outsiders through a specific apparatus, from composers to institutions to publicists to critics to the world—it gained discursive strength. At the same time, the cultural capital that “indie classical” as a brand helped its community gain—the success in reaching a *Pitchfork* demographic, and the success of Muhly as a spokesperson for his scene—ultimately undermined that strength and led to its abandonment.

Tracing the controversies that surrounded indie classical offers an example of how musicologists might approach other aesthetic labels that carry similar historical baggage. In considering clarifying or theorizing such terms—as has been done with scholarship on categories such as minimalism and spectralism, and also critiqued in studies of experimentalism—scholars may want to tread more lightly than I once did on Twitter.<sup>293</sup> Perhaps rather than adjudicate their definitional status, we might serve as witnesses to their emergences, while still aware that our own acts of documentation will affect the communities that we document.

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<sup>293</sup> Definitional discourse surrounding the term “minimalism” has been robust and controversial. See, for example, Jonathan Bernard, “The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music,” *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 86–132; Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Timothy A. Johnson, “Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?” *The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 741–73; and Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll ap Sion, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

For spectralism, see Drott, “The End(s) of Genre.” For experimentalism, see Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); and George Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 92–122.

## Curation

What makes an album a “New Amsterdam album”? In this section, I examine the curatorial practices of the record label and focus on two of its records: Snider’s 2010 *Penelope*, a “quintessential” New Amsterdam project, and Battle Trance’s *Palace of Wind*, a submission from an outsider to the indie classical scene. Together, these two albums offer a complicated portrait of how New Amsterdam’s “music without walls” operates in practice, and what the identity of the label represents for its artists.

Although New Amsterdam advocates for “music without walls,” it is a deeply selective record label with a specific mission. The label’s 2016 mission statement for submissions on its website is detailed and thorough, strongly emphasizing the ideas of post-genre and the album as a musical work:

New Amsterdam Records is dedicated first and foremost to representing mixed-genre music by trained composers and performers—an emerging genre-less form of music that currently has no concrete representation in the music marketplace. To better serve this purpose, New Amsterdam does not release work that has been previously commercially recorded or is specifically tied to one genre. Moving forward, we are looking to release albums of sophisticated composed music that have the continuity and thematic consistency of pop albums, recorded in a style comparable to pop records. As a label, we aim to avoid live performance-oriented or demo-oriented classical releases designed to replicate concerts of disparate pieces, or to solicit performance and/or commission opportunities. Our albums are intended to exist both on record and on stage as fluid set-length works of art—not unlike “concept” albums—and the live presentation of our albums both in New York and beyond is integral to our plan. Due to our specific interests, we prefer to work hand-in-hand with ensembles or performers with their projects, assisting in the solicitation and development of material, overseeing graphical elements, and formulating individualized publicity campaigns. In general, we tend to work most with projects in their later stages of musical development, functioning as a “finish line” of sorts for projects. We do not “sign” artists in a conventional sense, instead working exclusively on a project-to-project basis. New Amsterdam releases only

8–10 albums a year (though we certainly would wish to release many more), preferring to focus our full energy and resources into each project we endorse.<sup>294</sup>

Such a statement is typical of New Amsterdam in its simultaneous emphasis on a post-genre identity (“an emerging genre-less form of music”) and circumscription of the specific historical tradition in which such post-genre music might exist (“sophisticated composed music”). It emphasizes that submissions should be fundamentally new, and not music that has previously been recorded; that the label’s albums represent unified artistic works, ones that New Amsterdam associates more strongly with the practices of pop than those of classical or new music; that live performance are central to the institution’s identity; and that recording projects typically reach New Amsterdam only in their final stages.

In 2013, manager Michael Hammond told the *Wall Street Journal* that the label received three to four submissions per week; that year, New Amsterdam released ten albums, less than seven percent of the approximate number of submissions that Hammond estimated.<sup>295</sup> As of June 2016, the label listed seventy-five total albums on its website released since 2007. Although New Amsterdam first focused primarily on records by artistic colleagues and friends of the generational cohort, it has accepted submissions since the label’s founding; the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 2013 that “a fifth of projects come from those outside the immediate New Amsterdam community.”<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> See <http://newamrecords.com/about/>.

<sup>295</sup> Corinne Ramey, “The Misfits of Brooklyn’s Music Scene,” *Wall Street Journal*, 27 December 2013.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid. Hammond said that: “From the submission emails we get, I’d say about 20% of them have delved into our mission statement and are really pumped about it. We get a lot of just, like, ‘Hey you’re a record label, here’s my singer-songwriter project.’ Which is cool—you find some interesting stuff—but I think a lot of people are really pumped about it, I think other people just see another artist they like on the label, and they submit just from that point of reference.” Hammond, interview with author, 5 March 2015.

For the label's first two years, submissions were evaluated by New Amsterdam's artistic directors. In 2009, the label created a rotating advisory committee comprising peer musicians to evaluate submissions. In 2014, however, the advisory board was reformatted to comprise label artistic directors and staff members; according to Hammond, the logistics of organizing non-staff members had become too complicated. A 2016 *Wall Street Journal* article described this latest version of the evaluation process, in which Brittelle, Hammond, booking manager Curt LeClair, publicist Jill Strominger, executive director Emily Bookwalter, and development manager Erika Rush gathered around a table in an apartment in Brooklyn for a "listening session":

They were clearly enjoying themselves. Listening to a loopy electronic composition submitted by a small ensemble, William Brittelle, the co-artistic director and co-founder, popped a grin.

"It reminds me of early Pearl Jam records, which always had one weird track, and you're really glad it's there, even though you didn't listen to it every time," he said.

A submission with a throwback vibe was reluctantly dismissed. Other niche labels, they observed, could do a better job representing "experimental chamber folk."

They applauded an artist whose swirling, half-improvised composition defied description.

"This is such a hyper-personal interpretation of different elements," said Executive Director Emily Bookwalter. "It's exactly what we want."<sup>297</sup>

These statements align with the 2016 mission statement, as well as the identity of the label first crafted in 2007. A successful New Amsterdam project seamlessly fuses genres in a way that appears indebted to the "personal" expression of its creator. "Throwback vibes" are dismissed; the music should feel up-to-date, in line with the generationalism

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<sup>297</sup> Anne Kadet, "Brooklyn Label Makes Music, But Not Much Money," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 May 2016.

that informed the early ethos of the label. Genres such as experimental chamber folk, situated as outside the curatorial frame of “music without walls,” might find support elsewhere.

Sarah Kirkland Snider’s album *Penelope* faced no such curatorial challenges. “To me, this is the most quintessentially NewAm album,” Brittelle said of the record, around the time that it was released in October 2010.<sup>298</sup> In a group interview with New Amsterdam’s artistic directors conducted by Jayson Greene, Snider replied that:

This album wouldn’t exist were it not for Bill and Judd. They encouraged me so thoroughly from day one to make this music all that I wanted it to be, not to hold back in any way, and they played a huge role in its development, acting as creative and logistic sounding boards at every step. To me this album is a reminder that something that seems out of reach can happen if supported in the right way, by the right people. What I want most out of New Amsterdam is to make that happen for as many deserving members of our community as possible; to be a force that helps people achieve their artistic goals in the most satisfying way possible.<sup>299</sup>

This quote illustrates two key aspects of the label and *Penelope*: that New Amsterdam’s directors perceived a distinct identity for their institution, one that they connected to this record; and that the culture of an institution can play a vital role in the creation of a musical work.

Although Snider played piano and cello in her youth and dabbled in composition, she majored in psychology and sociology in her undergraduate as Wesleyan; after graduating in 1995, she moved to New York and worked at a pro-choice law firm. While considering pursuing public interest law, she began writing music for off-off-Broadway plays produced by friends; in a 2015 interview, she said that “I was really enjoying

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<sup>298</sup> Brittelle, quoted in Greene, “Label Profile: New Amsterdam Records,” *eMusic*, 26 October 2010, <http://www.wonderingsound.com/spotlight/label-profile-new-amsterdam-records/>.

<sup>299</sup> Snider, quoted in *ibid.*

writing the music and I found that I was taking more and more unpaid days off to write the music, so I realized that it made more sense for me to pursue composition seriously.”<sup>300</sup> Snider took classes at Juilliard, New York University, and Mannes, and enrolled in the composition master’s program at New York University to study with composer Justin Dello Joio but left after three semesters; she subsequently began the master’s program at Yale in 2003. Her colleagues in the Yale program included Greenstein, Mazzoli, NOW Ensemble co-founder Patrick Burke, and NOW guitarist and composer Marc Dancigers. She developed a kinship with Greenstein at Yale, because they both felt constricted by the culture of the School of Music. Although Greenstein was advised to attend Yale by the Bang on a Can founders, he recalled that

Going to Yale actually felt like a step backwards in time, where it was actually a quite conservative place that had a legacy of producing composers who were in some ways open to diverse influences. But the space itself felt more like a space where things were pulled into the classical tradition... It felt very much like the work that those of us who wound up starting NOW Ensemble, or Sarah and I, were doing, the conversations we were having with each other were outside and in some ways against what we were experiencing in the pedagogical universe of Yale.<sup>301</sup>

The effects of what Greenstein called a “quite conservative place,” however, were amplified in Snider’s experiences due to her gender. She has spoken frequently about the restrictions that the academic environment placed on her aesthetic development because she is a “woman composer.”<sup>302</sup> Even as graduate programs in composition accept more women, gender distribution within academic composition is significantly unequal. A

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<sup>300</sup> Snider, interview with author, 22 March 2014.

<sup>301</sup> Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

<sup>302</sup> See, for example, Ronni Reich, “Mixing Mother-Love and Melody: Princeton Composer Sarah Kirkland Snider Found That Starting a Family Fed Her Creative Endeavors,” *The Star-Ledger*, 13 May 2012, [http://www.nj.com/entertainment/music/index.ssf/2012/05/mixing\\_mother-love\\_and\\_melody.html](http://www.nj.com/entertainment/music/index.ssf/2012/05/mixing_mother-love_and_melody.html).

National Science Foundation report noted that of the 104 doctorates in music theory and composition awarded in 2014, only twenty-four, or 23.1%, were earned by women; a 2015 report in the journal *Science* compared PhDs in music to other non-STEM disciplines, and demonstrated that PhDs earned by women in music theory and composition (which comprised 15.8% in the 2011 NSF data that the study drew on) were by far the lowest percentage of any subfield in the social sciences and humanities.<sup>303</sup> In 2013, composer Hannah Lash became the first woman to be appointed to the composition faculty of Yale.<sup>304</sup> These issues are continually addressed in the new-music community, especially online. A 2012 post on *NewMusicBox* by composer Amy Beth Kirsten titled “The ‘Woman Composer is Dead’”—which argued against the programming of female

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<sup>303</sup> National Science Foundation, Survey of Earned Doctorates 2014, <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/srvydoctorates/>. The next-least percentage of female doctorates in a non-STEM subfield in 2011, the *Science* report noted in a bar graph, was 31.4%, for philosophy. In a STEM discipline, the lowest percentage was 18% in physics, making the PhD in music theory and composition the most gender disparate of any doctoral degree. See Sarah-Jane Leslie, Andrei Cimpian, Meredith Meyer, and Edward Freeland, “Supplementary Materials for ‘Expectations of Brilliance Underlie Gender Distributions Across Academic Disciplines,’” *Science* 347 (2014): 8. I discovered this report after several composers shared the 15.8% statistics on Facebook in early 2016, linking to a citation of the data in a blog post on the online magazine *Edge*. See Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, “The En-Gendering of Genius,” *Edge*, <http://edge.org/response-detail/26654>.

<sup>304</sup> In her Yale oral history interview, Lash describes her experience of joining the faculty as its first female composer: “There’s not a lot of women mentors yet in composition, and as I said before, Augusta Read Thomas was a mentor for me briefly when I was a teenager, and that was really wonderful, but she’s kind of the only one for me, and I know that many people do have more than I did, but the fact that that was even possible for me just to have one indicates to me that we really do have a paucity of women in the field in more powerful positions, and I feel so very, very strongly that I just want to make that a mission for myself. Not that I want to somehow have a niche market of just mentoring young women, not by any stretch, because I think that can be very damaging to do that, both for me and for the young women potentially whom I would be mentoring. But I do—I just want to, you know, I want my life, I want my presence here to serve as hope, an example, inspiration for other women aspiring to be in the field and not be sort of stuck or tamped down by the fact there are so many high level male colleagues. So I really feel very strongly about that.” Hannah Lash, interview with Maura Valenti, 12 July 2013, Yale Oral History of American Music, 438b–e, 51.

composers based on gender—became a flashpoint of controversy and garnered more than a hundred comments.<sup>305</sup>

While working on her orchestral work *Disquiet* at Yale, Snider recalled in a 2012 interview, a professor told her that “Unfortunately, Sarah, in order to be taken seriously as a female composer, you have to write like a man.”<sup>306</sup> Snider felt that only her male colleagues were permitted to unabashedly embrace a Romantic musical vocabulary. As she told critic Ronni Reich, “I look forward to the day that we’re past all this...I look forward to the female Barber’s ‘Adagio for Strings,’ the female Górecki’s 3rd, the female Arvo Pärt.”<sup>307</sup> Snider felt pressured to write complex music and suppress her melodic instinct, creating works that she later believed did not fully represent her voice as a composer.

These constrictions directly informed *Penelope*. The album originated as music for a monodrama that was written, performed, and directed by playwright Ellen McLaughlin: a reimagining of the story of Odysseus from the perspective of his wife. The play unfolds in an ambiguous present day in which a veteran returns home from an unnamed war, suffering from brain damage; his wife attempts to navigate his memory loss and war experiences by reading him passages from *The Odyssey*. Snider composed songs, accompanied by string quartet, that McLaughlin would sing as interludes between the spoken text; because McLaughlin could not read music, Snider wrote deliberately simple melodies that the playwright could learn by ear. Working outside the context of

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<sup>305</sup> Amy Beth Kirsten, “The ‘Woman Composer’ Is Dead,” *NewMusicBox*, 19 March 2012, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/the-woman-composer-is-dead/>.

<sup>306</sup> Snider, quoted in Reich, “Mixing Mother-Love and Melody.”

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

what she saw as new music—writing for an untrained singer in a theater production—allowed Snider to explore expressive idioms that she felt she could not develop in the academic environment. “The songs began life as simpler than I had let myself write while at Yale,” she said.<sup>308</sup>

After the play premiered in February 2008, Snider decided to expand the material she wrote into a large-scale song cycle for vocalist Shara Nova and album for New Amsterdam. Nova earned a bachelor’s degree in vocal performance from the University of North Texas in 1997; after graduation, she moved to New York and released two albums with her band Awry. In 2006, she started recording as the indie-rock band My Brightest Diamond, in which she sang and played several instruments; she initially recruited musicians with an ad on Craigslist that read “String Players Wanted: If you like Boulez as much as PJ Harvey, call me.”<sup>309</sup> (One of the first musicians to respond to the ad, violinist Rob Moose, went on to found yMusic, which recorded as My Brightest Diamond’s backup band for her 2011 album *All Things Will Unwind*.) In the rock world, she has also maintained a reputation as a collaborator with popular acts including Sufjan Stevens and The Decemberists

As a self-described fan of My Brightest Diamond, Snider “felt like the music needed somebody who understood rock and pop performance practice, but more than that somebody whose own artistic identity was compatible with the kind of music it was.”<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Snider, interview with author, 22 March 2014.

<sup>309</sup> Pandora, “Pandora at SXSW, 16 March 2006, [http://blog.pandora.com/roadtrip/pandora\\_at\\_sxsw/](http://blog.pandora.com/roadtrip/pandora_at_sxsw/); Rob Moose recalls that the ad read “Britten, Buckley, Boulez, Björk.” See Justin Colletti, “String Section: Rob Moose & yMusic,” *SonicScoop*, 18 April 2012, <http://www.sonicscoop.com/2012/04/18/string-sections-rob-moose-ymusic/>.

<sup>310</sup> Snider, interview with author, 22 March 2014.

Having read that Nova studied opera, Snider began to imagine writing a new version of *Penelope* specifically for her. She connected with Nova through mutual friends and passed a version of the score on to the performer. Nova studied the work and they rehearsed together in April 2009, after which Snider continued to revise and expand the piece.

The subsequent back-and-forth collaboration between Snider and Nova shaped both the compositional process and the institutional trajectory of *Penelope*. As Snider told me,

Once I knew that I was going to be working with Shara, I sort of let go of the idea of this being a piece that was going to impress the classical world, and embraced the idea that this was just going off in its own direction. I wasn't going to be applying for grants with this music, I wasn't going to be trying to climb another rung in the classical ladder.<sup>311</sup>

As she expanded the music for Nova, Snider re-considered the music's context, with Nova's artistic personality and status in the indie-rock world allowing her to envision a place for the music outside of the perceived strictures of classical or new music. That imagined space paralleled the emergent New Amsterdam and its "music without walls." Snider said that "New Amsterdam opened a door in me, where I was able to go to a more personal place in my writing that I wasn't really aware existed."<sup>312</sup>

From when Snider first imagined Nova singing *Penelope*, the composer conceived of the work as drawing on the vocal style of My Brightest Diamond. When the pair first met to rehearse the score, Snider urged Nova to emphasize the speech-like qualities of the music and be less careful in her approach, asking her to sing it as "if it

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Snider, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

were her own music and she were just letting it rip from the heart.”<sup>313</sup> In separate interviews, Snider and Nova discussed that while Nova initially attempted to realize the score in a more “classical” style, Snider desired a “pop” sound.<sup>314</sup> But Snider was also imagining a very specific kind of “pop”:

She doesn’t scoop into the notes, which is something you find a lot in pop music: that sort of American Idol phenomenon of approaching notes with a grace note from a whole or half-step below. Or that kind of breathy vocal fry at the end of phrases. Typically, if you work with classical singers and ask them to sing in a poppier style, they’ll almost unconsciously invoke that ornamentation—that seems to be the defining characteristic of pop singing for many vocalists. But that’s not the kind of pop I’m interested in. And same for Shara: her approach to singing combines aspects of classical and pop in a way that makes it sound like both and neither. To me her singing has a timeless, uncategorizable quality, almost like Edith Piaf merged with aspects of organum and Björk.<sup>315</sup>

On the *Penelope* album, Nova’s breathy vocals are somewhere between singing, whispering, and speaking; she frequently leaves space between notes rather than holding them for their full value. Snider’s score includes several passages instructing Nova to interpret lines in free rhythm. Comparing the score to the recording reveals several examples in which Nova embellishes her vocal lines, stretching rhythms or dying away before the end of a held note.

As that early collaborative process unfolded, however, *Penelope* was also being prepared by another singer. The live premiere of the expanded cycle would feature accompaniment—string orchestra, electric guitar, percussion, and electronics—from Ensemble Signal, a new-music chamber orchestra. Signal cellist and director Lauren Radnovsky asked Snider if she could attempt the May 2009 premiere performance with

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<sup>313</sup> Snider, interview with author, 22 March 2014.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid; and Nova, interview with author, 7 March 2014.

<sup>315</sup> Snider, interview with author, 22 March 2014.

soprano Rachel Calloway, a specialist in new music. But both singer and composer found the experience difficult. As Snider described, “It was tricky because there wasn’t a shared vocabulary there for the kind of singing I was looking for”; she cited Nova and indie-rock musician St. Vincent as examples of the vocal style she sought.<sup>316</sup> The premiere was presented in as part of New Amsterdam’s series “Undiscovered Islands” at Galapagos, part of a month of “indie classical premieres.” In the *New York Times*, Steve Smith reviewed the concert favorably—contextualizing it within what he described as New Amsterdam’s work in “advancing an expansive, inclusive aesthetic”—but also wrote that the performance was “troubled by issues of balance” and “occasionally marred by Calloway’s inability to project over the amplified ensemble.”<sup>317</sup>

Snider recalled that “After that performance Lauren was like, ‘You definitely need a different singer for this. And we need a rock drummer.’ So that was just further affirmation that we needed to go in a between-the-genres direction.”<sup>318</sup> Even as the Undiscovered Island series, its club setting, and the composed score of *Penelope* fell within New Amsterdam’s indie classical purview, the performance presented difficulties that were not yet fully addressed: challenges with balance in a live concert setting, and challenges of working with a classically-oriented singer. It would take Nova’s voice and the imaginary space of a studio recording to realize what Snider envisioned for *Penelope*.<sup>319</sup> Indeed, what the composer specifically valued about Nova’s artistic persona

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<sup>316</sup> Snider, interview with author, 22 March 2014.

<sup>317</sup> Smith, “Welcome Home, Says a New Mrs. Odysseus,” *New York Times*, 24 May 2009.

<sup>318</sup> Snider, interview with author, 22 March 2014.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

was entirely in line with indie classical’s ideology of a seamless and natural “music without walls”:

What I love about her music is that it doesn't sound like she’s consciously picking and choosing styles or gestures at any given time; it all just blends together seamlessly into something her own. I love how this is most evident in her singing itself; she can transition from a gentle lilting classical head voice to a full-throttle banshee pop wail on the turn of a dime, tapping into this whole netherworld of emotion that isn’t the province of any particular genre.<sup>320</sup>

In November 2009, Nova, Snider, producer Lawson White, sound designer Michael Hammond, and Signal recorded the *Penelope* album, which New Amsterdam released a year later. It was among New Amsterdam’s most critically acclaimed records, receiving mentions in best-of-2010 lists from publications including *Time Out New York*, NPR, and WNYC.<sup>321</sup> Since 2009, live versions of *Penelope*—arranged for differing ensemble forces, but primarily sung by Nova—have been performed across the U.S (see below).<sup>322</sup>

Snider’s post-Yale trajectory has been filtered through the success of *Penelope* and the high profile of New Amsterdam. “It’s hard for me to imagine what my career would look like without New Amsterdam,” she said.<sup>323</sup> The composer’s catalog primarily comprises chamber, orchestral, and vocal works; the outsize presence of *Penelope* has led to her being praised by music critics as “genre-erasing,” “post-classical,” and

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<sup>320</sup> Snider, quoted in Daniel J. Kushner, “Ecstatic Music Festival Interview #5: Sarah Kirkland Snider and Rob Moose,” *Huffington Post*, 25 May 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-j-kushner/ecstatic-music-festival-i\\_3\\_b\\_835602.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-j-kushner/ecstatic-music-festival-i_3_b_835602.html).

<sup>321</sup> These are compiled on an informational website that Snider established for *Penelope*; see <http://penelope-music.com/#/press/>.

<sup>322</sup> A December 2015 performance of *Penelope* at the Gardner Museum in Boston by vocalist Carla Kihlstedt and the Firebird Ensemble was the first performance of the full work not sung by Nova since the Calloway premiere. David Weininger, “In Snider’s *Penelope*, Evidence of a Composer’s Journey,” *Boston Globe*, 26 November 2015.

<sup>323</sup> Snider, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

participating in “an increasingly populous inter-genre space.”<sup>324</sup> *Penelope* has presented a new set of constraints, different from those she encountered in school:

*Penelope* wound up becoming my most-performed work and the piece that I was best known for, oddly enough. If I’d known that was going to happen I probably would have had more trepidation releasing the record, because the negative side of it was that I did feel pigeonholed by it—“Oh, she writes *that* kind of music”—which wasn’t the whole story. I had a whole lot of classical—more classical—music that I’d written, and that I still wanted to write. I think of the music I wrote as a continuum, stylistically—different projects bring out different sides of my musical personality—and I didn’t want *Penelope* to define me.<sup>325</sup>

And if Snider gradually shifted *Penelope* towards indie classical—from theater project to live song cycle to recorded album, and from McLaughlin to Calloway to Nova—then its successor, the song cycle *Unremembered*, was conceived entirely in the New Amsterdam world. *Unremembered* originated with a series of vocal pieces written in 2011 for the octet Roomful of Teeth, which commissions new works that foreground techniques drawn from disparate musical traditions, from Tuvan throat singing to yodeling.<sup>326</sup> Snider wanted to continue exploring the material, and was commissioned for an expansion of the cycle by Greenstein’s Ecstatic Music Festival. The thirteen-song *Unremembered* cycle—written for seven singers (including Nova) and chamber orchestra—premiered at Merkin Concert Hall in February 2013.

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<sup>324</sup> See “Ecstatic Music Festival: Sarah Kirkland Snider,” *New Yorker*, 2 February 2013; Lily Troia, “Sarah Kirkland Snider and Shara Nova on *Penelope*,” *Minneapolis City Pages*, 25 February 2013; and Greene, “Penelope,” *Pitchfork*, 5 January 2011.

<sup>325</sup> Snider, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

<sup>326</sup> One of the songs was recorded for Roomful of Teeth’s 2012 debut album on New Amsterdam, which also included Teeth member and composer Caroline Shaw’s *Partita*. When Shaw won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in Music for *Partita*, the Teeth record became New Amsterdam’s best-selling album, and it received nominations for three Grammy awards in 2014 (it won a Grammy for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance). Shaw also sang backup vocals in a live performance of *Penelope* with Nova and Signal in April 2010.

The final “product” of the *Unremembered* project was an album released on New Amsterdam in September 2015, featuring Nova alongside Padma Newsome and DM Stith, two other singers working in similarly cross-genre spaces. The album’s production values are significantly higher than *Penelope*, and the music more ambitious in conception. Snider said that she felt much more comfortable exploring Nova’s voice than she had with *Penelope*, because of the close collaborative relationship they had developed over the prior six years. Orchestras including the North Carolina Symphony and San Francisco Symphony have presented selections from *Unremembered* featuring Nova. These performances have been tied directly to Snider’s more conventional work in the symphonic world: the North Carolina Symphony, for example, commissioned an orchestral work from her to premiere in April 2015, but when the world premiere was delayed the orchestra instead presented the *Unremembered* excerpts.<sup>327</sup>

*Unremembered* was steeped in the institutional pathways carved out by Snider and her colleagues, from Yale through New Amsterdam, and might represent the culmination of the “music without walls” ethos that the label first imagined in 2007. As Snider said,

*Penelope*, from my perspective, was in many ways more indie rock than classical. And the fact that classical ensembles didn’t kick me out of the club forever, but in fact asked me to write music for them specifically because of it made me think, “Oh, wait a minute, maybe I’ve been thinking about music in too narrow a way.” Even more narrowly than I had realized. I think there is a lot of structuring of the way that we think about music that takes place in academia; it encourages you to think about music in terms of demarcated lines and compartments and dos and don’ts—at times it can feel like sides of a battle, like you’re betraying your fellow soldiers or ancestral family if you employ a certain technique or musical gesture. When I started working on *Unremembered*, I wanted the music to be different from *Penelope*, but I did very consciously strive to adopt that same creative

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<sup>327</sup> The orchestral work, *Hiraeth*, instead premiered in September 2016.

headspace where I felt free to bring all my influences together, without worrying about it being too non-classical for a certain commissioner or set of performers. I was writing it for an ensemble of my own devising, which meant freedom from internal or external pressure to conform to a certain set of artistic values, hopes, or expectations.<sup>328</sup>

The story of *Penelope* reveals how a musical work can bear traces of the institutional culture in which it evolved; and as it “became” a New Amsterdam project, Snider’s career corresponded more and more to the indie classical scene.

If Snider represents the quintessential New Amsterdam “insider” and *Penelope* its quintessential album, then composer and saxophonist Travis Laplante, and his quartet Battle Trance’s *Palace of Wind* (2014), provide a productive counterexample. Laplante (b. 1982) grew up in Woodstock, Vermont and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in jazz performance from The New School in 2005, where he studied with Mark Dresser, Andrew Cyrille, Randy Peterson, Mat Maneri, and Jim Black. His career in New York is primarily devoted to jazz and experimental improvisation and, in 2012, Laplante decided to form a tenor saxophone quartet with musicians Matthew Nelson, Jeremy Viner, and Patrick Breiner. Three times a week for seven months, the four saxophonists met and rehearsed a suite that Laplante had written out in score but mostly taught them by ear. Once the quartet had memorized the work—a continuous forty-five minutes of music, in which multiphonics, flutter tongue effects, and circular breathing create a wash of uncanny textures—they spent half a day in the studio recording an album.

“At that point we didn’t have a label or anything,” Laplante told me in a January 2015 interview in North Carolina, the morning after Battle Trance had performed at an art gallery in Durham. “We were a new band and I wasn’t expecting to wait around,

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<sup>328</sup> Snider, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

really, because that's pretty unpredictable."<sup>329</sup> Laplante paid for the studio upfront, and Battle Trance made the record in what he described as "essentially one take." He had the album professionally mixed and mastered; once the group had a complete CD-R, Laplante submitted it to several record labels, including New Amsterdam in August 2013.

Laplante said that:

Some labels I had a relationship with because of my solo work or my previous bands, things like that. And then there were other labels that I just sent into, pretty much blindly—in a cold call kind of way. And New Amsterdam was one of those labels, actually. I didn't know anyone at the label, and it was just was completely, "I'm going to mail in a CD."... Their mission statement resonated with what the music I was making was. It seemed to, in theory, on paper, be a perfect fit.<sup>330</sup>

Though Laplante had listened to several New Amsterdam albums and had friends who had performed in Ecstatic Music, he was mostly an outsider to the world of indie classical. After several weeks, he did not hear back from New Amsterdam; instead, he began planning to release the album with NNA Tapes, an independent cassette and record label based in Burlington, Vermont. Initially, Laplante's plan was to issue *Palace of Wind* on vinyl and digital with NNA, and self-release a CD for sale on tour. But soon afterwards, Laplante finally heard back from Hammond; New Amsterdam had submitted the album to its advisory board. Laplante proceeded to prepare for an NNA release as he waited for a response from New Amsterdam. The album was approved in December 2013, although Hammond, according to Laplante, noted that:

Apparently there was some uncertainty, with the board, as to whether or not Battle Trance fit the mission statement—which is interesting, because from my perspective the music couldn't fit the mission statement more perfectly. At the same time my music is very different from the rest of the catalog so I'm guessing

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<sup>329</sup> Travis Laplante, interview with author, 26 January 2015.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

this created a question. I don't know what actually happened but I like the fact that the music didn't seem like a safe bet but New Amsterdam still decided to go for it.<sup>331</sup>

Laplante, NNA, and New Amsterdam collaborated to co-release the album in August 2014: NNA printed vinyl, New Amsterdam and Naxos distributed CDs, and New Amsterdam covered digital sales on Bandcamp and iTunes as well as streaming services.

In advance of the release, New Amsterdam also handled publicity; at the time, it was working with the firm Big Hassle. Laplante pointed out that while he could have hired his own publicist, working with a label that utilized its own firm offered a significant advantage: “They’re more invested in your project, because their future work is affected by it.” In June 2014, I received a press release from Big Hassle publicist Sean Hallarman that announced the album, provided several paragraphs of the kind of hagiographic background information that is typical of such releases (“*Palace of Wind* is a piece that not only transcends genres, but also transcends time and space”), and included a list of the group’s upcoming tour dates.<sup>332</sup>

For Laplante, joining New Amsterdam’s roster offered several advantages. The staff was easy to communicate with—which he noted as a rare exception, in comparison to other institutional relationships—and that unlike with other record labels, he did not feel pressured to constantly tour in order to sell as many units as possible. And Battle

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid. Regarding the submission process, Hammond wrote in an email that “Looking back, it’s hard to tell. Most of those conversations happened off email and I don’t remember individual feedback, unfortunately. One thing I can tell for sure is that we had a very hard time scheduling that particular discussion. A number of people had to drop out in the middle of the process and I had to find new people to vote in their place. It used to be a much more unwieldy process. We’ve since restructured a lot and are able to get feedback in a much more timely manner.” Hammond, email to author, 7 July 2016. Printed with permission.

<sup>332</sup> Sean Hallarman, “Battle Trance Announces Full-Length Debut *Palace of Wind*,” press release, *Big Hassle Media*, 9 June 2014.

Trance has since developed relationships with the indie classical scene. In December 2014, it played with yMusic and singer-songwriter DM Stith at New Amsterdam's Winter Benefit at the Williamsburg venue Baby's All Right. When we spoke in January 2015, Laplante was planning a future collaboration with another artist for Greenstein's Ecstatic Music Festival; he said of Greenstein that "he's been really great about inviting us to be involved in that world."<sup>333</sup> In May 2016, New Amsterdam announced Battle Trance's *Blade of Love*, a new suite written by Laplante that would also be co-released with NNA Tapes in August. In July 2016, Q2 Music featured Battle Trance in a list of "10 Cutting-Edge Artists That Have Captured the Imagination Mid-Year."<sup>334</sup>

And though Snider's work with *Penelope* and New Amsterdam pushed her away from what she perceived as the institutional pathways typical of composers, Laplante sought out New Amsterdam for precisely the opposite reason:

They're coming out, from my understanding, of something that's more connected to the classical music world than the other labels that I had been working with in the past, they were more connected to the jazz tradition. And this music that I was writing was through-composed, in essence, and really it's quite arguably jazz—even though, of course I grew up playing jazz music and went to school for jazz, and everyone in the band did. So the thing is with the classical music tradition is that there's quite a beautiful etiquette in place, as far as performer and audience in the tradition. And a certain respect that's in place in order to really be able to build the proper container for the music to really come alive in. Whereas listening to music when people are in chairs without drinking—coming to a concert—it's a very different experience than playing in a jazz club when people are having cocktails, it's a very different experience from playing at a DIY space with people who are slamming forties... I was coming from the spectrum of lots of distraction, and lack of built-in etiquette, in many of the spaces that I was performing at. So that was part of the appeal: to have the opportunity for it to be presented at more of a "new music" environment. I will also say that the "new music" and classical music listening environments are also prone to their own problems, namely of being too sterile, uptight, or elitist. Of course, this isn't always the case, but I do

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<sup>333</sup> Laplante, interview with author, 26 January 2015.

<sup>334</sup> WQXR, "10 Cutting-Edge Artists That Have Captured the Imagination Mid-Year," Q2 Music, 5 July 2016, <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/10-cutting-edge-artists-have-captured-imagination-mid-year/>.

notice younger composers and ensembles wanting to present their work in more non-traditional settings due to this issue. So this is the other side of the coin.<sup>335</sup>

Whereas indie classical's generationalism strongly emphasized the idea of classical music in club spaces in which people were drinking cocktails—LPR's motto of "Serving Art & Alcohol"—Laplante saw New Amsterdam as an opportunity to move away from the performance culture of jazz and into the sanctified world of classical music's silent audience. Indeed, the North Carolina concert I attended seemed to confirm Laplante's desire for a space absent distraction. The quartet played at art gallery The Carrack for an attentive listenership of about a dozen people. It was one of the most intense performances I have ever seen: the quartet played the suite without pause, circular breathing for minutes at a time and creating massive waves of sound. Even as a saxophonist myself, I witnessed something I had never seen before: one of the musicians, when he had a rare moment to rest, would tilt his bell upside down in order to drain out a torrent of spit. If *Penelope* foregrounds the album as the essential document, *Palace of Wind* might have its home in visceral live performance.

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 5: William Robin, photograph of Battle Trance, 25 January 2015.**

A second reason why Laplante sought out New Amsterdam also differs, significantly, from what might be assumed to be the “typical” stance of an indie classical artist:

I was interested in getting to present myself as a composer and be able to apply for composer grants. Whereas in the jazz world that’s quite blurred—the difference between the composer and the performer—because most people who play jazz do write their own music. But I feel like it’s perceived differently than in the classical composer world. . . . It was interesting to me to be able to put myself in a position where I could exist as a composer and have access to some of those opportunities in that world: the new music or classical world.<sup>336</sup>

As opposed to Snider’s declaration that “I wasn’t going to be applying for grants with this music,” it is New Amsterdam’s identity as a label strongly associated with the grant-writing world of new music that appeals to Laplante. Being considered as a composer in

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

the classical sphere—even as one who “transcends” genres—appears to offer economic opportunities not necessarily available to composer-performers in the jazz world.<sup>337</sup>

*Palace of Wind* and *Penelope* suggest a concept underlying the practices of New Amsterdam that centers on “the composer”; it is an expanded notion of the composer as one who writes “music without walls,” but a traditional image nonetheless. Although both Snider and Laplante foreground collaboration and distributed authorship in the creation of their albums—the former in her close back-and-forth with Nova, the latter in the oral processes through which *Battle Trance* rehearsed—it does not displace the institutional benefits that Snider received in post-*Penelope* commissions or that Laplante seeks in future grant-writing. Thus, even as its 2016 mission statement emphasizes an “emerging genre-less form of music that currently has no concrete representation in the music marketplace,” New Amsterdam normatively orients itself within the marketplace and history of classical and new music.

## Travel

i forget sometimes, but NO ONE knows about any of us outside a small group in New York. it's going to take years to develop an audience for NAR across the country, but we can definitely do it. we can develop a reputation with presenting bodies all over the united states and Europe. we can create pipeline of open minded clubs, cultural institutions, and concerts halls to send our artists on. and we can raise money for them to start doing this before the tours will pay for themselves.

William Britelle, “BRAINSTORM,” April 2007<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> In a follow-up email in July 2016, he added that “I have applied for a couple of composer grants and will continue to do so. I’ve been so busy composing and performing that I haven’t had time to apply to many, as they often take a lot of time and energy to get the application together.” Laplante, email to author, 3 July 2016. Printed with permission.

As Brittelle’s “Brainstorm” attests, New Amsterdam’s directors knew from the label’s origins that live performances would play a crucial role. New York came first: to gain exposure for the label, build musicians’ performing experience, and obtain press coverage that could attract venues outside the city to present their projects. National and international tours would follow, with the long-term goal of establishing regional hubs—what Brittelle calls a “pipeline”—that could regularly collaborate with the label’s artists. As Brittelle wrote in another early document,

5 year plan,

have healthy touring circuit in across Europe and America  
solid digital cd sales  
healthy, consistent funding  
residencies at universities for NAR artists.<sup>339</sup>

By 2016, New Amsterdam had expanded outside of New York and employed a staff member dedicated to booking live performances. The label established major partnerships in Indiana, with the DePauw School of Music, Marianne Tobias Music Program at Eskenazi Health, and the Indianapolis Symphony; in Minnesota, with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra’s Liquid Music series; in Colorado, with the Colorado Music Project; and in Zurich, with the Apples & Olives Festival. Along with these large-scale collaborations, New Amsterdam also regularly books its artists for concerts with clubs, universities, and arts presenters. This section will trace the development of the label’s translocal pipeline and focus on a conflict between the ensemble yMusic and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra as representative of the local politics that indie classical has encountered as it traveled.

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<sup>338</sup> “BRAINSTORM BRITTELLE.”

<sup>339</sup> Brittelle, “loose thoughts.”

Because of the dramatic shifts in the record industry since New Amsterdam’s founding—a significant decline in album sales, partially owed to the rise of the streaming service Spotify, which debuted in the United States in November 2011—touring has become even more important for New Amsterdam’s artists.<sup>340</sup> As Sam Sadigursky, who released New Amsterdam’s third album in May 2007, said, “I remember after putting my first record out, getting my first quarterly or maybe six month check, and getting \$600 or something...it felt like, ‘Whoa, if something like this continues to trickle in, this could be viable.’ At this point now with four records out, and being somebody who’s much more established than I was back then, now my checks are for \$38.”<sup>341</sup> A fundraiser that New Amsterdam mailed to its subscriber list in July 2016 foregrounded that “In December 2015, Roomful of Teeth’s debut album streamed 7,500 times on Spotify for a profit of \$0.03.”<sup>342</sup>

New Amsterdam’s directors view live performance as essential to one of the core principles of the organization, which is to help their artists build what they call “sustainable careers.” As Greenstein told me,

The only groups that can make a living as a group, and the only composers who can make a living as composers, are people who establish a national presence. I would not be able to be an essentially full time composer—I curate things, but most of my food and shelter comes from writing music—the only reason that’s possibly true is because most of my work takes place outside of New York

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<sup>340</sup> Album sales in the first half of 2014, for example, declined by 15% in comparison to the first half of 2013; streaming from on-demand services including Spotify rose by 42%. See Ben Sisario, “Billboard, Changing the Charts, Will Count Streaming Services,” *New York Times*, 19 November 2014.

<sup>341</sup> Sam Sadigursky, interview with author, 9 November 2015.

<sup>342</sup> New Amsterdam, “One Week Left to Double Down with New Amsterdam!” email to subscriber list, 6 July 2016.

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Each of the label's directors had a background in producing concerts and tours:

Greenstein with the Free Speech Zone tour and NOW Ensemble, Snider with the Look & Listen Festival, and Britelle with his and other rock bands. Following the Joe's Pub concert in 2008, New Amsterdam organized local album-release shows for its artists, including two residencies at Galapagos.

In September 2009, composer and violinist Jeffrey Young began working for New Amsterdam as an intern. His primary role was to compile informational kits and one-sheets about the label's artists to distribute to venues, presenters, and the press. Soon afterwards, he shifted focus to organize tours outside New York. As he said,

They were also just figuring out how they might want to be involved in booking their artists, so they had a big list of venues across the country but most of them they hadn't had any deep contact with at that point.<sup>344</sup>

As a member of the experimental ensemble thingNY, Young had participated in small-scale tours that typically consisted of house shows and performances at small clubs; revenue was earned money at the door, which was often miniscule and not guaranteed. But New Amsterdam's directors made clear that any concerts they booked should assure income for the performing musicians, placing the label's touring mechanism more in line with the world of professionalized classical music than experimental music or indie rock. Young thus concentrated specifically on artists whose reputations had been established strongly enough that they would be known to presenting organizations outside New

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<sup>343</sup> Greenstein, interview with author, 26 April 2015.

<sup>344</sup> Jeffrey Young, interview with author, 22 November 2015.

York. He consequently primarily booked concerts and small tours for Missy Mazzoli's band Victoire; as he said,

Missy already had a *lot* of press for herself, so we were able to make more inroads because people had heard of her name already. You can't underestimate the importance of having good press in national outlets, in terms of being able to book a gig. Presenters really read these things. I helped set up a gig for her at Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut. When I was talking to them I remember them saying something like, "Oh yeah, we saw the piece about Missy in the *Times*. We'd love to have her up here."<sup>345</sup>

Here we can see the translation of cultural capital into economic capital, and the success of New Amsterdam's plan to leverage press towards attracting presenters: indie classical as a brand paid off. Mazzoli had received significant press in 2009 and 2010, including a January 2009 story on Victoire in *Time Out New York* written by Smith; several positive reviews of her performances in the *New York Times* by Smith and Allan Kozinn; and a February 2010 profile in *Time Out New York* by freelance writer Olivia Giovetti with the aforementioned headline "Brooklyn's Postmillennial Mozart."<sup>346</sup> Although press coverage can help sell concert tickets and albums, it may be most useful in this context for securing the interest of industry insiders. Even if New Amsterdam attempts to position its albums and concerts to reach audiences outside of classical and new music, the actual marketplace in which its artists earn their living is deeply tied to traditional institutional pathways.

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid. Victoire performed at Real Art Ways on 9 October 2010.

<sup>346</sup> Smith reviewed her opera *Songs from the Uproar*, part of the Undiscovered Islands festival, in May 2009, and highlighted her work in a year-end description of major achievements among young composers. See Smith, "Lonely Swiss Wanderer From Long Ago Becomes Composer's Music," *New York Times*, 31 May 2009; and Smith, "New Faces Among the Older Guard," *New York Times*, 16 December 2009. See Olivia Giovetti, "Missy Mazzoli: The Stock of Brooklyn's Postmillennial Mozart Continues to Rise," *Time Out New York*, 15 February 2010, <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/opera-classical/missy-mazzoli>. Smith served as music editor of *Time Out* at the time of that article, and likely commissioned it.

As an intern, Young primarily worked alongside Britelle and Greenstein in the label's first office—Greenstein's childhood bedroom in Greenwich Village—and he left in 2010 when New Amsterdam hired a professional booking agent.<sup>347</sup> That shift was part of an organizational restructuring of New Amsterdam that demonstrates the legalistic complications of the artistic and business model that it first sought to establish.

From 2007 until 2011, New Amsterdam Records functioned as its own business entity under the 501c3 nonprofit structure of NOW Ensemble. Although its closest model, Cantaloupe Records, was incorporated as a for-profit company separate from the nonprofit Bang on a Can—under tax law, they are able to share expenses and office space—there existed precedents for nonprofit record labels, including Composer Recordings Inc., which transitioned into a nonprofit in 1976. Because of New Amsterdam's community focus, its directors had hoped that it could remain a nonprofit organization, and first applied to the Internal Revenue Service in 2009 for 501c3 status. But the IRS misplaced the application and, upon reassessing it, decided that the record label was a business venture and could not incorporate as a nonprofit. As minutes from a 25 May 2011 New Amsterdam board meeting reveal,

During the course of communicating with the IRS, it became clear to S. Glaser and the Artistic Directors that the Company's recording business would prove to be a stumbling block in its quest for tax-exempt status; consequently, they proposed a restructuring. S. Glaser explained that the new structure would be the current organization on top, renamed "New Amsterdam Presents," which would carry on the live music and streaming operations, and a new taxable subsidiary

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<sup>347</sup> New Amsterdam moved into a warehouse space in Red Hook, Brooklyn in May 2012; it also functioned as a rehearsal space and small concert venue. In October 2012, the building was flooded during Hurricane Sandy, and the label lost financial records, musical equipment, and 70% of its CD catalog (albums are technically owned by the artists, not the label). The label organized a fundraiser to gain support, and restored the warehouse to working condition by May 2013. But in early 2015, New Amsterdam permanently moved out of the warehouse, due to mold issues that had persisted following Sandy. As of 2016, it had switched to a "mobile office" format, supplementing digital communications among its staff with regular meetings at a café at Whole Foods in Gowanus, Brooklyn.

which would conduct the recording operations.<sup>348</sup>

The organization essentially split into two: “New Amsterdam Presents” would act as a nonprofit organization focused on presenting concerts and booking tours, and “New Amsterdam Records” would function as a for-profit subsidiary dedicated to the sale of albums.

In December 2011, New Amsterdam sponsored its first annual fundraiser for Presents, and has continued to seek donations in a manner similar to other arts organizations. Like Bang on a Can and Cantaloupe, the Presents/Records division is a mutually beneficial one: they share administrative staff, and the artists that record for the label are subsequently booked for performances. And though an unintended consequence of legal minutiae, the split was well timed for New Amsterdam; Spotify also launched in 2011, and the touring income earned for artists by Presents could help offset the decline in sales at Records. As Brittelle said,

One thing we’ve recognized is that this isn’t going to work without a solid touring mechanism. This whole world of music is never really going to really take off without people being able to make it across the country and back when they release an album, it’s just not going to happen. So that’s one of the thing we’re targeting, and I don’t know if that effort would be possible without putting a stamp on Presents and saying, “This is an official branch of our operations.”<sup>349</sup>

With the launch of Ecstatic Music in 2011—a festival curated by Greenstein at the Kaufman Music Center in midtown Manhattan, which pairs musicians from disparate genres in collaborative projects—and Liquid Music in 2012, both facets of New Amsterdam had strong partners within and outside New York. A project might be

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<sup>348</sup> “Minutes of Amsterdam Records., Inc, Meeting of the Board of Directors—May 25, 2011,” New Amsterdam institutional archives. Printed with permission from New Amsterdam.

<sup>349</sup> Brittelle, interview with author, 5 September 2014.

commissioned by Ecstatic Music and premiere at Kaufman's Merkin Concert Hall, receive subsequent performances in St. Paul, and subsequently be recorded for an album released on New Amsterdam Records.

As New Amsterdam expanded translocally, it encountered local limits. The Liquid Music series evolved from Nordstrum's work at Minneapolis's Southern Theater, where she established a series in 2006; her first concert featured Nico Muhly, through whom she met Greenstein and began collaborating with New Amsterdam. When the Southern experienced a financial crisis and significant budget cuts in 2011, she left and created Liquid Music, a similar series at the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra (SPCO) that, as its marketing materials describe, "expands the world of classical music through innovative new projects, boundary-defying artists, and unique formats."<sup>350</sup> The Twin Cities have a strong history of presenting new music, as the home of the American Composers Forum, Walker Arts Center, Minnesota Orchestra, and SPCO. But Nordstrum felt that there wasn't necessarily a dedicated space to explore what she called "that in-between space" amid the classical and rock scenes.<sup>351</sup> Her conception of the series evolved in dialogue with New Amsterdam's directors: Brittelle came up with the name "Liquid Music."

In Liquid Music's first 2012–13 season, it presented several projects affiliated with New Amsterdam, including Jace Clayton's *The Julius Eastman Memorial Dinner*, which had been released as a New Amsterdam album shortly before its performance in St. Paul. Among the planned concerts was Snider's *Penelope*, to be performed by Nova and the chamber sextet yMusic. Founded in 2008, yMusic functions dually as a new-

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<sup>350</sup> See <http://www.newampresents.org/liquid-music-series/>.

<sup>351</sup> Kate Nordstrum, interview with author, 18 January 2016.

music ensemble that commissions its own repertoire and a back-up group for indie rock bands, as I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Snider had originally considered writing the *Penelope* album for the ensemble, due to its members' experiences as performers in the classical and rock spheres, before she decided to work with Signal. Nordstrum had already attempted to present *Penelope* in Minneapolis in May 2011 at the Southern, but the performance was cancelled when the venue encountered financial difficulties.

Not long after Nordstrum was hired by the SPCO in October 2011, strife emerged within the organization itself. In the wake of the recession, SPCO musicians voluntarily took a 12 percent pay cut for the 2009–10 season, followed by an 11.3 percent salary cut for the 2010–11 season. In September 2012, SPCO management attempted to restructure the orchestra as a part-time ensemble and remove musician tenure, among other concessions. After negotiations failed, the SPCO initiated a lockout against its musicians. The lockout of the Minnesota Orchestra was also ongoing at this time—which lasted fifteen months and attracted significant national and international press attention—heightening the sense of an attack on orchestral musicians in the area, and building solidarity among supporters of the two groups.<sup>352</sup> SPCO concerts were cancelled through March 2013. Because Liquid Music primarily featured touring artists rather than orchestral musicians, the performances were still planned, with the exception of a postponed December 2012 show that was to include local jazz bassist Reid Anderson (of trio The Bad Plus) accompanied by SPCO members.

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<sup>352</sup> In April 2013, for example, musicians of the San Francisco Symphony performed what they called a “solidarity concert” raising funds in support of the SPCO and Minnesota Orchestra musicians. See Janos Gereben, “Solidarity with Twin Cities Orchestras,” *San Francisco Classical Voice*, 23 April 2013, <https://www.sfcv.org/article/solidarity-with-twin-cities-orchestras>.

Liquid Music’s budget was independent from that of the SPCO, funded by its own specific grants and sponsors; a goal of the series was to build a new donor base for the organization, drawing in audiences who might not ordinarily attend SPCO performances.<sup>353</sup> But musicians in the orchestra were concerned that it represented a stand-in for the locked-out ensemble, and argued that they had been shut out of the discussions surrounding the creation of the series. In a November 2012 letter publicly presented during negotiations, SPCO musicians directly addressed this issue, arguing that the mission of the orchestra to “be a leading advocate for classical music in the community, has been misinterpreted by the Society.”<sup>354</sup> Partnerships with outside artists, including Liquid Music, were announced by the orchestra’s Artistic Vision Committee without the consent of the musicians, and two musicians resigned from the committee in protest. The letter also questioned the strong marketing and publicity that Liquid Music received at the expense of the orchestra itself:

Are the SPCO Musicians not suitable to participate in these activities or perform on Liquid Music (beyond just three musicians in one out of the six programs)? What message is the Management trying to send to us? We can only surmise because there is no longer even any communication. When we ask, the answer is that this has nothing to do with the orchestra and since it’s funded by outside grant money, their hands are clean and we shouldn’t complain. To add insult to injury, we see a shiny nice brochure for Liquid Music next to our program book with a blank cover; we see \$39 tickets for Laurie Anderson’s concerts at the Walker that have sold out while the Society refuses even to consider a \$2 increase

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<sup>353</sup> More direct artistic partnerships have emerged between the orchestra and the series as it matured; Nordstrum said that a festival was planned for 2016 that would involve collaborations between the orchestra and Liquid Music. The SPCO has also commissioned music from composers who have worked with the series; Timo Andres, for example, presented his *Work Songs* cycle at Liquid Music in March 2014 and subsequently wrote a piano concerto for the SPCO that premiered in November 2015.

<sup>354</sup> The Musicians’ Negotiating Committee, “Why SPCO’s Liquid Music Has No SPCO Musicians,” *Musicians of the SPCO* (blog), 2 November 2012, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131205032944/http://musiciansspco.org/2012/11/02/why-spcos-liquid-music-has-no-spco-musicians/>.

of our \$10 tickets; and we read about the exciting new SPCO Liquid Music Series in the *New York Times*—the only mention of our organization in that paper.

Nordstrum said that she had been careful to explain to the community that the series was not directly in conflict with the locked-out musicians: “We had to be very clear that people understood that it was new funds, and why it was of benefit to the orchestra as a whole.”<sup>355</sup> As grant funding for Liquid Music also came from her work at the Southern, she was concerned that if the series went dark for its first season because of the lockout, it might not have continued at all. As the letter attests, however, SPCO musicians feared that they were being replaced.

When yMusic arrived in St. Paul for *Penelope* in February 2013, the performers were individually contacted by Local 802, the American Federation of Musicians union chapter for Greater New York. A union representative warned yMusic members that performing at the SPCO-sponsored series would constitute crossing the picket line.<sup>356</sup> The Local 802 informed yMusic that to play the concerts would violate their union membership—several musicians in the ensemble derive portions of their income from unionized work, including gigs on Broadway, recording sessions, commercials, and concerts with freelance orchestras—and result in expulsion and fines of up to \$50,000. On the morning of the show, they met to discuss their options, and yMusic decided to recuse itself. Nov, a non-union musician, still performed, but as the leader of her indie band My Brightest Diamond, not the vocalist of *Penelope*. As she told me,

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<sup>355</sup> Nordstrum, interview with author, 18 January 2016.

<sup>356</sup> A similar situation arose in Atlanta in 2014, while the Atlanta Symphony was locked-out by its parent organization, the Woodruff Arts Center, which also holds concerts by touring artists; when visiting musicians such as singer Susan Boyle performed at Woodruff, they were accused of crossing the picket line and protested by demonstrators and union members.

I just decided, “Look, we have people coming, let’s get me a guitar, let’s get me a rig, and I’ll play My Brightest Diamond.” And my drummer felt comfortable: he was in the union but decided he would just risk it, because not as much of his work was in it. And we decided to do a duo show, to honor the people that were coming to the concert. For me, the entire conversation was about reaching the public, so I’m not going to stick it to my public who are coming to see me.<sup>357</sup>

Though tickets were refunded, those who chose to attend Nova’s concert were handed leaflets titled “Liquidation Music” by union members and local advocates; they included a letter from Brad Eggen, the president of the Local 30–73 Twin Cities’ musicians’ union, which stated that the SPCO’s management “continues to present other projects like the Liquid Music series for its promotion and financial benefit, a benefit not shared with its locked-out AFM musicians, as it uses its subscription procedures to sell tickets and hire musicians who are not part of the negotiating AFM Union and are not part of the orchestra.”

A few days after the incident, composer Rob Deemer reported on the conflict in *NewMusicBox*.<sup>358</sup> He printed statements from Snider and Tino Gagliardi, the president of the Local 802. Snider explained the details behind the cancelled performance and the frustration of the musicians. Although she wrote that she and the *Penelope* performers “believe in fair labor practices and fervently hope that the SPCO negotiations are resolved quickly,” she also expressed disappointment that that performance had become “collateral damage”:

But at the very least, our musical community should be one that minimizes that damage by showing its musicians respect, fellowship, and trust. Unions, like police, are supposed to be there to protect and serve. If you’re going to threaten your musicians with expulsion and \$50,000 fines for performing a concert, do it

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<sup>357</sup> Nova, interview with author, 25 April 2015.

<sup>358</sup> See Rob Deemer, “Solidarity,” *NewMusicBox*, 1 March 2013, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/solidarity/>.

before they've rehearsed, lined up childcare, and flown across the country.<sup>359</sup>

Gagliardi wrote that:

The union (Local 802 AFM) appealed to the AFM musicians that are members of the ensemble for solidarity by supporting our colleagues in St. Paul. The world class musicians of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra need all of our help in maintaining the standard of professionalism they deserve. The musicians of the SPCO have been locked out since October 1st. If the SPCO Society wants to present musical events, shouldn't they get serious about bargaining a fair deal for the musicians that have committed their lives and families to St. Paul?<sup>360</sup>

The lockout was resolved in April 2013 with a new contract that cut musicians' base salary and the size of the orchestra, but maintained its full-time status; Liquid Music repaired its relations with the orchestral musicians and has continued to present concerts featuring touring musicians and members of the orchestra. In a subsequent *MinnPost* article by journalist Doug Grow titled "How the SPCO Wants to Reinvent the Modern Chamber Orchestra," SPCO president and CEO Bruce Coppock—who had served in the orchestra's administration from 1999 to 2008 and returned after the lockout—said that "It's almost like a start-up company...In most organizations, you can have only incremental change. We have a fantastic opportunity to re-articulate what this orchestra can be."<sup>361</sup>

But unlike the Minnesota Orchestra—which, according to members of the orchestra and conductor Osmo Vänskä, rebuilt a sense of trust between musicians and management after its lockout—there was significant negative fallout from the SPCO's

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Doug Grow, "How the SPCO Wants to Reinvent the Modern Chamber Orchestra," *MinnPost*, 16 December 2014, <https://www.minnpost.com/arts-culture/2014/12/how-spco-wants-reinvent-modern-chamber-orchestra>.

labor strife.<sup>362</sup> All SPCO players above the age of 55 were offered buyouts, and ten musicians (a third of the orchestra) accepted. According to a subsequent article by Grow, violinist Leslie Shank—a member of the ensemble who left in August 2014—said at a labor history panel series at St. Paul’s Merriam Park Library that “there is ‘a rift’ among the 18 carryover members of the SPCO. A handful, she said, are happy with the orchestra’s direction. But, she said, other members ‘are afraid to speak out. There’s a sense that there are ‘haves’ and ‘have nots.’”<sup>363</sup>

In interviews, the members of yMusic felt that the incident had not jeopardized their place in the union or had palpable effects on their careers. They had varying opinions about the importance and necessity of organized labor in music: some felt solidarity with St. Paul musicians, but bullied by the Local 802; some felt that the union reflected an outdated labor culture did not have much to offer their portfolio-style careers. yMusic violist Nadia Sirota told me that she sent a letter to the Local 802 detailing why she wanted to quit—the majority of her work comes from non-unionized gigs—but she received a new card in the mail regardless; she saw this error as indicative of the disorganized state of the chapter. Other new-music performers with whom I have spoken were sympathetic to the idea of a union but felt frustrated by the practices of the AFM and Local 802 in particular. Sirota’s perspective was representative: “I think all of us are, in the abstract, very pro labor and, in the specific, very frustrated with our particular

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<sup>362</sup> See David Allen, “The Minnesota Orchestra Rebounds from ‘Near Death Experience,’” *New York Times*, 25 February 2016.

<sup>363</sup> Grow, “Two Lockouts, Two Outcomes. Joy at Minnesota Orchestra; Continued ‘Rift’ At St. Paul Chamber,” *MinnPost*, 29 April 2015, <https://www.minnpost.com/arts-culture/2014/12/how-spcowants-reinvent-modern-chamber-orchestra>.

local. And wish that they would, instead of antagonizing the little guys, help us out.”<sup>364</sup> She mentioned that other locals were more successful in working with new freelance ensembles, citing the positive relationship of the Boston Musicians’ Association (Local 9–535) with the string orchestra A Far Cry (founded in 2007).

The Local 802 has attempted to reach out to several ensembles of this same generation of musicians that have not corresponded to their labor practices. The International Contemporary Ensemble (founded in 2001) and chamber orchestra The Knights (founded in the late 1990s) have been pressured to unionize, though ensemble members with whom I have spoken believe that unionization would jeopardize their economic solvency and flexibility with rehearsal time.<sup>365</sup> The AFM has also picketed institutions including the Brooklyn Academy of Music for mounting performances featuring non-unionized groups, which have included new-music ensembles such as Joseph C. Phillips Jr.’s group Numinous (which has recorded for New Amsterdam).<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Sirota, interview with author, 17 November 2014.

<sup>365</sup> The financial vice president of the Local 802 publicly criticized these organizations in a 2013 report; see Tom Olcott, “Your Future Is in Your Hands,” *Allegro* 113, vol. 1 (January 2013), <http://www.local802afm.org/2013/01/your-future-is-in-your-hands/>. In a subsequent report, Olcott wrote, “I speak to all musicians who work in nonunion ensembles, but explicitly to the musicians who perform with the International Contemporary Ensemble, the Knights, the Salome Orchestra and the members of Distinguished Concerts International. Do you have any friends who play in these ensembles? Speak to them about the benefits of the union!” See Olcott, “Tell Your Friends: Go Union!” *Allegro* 114, no. 2 (February 2014), <http://www.local802afm.org/2014/02/tell-your-friends-go-union/>.

I have not found any on-the-record responses from members of these ensembles online, though I have spoken informally with members about this issue.

<sup>366</sup> The Local 802 placed Numinous Music on its “Unfair List” after investigating a complaint that the ensemble was a non-union orchestra that planned to perform at BAM; according to a report on its website by John O’Conner, they also discovered the ensemble preparing for the performance in the 802’s rehearsal space, which is intended for union musicians. See John O’Conner, “Whose Side Are You On?” *Allegro* 112, no. 12 (December 2012), <http://www.local802afm.org/2012/12/which-side-are-you-on-2/>.

Six members of the ensemble were threatened them with expulsion from the union preceding an October 2012 Numinous performance as part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival: four left the group, and two quit the union and performed. O’Conner wrote that “Had Numinous Music been doing a

Members of the new-music community have also criticized the AFM for explicitly denigrating contemporary music. A September 2013 survey by the Local 802, for example, asked union members “How do you *really* feel about 21st-century repertoire?”<sup>367</sup> In an interview with the *New York Times* about the bankruptcy of the New York City Opera—which, in its final seasons, had focused on contemporary works—Gagliardi criticized the organization’s decision to “abandon an accessible repertoire.”<sup>368</sup>

These struggles reflect fractures between and within the worlds of classical and new music—skepticism of contemporary music among orchestral musicians is nothing new—but they are also representative of struggles among trade unions and freelance workers in the United States today.<sup>369</sup> Parallels between the non-unionized musicians of yMusic and the neoliberal valorization of contingent labor clearly emerge, and resonate with Andrea Moore’s critique that “Musical entrepreneurship training, with its emphasis

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concert in a place that was not a major venue, there would have been no confrontation. Numinous’ excuse that it was caught in the middle is a copout, because the union was willing to compromise. Numinous said it would not accept any deal whatsoever. Numinous, perhaps being manipulated by BAM, stepped into territory where the union must act. If it doesn’t, the union risks its effectiveness. If the union is not effective, both union members and non-union members will suffer. In a world where there are far more musicians than there is work, without the union it will take very little time for the race to the bottom to reach the bottom.” Ibid.

In a blog post, Phillips argued that he had had no legal obligation to be in a union contract, he and BAM had paid the musicians a fair wage based on union rates, and that he felt that the ensemble had been collateral damage in a larger dispute between BAM and the AFM. Phillips, “Truth Will Out,” *Numinous* (blog), 23 October 2012, <http://www.numinousmusic.com/the-numinosum-blog/truth-will-out>.

<sup>367</sup> Quoted and discussed in Deemer, “Solidarity Revisited,” *NewMusicBox*, 6 September 2013, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/solidarity-revisited/>.

<sup>368</sup> See Michael Cooper, “New York City Opera Announces It Will Close,” *New York Times*, 1 October 2013, [http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/01/new-york-city-opera-announces-it-will-close/?partner=rss&emc=rss&pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/01/new-york-city-opera-announces-it-will-close/?partner=rss&emc=rss&pagewanted=all&_r=0). Similarly, when the Brooklyn Philharmonic shut down that same month, longtime members blamed a shift towards programming new music. See Brian Wise, “Brooklyn Philharmonic, Innovative But Sounding a Troubled Tune,” 18 October 2013, <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/brooklyn-philharmonic-troubled-tune/>.

<sup>369</sup> See Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

on flexibility, startups, and project-based work, suggests that the proper response to the decline of steady musical employment is for musicians to not only embrace precariousness, but also to further promote it.”<sup>370</sup>

Members of yMusic who were less sympathetic to the union seemed to confirm Moore’s claim. As ensemble violinist and founder Rob Moose told me of the St. Paul situation,

That was very frustrating, perhaps indicative of the lack of understanding the union has for an ensemble like ours. Our entire careers have been couched in the era of orchestras collapsing and the music industry shrinking. In response, we have created something that, as entrepreneurs, we are trying to preserve and grow. Because they don’t have a stake in it, they’re not interested in understanding it.<sup>371</sup>

But Moose’s viewpoint is not necessarily representative of this generation of freelancers as a whole; many musicians with whom I have spoken explicitly or implicitly disagree with Moose, and few that I interviewed were eager to call themselves entrepreneurs. I would argue that factors specific to classical and new music—that musicians are often left-leaning, skeptical of marketplace jargon, and maintain strong ties to unionized orchestras (whether because they trained in conservatories alongside friends who went on to be orchestral performers, or because their teachers and mentors are a part of that world)—account for a sense of solidarity within the labor force. Given an overall sympathy for unions but specific dissatisfaction with the Local 802, it is possible that a new kind of union might arise that could better fit the careers of these musicians.<sup>372</sup> In

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<sup>370</sup> Andrea Moore, “Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 1 (February 2016): 42.

<sup>371</sup> Rob Moose, interview with author, 12 November 2014.

<sup>372</sup> Composer Aaron Gervais has addressed the possibility of a new-music union in a *NewMusicBox* article; see Aaron Gervais, “Are Unions Relevant to New Music?” *NewMusicBox*, 21 October 2015, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/are-unions-relevant-to-new-music/>.

2015, online media organizations comprising freelance writers—including Gawker Media, Salon, Vice Media, Huffington Post, and Guardian U.S.—unionized as part of Writers Guild of America East; such steps might reflect a renewed commitment to organized labor for younger, contingent laborers in the cultural industries.<sup>373</sup> As of 2016, however, it is not clear whether the world of new music will drift into this movement.

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*Penelope*, the flagship work of New Amsterdam, has yet to be mounted in St. Paul, one of the label’s strongest regional hubs. Britelle’s “pipeline” was clogged by an institutional formation that New Amsterdam relies on for its growth, one that in this particular case also impeded its expansion. Organized labor does not govern the world of New Amsterdam—ensembles such as yMusic are not unionized—but it does exist as a powerful economic force in the lives of the freelance musicians who participate in the scene. The “classical” of indie classical is fraught with politics that are bound to the infrastructure that has allowed New Amsterdam to extend its network outside of New York—there is no Liquid Music without the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra—but the “indie” is not burdened with such baggage.<sup>374</sup> And if *Penelope* is the emblematic indie classical work, then Nova might represent its emblematic figure; she is the protagonist of David

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<sup>373</sup> See James Warren, “Who’s the Leader Behind the Union Moves at Gawker, Vice, and Salon?” *Poynter*, 12 August 2015, <http://www.poynter.org/2015/whos-the-leader-behind-the-union-moves-at-gawker-vice-and-salon/365623/>. See also Thomas Geoghegan, *Only One Thing Can Save Us: Why America Needs a New Kind of Labor Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2014); and Sarah Grey, “Four Myths about the ‘Freelancer Class,’” *Jacobin*, 7 May 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/freelance-independent-contractor-union-precariat/>.

<sup>374</sup> That indie-rock musicians such as Nova are not unionized connects this particular story back through a longer history of the AFM’s relationship to rock musicians; from the 1940s through 1960s, it did not recognize rock as legitimate music and refused to organize rock musicians, to its own economic disadvantage. See Michael James Roberts, *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock ‘n’ Roll, the Labor Question, and the Musicians’ Union, 1942–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

Lang's *death speaks*, which explicitly thematizes indie classical, as I discuss in my Conclusion. At Liquid Music, Nova could perform the "indie" of *My Brightest Diamond* where the "indie classical" of *Penelope* could not be heard.

In this chapter, I have navigated a few of the drifts of indie classical as New Amsterdam's institutional identity: as it moved through publicity materials, music critics, and a contested online sphere; as it guided curatorial practices of the label and two albums by its artists; and as it assembled a translocal pipeline fraught with its own local politics. The limits of indie classical are clear. As a term, it has been abandoned by its principal supporters; as a labor formation, it was momentarily halted by outside forces. But the durability of indie classical is also evident. The ethos of New Amsterdam in 2016 remains similar to the one that Greenstein, Brittelle, and Snider fashioned in 2007, and which traces back through Yale, the Free Speech Zone tour, and the blogosphere.

What, then, does this story of indie classical through the practices of New Amsterdam reveal about the world of new music? New music is entangled: social, aesthetic, and economic factors are intertwined in every aspect of New Amsterdam's institutional culture, from its mission statements and press releases to its albums and concerts. Reception is just one step—rather than the endpoint—of a circulation of discourse and cultural capital: the press that New Amsterdam achieved in branding and publicizing indie classical was leveraged towards building a national infrastructure for its music. And the new is deeply tied to the old: conflicts between new-music performers and unionized orchestras do not represent permanent ruptures, because the economic fragility of new music relies on the institutional apparatus of classical music.

## CHAPTER 3

### Indie Classical As Collaboration

“It’s your song!” exclaimed the graduate student. “It’s your arrangement,” retorted the famous rock musician. On the stage of Duke University’s Baldwin Auditorium in April 2015, the chamber sextet yMusic had just finished rehearsing Scott Lee’s orchestration of singer-songwriter Ben Folds’s 1999 song “Army.” Folds was singing and playing piano alongside yMusic, and wanted to ask Lee, a PhD student in composition at Duke, if he could try something different. For Lee, it was an unusual request: of course the author of a Billboard-charting hit song could make any changes to it that he desired.<sup>375</sup>

Along with Folds and percussionist Sam Smith, yMusic formed the “band” for Folds’s album *So There*, forthcoming that fall. Lee’s orchestration of “Army” for yMusic—an ensemble that consists of flute, clarinet, trumpet, violin, viola, and cello—added pizzicato strings, lithe woodwind melodies, and subtle rhythmic complexities to Folds’s piano and vocals. *So There* represented yMusic and Folds’s first time working together, and songs from Folds’s back catalog had been assigned to Duke PhD students to arrange for the ensemble as an exercise. yMusic guided the rehearsal, adjusting passages to better suit Folds’s songs, asking the composers for clarifications regarding performance practice, and offering general advice on arranging for rock bands.

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<sup>375</sup> “Army,” released on the Ben Folds Five album *The Unauthorized Biography of Reinhold Messner*, reached position 17 on Billboard’s “Modern Rock Tracks” chart in May 1990. See “Modern Rock Tracks,” *Billboard*, 29 May 1999, 89.

That exchange was emblematic of collaboration in twenty-first century new music: an ensemble, singer-songwriter, and composer worked together to create a song in which each artist played a key role. And with the presence of a group that works in indie rock and new music, the involvement of university composition students, and the participation of a famed rock musician, it might also represent a quintessential indie classical encounter. Indeed, indie classical has prioritized collaboration: from *The End of New Music*'s freewheeling group tours, to how composers such as Sarah Kirkland Snider emphasize their musical dialogues with performers like Shara Nova, to the curatorial pairings of rock bands and new-music ensembles fostered by the Ecstatic Music Festival and Liquid Music. Music critics have rearticulated this mentality: in 2007, Alex Ross described a "young community of composers and musicians supporting each other"; in 2012, Jayson Greene characterized the indie classical generation as "eager, collaborative, as invested in indie rock as they are in the nuts-and-bolts arcana of composition."<sup>376</sup> And yMusic strongly underscores collaboration in its own work. "In addition to performing its own repertoire, yMusic serves as a ready-made collaborative unit for bands and

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<sup>376</sup> Alex Ross, "The New Pragmatism," *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), 18 March 2007, [http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/03/the\\_new\\_pragmat.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/03/the_new_pragmat.html); Jayson Greene, "Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical," 28 February 2012, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/8778-indie-classical/>.

In my own history as a researcher and writer, I was also drawn to collaboration as a seemingly unique trait of this generation of musicians. My undergraduate thesis focused on the work of Nico Muhly through the lens of collaboration, which fueled an article for *New Yorker*'s website that previewed Muhly's opera *Two Boys* by considering the importance of his collaborations. See William Robin, "Nico Muhly's Team Spirit," *New Yorker* online, 20 October 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/nico-muhlys-team-spirit>. My article on yMusic for the *New York Times*—see below—similarly emphasized collaboration. In hindsight, I may have latched too easily onto the rhetoric of collaboration offered by these musicians, and this chapter offers a method that moves beyond such rhetoric.

songwriters,” reads a passage from the “About” section of the ensemble’s website in May 2016.<sup>377</sup>

Collaboration is not limited to the confines of the concert hall. That rehearsal took place on the final day of yMusic’s 2013–15 residency at Duke University, a partnership between arts presenter Duke Performances and the school’s music department. The Folds rehearsal—and subsequent performance that evening—was only one small part of the residency, which focused primarily on workshopping and premiering new pieces written for yMusic by the Duke students.

This chapter considers collaboration not only as in-the-moment partnership between musicians, but also as large-scale coordination: one that, in the case of yMusic at Duke, extended over two years and encompassed a wide swath of actors. I consider how individual acts of collaborative music making, such as the Folds/Lee/yMusic rehearsal, were held together; here, I take collaboration as a metaphor for larger institutional movements of social and economic capital, within and between networks. Collaboration encompassed yMusic working with the composers, Duke Performances working with the Duke music department, students working with faculty members, individual members of the ensemble working with each other. In interrogating indie classical through the practices of collaboration, this chapter reveals that the identities of an ensemble are contingent on its social relations—how it exists in the world—and that these socially constructed characteristics in turn inform the musical works created for it.

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<sup>377</sup> See <http://ymusicensemble.com/about/>. yMusic may represent the ensemble most closely associated with indie classical. In a *Kickstarter* crowdfunding campaign for its first album, it described “an indie classical record by yMusic”; Greene cites the ensemble as a principal example of indie classical in his “Making Overtures” article; and in his online bio in May 2016, Judd Greenstein describes it as a principal collaborator and one of the “standout groups that reflect this ‘post-genre’ sensibility.” See “Beautiful Mechanical—an indie classical record by yMusic,” *Kickstarter*, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/ymusic/beautiful-mechanical-an-indie-classical-record-by>; Greene, “Making Overtures”; and <http://www.juddgreenstein.com/about/>.

My approach in this chapter builds on Georgina Born's analysis of the mediation between music, identity, and the social, and specifically how "music produces its own diverse social relations—in the intimate socialities of musical performance and practice, in musical ensembles, and in the musical division of labour."<sup>378</sup> I examine how yMusic's identities—not only its twofold function as new-music ensemble and indie-rock backing band, but also its instrumentation, repertory, and collaborative ethos—are enacted in the local practices of Duke University.<sup>379</sup> Like Chapter 2's study of New Amsterdam, I also emphasize the relationship between indie classical and institutional identity. Rather than treating yMusic as a stable and singular object, I focus on how its identities are performed in shifting settings: how the ensemble is manifested in residency activities, student compositions, and collaborative relationships. Illuminating the relationship between the group's self-constructed image and how it is translated by students, professors, and administrators provides an understanding of how an institution's identity is configured in the act of collaboration.

The first half of this chapter describes the early history of yMusic; situates the sextet within the complex and entangled history of new-music ensembles; and examines the specific contexts that facilitated the residency. I then address how yMusic engaged in dialogue with Duke, focusing on how specific activities in yMusic's residency articulated particular characteristics of the ensemble; elucidating the musical and professional

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<sup>378</sup> Georgina Born, "Music and the Materialization of Identities," *Journal of Material Culture* 16, no. 4 (2011): 378.

<sup>379</sup> My focus in this chapter is indebted to the work of Annemarie Mol. Like Mol's examination of atherosclerosis in shifting hospital settings, I examine yMusic as ontologically multiple, an object that is enacted in different yet related practices. Rather than treating an object of study as singular and stable, this approach addresses the many realities in which it exists in the world. See Annemarie Mol, "Ontological Politics. A Word and Some Questions," *The Sociological Review* 47, no. 1 (1999): 74–89; and Mol, *The Body Multiple* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

implications of the Duke students' struggles with yMusic's instrumentation; and analyzing three works by Duke composers that construct versions of yMusic, first in dialogue with its repertoire and second in dialogue with its collaborative mentality.

Investigating how yMusic interacts with Duke and the Durham area uncovers how networks intersect, and specifically how a New York-based but translocal ensemble that participates in the indie classical and indie-rock worlds is situated within a midsized Southeastern city and a major private university's PhD program in composition.<sup>380</sup> Just as Benjamin Piekut has revealed how the ideologies of experimentalism unfolded in conflicts among New York musicians in the 1960s, here I follow yMusic to Durham to shed light on how indie classical is manifested in the practices of the Duke residency.<sup>381</sup> This chapter registers both the local causes and local effects of yMusic's translocal movements.<sup>382</sup> That the university invited the ensemble to campus—and that the two-year initiative was considered a success by faculty, students, and administrators—tells us as much about Duke as it does about yMusic.

In placing yMusic in dialogue with Duke, this chapter sheds light on the essential role of both the ensemble and the university within the broader history of contemporary

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<sup>380</sup> yMusic is at once local and translocal. Its twitter handle is @yMusicNYC, five of its six current members live in New York (its website calls it “a group of six New York City instrumentalists”), and it performs frequently in New York venues such as (Le) Poisson Rouge and Rockwood Music Hall. At the same time, the sextet's members are constantly touring as part of yMusic, other ensembles, and rock bands. Mobility is so central to yMusic's identity that composer Timo Andres titled his work for the sextet *Safe Travels*. As the ensemble's violist Nadia Sirota describes, “[Andres] wanted to riff on this [yMusic's] frenetic travel scheme with a piece named after his most common farewell to us, ‘Safe Travels.’” “Backtracking with yMusic's *Balance Problems*,” *textura*, October 2014, [http://textura.org/reviews/backtracking\\_ymusic.htm](http://textura.org/reviews/backtracking_ymusic.htm).

<sup>381</sup> See Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>382</sup> My focus on studying the local effects of a traveling ensemble takes after a broader turn toward situating travel at the center of anthropology and ethnography. See James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

music in the United States. Since the postwar reinvention of the “Pierrot” ensemble and contemporaneous formation of composer-led minimalist groups, the new-music ensemble has acted as an essential catalyst for the creation and dissemination of a large body of contemporary music.<sup>383</sup> The university has a similarly pivotal function, as a trainer of composers in doctoral programs, employer of composers who have earned PhDs and DMAs, and creator of a culture around new music. Universities also represent institutions whose financial reach has kept new music in the United States economically solvent, from the foundation of Cold War-era PhD programs and electronic music studios; to the network of university arts presenters that John Rockwell has called the “BAM Circuit,” which since the 1980s has commissioned staged productions presented in major venues such as the Brooklyn Academy of Music; to the present day, when New Amsterdam seeks out universities as regional hubs for disseminating its music.<sup>384</sup>

The university PhD program has historically exemplified an ideology of music as autonomous from society, one that Susan McClary has criticized as an “ivory tower” that has “sought to secure prestige precisely by claiming to renounce all possible social functions and value.”<sup>385</sup> But as Jann Pasler has shown, academic composition represents

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<sup>383</sup> “Pierrot” ensembles are chamber groups typically consisting of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, drawing on the instrumentation of Arnold Schoenberg’s pioneering 1912 *Pierrot Lunaire* instrumentation but often replacing its vocalist with a percussionist (with the addition of percussion, the format is casually called “Pierrot-plus”). See Robin, “Moondrunk for a Century: A History of the Pierrot Ensemble,” *NewMusicBox*, 25 July 2012; and Christopher Dromey, *The Pierrot Ensembles: Chronicle and Catalogue, 1912–2012* (Middlesex: Plumbago Books, 2012).

<sup>384</sup> John Rockwell, interview with author, 5 March 2015. The viability of translocal productions in the “BAM Circuit” is often predicated on the support that the circuit provides, whether financial (co-commissioning) or logistical (allowing for additional rehearsal and preparation). See also Sasha Metcalf, “Institutions and Patrons in American Opera: The Reception of Philip Glass, 1976–1992” (PhD diss., University of California at Santa Barbara, 2015).

<sup>385</sup> Susan McClary, “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition,” *Cultural Critique* no. 12 (Spring 1989): 61 and 62. For a critique of McClary’s essay, see Björn Heile, “Darmstadt as Other:

instead a complex art world with its own attendant socioeconomic and cultural sphere.<sup>386</sup> Investigating the relationships between student composers and visiting performers within the individual culture of a university program reveals a micro-social fabric that challenges the assumed autonomy of academic music.<sup>387</sup> My chapter answers McClary's call for historians to interrogate "the formation of the university-as-discursive-community and also the economy of prestige upon which this music has depended for survival."<sup>388</sup> This study represents a model for analyzing how the university creates its own art world, contingent on curricular priorities and local particularities, and one that also forms a dialogue with broader developments in the musical landscape.

From November 2013 to April 2015, I observed yMusic work with Duke graduate students in rehearsing, recording, and performing compositions written for the ensemble; I interviewed the members of the ensemble, graduate students, composition faculty, and Duke Performances personnel; and I spent "hangout" time with the ensemble and student composers.<sup>389</sup> My relationship with yMusic extends further back. In February 2012, I

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British and American Responses to Musical Modernism," *Twentieth-Century Music* 1, no. 2 (September 2004): 161–78.

<sup>386</sup> Jann Pasler, *Writing Through Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 318–62.

<sup>387</sup> This conception of the micro-social relates to how I discuss "the social" in this dissertation as a whole. And given the original model of the composition PhD as scientific laboratory—one informed by Milton Babbitt's famous essay "Who Cares If You Listen?"—this chapter's research into the culture of an academic program resonates with Bruno Latour's interventions into the social fabric of actual scientific laboratories. Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares if You Listen?" *High Fidelity Magazine* 8, no. 2 (February 1958). See Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>388</sup> McClary, "Terminal Prestige," 76.

<sup>389</sup> My approach is more broadly guided by Born's use of ethnography to examine the relationship between music and the social in institutional formations; see Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the*

wrote a feature article about the sextet for the *New York Times*, interviewing its performers as well as composers and songwriters with whom they had collaborated.<sup>390</sup> Since I became aware of yMusic upon the release of its first album in August 2011, I watched it develop—reading reviews, following it on blogs and Twitter, attending concerts, and listening to new recordings—and considered its work as both musicologist and music journalist.<sup>391</sup> My own actions as researcher and writer likely affected the direction of the ensemble, as I will discuss later in the chapter.

### **Multiple identities**

According to the “About” section of its website in October 2015,

yMusic is a group of six New York City instrumentalists flourishing in the overlap between the pop and classical worlds. Their virtuosic execution and unique configuration (string trio, flute, clarinet, and trumpet) has attracted the attention of high profile collaborators—from Ben Folds to Dirty Projectors to Jose Gonzalez—and more recently inspired an expanding repertoire of original works by some of today’s foremost composers....In addition to performing its own repertoire, yMusic serves as a ready-made collaborative unit for bands and songwriters.<sup>392</sup>

That biographical stability represents a historical construct, one that emerged over the

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*Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Born, “The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production,” *Cultural Sociology* 42, no. 2 (2010): 1–38; and Born, “For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135, no. 2 (2010): 205–43.

<sup>390</sup> See Robin, “Bridging Genres and Generations on the Fly,” *New York Times*, 3 February 2012. I have known Sirota since 2009, when I interviewed her for my thesis on the music of Nico Muhly.

<sup>391</sup> I also wrote a preview article for yMusic’s 2013–14 Duke residency for a local newspaper; see Robin, “In yMusic, Indie Rock Meets Classical, with Satisfying Results,” *IndyWeek*, 30 October 2013.

<sup>392</sup> See <http://ymusicensemble.com/about/>.

course of the ensemble's early development. In this section, I briefly outline yMusic's origins and examine how its multiple identities exist in practice.

In February 2008, violinist Rob Moose and trumpeter C.J. Camerieri played a concert with rock group The National at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. At a party following the performance, they spoke with colleagues about their dismay at the absence of camaraderie or musical cohesion among the freelance musicians who accompanied prominent indie bands. Moose recalled that he was:

Just doing a lot of freelance gigs with bands and songwriters, and feeling like there wasn't an organization designed to take it seriously or support it, and that every time it was a slap-together experience—some people who were there playing liked it, and other people, it was just a gig. Just thought there was a movement and a general interest in combining the chamber music-y world with the band world, and felt like that was where I lived, and wanted to create a group.<sup>393</sup>

Moose and Camerieri developed the idea for yMusic over the following weeks. They selected members based not on a pre-determined instrumentation but in an attempt to bring together what Camerieri called the “right people,” musicians that they felt most strongly about working with: violist Nadia Sirota, flutist Alex Sopp, clarinetist Hideaki Aomori, and cellist Mike Block.<sup>394</sup> Each of the freelance musicians had a conservatory background in classical or jazz performance—five of the six graduated from Juilliard, and Moose attended the Manhattan School of Music—and had significant experience

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<sup>393</sup> Rob Moose, interview with author, 12 November 2014.

<sup>394</sup> C.J. Camerieri, interview with author, 16 November 2014. Block left the ensemble in late 2008 and by January 2009 cellist Clarice Jensen, a Juilliard colleague and founder of the American Contemporary Music Ensemble, joined in his place. Jensen remained a fixture of the ensemble for several years and recorded on its two albums. In 2014, she departed and was replaced by Gabriel Cabezas, a graduate of the Curtis Institute. Besides these cellist changes, the personnel of yMusic has remained intact since its founding. Both Jensen and Cabezas worked with the Duke composers, as well as substitute cellist Andrea Lee, who filled in for Cabezas due to scheduling conflicts in the 2014–15 residency.

collaborating with rock musicians. The individual personalities of the performers were crucial to the ensemble's formation and function. As Camerieri told me,

yMusic doesn't make sense instrument to instrument, but it makes sense person to person. And we're all friends and we all talk about music incessantly, talk about our favorite composers and songwriters, and dream gigs, and how to make it happen. It's really an individual-specific group.<sup>395</sup>

The sextet first played together in a May 2008 rehearsal of *For the Union Dead*, a song cycle that composer and singer-songwriter Gabriel Kahane—who had worked with yMusic members in the past—wrote for the ensemble.<sup>396</sup> Besides the Kahane project, yMusic's only other joint work in its first year was *The Long Count*, a multimedia production created by The National members Bryce and Aaron Dessner and commissioned by the BAM Next Wave Festival. As Moose noted, "We didn't get to do as much collaborative stuff as we thought we would."<sup>397</sup> (They were not hired as a full ensemble by The National for the band's regular concerts, for example.)

Though yMusic initially intended to function exclusively as a collaborator with other songwriters or bands, it soon found itself becoming a new-music ensemble. As Sopp said,

When we first started we never really wanted to just play by ourselves, it was really just all about being this free-set ensemble that would accompany and work with different singers, musicians. And then we found out that we really just liked

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<sup>395</sup> Camerieri, interview with author, 16 November 2014.

<sup>396</sup> Notably, from the outset Kahane considered *For the Union Dead* in dialogue how he perceived the ensemble's personality; he wrote in a program note that "'For the Union Dead' was written for yMusic, with specific attention devoted to their ability to move effortlessly between American vernacular forms and more traditional Western concert music." See "projects/collaborators," yMusic website, archived with Wayback Machine, [https://web.archive.org/web/20091115181229/http://ymusicensemble.com/?page\\_id=7](https://web.archive.org/web/20091115181229/http://ymusicensemble.com/?page_id=7).

<sup>397</sup> Moose, interview with author, 12 November 2014.

playing together. That evolved naturally, I don't think it was a "decision."<sup>398</sup>

In December 2009 the sextet performed on its own in a concert at the Brooklyn Public Library, playing arrangements of pre-existing music by several composers and a new instrumental work by Kahane. For the next two years, yMusic worked with bands, and also turned toward building its own repertoire, commissioning works from established composers as well as rock musicians new to writing for an instrumental ensemble.

By 2011, it had collected a repertory large enough to release *Beautiful Mechanical*, a debut album on New Amsterdam featuring works by seven composers. Sirota suggested that she helped guide yMusic toward enlarging that body of compositions:

I had ulterior motives for the group, and I think pushed my agenda through in a funny way. I do remember at the beginning, Rob [Moose] being like, "No, we're not a new-music ensemble, we're definitely not going to play, commission, and premiere new classical music works, that's not the point, that's not what we do." But I think when we realized how technically tight the group had the potential to be, we were excited to get music to explore that.<sup>399</sup>

In this brief early history, we see yMusic's identity quickly shift from a backing band—guided by Camerieri and Moose's goals—to a new-music ensemble—guided by other members such as Sirota, a lack of continual employment in the rock world, and the sextet's technical potential. But rather than shed one identity for another, these both of these yMusic identities have co-existed in practice. As the group gained momentum in 2010 and 2011, it performed more frequently with prominent indie-rock bands such as My Brightest Diamond, Bon Iver, and the Dirty Projectors. By fall 2011—with the release of *Beautiful Mechanical* and also My Brightest Diamond's album *All Things Will*

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<sup>398</sup> Alex Sopp, interview with author, 18 November 2014.

<sup>399</sup> Nadia Sirota, interview with author, 17 November 2014.

*Unwind*, in which yMusic acted as songwriter Shara Nova's "band"—yMusic's duality was clearly established.

As yMusic develops, each additional album, performance, collaboration, or university residency clarifies and rearticulates how the ensemble exists in practice. In its daily life, yMusic is enacted by its members as source of prestige, income, and artistic fulfillment; by composers as a configuration of six instruments and six performers; by rock bands as set of accompanying musicians that might also grant cultural capital due to their classical pedigree; by the press as a model for post-genre, indie classical collaboration; or by scholars as a case study in a dissertation project. At Duke, similar yMusics are practiced, additionally inflected by the concerns of the graduate student composers and the particular configuration of the music department, university arts presenter, and local music scene. A multitude of practices, guided by the priorities of university actors—rooted in curricula, aesthetic preferences, artistic personalities, and scheduling concerns—enact yMusic as different yet related objects.

Specific enactments continue to shape how yMusic is viewed or performed. In a 2012 *New York Times* profile, for example, I treated yMusic as a counterpoint to perceived shortcomings in the world of classical music. The ensemble now actively performs that analysis—and, more importantly, its cultural sanctioning as published in a prestigious newspaper—as part of its own identity, displaying the following quotation at the "Press" section of its website:

The working methods of yMusic quietly repudiate one of the more stultifying aspects of classical tradition: the obsession with fidelity to the written score, in which the performer lives to serve the composer. With yMusic the performers act as co-conspirators in the compositional process, interacting with the music as a living document, not an abstract ideal. The flexibility of the yMusic players puts

them at the forefront of a rapidly changing performance culture...The group has set the bar high.  
New York Times—William Robin<sup>400</sup>

Although I do not focus here on the press reception of yMusic, an ethnography of a university residency can act as a form of reception unto itself. How composers write *for* particular ensembles and how journalists write *about* particular ensembles are both examples of reception. Reception history frequently cites the perspectives of elite actors such as music critics to draw broader conclusions about how music has been interpreted by specific audiences; though I do not address a more general listenership for yMusic, in this chapter I study the perspectives of a different set of elite actors—student composers, faculty, and administrators—to reveal how they received particular impressions of yMusic and articulated new ones in practice. This approach is consistent with previous chapters in which I consider how reception participates in an active and ongoing circulation of cultural and economic capital.

A lack of new-music press coverage in smaller cities such as Durham, and the gradual erosion of the classical press at a national level, means that an ethnography of an ensemble residency might be more valuable to reception studies than a more typical study of periodicals.<sup>401</sup> This chapter also represents a strategic attempt to decenter New York as the primary locus of new music. The city maintains an almost hegemonic position in histories of American new music, not only because it represents a primary site of activity

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<sup>400</sup> Robin, “Bridging Genres and Generations on the Fly”; and <http://ymusicensemble.com/press/>.

<sup>401</sup> Piekut implicitly calls for a form of reception studies guided by actor-network methodologies, though he never uses the word reception, instead seeking out scholarship on experimentalism that examines “the realities of what Cage meant *in the world*, where his spokespersons travelled widely and often forged unforeseen connections.” Piekut, “Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 11, no. 2 (September 2014): 199.

but also because of the robust paper trail that its press—in particular, the combination of the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, and *New Yorker*—has provided.

The practices of yMusic reveal multiple identities, and this chapter focuses on a select few. Others that emerged in my research, and which are deserving of further exploration, include yMusic as an advertised brand, as expressed in its press releases, marketing materials, and polished YouTube promotional videos; yMusic as an interdisciplinary collaborator with filmmakers and choreographers; yMusic as a recorded sound, with its two studio albums; yMusic as local to New York, with its strong emphasis on its musicians living and working in the city; yMusic as six individual personalities with varying musical backgrounds and tastes; yMusic as representative of the “Generation Y” for which the ensemble is named, and to which all of its members belong; yMusic as entrepreneurial business model, structured as a for-profit LLC that has funded its albums through the online platform Kickstarter; and yMusic as a gig for freelance substitute musicians. All of these identities have implications for the music written for the ensemble, and artistic spheres in which it participates. I treat the multiplicity of yMusic not as anomalous or contested, but simply as the natural status of an ensemble in the world.

### **New-music ensembles**

Although it did not initially place itself within a clear historical lineage or institutional context of contemporary classical music, yMusic certainly behaves like a new-music ensemble, with regular performances of repertoire that it has commissioned and two albums released on New Amsterdam Records. It attached itself, in hindsight, to a longer

ancestry of ensembles in several national contexts, one that has yet to be fully examined by scholars. In this section, I briefly consider the history of the new-music ensemble and compare yMusic to two peer groups, in order to situate yMusic's instrumentation and mission within the multivalent history of ensembles and their twenty-first century manifestations.

The explosion in number of ensembles in the late twentieth century is often cited as one of the driving forces for contemporary music in the twenty-first. In the *New Yorker*, Alex Ross used this growth of groups—as he calculated, between 1967 and 2007 the number of “full-time new-music ensembles” in New York swelled from two to more than forty—to assert that “there’s more new music in the city than ever before.”<sup>402</sup> A new-music ensemble is a chamber group—ranging in size from a duo to a small orchestra, and often in a configuration considered “alternative” to traditional instrumentations such as the string quartet—explicitly dedicated to performing repertoire from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and commissioning and advocating for new work.

Several types of new-music ensembles have fostered the abundance visible in 2015. The international codification of the “Pierrot” ensemble in the late 1960s and early 1970s is one origin point, beginning with the Pierrot Players in Britain (formed 1967 and reconstituted as The Fires of London in 1970), the Schoenberg Ensemble in Amsterdam (1972), and the Da Capo Chamber Players and New York New Music Ensemble in New York (1970 and 1975). A prominent successor of the Pierrot format is eighth blackbird, which I will discuss in more detail below. Another tradition is the composer-led

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<sup>402</sup> Ross, “Club Acts,” *New Yorker*, 16 April 2007. Ross likely underestimates the number of ensembles active in New York in the 1960s, given his limitation of “full time,” which would not take into account many freelance ensembles, composer-led ensembles, or improvising ensembles.

downtown ensemble such as Steve Reich and Musicians, the Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble, and the Philip Glass Ensemble, all of which are cited as models by young composers such as Matt McBane (Build), Judd Greenstein and Patrick Burke (NOW Ensemble) and Missy Mazzoli (Victoire).<sup>403</sup> Experimental groups more oriented toward improvisation—including the New Music Ensemble, Scratch Orchestra, AMM, and Musica Elettronica Viva—are part of this lineage, though are less of a clear prototype for the ensembles active in American new music today.<sup>404</sup>

The European new-music chamber orchestra represents another historical source for flexible American ensembles such as Alarm Will Sound and International Contemporary Ensemble; pioneering examples include the London Sinfonietta, Ensemble Intercontemporain, and Ensemble Modern.<sup>405</sup> In the Netherlands in the 1960s, ensembles such as De Volharding emerged in opposition to the perceived authoritarianism of the orchestra; Louis Andriessen's work with these groups was an important precedent for Bang on a Can and its All-Stars.<sup>406</sup> Uptown, New York-based ensembles including Speculum Musicae and the Group for Contemporary Music established a strong place for

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<sup>403</sup> For a history of Reich's and Glass's ensembles, see Chapman, "Collaboration, Presence, and Community," 18–58.

<sup>404</sup> Ensembles that are part of what George Lewis identifies as the tradition of black experimentalism are rarely discussed as precedents for today's groups, likely demonstrating the ongoing effects of the institutional and racial division of Afrological and Eurological streams of improvisation. See Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 92–122; and Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, ix–xiii. For a discussion of these racial divisions among experimental institutions in the 1960s, see Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*.

<sup>405</sup> Alistair Williams briefly traces the large-ensemble lineage back to Schoenberg's 1906 Chamber Symphony but notes that the 1980 founding of Ensemble Modern represented Germany's first "dedicated new music ensemble." Alistair Williams, *Music in Germany Since 1968* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23–24.

<sup>406</sup> Adlington, *Composing Dissent*.

the new-music ensemble in the context of the Cold War American university.<sup>407</sup> String quartets such as Kronos, Arditti, and JACK—dedicated to commissioning and performing new repertoire—and percussion groups such as Nexus and So Percussion should also be seen as part of this ensemble ancestry. A comprehensive history of the new-music ensemble in different aesthetic, national, and local contexts in the late twentieth century would be a welcome addition to the scholarship of new music.<sup>408</sup>

Because yMusic has no clear precedent in instrumentation or mission, composers writing for it—and journalists writing about it—do not necessarily have anything to compare it to besides itself.<sup>409</sup> Two peer ensembles that operate in the same institutional network, eighth blackbird and the American Contemporary Music Ensemble, offer a perspective on how yMusic fits into the twenty-first century new-music landscape. eighth blackbird originated as a student sextet at Oberlin Conservatory in 1996, initially gathered to play Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*; it soon expanded to performing

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<sup>407</sup> Susan Deaver traces the emergence of the “new music specialist”—a virtuosic performer dedicated to new music—to the 1962 founding of the Group for Contemporary Music, although this specialization was also emerging internationally in different ensemble contexts. See Deaver, “The Group for Contemporary Music 1962–1992.” Many universities and conservatories also maintain their own ensembles comprising students and faculty. Informal student ensembles often transform into professional groups: Alarm Will Sound, for example, formed as an offshoot of Ossia, a student ensemble at the Eastman School of Music. See Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*, 201–43.

<sup>408</sup> For two surveys of recent ensembles, see James Patrick Smart, “The Programming Practices of Alarm Will Sound, the International Contemporary Ensemble, and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players from 2004–2009” (DMA diss., Arizona State University, 2009); and Emily Wozniak and Paul Judy, “Alternative Ensembles: A Study of Musical Arts Organizations” (2013), <http://www.polyphonic.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Alternative-Ensembles-Report.pdf>.

<sup>409</sup> I am grateful to Benjamin Piekut for pointing out other precedents of such formalized backing bands, including The Memphis Brass, which worked with soul singers for Stax Records, and The Funk Brothers, session musicians who played on major Motown recordings in Detroit in the 1960s. Brass-and-drums ensemble The No BS! Brass Band frequently collaborates with many of the same indie-rock bands with which yMusic works (at the Eaux Claires festival in Wisconsin in 2014, members of No BS! and yMusic both performed in the bands of songwriters Sufjan Stevens and Bon Iver). I have not encountered any musicians or journalists, however, who have drawn connections from yMusic to these other ensembles.

and then commissioning other works with “Pierrot-plus” instrumentation. It has crafted a particularly extroverted identity—in June 2015, its website declared that the sextet “combines the finesse of a string quartet, the energy of a rock band and the audacity of a storefront theater company”—and focuses on large-scale projects, university residencies, and theatrical collaborations.<sup>410</sup> John Phippen identifies eighth blackbird as an example of a “postmodern avant-garde,” marked by a “friendly virtuosity” that attempts to make contemporary music more intelligible and accessible to audiences.<sup>411</sup> Part of that positioning includes an emphasis on hyper-theatrical productions incorporating the musicians as choreographed actors as well as performers.

Just as eighth blackbird branched out from the Pierrot model, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME) shifted from a specific prototype toward a more eclectic identity. Soon after completing her master’s degree at Juilliard in 2005, cellist (and later yMusic member) Clarice Jensen formed ACME as a large, conductor-led ensemble with flexible membership. ACME initially dedicated itself to “thorny,” post-serial modernist music along with minimalist and postminimalist repertoire.<sup>412</sup> A student of Group for Contemporary Music founder Joel Krosnick, Jensen saw ACME as part of an uptown ensemble lineage, a successor to the New York New Music Ensemble and

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<sup>410</sup> See <http://www.eighthblackbird.org/ensemble/>.

<sup>411</sup> Phippen, “Toward a Postmodern Avant-Garde.”

<sup>412</sup> Jensen herself used the word “thorny”—often a cliché, though a helpful one, used to refer to postwar serial and post-serial music—in interview. Clarice Jensen, interview with author, 18 April 2015. Notably, this deliberate mixture of post-serial and minimalist is similar to the programming of the early Bang on a Can marathons. ACME’s catholic taste was noticed by critics; Steve Smith wrote on his blog in 2007 that “Today, one can easily find new-music concerts in which Wuorinen’s music sits comfortably alongside works by Jacob Druckman and John Adams, or Steve Reich and Nico Muhly. (Those are both actual past programs by the ACME Ensemble, incidentally.)” Steve Smith, “Navel Gazing,” *Night After Night* (blog), 17 February 2007 [http://www.nightafternight.com/night\\_after\\_night/2007/02/navel\\_gazing.html](http://www.nightafternight.com/night_after_night/2007/02/navel_gazing.html).

Continuum ensemble. After 2008, however, when the ensemble's conductor took a position with the San Francisco Opera, ACME began to focus on chamber-sized projects, and gradually moved away from its modernist repertoire. As of 2015, it frequently featured music by composer-performers who were regular participants in the ensemble, including Caleb Burhans, Timo Andres, and Caroline Shaw. Jensen attributed these shifts partially to prohibitive economic factors, including permission fees paid to publishers and costs to transport large percussion set-ups or rent rehearsal spaces. The ensemble's increasing presence outside New York also shaped these developments, she said:

When you start doing concerts that aren't in New York, you have to convince presenters to hire you, to bring you, and a lot of times they may love that kind of music but it's hard—it has to really be packaged in a way that seems like an audience will want to come.<sup>413</sup>

Both eighth blackbird and ACME imitated postwar ensembles with legacy modernist repertoire before moving toward creating their own repertory and working with emerging composers. Both ensembles have also stepped into yMusic's territory, collaborating with prominent pop and indie-rock artists. A 2015 eighth blackbird biography described the ensemble as “one of the most vital bridges between the contemporary classical and pop worlds”: it has played music by Bryce Dessner and Richard Reed Parry, two composers (and yMusic collaborators) better known for their roles in rock bands The National and Arcade Fire; added fully-instrumental arrangements of songs by bands such as Bon Iver to its repertoire; and accompanied singer-songwriters.<sup>414</sup> ACME has similarly worked with singer-songwriters and a heavy metal

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<sup>413</sup> Jensen, interview with author, 18 April 2015.

<sup>414</sup> See <http://www.eighthblackbird.org/event/celebrate-brooklyn/>. “Heart & Breath,” a 2015 eighth blackbird program, incorporated Parry's *Duo for Heart and Breath* (originally composed for Sirota as part of a series of works, including several written for yMusic) and an arrangement of Bon Iver's song “Babys.”

guitarist. Whereas yMusic started as a back-up group for bands before creating its own body of instrumental works, eighth blackbird and ACME began as conventional new-music ensembles that expanded into pop collaborators. These three groups—and others, increasingly, including Yarn/Wire, So Percussion, and Alarm Will Sound—have met in this middle space, impelled by younger composers and performers as well as a network of institutions that has actively fostered pop-classical cross-pollination: the prioritization of indie classical.<sup>415</sup>

Ultimately, any unusual qualities of yMusic—its instrumental configuration, or its artistic mission—did not hinder its success in the new-music world, due to the emergence of this middle ground as well as an indie classical framework outlined in preceding chapters.<sup>416</sup> yMusic has performed in the venues described in Chapter 1, including (Le) Poisson Rouge; released both of its albums on New Amsterdam Records; participated in St. Paul’s Liquid Music and New York’s Ecstatic Music Festival; obtained prestigious gigs from classical music presenters including Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall; received enthusiastic press from publications such as *Pitchfork* and the *New York Times*; and, in press as well as interviews with me, connected its artistic history back to the

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<sup>415</sup> Yarn/Wire premiered *Round-Up*, a 2015 ballet score by Sufjan Stevens; So Percussion has released albums by Dessner and rock bandleader Bobby Previte, and collaborated with Nova. In 2014 Alarm Will Sound—of which Sirota is a member—launched “Alarm System,” which it describes as “a program to bring musical artists from a variety of backgrounds together with Alarm Will Sound to create new work. The goal is to expand the circle of those who can make great music for us, and who can contribute their ideas to the new-music world.” The initial year featured commissions from Valgeir Sigurðsson, producer Ryan McNeely, and the trio Medeski, Martin & Wood. Significantly, the approach of “Alarm System” resonates with how yMusic describes its collaborative methods: “These artists will create for Alarm Will Sound without the restriction that their work start its life as a traditional printed score and parts. Instead, the first step will be bringing the ensemble to the artist’s music-making method, whatever that may be.” See <http://www.alarmwillsound.com/alarmssystem/>.

<sup>416</sup> Indeed, yMusic’s artist bio frames its unusual instrumentation as a positive: “Their virtuosic execution and unique configuration (string trio, flute, clarinet, and trumpet) has attracted the attention of high profile collaborators.” See <http://ymusicensemble.com/about/>.

Kronos Quartet and Bang on a Can. With the Duke relationship, it added an aspect to its identity that is a central artistic and economic factor for nearly all new-music ensembles active today: the university residency.

### **The University**

As Phippen has described, short-term residencies at music schools often represent a core component of an ensemble's season.<sup>417</sup> At first glance, however, yMusic might seem an unlikely candidate for a university residency. Unlike eighth blackbird, the ensemble did not originate at a music school (though five of its six members attended Juilliard, the ensemble was founded after they graduated). The composers with whom it most frequently works are not strongly affiliated with any university programs. It maintains a relatively small repertoire of commissioned works (what they call "the hits"; see below) that it does not expand as quickly as peers such as ACME. Because yMusic is not "full time," it is difficult to coordinate a multi-day visit for all six members in a single setting (this was made clear by the presence of substitute musicians in the Duke residency). The ensemble's decision to incorporate as a for-profit LLC, rather than a tax-exempt 501(c) nonprofit—atypical for a classical or new-music ensemble, but typical for a rock band—means that it does not have an explicit educational mission that might be fulfilled by working with students. Of the six members of the ensemble, only Sirota held a faculty position at a university at the time of the Duke residency; in fall 2007, she joined the Manhattan School of Music to teach in a new master's degree program in Contemporary

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<sup>417</sup> See Phippen, "Spinning Plates, Entrepreneurship, and the Social Relationships of Ensemble Residencies," *Polyphonic*, 7 October 2015, <http://www.polyphonic.org/2015/10/07/spinning-plates-entrepreneurship-and-the-social-relationships-of-ensemble-residencies/>.

Music Performance, but left the school in spring 2015 because of her active travel schedule. Camerieri told me that he and his colleagues were not interested in teaching private lessons or coaching master classes, and only sought out a residency in which they could workshop new works specifically written for the group.

But if yMusic’s identity might pull away from academia, the particular characteristics of Duke draw the university toward the ensemble. Surveying the culture of Duke University’s composition program and the goals of the university’s arts presenter, Duke Performances, clarifies the local causes that facilitated the yMusic collaboration and allowed for specific identities of yMusic to emerge.

Since the 1962 founding of Princeton’s PhD program in composition, university doctoral programs have played a prominent role in American new music. Following the launch of the Princeton program under the purview of Milton Babbitt—itself implicitly allied with a Cold War cultural agenda and a constellation of institutions such as the Fromm Music Foundation, journal *Perspectives of New Music*, Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, and Group for Contemporary Music—other universities created similarly-structured PhDs. (Richard Taruskin has called them “the countless other degree programs that Princeton’s made not just possible but necessary.”<sup>418</sup>) The PhD and the DMA doctoral programs represent stepping stones to a career in composition, especially for those considering a future in academia.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> Richard Taruskin, “Afterword: *Nicht blutbefleckt?*” *Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 275. See also Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103–75; and Martin Brody, “‘Music For The Masses’: Milton Babbitt’s Cold War Music Theory,” *Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 161–92.

<sup>419</sup> See also Pasler, *Writing Through Music*, 318–62. Universities offer PhD or DMA doctoral programs depending on a number of factors within a music department. The DMA, or doctor of musical arts, tends to emphasize applied skills such as performing and conducting, while the PhD typically emphasizes research.

Although the 1960s culture of PhD composition programs was arguably connected to an ideology surrounding serial music, that perceived stylistic hegemony is no longer relevant.<sup>420</sup> Instead, individual universities foster particular cultures of new music guided by faculty, graduate students, and curricula. A school such as Princeton, Harvard, or Columbia might have a reputation for maintaining a faculty with particular aesthetic sensibilities—and students who share those proclivities might flock to that school, reinforcing the stereotype—though investigation of the individual cultures of these departments is necessary to understand what that might mean in practice.<sup>421</sup>

The Duke graduate program in composition was founded in 1992, and in spring 2015 included fourteen students working toward PhDs.<sup>422</sup> The ten graduate composers

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<sup>420</sup> Taruskin writes that “‘Ph.D. music,’ it was widely if tacitly recognized, meant serial music.” Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*, 160. Drawing on a wealth of data, Joseph Straus has argued that this perceived hegemony of serialism in the academy of the 1950s and 1960s is a myth; Anne Shreffler responded that such empiricism does not necessarily debunk the existence of a broad historical shift toward serialism as a prestigious musical language. This particular controversy points to the importance of examining the individual cultures of university music departments and their relationships to the construction of musical style. See Straus, “The Myth of Serial ‘Tyranny’ in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Musical Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 301–43; and Anne Shreffler, “The Myth of Empirical Historiography: A Response to Joseph N. Straus,” *Musical Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 30–39.

<sup>421</sup> The cultural fabric of the university PhD program—and its consequences for the careers and aesthetics of American composers and musical life—remains understudied. Past ethnographies of music departments have focused on conservatories and music schools, with an emphasis on undergraduate degrees in music performance. See Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, Performance* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988) and Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995). Although not surveying a PhD program in the United States, Born’s ethnography of IRCAM in Paris more closely represents the relationship between composers, institutions, and new-music culture present in this chapter. See Born, *Rationalizing Culture*.

I have participated in many discussions among composers and performers about the specific cultures and aesthetic orientations of composition departments. In an email, Duke professor and Princeton PhD John Supko characterized the departmental culture of his alma mater as “open,” “with a curriculum that allowed for many degrees of creative freedom, risk, and exploration; a cultivated absence of strong ideological commitment among the faculty that liberated graduate students; and an environment of collaboration rather than competition among composers.” John Supko, email to author, 14 March 2016. Printed with permission. That culture has also shaped institutions created by Princeton students, such as New Amsterdam.

<sup>422</sup> The composition PhD was developed alongside a PhD track in Historical Performance Practice, and faculty member Scott Lindroth was hired in 1990 in a tenure-track position as both programs were being

that I interviewed all expressed excitement at attending Duke and felt supported by their department, faculty, and colleagues.<sup>423</sup> Several appreciated that the program’s curriculum, which places musicology and composition graduate students in the same seminars, valued intellectual curiosity and research. Others prized attentive relationships with the three composition professors—Stephen Jaffe, Scott Lindroth, and John Supko—and an environment that prioritized cooperation over rivalry. For these students, the PhD represented a next stage in their training, a necessary career step if they intended to continue in academia, and an opportunity to receive funding for continuing to compose and study without having to seek a job outside their field.

Students perceived the culture of the Duke program to be particularly open to writing in a wide range of musical styles. Two of the three faculty members also have strong ties to the strand of new music under discussion in this dissertation. Lindroth was a colleague of the Bang on a Can founders at Yale, and participated in its early marathons. Supko attended Princeton alongside the New Amsterdam founders, worked with the NOW Ensemble, and released an album on New Amsterdam Records (*Due East, drawn only once*, 2011). Lindroth has described how the Duke program initially had “much more of a kind of a Bang on a Can current”—with students arriving with degrees from

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built. As he wrote in an email, “I think the idea was to foster a culture in which applied music and research could not only co-exist, but actually benefit from each other. I think this is still a distinctive aspect of our program.” Scott Lindroth, email to author, 15 September 2015. Printed with permission.

<sup>423</sup> Between September 2014 and June 2015, I spoke with Sarah Curzi, Ben Daniels, D. Edward Davis, Eren Gumrukcuoglu, Jamie L. Keesecker, Scott Lee, Owen S. Richardson, Vladimir Smirnov, Justin Tierney, and Yann Wagner. As a graduate student at UNC Chapel Hill, a PhD program located nearby that collaborates frequently with Duke, I participated in many activities with these composers including concerts, conferences, and informal gatherings. I consider them colleagues as well as research participants; that we were in similar career positions in similar fields offered me, I hope, additional insights into their lives.

Yale and Princeton—and has become more aesthetically diverse over time.<sup>424</sup> That diversity still has its limits, however, given that the three composition professors write primarily tonal music, which might lead potential students to apply based on their knowledge of the faculty’s stylistic orientation and thus narrow the department’s profile.<sup>425</sup>

Visiting artists have significantly shaped the culture of the Duke program, dating back to 1991 when Louis Andriessen visited the campus for a series of major lectures. A key component of the curriculum is the department’s “Encounters: with the music of our time,” a new-music presenting series that invites guest artists to perform on campus and collaborate with PhD students. Unlike Princeton or Yale—which due to their locations more easily foster connections between campus composers and New York-based ensembles—Duke lacks a robust, local new-music presence to draw upon outside of the university.<sup>426</sup> There are no full-time ensembles dedicated to contemporary music based in the area, though the department works with local and university-based musicians. “Encounters” represents an opportunity for students to workshop new music with specialized experts; build relationships with reputable ensembles that could lead to future

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<sup>424</sup> Lindroth, interview with author, 27 August 2014. Lindroth also serves as Duke’s Vice Provost for the Arts, which sponsors special grants to professional graduate arts programs in the university. For the 2013–14 yMusic residency, the Duke Music department contributed \$8,100, Duke Performances offered \$10,000, and the Vice Provost for the Arts provided \$15,000.

<sup>425</sup> Student composer Sarah Curzi questioned this description, writing that “Duke seemed to me to be a young, renegade program for artists who were tired of doing things as they have always been done, and that strongly supported unusual work by providing the resources to do so.” Sarah Curzi, email to author, 17 March 2016. Printed with permission.

<sup>426</sup> Students at schools near major cities frequently live in the metropolitan area once they have completed coursework, creating additional ties between new music in the city and on the campus. (Many composers connected to New Amsterdam were still students at Yale and Princeton when they began working professionally in New York.)

opportunities; and create a portfolio of professional scores and recordings. Supko explained the importance of maintaining long-term relationships with visitors:

It's great to give them the opportunity to socialize and work on a one-to-one level with musicians who may be professionally useful contacts in the future. I do think about that a lot—because if you don't have people who play your music or who know what you do and what you're about, it's much much much harder.<sup>427</sup>

For the yMusic residency, “Encounters” partnered with Duke Performances.

Distinct from the music department, Duke Performances is a university arts presenter that hosts theater, dance, and several genres of music in touring productions as well as commissions.<sup>428</sup> Subsidized by the Office of the Provost, Duke Performances is tasked with actively engaging with faculty and students as well as the intellectual mission of the university. But due to its director, Aaron Greenwald, and the particular nature of Durham's music scene, the organization also has stronger ties to local artists than many other university presenters. Its slogan is “In Durham, at Duke,” and Greenwald frequently commissions work from North Carolina-based musicians and bands, presenting them in campus spaces and downtown venues.<sup>429</sup> Greenwald contrasted his organization's focus with that of a nearby peer institution, UNC Chapel Hill's Carolina Performing Arts, which often employs the catchphrase “We bring the world to Chapel Hill.” Whereas Carolina Performing Arts was explicitly founded in 2005 to introduce internationally

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<sup>427</sup> Supko, interview with author, 3 September 2014.

<sup>428</sup> Duke Performances launched in 2004 as a redesign of the Duke Institute for the Arts, and Aaron Greenwald has served as director since 2007.

<sup>429</sup> Along with emphasizing a dialogue between campus and city, Greenwald and Duke Performances trade on the university's historical role as what David Blake calls “a home for popular musicians seeking ‘cultural empowerment’ through intellectual and critical prestige.” David K. Blake, “*Bildung* Culture: Elite Popular Music and the American University, 1960–2010” (PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2014), 5.

renowned artists to the Chapel Hill area—driven partially by the remodeling of UNC’s Memorial Hall, a large concert venue that could host touring professional orchestras—Duke Performances does not strongly emphasize the global over the local. In this way, Duke Performances also attempts to counteract perceptions of its partner university as a privileged private school disconnected from its location in the South (in contrast with UNC’s status as a public school).<sup>430</sup>

Past “Encounters” typically entailed a single campus visit from a professional ensemble, featuring concerts and a session in which the performers read through student works. In first partnering with the graduate students and “Encounters” in 2011, Greenwald instead desired what he called a “sustained, multi-visit engagement...an iterative conversation about the music that was being written,” and sought out ensembles outside the purview of who might typically work with graduate student composers.<sup>431</sup> The first Duke Performances affiliation with the composition program featured The Bad Plus, a jazz trio that engages with new music but does not typically work with outside composers.

For the next Duke Performances/“Encounters” residency, Greenwald suggested yMusic to the faculty. He was drawn to yMusic’s work outside of new music and “the notion of a chamber ensemble having a very specific identity, and commissioning for, in yMusic’s case, both that identity and the musical configuration—kind of curating their

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<sup>430</sup> Despite these differences, Duke Performances and Carolina Performing Arts still draw from similar rosters of prominent, internationally touring artists, though they have informally agreed not to engage the same artists. Gabriel Kahane, for example, was an artist-in-residence at Carolina Performing Arts from 2013–16; otherwise, he might have worked with yMusic at Duke. But there are some overlaps among indie classical musicians: in November 2015, Carolina Performing Arts presented Shara Nova’s opera *You Us We All*; in November 2016, Duke will present *My Brightest Diamond* as well as Nova’s collaboration with So Percussion.

<sup>431</sup> Greenwald, interview with author, 25 June 2015.

own musical lives.”<sup>432</sup> The interests of Greenwald and positioning of Duke Performances, the particular culture of Duke’s composition program in the historical context of the university PhD, and the role of the “Encounters” series constructed a set of priorities that allowed Duke to successfully engage yMusic for a residency. In the next section, we can see how Duke’s perceptions of yMusic, and the ensemble’s perceptions of itself, were negotiated in practice through residency activities.

### **Residency Activities**

The structure of the yMusic residency represented a compromise between the concerns of many actors. Activities spread across the 2013–14 and 2014–15 academic years reflected yMusic’s own needs, how Duke Performances and the music department interpreted those concerns, and Greenwald and the Duke faculty’s desires for their programs and students. This section focuses on two additions to yMusic’s activities in the residency’s second year, both based in explicit attempts to align the residency more directly with how ensemble members perceived the sextet’s identity. An organized brunch helped establish relationships between composers and performers, and emphasized the sociality that yMusic itself strongly performs as part of its identity; a singer-songwriter collaboration engaged yMusic as backing-band, trained the student composers in a new musical skillset, and attempted to draw on Durham’s music scene.

In the 2013–14 academic year, yMusic made three trips to the Duke campus: in November 3–5 2013, it recorded a dissertation composition, workshopped three pieces written for it by graduate student composers, and played a concert of its own repertory at

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

Casbah, a rock club in downtown Durham; in March 2–3 2014, it rehearsed and recorded graduate student compositions; and in March 23–25 2014, it rehearsed and performed student works at Motorco, another downtown Durham venue.<sup>433</sup> In 2014–15, yMusic also visited Duke three times: in November 15–18 2014, it provided the soundtrack for director Sam Green’s “live documentary” *The Measure of All Things* and workshopped early versions of graduate student works; in March 1–2 2015, it rehearsed graduate student works and played them at Motorco; and in April 19–22, it recorded two graduate dissertations and worked with Ben Folds.<sup>434</sup>

At the end of the first year, members of yMusic discussed with Greenwald how to better shape the residency to benefit both ensemble and students, and suggested two additions: a brunch for composers and performers, and a collaboration with a local singer-songwriter. Moose said he recommended the brunch because “It didn’t even feel like a residency—it just felt like, you had these sessions, and then you were living your separate life...you need to get to know the people and have the conversations, you have

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<sup>433</sup> Casbah ceased presenting concerts in the intervening period, and Duke Performances subsequently switched to Motorco. In 2015, Motorco was at the center of a burgeoning section of Durham, a city that has undergone gentrification since the early 2000s when developers transformed former tobacco warehouses into apartments, retail spaces, and offices. As resident and architect Mark Hough described the area surrounding Motorco, “Besides a venerable garden supply store, there had not been many successful businesses in the area in recent years. This all changed in 2010 with the opening of two vanguard endeavors: Fullsteam Brewery, which opened in an Art Deco former 7UP bottling plant, and the hip music venue Motorco, located across the street in an old modernist car dealership. Their immediate success created a momentum that led to the opening of several restaurants, bars, artist studios, a coffee shop, hair salon and other eclectic offerings. Now the neighborhood is regularly packed with food trucks and Duke University students mingling with hipsters, young families and other locals.” Mark Hough, “Finding Authenticity, *Planetizen*, 20 April 2014, <http://www.planetizen.com/node/68396>. This particular section of Durham has also received national attention; a 2013 “36 Hours in Durham, N.C.” tourist guide published in the *New York Times* recommended visiting Motorco, Fullsteam, and the food trucks that park in the area. Ingrid K. Williams, “36 Hours in Durham, N.C.,” *New York Times*, 17 January 2013.

<sup>434</sup> *The Measure of All Things* is a collaboration between Green and yMusic in which Green narrates a series of short films and photographs, with yMusic providing incidental music drawn from its repertoire. The November visit also included a meeting in which yMusic read through short works written by undergraduate composers for a course taught by Supko.

to structure unstructured time to make it work.”<sup>435</sup> This desire for sociality is not frivolous, but instead crucial to the collaborative lens through which yMusic perceives itself. The origin stories told by the ensemble’s members situate it within a nexus of dinners, after-parties, and trips for drinks.<sup>436</sup> The premise of the ensemble—“it makes sense person to person,” as Camerieri said—is predicated on friendship. That yMusic focuses almost exclusively on commissioning from close collaborators embeds this sociality within the music that it performs; I will show how this dynamic might play out in the sections below.<sup>437</sup> In a radio interview, Sirota contrasted the Duke experience with

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<sup>435</sup> Moose, interview with author, 12 November 2014.

<sup>436</sup> A post on the ensemble’s website in 2008 described yMusic as “vaguely formed upstairs at Frank’s Cocktail Lounge in Fort Greene, February ’08. The occasion was an after-party for The National’s ‘Brooklyn Next’ concert at BAM Opera House.” See “projects/collaborators,” yMusic ensemble website, archived with Wayback Machine, [https://web.archive.org/web/20091115181229/http://ymusicensemble.com/?page\\_id=7](https://web.archive.org/web/20091115181229/http://ymusicensemble.com/?page_id=7). In a June 2009 introduction to the group’s new blog, Moose wrote that “yMusic is an exciting group whose theoretical existence has been the excuse for many a bottle of Ridge Zinfandel.” See Moose, “edinburgh. then, a short history lesson,” yMusic website, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120513012352/http://ymusicensemble.com/2009/06/rob-from-edinburgh-uk/>.

In interviews and conversation, yMusic performers also spoke about their enthusiasm for restaurants and bars in Durham. Greenwald was pleased with the local culinary connections that the ensemble members formed, calling them “good champions for Durham.” Greenwald, interview with author, 25 June 2015.

When yMusic first formed, the members maintained a blog on its website in which it introduced the ensemble informally, described performance and touring experiences, and provided insights into the personalities of the individual performers. Today, yMusic’s website is more professionally oriented, intermittently updated with information regarding their upcoming concerts and projects; the original blog is no longer accessible from their main page. As of 2015, it still maintained a chatty Twitter feed, and individual members were active on public social media platforms including Twitter and Instagram.

<sup>437</sup> Sirota highlighted the relationship between the social and the musical, likening the Duke residency to yMusic’s work with its regular collaborators: “In a lot of ways, it’s actually very very similar. We’re dealing with composers who we have a close personal relationship with, and the music isn’t a static thing on the page...I think maybe one of the things that yMusic is so proud of, is just that we really like to work with the composer to put their piece onto our ensemble in a pretty hands-on way...when we’re working with composers, we like to work with them on the ideas that they have, but also sometimes we end up influencing a little bit the way that the piece ends up lying on our group. In a nice way, working with these Duke composers has had a lot of resonance or similarity to the way that we work with Nico [Muhly] or Timo [Andres].” Sirota, quoted in Eric Mennel and Phoebe Judge, “Setting the Shuttle Launch to Music,” *WUNC*, 25 March 2015, <http://wunc.org/post/setting-shuttle-launch-music>.

other, short-term residencies, and suggested that the opportunity to better know the student composers affected performance practice:

We don't get to develop the same kinds of relationships with the composers that we have the luxury to develop here at Duke....I always feel like I will play music better if I'm thinking about the personality and the person behind the piece.<sup>438</sup>

Greenwald had hoped the brunch would improve the social fabric of the first residency year, of which he said the performer-composer dynamic “felt a little bit like a player piano,” lacking personal connection.<sup>439</sup>

I attended the brunch, which took place in the morning following yMusic's performance of “The Measure of All Things” in its November 2014 visit. At a private, downstairs space at the trendy Mexican restaurant Dos Perros in downtown Durham, yMusic members spread out among the Duke students at long tables. Over coffee, mimosas, and breakfast burritos, groggy composers and performers chatted about university life, the hardships of touring, and mutual friends in the new-music world. I sat with Camerieri and several composers including Davis, a close friend with whom I founded a local Experimental Music Study Group. Camerieri told a number of stories about working with prominent musicians, one of which stood out as particularly memorable. He had recently joined Paul Simon's touring band, and at a meeting Simon played for him a recent studio recording, and asked for his thoughts.<sup>440</sup> Bewildered, and not knowing what to give as feedback to the legendary musician, Camerieri cursorily

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Greenwald, interview with author, 25 June 2015.

<sup>440</sup> Simon has further connections to the new music discussed in this dissertation: the musical director of his touring band is Bang on a Can All-Stars founding guitarist Mark Stewart. In June 2016, Simon released his thirteenth solo album, *Stranger to Stranger*, on which Camerieri, Stewart, Sopp, and Muhly perform, and for which Muhly wrote horn and flute arrangements.

responded that he heard a lot of “air” in the take; Simon was hugely impressed by Camerieri’s ears, revealing that in fact he specifically recorded the air outside every studio he worked in and added it to the mix of each album. The story was at once self-effacing and imposing: the yMusic members were young, and still intimidated by the musicians they performed with, but they were also working closely with celebrities whom the student composers might never even meet.

As an intermediary, both friendly with the Duke students and also known to the yMusic members, I made an effort to draw out connections between them. In general, I found that the yMusic players were not well acquainted with the semi-professional status of the PhD composers. Describing to Camerieri, for example, the prominent ensembles or performers that the Duke students had written for helped clarify that they were serious composers with nascent or established careers in the new-music world. (That lack of familiarity with what it means to be a graduate student composer—to be a student while also having a foothold in the professional sphere—would not necessarily be the case with past ensembles that visited Duke such as Wet Ink, whose members include composers with PhDs and university positions.)

Subsequent interviews also revealed that the event, and these celebrity stories, informed the music that the Duke students created. Composer Sarah Curzi, for example, told me that the brunch “stayed in my mind as I was writing for them”; she described her amazement at hearing Moose recount recent projects with indie-rock musician Sufjan Stevens and hip-hop mogul Dr. Dre, which “just made it so clear that they’re really professional.”<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>441</sup> Sarah Curzi, interview with author, 11 June 2015.

The addition of the singer-songwriter collaboration evolved out of Moose's similar desire to shape the residency more toward the ensemble's regular activities, and also Greenwald's impulse to push the Duke students in new directions. They planned for the composers to write instrumental arrangements of pre-existing songs by a local rock musician, which yMusic could rehearse and record as the songwriter's "band." Moose told me that he hoped the activity would showcase an essential part of yMusic's identity and also provide composers with collaborative experience that could help them professionally.

The Durham area houses a large indie-rock scene, rooted in historic clubs such as Cat's Cradle in nearby Carrboro.<sup>442</sup> Chapel Hill was a hub of what Michael Azerrad calls the American indie underground of the 1980s and 1990s; that legacy endures in Durham's Merge Records, an indie label founded by local musicians in 1989.<sup>443</sup> Unlike other rock scenes, Durham's indie community has become a source for artistic and institutional collaboration with its local university; Duke Performances has commissioned several projects from Merge artists. Individual members of yMusic have also worked with members of Merge bands such as Arcade Fire's Richard Reed Parry.

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<sup>442</sup> The Triangle indie scene is constructed in this network of venues, which emphasize local and touring groups; a prevalence of bands nearby; a history of the area as a hub for college and alternative rock; and strong coverage from *IndyWeek*, a local alt-weekly newspaper. The *Indy* in particular maintains a sense of coherence among multiple overlapping music scenes, providing fans with a self-awareness regarding local activity. The scene also acquires national attention from the long history of Cat's Cradle, the recent draw of the eclectic and independently focused Hopscotch Festival in Raleigh, and the success of Merge Records.

<sup>443</sup> See Michael Azerrad, *This Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981–1991* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2001).

For this project, Duke Performances and yMusic reached out to Mac McCaughan, a co-owner of Merge, founding member of the indie band Superchunk, and solo artist.<sup>444</sup> A rehearsal and recording session were planned for the April 2015 visit; McCaughan would provide Duke with recordings of songs, for which selected composers would write accompanying orchestrations that the sextet could perform with him. Supko, who helped plan the project, expressed enthusiasm at the opportunity for students to work in an area increasingly important to music-making today.<sup>445</sup>

In early 2015, however, yMusic and Ben Folds decided that their upcoming tour required several days of rehearsal and preparation, and that it made the most sense to initiate it at Duke. Duke Performances thus added a Ben Folds concert to its series, and scrapped the McCaughan collaboration. The same activity would take place, but with Duke composers working with Folds rather than the Durham-based musician.<sup>446</sup> Given that Folds had not arranged many of his older songs for yMusic, this collaboration would provide the ensemble with additional material for the tour. Although the project with Folds allowed the Duke students to gain experience in pop orchestration and work with a famous musician, a McCaughan collaboration might have led to subsequent local connections between the composition program and the indie scene. Greenwald pointed out that if the McCaughan idea had gone forward, yMusic might have acted as an ideal

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<sup>444</sup> yMusic also knew McCaughan through his brother Matt, the drummer for Bon Iver's touring band, to which Moose and Camerieri belong.

<sup>445</sup> Supko, interview with author, 3 September 2014.

<sup>446</sup> These changes took place before McCaughan collaboration was announced to the students, though some had learned informally that they might be working with a prominent local musician affiliated with Merge and were excited about the opportunity.

“translational space” between those two Durham worlds, which might not otherwise be bridged.<sup>447</sup>

The brunch and singer-songwriter collaboration were not only activities in the course of larger university collaboration, but also specific performances of yMusic created through negotiations between a variety of actors. They informed music that was written for the ensemble; shaped how the ensemble would be received in a local context; and articulated the sextet’s identity for the composers, presenters, and faculty involved in the decisions. Given the explicitly social lens through which the ensemble frames its origins and activities, a single gathering for a meal—as a strategically planned activity, coordinated between administrators and musicians—represents a crucial and ordinarily overlooked site in which to understand yMusic’s self-conceived identity as rearticulated in the networks through which it travels. The brunch also partially revealed the power dynamics and social tensions that might need to be bridged between elite performers and semi-professional graduate students. The gathering rearticulated yMusic’s status as a social grouping, one comprised of six friends as well as six musicians; the singer-songwriter project performed yMusic exactly as it describes itself, a “ready-made collaborative unit.”

Furthermore, the brunch and singer-songwriter project clarified how a translocal ensemble adapts—and is adapted—to specific local circumstances. As Camerieri said,

We just had brunch today with a bunch of really cool, interested composers, and now we’re going to play their music. We’re getting together to rehearse their music on our own tonight, we’re going to rehearse their music with them in the room tomorrow, and work on these compositions, and we’re going to perform them next time we come, and record them the next time—that’s exactly what we do in New York! That was the most exciting part of this, that’s why this works.

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<sup>447</sup> Greenwald, interview with author, 25 June 2015.

We want to do what we do, but Paradigm [yMusic’s management agency] and Duke together found an opportunity to do what we do, in a new place. And it’s so exciting: we’ve had the best time, this is literally our favorite thing to do—someone’s *paying us* to do what we *pay* to have happen in New York.<sup>448</sup>

This mapping of yMusic’s specific New York conditions onto Durham resonates with how Bruno Latour describes the successful extension of a network. According to Latour, “If some causality appears to be transported in a predictable and routine way, then it’s the proof that other mediators have been put in place to render such a displacement smooth and predictable.”<sup>449</sup> The 2014–15 residency was more successful for yMusic members and Greenwald because Duke’s translation of the ensemble included new mediators—in the form of residency activities—that smoothed its displacement.

### **Balance Problems**

The title of yMusic’s 2014 album alludes to the ensemble’s unusual instrumentation, and has significant implications for its identity. *Balance Problems*, the group’s second release on New Amsterdam, is named for an eponymous work by Nico Muhly, whose relationship with several yMusic players dates back their undergraduate years together at Juilliard. Muhly’s titles frequently make cheeky allusions to their works’ original performers; in this case, *Balance Problems* is a not-so-oblique reference to the difficulties of writing for an ensemble comprising flute, clarinet, trumpet, violin, viola, and cello.<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Camerieri, interview with author, 16 November 2014.

<sup>449</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 108.

<sup>450</sup> *Balance Problems* also refers to the sonic signature of the record of the whole, for which yMusic granted producer Ryan Lott (also known as Son Lux) a large degree of creative control and authorial voice, in a manner similar to a rock album. As Lott said in an interview, “Our goal was to produce an album that

In this section I scrutinize the musical and professional implications of yMusic’s balance problems for the Duke students, in order to show how over the two residency years they imagined yMusic as, alternately, a set of six instruments and a set of six people. This section reveals distinct versions of yMusic through the practices of the Duke composers, who as outsiders might also treat the ensemble differently from yMusic’s long-term colleagues such as Muhly; it also demonstrates a few of the limits of collaboration.

Instrumentation is both a key component and an incidental byproduct of yMusic’s formation. Members frequently described how they assembled the sextet based not on a specifically desired set of instruments but on a specifically desired set of collaborators. Although it was not at first clear how the musical results of the unusual setup might sound, yMusic now insists that its commissions are written for all six members. Moose referred to the instrumentation as “our signature”: “If you add anything or take anything away, it’s not the group anymore. It feels foundational.”<sup>451</sup> Sirota differentiated yMusic from ACME and Alarm Will Sound, two other ensembles of which the violist is a member, by its “fixed and bizarre instrumentation.”<sup>452</sup> And the ensemble often performs the connection between its social ethos—the relationship among its players and to the

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feels and sounds different than any other chamber music record.” See “Backtracking yMusic’s *Balance Problems*.” This kind of imaginary recorded space is similar to those of albums released by Bedroom Community and New Amsterdam, such as Muhly’s *Speaks Volumes* and *Mothertongue* as well as Sarah Kirkland Snider’s *Penelope* and *Unremembered*.

<sup>451</sup> Moose said, “Each piece that came in kind of created the sound of the group. We don’t necessarily know what a flute, clarinet, and trumpet are going sound like in close proximity, and every composer had a different idea about how to solve that challenge, or what opportunities would be created by that.” Moose, interview with author, 12 November 2014.

<sup>452</sup> Sirota, interview with author, 17 November 2014. In an episode of her podcast *Meet the Composer*, Sirota interviews composer Andrew Norman about his work *Music for Circles*, written for yMusic; she describes how Norman dealt specifically with the challenges of writing for the ensemble, and remarks that “yMusic’s instrumentation poses some pretty specific problems for composers.” Sirota, quoted in Sirota and Alexander Overington, “Andrew Norman: Better Living Through Architecture,” *Meet the Composer* (podcast), 29 July 2014, <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/meet-composer-andrew-norman-story/>.

composers with whom it regularly collaborates—and its instrumentation. At a yMusic concert that I attended at New York Live Arts in downtown Manhattan in December 2015, cellist Gabriel Cabezas told the audience that the ensemble’s unusual configuration meant that “you have to reach out to people to write your music, and so you ask your friends.”

In an April 2013 meeting, the Duke faculty announced to the graduate students which ensembles would visit for residency workshops, and which students would write for them.<sup>453</sup> I spoke with the seven students asked to work with yMusic in 2013–2014 about preparing to compose for the ensemble. They had varying levels of familiarity with yMusic’s activities, from being wholly unaware of the sextet to having listened to their recordings in the past. Research marked the first preparatory phase: composers browsed its website, listened to its recordings (at the time, the album *Beautiful Mechanical* and videos available on YouTube), and read reviews. Planning to write for yMusic meant acquiring information through mediating actors, providing a particular body of knowledge that might be different from friends of the ensemble such as Muhly and Kahane. Even *For the Union Dead*, the very first work composed for yMusic, was guided by what Kahane called the sextet’s “specific attention devoted to their ability to move effortlessly between American vernacular forms and more traditional Western concert music.”<sup>454</sup> None of the Duke composers had direct relationships with yMusic’s members

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<sup>453</sup> Rising first-year composers were informed of this information via email. In 2013–14, Duke composers also worked with the Hilliard Ensemble and Imani Winds, for readings of works written for them, though in a small-scale structure distinct from the yMusic residency; in 2014–15, similar short-term residencies took place with the Da Capo Chamber Players and New York Polyphony.

<sup>454</sup> See “projects/collaborators,” yMusic website, archived with Wayback Machine, [https://web.archive.org/web/20091115181229/http://ymusicensemble.com/?page\\_id=7](https://web.archive.org/web/20091115181229/http://ymusicensemble.com/?page_id=7).

or knowledge of its performance practice not obtained through reading reviews and listening to recordings.

The initial overriding concern among the Duke students was the presence of the trumpet.<sup>455</sup> Few small ensembles include a single brass instrument that is not a French horn, and the composers puzzled about how to navigate the trumpet's typically cutting sound within an otherwise softer timbre of woodwinds and strings. According to Scott Lee, "The main challenge of the group, anybody will tell you this, writing for them, is the trumpet. It doesn't really fit—you have string trio, flute and clarinet, and then you have this loud brass instrument."<sup>456</sup> Some composers hoped to avoid the issue entirely: student Vladimir Smirnov said that "Several times I thought, 'Oh, maybe I don't have to write for the trumpet—maybe I can just ask him to sit out.'"<sup>457</sup>

Once yMusic first visited campus in November 2013, the Duke students became more confident about the presence of the trumpet, and specifically Camerieri. The ensemble rehearsed early versions of two student pieces and performed its own repertoire at Casbah. Hearing Camerieri in yMusic clarified that balance would not, in fact, be a problem. As Lee said, "He's great, he can play anything, but still you have to be totally aware of that"; that awareness resulted from Lee's in-person experience with the ensemble.<sup>458</sup> Another composer, Ben Daniels, was reassured by his colleagues who

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<sup>455</sup> According to my interviews, other challenges of orchestration have included yMusic's lack of a chordal instrument (such as piano or guitar) and the overall middle range of the ensemble (with cello and bass clarinet, rather than double bass, providing the lowest end).

<sup>456</sup> Scott Lee, interview with author, 20 August 2014.

<sup>457</sup> Vladimir Smirnov, interview with author, 20 August 2014.

<sup>458</sup> Lee, interview with author, 20 August 2014.

attended the rehearsal: “First thing they said was, ‘The trumpet: he’s *unbelievable*. He can play anything. He can play a whisper; he will play *anything*. The guy is a monster, they’re all monsters. But in particular—don’t be worried about the trumpet.’”<sup>459</sup> Even though the composers had researched the individual musicians, they were not sure how to manage yMusic’s orchestration until they heard the ensemble in performance.

We see two different traditions at play here, accompanied by different interactions with the trumpet within yMusic: one is a conventional image of the authorial composer alone with a score, tinkering with musical material; the other is a collaborative mindset within the experience of live rehearsal, attuned to the specific persona of an individual performer. The trumpet—a loud instrument and a troublesome line on a sheet of staff paper or notation software—became trumpeter C.J. Camerieri—a musician who can be asked to play in specific ways, or who can carefully situate his own part within the ensemble texture. Different techniques are summoned by Lee and his colleagues; they ask different questions of the ensemble; and the reality of the balance problem shifts—and is, in fact, alleviated—in the shift between practices.

Just as Muhly’s *Balance Problems* plays off of yMusic’s unconventional instrumentation, so too did the presence of the trumpet shape what Duke students wrote. In the first movement of his *Liftoff*, Lee integrates the trumpet within the ensemble texture, as the instrument introduces repeated gestures that are imitated by violin, clarinet, and flute; the second movement, however, features a prominent trumpet solo at its center. That decision was motivated by Lee’s early concerns with how the trumpet fit

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<sup>459</sup> Ben Daniels, interview with author, 3 September 2014.

in the ensemble, and followed his actual experience working with Camerieri over the course of the rehearsal period:

I loved hanging out with him [Camerieri] the first time, and he's a great player, and so the second movement he gets to shine. I did that because I knew that he could play anything I put in front him, and also because the trumpet doesn't fit in.<sup>460</sup>

Each of the seven composers in 2013–14 confronted a similar challenge. Without knowledge of the yMusic performers as *people*, rather than *instruments*, they relied on mediating actors such as bios and recordings to grasp the implications of the trumpet. Lacking an understanding of what Moose called the “foundational” importance of all six musicians performing together as yMusic, they were doubtful about the instrument's inclusion. Experiencing rehearsals mitigated the issue. And it crucially allowed the Duke composers to treat what was first a hurdle as instead a compositional artifice, a structural device around which a piece of music could be conceived; these different yet related versions of yMusic significantly altered the students' compositional processes. Embedded in *Liftoff* is a balance problem—a specific attribute associated with the ensemble—and a social relationship—the connection that Lee and Camerieri made in “hanging out”—that enact yMusic as both a grouping of six instruments and a grouping of six people.

A separate balance problem arose in the 2014–15 residency. In an additional attempt to draw the Duke composers' attention to how the ensemble perceived itself, yMusic told the Duke faculty that four of its instrumentalists were doublers, or musicians who regularly perform more than one instrument. In yMusic, Moose plays electric guitar along with violin, Camerieri plays both French horn and trumpet, Aomori plays B-flat

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<sup>460</sup> Lee, interview with author, 20 August 2014.

and bass clarinets, and Sopp plays a variety of flutes, from piccolo to alto flute.<sup>461</sup> Works written for yMusic often ask the players to switch instruments in the middle of a piece, and composers who collaborate with them regularly draw on multiple configurations of the sextet's sonic palette. But the faculty's attempt to convey this information to the graduate students complicated yMusic's request. In May 2014, students received an email from John Supko explaining:

The faculty recently had a conference call with yMusic & one of the things they brought up was the fact that they play other instruments & want you to consider writing for them. Here's the full list of possibilities:

Violin, acoustic & electric guitar (same person)  
Viola  
Cello  
Flute, piccolo, alto flute (same person)  
Clarinet, bass clarinet (same person)  
Trumpet, French horn (same person)<sup>462</sup>

With this list, students could easily circumvent the aforementioned trumpet problem if desired. Sarah Curzi, for example, wrote for alto flute, bass clarinet, French horn, and strings, placing all three wind players on secondary instruments.

In a preparatory rehearsal that I attended in November 2014—an evening meeting without the composers present, before the year's first residency workshops began the next day—yMusic members expressed concerns about the instrumentation of the new Duke repertoire. Camerieri noted that he played trumpet in only one of the pieces, and substitute cellist Andrea Lee remarked that some Duke composers had said they were

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<sup>461</sup> Though the musicians are doublers, these instruments are also considered secondary. Camerieri learned French horn only after studying trumpet through college. Aomori purchased a bass clarinet after joining yMusic, when the ensemble realized how “treble-heavy” its original combination of instruments was; he said that “I definitely learned how to play the bass clarinet by being forced to play in yMusic.” Hideaki Aomori, interview with author, 16 November 2014.

<sup>462</sup> Supko, email to Duke graduate students, 19 May 2014. Printed with permission.

worried about balance, and thus opted to write for horn. Sirota suggested that the ensemble tell the composers that though it was nice that they thought about writing for these instruments, they were essentially auxiliary, and the ensemble did not sound as good playing them. She recommended that yMusic perform some of its own repertory in a subsequent rehearsal to “show the composers what we do.”<sup>463</sup>

Here, we see Duke students attempting to avoid a balance problem and instead presenting the ensemble with a problem of its own, imposing an instrumental identity outside what the players felt their norm. The burden shifts from the composers’ attempts to address instrumental balance to the performers’ attempts to address instrumental technique. This result of several levels of mediation—from yMusic to the faculty to the graduate students—ultimately embedded itself in the works written for the ensemble, articulating a different kind of balance problem.

For the Duke composers, yMusic’s instrumentation also presented professional complications. Since 2011, the ensemble’s repertory has consisted entirely of works written specifically for yMusic, many of which have been released on its two albums.<sup>464</sup> yMusic keeps these compositions in its active touring repertory, and takes a certain degree of ownership over them.<sup>465</sup> This runs counter to how many new-music ensembles

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<sup>463</sup> This rehearsal/performance and the suggested conversation, to my knowledge, did not take place; and the instrumentation of these works did not change.

<sup>464</sup> Members of the ensemble, in fact, discuss the creation of *Beautiful Mechanical* as the result of obtaining a large enough repertoire to record an album; when I asked Aomori why the ensemble released its first record, he said “*Beautiful Mechanical*? Because we had enough pieces. We were like, ‘Now we can make an album, because all of these add up to fifty minutes.’” Aomori, interview with author, 16 November 2014.

<sup>465</sup> This ownership is not necessarily official, and is guided to a certain extent by the publishing status of the composers. Judd Greenstein’s *Clearing, Dawn, Dance*, written for yMusic, is available for purchase from his publisher, Good Child Music, and is frequently performed by other ensembles and pick-up groups. Annie Clark—better known as the leader of the band St. Vincent—does not have a publisher, as she does

function, in which works are commissioned, developed, premiered, and recorded, and often subsequently discarded as a group moves on to new projects; it instead, according to yMusic members, hews closer to the model of the rock band. As Camerieri said,

We treat our repertoire like a band treats their repertoire, we're not going to commission for a concert at Zankel Hall and rehearse it four times, and then perform it, and then move on to our next project...[we] treat it like it's pop music, we always say we're going to play the hits.<sup>466</sup>

That music will thus remain in regular circulation for the near future, existing on New Amsterdam recordings and appearing regularly on yMusic performances—including rock concerts such as the Ben Folds tour, attended by audiences likely larger than any that these composers would otherwise obtain. “The hits” allow yMusic to consider itself as much a band as a new-music ensemble; “the hits” also provide the idea of a “yMusic piece” that I will discuss in the next section.

The Duke compositions, however, did not become part of yMusic's touring repertoire. Members of the ensemble had expressed interest in possibly incorporating one or two of the pieces into their regular performances, or recording them in the future, but as of September 2015 there were no plans to do so.<sup>467</sup> This is not particularly unusual: residencies are a standard part of the concert season for many ensembles, and there are no guarantees that a student composition has a future with an ensemble after it leaves campus. But it reveals the distinction between yMusic's position at Duke and its position

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not have a career as a composer in the classical world; her yMusic piece, *Proven Badlands*, is thus implicitly exclusive to yMusic.

<sup>466</sup> Camerieri, interview with author, 16 November 2014.

<sup>467</sup> In an email, yMusic members wrote that “I would say it's not impossible that we might record one of the pieces, depending upon how future recordings shape up, but it isn't part of core planning.” yMusic Mgmt, email to author, 16 September 2015. What did join yMusic's touring repertory, however, were the four Ben Folds orchestrations by Duke graduate students (see below).

in the rest of the world. The ideals of the group as maintaining an active repertory of “hits” and working exclusively with long-term friends—the ensemble’s self-perceived, distinctive core identity that foregrounds its status as a “band”—is discarded in the practices of the residency, in which it must function like the other ensembles from which its members typically distinguish it.<sup>468</sup>

Duke students had also typically worked with ensembles of more conventional instrumentations. In past years, other short- and long-term residencies featured Wet Ink, a septet that can be set up in multiple configurations (composers do not have to write for all seven players); the Da Capo Chamber Players, a standardized Pierrot ensemble; and Imani Winds, a woodwind quintet.<sup>469</sup> Even if an ensemble does not incorporate a student piece into its repertoire, composers can seek further performances by submitting to competitions, putting together an ad-hoc group themselves, or sending scores to similar groups. But because of yMusic’s instrumentation, and in particular the presence of the trumpet, these opportunities were more limited. Duke composers told me that they would likely have to seek out performances from a larger ensemble, which might request music for a mixed instrumentation selected from its pool of musicians.

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<sup>468</sup> Indeed, a key ingredient of Duke ensemble residencies and the “Encounters” series is that visiting groups participate in recording dissertation compositions written by graduating PhD students, and these major works are often written for larger ensembles. For the recording sessions for three dissertations in 2013–14 and 2014–15, a Duke faculty member conducted a small orchestra comprising yMusic members and local musicians: yMusic’s identity as a specific set of instruments and people was thus subsumed into the practical necessities of the residency.

<sup>469</sup> Only the Duke Performances residency collaborations have included non-standard ensembles: the piano, bass, and percussion trio of The Bad Plus; the sextet of yMusic; and in 2015–16, the Deviant Septet, an instrumentation based on Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du Soldat*. Greenwald felt particularly inclined to structure residencies around these unconventional ensembles; he told me that “I like the idea of forcing the composers to write for configurations of musicians they might not normally. I think that Deviant—like eighth blackbird and yMusic—is committed to commissioning for a certain configuration.” Greenwald, interview with author, 25 June 2015.

The specific identity of the performers—initially an asset for the Duke composers, when they realized that Camerieri was a gifted player who could easily handle any balance issues—might represent a future setback. As Justin Tierney said,

C.J. [Camerieri] is one of the founders of the ensemble—he *really* blends well with all of the other instruments, and he has so much experience doing that. They were founded in 2008, I think, and having that many years playing together, if I tried to pull an ensemble, getting random players to play my music, I’m not sure if it would work that way.<sup>470</sup>

This restriction is not insurmountable, and it would not be unusual for a student composer to rework a score for a different instrumentation. But it does emerge as a distinctive challenge, another problem tied to balance, that students encountered when writing for yMusic.

### **Polyrhythmic Hocketers**

Just as the Duke students’ compositional choices were shaped by yMusic’s instrumentation, so too were they informed by the ensemble’s pre-existing repertoire.<sup>471</sup> Several spoke of a particular yMusic “sound”: a sonic identity linked to and performed in the ensemble’s repertory. D. Edward Davis, for example, referred to layered rhythms as a “yMusic-y thing, whatever that means—my own perception of what I think that they can do.”<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Tierney, interview with author, 27 August 2014. Tierney proposed several options for the future of his yMusic work: he could make it part of a larger, multi-movement piece; change the orchestration and adapt it for other ensembles; or, possibly, “never look at it again.”

<sup>471</sup> As the ensemble’s second album *Balance Problems* was released in September 2014, it did not influence the 2013–14 composers. And it may have come out too late to initially influence the 2014–15 composers as well, given that rehearsals started in November 2014.

<sup>472</sup> D. Edward Davis, interview with author, 3 September 2014.

In this section, I analyze how two Duke students—Davis and Ben Daniels—drew on such “yMusic-y things” in their works. Here, yMusic is enacted as a set of musical techniques gleaned from its repertory by astute composers with their own artistic priorities. For Daniels, yMusic represented a particular sound and repertoire that resonated strongly with his preferred musical style; for Davis, yMusic’s commissions were distant from his own aesthetic, but he performed one perceived sonic aspect of the ensemble in a work that otherwise differs dramatically from its “hits.”

Members of yMusic are aware of the idea—and the danger—that there might be a “yMusic piece” or “yMusic sound.” The ensemble first gained wide recognition when it released *Beautiful Mechanical* on New Amsterdam in 2011. The seven works that appear on *Beautiful Mechanical* share aesthetic similarities—all are tonal, rhythmically vibrant, and relatively brief—which provides the album with the semblance of a coherently defined ensemble sound. One could describe this as not only the sound of yMusic, but also the sound of indie classical: as of 2016, the first track on Spotify’s playlist “Indie Classical: Composed in 21st Century” was Judd Greenstein’s *Clearing, Dawn, Dance*, off of *Beautiful Mechanical*.<sup>473</sup>

That coherence could be perniciously prescriptive, as future composers might look to those works as a guide to what to write for yMusic. According to Sirota, that possibility was evident in the 2013–14 Duke residency:

There are holes that people have fallen into—especially after our first record with so many sort of groove-type, hokey-y pieces, and our first year of the Duke

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<sup>473</sup> See

[https://play.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/51lgGoMbd6Oto4rcq2UOqn?play=true&utm\\_source=open.spotify.com&utm\\_medium=open](https://play.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/51lgGoMbd6Oto4rcq2UOqn?play=true&utm_source=open.spotify.com&utm_medium=open).

residency, we got two more of those, and we were like “Oh shit, man, people are really writing a yMusic piece, whatever that means.”<sup>474</sup>

Though the performers did not name specific Duke composers that they felt wrote “yMusic pieces,” one specific student might be identified by his enthusiasm for the ensemble’s repertory. Entering his second year at Duke when he was asked to write for yMusic’s 2013–14 residency, Daniels had not previously heard of the ensemble:

I ended up over the summer listening to some of their recordings, and I was like, “*Oh man*. This is the group that *does my thing*”...I don’t want to say, “I do this and they do only this,” because they’re obviously well-rounded musicians and they don’t only play, you know, whatever...but I felt like whatever it is I do, that they were really going to bring an authenticity to that.<sup>475</sup>

yMusic members might have assumed that students were simply mimicking its repertoire in writing “yMusic pieces,” but Daniels had instead discovered an ensemble that specialized in the type of music he already composed. *X*, the work he wrote for the ensemble, develops on Daniels’s own trajectory—“my thing”—and also resonates with musical traits of yMusic’s repertoire.

Like several pieces on the *Beautiful Mechanical* album, *X* is composed in a postminimalist idiom and builds a layered, polyrhythmic texture from the staggered entrances of each of the six instruments. But the strongest yMusic signifier in *X* is the hocket. Typically associated with medieval polyphonic practices and non-Western traditions including Balinese gamelan and Pygmy singing, the hocket is a contrapuntal technique in which rests are alternated. A single melodic line is thus broken up and shared among multiple voices, such that as one sounds, the other is silent. *X* opens with

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<sup>474</sup> Sirota, interview with author, 17 November 2014.

<sup>475</sup> Daniels, interview with author, 3 September 2014.

solo piccolo arpeggiating C-minor7 and Bb-major chords in short, shifting groupings of eighth notes separated by rests (see Example 1). At m. 13, the bass clarinet enters and begins filling in many of the rests with its own eighth notes. As subsequent instruments join in with their own rhythmic cells, which move on or off the beat every few measures, a cumulative melodic line forms. Daniels occasionally breaks the line with a rest, or articulates it more strongly with several instruments playing the same note together. The collective effect is a hiccupping, hocketing groove and evenness among the melodic voices, as Daniels avoids placing any single instrument in the spotlight (see Example 2).<sup>476</sup>

The image shows a musical score for five measures. The top staff is for Piccolo, marked with a tempo of quarter note = 152. It plays a continuous eighth-note arpeggiated pattern of C-minor7 and Bb-major chords. The second staff is for Bass Clarinet in Bb, which enters in measure 3 with eighth notes that fill in the rests of the piccolo part. The other instruments (Trumpet in Bb, Violin, Viola, Violoncello) are shown as rests throughout the five measures.

**Example 1: Ben Daniels, *X*, mm. 1–5. Printed with permission.**

<sup>476</sup> Hockets played a role in a Duke piece from the 2014–15 residency, composer Vladimir Smirnov’s dissertation composition *Double Rainbow*, written for a larger ensemble that included the yMusic members. In a movement titled “Soul Machine,” Smirnov evokes Louis Andriessen, with pummeling riffs that hocket steadily between two sections of the divided ensemble.

33 Picc. *mf*  
 B. Cl. *pizz.*  
 Tpt. *f*  
 Vln. *f*  
 Vla. *f*  
 Vc. *f*

37 Picc. *mp*  
 B. Cl. *mp*  
 Tpt. *mp*  
 Vln. *mp*  
 Vla. *mp*  
 Vc. *mp*

**Example 2: Daniels, X, mm. 33–40. Printed with permission.**

Sirota described a characteristic early yMusic commission as a “groove-based piece with a lot of hockets.”<sup>477</sup> On *Beautiful Mechanical*, this is epitomized in the stratified lines of Judd Greenstein’s *Clearing, Dawn, Dance*. Hockets are also a part of yMusic’s collaborative vocabulary, as demonstrated in the Ben Folds workshop at Duke. When the musicians rehearsed Sarah Curzi’s orchestration of Folds’s song “Zak & Sara,” Sirota and Moose verbally agreed to “hocket it” for a particular passage, separating and trading off a single melody originally written for both of them.

<sup>477</sup> Sirota, interview with author, 17 November 2014.

These hocketing effects are by no means exclusive to yMusic's identity, and extend backwards through a musical tradition whose twenty-first century manifestations are outlined in this dissertation. One foundational work is Louis Andriessen's 1975–77 *Hoketus*, part of the repertory of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, whose commissions often employ hocketing techniques inspired by Andriessen and other minimalist composers.<sup>478</sup> Given Andriessen's connection to Duke, and Lindroth's ties to Bang on a Can, the hocket also has local resonances that might partially account for Daniels's employment of the technique.<sup>479</sup> (Daniels attended Bang on a Can's 2015 Summer Festival at Mass MoCA.) Hockets have become a part of the indie-rock world in which yMusic participates, most strongly associated with the band Dirty Projectors (with whom yMusic has performed and recorded).<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> *Hoketus* itself originated in a collaborative relationship between Andriessen and a student ensemble in the Netherlands in which power relations between composer and performer were restructured. As Nick Williams describes, the *Hoketus* ensemble formed out of an exploratory minimalist project at the Hague Conservatoire in which students experimented with hocketing techniques, with working methods that challenged conventional performer-composer hierarchies (a parallel that can easily be made with yMusic). Other comparisons between *Hoketus* and yMusic are apt; Williams writes that "*Hoketus* could claim a greater identification with what they played," and quotes Andriessen remarking that "When *Hoketus* play a G#, it isn't only a G#, it is *Hoketus* too." Nick Williams, "Hoketus: Of Hierarchy and Hiccups," *Tempo* 69, no. 273 (July 2015): 9.

Meredith Monk's ensemble works also highlight vocal hocketing. In interviews for Sirota's podcast *Meet the Composer*, Monk and ensemble member and composer Theo Bleckmann discuss hockets as social practice within the ensemble. Bleckmann says that "One part is nothing without the other—if you sing it by itself it's bizarre, it's nothing—but with the other person it comes to life...it's a really interdependent piece." Sirota and her producer Alexander Overington, in fact, edited interviews into a hocket itself, such that one passage of the podcast alternates rapidly between the voices of Monk and Bleckmann. Theo Bleckmann, quoted in Sirota and Overington, "Meredith Monk: Creation as Spiritual Practice," *Meet the Composer* (podcast), 30 June 2015, <http://www.wqxr.org#!/story/meredith-monk-creation-spiritual-practice/>.

<sup>479</sup> Daniels, however, did not work with Lindroth while composing *X*; Lindroth himself noted that "hocketing is such a typical post-minimalist device today that young composers like Ben would have picked up this technique on their own (rather than through the BOAC-Lindroth channel)." Lindroth, email to author, 14 March 2016. Printed with permission.

<sup>480</sup> Reception of Dirty Projectors frequently addresses composer and bandleader David Longstreth's employment of hocketing techniques and explicitly connects contemporary indie rock to medieval music.

yMusic performs amplified in a semicircle, with the trio of strings on the audience's left and trio of winds on the right (see Figure 6). The staging helps balance the ensemble dynamics and also provides a visual effect in concert, as musicians lean toward each other or make eye contact across the arc for particular passages. These provide a kind of performative confirmation of the importance that yMusic places on its social ethos, making clear the connections between the personal and the musical.<sup>481</sup> Hocketing is a particularly effective method for performing those relationships. At the beginning of a rendition of Greenstein's *Clearing, Dawn, Dance*, Aomori and Sirota might lean toward each other or make eye contact as their parts lock in sync. The music becomes as much about the musicians playing with each other as playing the notes on the page, envisaging the ensemble's collaborative spirit and performing the sextet for the audience as a grouping of close friends. During the March 2014 premiere of the Duke composers' works at Motorco, Daniels's hockets were similarly performative (though the musicians were more focused on reading the new score than they might be with Greenstein's music). *X* opened the concert, allowing Daniels's hockets to further resonate as a kind of unofficial introduction to the Duke/yMusic partnership.

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Pop critic Sasha Frere-Jones, for example, wrote "Longstreth employs a method for arranging voices known as hocketing, which stretches back to the work of thirteenth-century French monks." Sasha Frere-Jones, "Yips and Riddles," *New Yorker*, 23 November 2009. (Longstreth, who also composes instrumental works, was commissioned in 2009 by Bang on a Can's People's Commissioning Fund to write a piece for the All-Stars.)

<sup>481</sup> It might also represent an example of the "friendly virtuosity" that Pippen has analyzed in choreographed performances by eighth blackbird. Pippen, "Toward a Postmodern Avant-Garde," 137–75.



**Figure 6: yMusic at Casbah, 5 November 2013. Photo credit: Duke Performances.**

If  $X$  represents a work squarely in yMusic’s wheelhouse—a veritable “yMusic piece”—then Davis’s *karst* offers a strong counterexample. Davis’s music draws on the experimental practices of the composer-collective Wandelweiser, which focuses on the relationship between sound and silence, as well as composers who engage with the environment, such as John Luther Adams and Pauline Oliveros.<sup>482</sup> His music frequently explores the edges of silence, blending live instruments, electronics, and field recordings that transform the concert hall into an unfamiliar space.

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<sup>482</sup> On his website, Davis writes that his “work often engages with the sounds of the environment, exploring processes, patterns, and systems inspired by nature.” See <http://sound.warmsilence.org/about/>. For a discussion of the relationship between Wandelweiser and site-specific sound, see M.J. Grant, “Series and Place,” *Contemporary Music Review* 30 no. 6 (December 2011): 525–42.

Unlike Daniels, Davis was previously familiar with yMusic's work. When I asked him his impressions of the ensemble, he said:

I write music that's very different from what they tend to do; they have, at least to me, they have a very recognizable kind of style, or the pieces that they tend to play are similar to each other in some significant ways...my first reaction was, it was one of creative crisis: do I write a yMusic piece or do I write something that's what I do that's not what they do? And how would they react to that?<sup>483</sup>

Davis identified a stylistic similarity among yMusic's repertoire that others also perceived, but he was acutely concerned about being placed in dialogue with it. He explained that this type of miniature crisis is characteristic of his compositional process; when writing for ensembles, Davis often struggles with navigating how they appear to identify themselves aesthetically versus the kind of music he may want to write. In working with the esteemed Hilliard Ensemble earlier in the academic year, Davis felt that that he strayed too far from his own voice, and "resolved that for yMusic I would not make that same mistake again...I ended up doing something that's closer to my own interests, than trying to write just a straight yMusic piece."<sup>484</sup>

Written for standard yMusic instrumentation (with bass clarinet), *karst* also incorporates digital playback, with a laptop running a MaxMSP patch connected to an on-stage PA system.<sup>485</sup> The cellist manipulates electronics with a foot controller during performance, guided by notated cues corresponding to different pedals. Playback consists of an intermittent series of sine tones that sound either with yMusic or while the ensemble rests. Davis asks in the score that the PA system be "extremely quiet, so that

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<sup>483</sup> Davis, interview with author, 3 September 2014.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> MaxMSP is a programming language frequently employed by composers for live electronics and recording. A patch is a user-created subprogram that performs a particular function (in this case, digital playback).

each of the laptop sounds is nearly lost in the ambient sounds of the performance space.”<sup>486</sup> This approach is typical of Davis’s music, examining what he called the “relationship of composed sound to environmental sound.”<sup>487</sup>

The interplay between composition and environment was particularly powerful at the Motorco premiere. *karst* concludes extremely softly: the viola sustains a soft, brittle note followed by a rest, trailed by the trumpet playing a *pianissimo* gesture while the strings hold a *sul ponticello* note marked “*ppppp barely audible*.” Throughout this passage, the electronics contribute a particularly low and soft drone. In the context of a rock venue in downtown Durham—surrounded by city life and traffic, and without soundproofing—it was not clear to me if the lingering, muted sound manifested from the speakers or from outside. Davis saw this as ideal:

Some people came up to me afterwards and said, “It’s too bad about that car that was outside at the end, with its bass going.”...I was pleased with that, that was something about the success of piece, that those sounds became so much about the environment that it made people wonder whether that was even part of the piece or not.<sup>488</sup>

Even as *karst* falls wholly within Davis’s own compositional interests, it also nods to a particular sonic trait that the composer associated with yMusic. The sextet consistently alternates in each bar between playing and resting; sometimes the electronics are present while yMusic is silent, and occasionally a single instrument continues playing a soft passage through the rest (this might be seen as a peculiar kind of hocket). While the alternation between sound and silence is certainly not representative of yMusic’s

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<sup>486</sup> Davis, *karst* score.

<sup>487</sup> Davis, interview with author, 3 September 2014.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*

repertoire, the actual rhythms that the ensemble plays are, in fact, an allusion to its style.

Davis said:

A lot of the pieces of theirs that I've heard are these multi-layered—they have lots of rhythms happening at the same time, interlocking or overlapping or they have sort of simultaneous different tempos or polyrhythms...[I decided that] what I'm going to write for yMusic is these sort of, repeated rhythm, ostinato, with several different tempos happening at the same time...my experience of working with them is that was simple for them to do.<sup>489</sup>

*karst* opens with a series of staggered entrances, as each instrument plays a distinct rhythm that articulates a single D, spread across several octaves (see Example 3). The music is extremely quiet, with parts ranging from *ppp* to *piano*, and Davis blurs the instruments and electronics together, with muted trumpet and extended string techniques creating a unified but also unstable ensemble blend. When all six musicians finally enter together in m. 11, Davis divides a 7/4 bar in six ways, with each instrument playing a different subdivision (from flute playing two against seven to cello playing seven against seven).

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fl

bcl

tpt

vn

va

vc

drone

<sup>489</sup> Ibid.

2 karst fragile legato

fl  
bcl  
tpt  
vn  
va  
vc  
drone

**Example 3: D. Edward Davis, *karst*, mm. 5–11. Printed with permission.**

Unlike the performative hockets of Daniels’s *X*, the sonic effect of these polyrhythms is almost imperceptible. I hear, instead, a tiny amount of “beating” in the pitch that feels more timbral than rhythmic, enhanced by Davis’s request that the six Ds not necessarily be played in tune (he writes in the score that “notated ‘unisons’ need not always sound as a perfect unison”). It is a technique that yMusic can execute effortlessly, as Davis inferred from its repertoire, but it is a gesture that one does not otherwise find in their works. The cumulative effect is *pulse*—a musical aspect that Davis acknowledges yMusic’s expertise in—without *groove*—something that does not align with his own stylistic concerns.

In *X* and *karst*, we see the musical effects of enacting yMusic as its repertoire, as Duke composers craft a dialogue with what they perceive to be the ensemble’s sonic strengths. They construct yMusic’s identity through a conception of specific stereotypes drawn from its first album—for Daniels, “*my thing*,” and for Davis, “simultaneous

different tempos or polyrhythms”—and re-construct it through drawing on those “yMusic-y” characteristics, differently, in their works. In *X*, the hocket represents a musical technique with historical resonances and performative social implications for yMusic’s identity; in *karst*, a polyrhythmic notational artifice sits comfortably within the ensemble’s purview, while its sonic result is wholly distinct. Here we see—and hear!—a local reception of yMusic encoded in music: yMusic’s identity is manifested sonically, in different stylistic idioms. The enactments are also constructed through the building of relationships with the ensemble, though in this case those relationships are less directly personal than mediated through the sounds of the *Beautiful Mechanical* record.

### **Collaborators**

Whereas Daniels and Davis each stage deliberate encounters with yMusic’s repertory, Sarah Curzi’s *to form an idea of size or distance* avoids such resonances. Written for alto flute, bass clarinet, horn, and strings—an auxiliary instrument configuration of yMusic—Curzi’s work begins with the full ensemble playing soft, slowly winding lines that overlap to create a murky texture (see Example 4). Horn is muted, strings play *sul ponticello* and *legato*, and alto flute unfurls an ascending passage that Curzi amplifies so that it emerges within the hazy sextet balance. The first movement is titled “The journey through endless dusk,” and the appropriately shadowy, chromatic music stands in contrast to yMusic’s generally bright-hued repertoire.

# to form an idea of size or distance

for yMusic

Sarah Curzi

C Score

$\bullet = 60$   
*The journey through endless dusk*  
*dolcissimo, within the texture*

Alto Flute  
*p* *mp* *p* *mp* *echo*

Bass Clarinet  
*p* *mp* *p* *mp*

Horn in F  
*with mute*  
*p* *mp* *p*

Violin  
*sul pont., legato*  
*p* *mp* *p* *mf*

Viola  
*p* *mp* *p*

Cello  
*sul pont., legato*  
*p* *mp* *p*

**Example 4: Sarah Curzi, *to form an idea of size or distance*, mm. 1–4. Printed with permission.**

The broader impression of *to form an idea* is understandable given how Curzi approached working with yMusic. Like other Duke composers, she had not heard of the ensemble before being asked to compose for the 2014–15 residency, as she entered her first year of the Duke program. Curzi researched individual performers, investigated yMusic’s website, listened to recordings, and watched videos. But unlike that of her colleagues, this research did not lead her to draw on that repertoire:

I just honestly started writing, I wasn't trying to fit it to specific pieces or write in a certain style...mostly I just wanted to write a piece that was special enough that I could feel good handing it over to musicians that are that good.<sup>490</sup>

She instead performed another key identity of yMusic when creating *to form an idea*: its collaborative process. For Curzi, yMusic represented at first a compositional challenge, but evolved into a set of specific people as she worked with them over the course of the academic year. In this section, I consider *to form an idea* as an enactment of yMusic as both individuals and instrumentalists, guided by a developing social rapport between composer and performers.

When observing yMusic rehearsals of Duke compositions in November 2014 and March 2015, I was struck by the degree to which Curzi engaged in dialogue with the ensemble: collaboration rendered active and visible. In both residency years, conversations between Duke students and yMusic performers primarily addressed questions about notation, performance practice, and rehearsal strategies for difficult passages. Ensemble members frequently offered their own advice on how to notate certain gestures, better achieve instrumental effects, or navigate technical issues regarding amplification and balance. Rehearsals emphasized the accurate translations of the composers' intentions: a student might suggest methods for yMusic to faithfully execute his or her score, or yMusic might ask a composer to clarify what his or her notation meant.<sup>491</sup> Curzi, however, seemed particularly drawn to experimentation in the

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

<sup>491</sup> I employ "his or her" here, but I do not wish to suggest that the Duke program is gender balanced; Curzi was the only female composer to work with yMusic, and one of only two female PhD students in composition at Duke between 2013–15 (out of fourteen total students). The gender balance of the program shifts year-to-year but strongly skews towards men. (The three composition professors at Duke are also men.)

rehearsal process, developing her music on the stage of Baldwin Auditorium in real time. Less reliant on the text as mediator, Curzi frequently ignored her score in favor of recommendations from the ensemble, or asked them to explore different gestures and see how they might affect her music.

yMusic members regularly cite this back-and-forth, collaborative ethos as an attribute specific to their ensemble. As Sirota told me when I interviewed her for the 2011 *New York Times* article,

People get so involved in, “The process is meant to go this one way, and if it doesn’t go this one way, you’re an amateur and this is bad music making”... That process is: You have a score, you read every single little detail on the page, and you interpret that. There’s so much music that is wonderful that is not being made because people only want that process to work. What’s really enjoyable about this group is that we’re all in it for music enough that all sort of different processes are fair game.<sup>492</sup>

These alternative processes typically play themselves out in pop collaborations—in which the ensemble might assist in constructing instrumental arrangements of a band’s songs—but it is also embedded in several of yMusic’s repertoire works. Annie Clark’s *Proven Badlands*, for example, began as a MIDI sound file that the rock musician sent to Moose; he notated and orchestrated it for yMusic, and the work continued to evolve as the sextet performed it. As mentioned, the importance that the ensemble places on this collaborative persona can be seen in its decision to quote a selection from my *Times* article at the top of its “Press” page in which I wrote that “the performers act as co-conspirators in the compositional process.”

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<sup>492</sup> Robin, “Bridging Genres and Generations.” Here, Sirota appears to perceive collaboration as a form of resistance against an enduring ontology of the work concept; see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1992). Foregrounding multiple working processes is certainly not unique to yMusic as an ensemble—many other groups adopt similarly collaborative methods—nor is it historically unprecedented. Still, it represents a strong point of self-identity for the group, and one often picked up in press reception of the ensemble (as in my own *New York Times* feature).

For the November 2014 workshop Curzi submitted two disconnected sections, titled “Excerpt 1” and “Score,” for her future piece. (Student composers were asked to prepare approximately half of the work that would be performed in March.) The horn part in “Excerpt 1” asks the player to “employ pitch bends, growling, tuning fluctuation, or other techniques to capture a raw, out of control sound.” Camerieri attempted to realize this part in rehearsal, but did not achieve Curzi’s desired effect. She asked him to try a flutter tongue technique and disregard the actual pitches that she had written; instead, he could improvise in a manner that felt comfortable but gave the appropriately out of control impression. Camerieri subsequently suggested playing in a particularly high register to provide the necessary rawness, and discussion then moved to other members of the ensemble, who offered additional solutions for creating the preferred sound. In the same excerpt, Curzi asked substitute cellist Andrea Lee to try to make a particular cello episode sound louder and grittier. A conversation ensued among the performers, as Sirota suggested possibilities for different techniques that could achieve a rougher effect; Curzi told Lee that she could “toy with color,” and change the bowing technique throughout the passage to create a shifting range of timbres.

“Excerpt 1” ultimately did not become part of Curzi’s final piece in March 2015; “Score” became the opening of the first movement of *to form an idea*, and Curzi wrote the rest of her material in the fall and winter. But aspects of the timbral experiments from the November rehearsal of “Excerpt 1” ended up scattered through the new material, with a modified version of the cello passage appearing later in the work. Perhaps more significantly, Curzi explained to me that those interactions made her more comfortable with the ensemble. “It was just nice to have their guidance regarding the timbre in that

section,” she said.<sup>493</sup> Similar to the sentiments affirmed by other Duke composers in their interviews, Curzi was particularly satisfied with the working methods of yMusic and the openness the performers displayed in taking and offering suggestions.

As addressed above, the brunch in November 2014 also shaped how Curzi approached her piece’s development. Curzi’s informal conversation with Moose provided her with a renewed desire to create music worthy of performers who had collaborated with such impressive celebrities as Sufjan Stevens and Dr. Dre. The relationship that Curzi established with yMusic in the November residency continued to transform what she wrote for the ensemble, even after it left campus. The first movement of *to form an idea* is in a particularly low register, but features an extended passage for the violin playing at the top of its range. Curzi said that:

The reason I ended up with so many crazy high descants in the final piece is that in the first reading, there’s that high melody I had written for Rob [Moose], and I was sitting up there with him on stage and to hear him play it for the first time, I *melted*....I’d been avoiding writing for violin in a super high register for years, because I was like, “Oh it sounds scratchy up there,” and I then was like, “Oh! It doesn’t sound scratchy up there.” His playing was so utterly sweet—I was, like, “*Taking* advantage of that.”<sup>494</sup>

This rehearsal experience led Curzi to insert Moose’s own particular sonic identity in her score, and also shaped her own musical growth in writing for the violin.

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“As soon as attention shifts to the co-existence of different realities (or logics, or modes of ordering),” empirical philosopher Annemarie Mol writes, “the question arises as to

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<sup>493</sup> Curzi, interview with author, 11 June 2015.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

how these hang together.” She offers “coordination” as a model for evaluating how such multiple realities appear to coexist. For Mol, coordination

does not evoke a single, overarching and coherent order in which everything fits just fine and friction-free like the bits and pieces of a mosaic or the components of a watch. Instead, the term coordination suggests continuing effort. Tensions live on and gaps must be bridged, hence the need for “coordination.”<sup>495</sup>

Mol’s model of coordination is one theoretical lens into the idea of collaboration. The Duke residency represented in itself a massive coordination of yMusic’s multiple identities, attempting to resolve tensions and bridge gaps: it took the ongoing effort of administrators, faculty, students, and ensemble members to create a successful collaboration over two years. Another, smaller-scale collaborative coordination took place in April 2015, at the Ben Folds concert, the final event of yMusic’s residency.

The evening at Baldwin Auditorium opened with yMusic alone on stage, playing one of its signature works: Ryan Lott/Son Lux’s vivacious *Beautiful Mechanical*, for which its debut album was named. After the performance, Folds joined them for a set of his new songs as well as older classics. Later in the concert, Folds left the stage and the sextet played Andrew Norman’s *Music in Circles*, another yMusic commission. When he returned, Folds quipped to the audience, “You can see why I had to work with this band when I heard them.” To conclude the concert, Folds turned to student Scott Lee’s orchestration of “Army,” fervently anticipated with cheers from the sold-out crowd. The original recording of “Army” includes a prominent brass section; at Duke, Folds introduced the song by explaining that though his band did not include a horn contingent, “C.J. plays with the strength of ten men.” Lee’s peppy arrangement was a rousing success, with an assured Camerieri playing the trumpet-heavy bridge and Folds

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<sup>495</sup> Mol, “Actor-Network Theory: Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 50, no. 1 (2010): 264.

subsequently leading a sing-along with the audience, many of whom knew all of the song's lyrics.

This chapter somewhat disingenuously disentangled yMusic's multiplicity into discrete identities, divided into convenient sections. Multiplicity, though, is a constant factor. While a composer reckons with yMusic's unusual instrumentation, she also keeps in mind its expertise in pop rhythms; when a university administrator engages yMusic to work with student composers, he does not forget that it is better known for working with rock musicians. The Ben Folds concert showcased how yMusic exists in the world, in its many entangled realities: as new-music ensemble, as backing band, as amalgamation of six virtuosos, as ambassadors of classical music for a pop audience. Revealing multiple yMusics and observing how they are coordinated provides a useful framework for the study of live performance. A performance by yMusic is also a performance *of* yMusic: the concert becomes not an ephemeral moment but a strategic effort. Following Mol's methodology in this manner represents one response to Carolyn Abbate's call to "take intellectual pleasure from music not as a work but as an event."<sup>496</sup>

But just as the Folds concert enacted several of yMusic's identities, it also discarded others. Although the audience appeared attentive and engaged during *Beautiful Mechanical* and *Music in Circles*, they were not told the names of the compositions or their composers. The printed program did not list these instrumental works, and yMusic members did not introduce them from the stage. When Folds joined the sextet after *Music in Circles*, he heralded the ensemble's virtuosity, not Norman's piece. Imagining yMusic

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<sup>496</sup> Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 533.

as a band rather than an ensemble, Folds and, implicitly, the Baldwin Auditorium audience, attributed its “hits” to the group itself.

Earlier in the day, the Duke composers who wrote for Folds were told that their orchestrations would be on the set list, and the program listed the four songs and their arrangers. But Folds changed his mind at the last minute, and only Lee’s “Army” was performed. Rather than credit Lee, Folds introduced “Army” by praising Camerieri’s strength as a trumpeter. Subsequent concerts on yMusic and Folds’s tour that summer included the student arrangements, though Duke composers only discovered that their songs were played by reading online reviews or looking up recordings uploaded to YouTube by fans.<sup>497</sup> And the Duke concert, because of its university setting and the role of Duke Performances, was likely the only venue on the tour to print a program listing the students. Unlike the yMusic pieces discussed above, which remained in the students’ compositional and professional portfolios but did not have a clear future with yMusic, the Folds arrangements were entirely out of the hands of their authors. These represent the living tensions and gaps left unbridged in the act of coordination, the limits of collaboration. A live performance does not resolve all realities neatly together, instead casting off some in favor of others.

Whereas Folds’s response to Lee in the opening of this chapter—“It’s your arrangement”—suggested a deference to the Duke composer’s labor, in practice the music became the property of the translocal ensemble and singer-songwriter. In an alternate scenario, if yMusic had worked with McCaughan at Duke, the relationship between the composers and the singer-songwriter, and the arrangements they produced,

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<sup>497</sup> Because of a Google Alert for yMusic, which let me know when the ensemble’s name is mentioned on the Internet, I was able to notify composers when new videos of their arrangements were posted online.

might have remained local or developed differently. And the social capital that New York-based composers gain from being one of yMusic’s “friends”—a collaborator whose music can become one of the “hits” it performs regularly in concert—was never obtained by the Duke students, and could not be leveraged into the economic capital that should have been acquired for their work on the Folds arrangements.

Describing how yMusic might bridge the divide between a local composition program and a local indie rock scene—just as they brought together Lee and Folds—Greenwald called the ensemble a “translational space.” For Bruno Latour, translation represents “a relation that does not transport causality but induces two mediators into coexisting.”<sup>498</sup> The act of translation is an act of transformation; in focusing on an ensemble, this chapter has taken as active agent a subject often considered a passive intermediary. By examining how that object is enacted in practice, I reveal the values and priorities of a constellation of institutions, composers, professors, administrators, and performers, and how their relationships are manifested in musical works. I have shown how a network of social relations constructed the multiple identities of yMusic at Duke over a two-year period: through residency activities, through balance problems, through musical techniques, and through collaborative processes. And I have shown how one of the central practices of indie classical—the act of musical collaboration—is held together by larger movements between and within institutions. But at that Ben Folds concert at the conclusion of my two-year ethnography, the potential hazards of placing an ensemble at the center of focus became clear. On the stage of Baldwin Auditorium, the identities of Lott, Norman, and Lee seemed to disappear into that of the ensemble’s own. The balance

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<sup>498</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 108.

between composer and performer—that which, in the history of new music, has typically tilted in favor of the former—had become a problem.

## CONCLUSION

What is—or was—indie classical?

The previous three chapters identified indie classical as a generation that assembled itself through common institutional backgrounds, performative acts of generationalism, and a successful exchange with the press; a self-proclaimed identity of a record label that deeply informed its branding, artistry, and how it traveled outside New York; and a collaboration in which the identity of a new-music ensemble was rearticulated and redefined in the practices of a university residency. I have shown a few of the limits of indie classical and its “music without walls”: how it fell out of favor as a term; how it has relied on the institutional structures of classical music; and how it is oriented, despite its attempts to transcend genre, towards traditional conceptions of the composer. This study has examined how composers and performers, administrators and venues, critics and publicists, press releases and blogposts play crucial roles in shaping the world of new music; I have revealed the flows of cultural and economic capital that granted indie classical a prominent role in the twenty-first century United States.

To conclude, I would like to turn to the temporality implicit in that question. As of June 2016, is indie classical present or past? Much of this dissertation focused on the historical past. With the exception of Chapter 3, the story of indie classical took place primarily before my research began. My interviews with informants were oriented towards their backgrounds and concerned with their activities of five or ten years ago.

Following its abandonment by New Amsterdam, the term indie classical has mostly faded into history, with the exception of a handful of music critics, online playlists, and institutions that continue to utilize it.

At the same time, powerful figures in the world of new music have raised the question of whether indie classical might, in fact, be the future. “You will return, return to dust,” Shara Nova coolly intones in the opening of David Lang’s 2012 song cycle *death speaks*. The words are drawn from Schubert: Lang compiled English translations of texts from the Schubert’s *Lieder* in which, the composer writes in a program note, “the dead send a message to the living.”<sup>499</sup> In *death speaks*, Lang—a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and founder of the Bang on a Can collective—stages an encounter between the nineteenth-century *Lied* and a quartet of musicians whom he believes represent its twenty-first century legacy. He wrote the work for four specific individuals, whom he describes as “successful indie composer-performers”: Nova, known for her work in the band My Brightest Diamond as well as Sarah Kirkland Snider’s *Penelope*; composer Nico Muhly, who plays keyboard in the piece; guitarist and composer Bryce Dessner, a member of the popular band The National; and violinist and indie musician Owen Pallett.<sup>500</sup> “I wondered if I could build an entire band out of people who abandoned classical music for something else,” Lang has said.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> David Lang, “Program Note: *death speaks*,” 2012, <http://davidlangmusic.com/music/death-speaks>.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Lang, quoted in “Modern Muses 6: David Lang and Shara Nova,” *BBC Hear and Now*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02vb9zv>

And although the composer does not address it in his program note, the origins of *death speaks* are tied to a popular meta-narrative about classical music in the twenty-first century. As Nova explained,

We had our first meeting and he [Lang] said, “I’d like to write a piece about the death of classical music.” And he doesn’t really talk about it, but the way that he talks about it, I just started crying. It was the first time I’d ever met David Lang, and I’m sitting at this table with Bryce [Dessner] and I’m just crying, I can’t stop crying. And I’m really, really emotional, and he’s like, “You guys represent the death of the old thing.” And I’m crying because I love the old thing too, and he loves the old thing, and we all love the old thing. And so it felt like grieving, like the passage of time or something, that there’s something new that’s happening, and it doesn’t mean that any of us don’t love the old stuff too.<sup>502</sup>

The metaphor of *death speaks* is the ne plus ultra of intergenerational citations, a declaration that this quartet of indie composer-performers represents a kind of phoenix that will rise from the ashes of classical music.

But I do not share Lang’s apocalyptic optimism. I worry instead that the mechanisms that I traced in this dissertation—what allowed Muhly’s cohort and the indie classical generation to establish itself—have begun to unravel. As I have shown, what facilitated the rise of indie classical *was* the “old thing.” It is telling that *death speaks* was co-commissioned by Carnegie Hall and arts presenter Stanford Lively Arts: it is yet another example of rhetorical distance and institutional nearness. “Music without walls” has always existed within the frame of classical music.

During my dissertation research, I felt a certain mournful nostalgia for the world that I was investigating, as it seemed to slip into the past. Of the twenty-two blogs that I list in my bibliography, only three are still updated with regularity. Many remain dormant, except for an occasional post. The intense textuality of the blogosphere that

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<sup>502</sup> Shara Nova, interview with author, 7 March 2014.

shaped the emergence of indie classical a decade ago—one that allowed composers to fiercely debate what they should call themselves and imagine a shared generational ethos—has mostly disappeared. Although this evidence is anecdotal, it is part of a larger decline within blogging practices since around 2011, one primarily shaped by the rising presence and prestige of Facebook and Twitter.<sup>503</sup> When Greenstein updated his website and removed his blog in 2013, he was referring to Twitter when he posted that “most of my writing attention has been given over to feeding the 140-character Moloch.”<sup>504</sup> Communication will always exist within and among musical communities, and a robust discussion of new music exists on these social media platforms. But the public discourse of the blogosphere has been replaced by either Facebook—in which information is only semi-public, available to one’s “friends,” and shaped by an algorithm that determines what conversations users may actually see—or Twitter—which, in its aphoristic form, is useful for pithy disputes like the ones that surrounded indie classical, but is limited in its ability to generate serious dialogue and debate.<sup>505</sup>

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<sup>503</sup> See Verne G. Kopytoff, “Blogs Wane as the Young Drift to Sites Like Twitter,” *New York Times*, 20 February 2011; and Jason Kottke, “The Blog Is Dead, Long Live the Blog,” *Nieman Lab*, 19 December 2013, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/12/the-blog-is-dead/>.

<sup>504</sup> Judd Greenstein, “Website 2.0,” *Judd Greenstein*, 19 April 2013, <http://www.juddgreenstein.com/website-2-0/>.

<sup>505</sup> For a discussion of the implications of Facebook’s algorithms, see Zeynep Tufekci, “The Real Bias Built In at Facebook,” *New York Times*, 19 May 2016.

Since 2015, a community discussion oriented around new music has taken place weekly on Sunday evenings on Twitter, utilizing the hashtag #musochat; see <http://musochat.com/>.

Both platforms also exist outside the archiving reach of the Wayback Machine, making historical research more difficult. In the wake of the importance of Twitter and Facebook in the Arab Spring and the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, scholars have begun to develop tools to archive social media, including the in-progress digital humanities project Documenting the Now; see <http://www.docnow.io/>.

Indie classical institutions have themselves contributed to this discursive decline. When it launched in 2008, New Amsterdam’s website included a social network component; a blog oriented towards, as Brittelle put it, “talking about what alex [ross] and steve smith are talking about”; and freewheeling interview podcasts such as the Bourbon Roundtable. In 2016, New Amsterdam Records and New Amsterdam Presents—which maintain separate websites that link to one another—act as a professional home for its artists, with information pages for musicians and albums, descriptions of projects, submissions information, and a calendar. Today, New Amsterdam’s discourse is generated primarily in its press releases. Similarly, the chatty blog that yMusic maintained when it first launched has been replaced by an irregularly updated “News” section announcing projects and concerts. Whereas these organizations once attempted to shape a community and perform generationalism, their online identities have now settled into a distanced professionalism.<sup>506</sup>

The blogosphere allowed indie classical to arise because it engaged in a strong dialogue with traditional forms of media and criticism that have historically supported new music. In 2007, Alex Ross heralded the “music beyond ideology” of a new generation of musicians on *The Rest Is Noise*, and Steve Smith reviewed early New Amsterdam albums at *Night After Night*; in 2016, neither critic posts on his blog with frequency. And, as the blogosphere has eroded, so too has the world of professional music criticism. In April 2015, *Time Out New York*—which once tagged Mazzoli with

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<sup>506</sup> This follows a broader shift towards professionalization in online communities, in which personal blogs have been monetized and refocused towards entrepreneurial branding. A 2015 article on the website *Refinery29*, for example, describes how fashion blogs—once “manned by obsessive fashion fans who got paid in the emotional currency of comments rather than agent-negotiated contracts”—have transformed into a professional blogging economy driven by corporate-sponsored posts. See Alice Hines, “Bye Gucci, Hello Kotex: How Fashion Blogging Went Mainstream,” 2 July 2015, <http://www.refinery29.com/fashion-blogging-mainstream>.

the description “the Postmillennial Mozart”—drastically cut its extensive classical music listings into a handful of events in a small column. Two of the strongest proponents of indie classical in the press, Smith and Allan Kozinn, have left the *New York Times* and New York: in April 2014, Smith began a position as assistant arts editor at the *Boston Globe*; Kozinn took a buyout in December 2014 and has moved to Maine. In 2006, the *New York Times* had three full-time classical music critics; now it has one.<sup>507</sup> Two years after Smith started his position, the *Boston Globe* cut nearly all of its freelance music criticism.<sup>508</sup> As I was working on this conclusion and wrote to Smith to check a fact, he responded that “it’s interesting to contemplate my small role in having helped to foster a musical movement, at a time when the conventional media are increasingly abandoning cultural coverage. It was a bright, shining moment—and happily the baby has its own legs to stand on.”<sup>509</sup> Ross said that he “sometimes feels as though I belong to a dying profession while covering a dying art.”<sup>510</sup>

The mechanisms that allowed indie classical to gain prestige and institutional support have been disrupted. Future cohorts of composers will continue to emerge, but is not clear how they will transform cultural capital into economic capital to create the kind of sustainable careers that New Amsterdam has sought for its artists. The rhetorical positioning of indie classical—that it came into existence outside the “strictures” of the

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<sup>507</sup> Staff critic Bernard Holland took a buyout in 2008; the only remaining full-time classical critic is Anthony Tommasini.

<sup>508</sup> See BMint Staff, “To Dispossessed Freelancers *BMInt* Offers a Megaphone,” *Boston Musical Intelligencer*, 23 May 2016, <http://www.classical-scene.com/2016/05/23/globe-no-freelancers/>.

<sup>509</sup> Steve Smith, Facebook message to author, 29 June 2016. Printed with permission.

<sup>510</sup> Alex Ross, email to author, 29 May 2016. Printed with permission.

concert hall and the academy—may create the false impression that the next generation could thrive without the traditional infrastructure of classical and new music.

It is troubling, then, that the supposed entrepreneurialism of indie classical is presented as a solution to classical music's economic woes. In a 2014 editorial, *New York Times* chief music critic Anthony Tommasini contrasted the bankruptcy of City Opera and struggles of the Minnesota Orchestra with a “positive front”: “an entrepreneurial ethos is welling up from the ranks of idealistic young composers and performers, gifted artists who are inventing new templates for a life in music.”<sup>511</sup> In a widely disseminated graduation speech given at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music in 2013, flutist and International Contemporary Ensemble founder Claire Chase said,

You can open the paper any day of the week and read about the supposed death of classical music, about the dissolution of symphony orchestras, and the implosion and bankruptcy of opera companies, about the narrowing number of jobs available to an exponentially growing workforce... Let's not mourn a tragedy; let's use our gifts for free and creative thinking, and our broad vision to seize this tremendous, and one could argue, historically unprecedented moment of opportunity as young artists in the year 2013. Classical music isn't dying; it's now just being born.<sup>512</sup>

The optimism of Lang, Tommasini, and Chase—despite economic circumstance—resonates with what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello analyze as a “new spirit of capitalism,” one that justifies entrepreneurship over stability because of the artistic

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<sup>511</sup> Anthony Tommasini, “Lessons in a Year of Crises,” *New York Times*, 8 January 2014.

<sup>512</sup> Claire Chase, “2013 Bienen School of Music Convocation Address,” <http://davee.music.northwestern.edu/video/2013-bienen-school-music-convocation-address-claire-chase>.

Chase has since nuanced her perspective about the future of classical music; in a 2016 interview she described the future of classical and contemporary music as “both disastrous and immensely hopeful. I think it is lazy to focus on one or the other... It's a wretched situation, but also we are in—or soon will be in—a new renaissance. See Ricky O'Bannon, “ICE Founder Claire Chase on the ‘Disastrous’ and ‘Hopeful’ Future of New Music,” *Baltimore Symphony Orchestra Stories*, 14 March 2016, <https://www.bsomusic.org/stories/ice-founder-claire-chase-on-the-disastrous-and-hopeful-future-of-new-music.aspx>

freedom and personal liberation that it claims to offer.<sup>513</sup> The collaborative mentality and social ethos fostered by indie classical in particular might not facilitate a culture that is actively critical and resistant to the damages—from gentrification to the decline of state funding to attacks on the academy—that neoliberal capitalism has wreaked on the arts in the United States. As the new-music world continues to grow, it does not necessarily become an easier one in which to live.

As my interviews made clear, there *is* a pervasive sense that the current era is unprecedented in the amount of new-music activity and excitement around it. But less frequently addressed among indie classical’s participants is that it exists in a climate of arts austerity. New music in the United States today lacks the robust funding apparatus of past decades such as the 1980s, which composer Scott Johnson once called a “new music boom,” one supported by foundations, festivals, corporations, governmental funding, the record industry, and nonprofits such as Meet the Composer.<sup>514</sup>

Rather than a boom, the era of indie classical might be characterized as a new-music bubble. The surge of ensembles, record labels, institutions, composers, and performers dedicated to contemporary music exists on shaky ground, one marked by broader inequality and absent the significant flows of economic capital towards the arts that took place in the mid- to late twentieth century. In 1990, the organization Meet the Composer awarded approximately \$2.5 million in grants (adjusted for inflation in June 2016, \$4.6 million); in 2016, its successor New Music USA provided approximately \$1

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<sup>513</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>514</sup> Scott Johnson, interview with Jack Veas, 8 March 2006, Yale Oral History of American Music, 338 f–g, 49.

million.<sup>515</sup> And in a more crowded new-music marketplace, these grants are themselves significantly more competitive.

For composers, the PhD program represents not a retreat from an inhospitable climate for new music, as Milton Babbitt originally sought, but an opportunity for several years of relative financial stability during which musicians can study and create. After early success as the creator of his own ensemble and music festival—an entrepreneurial career fitting for a composer who helped create the term “indie classical”—Matt McBane entered Princeton’s PhD program in 2015. “As a freelance composer, you have to work based on commissions which may not always be the projects you must want to do, or take other work that distracts from your artistic goals,” he told me. “The institutional support of the PhD gives the gift of time both to focus on the projects I most want to create, and for musical study and artistic growth.”<sup>516</sup> But the academy in the twenty-first century is a temporary respite from the market, in which graduate school is often succeeded by a precarious world of adjunct teaching; it is unlikely that, following graduation, more than a handful of the graduate student composers that I interviewed will obtain tenure-track jobs. The university is facing its own unwinding, one that might be further facilitated by the anti-academic posture of indie classical.

In her 2015 monograph *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, anthropologist Anna Tsing offers the matsutake mushroom—which thrives in human-disturbed forests—as a metaphor for understanding modern life. “These places can be lively despite

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<sup>515</sup> See Allan Kozinn, “Getting Composers in the Public Eye as Well as the Ear,” *New York Times*, 26 December 1990; and New Music USA, “Our Approach,” <https://www.newmusicusa.org/about/our-approach/>.

<sup>516</sup> Matt McBane, interview with author, 19 September 2015.

announcements of their death,” Tsing writes of such environments. “Abandoned asset fields yield new multispecies and multicultural life. In a global state of precarity, we don’t have choices other than looking for life in this ruin.”<sup>517</sup> While acknowledging the pervasive narrative that classical music is dying, musicologists can also seek out life amidst its purported ruins, and provide critical histories of the present day. Scholars might thus help musicians—our colleagues and our students—gain a grounded and comparative understanding of what exactly flourishes, and how it grows, in the death of the old thing.

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<sup>517</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of The World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6.

## APPENDIX 1

Twitter exchange about the term indie classical, 12 December 2011.



**Will Robin**  
@seatedovation

Just heard the words "indie classical" and "alt classical" come out of my speakers. Vomited a little.

5:51 PM - 12 Dec 2011

4 1

Follow



**Will Robin**  
@seatedovation

Also not sure what this fascination with "Brooklyn" is?

5:52 PM - 12 Dec 2011

Follow



**Steven ((Swartz))**  
@dotdotdottweet

@seatedovation Open to your non-vomitose suggestions for another term...

6:25 PM - 12 Dec 2011

Follow



**Will Robin**  
@seatedovation

@dotdotdottweet "That thing they are doing in the greater New York area as well as other places with the musics"

6:34 PM - 12 Dec 2011

Follow



**Judd Greenstein**

@juddgreenstein

Follow

@seatedovation expect to vomit Friday morning.

6:36 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Will Robin**

@seatedovation

Follow

@juddgreenstein @dotdottweet My other idea is to give whatever-it-is just a random number sequence: 9302

6:47 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Steven ((Swartz))**

@dotdottweet

Follow

@seatedovation @juddgreenstein or maybe just hijack a completely unrelated term + use that. I propose calling this new stuff 'crumping'

6:51 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Daniel S. Johnson**

@linernotesdanny

Follow

@seatedovation I'm actually gonna allow "indie classical," but only to describe of classical music released on small, independent labels.

6:52 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Steven ((Swartz))**  
@dotdottweet

Follow

[@linernotesdanny](#) [@seatedovation](#) [@juddgreenstein](#) Exactly.  
It's the DIY ethic that defines the scene, if anything does.  
6:59 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Will Robin**  
@seatedovation

Follow

[@linernotesdanny](#) I'm cool with that. I'm okay with naming things, with 2 conditions: 1) specificity of meaning, 2) no implicit/covert values  
7:01 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Will Robin**  
@seatedovation

Follow

[@linernotesdanny](#) Which is why alt-classical fails  
7:01 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Maura Lafferty**  
@mlaffs

Follow

Emo-classical OK tho RT [@seatedovation](#): Just heard the words "indie classical" and "alt classical" come out of my speakers.  
Vomited a little  
7:02 PM - 12 Dec 2011

1



**Judd Greenstein**

@juddgreenstein

Follow

[@seatedovation](#) [@linernotesdanny](#) also it sounds like a 1994 BBS forum

7:03 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Alex Ross**

@alexrossmusic

Follow

[@linernotesdanny](#) [@dotdotdottweet](#) [@seatedovation](#) [@juddgreenstein](#) swingin' on the flippity-flop

7:06 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Chris Thompson**

@chrishthompson

Follow

[@juddgreenstein](#) [@seatedovation](#) [@linernotesdanny](#) I miss BBSes almost enough to start one today and call it that.

7:06 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Daniel S. Johnson**

@linernotesdanny

Follow

[@alexrossmusic](#) WE HAVE A WINNER [@dotdotdottweet](#) [@seatedovation](#) [@juddgreenstein](#)

7:07 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**New Amsterdam**

@newamrecords

Follow

I guess we should plant our flag. "New Amsterdam, the first swingin' on the flippity-flop record label, thusly branded in 2011..."

7:11 PM - 12 Dec 2011

1



**Will Robin**

@seatedovation

Follow

@linernotesdanny @chrispthompson I like classical because it's so broad/flimsy, actually, that it allows you to just carve off a huge swath

7:18 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Judd Greenstein**

@juddgreenstein

Follow

It's not like we have any control over whether people use terms to describe music. The choice is between terms we create or terms others do.

7:27 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Steven ((Swartz))**

@dotdotdottweet

Follow

@newamrecords "Swingin' the Flip-Floppity Since 2008"

7:31 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Judd Greenstein**

@juddgreenstein

Follow

We can't have these conversations divorced from the real world, in which people make up all kinds of nonsense when left to their own devices

7:32 PM - 12 Dec 2011

2



**Will Robin**

@seatedovation

Follow

@juddgreenstein Welcome to academia. Check your reality at the door.

7:38 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Daniel S. Johnson**

@linernotesdanny

Follow

@juddgreenstein I steadfastly refuse to have anything to do with the real world [climbs ivory tower, pulls up ladder, plugs ears w/ fingers]

7:39 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Martin Sher**

@shermartin

Follow

@seatedovation @juddgreenstein agree for those of us fighting orchestrossification people need a label for things they don't yet understand

7:43 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Martin Sher**  
@shermartin

Follow

[@seatedovation](#) [@juddgreenstein](#) it's more of a convenient descriptor than label - I've found lot of open minds but no common vocabulary.

7:48 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Maura Lafferty**  
@mlaffs

Follow

[@shermartin](#) i think everyone agrees that it's an imperfect descriptor [@seatedovation](#) [@juddgreenstein](#)

7:49 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Maura Lafferty**  
@mlaffs

Follow

[@shermartin](#) i think everyone agrees that it's an imperfect descriptor [@seatedovation](#) [@juddgreenstein](#)

7:49 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Martin Sher**  
@shermartin

Follow

And yes in my world, necessary. But agreeing w [@juddgreenstein](#) I'd rather let artists self describe than inflict/impose something

7:50 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Martin Sher**  
@shermartin

Follow

[@mlaffs](#) but i like beating horses until there's absolutely no sign of life whatsoever. Really dead. Really.

7:55 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Judd Greenstein**  
@juddgreenstein

Follow

[@sksnider](#) just a couple of white-bearded, elbow-patched academics doing their thing. (check [@seatedovation](#) [@linernotesdanny](#) TLs.)

8:02 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Sarah K. Snider**  
@sksnider

Follow

[@juddgreenstein](#) [@seatedovation](#) [@linernotesdanny](#) No, I got that, but didn't under the "nonsense other people make up" part. Because...

8:11 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Sarah K. Snider**  
@sksnider

Follow

[@juddgreenstein](#) [@seatedovation](#) [@linernotesdanny](#) \*we\* decided to go with "indie classical" from the outset, but it was Danny's definition...

8:14 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Martin Sher**  
@shermartin

Follow

Didn't realize there was a whole academic thing going on that I was butting in on. Apologies. Can't follow w new twitter very well.

8:15 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Sarah K. Snider**  
@sksnider

Follow

[@juddgreenstein](#) [@seatedovation](#) [@linernotesdanny](#) of "small, independent, DIY" -- which is an important distinction from the "alt" barfness

8:15 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Judd Greenstein**  
@juddgreenstein

Follow

[@sksnider](#) haha you know I agree with you. I'm making a more general point about how we have to engage with the world that exists.

8:16 PM - 12 Dec 2011



**Judd Greenstein**  
@juddgreenstein

Follow

[@shermartin](#) your points made sense in the context. I don't really buy the "academic"/"real" distinction anyway.

8:22 PM - 12 Dec 2011

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