

This recital is the culmination of my time here at SFCM. I am honoring the end of my school career—for the foreseeable future, at least— with a few deeply personal pieces, significant points of intersection in the course of my life as a music student. The following program notes will try to capture the spirit of that intersection: they are in turns fragmentary, narrative, schematic, descriptive, stratospheric, concretizing, but always essentially personal.

I hope these notes provide a small window into the nature of the unique relationship I have been able to form with each piece on the program. But more broadly, through outlining these unique and widely varied relationships that I have formed with each piece, perhaps these notes will form a composite image— revealing at least in part the foundational structures with which I approach music at this time in my life. Perhaps each piece is a single layer of thin drafting paper, with roughly sketched-in blueprints for the structure of my musical life; as they are stacked on top of one another, the details and formal capacities of the whole will emerge, translucently through the grid.

Luciano Berio's *Sequenza V*

It's one of the first pieces I ever took a real crack at – I was a freshman in college and I finally took out this crazy score I had picked up at a conference back in high school. I had absolutely zero clue how to parse the visual information – at that time a mystifying and obscured document. I never intended to perform it, but I began trying to understand what the proportional-ized notation meant, the reduction of dynamics to circled numbers, the concept that a monophonic instrument could sustain polyphonic lines....

Despite my personal longevity with the piece, I never found the right opportunity to perform it live. Recently, I became aware that Stuart Dempster originally premiered the piece *almost* exactly 50 years ago to the date here in San Francisco (March 21, 1966). This piece has become one of the stalwarts of the repertoire – a personal and aesthetic challenge to about everyone that chooses to take it on as their own.

Alvin Lucier's *Wind Shadows*

Alvin Lucier's music is incredibly formative for me. His works for instruments + sine tones and those exploring singular, audible phenomenon continue to absolutely astound me. By setting up a myopic and restricted playing field, whose performance is merely a creative demonstration of the particular territory, I enter a very perplexing and fascinating place. One would think that by entering such a cold, un-emotive mindset that sounds would become static, lifeless. However, it's an odd phenomenon: you cross a perceptual boundary where the performers (whether human or loudspeakers) lose their individual identity into the total *experience* of sound (a phenomenon composer Jürg Frey writes [at length on](#)). The sound is the idea is the phenomenon is the work is the experience. In this piece, two sine waves tuned 0.1Hz apart ricochet between stereophonic speakers – the laws of sound and vibration generating interference patterns between the waves, in which I merely spin off of with my own minutely tuned frequencies. That's really all there is. But there is something so warm about t his austerity, about the experience of sound taking on a life of its own ([something composer Catherine Lamb positively names "blandness"](#)): no longer do we as performers have to place ourselves above our sounds, but merely activate them....set them into their own motion...

Andrew Greenwald's *A Thing Is A Hole In A Thing It Is Not (VI)*:

"I would say a thing is a hole in a thing it is not. Our whole education is conducted by linguistic means. Language is mostly devoted to symbols, and art has very little to do with that. Any artists can symbolize but very few artists can execute. I would say that all ideas are the same except in execution. They lie in the head. In terms of the artist, the only difference between one idea and another is how it is executed...Art doesn't come from the mouth, you know. It is not a telling experience. We want experience to tell us something, but I don't think that understanding has to do with telling anything... Science is creating and comparing, and art is creating conditions that do not quite exist. That is why art is different from science. The ideal of science is to create at least theoretical models of things we hope have some correspondence with what exists; whereas with art, you try as a human being to create something that wouldn't exist unless you made it."

- [Carl Andre](#) (excerpted from *Cuts*)

The above quote is both a starting point, and a shared territory between Andrew and myself. It, in tandem with the expressive, glitchy, noisy, paradoxical sound objects that constitute this piece, open up some of the ways I currently feel about art better than I can.

John Cage's *Solo for Sliding Trombone*

Whether we like it or not, the ideas, aesthetics, philosophies, systems, and influences of John Cage are like a bell that cannot be un-rung. Reading his writing at age 17 or 18 was a very emphatic, personal manifestation of this metaphor – through his musings, Cage asks questions, asks *why?* or *why not?* about ideas and objects that one is never really taught to question. Cage's scores are widely and wildly interpreted as blueprints for improvisation/creativity/blundering/randomness/nihilism/hippie-love/you name it. However, digging back into his relationship with pianist David Tudor, these scores (particularly the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* that this piece is extracted from) are merely raw materials for the creation of new pieces. Tudor would apply dense systems of chance operations to really fix realizations of these works, even going as far to turn dots and transparencies into a fully notated piano solo. Tudor's obsessive working methods have always felt natural – even before I had ever heard of his processes, I remember taking a fine ruler to the *Sequenza* to try and re-notate the proportional notes into common time at 60 BPM...

Therefore with this piece, it is the coexistence of sounds, the opening up of spaces – of finding new solutions *towards* the creation of musical sounds. One quote from *Silence* has always somehow stuck with me: "Composing is one thing, performing is another, a listening is a third. What have they possibly got to do with each other?"

Erik Ulman's *The Coronation of Sesostris*

Loosely based on a [cycle of ten paintings](#) by the late [Cy Twombly](#), themselves referencing [this guy](#), this piece is quickly becoming an odd favorite – it's extremely unwieldy duration, intense contradictions between formal grandeur and fragile, slippery details, the amount of contrasting activity all contained within one solo piece. I approached Erik about this piece, noticing that it had not been premiered. Seeing the material challenge of it as potentially demanding, I naturally chose to try and take it on, even just as a technical project. Fast-forward a few months: I'm beginning to ask "why performing? why trombone? why continue?"...I realized, with prodding from many friends and colleagues, that all of these commissioning efforts, working with people on new pieces and digging into the conception of what a new project can be, was merely a way for me to vicariously live out the fantasy of actually writing my own music. Many of these same friends were and are students of Erik's, and I decided to finally step it up and go after it myself. Although our time has been relatively short, the effects of this type of work are still resounding well into the unimagined future, changing the course of what will happen after leaving school in ways that I can't imagine otherwise.

Timothy McCormack's *HEAVY MATTER*

This piece in particular seems the most appropriate way to end this. I started preparing *HEAVY MATTER* the very first day I arrived in San Francisco. While it was not written for me, I was intrigued again by the density, the energy, and the utterly compelling work that Tim produces. This piece is a particularly personal example of how anonymous work can lead to a lasting friendship, one that is already manifesting in fuller ways and projecting itself outward into the near future. It's these kinds of interpersonal relationships that unify the greater new music community and that continues to sustain it – it makes trying and sometimes failing to learn/write/produce/create these unwieldy and impractical things into something continually rich and rewarding.

Musically, *HEAVY MATTER* takes up where the *Sequenza* leaves off. Berio's quest for a continuous trombone sound finds its potential solutions within the labyrinths of Tim's – despite the relatively traditional treatment of the trombone, the smashing of fragmentary objects on top of one another evokes the kind of napalm-like energy that I had always wished the trombone could handle. The piece, in its own way, says to me "I dare you." It's one of the few pieces that really pushes back against you while realizing it – asserting its autonomy and physicality while providing the space for the trombone to create *its* own sonic space. I've written and spoke at length about what the work does and sounds like, how it functions physical/formally/conceptually, but here I'd prefer to leave it with one simple thing: I wouldn't be the musician I am today without this piece, and I'm finding that's one of the rarest things around...and for which I'm incredibly grateful.