

# *A Loose Affiliation of Alleluias: Tracing Genealogies of Technique and Power in Creative Practice*

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This essay outlines a method for engaging in composition and performance as a practice of excavating the material histories guiding our musical knowledge and technique. To demonstrate, we discuss our own creative work: Celeste's violin concerto, *a loose affiliation of alleluias*, premiered in December 2019 by the La Jolla Symphony with Steven Schick conducting, Keir performing the mostly improvised solo violin part, and Barbara Byers, Lauren Jones, and Celeste as three offstage vocalists. The concerto strategically brings together certain historical materials and techniques: it is a collage, which aims to make visible the pastiched, overlapping traditions constituting our individual musical voices. In reflecting upon the process of composing and performing this concerto, we show the ways in which every present moment of creative practice is thick with the sedimentation of historical moments, movements, and affiliations.

This account illustrates several material histories embedded within our concerto: *ornamentation* as an index of a performer or composer's individuality (the measure of which changes historically); *taste* as a circumscribing marker of elite patronage; church *polyphony* as a prop for religious power; the *romantic violin concerto* as a trope of militarism. What we aim to draw out through these historical fault lines is the multitude of overlapping hermeneutic codes and traditions, which overdetermine every instance of creative decision-making, including our most reflexive, improvisatory actions. Throughout the paper, we excavate these determining, ideological frameworks, with the help of related theoretical apparatuses: Ben Spatz's (2015) explanation of personal "technique" as the reproduction of historical knowledge; and Edward Said's (1983) notion of "affiliations" as the networks which build up cultural relationships and cultural authority. We follow these authors in critically attending to the corporeal, social, and aesthetic networks which historically exercise power. In doing so, we call into question some of the critical gestures of musical modernism, which conspicuously arrest and negate historical musical grammars and logics while occupying the same frameworks and institutions.

It has been pointed out to us that it is not immediately apparent why an audience of music scholars should care about our creative work. After all, there

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are indeed more prominent examples of contemporary music which variously take their shape from historical techniques and materials. It has been noted that we might make a better case by presenting ourselves as part of a broader group of composers, or that we could explain the critical apparatus with which we examine relationships between historical and contemporary music, rather than connecting it concretely to our own creative work. These criticisms carry with them the following assumption: that the only music worthy of musicological analysis is that which makes a claim to canonic importance. For us, the question of historical import (however that is measured) is less pressing than the task of examining how legacies of cultural violence and exclusion continue to determine the frames of our most personal musical utterances. Like any professionalized musician, we are products of systemic pedagogies, beholden to cultural norms and the expectations of institutional patronage. As such, the scholarly value of this paper does not rest on the exceptionality of our creative work, nor on us legitimizing it within a historical frame; it rather rests on our ability to unearth the cultural histories conditioning our creative practice.

In our concluding statements, we gesture towards some of the pedagogical implications of this work. Like many students, our experience of music-making came first through performing and composing. We suggest that the corporeal and creative stakes of these practices—felt on the level of a body’s engagement with sound, with frames of knowledge and reference, and with other musical bodies—provide concrete experiences through which to engage students in broader questions of cultural inheritance. *a loose affiliation of alleluias* is both the result of our creative labor, and a critical accounting of the ideological frameworks guiding our creativity — the former being necessary to arrive at the latter. We extend this particular example to advocate the scholarly potential of creative work: attuning students’ critical attention to the inherited material histories surfacing in their embodied, kinesthetic practice.

## Technique, Affiliation, and the Genealogy of Compositional Choices

### *Celeste*

In this section I reflect on the process of composing *a loose affiliation of alleluias*, and I take the “compositional process” to mean a sequence of innumerable decisions: some whose impact are almost infinitesimal (which note comes next in the second oboe part), and some which determine the most defining features

of a piece (that the solo violin part in *a loose affiliation* would be mostly improvised, for example). Understanding composition as an exercise in choice-making then invites inquiry into the knowledge informing those choices. Rather than a mode of analysis which plots out a composition's supposedly self-contained formal and material properties, I am more interested in excavating the historical templates shaping those forms and materials. This approach understands composing as a practice which reproduces ways of hearing, thinking about, rationalizing, and employing musical sound.

To account for the ways in which historical knowledge is reproduced in composition, I draw on performance theorist Ben Spatz's (2015) definition of "technique," which extends early twentieth-century anthropological studies of the term (namely, by Marcel Mauss) into dialogue with recent humanities scholarship examining "technique" as a key vector of both agency and cultural transmission. Spatz defines technique as "sedimented" or "embodied" knowledge which structures "the way we think, move and understand ourselves" (47). "Technique" can be a fraught word for musicians, often used as shorthand for the carefully-coded signals of affiliation with elite musical practices: conservatory training in performers, for instance, or access to expensive technologies for computer-assisted composition.

But Spatz's definition of "technique" usefully recuperates the term; by his definition, everyone has technique. The embodied, sedimented knowledge of technique is what guides one's actions in any particular "moment of practice," "by offering a range of relatively reliable pathways through any given situation" (26). For Spatz, "technique" is thus present in a broad gamut of human activity: "from ballet to soccer, from martial arts to meditation, from tango to prayer, from fighting to lovemaking" (43). Kramer & Bredekamp (2013, 24) similarly assert the value of technique as a model for cultural knowledge that is not "congealed in works, documents, or monuments, but liquefies into our everyday practices with objects, symbols, instruments, and machines."

Second, Spatz argues that technique is "not ahistorical but transhistorical" (41). Although a given "moment of practice" is unrepeatably, the technique structuring moments of practice can be repeated from person to person, and over time (41). Distinguishing between technique and its moments of practice allows one to trace connections between individual practitioners across history and geography, and also to attend to "highly specific and localized" aspects of practice (41). There are components of my vocal technique as a choral singer in New Zealand, for instance, that I share with choral singers in England, the United States, and Mexico, which can be heard as symptoms of the church's allegiances

with colonial invasion and culture-building in settler nations. At the same time, attending to the infinite variations between those local practices enriches analyses of cultural formation, transmission, and practice.

Third, Spatz asserts that formations of technique are “interwoven with power,” because technical knowledge is so often distributed along—and thereby reinforces—social hierarchies (34). This can be fairly obvious in the domain of Western classical music, for instance if a singer’s technique signals their training within an institutionally-sanctioned tradition, such as bel canto opera or church music. At the same time, Spatz is careful to note that “technical knowledge cannot be reduced to power relations,” nor can any given technique be “exclusively classified as either oppressive or liberatory” (35). Drawing from Foucault, Spatz suggests that “the same technique can be deployed under different circumstances to radically different effect” (34). For example, even if aspects of my singing technique have been formed in relation to historical repertoires of sacred music, Spatz leaves open the possibility that I do not necessarily reinforce the cultural dominance of the Church every time I sing. Spatz thus advocates that a studied awareness of one’s own technique might allow for “ethical practices of the self rather than simple reinscriptions of power” (34). Carrie Noland (2009, 2) similarly echoes the promise of individual agency to revise and inflect acquired routines; indeed, she argues that learned techniques of the body *are* precisely “the means by which cultural conditioning is simultaneously embodied and put to the test.”

In emphasizing the need for awareness of one’s tacit, embodied knowledge, Spatz calls to mind Edward Said’s (1983) contrasting notions of filiation versus affiliation, which, for Said, stake out the political urgency of drawing attention to latent formations and reinscriptions of cultural authority. Filiation, Said defines, belongs to the realm of nature: it describes the simple and unavoidable fact of being born into a certain community, be it a family unit or a nation-state. Affiliation, on the other hand, belongs to the realm of culture and society: it describes the cultural relationships one consciously builds for oneself, as well as the manner in which cultural authority is constructed and reproduced.

The need to articulate affiliative networks is important, Said (2001, 336) argues, because “we tend to forget” them; as Moustafa Bayoumi (2004, 58) elaborates, modern authority “often rationalizes and naturalizes its own affiliations away” by disguising its orthodoxies with “a seemingly filiative relationship, or one that appears entirely natural or self-evident.” Illustrating affiliative networks and how they are formed therefore serves to “make explicit all kinds of connections [...] that have to be made explicit and even dramatic in

order for political change to take place” (Said 2001, 336). Kramer and Bredekamp arrive at a similar analysis in arguing that a text-centric conception of culture “forgets’ its genesis” first as “lived-in” technique (21).

In composing and analyzing *a loose affiliation of alleluias*, I engage in what Spatz and Said propose: excavating the affiliative networks shaping my technique and my compositional decisions. Much of what I understand to be my formative musical technique has come from studying at universities, and singing in choirs whose practices descend from Western European sacred polyphony. My musical experience also includes popular and folk music, songwriting, musical theatre, and playing in bands. The vast global archive of recorded music available to me as a twenty-first-century listener certainly shapes my musical imagination too, even while I remain distant from the knowledge of how much of what I listen to is created or culturally situated. Charting my technical knowledge might therefore begin from the histories of Western art music which are most familiar to me, but it would be a mistake to over-emphasize their presence in my musical constitution. At the same time, my affiliative awareness needs to include an awareness of the limits of my knowledge, and of the vectors of culture and capital which proximate (and occlude) various musics to me in the first place.

Coming from the position that composition is as much a reproductive activity as an original one, in *a loose affiliation*, I wanted to complicate how the piece’s authorship, or “originality,” would be understood. One strategy in this respect was for the solo violin part to be improvised, so the piece would foreground not only my creative choices but also Keir’s (which Keir discusses in the next section), thereby drawing attention to a performer’s routine negotiation of transhistorical embodied knowledge, whether or not improvisation is involved. Another strategy was to select a small handful of existing musical pieces which I worked with as starting material for the concerto. In a sense, with these historical excerpts I deliberately gesture towards the cultural genealogy that I understand to shape my musical thought and imagination. I do not suggest that adapting demonstrably historical music is the only (nor necessarily the best) way to underscore historical presences in one’s own current practice. It is simply the approach that I took in this case, in an effort to make the presence of my own “compositional hand” more conspicuous by sliding it in and out of view. We return to an evaluation of this approach later in this essay.

*a loose affiliation of alleluias* recognizably includes musical material from:

- A hymn to St. James, “Ad superni regis,” two-part counterpoint from the twelfth-century *Liber Sancti Jacobi* as recorded in the Codex Callixtinus.

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- Three musical fragments from Giovanni Gabrieli's 16-voice sacred symphony *Exaudi me Domine*, from the early seventeenth century—those that set the text [a] “quando caeli”, [b] “movendi sunt,” and [c] “et terra.”
- Lyrical fragments from the 1986 song “The Boy in the Bubble” by Paul Simon and Forere Motloheloa, from the album *Graceland*: “don't cry, baby, don't cry,” and the “loose affiliation” of the concerto's title.

In one sense, any connection between these hand-picked materials is truly “loose”; all this music is very familiar to me, and has afforded me considerable musical enjoyment at various points in my life. The collection's eclecticism and anachronism is deliberate, as is its brevity: it is by no means a comprehensive anthology, and so a large part of my creative task is to serve as an interlocutor between these disparate musical fragments.

What these materials have in common is their entanglement with formations and consolidations of imperial power. The twelfth-century hymn is a paean to a saint whose cult boomed with Iberian crusading and warfare against Islam (Purkis 2008). Gabrieli's professional musical life in the employ of St. Mark's Basilica was devoted to amplifying the splendor of the Papal empire at a time when it was desperately clamoring for power in post-Reformation Europe (Arnold 1979). And Paul Simon's iconic and controversial *Graceland* album signals to the extensive histories of white musical artists' and markets' reliance on non-white—and especially Black—cultural resources for their creative enrichment and economic monopoly. *Graceland*'s huge and sudden commercial success, Neil Lazarus (1999, 204) argues, was “imperial in its effects” in the way it disrupted and reconfigured South African popular music via “top-down determination, more or less wholly indifferent to the response of local [Black] musicians and listeners.” Given the notoriety of *Graceland*, the concerto's allusion to it marks the contemporary stakes of imperial affiliations in musical-cultural transmission: namely, the constructions of race and capital which produce and popularize so much of the music in my field of knowledge and reference.

*a loose affiliation of alleluias* roughly takes the form of a pop song—which I adopted as a nod to “The Boy in the Bubble”—but on a massively drawn-out scale (the premiere performance was around 18 minutes). The piece comprises sections that I consider analogous to an intro, verses, choruses, a bridge, and an outro to fade. The table below indicates where and how each of the historical musical materials appears in the concerto (though there are additional things

going on; this table does not always account for musical activity not derived from the materials above).

Intro	solo violin and three offstage voices extemporize on a repeating harmonic progression
Verse 1	three different wind quartets antiphonally play four-voice adaptations of [1], [2a] and [2b]; solo violin extemporizes on a repeating harmonic progression
Chorus	three offstage voices sing lyrics of [3] to newly-composed music; solo violin tacet
Verse 2	three different wind quartets antiphonally play four-voice adaptations of [1], [2a] and [2b]; solo violin extemporizes on a repeating harmonic progression
Chorus	three offstage voices sing lyrics of [3] to newly-composed music; solo violin tacet
Bridge	begins with a freely-improvised quasi-cadenza for solo violin; then winds antiphonally play eight-voice adaptations of [1] and [2a] while solo violin extemporizes on a repeating harmonic progression
Chorus / Et Terra	tutti orchestral parts play an extended 20-voice adaptation of [2c]; solo violin tacet
Outro / Fade	orchestral parts play downwardly-transposing cycles of the harmonic progression that the solo violin has previously played; angels sing newly-composed music; solo violin improvises freely

There were two main ways in which I worked with the Gabrieli and Codex Callixtinus material compositionally:

1. Composing additional counterpoints to existing lines: not in an attempt to pass them off as stylistically consistent with the source material, but rather to explore and adapt the material to satisfy my own musical senses;
2. ‘Learning’ characteristic techniques of voice-leading from the original repertoire (for example, Gabrieli’s use of chains of suspensions to plot a pathway through different harmonic regions, or points of imitation to arrive at a cadence), and adopting these templates to my own ends.

To illustrate, I offer an example adapting the twelfth-century hymn to St. James, “Ad superni regis,” a piece of two-voice counterpoint. The original hymn itself is an interesting case study in how embodied technique shapes musical creation; polyphony such as this was likely devised between two singers, improvising different combinations of discant until the most pleasing version

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was written down (Holzer, Taruskin, and Gibbs 2012). Circumscribing that improvisation is the singers' entrained pitch-pathways around their Guidonian hands; the acoustic responsiveness of the buildings in which they were singing; and their cosmo-mathematically-derived understandings of consonance and dissonance and their divine invocations which, for instance, goad the singers into unison—the most “perfect” consonance—at the end of every phrase.

In a nod to the hymn's original composition, improvisation played a significant role in how I devised additional contrapuntal lines; I would sing or play along on my flute with the original hymn until arriving at what felt like a “keeper.” In a post-hoc analysis sketched out in the video below, I aim to spell out the musical results my improvisation drew me to, and connect them to what I sense to be the technique informing it. For instance, I was attracted to a kind of nimbleness of affect, and the apparatus with which I explore this has historical roots in *musica ficta*, as well as Baroque ornamentation. I flip frequently back and forth between sharps and naturals, either to inflect a melodic line with shifting modal implications (in the upper discant), or to temper the momentum to and from quasi-cadential points via various combinations of raised/lowered sixth and seventh degrees (in the lower discant).

The image shows a musical score for four woodwind instruments: Alto Flute, Cor Anglais, Horn in F, and Bassoon. The score is annotated with handwritten notes in red and green. The Alto Flute part is marked with a tempo of *c. 104, but with highly elastic rubato* and includes a section labeled *\*original hymn*. The Cor Anglais part is marked *mf strident but fluid* and *mf overflowing*. The Horn in F part is marked *sempre con sord.* and *mp strident but fluid*. The Bassoon part is marked *mf overflowing*. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings. Handwritten annotations include: "high entrance pitch sets us up for a fall, like a sigh" (pointing to the start of the Alto Flute part); "fluid, lilting rhythm plays against the even quavers" (pointing to the Cor Anglais part); "sad ↓ C4 .." (pointing to a note in the Cor Anglais part); "dovetailed phrases" (pointing to overlapping phrases in the Cor Anglais and Bassoon parts); "relative tonal stability in 'bass' part (for starters - this will change...)" (pointing to the Bassoon part); "5th leap = DRAMATIC PLUNGE" (pointing to a large interval in the Bassoon part); and "new discants" (circled in yellow in the Bassoon part). The score also includes performance instructions like *poco rit.* and *mf overflowing*.

**Figure 1:** Annotated score video of woodwind material in the Verse sections based on “Ad superni regis.” See: <https://vimeo.com/576933093>.



To fully account for the sum total of historical knowledge operative in one's creative practice would be a never-ending task. I only scratch the surface here, providing a few examples of how I connect my compositional process with my historically-determined knowledge in a way that begins to trace my affiliations. Said (1983, 15) argues that this accounting of affiliation transforms the individual subject from being “naturally and easily a mere child of the culture” to consciously conceiving a role as a “historical and social actor in it.” Positioning one's critical consciousness as an agent within a culture—rather than attempting to set oneself apart from it— one finds oneself better positioned to follow through on Spatz's hypothesis: that prevailing technique and knowledge can be employed to different ends than those it historically served.

I return to the example of “Ad superni regis” to consider the affiliations between its musical means and the exercising of religious power. Anthologized in the Codex Callixtinus—more specifically, the *Liber Sancti Jacobi* (the Book of St. James)—the hymn is part of a liturgy venerating St. James as a righteous martyr. Historian William Purkis argues that the *Liber's* explicit purpose was to promote the cult of St. James, and the Compostela pilgrimage associated with him. The pilgrimage to Compostela in turn advanced the idea that the Iberian Peninsula was another frontier of crusading warfare, in the interests of expelling Muslims and expanding papal influence in the region. The book's power comes from its claim to authenticity and authority. An introductory letter, spuriously attributed to Pope Callixtinus, states the liturgy “may be sung and read in churches at matins and masses, according to ordinance, for it is authentic and described with great authority” (in Purkis 2008, 143). Another sermon states the *Liber Sancti Jacobi's* purpose is to anthologize a wealth of materials “so that no one may dare to write anything about [St. James] except the authentic things that this codex [...] contains.”

It is difficult to conjecture how this hymn might have consolidated, in musical terms, its liturgy's authority and authenticity for its twelfth-century listeners. I hazard only what Dylan Robison (2014, 282-3) describes as music's “agglutinating” properties: its capacity to make “meaning ‘stick.’” The practice of sacred polyphony, engineered over generations to signal and invoke divinity, contributes to the aura of St. James's saintliness. The hymn's crystalline consonance naturalizes his divine authority to inspire crusading, thus “forgetting” the affiliations between spiritual and imperial devotion. Singing to St. James elicits what Walter Benjamin (1968 [1942], 256) terms “empathy with the victor,” whose “spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called

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cultural treasures,” and their origin the historical materialist “cannot contemplate without horror.”

This 900-year-old hymn shapes and energizes my musical thinking in the twenty-first century precisely because it has been carried along in the procession. First disseminated broadly by imperial interests, it has more recently been preserved and anthologized to chart a grand narrative of European high art. I first came across this hymn in a college survey course on the history of Western art music: a narrative which often presents complex affiliative networks as a series of natural filiations. Robert Walser (1992, 265) calls Western art music an “imagined tradition,” one whose continuity and cohesion is fabricated by present interests in order to “establish or legitimize present institutions or social relations.”

Such strategies for establishing European cultural supremacy go hand-in-hand with strategies for disrupting the continuity of non-European cultural traditions. Rob Thorne (2013), a practitioner of taonga pūoro—a revival of pre-colonial Māori musical practices—describes taonga pūoro as a practice “broken” and “discontinued” by colonial warfare, genocide, and criminalization of Indigenous practices; its current practitioners hence cannot refer to a “consistent, fixed body of instrumental musical learning”. Moreover, as taonga pūoro musician and scholar Ruby Solly (2020) has described, the fiction of Western classical music’s immemorial continuity is often wielded to delegitimize the cultural authority and authenticity of these disrupted traditions’ current practitioners.

Staking out the genealogy of one’s technical entrainments is therefore a profoundly political project, for the assertions one makes have the potential to both reinscribe imaginary filiations, as well as to trouble them. I bring this section to a close with reference to another of Said’s contentions: that illuminating webs of affiliation can also illuminate the “social densities” which have been “stripped” from cultural artefacts. Drawing from Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City*, Said suggests that, for the modern reader, literary depictions of (for example) the rural mansion should not “entail only what is to be admired by way of harmony, repose, and beauty; they should also entail [...] what in fact has been excluded [...] the labor that created the mansions, the social processes of which they are the culmination, the dispossessions and theft they actually signified” (23). In a similar manner, there is an imperative for a modern listener to try to hear in historical music what has been discursively concealed and excluded—what the music itself has been leveraged to filiate and naturalize. In doing so, we

might hear a denser overlapping of relationships between individuals, cultures, and histories.

## The Violinist's Historical Body

*Keir*

In this section I reflect upon certain topoi, forms, and techniques which appear throughout my solo violin part in *a loose affiliation of alleluias*. In doing so, I aim to identify some of the sedimented historical knowledge which structures both engineered musical effects and the most innate, bodily, intuitive elements of my playing. This continues the overall method of our paper: to excavate various historical-material strands of practice undergirding our creation of this concerto. Celeste, borrowing from Said and Spatz, points to the cultural artifacts and social contexts inhering in her compositional materials and tendencies. In my own reflections on the process of interpreting and improvising within her composed musical structures, I attend to a host of overlapping practices guiding both my improvisations on Celeste's schematic materials, and my interpretation of the concerto's larger-scale structural narrative. I argue that an agentic awareness of these interpretive and improvisatory codes allows me to subtly transform this transhistorical corpus through my own performing body.

The genre of the violin concerto itself carries with it a history of structural and signifying characteristics. Musicologist Maiko Kawabata (2004) identifies several military topoi in nineteenth-century violin concerti: tropes which were exaggerated during and after the Napoleonic era. As she writes, "military-heroic themes and ideas permeated virtually every aspect of violin composition, performance, and reception, from the notes themselves to the symbolic meanings of performers and instruments" (92). If the orchestra throughout the eighteenth century became a highly visible metaphor for an army, the virtuoso violinist came to be described as "a general in the midst of his soldiers" (101).

Many aspects of *a loose affiliation of alleluias* subvert the most audible and visible signals of virtuosic heroism: the solo violinist continually returns to a slow-moving, three-part refrain; there are no fast-moving passages or militant march rhythms; nothing in my general comportment or playing suggests much of a desire to go to war. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the concerto replay what Kawabata describes as the "remarkable individual holding his own against the amassed orchestra" (96). In the climactic section following the Bridge (directly preceding the Outro) I play a four-note chord together with the offstage singers

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— a kind of victorious exclamation point on a long orchestral build. To an extent this climax is already embedded in the source material: Gabrieli's "et terra" also builds rousingly to a splendiferous major chord, which Celeste orchestrates with timpani and cymbals. As soon as the chord arrives, it begins to disintegrate, swallowed up by swelling strings and bass drum, recapitulating the Romantic cliché of the heroic individual overcome by the sublime.

The image shows a musical score extract. At the top, a staff for 'THREE TENORS ANGELS' is shown with a dense, sustained texture. A text box above this staff reads: '(the ANGELS drop out once the tutti sound gets too saturated for them to be heard)'. Below this are four staves for Violins I and II, labeled 'Vln. I(a)', 'Vln. I(b)', 'Vln. II(a)', and 'Vln. II(b)'. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *p*, *mf*, and *f*. A key signature change is indicated by a 'K' symbol. The notation features various articulations, including slurs and accents, and includes some performance instructions like 'abrupt deceleration; absolutely senza rub.'.

**Figure 2:** Extract from the section following the Bridge and preceding the Outro. An audio clip can be found at: <https://vimeo.com/576938385>.

This musical moment characterizes a more general dissonance in our use of historical materials: that, even given a skeptical, critical distance from these tropes, they still condition our musical activity. What is expressively possible is determined by what remains materially present: the solo violinist still conjures the specter of the hero; the flanks of tutti violins still function with regimental force; the heavy artillery of the bass drum and timpani still bring up the rear. By experimentally working within and around these templates, we explore alternative renderings of these inescapable historical presences. For instance, my improvisations involve a degree of reflexive uncertainty, peppering the concerto's outsized heroic space with silences and broken-off phrases.

My playing references earlier instrumental practices as well. In the Bridge section of *a loose affiliation*, I take a notated harmonic refrain—a cyclic progression between roots a fourth apart, ambiguating the tonic—and recombine the voices across different strings of the violin. This is a staple improvisatory technique, which can be traced back to eighteenth-century descriptions of what certain Italian theorists referred to as *diminuzione*. The eighteenth-century violinist and theorist, Francesco Galeazzi (1791/1819, 357), describes the *diminuzione* as a combinatorial art of imaginative improvisation:

It is impossible to give rules for the *diminuzione* since they depend so much upon the talent and style of the performer [...]. This enormous progression gives one clearly to understand what an immense multiplicity of *cantilene* may emerge from a very few pitches, and what a vast field is here offered to the young performer to display his talents in the selection of the most fitting ornaments so as to enhance an expressive *cantilena*, a largo, etc.

As Galeazzi points out, ornamentation allowed the performer to “display his talents.” Other treatises on ornamentation from the eighteenth century—including those by violinists Francesco Geminiani and Giuseppe Tartini—similarly point to ornamentation as a means of expressive individualization. Before the solo violinist performed in front of a symphony orchestra in an opera house, ornamentation gave violinists a more intimate means of performing their virtuosity, judgment, and good taste.

Ornamentation in the eighteenth century was often closely associated—sometimes even synonymous—with the cultivation of taste. By ornamenting a musical line, the performer might express both their individual musical voice, and their robust musical learning. Taste, as the mediation between imagination and understanding, or between individual fantasy and common convention, affiliated a musician’s practice with the aristocratic sensibilities they served. Put another way, ornamentation, as a marker of taste, served as a “reinscription of power” (Spatz 2015, 34) by signaling a performer’s proximity to elite spaces, and reinforcing social hierarchy via musical means.

This cultivated, embodied, and ideological framework of eighteenth-century taste continues to guide twenty-first-century violinists’ reflexive musical utterances and personal practices. My own embodied knowledge of ornamentation, for example, comes from a few decades practicing works by Mozart, Bach, Corelli, and the like. As a student interested in historically-informed practice, I was encouraged to read treatises, and to ornament historical works in personally vivid ways. In more mainstream pedagogical settings, ornaments were explained to me as codified gestures with codified methods of execution. In both cases, as a student of the tradition, I measured myself against historical frames and figures, hoping to fit my playing within conventional codes of interpretive performance, or even to distinguish my singular voice through these codes, much as eighteenth-century violinists used ornamentation as a means of manifesting their individuality.

In a short essay on Beethoven, Theodor Adorno similarly describes the ways in which musical conventions shed and acquired meaning, gesturing towards a material history of taste and ornamentation. Adorno (2002 [1937],

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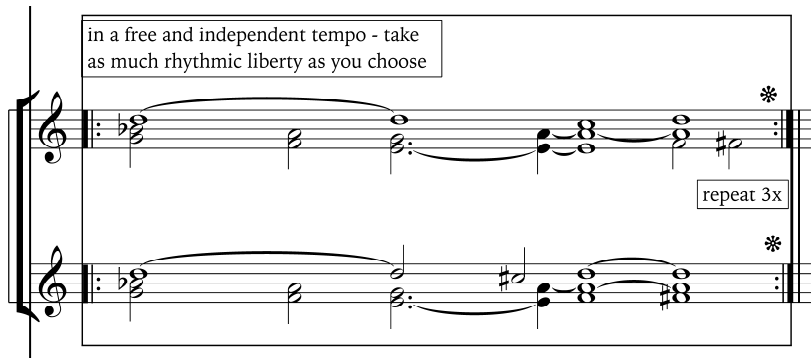
565) compares Beethoven's late style against the composer's middle period, in which his "subjectivist methodology" aimed to free musical material "from convention on the strength of their own uniqueness." This middle period manifested a highly individualized style by beginning to bend and warp conventions of taste, challenging the hold that the aristocracy seemed to assert over earlier composers' music. In Adorno's reading, Beethoven transforms this arch-Romantic individualism in his late style, returning to convention in order to de-familiarize it: the last five piano sonatas "are full of decorative trill sequences, cadences, and *fiorituras*" (565). These conventional ornaments appear "in a form that is bald, undisguised, untransformed" (565): the authorial subject speaks not through mastery over convention, but through "the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves [...] and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself" (566).

For Adorno, this return to the discarded husks of historical conventions (like ornaments) expresses the alienation of subjective and objective components of music. He interprets Beethoven's late works as characteristic of a fractured subjectivity, which sees conventional musical codes (i.e., objects) as alien and anachronistic. These late works move beyond the discourse of taste and pleasure: "devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation [...] they show more traces of history than of growth" (564). As harbingers of modernity, Beethoven's late style comes not only late in the day for him: they signal the lateness of a musical art tradition whose focal point lies in the distant past.

Adorno's historical materialist reading of ornamentation articulates something like what I refer to earlier: the dissonance between the materials we are left with and what they historically signified or meant. Adorno pinpoints this dissonance in Beethoven's late work: Beethoven draws attention to the bald conventionality of "decorative" tropes, drawing an expressive gesture out of their mute objectivity. My own performative choices are pulled between two polarities: to work towards insufflating historical materials in an effort to make them appear spontaneous, imaginative, subjective utterances – or to let them sit there as ambivalent historical objects. There is also latitude in between these two positions, and navigating this latitude energizes and shapes my musical decisions.

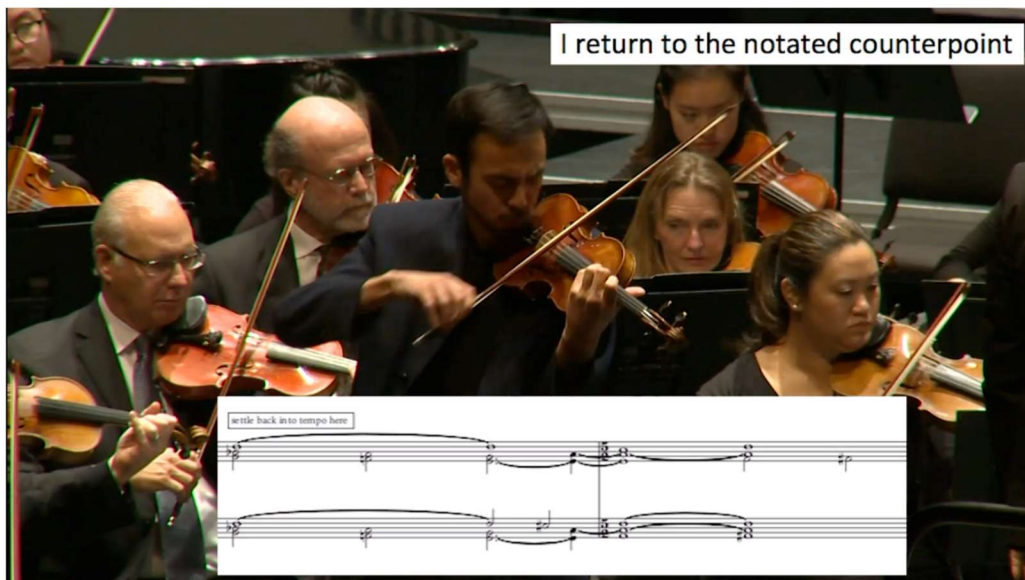
By way of illustration, the cadenza-like hiatus at the beginning of the Bridge in *a loose affiliation* is the most substantial opportunity I have to

imaginatively ornament the aforementioned harmonic refrain, first introduced by the offstage singers in the piece's opening:



**Figure 3:** Harmonic template undergirding Keir's improvisation in the Verse & Bridge sections.

As the Bridge section develops, I move beyond combinatorial play around the harmonic progression (somewhat like Galeazzi's *diminuzione*), responding to Celeste's woodwind counterpoint around materials from the Codex Callixtinus and Gabrieli's motet. These improvisatory responses draw upon a saturated chromaticism, perhaps reminiscent of Alban Berg's Violin Concerto and his post-tonal Romantic language. In his treatise, Galeazzi (1791/1819, 358) points to the "new and astonishing" effects of chromatic diminution, suggesting that this strategy was also employed in eighteenth-century performance to leverage harmonic ambiguity to dramatic effect. My improvisations in this section represent an intuitive working out of the various historical frameworks guiding my hands and ears.



**Figure 4:** Annotated performance video of Keir's improvisation in the Bridge section. See: <https://vimeo.com/576934141>.

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While this Bridge section presents a moment to work out some of the schematic materials in the violin and orchestral parts, these improvisations also take into account the larger picture of the violin's position within the whole piece: its halting interactions with the voices in the intro, its plainer embellishments of the singing refrain in verses one and two, its triumphant arrival following the Bridge, and its keening ascension over the course of the outro. On both micro and macro scales, these improvisatory responses reflect the superimposition of anachronistic methods and techniques: chromatic diminution, tonal elements of romantic *espressivo*, eighteenth-century embellishment, and the nineteenth-century interpretive practice of parsing large-scale structural narratives. In tracing some of these cultural histories, I draw attention to the ways in which my own bodily practice is shaped by a transhistorical corpus, and vice versa, the ways in which this observation in some small way alters this inherited culture. That is, if classical music pedagogy is premised on the encoding of historical subjectivities, animistic reflexes, and sonic presences into the movements of performers and the materials of composition, then observing their enculturation is a first step in "altering the routine, the body that performs the routine, and eventually perhaps, culture itself" (Noland 2009, 2).

This account has drawn attention to the corporeal, historical frameworks determining my present practice as a violinist. In doing so, I have posited a complex account of my own musical agency, one which, as Spatz (2015, 54) writes (referencing Saba Mahmood) "does not assume that traditional technique is always coercive, or that transgressive technique is necessarily empowering or freeing, but instead pays closer attention to the specific and contextual relationship between practitioner and practice." While aspects of our musical inheritances—ornamentation, the orchestral apparatus, aristocratic codes of taste—carry material signs and traces of cultural chauvinism and imperialism, the contexts in which these fragments are reproduced are complex and multivalent. Denying their presence in our minds and bodies does not do any work towards erasing their historical and present power. Instead, we have here endeavored to surface some of the material genealogies guiding our corporeal, aesthetic, and ideological affiliations.



## Revisiting the Critical Promises of (Post)Modernity

*Keir*

What, actually, does this critical accounting of one's genealogy provide in the end? We here contextualize some of the contemporary frames for our composition and performance, in order to explain how particular social and intellectual contexts shaped our decisions in making *a loose affiliation of alleluias*. We do not suggest that the piece provides anything more, or anything less, than a researched response to the conditions of its creation.

*a loose affiliation* was commissioned and premiered by the La Jolla Symphony, a community orchestra closely connected with the University of California San Diego: it is directed by Steven Schick (a professor in the music department at UCSD); UCSD faculty and students are often featured artists; many of its tutti players have UCSD connections as alumni, employees, or extended family; and the orchestra receives technical support from staff employed by the Department of Music. UCSD is an R1 research institution, whose music department was founded in the 1960s. As is stated on the department's website:

As UC San Diego began constructing its new music program, [John] Stewart [Provost of Muir College] consulted Modernist composer Ernst Krenek to help shape the department's mission. The emphasis was to be on composing and performing new and experimental music, as well as on developing innovative musical research and theory.

In 1965, Krenek, then a former professor at Hamline University in Minneapolis, recommended his former student Will Ogdon as the department's founding chairman. Two more of Krenek's onetime students, composer Robert Erickson and conductor Tom Nee, soon joined Ogdon as UC San Diego's founding music faculty. (UCSD Department of Music, n.d.)

Ernst Krenek, like so many composers staffing post-War United States universities, was a German émigré, whose music was steeped in the language of European Modernism and Postmodernism. He variously experimented with methods of serialism (à la Schoenberg) and Neo-Classicism (à la Stravinsky), also incorporating elements of jazz and Neo-Romanticism in his music. Notably, three of his students were founding members of the UCSD music department, and one of them, Thomas Nee, was the first conductor of the La Jolla Symphony. *a loose affiliation* was funded by the annually-awarded Thomas Nee commission.

We wrote and performed *a loose affiliation* as PhD students at the UCSD Department of Music, which draws much of its cultural cachet from, as its website advertises, its “identity as a world leader in new and experimental music.” The La Jolla Symphony audience and patrons (many of whom are also professionally affiliated with UCSD) have been familiar, since the 1960s, with academic considerations of contemporary art music. As such, the context of this commission set several frames—in terms of institutional resources, audience, and aesthetic expectations. This context sits comfortably within the analytical category that Benjamin Piekut (2019, 388) terms “elite avant-gardism”: where “elite” is used “not as a judgement of value or skill but rather as a registration of the real social and economic differences in the production and reception of the music.” In attending to our position within this category, *a loose affiliation* constitutes a response to these conditions of its creation, if not a solution to our own compromised positions within these networks.

What also aligns our work with “elite avant-gardism” is a concern with re-assessing what authority the historical musical materials of the European bourgeoisie have to steer cultural futurity. This brings our work into dialogue (if not always consonance) with European Modernism’s prevailing attitudes around the role of cultural critique in art. Adorno—another German émigré (like Krenek)—articulated in his *Philosophy of New Music* (2006 [1949]) an aesthetic position which remains hugely influential for the network of post-War composers staffing American university departments. On the question of how European art music responds to Fascism, Adorno argues that Arnold Schoenberg’s audible negation of tonal grammar (first through his Expressionist works) represents perhaps the only authentic expression of a society that has reached the point of genocidal violence. For Adorno, serialism truthfully reflects the endgame of Western art music and society, whose faith in Enlightenment rationalism has overreached into hyper-determinism and unfreedom.

Stravinsky, on the other hand, Adorno labels as regressive—his representations of barbarism in the *Rite of Spring*, and his mechanistic pastiches of earlier European music in *Petrushka*, represent an inauthentic retreat into an imagined past. Adorno disparages Stravinsky’s Neo-Classical work as “music about music,” which nullifies music’s capacity to represent psychology and intentionality (2006, 150). Adorno reads Stravinsky’s Neo-Classicism, his incorporation of elements of jazz, and his mechanistic meters and tempi as pastiche, collapsing historical intention and meaning. This reading is premised on a teleological vision of European art music—one which motivates some of Adorno’s most infamous and racist remarks about jazz as “primitive” (171).

We disagree with Adorno's fundamentally negative, impossibly narrow, and chauvinistic prescriptions for authentic musical expressions. Nonetheless, we see value in his long view of the historical tendencies of musical materials. Maintaining this critical attention to the determining presence of history is necessary for parsing one's own musical identity and inheritances. Especially for musicians affiliated with a language of institutional power, these inheritances include what Tamara Levitz (2020) calls "epistemologies of coloniality": ways of knowing that resurface in the reflexive elements of our practice, reinscribing colonizing patterns of thought. One such pattern surfaces in what Georgina Born (1995, 62) characterizes as Modernism's and Postmodernism's "tendency of negation," which claims cultural authority for its own labors by condemning other music for being too commercial, too loose, too anachronistic, too simple, too sexy. These negating proclamations of the European Avant-Garde continue to operate as a means for excluding and dominating non-white musics in institutional spaces—a pattern that Levitz and Piekut (2020) address in their recent essay expanding the concept of Avant-Gardism, and which George Lewis (2007) repeatedly critiques throughout his history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music.

We suggest that directly linking our present creativity to historical materials and contexts is one way to break from Modern and Postmodern tendencies of ideological negation. By staying with the histories comprising and compromising our own creative utterances, we put ourselves in a better position to avoid imposing our inherited cultural limitations upon possible musical futures. The observation of these historical parameters in *a loose affiliation* shifts the means and ends of our creative practice, away from the unconscious reproduction of historical attitudes, and towards a conscientious reckoning with the cultural values undergirding our social, corporeal, and epistemological foundations.

## Conclusion

We have sought to explain the ways in which the stewardship of creative practice necessitates a critical re-appraisal of the histories shaping our practices of composition, improvisation, and performance. We understand creative practice as part of a single, continuous gesture with musicological analysis and hermeneutics. By creative practice, we mean something more than the instrumentalization of creative labor for the performance of mastery over tradition. This gesture, as we see it, plugs oneself into the so-called objectivity of

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music history without troubling the filiations which reify traditional narratives. By contrast, we see creativity as the agency to exploratively shape how those histories determine one's own musical voice.

The excavating potential of creative practice provides a means of reckoning with the affordances and limitations of historical and present pedagogies. The teaching of composition, improvisation and performance—practices that are immediately experienced at a corporeal level—viscerally convey the stakes of expressive autonomy, and of cultural inheritance. That is, even before critical reappraisals of culture are discursively articulated, they can be felt in the disciplining of the body, in the hierarchical structures of classical institutions, or in the relationship with one's own instrument and sound, however fraught that might be.

These modes of corporeal and epistemological entrainment often create a cognitive dissonance between cultural critique and creative (re)production. We have sought to surface such dissonances in our own practices, as well as in the ideological negations of musical Modernisms and Postmodernisms bounded by “elite avant-gardism” (Piekut, 388). We suggest that our analysis of *a loose affiliation* might also be adapted as a pedagogical approach which stays with this unresolved dissonance between critique and creation—a dissonance which is registered both through historical research and the sensorial re-attunement of musical bodies.

Namely, we suggest that something of the philosophy and politics of citation might be transferred into the pedagogy of creative practice — especially where that practice is supported and presented by the auspices of an institution of the “elite avant-garde,” such as a university. Our compositional process and post-hoc reflection for *a loose affiliation* is one example of a citational approach — though other approaches might not necessarily adapt historical musical sources (as in *a loose affiliation*) and might necessitate methods other than the text-centric terms of a scholarly bibliography. Rather, a creative citational practice would articulate what frames of knowledge and reference have informed one's own creative decisions, and what historical materials enable their efficacy.

In our experience, such an acknowledgement of the thick historical presences underpinning our creative work and decisions has not brought with it the sense of being a mere cog in the machine — nor the resignation that “there's nothing new in Hollywood,” that our creative utterances are doomed to recapitulate the conditioning we have inherited. On the contrary, we have found it to be a motivating force: for it is precisely by positioning ourselves within a

culture that we assert our role as an agent in it, and thus assert our capacity to resist, transform, or shift that culture.

### *Acknowledgments*

With grateful thanks to those who have supported this project at various stages: Prof. Amy Cimini, Prof. Anthony Burr, Prof. Steven Schick, Callum Blackmore.

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