

Never Mind

For the final piece that I would compose during my time at university, I wanted to undertake a significant project that would allow me to return to many of the concepts from across my three years of study that I felt I had not fully developed and address them in the service of a single idea. The genesis of the piece was a research summary I read earlier in the year in which I learned of the bitterly humorous fact that self-help books have been linked to increased rates of the very depression and anxiousness that many of the books aim to address.²⁸ I had been working on my undergraduate dissertation on the topic of neoliberalism and its effect on the cultural value of high art for some time, and the research into relativism and its prevalence in twenty-first century capitalist culture that I had conducted as part of this made me curious to investigate the often contradictory advice available within the vast body of self-help literature, as well as in its online equivalents, further. I discovered that the self-help genre together with the internet make it possible for writers and thinkers of any background to make unqualified, unverifiable and unchallenged claims on some of the most important issues that individuals may face, and felt that the nonchalant attitude often exhibited toward these potential contradictions either from within their own work or that other of writers made an interesting topic for this project. I was keen to return to the format of a piece I composed for spoken word and percussion as part of my second-year technical portfolio, and felt this to be an excellent opportunity to do so.

²⁸ Université de Montréal, *Self-Help Books: Stressed Readers or Stressful Reading?*, 17th November 2015. Available at: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/11/151117112749.htm> (Accessed 6th May 2017).

The next concept that I felt a need to return to was one that had featured in my work since I joined the university but that I had been unable to develop to a sufficient degree. During my first year of study, I became interested in a form of musical movement where repeated phrases are linked by 'joints' that serve as both a point within an origin bar and the downbeat of a subsequent bar. My first-year composition *Ripcord* contained a number of instances of this, and in second year sought to explore it further in *Nausea* (Example 1). Although I found analogous examples of this 'phrase-splicing' technique in the work of American composers from the 1960s—most notably in Philip Glass *Music in Twelve Parts* (1974)—I was unable to gain an adequate grasp over the technique, and understood that I would not be able to make it the major subject of a piece until I did so. Whilst ruminating on the matter over the course of the summer, I determined that the technique would be most effective if governed by an extra-musical force that would warrant abrupt musical changes, and developed the idea of pairing it with a spoken text. This would be the perfect opportunity to explore the technique systematically. Finally, as a first-study pianist, I found that I had composed little for my own instrument as I went into my final year, and decided that the final instrumentation of the present piece would be percussion, voice and piano.

Feedback I received for my second-year work suggested a reliance on working-method during my compositional process that had a tendency to hinder the progression of my finished product. This piece presented an opportunity to step outside of my regular compositional procedure as I had done with *Variations*. Edgard Varèse, in a lecture to music students at Princeton University in 1959, spoke of the harmful assumption prevalent among composers that form should be thought of as a

Example 1: Examples of 'phrase splicing' in my previous work.

Ripcord (2015)

10 **A**

The score for *Ripcord* (2015) is presented in two systems. The first system begins at measure 10, marked with a box 'A'. It features a piano accompaniment with a red box highlighting a phrase that is repeated four times (x4) and then spliced into a new context. The score includes a first ending bracket labeled '4.' and various time signature changes (6/8, 10/8, 7/8). The second system continues the piano part, also featuring a red box highlighting a similar phrase splicing. The score includes a first ending bracket labeled '4.' and various time signature changes (6/8, 10/8, 7/8).

Nausea (2016)

90

The score for *Nausea* (2016) is presented in a single system starting at measure 90. It features violin (Vln), viola (Vc), and piano (Pno) parts. A red box highlights a section of the violin and piano parts where a phrase is repeated four times (x4) and then spliced into a new context. The score includes a first ending bracket labeled '4.' and various time signature changes (3/8, 6/8, 3/8).

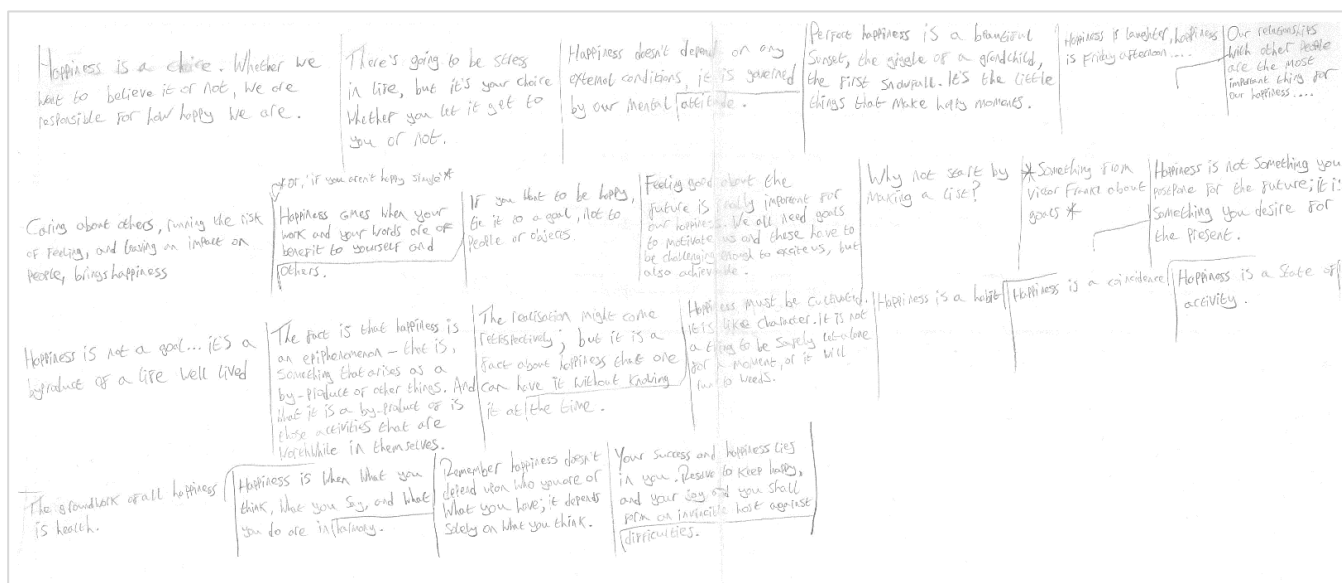
point of departure, rather than something that results of a process.²⁹ His own music, he states, 'discovers its own form', and he makes an analogy with the manner in which crystals are formed, with overall shapes resulting from the interaction of their components on the smallest scale.³⁰ I welcomed this analogy, and resisted the temptation to follow my usual course by pre-determining nothing in the domain of form and structure before proceeding with work on the piece. My sole organisational factor would be the text that I selected, with every note of resulting music existing only due to its ability to serve this text.

My first preparatory task was to compile a substantial catalogue of quotations and excerpts from self-help literature. My aim was to identify as many contradictions within this literature as possible, which would serve as the points at which phrase-splicing would be applied. Almost immediately following this stage of the research, a form began to take shape quite organically: I could see that a large portion of the text I had amassed seemed to be concerned with such abstruse concepts as existence and its purpose, and their conclusions tended to fall into one of three categories—those of 'life-as-happiness', 'life-as-enjoyment', or the pseudo-nihilist denial of purpose. These three categories would be the basis of a piece with three sections, each one seeking to settle on a definitive answer to the purpose-of-existence question that much of my source material concerns itself with, but unable to do so due to the contestable nature of each statement. I mapped the text for each of my three sections using an informal notation method such as the one shown in Example 2, which allowed me to determine where the all-important points of contradiction would fall.

²⁹ Edgard Varèse, 'Rhythm, Form and Content', in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, ed. Elliot Schwartz and Barney Childs (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), p. 203.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Example 2: Hand-written text map for section one.



To generate pitch material for my piano part, I required a system that would allow me to work within a quasi-tonal frame where I felt it necessary but also to jump into unrelated key-areas when at will. For this, I returned to the serial works that I had studied as part of my technical portfolio earlier in the year. In an analysis of Igor Stravinsky's *The Flood* (1962), Ja Young Choi identifies tonal 'allusions' within the piece that arise due to the presence of tonal peculiarities in the prime row that the composer selected as its basis.³¹ The perfect-fifth interval that separates the first and last notes of the row is exploited to appropriate movement through the circle of fifths that is central to the Western tonal system, for example.³² The design of the prime row determines the characteristics of the resulting composition, and for my purposes I constructed a series rich in thirds to allow me to build triads (Example 3).

³¹ Ja Young Choi, 'Stravinsky's Tonal Allusion and the Rotational Arrays in his Serialism: A Study of *The Flood*', *Pacific Science Review*, 13, no. 2 (2011): p. 98.

³² *Ibid.*

Example 3: Prime row and distribution of interval classes (IC).

IC:	4	3	3	3	1	5	3	4	2	1	3	
Row:	A	C#	E	G	B	Bb	F	Ab	C	D	Eb	F#

Totals:	IC1	IC2	IC3	IC4	IC5	IC6
	2	1	5	2	1	0

The row itself is well-suited and is able to function similarly to my phrase-splicing technique, in that it contains triads that ‘overlap’. This feature is the ‘joint’ by which tonal centres pivot with each contradiction that takes place within the text. At bar 8, for example, the first change of theme in the text occurs at which point the second quaver of beat three of the $\frac{3}{4}$ bar which preceded it becomes the new downbeat, whilst at the same time the E which had heretofore served as the dominant of an A major tonal centre becomes the tonic of an E minor section (Example 4). To generate harmony for each tonal centre, I employed Stravinsky’s rotational-array method of generating hexachord matrices, and this provides an additional vertical element for each set of six pitches. (Example 5). Following my work with interrupted process in *Plight*, I was able to capture something of the non-linear direction of my subject matter by departing from the organisation of my tone row at points where the text strays into ambiguity-of-stance. At such points, where the music necessarily increases in intensity, I needed a more rapid means of pivoting phrases, and found a solution in the all-trichord hexachord, a ‘unique pitch-class set from which all twelve types of trichord can be extracted’.³³ James Boros has authored an authoritative analysis of the chord and the means by which it can be transformed, and from this I

³³ James Boros, ‘Some Properties of the All-Trichord Hexachord’, *In Theory Only*, 11, no. 6 (September 1990), p. 19.

Example 4: bb. 6–10, first change of theme in text part is accompanied by rhythmic and tonal pivot.

3/4

mf

End of A major section

Slightly faster (♩ = 80)

warmly
1: Perfect happiness is a beautiful sunset, the giggle of a grandchild, the first snowfall. Its little things that make the happy moments.

over-do it
2: Happiness is laughter, happiness is Friday afternoon.

over-do it
3: Happiness is living for the moment, happiness is doing what you love.

Piano accompaniment (Pno.)

Example 5: b. 6–10, construction of a hexachord matrix and example of application.

3/4

mf

Slightly faster (♩ = 80)

warmly
1: Perfect happiness is a beautiful sunset, the giggle of a grandchild, the first snowfall. Its little things that make the happy moments.

over-do it
2: Happiness is laughter, happiness is Friday afternoon.

over-do it
3: Happiness is living for the moment, happiness is doing what you love.

Piano accompaniment (Pno.)

+IC4 +IC3 +IC3 +IC4 -IC1 (-IC1)

A	C#	E	G	B	Bb
A	C	Eb	G	F#	F
A	C	Eb	Eb	D	F#
A	C#	C	B	Eb	F#
A	G#	G	B	D	F
A	G#	C	Eb	F#	Bb

A C# E G B Bb F Ab C D Eb F#

was able to map a rapid course through a number of chord changes where I required it. This was particularly useful during my second section, where it allowed me to manufacture a relation between the tonality of my series and the diminished chord on D that was chosen arbitrarily during my first section (an explanation of this can be found in Example 6).

Section three begins with an exploration of pseudo-nihilist material that I had gathered, as if in exasperation at the failings in constructing a coherent position during the previous two attempts. I found it fitting to make some changes to my row at this point, and made some rearrangements that would allow me to begin the section with a minor-key transformation of the A-major phrase that had initiated the previous two (Example 7). Returning to the cinematic techniques of David Lynch that I had researched as part of my preparation for *Variations*, I felt that I could use cliché and expectation to make the appearance of the next textural contradiction all the more poignant, and as such section three progresses in a fairly elementary minor-key fashion before resolving with a perfect cadence in b. 132. Following this, a sudden harmonic and textural shift begins a deconstruction of the order and direction of the piano part which culminates in a fully percussive section and the loudest point of the piece.

When it came time to begin my percussion part, I immediately returned to my second-year composition *No, Luke* to identify the things I did not do well during my first attempt. During my first year with the university, I performed Paul Patterson's hybrid score *Rebecca*, which left such a lasting impression on me that I similarly designed *No, Luke* in a way that used the design of the score to convey performance

Example 6: In section two, progress through tone row is interrupted as harmony tracks a course to D diminished chord using the all-trichord hexachord.

A	C#	E	G	B	Bb
A	C	Eb	G	F#	F
A	C	Eb	Eb	D	F#
A	C#	C	B	Eb	F#
A	G#	G	B	D	F
A	G#	C	Eb	F#	Bb

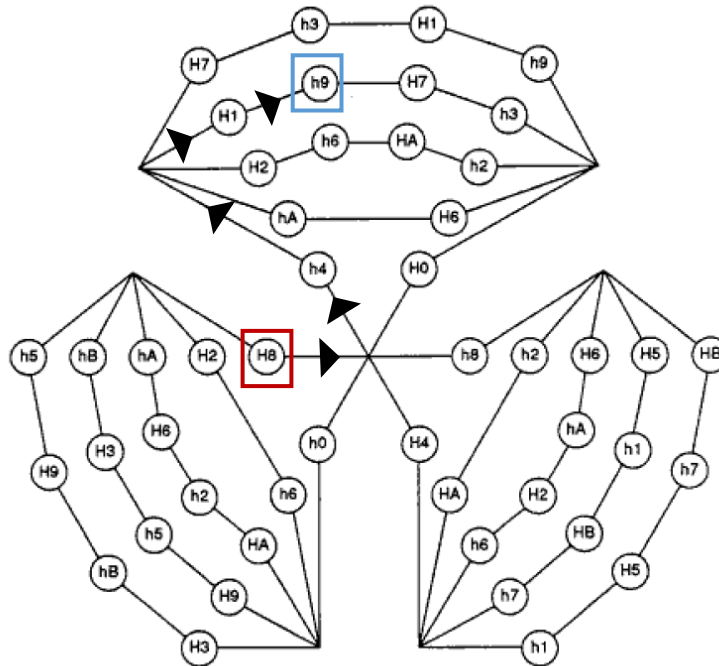
bb. 83–86, beginning of section two is based on same hexachord matrix as beginning of section one.

bb. 87–89, G# is reinterpreted as H8 form of all-trichord hexachord.

Prime Forms		Inverted Forms	
H0	012478	h0	0458AB
H1	123589	h1	01569B
H2	23469A	h2	01267A
H3	3457AB	h3	12378B
H4	04568B	h4	023489
H5	015679	h5	13459A
H6	12678A	h6	2456AB
H7	23789B	h7	03567B
H8	03489A	h8	014678
H9	1459AB	h9	125789
HA	0256AB	hA	23689A
HB	01367B	hB	3479AB

D diminished chord is contained within form h9.

Boros identifies hexahord forms that are differentiated by just one note and maps the connections between them:



bb. 90–96, harmony tracks course to h9 form.

Prime Forms		Inverted Forms	
H0	012478	h0	0458AB
H1	123589	h1	01569B
H2	23469A	h2	01267A
H3	3457AB	h3	12378B
H4	04568B	h4	023489
H5	015679	h5	13459A
H6	12678A	h6	2456AB
H7	23789B	h7	03567B
H8	03489A	h8	01467B
H9	1459AB	h9	125789
HA	0256AB	hA	23689A
HB	01367B	hB	3479AB

Example 7: Series hexachord matrices for sections one and two and new series for section three. Major and minor variants of the opening theme are shown below.

Original row

A	C#	E	G	B	Bb
A	C	Eb	G	F#	F
A	C	Eb	Eb	D	F#
A	C#	C	B	Eb	F#
A	G#	G	B	D	F
A	G#	C	Eb	F#	Bb

Variant

A	C	E	G#	B	Bb
A	C#	F	G#	G	F#
A	C#	E	Eb	D	F
A	C	B	Bb	C#	F
A	G#	G	Bb	D	F#
A	G#	B	Eb	G	Bb

bb. 2–5, section one opening phrase

$\text{♩} = c. 73$

mp placido
8#

poco accel. *2nd time cresc.*

bb. 120–127, opening theme of section three

$\text{♩} = c. 70$

mf *solemn*

information. The main feature was a graph that mapped the 'intensity' level of the percussion section, but my hand-drawn text provided performers with an additional sense of the tone of the piece as well as serving as performance direction for the speaker (Example 8). The feedback I received for the score informed me that having the entire percussion section reading and interpreting a part that concerns just one parameter is likely to result in a homogeneity of texture that I had perhaps not intended, and that it would be necessary to add more detail to allow myself more control over the resulting sound. Workshopping the piece also revealed that performers ran into trouble during rest bars, as I had given bars a time-based duration that was not immediately apparent due to each bar taking up the same amount of physical space on a page.

I felt that the 'intensity level' parameter yielded some interesting results when interpreted by performers, and would be valuable to the declamatory aspect of *Never Mind*. I decided to keep the graph concept, but added an additional line that would allow me to control dynamics and divided the ensemble into high, medium and low range instruments. I abandoned the duration-based instructions that had caused confusion, and, in line with my previous decision to allow content to dictate form, used my text as the primary organising factor. I found that performers of *No, Luke* seemed to enjoy the final act in which the design of the score is subverted to elicit a dense and highly energetic free passage, and, taking inspiration from the many constructivist works of my lecturers and colleagues at the university that I have been able to observe, considered ways in which I could do this in a more creative manner. My solution was to use a photocopier to create a distorted version of my template score and computational methods to add instructions accordingly, and found that the

Example 8: Page two of score for *No, Luke*.

† 'This tea has 1.6 sugars in - you, MUST USE 1.5!!'. 8s

† 'You have written this credit note number in black ink - it must be in RED!!!'. Quicker 5s

Crash!

Alarmed, use high glissandi

† 'And why haven't you filed your files in the file? You must file your files!'. 3s

More frantic

result served my purpose well as well as fitting convincingly with the rest of the score.

I was immensely satisfied with the finished product. I felt that I had managed synthesise a great deal of the ideas and concepts that I had left unfinished throughout my studies, and employed them in the service of a clear-cut ambition that resisted cliché and convention. I found it very liberating to subordinate form to content, and a great deal of the work's best features came as a result of permitting myself a degree of impulsiveness during the compositional process.

Bibliography

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