

William Saul
MSt in Music (Composition)
Oxford University
Compositional Time Capsule: Documenting My
Conceptual, Stylistic, and Technical Practices
Word Count: 3,961

I. Introduction

As I near the final term of my postgraduate studies at Oxford University, this essay serves as a time capsule of my music composition portfolio. Its increasingly eclectic nature reflects an accumulation of influences: experimental and ‘avant-garde’ music, conceptual art, videography, the applied arts, and various internet subcultures.

I have long been influenced by interdisciplinary artists, especially those who create work for the internet. Recent seminars with Professor Jennifer Walshe on post-internet art have consolidated this interest and inspired me to deepen my engagement with digital art. To echo the sentiments of poet Kenneth Goldsmith: “In a time in which people are gallery artists, poets, sound poets, composers—all at the same time—why would you be one thing anymore? There’s no verticals anymore. It’s all horizon.”¹

This essay investigates three modes of compositional thinking—conceptual, stylistic, and technical—each explored in its own section. While these modes often intersect in a finished piece, the initial motivation tends to influence its outcome in distinct ways. The works are also evaluated in relation to other composers and artists, both historical and contemporary. The portfolio spans concert, multimedia, and acousmatic formats, many of which are electronically produced.

II. Conceptual Modes

1. Context and foundations

My sonic and visual works often begin at the level of concept: ‘music with a staircase’—‘plant agents in the audience who follow a score instructing them to disrupt the performance’—‘use AI to generate fraudulent flattering quotes about me for my website’—‘acronym poetry’—‘JavaScript serialist composition generator’—‘stack 433 versions of 4’33” and loop them 433

¹ Kenneth Goldsmith, “Kenneth Goldsmith on the Samuel Andreyev Podcast,” YouTube video, posted by Samuel Andreyev, January 29, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ke9HRpJMSU>, accessed March 30, 2025, at 35:10.

times’—among others. These catalysts may function as complete instructions, technical constraints, narrative frameworks, or primary elements embedded within more traditional parameters.

Working from the ‘big picture’ entails formulating a central idea around which secondary features can be arranged. This is how many viral videos are constructed. For example, in 2017, popular YouTuber *MrBeast* released a video in which he simply counts to 100,000 over the course of 40 hours—effectively functioning as a piece of conceptual or performance art.² Most viral videos foreground the concept to some extent—whether through titles or thumbnails—while developing narratives that extend beyond the initial premise. Much of my work operates this way.

2. Intuitive constructions originating from concepts

Stairs (2023) is a piece whose prevailing concept is immediately legible, while its musical materials emerge intuitively. Using yarn mallets, broomcorn brushes, chopsticks, fabric, a double bass bow, and my hands, I recorded hundreds of samples from my staircase’s metal hand-railing and steps. Categorizing the recordings by texture and timbre, I assembled an ensemble of percussive, sustained, and granular sounds—later processing them with reverb, delay, and pitch shifting.

Naturally, the length and thickness of each rung determined its pitch and timbre. Larger ones were dampened using fabric and struck with mallets to mimic a hide drum, or pounded with palms to produce various percussive sounds. Smaller rungs were tapped with chopsticks and processed with delay to create sharp, echoing transients, while others were bowed to form melodic lines. Using the *détaché* bowing technique combined with excessive delay, I generated ‘animal sounds’—disconnected chattering noises. Mallet handles and brushes were gently dragged across the rungs and steps to generate background textures, and mallet hits were reversed and pitch-shifted to form chords.

² MrBeast, “I Counted to 100,000!,” YouTube video, posted January 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWcldHxHFpo>, accessed March 30, 2025.

Musically, *Stairs* unfolds through layered repetitive patterns. Simple melodies, three-part harmonies, and percussive beats form a recognizable container for its unusual timbres. The piece has a humid, jungle-like quality: wet, brushing textures mirror the swaying of trees during a downpour, while bowed phrases mimic artificial bird song. I attribute this quality to my recent discovery of sound artist Francisco López, whose acousmatic work occupied many hours of my listening during that period. His hundreds of untitled pieces—layered manipulations of natural and urban environments—helped shape my taste for phenomenological approaches to electroacoustic music.³ As López writes, “The essence of sound recording is not that of documenting or representing a much richer and more significant world, but a way to focus on and access the inner world of sounds.”⁴

I’ve received critiques of *Stairs* for its relatively conservative presentation of materials—a point I understand, but would respond to as follows: it’s interesting to take what is foreign and make it familiar. To use the strange in a strange way is expected—to use it conventionally is striking. I’m particularly interested in the listener’s immediate perception—and their surprise at the piece’s accessibility. If the work sounded like La Monte Young’s *Poem for Chairs, Tables, Benches, etc.* (1960), the reaction would disappoint me—not because it would lack amusement, but because it would leave the listener’s sonic conception of a staircase unaltered. This approach isn’t prescriptive, but in this case, the music seeks to persuade—particularly the uninitiated.

3. ‘Pure’ conceptualism and process

When I was younger, I gravitated toward videos that blurred the line between art and ‘content.’⁵ One long-standing influence is the eccentric Taiwanese artist, bodybuilder, and spiritual

³ See *untitled#361*, for example.

⁴ Francisco López, quoted in Jennie Gottschalk, *Experimental Music Since 1970* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 115.

⁵ ‘Content’ colloquially refers to productions made primarily for digital consumption—often optimized for mass social engagement.

guru Frank Yang, whose videos *HOW TO RUN LIKE TOM CRUISE* (2012) and *lifting nightmare with GOYA* (2013) exemplify this genre. In the former, Yang likens Cruise's sprinting to a Platonic ideal, then performs the motion himself before 'exorcising' Cruise's visceral organs onto a racetrack.⁶ In the latter, he inhabits the grotesque figures of Francisco Goya paintings while weightlifting—an idea I later copied in my seminar presentation '13 Ways of Looking at AI,' a literal interpretation of Jennifer Walshe's series of the same name, in which I stared at terminal windows while cycling through distorted facial expressions.⁷ This was accompanied by a serialist piano score generated using JavaScript.

During my undergraduate studies, I began engaging with late 20th- and 21st-century experimental and avant-garde movements from which Yang's work is undoubtedly downstream. I've come to see that my early and later influences form a continuum, rather than belonging to distinct categories. Yang's *Street Love* (2011)—a short film in which he has sex with an emotionless woman in public—is reminiscent of the practices of Marina Abramović or Chris Burden.⁸ His 'workout compilations'—featuring unhinged behavior ranging from exercising in an art gallery to shaving his head on a train—echo Dick Higgins' *Danger Music* series and Leigh Bowery's clubbing antics. Even his sculptures and photographs—saturated with sexualized and distorted imagery—reflect a Surrealist fascination with exposing the unconscious. Paradoxically, Yang's work seemed to prepare me to receive the very influences that had shaped it.

My piece *433 versions of 4'33" simultaneously and looped 433 times [433 Hz]* (2025) emerged as a response to this newfound synthesis of influences—something I felt should manifest as conceptual art made for the internet. I began by obsessively watching interviews with Kenneth

⁶ Frank Yang, "HOW TO RUN LIKE TOM CRUISE - (Frank Yang as the Sprinting Tom Cruise)," YouTube video, posted January 31, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQFzHrridw8>, accessed April 8, 2025.

⁷ Frank Yang, "Frank Yang - Lifting Nightmare With GOYA," YouTube video, posted September 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIDPD8osYhM>, accessed April 8, 2025.

⁸ Frank Yang, "Frank Yang - Street Love (the Infamous Public Sex Video That Woke up Asia)," Vimeo video, posted April 7, 2011, <https://vimeo.com/22069140>, accessed April 12, 2025.

Goldsmith, drawn to the archival and collective processes of *Printing Out the Internet* (2013) and *Soliloquy* (1996). I also visited the Tate Modern to study Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, but found more help in old televisions. The concept revealed itself while scrolling Christian Bök's Twitter, where I discovered Nina Katchadourian's *Sorted Books* project—in which she writes poems by stacking book titles. One piece, *Sorting Shark* (2001), ended with John Cage's *Silence*, which caught my eye, as I had read it the year before.⁹ This somehow led me to imagine a noisy version of *4'33"*, which eventually evolved into layering 433 versions of the piece itself. Bök later reposted my piece, completing the cycle.

I collected covers of *4'33"* on YouTube, using JavaScript to download each video at 640×360 resolution. Surprisingly, I found approximately 550 videos, which I later reduced to 433. The final selection included versions by Frank Zappa, David Tudor, Jim Carrey, Depeche Mode, death metal bands, orchestras, soloists, school ensembles, computers, a LEGO machine, a furry bassist, Zoom meetings, anime characters, silent frames, digital audio workstations, street and underground environments, Minecraft, and more. Due to processing limitations, I divided the clips into nine sub-projects, scaling each video to 43.3% of its original size and intuitively positioning them within the frame. These sub-projects were then combined, resulting in an abstract visual overlay of varying depths and concentrations. I looped this composite 433 times, producing a total duration of 32 hours, 50 minutes, and 9 seconds.

Sonically, the piece is extremely loud at first—due to the accumulation of background noise—but becomes progressively duller and more taxing. It reflects what Cage observed about background noise: “No ivory tower exists... there is no getting away from life.”¹⁰ Furthermore, it foregrounds the reality that ‘silence’ is not an absence, but a relative threshold of noise—one that may register as deaf or deafening.

⁹ Christian Bök, “SORTING SHARK by Nina Katchadourian (who writes poetry by stacking books):” X, March 1, 2025, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://x.com/christianbok/status/1895888760216445307>.

¹⁰ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2009), 135.

I echoed the number 433 throughout my documentation—beginning with the piece’s title page, which is structured in a $4 \times 3^1 \times 3^2$ pattern. I also suggest a listening setup of either stereo or a 4.3.3 sound system—realizable as a square of main speakers intersected by two triangles of overheads and subwoofers. The preface is exactly 433 words long and includes various out-of-context quotes from experimental composers, concluding with a pseudo-poetic line I commissioned from a friend who works in corporate finance. The preface’s 14 pt font is mischievously juxtaposed with a single page of source URLs in 2 pt.

III. Stylistic Influences

1. Consequential personal revelations

I lived in a cabin near British Columbia for a year. I spent much of my time in the woods—I prefer the company of trees to people, and in art, landscapes to portraits. Where the traditional painter might meticulously sculpt the contours of a snowy mountain or place each needle onto an evergreen, I’m drawn to scattering white across a bed of grey, or carving lines through fanned green. My stylistic instincts originate from the impressionists and the music of Erik Satie, which my mother played when I was a child.

The mind creates fantasy—not symbols on a page or vibrations in the air. I came to understand the phrase ‘music is the silence between the notes’ while studying videography.¹¹ A film shot at 24 frames per second gives the mind just enough information to believe the story is real—but not enough to realize it’s fake. It’s a kind of visual Dunning-Kruger effect.¹² The mind fills in the gaps—that’s the beautiful deception. 48fps, by contrast, is simply actors role-playing. Just so, I’m drawn to music that is elusive—secretive, reserved, interpretable: the silence between notes.

¹¹ This quote is often attributed to Claude Debussy, though it does not appear in his published writings.

¹² The Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive phenomenon in which individuals overestimate their understanding due to a lack of self-awareness.

Since I was very young, I've dreamt of the perfect uniform—an outfit I could wear every day. I haven't found it yet, but the desire remains. Even then, I sensed—on a primitive level—that I need routine: a container for my internal wildness. I believe in the freedom of rules and the flexibility of form. I seek clarity and simplicity—though I don't always achieve them—and so it is with my music. I don't mind repetition—the same thing is never quite the same. “Repetition is a form of change.”¹³

2. *Sparsity*

I discovered the Wandelweiser Group some years ago through the music of Michael Pisaro-Liu. The group's emphasis on sparsity, and its lineage from Cage—and therefore, Satie—closely aligned with my own intuitions. I approach the word sparsity in an aspirational sense: a general attraction to and gradual adoption of less—rather than as a descriptor of my current work. I'm like a recovering hoarder—it will take time to let go, though I've done so intellectually.

I particularly admire the work of Jürg Frey, whose arrangements embed “extremely delicate moments between solid sound objects,” creating a structure of contrasting experiences.¹⁴ What interests me is how, despite its regular juxtapositions, Frey's music remains cohesive and light. I think this is due to its glacial pacing, which invites the listener to be both present and quietly longing.

Many composers writing sparse music utilize consonant harmonies like triads, but do so in a non-functional capacity. Rather than following traditional tonal functions—tonic, subdominant, dominant—pitch organization is localized. Laurence Crane is exemplary of this approach, using familiar chords and arpeggios with beautifully unique voicing, timbral, and spacing decisions—

¹³ Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt, *Oblique Strategies: Over One Hundred Worthwhile Dilemmas*, [n.p.], [n.d.].

¹⁴ Gottschalk, *Experimental Music Since 1970*, 109.

without relying on conventional resolutions.¹⁵ My sparser scores often use basic harmonies in a similar way, though I'm also interested in exploring other methods of pitch construction.

9/24 (2024) is a piece I wrote for the Castalian Quartet last summer. I wanted to experiment with the combination of drones and twelve-tone rows—ideas that are somewhat incongruous: one grounds the music in a single pitch, while the other avoids emphasizing any pitch above another. The first half begins extremely sparsely: a drone emerges from nothingness, followed by six sustained violin and viola harmonics, unfolding over the course of a minute. After a brief pause, an unaccompanied twelve-tone cello melody appears. The initial idea then returns with six more sustained string harmonics, completing the twelve-tone row introduced earlier. This is followed by another solo cello melody—this time, a retrograde inversion of the previous row.

The second half is dominated by a sequence of transposed twelve-tone cello melodies, unfolding beneath a drone and various microtonal lines. As the melody develops, the arrangement becomes more active, with repetitive motifs filling gaps in the texture. The piece eventually crescendos into a loud conclusion—the cello naturally resolving to the drone pitch. Perceptually, the piece creates a sense of rising from the abyss into something—but what that something is, I've been unable to locate. I've considered composing a second movement—as the current version could easily serve as a prelude—but I feel it's inappropriate to proceed without a clearer image.

3. Texture and non-Western influences

Jürg Frey and Michael Pisaro-Liu have also influenced my use of percussion in *RITUAL MUSIC* (2025)—an upcoming four-movement composition exploring texture and spirituality. By texture, I mean the balance of sustained, granular, and transient elements, around which melody, harmony, and rhythm function secondarily and in support. The piece features a Native American hide drum, voices, and traditional Western instruments.

¹⁵ See *Seven Short Pieces*, for example.

This is a narrative piece, tracing the arc of an imaginary pagan ritual. It draws broadly on the esoteric themes and mysticism found in A24 and Stanley Kubrick films, Hermetic texts, and Greek and Scandinavian mythology. The work opens with a simple alternation between hide drum beats and vertical cluster harmonies—played softly and with tight voice leading. Later, the drum is scraped with tree branches, a gesture borrowed from Frey’s vocabulary. The third movement builds to a crescendo of chanting before suddenly dropping the listener into ocean recordings. In the final movement, the listener ‘swims ashore.’ Here, I use consonant harmonies and shift pebbles around the base of a drum to create soothing textures—a technique borrowed from Pisaro-Liu.

The Observer (2023) is a composition and video that explores the sonic textures of my voice, wind chimes, tree branches, a smoker drip pan, and my neighbor’s chainsaw.¹⁶ I composed the piece in response to a series of intense spiritual experiences I had while meditating through trauma after a shocking event. Unlike *Stairs*, which also employs found objects, the elements in this piece were chosen for specific aesthetic purposes—rather than an arbitrary conceptual premise.

I processed my voice to create low-pitched drones using time-stretching and reverb, inspired by the Tibetan dungchen and Mongolian throat singing. I’ve long been fascinated by Tibetan Buddhist music, particularly that of monastic ensembles and Chöd rituals—this is music that insists on awakening. The dungchen produces a deep, guttural tone that physically rattles the listener into presence. Similarly, I used my voice in a penetrating, eerie capacity.

The wind chimes function similarly to the bells that accompany Gyütö monk singing—offsetting dark, sustained tones with bright transients. To create an unsettling granular texture, I recorded myself stepping on and sifting tree branches by hand. I wanted to evoke an evolutionarily significant perceptual relationship: humans and the sound of snapping branches. This is reminiscent

¹⁶ A smoker drip pan is a tray that catches grease in a barbecue smoker.

of Anna Kristina Golubkova's *Come as You Are* (2020), an installation in which visitors navigate a dark room filled with branches.¹⁷

The drip pan was suspended and waved to produce wind-like textures, akin to a thunder sheet. The chainsaw's ignition appears only once, subtly reinforcing a crescendo. The piece's elements convey a balance of earthliness—vocals and branches—and transcendence—chimes and the drip pan.

I filmed the video in forests near Franklin, Tennessee, during early autumn, using a 28–70mm zoom lens and a gimbal. It begins with upward-facing shots of trees. As a drone builds in the music, I fade from a resting trail view into a fast run—the camera low to the ground, like a quadruped. I synchronized the trail's curve with another turning shot—this time facing skyward—to maintain continuity.

Later, I move between close-ups of stone hedges, boulders, and tree bark—visually echoing the sonic granularity of the tree-branch sounds. The following sequences explore direction and momentum: I spun the gimbal in a supine orientation, creating spiraling images of treetops, each clip darkening in succession. As the video transitions into night, I added subtle wave distortion to bend the trees unnaturally—suggesting dizziness. It ends with still shots of the night sky, concluding with a mirrored image resembling the silhouette of an owl: two moons for eyes, tree branches for a body.

IV. Technical Considerations

Occasionally, I'm driven to explore specific techniques or formal ideas in my work. These impulses often emerge from observing something emotionally or philosophically compelling and wanting to test it myself.

¹⁷ Anna Kristina Golubkova, "Come as You Are, Interactive Sound Installation at BARIN HAN, Istanbul," YouTube video, posted March 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYwDS1rVAgc>, accessed April 10, 2025.

I was recently introduced to James Ingram—Karlheinz Stockhausen’s copyist—through my relationship with Samuel Andreyev. Ingram is a fascinating figure: closely involved in late 20th-century notational explorations, he now reflects critically on their outcomes, both retrospectively and in his own compositions. He is also a programmer, developing tools for web-based audio and notation while investigating how traditional Western notation might be more compatible with computers. His piece *Study 2b3* (2011), for example, uses a system of absolute time organization, categorizing note values by ranges of milliseconds rather than relying on time signatures.¹⁸ I’ve always felt that mensural rhythmic notation is logically convoluted. The separation of meters, time signatures, and relative subdivisions creates redundancy, and visual and sonic durations are often misaligned. Many of my pieces are notated using seconds—a method that suits my sparser work but doesn’t easily scale to dense styles—and performers often find it jarring.

Many of my notational experiments have been informative but humbling. One such piece, *really about the same* (2024)—for cello and live electronics—was an attempt to increase the variability of an open score by programming my computer to determine the sequence of musical fragments. These traditionally notated fragments, called ‘modules,’ were displayed on a laptop screen and flipped by the performer using a foot pedal. The performer had to respond to each new module as it appeared—similar to a flashcard. Additionally, pre-recorded sounds were triggered at random intervals, prompting the performer to pause upon their interruption.

At the time, I was inspired by Cage’s ideas about indeterminacy, but eventually adopted an approach influenced by Pierre Boulez’s writing, thinking in terms of “mobile elements” moving within a “fixed structure.”¹⁹ To maintain rhythmic and timbral balance, I instructed the computer to alternate between two contrasting categories of modules—one homogeneous, the other heterogeneous. The interrupting sounds functioned poorly in conjunction with the latter category,

¹⁸ James Ingram, “About Study 2b,” last modified May 2011, <https://james-ingram-act-two.de/compositions/study2/study2b/aboutStudy2b.html>, accessed April 23, 2025.

¹⁹ Pierre Boulez, “Alea,” *Perspectives of New Music* 3, no. 1 (1964): 49.

prompting an additional rule that forced them to trigger only alongside the homogeneous modules. In the end, the material, implementation, and perceptual outcome remained virtually unchanged between versions. The piece works—but I could have achieved the same formal effect without such technical over-engineering.

I've received suggestions to revise the piece—exaggerating intervals within and between modules—a sentiment I resonate with, but find incompatible with the rigidity of this framework. Increasing the variance of the modules themselves leads to destabilization: longer modules often occur successively, as do shorter ones, which undermines contrast and momentum. As listeners, we encounter musical events sequentially. The composer will often favor one ordering over another, which raises the question: why not specify that version to begin with? In the end, I concluded that I can still achieve mosaic-like forms within a fixed score—and ultimately prefer this approach in my own work.

Indeterminacy remains an interest of mine, though less so in the context of polyvalent or modular structuring, as seen in scores like Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI* (1956) or Terry Riley's *In C* (1964). My future experiments may draw on more contemporary notational approaches—for example, the loose time-space system used in Scott McLaughlin's *a metastable harmony* (2012).²⁰ I'm particularly curious about the relationship between notational ambiguity and affective outcomes—especially whether it yields distinct results absent changes in performance practice.

V. Conclusion

This essay has outlined my conceptual, stylistic, and technical focuses—revealing a fluid rather than fixed artistic identity. I've pursued a range of directions and intend to continue doing so. I prefer departures to arrivals and acquaintances to followers. I'll have opinions when I'm old.

²⁰ Scott McLaughlin, *A Metastable Harmony* (Lutins, September 2012), <https://lutins.co.uk/scores/aMetastableHarmony.pdf>, accessed May 2, 2025.

I cannot predict where my practice will lead, except that it tends toward the unfamiliar. As in music, I dislike ornamentation in text—so I'll end simply. Years from now, I may look back on this time capsule as the beginning of an eclectic practice, a transitional phase that narrowed in focus, or something else entirely. My only wish is that the work continues to evolve.

Bibliography

Bök, Christian. "SORTING SHARK by Nina Katchadourian (who writes poetry by stacking books)." X, March 1, 2025. <https://x.com/christianbok/status/1895888760216445307>.

Boulez, Pierre. "Alea." *Perspectives of New Music* 3, no. 1 (1964): 42–53.

Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2009. Reprint of 1968 edition, originally published 1961.

Eno, Brian, and Peter Schmidt. *Oblique Strategies: Over One Hundred Worthwhile Dilemmas*. [n.p.]: [n.d.].

Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Kenneth Goldsmith on the Samuel Andreyev Podcast." YouTube video. Posted by Samuel Andreyev, January 29, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ke9HRpJMSU>.

Golubkova, Anna Kristina. "Come as You Are, Interactive Sound Installation at BARIN HAN, Istanbul." YouTube video. Posted March 9, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYwDS1rVAgc>.

Gottschalk, Jennie. *Experimental Music Since 1970*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

Ingram, James. "About Study 2b." Last modified May 2011. <https://james-ingram-act-two.de/compositions/study2/study2b/aboutStudy2b.html>.

McLaughlin, Scott. *A Metastable Harmony*. Lutins, September 2012. <https://lutins.co.uk/scores/aMetastableHarmony.pdf>.

MrBeast. "I Counted to 100,000!" YouTube video. Posted January 9, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWcldHxHFpo>.

Yang, Frank. "Frank Yang - Street Love (the Infamous Public Sex Video That Woke up Asia)." Vimeo video. Posted April 7, 2011. <https://vimeo.com/22069140>.

———. "HOW TO RUN LIKE TOM CRUISE - (Frank Yang as the Sprinting Tom Cruise)." YouTube video. Posted January 31, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQFzHrridw8>.

———. "Frank Yang - Lifting Nightmare With GOYA." YouTube video. Posted September 10, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIDPD8osYhM>.