The Influence of Pop Music in the Works of Three Contemporary American Composers:
Steven Mackey, Julia Wolfe and Nico Muhly

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Publication Date
2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Los Angeles

The Influence of Pop Music
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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctoral of Philosophy
in Music

by

Hyunjong Lee

2014
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Influence of Pop Music in the Works of Three Contemporary American Composers: Steven Mackey, Julia Wolfe and Nico Muhly

by

Hyunjong Lee
Doctor of Philosophy in Music
University of California, Los Angeles, 2014
Professor Ian Krouse, Chair

There are two volumes in this dissertation: the first is a monograph, and the second a musical composition, both of which are described below.

Volume I

These days, labels such as classical, rock and pop mean less and less since young musicians frequently blur boundaries between genres. These young musicians have built an alternative musical universe. I construct five different categories to explore this universe. They are 1) circuits of alternate concert venues, 2) cross-genre collaborations, 3) alternative modes of musical groups, 4) new compositional trends in classical chamber music, and 5) new ensembles and record labels.
In this dissertation, I aim to explore these five categories, connecting them to recent cultural trends in New York. In addition to considering social, cultural, and institutional aspects, I also analyze two contemporary classical works, Steven Mackey’s “Physical Property” and Julia Wolfe’s “Believing,” which exemplify alternative classical composers’ attempts at exploring and crossing the divide between contemporary classical music and vernacular music styles, like rock and popular music. Through this set of examinations, I aim to show what it is like to be a classical composer in today’s society, where popular culture has enormous prestige.

Volume II

The title for the composition is The Arctic. It is inspired by the images of North Polar with its vast, giant and beautiful nature. It is for large orchestra: 3 flutes (2\textsuperscript{nd} doubling Piccolo), 3 oboes (3\textsuperscript{rd} doubling English Horn), 2 Clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, 3 percussionists, harp, piano, celesta and strings in about 15 minutes in duration. The first part is an exploration of a spinning melody of strings and often splashes of color from other instruments. The second part is more serenely scored, culminating in a kind of cosmic dance for the entire orchestra. The third part takes serious effort to build up momentum – as if desperately seeking final destination. The musical ideas reflect on the beauty of tonality.
The dissertation of Hyunjong Lee is approved.

______________________________
Michael Dean

______________________________
David S. Lefkowitz

______________________________
Robert Fink

______________________________
Ian Krouse, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2014
This work is gratefully dedicated to my wife, Kyeong-Eun Min, for her constant belief and endless support in me.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) I was privileged to work with many precious people. I first came to Los Angeles to study with Professor Paul Chihara. The ways in which Paul triggers and challenges my imagination, as a musician and a composer have been essential to the path I have taken. My first year seminar on post-tonal analysis with Professor David Lefkowitz has been a firm source of support, and has been instrumental in my development as a thinker. Thanks to Professor Roger Bourland to offer crucial lessons.

To Professor Nina Eidsheim on her seminar on multi-sensory aspects of music, I am grateful for her generous and endless support; for close readings and intense conversations; and for delightful adventures in Joshua Tree National Park and rooftop swimming pool in downtown Los Angeles.

Special thanks must go to Professor Ian Krouse for working with me for six years, and for reminding me to keep writing music even when I felt overwhelmed with research and writing. I have grown enormously as a musician under his expert guidance.

Thanks to Professor Cheryl Keyes for her definitive seminar in African-American Music. I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Robert Fink for his invaluable help in completing my dissertation. Thank you to all the teachers who have taken time to talk with me.
Thank you to my father Kyu Sik and mother Yeon Hwa, brother Hyo Jong, sister Misun, and my lovely sons Philip and Jacob, who are always thinking of me and whom always keep with us.

And finally, thanks to my loving wife, Kyeong Eun, for her endless support and constant belief in me.
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INTRODUCTION

John Adams, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer, is one of America’s most admired and performed composers and the author of *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life*. During a lecture delivered on May 14, 2009 at Central Library in Los Angeles, John Adams talked about popular culture. One of the most memorable lines during this lecture was the following: “The great bifurcation in music is between pop and classical.” He then went onto discuss the challenge of creating classical music in today’s society—one dominated by pop culture and what he termed “lingering anti-intellectualism.”

As a young composer, I found myself agreeing with him completely. I, too, have felt that composing classical music was a challenge under present cultural trends and that there was a silent battle between classical music culture and popular culture. This felt tension made me interested in the question of how classical composers may transform today’s soundscapes in ways that are intellectually curious but at the same time also socially relevant and personally meaningful. The research that was sparked by this curiosity has made me familiar with the works of creative young musicians in New York. This dissertation discusses some of the key ingredients of their successful, innovative projects.

These days, labels such as classical, rock, and pop mean less and less since young musicians frequently blur boundaries between genres. These young musicians have built an alternative musical world. This world is constituted of 1) circuits of alternate concert venues, for example, cabaret-like bars such as Le Poisson Rouge, Joe’s Pub, and Galapagos in New York

City, as well as various public spaces, like the Winter Garden at the World Financial Center in the same city, and 2) collaborations across various genres of music, for example, the Calder Quartet’s collaboration with “party rocker” Andrew W. K. and the Kronos Quartet’s work with Dave Mathews Band and Nine Inch Nails. This alternative musical world also involves 3) composer-collective groups like Bang On A Can and 4) new ensembles like yMusic and Now Ensemble. Composers noted in these groups include Missy Mazzoli, Caleb Burhans, Bryce Dessner, and Du Yun. Young musicians plugged into this network have developed 5) new record labels, including Cantaloupe, New Amsterdam, and Bedroom Community. Familiar names in these circles include Sarah Kirkland Snider, Nico Muhly, Missy Mazzoli, and Owen Pallett.

What is common to all of the aforementioned musicians is that they use pop, rock, jazz, folk, and other vernacular stylistic elements as fundamental palettes in their works.

This dissertation seeks to explore the alternative musical world described above, approaching it through a number of mutually reinforcing entry points: venues, modes of collaboration, collectives and ensembles, record labels, and compositions. This dissertation concerns itself principally with the network of musicians and places based in New York given this city’s centrality in spearheading innovative artistic projects. Chapter 1 investigates the topics of alternate concert venues and collaborations across genres. After some general discussions of the “decline” of traditional venues and the emergence of alternative venues, this chapter explores the latter through published reviews of concerts and performances as well as web informational/promotional materials on venues and musicians. These venues include Le Poisson Rouge and Joe’s Club, which are popular alternative spaces that host some of the most outstanding young musicians in a casual, experimental atmosphere. This chapter also looks into
concerts that take advantage of the fluid, informal nature of public spaces, for example, “flash mob” concerts by the Asphalt orchestra and Bang on a Can marathon concerts. Following this, I consider how today’s young musicians communicate with the audiences in a society where popular music has tremendous power. In Chapter 2, I introduce a composer-collective festival, Bang on a Can, and discuss Julia Wolfe’s piece “Believing” from the album Renegade Heaven, performed by the Bang on a Can All-Stars. The emphasis is on this piece’s attempts at crossing genre and stylistic conventions. In Chapter 3, I examine the Kronos Quartet as a model for new ensembles like yMusic and Now Ensemble. In particular, I focus on the Kronos Quartet’s programming choices and venue selections. I also analyze “Physical Property” by Steven Mackey, a figure associated with the network of performers in such groups (e.g., Missy Mazzoli, Caleb Burhans, Bryce Dessner, and Du Yun), and show how this piece explores the divide between experimental classical and rock music. Chapter 4 addresses how composers-curated record labels like New Amsterdam Records and Bedroom Community have developed new methods of music composition, performance, and recording. I then focus on composer Nico Muhly’s recent projects and his musical style.
In her 2013 dissertation, Sarah May Robinson makes a distinction between “alternative” and “traditional” concert venues for classical music in the U.S. in the 21st century. In defining “alternative” venues, she identifies large concert halls as “traditional” venues and locates these venues’ beginnings in mid-19th century Europe. A number of factors, according to Robinson, coalesced to enable the rise of the public concert hall in this milieu—for example, the burgeoning middle class, the growing size of the instruments, and the audiences’ increasing fascination with the staged performers’ virtuosity. Nevertheless, Robinson, drawing on the work of Richard Taruskin, argues that the most influential factor behind the rise of the concert halls was the “canonization of the great classical composers in both symphonic and chamber music.”

What happens to classical musical venues when the canon of classical composers no longer holds authority?

The topic of the decline of the classical canon and, by extension, the decline of conventional venues and cultures of classical music has caught the attention of numerous music commentators, ranging from controversial satirist Norman Lebrecht and critically acclaimed

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writer Alex Ross to musicologist Robert Fink.\(^5\) In “Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon,” a critical exploration of the “post-classical” age, Robert Fink explains that the ascendancy of classical music depended on “a performing canon of masterworks, centered in 19\(^{th}\) century Romanticism,” as well as a conceptualization of “‘great’ music hedged around powerful social mystifications like genius, transcendence and autonomy.”\(^6\) According to Fink, these ideological foundations, which had powered the heyday of classical music, have undergone a serious crisis at least in the last three decades, and this shift has brought about certain changes in the ways in which a number of classically trained musicians have managed their work and career.\(^7\) Alex Ross offers a comparable argument. Using evocative details, he writes: “Magazines that once put Bernstein and Britten on their covers now have time only for Bono and Beyoncé. The most conspicuous music lover in modern Hollywood film is the fey serial killer Hannibal Lecter, moving his bloody fingers in time to the Goldberg Variations.”\(^8\) However, instead of ending on a pessimistic note, Ross notes: “seen from a more sympathetic angle, the picture is quite different. Classical music is reaching far larger audiences than it has at any time in history.”\(^9\)

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\(^6\) Fink, “Elvis Everywhere,” 141.


\(^8\) Ross, *The Rest is*, 560.

\(^9\) Ross, *The Rest is*, 561.
Alternative venues such as bars, clubs, and public spaces have risen as important pathways for outreach and exposure for groups of classical music performers and/or classically trained performers in the post-classical era. To be sure, these alternative circuits alone do not account for Ross’s optimistic statistics: in his reading, the sizable “revival” that classical music has recently enjoyed has been taking place not in the traditional West (Europe and the U.S.) but in South America and East Asia. Nevertheless, non-standard venues have emerged as meaningful, creative outlets for well-trained performers and composers in the U.S., many of whom feel that traditional venues do not grant them satisfactory public exposure, financial reward, or a sense of social relevance upon completing their formal training. And, importantly, the search for alternative venues is not just about the money, as Robinson, Fink, and Ross suggest. It is also a matter of generational shift in perception and taste with respect to style and genre, which translates into the artists’ desire to transform the soundscape, scope, and meaning of classical music. No artist represents this shift better than Julia Wolfe, an iconic post-minimalist composer. As she puts it, she is “classically trained,” but her work “is influenced by all the music that [she] love[s]: funk, hip-hop, Appalachian folk music, Led Zeppelin, Beethoven… It’s the outcome of living with a lot of different music.”

Non-standard venues have facilitated and have been facilitated by projects of boundary-crossing artists like Julia Wolfe. This intersection of venues and alternative visions has been particularly relevant to a growing number of classically trained musicians in New York, a cosmopolitan city that boasts a history of unconventional venues. Recall, for example, the use of

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10 Ross, *The Rest is*, 561.

private lofts by artists such as John Cage, Yoko Ono, and La Monte Young in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as Steve Reich’s and Philip Glass’s presentations at galleries and museums from the late 1960s through the early 1980s.\(^\text{12}\)

For an illustration of what an alternative venue might sound, look, and feel like in the 21\(^{st}\) century, consider Le Poisson Rouge in Greenwich Village in New York. On a chilly Sunday night in January 2012, this cabaret-like venue was packed with friends, fans and music lovers. Andrew W. K., a “party rocker” and lifestyle guru, shared the stage with the Calder Quartet, a string quartet based in Los Angeles and one that is fluent in Mozart as well as Terry Riley and Thomas Ades. Equipped with a dance floor, multi-colored lighting, and a corner stage, Le Poisson Rouge could not be farther from Carnegie Hall and the Lincoln Center, the traditional centers of classical music in New York. Reflecting this unlikely venue, there was nothing conventional about the Calder Quartet’s concert on this night. The program was an assortment: Riley and Cage, Bach, and Andrew W. K.\(^\text{13}\) The concert began with Cadenza On The Night Plain by minimalist composer Terry Riley and took some odd turns; the quartet’s cellist played a Bach cello suite, with Andrew W. K. awkwardly dancing to it, mimicking the melodic contours of the suite;\(^\text{14}\) an array of genre-defying improvisations punctuated the concert, with Andrew W. K. at the keyboard; and finally, Andrew W. K. performed several songs from the albums Party Hard

\(^\text{12}\) See Robinson, “Chamber Music,” 17-23. Also see Michael Nyman, Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond, 2\(^{nd}\) ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 31-49.

\(^\text{13}\) http://lepoissonrouge.com/events/view/2863

\(^\text{14}\) An example of this act performed on an earlier date can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEfQp3Ugg-w
and *I Get Wet*, with the quartet providing back-up arrangements.\textsuperscript{15} The concert ended with John Cage’s *4’33”*.

Evidently, this concert at Le Poisson Rouge embodies the breakdown of boundaries between popular and classical music. Resonating with the crossover nature of the venue, the programming choice of the Calder Quartet bespeaks a desire to break away from the association of classical music with formality and cultural elitism—or, in the words of Kyle Gann, “the tuxedos and the distant proscenium stage”\textsuperscript{16}—through collaboration. Most revealing in this regard is Andrew W. K.’s deliberately bizarre yet entertaining dance to Bach cello suite: this may be read as a playful, ironic commentary on classical music itself, or, at the least an implicit message that the quartet is perfectly fine with a good laugh at the seeming rigidity of classical music. The audience laughs audibly at Andrew W. K.’s irreverent act, and this rather casual relationship between the audience and the performer is facilitated by the informal, intimate nature of the venue, Le Poisson Rouge.

Intimate, cross-over venues like Le Poisson Rouge also reinforce the classical musicians’ choice in the realm of collaboration. It is notable that the Calder Quartet chose a practitioner of rock—the quintessential popular music genre—as a collaborator, rather than musicians who have a more legitimate claim to highbrow credibility. In “The Rest Is Noise,” Alex Ross explains that critics have noted that more contemporary performers and groups, some of whom are labeled as

\textsuperscript{15} http://lepoissonrouge.com/events/view/2863

“postminimalist,” welcome the chance to draw from “low-brow” genres, such as funk, punk, heavy metal, electronic and DJ music, and hip-hop. Using Kyle Gann’s concept “postminimalism,” Ross states that postminimalists are different from the minimalists because the former is far less interested than the latter in maintaining a “prophet-in-the-wilderness, who-cares-if-you-listen mentality that prevailed after the Second World War” and less afraid to operate within the tonal idiom. Similarly, Robert Fink outlines remarkable affinities between rock aesthetics and postminimalism as practiced by Steven Martlent, Elliot Sharp, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Michael Gordon: “Highly amplified ensembles feature horns, guitars, and percussion; the musical language emphasizes aggressive, explicit backbeats, virtuosic rhythmic play, and a deliberately restricted harmonic and melodic palette; the composers dress, talk, and sometimes preen like rock.” Fink adds that such rock-informed music is satisfying not just in terms of aesthetics but also in terms of what they represent ideologically; many postminimalists harbor “a particular reading of popular music as anarchic critique of society.” Alternative venues like bars, then, are excellent media through which these groups can perform and signal

17 Ross, The Rest Is, 568.
18 Ross, The Rest Is, 568.
19 Citing Kyle Gann, Ross describes [postminimalism] as “a tonal, steady-pulsing kind of music that avoids defining itself through a controlling process, such as Reich’s phrase shifting or Glass’s additive rhythm. Instead, repetition becomes a background grid on which a large variety of material can be plotted: everything from the Southern American shape-note singing in William Duckworth’s Southern Harmony to the microtonal electric-guitar soundscapes of Glenn Branca.” Ross, The Rest Is, 568. Also see Robert Fink, “Post-minimalism(s) 1975-2000: the Search for a New Mainstream,” in The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music, ed. Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 539-556.
20 Fink, “Elvis Everywhere,” 145.
their association with and admiration for popular music and affiliate with younger, hip audiences comfortable with their cross-over, experimental identities.

Joe’s Pub in New York is another bar that embodies certain key dynamics of alternative venues. Joe's Pub is a nightclub with cabaret-style seating and food and drink service inside the Public Theatre on Lafayette Street. Opened in 1998, Joe's Pub has since become one of New York's most popular venues for performing artists and played a significant role in The Public Theater's mission of “supporting young artists while providing established artists with an intimate space to perform and develop new work.”22 The roster of performers is not confined to experimental, crossover, and postminimalist classical musicians but is impressively diverse: world music (Bebel Gilberto, Soledad Barrio & Noche Flamenca), jazz-classical crossover (Luciana Souza), American and international jazz (Alice Coltrane, Akiko Yano Trio), indie pop (Capital Cities), classical (Emerson String Quartet), etc.23 Thus rather than simply being a space for innovation, Joe’s Pub is a space that crosses the boundaries of genre and style through its larger programming.

Because of this programming fluidity, venues like Joe’s Pub have facilitated classical music groups to showcase different performance narratives and alternative repertoires. An excellent example in this regard is Kronos Quartet’s concert at Joe’s Pub in May, 2002. This particular concert comprised of pieces from Kronos Quartet’s 2002 album “Nuevo,” which is devoted to different music of Mexico. The hip, young audience at the Joe’s Pub—Kronos Quartet’s ideal audience—listened to “an idiosyncratic anthology of Mexican compositions:

classical, rural, television themes, romantic ballads, warped easy listening, alternative rock.\textsuperscript{24}

Thus, this concert was in essence a version of world music, a repertory that has set the Kronos Quartet apart from the majority of string quartets in the U.S. The venue also made it more natural for the Quartet to experiment with electro-acoustic, multimedia components. For example, their performances were accompanied by pre-recorded tracks by Carlos Garcia, an entirely obscure street musician blowing on the end of an ivy leaf, and Café Tacuba, a popular indie rock group in Mexico. Besides the novelty of the programming, Jon Pareles’s review of this concert for the New York Times suggests some of the advantages of having such a concert in an intimate cabaret-like venue. Pareles reports ample signs of “near-kitschy emotion” and “the knowing humor” among the audiences and highlights the quartet members’ brief, informal verbal descriptions of unfamiliar pieces. Such an audience-performer relationship was most likely enhanced by the casual, intimate environment of Joe’s Pub.

Besides cabaret-like venues such as Le Poisson Rouge, Joe’s Pub, the Issues Project Room, and the Galapagos Art Space, young musicians can be found presenting events in a wide variety of public spaces. The use of public spaces as a venue for music concerts is not without precedents, as Sarah Robinson documents in her dissertation. For example, John Adams said about his experiences in 1970s San Francisco: “with my friends I made avant-garde music in every imaginable location throughout the city; in underground culverts, in an arboretum in Golden Gate Park…in dank storefronts and bookstore lofts.\textsuperscript{25} Also consider the New Music

America festival from 1979 to 1992, which started at New York’s Kitchen and subsequently was hosted in different city each year.\textsuperscript{26}

In the last twenty years, Bang on a Can’s annual marathon concerts have become perhaps the most legendary in the domain of public space concerts: it is mounted for twelve hours in the Winter Garden at World Financial Center with its inimitable mix of music around the world. According to a music critic, this free event in 2012 entertained an estimated 10,000 people, some of whom were casual spectators, and others, more serious followers.\textsuperscript{27} With events like this providing an inspiring, stimulating model, young musicians including college students currently majoring in music are becoming much more aggressive and creative about the use of public spaces at both small and large levels.\textsuperscript{28} Sarah Robinson notes that venues selected by local, relatively unknown groups include outdoor spaces like parks, plazas, campground, forests, and golf courses.\textsuperscript{29}

Another notable project in the realm of public space concert is the Asphalt Orchestra, an ensemble created by Bang on a Can. Rather than composing a sedate body of music performers, the 10 members of the Asphalt Orchestra march between and in public places, catching the audiences by surprise. According to Vivien Schweitzer, who reviewed one of Asphalt Orchestra’s “flash mob” concerts for the New York Times in 2010, the Orchestra played various

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Robinson, “Chamber Music,” 34-35.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Steven Smith, “Hour by Hour, Celebrating an Eclectic Festival,” \textit{The New York Times}, June 18, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Robinson, “Chamber Music,” 67-68.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Robinson, “Chamber Music,” 67-68.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
toe-tapping pieces after entering Alice Tully Hall from 65th Street.\textsuperscript{30} Each piece was shaped with quirky choreography and funky arrangement. A youtube video of the Asphalt Orchestra’s 2012 concert documents this concert’s participatory aspect: the crowd that gathers and surrounds the performers cannot hide their enthusiasm and excitement, tapping their feet to the music, dancing to the rhythms, and photographing and recording the performances with their smart phones—essentially, enjoying a surprising highlight of urban life in New York.\textsuperscript{31} The quirkiness of the acts also seems to amuse them: they have aspects of street jazz festival, performance art, or circus act, depending on the individual act.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, young classically trained musicians have become more innovative in reaching out to alternative audiences in a postclassical age by situating themselves in non-standard venues. Venues such as cabaret-like clubs facilitate musicians to take on creative crossover projects for audiences who are probably more enthusiastic about popular music than about classical music. In such venues, the musicians demonstrate their willingness to open up to previously “lowbrow” cultures as well as to court the audiences with a soundscape marked by the legacy of classical music. Public spaces afford the musicians with the opportunity to actually reach out to the everyday people. These musicians insert themselves to the fabric of urban life, gaining a sense of relevance that big and small concert halls may not give them anymore. As such, these venues enable the young musicians to imbue their artistic practices with more joy, dynamism, and meaning.


\textsuperscript{31} http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8jtNnSl6Ww
CHAPTER 2. BANG ON A CAN

Bang on a Can was founded in 1987 by three composers in Yale School of Music: Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe. For 27 years, it has had a history that defies easy definition and categorization. Bang on a Can is known mostly for its annual marathons: in 1987, it mounted a one-day, 12-hour marathon concert, which has ever since become one of the most talked-about, well-attended cultural events in New York. It has also run season-long music festivals in various cities, which have served as avenues of artistic exchange and innovation. And in 2001, it even founded a record label. So what is Bang on a Can, exactly? As the music critic Frank J. Oteri asked Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe during an interview in 1999: “What exactly is Bang on a Can? Is it a presenter, an ensemble, a style of music, or a way of life?”\textsuperscript{32} Not surprisingly, the members’ responses were neither simple nor brief. Here I cite one of the representative stories about how the trio came together as a force: “We had the simplicity, energy and drive of pop music in our ears—we’d heard it from the cradle. But we also had the idea from our classical music training that composing was exalted.”\textsuperscript{33}

Bang on a Can is passionate about making new music as well as making music in new contexts. This passion has translated into an unwillingness to abide by the confines of a genre or style. As Joyson Greene, the editor of \textit{Wondering Sound}, describes, “[Bang on a Can] were after something that wasn’t quite minimalism, but drew on its pulse; that wasn’t rock, but that showed evidence that rock existed; that wasn’t classical but sprang from its traditions.”\textsuperscript{34} To this mixture,

\textsuperscript{32} Frank J. Oteri, \textit{NewMusicBox}, May 1, 1999.

\textsuperscript{33} Ross, \textit{The Rest Is}, 568.

one can also add some version of world music, as the group has collaborated with and/or invited musicians working outside the U.S. As Julia Wolfe, a co-founder of Bang on a Can and a composer based in New York, put it herself, Bang on a Can represents a kind of “declaration…about the lack of stylistic approaches.”\(^{35}\) In addition to putting these ideas about music into action, Bang on a Can has been building a bold society of music, internationally. Through various programs, it has commissioned new young composers, recorded new works, and educated the musicians of the future. At the concert of Bang on a Can All-Stars, one will hear energetic new musical ideas arise freely across genres and borders.

Julia Wolfe has written pieces drawing inspiration from funk, hip-hop, Appalachian folk, and rock music. Wolfe’s “Believing” from the album Renegade Heaven, performed by the Bang on a Can All-Stars, is a good illustration. “Believing” was originally commissioned by the NPS Dutch Radio and first performed by Bang on a Can All-Stars during a Bang on a Can marathon at the Lincoln Center on May 18\(^{th}\), 1997. In the liner notes to the album Renegade Heaven, Wolfe wrote the following about her compositional thinking behind “Believing”:

The title for “Believing” came to me after the music had been written. During the time I was working on the piece I had been listening to a song by John Lennon called “Tomorrow Never Knows.” It’s a fantastic song, very psychedelic, written at a time when the Beatles were exploring spiritual questions. You can hear it in the music and in the words. There’s a line, “It is believing,” that comes back again and again. “Believing” is such a powerful word, full of optimism and struggle. It’s hard to believe and it’s liberating to believe.\(^{36}\)

Wolfe’s “Believing” is a work for clarinet, electric guitar, percussion (hi-hat, two

\(^{35}\) Frank J. Oteri, *NewMusicBox*, May 1, 1999.
\(^{36}\) From the liner notes to *Renegade Heaven*, 2001.
tambourines, bongos, and marimba), electric keyboard, cello, and bass. All instruments are amplified. Perhaps the most striking juxtaposition is between the strings and the electric guitar, which gives “Believing” a rock-oriented sound. The piece is a fast-tempo, groove-driven rock tune with something of a contemporary classical flavor.

Ex. 1.1 Julia Wolfe’s “Believing,” first statement of the groove, mm. 1-4

The first word that comes to mind with “Believing” is “unstoppable.” It has a driving force, which pushes the audiences through the work. The piece begins with a fast breathless pulse, which is exhausted by the end. It sounds as if the piece is driven by rapid 16th notes, which build the rhythms and the movement of the work. The piece starts with unaccompanied cello performing the music shown in Example 1.1. A remarkable aspect of this passage is that it is marked by irregular duration patterns. If I split these durations in terms of sixteenth notes, we would get the following pattern:

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112  1111  112  112  1111  1111  211  
211  1111  1111  112  121  1111  112  1111
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These continually changing patterns provide rotating feelings of pause and anticipation. It makes the listeners focus on listening for the next change in the pattern. When the change is delayed, the listeners are faced with high tension of anticipation. The passage also provides a clear tonal center, which is projected both by the repeated lower note G and by the statement of a G minor chord in the beginning of m. 3. Essentially, what we have here is a groove: a large-scale pattern that relates to both rhythmic and pitch materials. The sixteenth note is repeated mainly on the downbeat, leading in each case to a tonic chord on the eighth-note upbeat. The tambourine and the hi-hat lay out the ground for the various durations of the solo cello part, boosting the sense of driving force in the music. There are two interacting rhythmic layers in Example 1.2, each playing a different function. A clear layer in the cello provides the fundamental element of the groove. A more ambiguous layer in percussion serves as a frame for the groove.

In the third statement of the groove in m.13, a bass part is added. The bass part emphasizes the syncopations in percussion, while also giving a hint of the rock guitar through the effect of a series of dips on natural harmonies, which is mainly used in rock music. This certainly elicits a rock flavor. This brings us back to Julia’s compositional thinking behind “Believing.”
In the program notes to *Renegade Heaven*, Wolfe said “During the time I was working on the piece [“Believing”] I had been listening to a song by John Lennon called “Tomorrow Never
On an emotional level, “Believing” invokes the excitement that many people in and outside the U.S. must have experienced upon discovering The Beatles (or, rock)—not only “Tomorrow Never Knows” but also the Beatles in general and all the things that this now-canonic group has represented over the years. In my own case, the sense of euphoric, forward-moving energy in “Believing” triggered my long-forgotten excitement for “Tomorrow Never Knows,” in addition to the Beatles’s other songs such as “Hey Jude.” “Believing” actually motivated me to plug in my headphones and listen to “Tomorrow Never Knows.”

What is common to “Believing” and “Tomorrow Never Knows” is that they are boundary-pushing projects: both are bold, conceptual, and experimental. If the direction is from

37 From the liner notes to Renegade Heaven, 2001.
“classical” to “rock/popular” in “Believing,” “Tomorrow Never Knows” starts from “rock/popular” and crosses into the “classical” domain. The final track of the Beatles’ 1966 studio album Revolver, “Tomorrow Never Knows” is built on the concept of cycle, unlike other rock tunes of the time. The one-bar drum pattern with a bumping syncopation provides the basis of the cycle and the cyclical time, just as the first statement of groove in Believing does the same for the piece. The now-legendary drone “in C” in “Tomorrow Never Knows,” which mutes the sense of chord change, also mirrors the constant use of G in “Believing.” These looped effects in “Tomorrow Never Knows,” aided by exotic Indian sounds and experimental recording effects, strive to pull the listeners out of the normal subjective state and into a strange new one (hence the piece’s categorization as psychedelic rock).

In “Believing,” the cyclical, looping aspect is furthered through the addition of layers. “Believing” begins with just the tambourine/hi-hat and the cello. Then the double bass is added. The electric guitar and the keyboard (synthesizers set up to sound like electric organ) are added later. Wolfe’s style tends to spin out over big blocks of time. It is only in mm. 112-113, at about 5’20 of this 9-minutes work, that there is a breaking point: here, the atmosphere suddenly becomes mystical and dark. Due to the gradual layering up to this point, the contrasting section is very effective. The 16th-note pulse is now suspended and replaced by 16th-note triplets in cello. The cellist then doubles the upper pitches with her voice, conveying hints of Middle Eastern muezzin calls and thus making the piece more emotional and enigmatic. After this more improvisatory material, the work finally recalls the opening textures and is headed towards the end.

As I have discussed in this chapter, Bang on a Can exemplifies an experimental,
innovative “classical music” group that envisions crossing the boundaries of genre, venue, and style. “Believing,” a representative work by Julia Wolfe, a co-founder of Bang on a Can, acts upon this vision, providing a model for young musicians. It crafts and expresses a forward-moving energy by drawing on certain elements of rock and minimalism and interweaves itself beautifully with another boundary-crossing project undertaken in the 1960s. In these ways, “Believing” liberates itself from the confines of the conventions of genre and style.
CHAPTER 3. NEW TRENDS IN TODAY’S CLASSICAL CHAMBER MUSIC:

KRONOS QUARTET

In *Nineteenth-Century Chamber Music*, Stephen Hefling attributes the ascendancy of chamber music to the seriousness of the early Romantics (in particular, Beethoven), as well as the proliferation of private venues.\(^{38}\) Hefling identifies Beethoven’s understanding of the importance of his own chamber music, especially the string quartets of Op. 18, as an impetus for nineteenth-century chamber music.\(^{39}\) For instance, informed by Beethoven’s authoritative take on chamber music, the influential music critic Gustav Schilling wrote a decade after Beethoven’s death: “[chamber music] was not intended for a large public, but actually only for connoisseurs and amateurs…It was more finely worked out, more difficult, and more artistic.”\(^ {40}\) Music historian John Baron also characterizes chamber music as quintessential “pure” music: that is, music that “stands on its own, as a musically logical happening, without the need of other considerations to give it its *raison d’etre*.“\(^ {41}\) This characterization is particularly applicable to string quartets. As Baron notes, “by the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century, chamber music meant serious string quartet music first and foremost.”\(^ {42}\)

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38 See Stephen E. Hefling, preface to *Nineteenth-Century Chamber Music* (New York: Routledge, 2003), vii-xii. Hefling argues, “chamber music, in the sense that we think of it today, is a concept that crystallized gradually during the course of the nineteenth century.” (vii)


According to Baron, chamber music did not fare well with the moderns despite the high regard placed upon it in the previous century. He notes: “the enormous impact of Liszt and Wagner upon European music life yielded, on the whole, unfortunate consequences for chamber music. Chamber music did not rank high in the agenda of the moderns, and accordingly during the second half of the century many of the best talents avoided it.”43 Yet, despite this alleged “decline,” chamber music has been a site of experimentation for a number of noted twentieth-century composers—consider, for example, George Crumb’s “Black Angels” (1970) for electric string quartet, Stockhausen’s “Kontakte” (1959) for piano, percussion, and four-track tape, and Alfred Schnittke’s “Prelude In Memoriam Dmitri Shostakovich” (1975) for live violin and pre-recorded violin.44 Baron himself holds an optimistic outlook on the future of chamber music in the twentieth-first century. Not only do string quartets and other chamber groups continue to popularize established works, but new chamber pieces are also proving to be an excellent medium of experimentation and innovation:

“There will probably be more integration of traditional chamber music with non-Western or ethnic chamber musics such as American jazz and rock, Asian gamelan and gagaku, African percussion ensembles, and so on. This integration, already underway, will no doubt cause turmoil in many traditional chamber music circles and will challenge the accepted conceptions of what constitutes serious art music as opposed to popular music.”45

To Baron’s observation, I would add that another potential for the reinvention and reconceptualization of chamber music may be found in its inherent capacity to enable music

43 Hefling, Nineteenth-Century, x.
44 Baron, Intimate Music, 423-424.
45 Baron, Intimate Music, 424.
making that is at once both serious and intimate. This chapter introduces the Kronos Quartet, a chamber group that has embodied the spirit of reinvention better than any other group since the 1970s, and discusses Steven Mackey’s *Physical Property*, an unorthodox genre-bending piece that the Kronos Quartet performed and recoded in 1993.

**Kronos Quartet: Introduction**

The Kronos Quartet was founded in 1973 by violinist David Harrington. Its beginning owes to Harrington’s encounter with George Crumb’s “Black Angels,” an unorthodox piece for electric strings, crystal glasses, and gongs. “Black Angels,” composed with politically charged (anti-Vietnam War) intentions, pushes the tonal, formal, and timbral limits of the string quartet idiom.46 Reflective of this beginning, the Kronos Quartet has advanced the works of modern and contemporary composers. The biographical-promotional material on the Kronos Quartet’s official website confirms this programming tendency.47 According to this material, the Kronos Quartet has been devoted to the following categories of music: 1) “20th-century masters,” 2) “contemporary composers,” 3) “jazz legends,” 4) “rock artists,” and 5) “artists who truly defy genre.” As impressive as this eclecticism is the quartet’s vigorous schedule. During its 40-year career (as of 2013), the Quartet has premiered approximately 800 works by contemporary composers, released 57 albums, and sold more than 2.5 million records.48


47 http://kronosquartet.org/about

48 Schweitzer, “Kronos Quartet’s.”
The Kronos Quartet’s commitment to unorthodox, idiosyncratic programming has often meant delivering concert experiences that diverge from the conventional. The typical Kronos Quartet concert features amplified sounds, improvisational components, and non-standard string techniques, all of which are implicated by the Quartet’s programming choices. Often, the Quartet’s concerts are also marked by a quality of performance art or theater art. For example, “visual design” aspects may serve to choreograph or punctuate moments within performances. For example, consider a critic’s description of “New Work,” premiered during one of the Kronos Quartet’s concerts in 1987: “Created—semi-improvisatorially, one presumes—by the quartet, they faced the audience all in a row, each player dressed in a variant of stylish black and created a telling panoply of sonic effects from their electronically altered instruments, finally placing cassette players in a circle that continued to play as the live musicians slipped into the darkness.”\(^{49}\) Such non-standard performance aspects mirror David Harrington’s philosophy. As he put it in 1998: “I’ve always wanted the string quartet to be vital, and energetic, and alive, and cool, and not afraid to kick ass, and be absolutely beautiful and ugly if it has to be.”\(^{50}\)

Reviewers of the Kronos Quartet’s concerts have not always been unconditionally enthusiastic, but despite some reservations, they have almost always named it as a group worthwhile to take note and follow. For instance, reviewing a concert in Purchase, New York, in 1987, music critic John Rockwell remarked that the Kronos Quartet’s “theatricality [seems] more silly than stylish” and that “the technology of the instruments and the music imposes certain


compromises that intrude with quaint insistence.” Nevertheless, Rockwell concludes that despite these perceived incongruities, “‘Kronos on Stage’ proved effective and evocative, and well worth further exploration and public exposure.” In a piece that summarizes the Kronos Quartet’s 40-year career, Vivien Schweitzer outlines a comparable reception history: “Critics have also observed throughout the decades that Kronos performance sometimes lack the virtuosity and polish of other ensembles, although technical deficiencies are usually countered by the spirit and energy of their idiosyncratic concerts.” On the whole, musicians themselves have embraced Kronos Quartet much more enthusiastically and wholeheartedly—particularly, young musicians who place value on the Quartet’s entrepreneurial, bold spirit. Most of the noted string quartets formed since the 1990s have benchmarked the Kronos Quartet model—consider, for example, Ethel, the JACK Quartet, and Brooklyn Rider, as well as lesser-known yet forward-looking quartets in and around college campuses. As a member of the Brooklyn Rider states, “The influence of the Kronos Quartet has been felt by virtually any quartet operating today, even those who are not doing stuff on the fringe. They have had a role in generating interest in what a string quartet can do.”

In addition to idiosyncratic programming and concert format, the Kronos Quartet has acted upon two noteworthy commitments in the more recent decades. Firstly, the Quartet has demonstrated a focused interest in world music, in the forms of collaboration, commission, or re-

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51 Rockwell, “Concert.”
52 Rockwell, “Concert.”
53 Schweitzer, “Kronos Quartet’s.”
54 Quoted in Schweitzer, “Kronos Quartet’s.”
arrangement—an interest that has also become something of a trend in contemporary classical music community. The Quartet has promoted this component as its central project in the recent years: for instance, collaboration with Wu Man, a Chinese pipa virtuoso (2009); Homayun Sahki, an Afghan rubâb artist (2008); and Alim Qasimov, a noted artist in the oral tradition of Azerbaijani Ashiqs (2008). The quartet’s most recent CD release, the “Explorer Series,” also communicates this interest. Released around the Quartet’s 40th anniversary, the “Explorer Series” is a “concept” box set of highlighted world music albums that it released previously. This box set includes *Pieces of Africa* (1992), the Quartet’s first record of African music; *Night Prayers* (1994), which includes works by today’s Eastern European composers; *Caravan* (2000), which features music associated with “Pannonia,” a mythological region connecting Europe and Asia; *Nuevo* (2002), based on rearrangement and collaborations involving Mexican genres, from rock to mariachi; and *Floodplain* (2009), which showcases collaboration with folk and classical music from various regions, such as Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, Mexico and even California. Secondly, the Kronos Quartet has become active in mentoring younger musicians. The Quartet members advises and directs the Face the Music Program, the only teen program in the U.S. dedicated to the performance of living composers, at the Kaufman Music Center, in addition to holding open lectures and classes for students in elementary and secondary

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55 The Kronos Quartet has often been praised for “discovering” talented musicians of non-Western traditions and for helping them propel their career through cross-cultural collaborations. For instance, consider Wu Man’s statement about her own experience of being contacted by the Kronos Quartet and eventually joining a number of the Quartet’s recording and performance projects: “I never thought about stepping out from my own box, or that a pipa could be played with a Western string quartet. That’s amazing. They opened my musical world. They have been a huge influence.” Quoted in Schweitzer, “Kronos Quartet’s.” Also see the artist statement by Jin-Hi Kim, a Korean *komungo* artist who collaborated with the Kronos in 1986. Jin-Hi Kim, “Living Tones: On My Cross-cultural Dance-Music Drama ‘Dragon Bond Rite’,”, *the world of music* 45, no. 2 (2003): 127-131.

schools. The Kronos Quartet also runs the *Under 30 Project*, an international project aimed at discovering and advancing talented young composers.

The 40th anniversary concert of the Kronos Quartet, held at the Carnegie Hall on March 28, 2014, may be considered a culmination of the quartet’s signature approach to genre-crossing, non-standard programming. It featured commissioned works by two living composers: Aleksandra Vrebalov, a Serbian composer, and Bryce Dessner, a composer and a member of Brooklyn-based rock group, The National. Other highlights ranged from beautiful arrangements of Swedish folk music, a little-known blues song, and a Syrian folk-rock tune, to pieces by Terry Riley and Laurie Anderson and the New York premiere of Philip Glass's *Orion: China*, featuring pipa virtuoso Wu Man. Young musicians made guest appearances during this concert as well. These include the Brooklyn Youth Choir and the Kronos-mentored Pannonia Quartet.

*Short Stories*

Within the Kronos Quartet’s artistic career, few records were as ground-breaking as *Short Stories*, released in 1992. *Short Stories* features nine short works, ranging from two minutes to about 15. It opens with Elliott Sharp’s “Digital,” which has the Kronos recreate the clicking sounds of a vintage typewriter with the bodies of the violin. The second track “Spoonful” is the Quartet’s ingenious recreation of Willie Dixon’s classic blues song and arguably one of the best pieces in this album. It amplifies and refines the macabre sensibilities inherent in the Dixon’s

version through sliding techniques as well as chromatic and temporal exaggerations. This is followed by a number of postmodern pieces: John Oswald’s *Spectre*, which explores layering methods in electronic music; John Zorn’s *Cat O’ Nine Tails*, a classic postmodern collage that sets gestures from classical music side by side with comical sound effects; and Sofia Gubaidulina’s Quartet No.2, a postmodern political-musical collage that juxtaposes slow cyclical passages with spoken words from soliloquy from “How It Happens.” Common to all of these pieces is a deliberate attempt to break the boundary of genre—or, to put differently, a refreshing assault on the listeners’ sense of stylistic congruity. Perhaps the most emblematic piece in this regard is Steven Mackey’s *Physical Property*, the sixth track in *Short Stories*, written for string quartet and electric guitar. It is at once an attempt to integrate some the aesthetics attributed to classical music and rock music and a project that highlights the contrast. In other words, the piece both blurs the boundary and renders it visible.

**Kronos Quartet, Steven Mackey, and Physical Property**

Even for experimental living composers, rock aesthetics based in electric guitar performance has been among the overlooked sources of inspiration, apparently due to the perceived distance between “serious” music and rock music. Robert M. Poss, a multi-media artist best known for his work in the noise rock band Band of Susans, counters this tendency by articulating the potentiality of electric guitar in his article “Distortion is Truth”: “when properly amplified and/or processed becomes the most varied, versatile and character laden instrument imaginable, with both the ability to sustain tones like a bowed violin or cello and the dynamic

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percussive range of a piano." These varied qualities native to the electric guitar’s sound can allow countless creative possibilities for the composer. *Physical Property*, Steven Mackey’s piece for a string quartet and an electric guitar featured in *Short Stories* (1992), presents a solid model for achieving working connections between the electric guitar and string quartet. Mackey enables the guitarist to shift between clean and distorted tones throughout the piece. The distorted tones, shaped by bended and squeezed sonorities, can create a layer of sonic puzzle when put side by side with a string quartet. “I love the sound of the distorted electric guitar,” Mackey said in his Princeton home. “It encapsulates what I want my music to be like. I want there to be this underlying beauty but you have to earn it. It's a little tough, a little crunchy on the surface.”

Other rock-crossover characteristics also make Steven Mackey’s *Physical Property* a rich subject of analysis. Importantly, *Physical Property* represents Mackey’s practice of incorporating “grooves” or “riffs,” which take cue from the ways in which these appear in electric guitar-driven rock. This “borrowing” achieves a virtuosic melodic-contrapuntal dialogue and a textural balance between the electric guitar and the quartet. There is nothing surprising about this pairing in some sense: the glaring comparability of passagework in rock and classical idioms has indeed received some attention. For instance, drawing on the concept of virtuosity, musicologist Robert Walser comments on how both students of classical music and heavy metal practitioners devote


59 *Physical Property* was commissioned by the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival for the Kronos Quartet. It was completed in 1992.

an inordinate amount of time to serious passagework that includes “scales, arpeggios,…riffs, and transcriptions.” Walser also notes that the ideal of virtuosity cultivated in both classical music and certain rock genres has sometimes provided the interface through which classical music, especially materials that hark back to Baroque materials, has reached into certain genres of rock; and he cites musicians such as Ritchie Blackmore, Van Halen, and Randy Rhoads as examples.

These two disparate worlds—classical music and rock—shape Steven Mackey’s Physical Property, and this cross-genre conception has been facilitated by the composer’s multi-faceted musical background. As the composer himself put it, he represents “the thing that punk was rebelling against: pretty sophisticated musicians devoted to really developing chops”; at the same time, pieces like Physical Property are informed by “[Mackey’s] entry into music as a rock guitar player, namely a physicality of rhythm, directness of expression, boldness of ideas.” Mackey uses the word “joyous freedom” to describe the creative, if unusual, overlap between rock and classical music in his program note accompanying Physical Property, featured in his personal website: “The piece demands that an unlikely combo, the quintessential classical music chamber ensemble and the symbol of adolescent rebellion, work together with consummate discipline in the service of joyous freedom.”

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64 “An Interview with the American Composer Steven Mackey,” by Tom Moore, Revista Brasileira de Musica 25 no. 1 (2012), 222.
energy of Physical Property by invoking the experience of skiing, which he practiced as a professional before turning to composition: “When I ended up at the bottom of the hill unscathed, you realized, ‘Oh wow, that must have been on purpose.’ Physical Property is like that. It races downhill, like “Whoa, can this really happen, can they keep going like this, and is it on purpose? Somehow we manage to survive and even create some beautiful moments along the way.”66

At first listen, Physical Property gives the impression of a blues jam session between a string quartet and an electric guitar. It seemed that Mackey looked for a riff or an essential melodic idea to the draw the listeners’ attention to the piece. This riff motive (notes E♭–F–E♭–E♮) is established in the context of the electric guitar’s passage, beginning from measure 29 (see example 2.1). This repeated riff is emphasized by the aggressive cello pizzicatos, which play an enhanced rhythmic role in this passage, comparable to the role of the drum in blues. However, the cello does not strengthen the metric framework; it rather adds a metric ambiguity that emphasizes the riff motive. It subsequently facilitates a complete metric shift that transforms the metric setting of the “shout” motive in violin I, violin II and viola. At this point, the implication of the ambiguity becomes clear. This textural-metric idea continues with the violins’ syncopated pattern, juxtaposed with the electric guitar’s new riff motive (notes E♭–G– F–C♯) in measure 41 and subsequently with the guitar’s increasingly intense solo. When the original riff figure returns, it is supported by the cello as before, co-producing conflicting syncopation (as in ex. 2.2).

Mackey continues this syntactical development throughout the first five minutes of the piece: the

65 Steven Mackey, program notes for Physical Property. The program notes can be found at http://stevenmackey.com/composer

riff undergoes stylistic recreations, sonic transformations, and rhythmic physicality.

Ex. 2.1 *Physical Property*, guitar, m. 30

Ex. 2.2 *Physical Property*, cello, m. 30

Ex. 2.3 *Physical Property*, opening riff, guitar with string quartets, mm. 28-36
One of the most fundamental aspects of Mackey’s *Physical Property* is repetition—a device central to the formation of riffs in popular music, especially blues and rock and roll. It has a powerful energy, which pushes the audiences through the work and draws their attention to the piece (corresponding to mm. 157-184, 291-295, 451-486 of the model). Indeed, I would identify the repeated riff motive as central to Mackey’s attempt to bend the genre boundary between rock and classical music in *Physical Property*. In this regard, it is interesting to note some similarities between Mackey’s *Physical Property* and the songs of Cream, a 1960s British rock trio, particularly their new arrangement of a famous blues song, *Rollin’ and Tumblin*, which was first recorded by American singer and guitarist Hambone Willie Newbern in 1929. Cream’s new version of *Rollin’ and Tumblin* appeared on their debut studio album in 1966, and an extended live version was released later on *Live Cream* in 1969. It involves a trio of harmonica, guitar and drums. As with *Physical Property*, the most pronounced aspect of Cream’s *Rollin’ and Tumblin* is the repeated motive.

Ex. 2.4 *Rollin’ and Tumblin*, mm. 1-6
Cream’s *Rollin’ and Tumblin* has syncopation patterns characteristic of rock rhythms. The syncopation of the repeated riff in this song is highlighted by the drums, which provide an energetic, playful dialogue vis-à-vis the crunchy riff.

Playful, collaborative relationship between the instruments is also a noted characteristic of *Physical Property*. There are exhilarating moments in this piece in which the string quartet welcomes and embraces the guitar. A good example of this use of the guitar occurs in measure 354, when the string quartet begins to work with the electric guitar to broaden the instrumental sound. The guitar is doubled by the first violin from the measure 354 to measure 366. Mackey demonstrates the distinctive nature of the electric guitar’s sound, ironically by having the strings play the same material (Example 2.5). The result is an uncannily harmonious effect.

Ex. 2.5 *Physical Property*, mm. 354-356
Similarly, Mackey uses the accompanying ensemble to expand the guitar part at measure 100. Here, the string quartet echoes the repeated motives of the guitar. The combination of timbres between the string quartet and the electric guitar in this passage gives another meaning to the concept of “stability.”

Ex. 2.6 Physical Property, mm. 100-102

As I have discussed in this chapter, the Kronos Quartet has provided a new model for contemporary string quartet. Instead of focusing on the established repertory, the Kronos Quartet has supported and showcased unorthodox works by living composers and collaborators working across genres. Such efforts have pushed the boundaries of genres and concert formats, in the course helping the Quartet gain a degree of popularity and attention that conventional chamber groups have not enjoyed since the 1970s. I have also discussed Steven Mackey’s Physical Property as a piece that embodies the Kronos Quartet’s signature style. Physical Property
responds actively to the need for more relevant, more innovative string quartet pieces through the incorporation and application of rock aesthetics, especially those based in the electric guitar’s repetitive riffs and sonic effects. In this way, *Physical Property* achieves what chamber music had done so well in the past: to bring a piece of serious music and unfurl it in a fun, intimate setting.
CHAPTER 4. NEW RECORD LABELS

Reportage of the state of classical music today is often accompanied by a gloom-and-doom, apocalyptic tone, or worse, an outright contempt for the “establishment.” Critics invoke the “graying of the audience” and evince a bitter ambivalence toward the museum culture that has become of orchestras, chamber groups, and opera companies. In his discussion of various music critics’ attitudes toward the notion of “the death of classical music,” Robert Fink highlights Norman Lebrecht’s “exposé” as a particularly acrimonious critique. Fink writes, “Lebrecht has wicked fun pointing out that the entire budget of Sony’s classical music subsidiary is less money than the conglomerate has tied up in a single notoriously unstable pop star like Michael Jackson; when one of the Jacko’s records tanks, dozens of arty projects at what used to be Columbia Masterworks go down with it.” But its scathing tone aside, Lebrecht’s statement is forthright about the state of major classical record labels. As cultural critic Steve Smith stated in less spiteful terms in 2009, “the major classical recording labels, a few notable exceptions aside, seemed determined to continue their march toward irrelevance and oblivion this year.”

The decline of classical music record labels has posed a seemingly insurmountable challenge for many performers and composers trained in classical music. It is practically impossible for them to be “discovered” by major-label executives or producers—a feat that is


already difficult for young musicians, regardless of the musical universe they come from. As music critic for the *New York Magazine* Justin Davidson put it: “The ability to get noticed by having some record executive take an interest in you and record you—you know, that’s really practically a thing of the past.” Yet, a record is an absolute requisite if these artists want to be taken seriously by critics and audiences, even in a digital age. Judd Greenstein, a composer of contemporary music and a co-founder of New Amsterdam Records, summarized this ironic necessity during a 2008 interview:

> In order to get critics to the shows, and in order to get people to know about what’s going on, you need to have the CD, something that says, ‘Hey, we’re really serious about this.’ So much so, we took the time, effort, the money to print a CD, which is kind of this weird, anachronistic and uselessly expensive object… There needs to be this marker of effort.

As Greenstein’s comment suggests, the problem of having a record deal puts the artists on a trial. It is one thing for them to get commissioned by prestigious organizations or for their pieces to be performed by the New York Met (indeed, some young composers have actually reached such measures, as in the case of Nico Muhly, a young Julliard-trained composer who had his first opera performed by the Met in 2011). However, it is quite another thing to have a record label sign them on.

This chapter discusses composer-initiated labels that have emerged in the last ten years to pose creative solutions to the challenges arising from the “decline,” the indifference, and the

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71 Vitale, “A New Label.”

increasing irrelevance of major classical music record labels. It focuses on two exemplary labels, New Amsterdam Records and Bedroom Community. These labels have enabled young composers and performers by giving them a platform outside the “mainstream” of classical music, but they are much more than that as well. They form the basis for promoting the artists as parts of trendsetting collectives—collectives whose identities are based on cross-genre work, collaborative spirit, a sense of kinship with similar artists, and alternative venues. In the words of Steve Smith, labels such New Amsterdam Records and Bedroom Community shape “complex ecology and hierarchy of coolness” and exist in tandem with “a web of composer-performer collaborations [and] circuits of preferred concert spaces.”

New Amsterdam Records

New Amsterdam Records, founded in 2008 in New York, has set a viable model for composer-run labels for young classically trained musicians who are enthusiastic about experimental approaches and new avenues of exposure. The beginning of New Amsterdam Records embodies an entrepreneurial spirit and a cross-over identification—the primary tools with which these young musicians attract new audiences. Three composers associated with Yale University who felt frustrated by the established practices—Judd Greenstein, Sarah Kirkland Snider, and William Brittelle—founded New Amsterdam as an attempt to counter the established mechanisms. In a 2008 interview, Judd Greenstein explained that his motive behind co-founding New Amsterdam Records was to get himself and others like him started in an otherwise disabling environment: “there's really not a place for young ensembles, young composers, young

performers to have that first record. Unlike in the popular music, where being 27, 28 years old, 30 years old—you're old. In this, you're like super-young. You're like an infant.”  

The comments of William Brittelle, another co-founder who studied composition at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and sang in a rock band, The Blondes, suggest the connections between Do-It-Yourself record labels on the one hand and the young classical musicians’ self-identification on the other: “I don’t personally think about it—what I do as coming from a classical tradition. I think of the classical music that I've studied and my training as tools to do whatever I want to do. The ability to digest things and compose for the kind of instruments that I want to compose for, and have strings and horns, and all this stuff. And really write for electric guitar and not just have power chords.”

Founded with such attitudes and goals, New Amsterdam Records has served as a forum for similarly minded composers and performers—musicians “who get out of music school with all of these incredible skills,” but who are also “fully aware that nobody is going to hand them a career.” Indeed, New Amsterdam Records facilitates the process of crafting and selling an altogether different identity of classical musicians in important ways. Firstly, the CD album covers are telling. Instead of the trite images of performers in their recital dresses holding their instruments, New Amsterdam CD covers convey a kind of hipness that would resonate with Pitchfolk or minimalist art. All of them use grotesque, dark, slick, postmodern, or ultra-modern

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74 Vitale, “A New Label.”

75 Vitale, “A New Label.”

76 Vitale, “A New Label.”
images, befitting the “concept album” ethos. The online promotional pictures of performers and composers on the label’s roster are also hip: individual artists look like urban hipsters and the groups could pass for well-groomed indie rock bands. Secondly, the label puts together label-focused festivals, promoting the artists on the roster and increasing their visibility as a “collective.” Consider, for stance, New Amsterdam’s concert series like the ones held regularly at Galapagos Art Space in Brooklyn and Le Poison Rouge in Manhattan. Steve Smith describes these concerts as the label’s “savvy, aggressive approach to showcasing and promoting its artists and fellow travelers.”

Amsterdam Records, through the promotion of its artists as a trendsetting collective, enhances the presence and perception of the artists as a group, as well as defining a circuit of venues for this purpose. Indeed, in Tom Vitale’s piece on Amsterdam Records for NPR’s All Things Considered, what he stresses the most is the formation of in-group affiliation, based on the Amsterdam Records artists’ sense of shared place, attitude, and goals. Vitale opens his piece by describing two cutting-edge groups working in disparate places in Manhattan—the NOW Ensemble in downtown and the chamber duo itsnotyouitsme in uptown—and stating the important fact that they are all friends. Accordingly, they are simply friends who “all jam together,” rather than the more familiar stereotype of glitzy performers in a hyper-competitive yet largely irrelevant musical universe. Vitale attributes this kinship to the ways in which

77 http://newamrecords.com/
78 http://newamrecords.com/artists/
79 Smith, “Welcome Home.”
80 Vitale, “A New Label.”
Amsterdam Records operates (itsnotyouitsme and NOW Ensemble have released two acclaimed albums each on New Amsterdam). The formation of this kind of kinship bears some surprising comparison to the notion of subculture or taste cultures, as defined by Sarah Thorton in her study of club cultures. Just like the clubbers or ravers, these artists “congregate on the basis of their shred taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves. Taking part…builds further affinities.”

Another fascinating model of alternative classical music label is Bedroom Community, which is located near Reykjavík, Iceland. Since its creation in 2006, Bedroom Community has been one of the hippest labels. Founded and managed by Valgeir Sigurdsson, film composer and producer of Icelandic pop artists such as Björk, Bedroom Community has generated international, multi-genre, cross-genre work among the artists on the roster, who come from different musical backgrounds but who are nevertheless very open to the idea of collaboration and express a degree of discomfort with genre labels. Bedroom Community is well-known for Nico Muhly, a Julliard-trained composer, and, according to Pitchfork, “the facto poster boy for a growing movement of young composers divorced from the rock-vs-classical wars of the 1970s” and “a certifiable whiz-kid” who has done “exquisite work on some seminal indie records.”

Like most other music labels, Bedroom Community releases recordings by individual musicians, but perhaps a more important component of this record label involves its role as a

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platform for cross-genre or multi-genre collaboration. In this sense, Bedroom Community operates as a carefully selected pool of musicians-personalities from the classical and the non-classical worlds. Artists on the roster include noise artist Ben Frost, dubstep artist Mary-Anne Hobb, acoustic folk artists Sam Amidon and Puzzle Muteson, Julliard-trained violist Nadia Sirota, and “alt-classical” composers Nico Muhly and Daniel Bjarnason. These artists’ individual albums always contain some measure of collaboration (pre-arranged as well as improvisational) amongst themselves; and this “team-spirit” also crosses over into projects beyond these artist-centered albums. For example, Valgeir Sigurdsson’s film scoring for Andri Magnason’s *Draumalandið (Dreamland)*, a documentary about the devastation of the Iceland countryside by U.S. economic forces, involved collaborative work of Muhly, Bjarnason, Amidon, and Frost. The environment of “artists’ collective” is a deliberate point made by Valgeir Sigurdsson, the founder of the label and a producer experienced in such disparate pop genres as rap, electronic music, and rock. According to a 2012 interview, Sigurdsson sees himself more as “a theater director” than a conventional producer, whose role typically entails financial aspects. In this regard, Ben Frost’s statement about Sigurdsson’s role as a studio master, engineer, and advisor is revealing. Frost attests that Sigurdsson’s role as the final mixer is important for the artists on the roster because “it’s a far more post-production way of working than it used to be.”

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83 [http://bedroomcommunity.net/artists/](http://bedroomcommunity.net/artists/)


85 Tony Mitchell, “A bedroom community.”

86 Tony Mitchell, “A bedroom community.”
Indeed, a number of critics have highlighted the ability of Bedroom Community to promote a spirit of collectivism, a “we’re-all-friends” attitude, and environment of kinship as the label’s most groundbreaking aspect. For instance, writing in a New Yorker blog piece on Nico Muhly, William Robin praises Bedroom Community for applying certain models of collaboration found in popular music world to classical / classically trained musicians and suggests that this uniquely cross-over aspect may serve as an antidote to what he calls “The Beethoven Paradigm” and other “ailments” of the classical music world:

“The Beethoven Paradigm” of production isn’t the only hoary Romantic myth that Muhly has set aside; he’s also forsaken the image of the composer as solitary, antisocial genius. Muhly has a remarkable ability to join forces with other musicians, cede control of his compositional process, and allow other artistic identities to mingle with his own. Such is the credo of Bedroom Community.87

Evidently, for critics like William Robin, so-called “alt-classical” music is not only concerned with the final work or with issues of genre and style but also with the process—in other words, the kinds of work that is necessarily entailed by bona fide cross-genre projects.

Reflecting on the spirit of Bedroom Community, much of Nico Muhly’s works has been marked by playful, intimate collaboration with other Bedroom Community artists. These typically involve certain elements of improvisation, which allows for a degree of spontaneity; and some of them even encode stories of kinship between the artists. Consider “Keep in Touch” (2007), for example. “Keep in Touch” is a multi-section chaconne that has the violist Nadia Sirota perform loosely improvisatory passages and Antony Hegarty, the androgynous, falsetto-

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centered vocalist of the Antony and the Johnsons, mirror the lonely ethos of the viola part. At the same time, “Keep in Touch” is also a homage to Muhly’s personal relationship with Sirota, “a reference to a communication meltdown that [Nico Muhly and Nadia Sirota] experienced in the middle of the process.” The subtitle of the piece makes a more insider reference: “Three Missed Calls for Holy Week.” “The Only Tune,” a track in Muhly’s 2008 album Mothertongue, also encodes a similar sense of kinship between the composer and the collaborator, Sam Amidon. It begins with “an old murder ballad that both Amidon and Muhly’s parents sang to them when they were children” and subjects it to “various techniques that refer back to the nineteen-sixties music of Glass and Steven Reich.” Having built his reputation as a collaborationist, Nico Muhly has indeed worked with a truly impressive roster of artists across genres (it should be noted that such collaborations have not always been reviewed positively): Sufjian Stevens, Bruce Dessner from The National, Antony and the Johnsons, Philip Glass, Björk, Gizzly Bear, Bonnie Prince Billy, and Jónsi from Sigur Rós.

As I have discussed in this chapter, alternative labels constitute a fundamental component of the alternative classical music universe built by young classically trained musicians. These labels, beyond being a site of financial transaction, are central to the making of the artists’

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89 Robin, “Nico Muhly’s.”
90 Robin, “Nico Muhly’s.”
91 Robin, “Nico Muhly’s.”
92 For example, see Michael White, “Do Composers-Collaborations Ever Work? Not in This New Case, with Sufjan Stevens, Nico Muhly and Bryce Dessner,” The Telegraph (blog), April 10, 2012.
identity in today’s cultural context. They underpin the artists’ stylistic identification, affiliation within trendsetting collectives, and choice of venues. These crucial aspects, which may be placed under the categories of “branding” and “entrepreneurship,” are well exemplified by the operation of New Amsterdam Records and Bedroom Community, as I have shown throughout this chapter.

It is too early to tell whether these labels will be financially viable or, for that matter, if financial viability is actually a primary goal for them. Yet, the fact that a number of major establishments such as the New York City Opera, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra are taking certain cues from these labels’ creative practices reflects that they have created a stir.94 At a time when classical music seems to be faced with an impasse, alternative classical music labels enable certain paths that take the classically trained musicians, who have spent thousands of hours perfecting their skills, to an audience.

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CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined major components that make up the alternative classical music world in post-1980s New York—a scene shaped by young, classically trained musicians who are eager to search for new audiences who would connect with their innovative, experimental works. It focused on the creative strategies of the composers and performers in this musical world. While discussion of music and music style was important to this dissertation, it also explored less examined social and cultural aspects such as performance venues, models of collaboration, and entrepreneurial mindset.

Chapter 1 considered new venues of performance such as bars, clubs, and public spaces as crucial landscapes of this music world. It focused on the Calder Quartet’s performance at Le Poisson Rouge, the Kronos Quartet’s performance at Joe’s Pub, and the Asphalt Orchestra’s “flash-mob” street concert. Through these focused analyses, I attempted to convey the possibilities inherent in casual contexts of performance and reception and argued that these venues enable musicians to re-insert themselves into the fabric of everyday urban life.

Chapter 2 discussed representative compositional styles that are popular within this alternative musical world and emphasized the artists’ shared goal of crossing boundaries of genre and style. It examined Bang on a Can as a leading ensemble committed to this goal and analyzed “Believing” by Julia Wolfe, the director of Bang on a Can. In particular, I identified the forward-driving energy of rock and (post-)minimalist layering as this piece’s guiding principles and influences.
Chapter 3 considered contemporary reinvention of chamber music from a number of perspectives: eclectic programming, performance of cross-genre works, concert performance style, and pedagogic commitments. It discussed these perspectives through an examination of the Kronos Quartet’s albums and concerts, as well as Steven Mackey’s *Physical Property*, performed by the Kronos Quartet with an electric guitarist. I explored the ways in which the sonic and textural elements of the rock guitar are integrated into the string quartet format and the intriguing counterpoint created by the interplay of string quartet and rock guitar in this piece.

Chapter 4 considered new record labels as a crucial part of the alternative classical music universe through a focused examination of New Amsterdam Record and Bedroom Community. It demonstrated that new alternative labels, in addition to helping young artists get started with a first record, enhance their identity as constituents of trendsetting collectives and provide a forum for collaboration and network. Through this, I explored an overlooked component of today’s classical music world.

As a young composer, the study of alternative classical music world based in New York has been extremely rewarding and instructive. Like the artists I study here, I, too, believe that classically trained musicians have much to gain from breaking boundaries, especially the boundary between classical music and popular music. But the efforts at bridging must not stop at the level of music styles, as this dissertation has attempted to show. Music stylistic re-inventions must be accompanied by other kinds of bridging: for instance, those that concern human contact and physical space, like performance venues and labels. In this regard, it would be an asset if the teachers in conservatories and university music programs cultivate a proactive, entrepreneurial
attitude in their students. Students would have a better chance at adapting to and shaping today’s cultural contexts if they focus less on perfecting their techniques inside the building and focus more on reaching outward for potentials and possibilities—perhaps, they can initiate small performances in a small café, a museum space, a park, or even just the streets. This sociality and desire for it, it seems to me, may revitalize universes of classical music internationally at a time when classical music risks becoming ever more irrelevant.
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White, Michael. “A Camp Cherub in a Frock: Nico Muhly’s Opera Is This Year’s Hot Ticket,” The Telegraph, May 19, 2011.


Wolfe, Julia. Liner notes from Renegade Heaven, Cantaloupe, 2001. CD.
INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo
2 Flutes (2nd doubling Piccolo)
3 Oboes (3rd doubling English Horn)
2 Clarinets in B♭
Bass Clarinet in B♭
3 Bassoons

4 Horns in F
3 Trumpets in C
2 Trombones
Bass Trombone
Tuba

Timpani
Percussion (3 players)*
Triangle, Snare Drum, Glockenspiel, 4 Field Drums (Tenor Drums), 2 Suspended Cymbals (med., lg.), Small High-Pitched Bell, Hi-hat, Tam-tam, Gongs, Cowbell, Bass Drum

Piano
Celesta
Harp

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
Double Bass

The score is notated in C.

Duration: ca. 15 minutes
The Arctic

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