

# To “LINKS”...

Chaz Underriner

This text is a sequence of answers to Hervé Zénouda’s questionnaire entitled “Sound Arts and Instrumental Music... composers facing digital deterritorializations.”

Transposed Score

## nocturne series: 8

by Chaz Underriner

The score is a transposed score for a chamber ensemble. It includes parts for Field Recording, Piano, Violin, Guitar, Saxophone (Tenor), and Percussion. The score is marked with time points at 0:20, 0:33, 0:42, and 1:00. Dynamic markings include *mp*, *mf*, and *f*. The piano part includes the instruction "very slowly, legato J = 50 bpm". The saxophone part includes the instruction "break with field recording". The percussion part includes the instruction "break with field recording".

Fig. 1 This is the first page of *Nocturne Series: 8* for violin, saxophone, electric guitar, percussion, piano and field recording. This piece was commissioned for Kluster5 by Gaudeamus Muziekweek. See <http://chazunderriner.com/composition/chamber/nocturne-series-8/>.

The first thing to decide about a new work — particularly if it’s a collaboration or a commission — is what the resulting medium should be. Before this is nailed down, a piece could manifest itself as combination of an installation, video work, chamber music performance, audio recording, movement, or whatever. One of the hardest parts of composing for me is trying to figure out what the best medium is for a new work.

I’m personally not particularly interested in musical gesture — I find the physical expressivity of gesture to be quite alluring in different parts of the literature, but most of my work

involves a state of contemplation or stillness. Any gestures that do result from my composing tend to arise secondarily from whatever exploration of place I’m working on. One of the ‘mediums’ that I’m persistently interested in is field recording, especially with exploring what it has to do with location or the idea of ‘place,’ and the representation of reality in sound (*mimesis*). My creative work and my scholarly writing address these questions.<sup>1</sup>

What I’ve landed on in my relationship to technology is an iterative process of composing in multiple programs and media for any

given piece. This is different depending on the piece itself, but it usually consists of handwritten prose sketches, drawings about structure, playing ideas on whatever instruments I have on hand, making recordings of those musical ideas (or images), handwritten sketches that transcribe my recordings and alter them, a ‘demo’ version of the piece in Pro Tools, Logic and/or Adobe Premiere Pro, and a final handwritten draft.

I then take the piece into the score copying stage, which consists of finalizing the layout of each score page in photoshop, handwriting in pencil and pen on the printed systems, scanning each page, editing in photoshop, and assembling the final score. If the piece strongly involves a visual element, then that part is usually locked at the beginning of the copy work stage (and serves as a reference during copying).

I consider a composition to be for any combination of media/instruments/live performers/electronics depending on commission or context. I’m a multimedia/intermedia/multimodal artist, not ‘just a composer.’ I like to freely consider each possible medium for a

given piece rather than compose using notes and rhythms, then add in other stuff. This comes from a challenge from my former teacher Panayiotis Kokoras—your film work should be just as thought-out and refined as your sound work. One strategy for attempting to reach this is composing them together—working as an inter-media composer rather than simply a composer that also does other stuff.

I’ve worked to try to be just as comfortable in making video art as composing for instruments or composing with electronics, etc. The result of this is that I’ve done quite a bit of work in the last 5 years or so to try to ‘catch up’ my visual work to the level of my compositional training.

To me, this also means that whatever medium I’m working in, each element always has to function in the work, rather than act as decoration. Any image has to be just as important and crafted as music and sound, just as key to the essence of the work at hand. If taking out a medium or layer in the work is better than having it in, then it’s not good enough to stay in the piece.

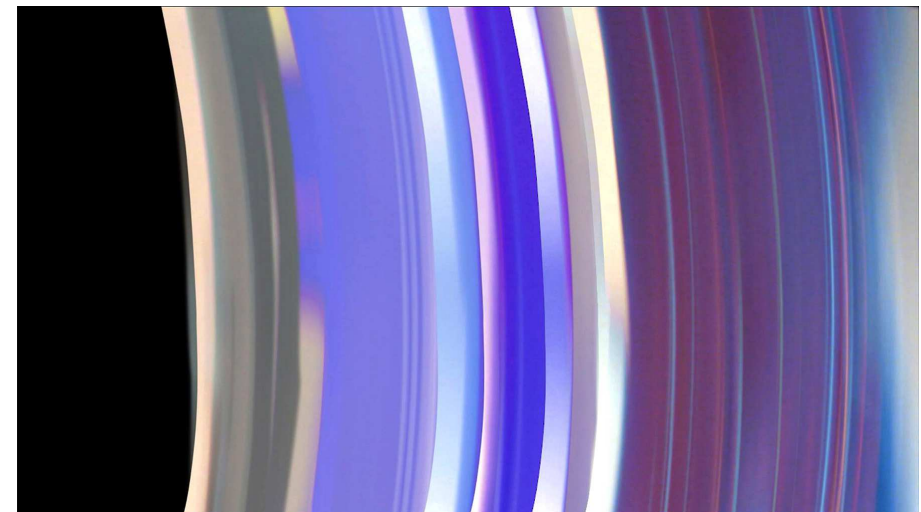


Fig. 2. Screenshot from the video component of *Moving (1)*. See <http://chazunderriner.com/composition/chamber/moving-1/>.

Fig. 3. This is page 16 of *Moving (1)* for flute, saxophone, violin, piano, video, and field recording. This piece was commissioned by the Wet Ink Ensemble and was premiered at Stetson University in April 2019. (Remarquons que dans cette même partition on voit cohabiter dans la même partition, notes, audio et vidéo, avec des indications de temps et pas simplement de mesures, ndr).

"I write what I want to hear," as Syd Hodkinson, my colleague at Stetson University, has shared in one of our lunch-time conversations about composing. Or maybe, because of my multimedia concerns, I write what I want to experience.

I am on the periphery of several groups of composers or artists—Wandelweiser, Just Intonation<sup>2</sup> enthusiasts, experimental filmmakers—but I don't belong to any given school. I see the artistic 'school' as basically an institutionalization of a style or core set of concerns. This stands to benefit the 'father figure' of a style—usually always a man, unfortunately—and usually codifies that style or aesthetic. I have a lot of respect for artists like Luc Ferrari who *r\_e\_f\_u\_s\_e\_d* to turn his way of thinking into a 'school,' but rather continued to push his creative process in multiple ways.

My style is the consequence of investigation, asking questions over and over in the work—"What is essential? What cannot be left out? What is lovely?". This idea of continuing inquiry is what links my creative impulses with my scholarship, with recording engineering,

with teaching, with being a part of the artistic community. I value being able to pursue a concern—such as the representation of reality in multimedia art—both artistically and in scholarly research.

I think making music or art is a logical response to living in a capitalist world. To create something that may have no intrinsic value in the marketplace, but exists solely to pursue its own concerns, is lovely to me in its ephemerality—an attempt to add to the passing beauty of the world rather than merely consume it.

I'm an academic. I love the intellectual and artistic community that's a part of academia, particularly in talking with experts in different fields. I think it's invaluable to be a part of the cross-pollination of different sets of scholarly literature. I'm really stimulated by fiction and scholarly writing, so I spend a lot of time thinking about how I can pursue questions related to my reading rather than specific musical concerns.

Through my job as a professor, I'm exposed to different topics via my teaching and the diffe-

rent roles I play—engineer, composer, performer, pedagogue, etc. For example, researching how best to communicate and teach different recording engineering techniques inevitably makes its way into my compositional process.

I'm very curious about the potential effects of different mediums on the audience—for example, the way that film can so convincingly build its own reality that immerses the viewer into it. My creative and scholarly research has to do with mimesis, or the representation of reality in art, and how it works in different combinations of media. Fortunately, there is a useful body of writing in literature and critical studies that addresses mimesis and is helpful for trying to understand issues of reality in multimedia art.

Regarding mimesis, one of my primary concerns is that of creating the unreal or surreal—what are the best techniques to alter reality for an audience in each artistic medium?

I collaborate with people locally and remotely. Living in a small town in central Florida has its advantages and disadvantages; having an academic position with its stability means living away from the artistic communities where I might be best stimulated—LA for example—but gives quite a lot in terms of intellectual community.

One of my favorite recent collaborators is the composer and theorist James O'Callaghan, who lives in Montreal. We have acted as proofreaders for each other's scholarly writing (since we share topics of interest), scores, and parts, even though we've never actually met IRL'. I look forward to hopefully getting to meet James in person soon.

My work resonates with different groups of people internationally, but usually not with the people where I live. On this topic, however, it is important to me to own my Texanness and Southern-ness as an artist since so many people leave where they are from to be rebranded in a new city. My geographic and social roots are important to me, even if not really appreciated artistically in the contexts where I'm from. There are contradictions here.

A new music performer once asked me, "Why do you list your birth city on your biography? Have you ever gained anything from saying you're from Texas?" In short, no. I don't think saying that I'm from Texas has ever benefitted my artistic career, but if I removed it from my biography I think the implicit message to other artists, especially young artists, is to try to hide where they're from. I'd like to contribute to a better world for young artists to grow up in, so that they don't have to be ashamed of where they're from, so they can have a career even if they are not from New York City or whatever.

I am immensely grateful to work with excellent performers for my music—I currently have commissions in the docket for the Wet Ink Ensemble, guitarist Nico Couck, and Ugly Pug ensemble—because it simply means that I can take more risks in composing. I know that these expert interpreters of new music will communicate my ideas the best way possible, and doing so gives me a tangible sense of creative security. I really enjoy how building friendships with kindred spirits is central to being a composer.

These relationships were cultivated because of organizations like Gaudeamus and the Ulysses network. These organizations have done a lot to support composers and performers internationally, and I feel lucky to count myself as one of those people.

<sup>1</sup> See C. UNDERRINER & C. FRANCIS, "The Sound-Poetry of the Instability of Reality: The Audio Reality Effect and Mimesis", *Organised Sound* 22(1), 2017, 20-31. Also see C. UNDERRINER, "Mimesis, Murakami, and Multimedia Art: Parallel Worlds in Performance", *Leonardo Music Journal* 29, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *Just intonation* means close to the acoustic reality, in which all intervals are tuned (ndlr).