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## Imagining the Trans Symphony: Integrating Transgender Composer Identity in Music Analysis

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**IMAGINING THE TRANS SYMPHONY:  
INTEGRATING TRANSGENDER COMPOSER IDENTITY IN MUSIC ANALYSIS**

A Thesis Presented

by

PENROSE M. ALLPHIN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

May 2021

Department of Music and Dance

Imagining the Trans Symphony: Integrating Transgender Composer Identity in Music Analysis

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<sup>1</sup> All composers interviewed for this project shared their work and agreed to discuss it following IRB approval.

<sup>2</sup> His full name is Percival M. Allphin, and the M stands for anything starting with that letter, from madrigal to marmalade.

## ABSTRACT

### IMAGINING THE TRANS SYMPHONY: INTEGRATING TRANSGENDER COMPOSER IDENTITY IN MUSIC ANALYSIS

MAY 2021

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Contemporary music analysts have generally downplayed the relevance of composer intent, a dismissal which ignores the potential for an enhanced expressive context afforded by composers' own assessments and also contributes to the silencing of already othered voices, such as in the case of queer and trans composers. Allowing the trans composer a voice in the reading of their work affirms the integral part of the trans experience that is self-determination. Over time, this project to tell trans stories evolved into a series of vignette-like analyses of trans composers' works in which I use a methodology that incorporates the voices of living composers while building on and modifying the work of music theorists and queer theorists,<sup>1</sup> moving queer musicology towards a new trans musicology that includes non-binary genders. This thesis demonstrates my theoretical framework using interviews of six transgender composers to supplement my analyses of their works. By analyzing the work with the added context of the composer's statements about their own music, my analyses paint more nuanced and complete pictures of the work that reinvest music analysis with the trans voice behind the composition.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an intentional epistemological and political move to explicitly center trans voices, both of the composers and the author (me).

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# CHAPTER 1

## REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

### 1.1 Introduction

My fascination with the issue of how composer intent is left out of music analysis began last October, in response to Timothy Johnson's talk at UMass about Caroline Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices*.<sup>1</sup> Johnson's talk focused on the connections between Shaw's *Partita* and the Sol LeWitt art at Mass MoCA that inspired her work while in residency at the Western MA museum. His analysis centered on the ways in which Shaw incorporated Sol LeWitt's textual instructions for the drafting technicians who created the Mass MoCA drawings. Some of Johnson's analysis of Shaw's work relied upon a very specific image of how she might have been positioned amidst Sol LeWitt's wall drawings at MASS MoCA while composing her acclaimed *Partita*. One attendee asked Johnson whether he had reached out to Caroline Shaw about this particular conjecture of his, and he responded that what we were doing as listeners and observers was of more value than what the composer intended. His argument was predicated on the idea that musical meaning is located with the listener, not with the composer.

After considering the implications of this statement for a number of months, I applied this to my interactions with Grey Grant, a non-binary transfeminine composer who came to my choir at Amherst College for a premiere of their<sup>2</sup> work, I asked Grant if they would let me interview them about their choral piece. I had already formed some analytical insights about Grant's piece and had drawn up a list of interview questions in case I was able to speak with them. They

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<sup>1</sup> *Caroline Shaw's Musical Interactions with Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings*. Timothy Johnson. UMass Amherst. Oct 18, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Grant uses the pronouns they and she interchangeably, but has asked for me to use they/them pronouns throughout the manuscript that is attached later on in this proposal.

graciously said yes. My conversation with Grant resulted in a final paper for Chris White's Post-Tonal class, which would later become the upcoming Transgender Studies Quarterly article titled "Trans Sonorities in Grey Grant's 'Drones for the In-Between Times.'" "

My advisor (Chris White) and I had a discussion about this paper that led to my preliminary thesis, that a full acceptance of the intentional fallacy and complete dismissal of composer intent might be somehow erasing the presence of a composer's trans/queer<sup>3</sup> identity. I kept working on this project after that conversation in order to further situate my proposed methodology and case study in scholarship on queer musicology and gender theory. As I spent more time with this project and worked with my editor at TSQ, I realized that the intentional fallacy was no longer central to the way I conceived of this project. Instead, this project is now a set of vignette-like analyses of trans composers' works.

In Section 2.4, you will find a manuscript in the works for a 2021 publication by Transgender Studies Quarterly that summarizes my trial run of this project in Fall 2019. As I conducted the aforementioned preliminary project with Grey Grant on a somewhat rushed timeline, I was very fortunate to be able to interview a larger number of trans composers and examine their works in greater depth for this thesis.

Contemporary music analysts have generally downplayed the relevance of composer intent, which they often regard as an example of the intentional fallacy at best, and misleading at worst. I argue that such dismissal not only ignores the potential for an enhanced expressive context afforded by composers' own assessments, but also contributes to the silencing of already othered voices, such as in the case of queer and transgender composers.

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<sup>3</sup> LGBTQ+ identities are the common denominator between the examples I discuss here, but other identities can have similar importance in the compositional process, and will be discussed in the proposed thesis when they are applicable.

Full acceptance of the intentional fallacy for contemporary music analysis relies on two flawed assumptions: that general conventions against which a work can be measured always exist, and the disposability of the voice and identity of the composer, which presumes an ‘insider,’ unmarked,<sup>4</sup> that is, cisgender, heterosexual, white, male composer. Giving the transgender composer a voice in the reading of their work affirms the integral part of the transgender experience that is self-determination.

I propose a methodology that incorporates the voices of living composers while by building on and modifying the work of canonical music theorists and queer theorists.<sup>5</sup> My methodology moves queer musicology towards a new transgender musicology that includes non-binary genders, in response to Dana Baitz’s “Toward a Trans\* Method in Musicology.” My methodology can be summarized as follows: study the work for initial impressions, come up with questions for the composer, talk with the composer, and integrate the composer’s own thoughts into the final analysis.

The analysis in Section 2.4 demonstrates the theoretical framework I will be using for this thesis with an interview of a transgender composer that supplement my analysis of their contemporary choral piece. By analyzing the work with the added context of the composer’s statements about their own music, my analysis paints a more nuanced and complete picture of the work — one that reinvests music analysis with the trans voice behind the composition.

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters the Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> This is an intentional epistemological and political move to explicitly center trans voices, both of the composers and the author (me).

Barry Truax writes, “Art is said to mirror society, but if you look in the mirror and see no reflection, then the implicit message is that you don’t exist.”<sup>6</sup> In my personal experience, growing up assumed to be a girl in the aughts, I was convinced I would become the first female orchestral conductor. Of course there had already been generations of talented female orchestral conductors — I know that now — but my entire youth, I never played under a women’s baton, so I assumed the profession was all male. Serendipitously, the musical *Fun Home*<sup>7</sup> was on Broadway just as I first came out as a lesbian at the end of high school. For the first time, I saw myself represented onstage and in the musical style I loved best. I never saw myself in Eponine’s unrequited love for Marius.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the lyric “I really tried to deny my feelings for girls,”<sup>9</sup> or young Alison recognizing herself in an old-school butch she noticed?<sup>10</sup> Painfully relatable. The college scenes with Alison’s first girlfriend?<sup>11</sup> Aspirational. It was a queer show written by a queer librettist and played by (mostly) queer actors. *Fun Home* showed me I still could have a place in music if I wanted. In her TONY acceptance speech for *Fun Home*, composer Jeanine Tesori repeated a quote first attributed to Billie Jean King, saying, “For girls,

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<sup>6</sup> Barry Truax. 2003. “Homoeroticism and Electroacoustic Music: Absence and Personal Voice.” *Organised Sound: An International Journal of Music Technology* 8 (1): 117–24.

<sup>7</sup> The musicalized autobiography of lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel.

<sup>8</sup> Schönberg, Claude-Michel. “*Les Misérables : a Musical*.” London : Milwaukee, WI :Alain Boublil Music ; Exclusively distributed by H. Leonard, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> “Original Broadway Cast of *Fun Home* (Ft. Beth Malone & Michael Cerveris) – Telephone Wire,” Genius, May 19, 2015, <https://genius.com/Original-broadway-cast-of-fun-home-telephone-wire-lyrics>.

<sup>10</sup> “Original Broadway Cast of *Fun Home* (Ft. Beth Malone & Sydney Lucas) – Ring of Keys,” Genius, May 19, 2015, <https://genius.com/Original-broadway-cast-of-fun-home-ring-of-keys-lyrics>.

<sup>11</sup> “Original Broadway Cast of *Fun Home* (Ft. Beth Malone & Sydney Lucas) – Ring of Keys,” Genius, May 19, 2015, <https://genius.com/Original-broadway-cast-of-fun-home-ring-of-keys-lyrics>.

you have to see it to be it.”<sup>12</sup> As I mention in my analysis of Grey Grant’s choral piece later on (redacted in this version), I had never performed a piece by a trans composer until the year after I graduated college (with the exception of a few pieces on my senior recital that I programmed). Of course there are trailblazers in every discipline, but it is so much more difficult to be something that you don’t see reflected around you. As Victoria Moon Joyce writes, “music mirrors culture while actively producing culture.”<sup>13</sup>

My central question I wish to explore in this project is: *how does transness inform or intersect with compositional style?* It is important to interrogate the assumption that composer intent doesn’t matter at all in the context of marginalized identities. It is true that, for example, a transfeminine composer of color isn’t marginalized directly on the basis of her composerhood. However, she may have experienced racism, misogyny, and transphobia that have impacted her opportunities as a composer or her music itself (see theory of intersectionality in literature review section below). The goal of this project is not to reduce the composers or their music to these Other identities, but rather, to allow their music to be viewed and analyzed within a more inclusive, intersectional context. Additionally, in this project I will endeavor to challenge “Composer” as a category that is thought of as objective, that is; white, male, able, straight, cisgender, and upper/middle class enough to be dismissed as overly subjective in the field of music analysis.

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<sup>12</sup> Adam Hetrick, “For Girls, You Have to See It to Be It’ – The Historic and Powerful Fun Home Tony Acceptance Speeches You Didn’t See on TV,” Playbill (PLAYBILL INC., June 8, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Victoria Moon Joyce. “What’s so Queer about Composing? Exploring Attali’s Concept of Composition from a Queer Perspective.” *Popular Music and Society* 21, no. 3 (1997): 35–59.

## 1.2. Theories of Music and Feminism .

Kimberlé Crenshaw is a critical race scholar who developed the theory of intersectionality as we understand it today. She argues that a Black feminist framework is necessary because of the troublesome inclination in feminist theory, antidiscrimination law, and antiracist politics to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive axes of oppression. She posits that multiple categories must be understood not independently, but in relation to one another, writing, “Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender.”<sup>14</sup> Crenshaw’s understanding of an individual’s multiplicity of identities as factors that compound upon and reinforce one another, instead of as facets that only operate in isolation, is essential to a project that endeavors to explore the relation of multiple concurrent identities. In the case of this thesis, these identities are *composer* and *transgender*, in addition to many others (race, (dis)ability, class, educational background, etc.) that will differ between participants.

The only specifically trans piece of writing on musicological methodology of which I am aware is Dana Baitz’s “Toward a Trans\* Method in Musicology.” Her article draws a distinction between queer methods and trans(sexual) methods by focusing on a model that is overly embodied and provides an interesting foundation for focusing on trans subjects who are binary, while my methodology will attempt to move queer musicology towards a new transgender methodology that actively includes non-binary genders and does not only center medical forms of transition. Baitz’s piece juxtaposes queer and trans methods by emphasizing that queer

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<sup>14</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics." u. Chi. Legal f. (1989): 139.

methods seek to transcend the body, whereas her trans(sexual) methods invest in the body. While I take issue with an exclusively embodied approach, Baitz's work is valuable as a starting point for the formation of trans methodologies in musicology. Baitz makes the fundamental point for this sort of research that "through trans\* musicology, we begin to reinstate a personal narrative (and the conditions producing it) as a source of knowledge."<sup>15</sup> This idea is central to my project of interviewing trans composers to situate their lived experiences as a source of knowledge about their music.

In *Feminine Endings*, McClary advocates for contextualizing the music in relation to the composer's queerness — "not for the sake of sensationalism," but rather because "it would permit much more interesting and human readings of the music." This distinction will function in my thesis as a central component, since I too am advocating for composer intention to be recognized, not for the sake of sensationalism, but to allow for more human readings of music.

In Wood's *Queering the Pitch* chapter, "Sapphonics," she describes a concept she calls "sonic cross-dressing: a merging rather than splitting of 'butch' authority and 'femme' ambiguity, an acceptance and integration of male and female. This idea can be used to expand the perception of trans voices as 'before' and 'after' (for people on testosterone), or of having distinct 'true' male and 'false' female voices (in the case of transfeminine people).<sup>16</sup> I

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<sup>15</sup> Dana Baitz. "Toward a Trans\* Method in Musicology." *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, October 2018.

<sup>16</sup> One contemporary opera, *As One*, demonstrates an interesting and problematic twist on this common (mis)conception. Two singers voice the main character (Hannah) — a baritone named 'Hannah Before' and a mezzo named 'Hannah After'. Among other issues, this character division plays into the idea that trans lives are split evenly into those of two different people (a pre-transition and post-transition version), as well as the common belief that estrogen has a significant effect on the transfeminine voice (the effect, if present, is subtle and wholly unstudied).

specifically use Wood's definition of sonic cross-dressing to explore the gendered implications of the countertenor solo that features prominently in Grey Grant's *Drones*.

In Emily Wilbourne's "Queer History of the Castrato," she reasons that although modern academic discourse around castrati has generally viewed them as queer, this label is thrust upon them for all the wrong reasons. They were not queer because they were all gay, nor because their castrations made them homosexual or less male, nor because their soprano and alto voices inherently made them feminine, none of which were the case. She suggests instead that "the primary queerness of all castrati was a melophilic desire that was so strong that it trumped the procreative imperatives of heteronormative sociality." While referring to castrati in the aforementioned paper, this line of reasoning can be expanded to inform the analysis of trans music. That is, in analyzing scores, I will be looking for musical elements *besides* the transness of the composers that reflect transness or gender-nonconformity. Joyce pinpoints one such relationship between queerness and music, writing that

the composer inhabits the margins when composing, including one's internal landscape of marginality—always struggling to create, assert, and know her own identifications. She composes to connect, to relate/integrate, and to communicate—within herself and outside herself. Composing disrupts normalizing identificatory codes and practices, and therefore represents an act of resistance to domination, control, and the deadening effect of repetition. It is a queer thing to compose.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Victoria Moon Joyce. "What's so Queer about Composing? Exploring Attali's Concept of Composition from a Queer Perspective." *Popular Music and Society* 21, no. 3 (1997): 35–59.



Suzanne Cusick takes Judith Butler's assertion that gender is performative<sup>18</sup> and applies this to music:

If gender is constituted by bodily performances, and metaphors of gender are constantly circulating through discourse, might not elements of all bodily performances be read as metaphors of gender even when they seem to be performances of other things? If bodily performances can be both constitutive of gender and metaphors for gender, then we who study the results of bodily performances like music might profitably look to our subject as a set of scripts for bodily performances which may actually constitute gender for the performers and which may be recognizable as metaphors of gender for those who witness the performers' displays.<sup>19</sup>

Cusick's line of reasoning is based on how it feels, as a performer, to play a piece, but Joyce ties Butler's work back into composing, writing:

To compose is not only to produce a work *for its own sake*, but it is to actively participate in the practice of composing one's own life. This resonates with notions of performativity (Butler, *Bodies*; Scott; Sedgwick). We perform ourselves and compose ourselves...

Cusick argues that the analytical paradigm has erased the metaphorical feminine of knowing through performance; "and especially a feminist music theory would theorize about the practices of performing bodies, the bodies most likely to enact metaphors of gender or to enact the constitution of gender itself." She writes that

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem." *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (1994): 8-27.

such a theorizing would be more like feminist theory than it would be like traditional music theory, for traditional music theory consists more of answers-descriptions of practices which are understood to be objective and true-than of questions. Feminist theory, on the other hand, tends to consist more of questions, or of hypotheses around which to frame questions. At this point, theorizing about musical bodies would be characterized, I think, by the kinds of questions it would ask.<sup>20</sup>

Musicologist Danielle Sofer praises several histories and analyses by the likes of McClary, Judy Lochhead, and Angela Davis, writing that “the analyses take care...to center the perspectives of those whose work is being analyzed and therefore prioritize the performers’ orientation alongside the theorist’s own express experiences.”<sup>21</sup> Sofer continues, “Surely anyone can propose any theory whatsoever, but a reliable and convincing analysis is grounded in compositional context, if not the composer’s own purview then some historical or socio-cultural background situating the music.”<sup>22</sup>

Donna Haraway writes, “The only people who end up actually believing and...acting on the ideological doctrines of disembodied scientific objectivity-enshrined in elementary textbooks and technoscience booster literature-are nonscientists, including a few very trusting philosophers,” referring to an entire class of academics that includes most music theorists.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem." *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (1994): 8-27.

<sup>21</sup> Danielle Sofer. “Specters of Sex. Tracing the Tools and Techniques of Contemporary Music Analysis.” *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie [Journal of the German-Speaking Society of Music Theory]* 17, no. 1 (June 15, 2020): 31–63.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Donna Haraway. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-99.

Most of the time, what music theory is doing is not science, but that is generally okay, so long as we are not pretending that it is. There is no inherent shame in being a field that operates through methods that are not precisely scientific, although there is always a tendency for sub-disciplines to try to assert themselves as the hardest science within their larger discipline.<sup>24</sup> Physics does this within science, music theory does this within music-at large, etc. The issues occur when a discipline tries to dishonestly sell their methods as scientific and objective.<sup>25</sup> Cusick also applies Donna Haraway's concerns to music theory:

Music theory...is a discipline that identifies nearly totally with the composer as mind, and which identifies music as mind. Identification of both composer and music as mind may be our discipline's version of what Donna Haraway calls the "god trick," the epistemological illusion of all-encompassing, and thus objective, knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

Recent events surrounding Philip Ewell's keynote speech<sup>27</sup> at the 2019 SMT conference in Columbus, Ohio, and the resulting *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* issue<sup>28</sup> should make it clear that music theory should not, cannot, and does not operate in a vacuum with complete disregard for societal issues. In November 2019, Ewell delivered a plenary speech titled "Music Theory's

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<sup>24</sup> What is considered a 'hard science' often correlates to the number of women in the field, and this seems to carry over beyond science. Music theory treats itself as the hard science of music scholarship. In each of AMS/SMT's most recent data sets on demographics as of 2016 (the latest info for AMS), AMS was 51.2% women whereas SMT was 34% women (although the disparity has lessened in the last few years).

<sup>25</sup> The former of which is more attainable than the latter.

<sup>26</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick. "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem." *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (1994): 8-27.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Ewell. "Music Theory's White Racial Frame." Plenary Speech, Society for Music Theory Annual Meeting, City, Nov. 7-10.

<sup>28</sup> *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, Vol. 12 (2020).

White Racial Frame,” examining the whiteness that is so deeply entrenched in Western music theory, and specifically focusing on the ways in which Schenker’s racism informed his analysis. In 2020, the Journal of Schenkerian Studies published a collection of responses to Ewell’s talk, including an anonymously authored contribution, not subjecting submissions to traditional peer review, and without inviting Ewell to respond. In the collection, University of Toronto emeritus professor David Beach wrote, “My suggestion to Philip Ewell is that he stop complaining about us white guys and publish some sophisticated analytical graphs of works by black composers. I, for one, would welcome into the analytical canon works by both black and women composers.” As Megan Lavengood tweeted, this is “coming a little uncomfortably close to ‘separate but equal’ thinking when implying that as a ‘white guy’ he doesn’t need to do the work of analyzing Black music. And bonus points for insisting that the analysis has to conform to the problematic white methodology.”<sup>29</sup> Beach’s proposal upholds the prejudiced idea that the reason so few marginalized composers are in the canon is because these composers aren’t as worthy as their white cishet male counterparts, as well as upholding the entire concept of the classical canon, which is based on white and male understandings of what makes music valuable.

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<sup>29</sup> Megan Lavengood (@meganlavengood). Twitter Post. December 26, 2020, 1:35 PM.  
<https://twitter.com/meganlavengood/status/1287441536372932608?s=20>

### 1.3 What if music isn't sex?

Much of feminist and queer music theory to date has centered on notions of sexual position and penetration, with the music assumed as the penetrative partner of the penetrated listener. From McClary's writings on the 'thrustings' of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in *Feminine Endings* to Suzanne Cusick's question of "what if music is sex?" in her lesbian spin on this perspective,<sup>30</sup> to Fred Maus' thoughts on the same question,<sup>31</sup> to Gavin Lee's applications of Lewin to theorizing about music in terms of gay male sexuality.<sup>32</sup>

In his 1993 article "Masculine Discourse in Music Theory," Fred Maus speculates about how the male music theorist presents their gender in analytical writing, as Western music theory and analysis has largely been written by men. His angle is that male theorists internalize listening to music as a bottoming, and therefore feminizing,<sup>33</sup> activity. To cope with this discomfort, Maus posits, male theorists try to position their analytical assertions as objective. He writes, "[t]he manly writing is the compensation...for the unmanliness of the listening."<sup>34</sup>

In 1991, Suzanne Cusick stood before a room of musicologists and theorists at the first Feminist Theory and Music conference. She began speaking in Italian, then switched to English, explaining that "to say the word "lesbian" in a musicological crowd is to speak a foreign language, though at first it may not seem so." The paper Cusick gave that day, which would later

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<sup>30</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick, "On A Lesbian Relationship with Music." *Music and Identity Politics*, 2017, 19–35.

<sup>31</sup> Fred Maus, "'What If Music IS Sex?': Suzanne Cusick and Collaboration," *Radical Musicology* 7 (2019).

<sup>32</sup> Gavin Lee, "Queer Music Theory," *Music Theory Spectrum* 42, no. 1 (2019): pp. 143-153.

<sup>33</sup> Of course, bottoming isn't an inherently feminizing position, role, or activity, yet is often seen as such.

<sup>34</sup> Fred Maus. "Masculine Discourse in Music Theory." *Perspectives of New Music* (1993).

become the 1994 *Queering the Pitch* chapter “On A Lesbian Relationship with Music,” was her attempt to work out her relationship between being a lesbian and being a musicologist, identities and practices that she realized she had compartmentalized. She writes that, “If music isn’t sexuality, for most of us it is psychically right next door.” For Cusick, “Being’ ‘lesbian’ is a position which scrambles the usual components of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (it is not about being a social man) and celebrates the scrambling,” yet her assertion that “lesbian is not a noun but a way I prefer to behave” feels oddly evocative of political lesbianism.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Lee later, Cusick uses “lover” and “beloved” in place of the words “top” and “bottom,” but she discusses music in similar terms of sex and positioning as other feminist musicologists. Unlike the others before her, she views herself and the music as equal partners in a lesbian relationship, and expands the metaphor beyond the phallic<sup>36</sup> by asking “What if hands are sex organs? Mine are. What if ears are sex organs? What if music-making is a form of sexuality in which (as in some other forms of sexuality) the sites of giving and receiving pleasure are separated?” Upon reflection, Cusick realized that she taught music in such a way that when she instructed her students to listen, she asked them to lie flat on their metaphorical backs and let the music top them. She reconciles this with her lesbian feminism by reasoning that she views the music as another woman and therefore both identifies with and loves it, writing “In some sense I love the music I teach as if it were a(nother) woman, a(nother) lesbian, and when I teach some ways of interrogating and thus

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<sup>35</sup> Political lesbian advocates for adoption of a lesbian sexuality as a lifestyle choice and as part of a (lesbian) separation from men.

<sup>36</sup> Cusick writes that “‘Being’ a ‘lesbian’...is a way of organizing the force field of power, pleasure, and intimacy that refuses the simple binary opposition male and female; that refuses the linking of those forces at their point of intersection with reproduction; that, therefore, refuses to play the game ‘phallic economy.’” However, conflating the phallus with the male once again returns to the heart of how many trans existences are denied by the issue of embodiment-as-essentialism.

knowing her in preference to other ways, I am again teaching a strange position to my students (a gender position? a “sexual” position? certainly, a position in the power/pleasure/intimacy triad in which both musicality and sexuality negotiate).” This is why, she explains, she tries to treat the music

analytically as I would be treated: as a subject who may have things to say that are totally different from what listeners expect to hear. By what feels like instinct, the strongest of instincts, I pass quickly over what feel like essentializing strategies (e.g., describing a work as an example of such and such a form, or Schenkerian analysis). I pass almost as quickly over discursively valued strategies (analysis of harmony, tonal structures) to less-valued, “sensual” features like texture and timbre. I feel a deep, deep reluctance to engage in what feels like the dismemberment of music’s body into the categories “form,” “melody,” “rhythm,” “harmony.”<sup>37</sup>

Gavin Lee’s “Queer Music Theory” applies Fred Maus’s “Discourses” for a queer reading of David Lewin’s “Phenomenology.” He imagines:

Perhaps the new form of campy expression comes from a theorist who is less fearful of “getting fucked” (to continue Maus’s thread). Perhaps the poetic theorist is a new kind of theorist whose subjectivity can be described as gay-friendly—this theorist has flipped from the homophobia of being penetrated to the post-homophobic state, or has even (who knows?) developed a desire for musical “penetration”—a desire to relinquish control and be utterly overwhelmed by the music, to be told to become “you-minor triad.” If this theorist willingly submits to the power of the composer’s agential persona in the music over him, he could be also described as a “masochist.” If the masochist were a gay man, he would be a gay bottom (in the sense of submissive).

Lee claims that it is a logical conclusion of Maus’s work for a connection to be made draws a line between Lewin’s poetics of analysis and the subjectivity of “not just a male who is anally penetrated, but specifically a gay bottom who identifies with that sexuality and position.” He recenters the discourse around (male) bottoming in music theory to allow for the possibility

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<sup>37</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick, “On A Lesbian Relationship with Music.” *Music and Identity Politics*, 2017, 19–35.

of a bottom who desires instead of fears his positioning. “After all,” he concludes, “audiences (gay bottoms or not) in concert halls sit passively in the dark, taking in the music without much control over what is acoustically sounded.” One might ask where this leaves the non-passive bottom, and here Lee halfheartedly attempts to draw from BDSM to evoke the gay bottom who is not passive but instead “actively directs and limits the repertoire of painful-pleasurable sensations that the top visits upon him.” This allows Lee to reimagine the assumed passivity of the listener; he writes, “The embodied experience of the gay bottom allows us to reconceptualize the supposed passive receptivity of the listener as a form of agential perception.”<sup>38</sup>

Sofer points out that despite some efforts to the contrary, Lee still maintains an active/passive dichotomy between tops and bottoms, and that in a conversation purportedly about the stigmatization of femininity, women are almost completely left out of the conversation in both Maus and Lee’s work, and that Lee, coming 25 years after Maus, had even less of an excuse to do so. Sofer invokes Robin James’ work on passivity as a stereotype of white femininity, and writes, “If we only use women’s compositions or performances and do not explicitly name women as users of music’s theories, we necessarily exclude women from music-theoretical practice. Women may very well read and engage with music-theoretical research, but we do not see ourselves implicated in and impacted by this research.” Sofer concludes that women of all intersecting identities must be explicitly named as the users of our theories in order for our music-theoretical objectives to change. Sofer rightly categorizes Lee’s work as homonormative<sup>39</sup> and takes issue with his use of embodiment, writing that

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<sup>38</sup> Gavin Lee, “Queer Music Theory,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 42, no. 1 (2019): pp. 143-153,

<sup>39</sup> Homonormativity is the projection of cisheteronormative ideals onto gay people.



“embodiment” participates in a habitual abstraction that actually moves to orient music analysis away from the work of the very queer women of color Lee claims to center, for example, Sara Ahmed and myself. I argue that theories of “embodiment” use inclusivity and diversity as a form of virtue signaling aimed at elevating the status of an individual scholar in a way that does not actually raise up those individuals who continue to be marginalized in music theory as a discipline: primarily women, individuals who identify with labels under the acronym of the LGBTQIA+, racialized individuals, and individuals otherwise minoritized on account of ethnicity. In summary, theorists can be orientated (statically) toward particular individuals (other theorists) or objects (music), and thus become engaged in a kind of metaphorically embodied perspective without actually betraying how one’s body comes to be oriented within and among academic and scholarly spaces.

Sofer believes that Lee’s “Queer Music Theory” confuses “embodiment” with Ahmed’s “orientations” because of how “orientation” has been used in previous music theory, such as in Cone’s work, and in pointing out this distinction, makes an effort to articulate that “theories are not in themselves gendered or sexual; rather, they are made so by someone who does theory and, in doing so, scripts familiar language about music from a particularly gendered and sexualized perspective.” Sofer opposes Maus’s description of Milton Babbitt’s music as “queer,” especially since Babbitt was both not queer himself and even expressed actively homophobic sentiments, as well as pointing out that Maus attempts to write about sex, sexuality, and gender in music analysis while leaving out music that actually pertains to any of these issues.

While finding such mental exercises of sexual metaphor interesting and sometimes helpful in the short term, I also take some issue with the overly embodied theories that would view a listener and their music as having a sexual relationship with distinct roles centering around penetration and a top/bottom dichotomy. Just as I reject the extent to which Baitz’s contributions to trans music theory are embodied, I also believe that these sexual metaphors erase many trans modes of existence. Even if we concede that the relationship between music

and listeners is one of a sexual nature (which I do not dispute that it absolutely can be at times for some), I reject the notion that there needs to be a penetrator and a penetrated in order for a sexual relationship to exist. One question that was posed to me when discussing this section with a friend was, “where does this leave the listening top?” Admittedly, Cusick’s<sup>40</sup> reasoning where in a lesbian relationship to music, listener and music alike can assume a ‘vers’<sup>41</sup> role, does sit better with me. I appreciate her move away from the phallogentricity of Lee’s argument. However, why can music and listener not symbiotically and simultaneously interact, why must one or the other always be in a dominant role? Despite an attempt to return some agency to the bottom, Lee’s comparison of passive audiences to gay bottoms diminishes both the role of the brain and the body in processing and responding to music and implies unequivocally that bottoming is inherently passive (which stems from a place of homophobia and misogyny).

Here, I ask, what if music *isn’t* sex? Perhaps music as sex is a kink or fetish of sorts, sexual for those who experience it that way, but not for others. My ears are not sexual orifices, but my ears are queer in a way that is more broad than a sexual act. Music is generally only sex for me when it is music *about* sex. I am still a queer listener even if music isn’t sex for me. Just as music can evoke many emotions, music can of course create sexual tension, especially between two performers.<sup>42</sup>

In pointing out that Maus and Lee’s work leaves behind women, trans, and non-binary people, as both theorists center sex acts performed by cis men, Sofer writes, “Could we in good

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<sup>40</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick, “On A Lesbian Relationship with Music,” *Music and Identity Politics*, May 2017, pp. 19-35.

<sup>41</sup> Neither exclusively top nor bottom, takes turns.

<sup>42</sup> After all, who hasn’t experienced a shared practice room as a site of repressed homosexual longing? (See Philip Brett’s writing on Schubert duets.)

conscience equate a woman's desire to become a music theorist with her desire to be passively 'fucked?'"<sup>43</sup> Obviously not, but this remains a lingering implication of many of the works considering music as sex. Perhaps an overly body-centric, and even genitalia-centric music theory is a fitting segue to a look at the lives of two trans women who were repeatedly thrust under a microscope, ridiculed, and verbally dissected on the basis of their anatomy and histories.

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<sup>43</sup> Danielle Sofer. "Specters of Sex. Tracing the Tools and Techniques of Contemporary Music Analysis." *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie [Journal of the German-Speaking Society of Music Theory]* 17, no. 1 (June 15, 2020): 31–63.

## 1.4 A Very Incomplete History of (Two White Western Classical) Trans Composers

While trans people have created music forever, this thesis will (due to disciplinary limitations and the need for a finite scope) focus on music with a score that falls loosely into the classical or musical theatre genres. This excludes many generations and genres of accomplished trans songwriters who may not have repertoire matching these requirements, and tends to prioritize musicians from Western (and largely white) traditions. For the record, I do not believe that this dichotomy should be maintained between songwriters and composers, as this upholds yet another false binary along with the gender one. However, that is the topic for another paper. A list of some of the many impressive trans singer-songwriters that do not fall under the purview of this project can be found in a Nancy Bos article on trans singers of pop music.<sup>44</sup>

The two names in this history that come up over and over again are those of Wendy Carlos (1939–) and Angela Morley (1924-2009), two women who transitioned in the 1970s and are both known for their film scores. Carlos is also known for her popularization of the Moog synthesizer in her album *Switched On Bach*.

Their stories are tied together by their shared deadname<sup>45</sup> in a chapter of *Intersecting Film, Music, and Queerness* titled “A Tale of Two Walters: Genre and Gender Outsiders.”<sup>46</sup> The chapter, seemingly by a cisgender author, improves marginally from the title, but continues to refer to the two women by their deadnames and he/him pronouns when talking about their

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<sup>44</sup> Nancy Bos, “Forging a New Path: Transgender Singers in Popular Music,” *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 4 (March 2017): pp. 421-424.

<sup>45</sup> *Deadname* is a term that is often used to refer to the birth name or former name of a trans person. Although each trans person has their own relationship with any former name(s), it is best practice to avoid these names altogether.

<sup>46</sup> Jack Curtis Dubowsky, “A Tale of Two Walters: Genre and Gender Outsiders.,” in *Intersecting Film, Music, and Queerness* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 105-130.

pre-transition lives, which is not in line with current journalistic standards regarding trans people, nor the recommended ones at the time of the book's publication.<sup>47</sup>

A news clipping from March 13th, 1985, headlined "Wally Follies" reads:

Strange things have happened to musicians with the name Wally. Walter "Wally" Carlos had a sex change and became Wendy Carlos. He was famous for Switched On Bach and for the score of A Clockwork Orange. The same fate befell Wally Stott, now known as Angela Morley. Stott created the music for The Goon Shows and did those lush string arrangements on Scott Walker's hits. Now all the wallies are being celebrated in music by Oxford polytechnic economics lecturer Richard Fordham, whose single Wally is released this week.<sup>48</sup>

The aforementioned single "Wally" appears to have been taken down from all streaming platforms, but another song, "Walter Carlos,"<sup>49</sup> was written about Wendy Carlos time-traveling to marry her pre-transition self. Carlos sued the artist, Momus, and had the song removed from its album.<sup>50</sup>

Another news clipping from March 29th, 1982 reads:

Followers of Walter Carlos, the brilliant arranger/composer of the music of the film A Clockwork Orange, may be a little surprised to learn that he is now over here composing the music for a new movie, Tron. But he is now called Wendy. An acquaintance who was

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<sup>47</sup> NLGJA, "Open Letter: Covering Caitlyn Jenner," NLGJA, June 1, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> "Wally Follies." Clipping. 1985. *Digital Transgender Archive*.

<sup>49</sup> "Momus – Walter Carlos," Genius, January 1, 1998, <https://genius.com/Momus-walter-carlos-lyrics>.

<sup>50</sup> Edited by Joel Selvin, Aidin Vaziri. "\$1,000 Bought a Custom Song On Momus' Latest Album." SFGate. San Francisco Chronicle, November 7, 1999..

asked to comment recently on Carlos's musical career, pre- and post-operation, observed; "Loved him, hated her."<sup>51</sup>

This is likely the same acquaintance, and quite possibly a misquote of Carlos' own words, that she referenced in her *Playboy* interview as saying "Gee, I used to like Walter a whole lot, but I really don't like Wendy."<sup>52</sup> It was common for media from the 70s and 80s to paint the pre- and post-transition self as different people, but nevertheless, this quote from the unnamed acquaintance reeks of (trans)misogyny. Surely Wendy Carlos' music did not change drastically at the moment of what the *Evening Standard* so crudely dubs her "operation." In fact, for the years between the time she began her medical transition and when she came out in a 1979 *Playboy*, she would paste on fake sideburns and use makeup to pencil on fake stubble when making a public appearance.<sup>53</sup> Thus, it seems, this supposed acquaintance would not have known Carlos had begun her transition when listening to her music from those years.

In 1979, eleven years after beginning her medical transition, Wendy Carlos came out in a *Playboy* interview. Forty years later, some of the material and many of the questions asked of her might strike a modern reader as insensitive at best, but it is an incredibly in-depth interview and remains the only time Carlos talked publicly in detail about her transition. Before the transcribed portion of the interview, Arthur Bell, the journalist, introduces his piece, writing of a time when he injured his ankle so Carlos came to his house for the interview: "I took advantage and asked her to describe the transsexual operation, which she'd resisted in earlier sessions." Carlos was also asked whether she had sexual fantasies as a child. She separates herself from the

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<sup>51</sup> "Walter Carlos Composing Music for New Movie." Clipping. 1982. *Digital Transgender Archive*.

<sup>52</sup> *Playboy Magazine*. "Playboy Interview: Wendy/Walter Carlos." Clipping. 1979. *Digital Transgender Archive*.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*.

(underground) trans community of the time, saying “I wanted to protect my career.” This Playboy interview, in addition to providing the best insight into Carlos beyond her music, also contains some of the only quotes she has about how her transness doesn’t inform her music.

Playboy: The secrecy of your life this past decade, you claim, has affected the progress of the synthesizer; but has your transsexuality personally affected your own music?

Carlos: I would think not at all. Can you imagine writing *The Transsexual Symphony*?<sup>54</sup>  
[Laughs].

Playboy: Is there an analogy between your music and your transsexuality?

Carlos: A simple one would be that *Switched-On Bach* in 1969 was a good musical barometer, while transsexuality in 1979 is a fairly good sexual and attitudinal social barometer. When *Switched-On Bach* was new, it stimulated strong reactions. Those who were comfortable in all forms of music, those who were open to novel variations, loved it. Transsexuality, too, is an emotional, action-prone situation, in that it tends to polarize people, depending on the attitudes one brings to sexuality and human rights. In both cases, there’s no middle ground.<sup>55</sup>

A page from Wendy Carlos’ prolific, yet stagnant website, titled “On Prurient Matters,” provides the only other tidbit of information on Carlos’ feelings about how her transition and her music play into one another. She intentionally leaves out any explicit mention of gender or transness, citing search engines as her reason for avoiding such buzzwords. Carlos writes,

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<sup>54</sup> Aaron Copland had his *Fanfare for the Common Man*, Joan Tower had her *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, why not *Transfare*?

<sup>55</sup> Playboy Magazine. "Playboy Interview: Wendy/Walter Carlos." Clipping. 1979. *Digital Transgender Archive*.

“Interestingly, the writers who so bravely abuse me are very selective and highly hypocritical. Of all the composers who were and are secretly or openly gay, you won’t find that bit of information about them in any of the general music websites or books on musicians and composers. The reason is trivial: it’s irrelevant. Why announce that Bernstein had blue eyes, or that Virgil Thompson [sic] stood only five feet four inches tall? What has that to do with music? --Exactly. I’m the sole exception.” One of the “general music websites or books on musicians and composers” to which she refers,<sup>56</sup> is The Grove's Dictionary of Musicians, now available as Oxford Grove Music Online. Grove’s articles on Bernstein and Thomson have each been updated in the summer of 2020, and each reflects the composers’ queer sexualities, although they might not have in the early aughts. However, the Grove article on Wendy Carlos has not been updated since its 2001 publication, and opens by labeling her “a transsexual, known until 1979 as Walter Carlos.” Whether or not the word “transsexual” is still Carlos’ preferred terminology cannot be known, as she has remained entirely out of the public eye for decades now. However, it is clear from her own words that she abhors any focus on her pre-transition self, which Grove emphasizes twice in this one sentence.<sup>57</sup> Angela Morley’s Grove biography, which uses the same language, was initially published at the same time as Carlos’, although hers was updated in 2009 to account for her death that year.<sup>58</sup>

Another of the dictionaries Carlos calls out on her website was Baker's Biographical Dictionary of 20th Century Classical Musicians (2001). In the introduction to Baker’s Dictionary, Editor Nicolas Slonimsky writes indelicately, contrary to what he describes as

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<sup>56</sup>Wendy Carlos, “Ouch = A Shortlist of the Cruel,” Wendy Carlos, 2001, <http://www.wendycarlos.com/ouch.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Rosen. "Carlos, Wendy." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 14 Aug. 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Marie Fitzpatrick. "Morley, Angela." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 14 Aug. 2020.



A delicate problem confronted me in putting together a biographical sketch on the electronic composer Walter Carlos, who on St. Valentine's Day of 1971<sup>59</sup> had surgery performed in which his natural male organ was everted to form a respectable receptive vagina, and thereby became Wendy Carlos. He recounted his transformation in full anatomical detail in an interview with *Playboy* magazine. I listed him/her as Carlos, Wendy (nee Walter). In my preface to the 6th edition of *Baker's* I had already cited other curious biological phenomena, such as the elopement of the castrato Tenducci with a young English girl who bore him a child (he was a triorchis).<sup>60</sup>

The biographical entry for Carlos herself begins predictably — if disrespectfully — until her transition comes up:

Then, at the age of 32, he suddenly became aware of his unique sexual duality, and underwent a transsexual operation. On St. Valentine's Day, Feb. 14, 1979, he officially changed his first name from Walter to Wendy. She/he described his sexual tergiversation in a candid interview in *Playboy* (May 1979), illustrated with ‘before and after’ photographs.<sup>61</sup>

Wendy Carlos describes this dictionary on her website as “pulp expose [sic] trash disguised as scholarship,”<sup>62</sup> and indeed, her entry does seem to be written with shock factor in mind.

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<sup>59</sup> According to her *Playboy* interview, she did not have surgery until 1973. Her legal name change, however, did go into effect on Valentine's Day, although not until the year 1979, when she was ready to come out publicly.

<sup>60</sup> Having three testicles.

<sup>61</sup> Nicolas Slonimsky, Laura Diane Kuhn, and Dennis McIntire, in *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, Aalt-Cone, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Schirmer Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 2001), p. xlv, 574.

<sup>62</sup> Wendy Carlos, “Ouch = A Shortlist of the Cruel,” Wendy Carlos, 2001, <http://www.wendycarlos.com/ouch.html>.

In the book *Switched-On Bach*, Roshanak Kheshti applies a queer feminist lens to Wendy Carlos' career. Kheshti explores Carlos' declaration of herself and her work as 'The Original Synth' and describes her as 'synthgender,' setting this in opposition to cisgender, and comparing this to Haraway's cyborg imagining a 'world without gender.' Kheshti also entertains the line of later public speculation that Wendy Carlos might not be trans, despite the Playboy interview in which she clearly states that she has transitioned. Kheshti repeatedly refers to Carlos' deadname as her *nom de plume*. She writes, "Carlos often laments the music industry's misogyny, which she claims forced her to initially publish under this alias." Kheshti's positioning of Carlos as a non-binary or gender-nonconforming figure is in direct opposition from the way that Carlos has worked to paint herself over the last four decades; as a woman whose trans history is irrelevant.<sup>63</sup> She writes, "[Carlos'] origin story emphasizes the paternalism of journalists and academics who have insisted upon a story in which the master of the Moog synthesizer must have begun as a "he"; how else could Carlos's prodigious talent and virtuosity be explained?"

Kheshti provides larger context for the Playboy interview, explaining the journalist Arthur Bell's role as a gay liberation activist. Bell may have edited the 800-page interview transcript down to a measly narrative focusing on anatomy and tragedy on his own, or the Playboy editors may have been behind this. "Maybe," she writes:

Playboy/Bell was projecting onto Carlos the false consciousness some gay liberationists attributed to trans people in the struggle, a trans-misogyny shrouded in the righteous insistence upon an imperative of gay liberation above and beyond the race and class politics so many trans figures in the Gay Liberation Front prioritized or maybe Bell was

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<sup>63</sup> Wendy Carlos, "On Prurient Matters," Wendy Carlos. <http://www.wendycarlos.com/pruri.html>.

just mad at Carlos for fiddling with patch cables and sound color orchestration instead of fighting in the streets for gay and trans liberation; perhaps we'll never know. Bell's commitment to politics in the street, where civil rights movements have been waged, makes it impossible for him to recognize the through line in Carlos's narrative: electronic pop music saved her life; that Carlos's quest for liberation was not in the domain of civil rights but through the medium of sound.<sup>64</sup>

In 2020, there is much greater awareness of trans composers. Still, the first page of results for a Google Search for "trans composers" turns up "A Trans Composers Playlist," an essay titled "I'm a Trans Composer. What the Hell Does That Mean?,"<sup>65</sup> a wiki list of trans musicians, a Talk Classical forum where anonymous posters discuss whether Wendy Carlos is the only trans composer, Wendy Carlos' Wikipedia page, an Advocate.com listicle of "18 Queer Composers Who Made Music History" (none of whom are trans), one master's thesis,<sup>66</sup> one call for scores, a list of queer composers, and a news article about a trans man who quit classical music.

What does it mean to hold Wendy Carlos, an extremely private person who has pushed back against the connection between her transness and her music, as a musical trans icon? At this point, she is a poster-child for trans musicians and composers regardless of her personal feelings on the matter. How do we navigate this disparity with respect? What does it mean to do this sort of work and talk about Carlos as the grandmother of contemporary trans composers and

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<sup>64</sup> Kheshti, Roshanak. *Switched-On Bach*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> These first two results are by Alex Temple, whose interview can be found later in this thesis.

<sup>66</sup> Xavia Publius, "Suggestions for transgender inclusion in classical music: a mini-cycle." Master's thesis., University of Northern Iowa, 2015.

especially trans women in electronic music when she herself wishes to decenter her transness in relation to her life story and her music and outright denies the possibility of a trans/music connection? I do not have definitive answers to most of these questions, other than to say that it is first and foremost important to fully respect Wendy Carlos's wish for privacy when confronting these issues, but also acknowledge that it is difficult to study the modern history of American trans composers without considering her career and life. How should we make peace with this contradiction? Again, I cannot offer a single simple solution, but the questions raised by Wendy Carlos's story point towards the need for composer intent and identities to be discussed with those trans composers who are comfortable having these conversations.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1 METHODS

I interviewed 8 transgender and/or non-binary composers about their work in order to create contextually grounded analyses,<sup>67</sup> thereby allowing the composers a voice in the reading and reception of their work. As of 5.15.20, my interview protocol was approved by the IRB as exempt and I was cleared to begin (virtual) research.

Dana Baitz's article "Toward a Trans\* Method in Musicology" relies on traditional applications of mind/body dualism to narratives surrounding transness. Baitz does not take it this far, but this line of thinking can lapse into bioessentialism, and her article does explicitly reinforce a troublesome distinction between transgender and transsexual people. Her differentiation of queer and transsexual methods comes from a heterosexual binary trans perspective, and erases those whose queerness and transness may be intertwined. Even beyond identities such as gay trans men and lesbian trans women; historically, there has been a less clear line between some certain gay and trans identities. For instance, many street queens of the Stonewall Riots considered themselves politically to be both gay (attracted to men) and trans (transsexual/transvestite/trans women/transfeminine).<sup>68</sup> Likewise, the line between lesbian butchness and transmasculinity has also historically been less pronounced than queer youth

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<sup>67</sup> Danielle Sofer. "Specters of Sex. Tracing the Tools and Techniques of Contemporary Music Analysis." *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie [Journal of the German-Speaking Society of Music Theory]* 17, no. 1 (June 15, 2020): 31–63.

<sup>68</sup> *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle* (Untorelli Press, 2006).

coming of age on the internet might believe.<sup>69</sup> Non-binary identities and non-straight trans identities are largely erased from Baitz’s methodology. The point of agreement between my philosophy and that of Baitz’s methodology is that trans musicology involves reinstating “a personal narrative (and the conditions producing it) as a source of knowledge,” and this forms the basis for my trans methodology in this project.<sup>70</sup> What makes a methodology trans?

Halberstam writes that

A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence.<sup>71</sup>

This is the sort of queer, and specifically trans, methodology that I aim to center in my project. I endeavor to center the voices of these subjects who have been excluded from studies and use an array of approaches to achieve this goal. Susan Stryker writes, “[t]ransgender studies, through desubjugating previously marginalized forms of knowledge about gendered subjectivity and sexed embodiment, promises...a radical critical intervention.”<sup>72</sup> It is this radical critical intervention that I provide in the following collection of interviews and analyses.

## **Participants**

Participants were transgender and/or non-binary composers in the U.S. who are over the age of 18. My target number of participants was between 4-8 composers, in order to ensure a

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<sup>69</sup> Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Dana Baitz. “Toward a Trans\* Method in Musicology.” *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, October 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>72</sup> Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Stephen Whittle (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-15.

broad sample of experiences but to still keep the number of interviews manageable and attainable. I ended up with 6 participants. Participants were identified by the criteria of being an openly trans and/or non-binary living composer and were either found online or through intracommunity common knowledge. I corresponded with them and provided information and consent forms through email.

### **Analyses**

I worked with each composer in my participant group to select one of their works and requested a score. My initial analysis of the work was conducted prior to my interview with that composer, and informed some of my specific interview questions. Other interview questions (examples of which can be found below) were consistent between participants. After the interview I made notes of how the interview influenced my understanding, and therefore, analysis, of the piece, and combined observations and quotes for a final product.

### **Interviews**

Several of my questions were tailored to the particular composer and their work. Here are some examples of generic and specific interview questions:<sup>73</sup>

- How would you describe your gender and other important facets of your identity?
- What pronouns do you use?
- How does your gender relate to your compositional style or process, if at all?
- How has your relationship to tonality evolved over time?\*
- Did you consider using microtonality at all to illustrate between-ness, if so, what influenced your ultimate decision not to?\*
- How do you consider meter to function in this piece?\*
- What or who have you considered to be some of your inspirations?
- Is there any other connection between your music and your identity that you'd like to share?

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<sup>73</sup> The asterisked questions are a subset of the specific questions that I used in the trial analysis with Grey Grant.

## 2.2. LIMITATIONS

I acknowledge that by bringing some trans composers into the realm of classical analysis I am simultaneously serving to delegitimize those who do not fall within my selection criteria for this project. While I absolutely do not believe that marginalized communities *should* have to make themselves legible to academia in order to achieve respect and legitimacy, they still unfortunately *do*. In the long run, I think music theory needs to be completely deconstructed (and then *if* rebuilt, done so in a way that will be virtually unrecognizable to the current discipline).



### 2.3. CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

As far as I am aware, this thesis will be the first large-scale academic project to discuss more than two trans classical-adjacent composers.<sup>74</sup> As such, it will be important in that it will highlight the accomplishments of contemporary transgender composers in an academic analytical context. While being the subject of academic music analysis should not be necessary to legitimize a composer as an artist of value, historically, the white male cisheteronormative canon has been reinforced by the narrow range of composers who constitute the majority of published analyses.

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<sup>74</sup> In 2016, Jack Curtis Dubowsky published a chapter titled "A Tale of Two Walters: Genre and Gender Outsiders" in *Intersecting Film, Music, and Queerness*. The title alone is misguided, focusing on each of these composers' (Wendy Carlos and Angela Morley) shared deadname, or pre-transition name, instead of the identities in which each firmly settled and spent the most important years of their adult lives.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**ANALYSES AND INTERVIEWS**  
*Imagining the Trans Symphony*

This chapter is a collection of vignettes and contextualized analyses of contemporary transgender composers and their works. The styles range from Golden Age musical theatre to music with electronics. My conversations with these composers ranged from discussions on using instrumental writing as a way of more subtly communicating a closeted identity to talking about non-binary presence in spaces that are labeled “women and nonbinary” as feeling like “You can be here, but we didn’t really design this space for you.”<sup>75</sup> Due to the common identity shared between the composer as being one of either transness or another lack of connection to a fixed gender binary, there is a running thread of gender through many of the pieces that were selected for this project, and several of the works discussed here were written specifically with the trans voice, either literal, metaphorical, or both in mind, from the writing for a trans lead in Jaime Jarrett’s *Wonder Boy* to the collection of Miss Major quotes used throughout Mari Esabel Valverde’s “When the Dust Settles.” Trans people are not a monolith, nor do these six individuals collectively represent all or even most of trans experience. The vignette approach seemed appropriate for this project as these following pages are snapshots into the works and processes of contemporary trans composers.

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<sup>75</sup> Socks Whitmore (they/them) in discussion with the author, January 12, 2021.

### 3.1 “I Enjoy Being A Girl” from *Defiant, Majestic, and Beautiful* by brin solomon (it/its)

Composer brin solomon<sup>76</sup> is “a secretary bird in an ill-fitting human suit” who “writes words and music in several genres and is doing its best to queer all of them.”<sup>77</sup> Compositionally, solomon tells me it is “something of a stylistic chameleon,” and as for gender, it uses the term “agender...under the nonbinary umbrella...under the larger trans umbrella...a complete lack of gender,” while elaborating that more recently, it explains its gender as unplotable on gender axes or coordinates, but also includes birds, the color purple, and interstellar voids. Other important facets of solomon’s identity include being queer and Reconstructionist Jewish and trying to be accountable for how these identities intersect with being white.

When asked how its transness and queerness inform its composition, solomon says that while these “don’t specifically relate to my compositional style...the mystical, spiritual level that i unlock in certain Jewish states feels very related to the weird, intense, emotional vulnerability that i try to achieve in a lot of my music, and that also feels related to queer liminality and the expansiveness and undefinedness and existing outside of rigidly defined societal structures that come preloaded from heteropatriarchy.” Additionally, solomon adds, “that said, i also am very adamant that when i am writing a clarinet sonata, i’m like ‘also i’m a trans composer and i’m not going to let you forget that!’” It continues, “I feel like often when people talk about ‘universality’ in music it’s one of those things where they use that to mean ‘oh, well your music isn’t *trans* music, it’s universal music that cis people can relate to too!’ and like, it’s cool if they have

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<sup>76</sup> Name intentionally all in lowercase, as are any subsequent uses of the first-person pronoun “i” except when at the beginning of the sentence.

<sup>77</sup> brin solomon, “Biography,” brin solomon, accessed March 13, 2021, <http://www.brinsolomon.com/bio>.

feelings about it, but you're using that as a way to erase the fact that i'm trans, and you don't get to do that."

One of solomon's many varied theatrical works — including a Mothman musical — is *Defiant, Majestic, and Beautiful (DMAB)*, which its website describes as “a theatrical song cycle sharing some slices of life from people who experience transmisogyny. There's agony, there's ecstasy, there's an ode to salt.”<sup>78</sup> <sup>79</sup> In our personal correspondence, solomon has endorsed the use of the word “syllene,” a neologism referring to “trans women and nonbinary people who caucus with trans women” as another way of describing the perspective of the *DMAB* song cycle. In terms of writing for trans voices, and more specifically for *DMAB*, solomon set out to establish “a very broad range of vocal ranges, from countertenor to baritone” and wrote the cycle specifically to allow for key changes as necessary. More generally, solomon also endeavors “to demolish the correlation between gender and voice.” One of solomon's pet peeves is “when people don't fully trust what's written on the page; my music does ask a high level of trust from the performer.” In terms of its inspirations, solomon lists Värttinä, a Finnish folk rock group for their use of changing and additive meter, English folk song tradition, Britten in terms of singing theatre and orchestration, and “generally things that were happening in the European-American art music tradition between the two world wars, including Neoclassicism, and later Bernstein, Sondheim, and Messiaen. Its future compositional projects may draw from more Jewish liturgical chant traditions and setting psalms, it is also “very interested in the interaction of ritual

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<sup>78</sup> solomon, brin “Works,” brin solomon, accessed March 13, 2021, <http://www.brinsolomon.com/works>.

<sup>79</sup> Spironolactone, an anti-androgen and diuretic part of many HRT regimens, has an often-reported side effect of sodium cravings.

and theatre and music.” As an extension of this, solomon describes the end of *DMAB* as “a ritual of leave-taking.”

In the notes for the show, solomon writes that the eighth song in the cycle, “I Enjoy Being A Girl,”<sup>80</sup> is “an evisceration of the Rodgers & Hammerstein number about the sometimes necessity of aggressively performing 1950s white suburban femininity in order to get needed medical care.” The following dialogue precedes the song:

(SONYA, immaculately made up, bustles into a psychologist’s office and settles on the couch.

She could be the ingénue of a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical.)

[MUSIC GO]

SONYA: Well hello, Dr Singal, thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice! I know your schedule must be very busy what with all of the “transtrenders” these days trying to get permission to take hormones. Thank goodness we have people like you to s[t]and in their way and make sure that only the genuine transsexuals are allowed to transition. I mean, (A polite, artificial laugh.)

Could you imagine if we just let people decide for themselves what they wanted to do with their own bodies? Why, someone might wind up trying something they might later decide isn’t right for them!

Shall we begin with a review of my history of cross-gender behavior?

“Dr. Singal is a deliberate reference to Jesse Singal,” solomon clarifies in one of our email correspondences. Jesse Singal is a cisgender journalist who has written viral articles about trans issues such as “When Children Say They’re Trans,” a story that focuses on the rare phenomenon of transition regret and detransition instead of on the successful outcomes of what are social transitions with younger children (and later sometimes puberty blockers and eventually HRT). This disparity in which narratives get the media coverage has real implications when it

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<sup>80</sup> Watch here:

brin solomon, “I Enjoy Being A Girl (Defiant, Majestic, and Beautiful),” YouTube (YouTube, September 25, 2018), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9wGSd6VELs&list=PLWcx0mjb\\_pV6U0z2pDEg9YqTaXnKcNIUu&index=6](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9wGSd6VELs&list=PLWcx0mjb_pV6U0z2pDEg9YqTaXnKcNIUu&index=6).

comes to popular support for issues such as puberty blockers for trans youth (see the recent UK case of *Bell v Tavistock*).

The song “I Enjoy Being A Girl,” takes place in a psychologist’s office, where Sonya sings a time-tested stereotypical trans narrative, in a commentary on the pressure to present an established trans narrative, in order to receive a letter from a therapist to begin medical transition. In 1966, Harry Benjamin, a German-American endocrinologist and sexologist, published a textbook of case studies that would become the standard diagnostic tool for transsexualism, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. Soon after, when trans people were trying to prove their suitability for surgery, they matched Benjamin’s criteria perfectly. For years, researchers thought this was due to the widespread accuracy of Benjamin’s text, but eventually they realized that the book was being circulated throughout the trans community, so that the patients could present narratives that would deem them eligible for medical transition.<sup>81</sup>

“I Enjoy Being A Girl” takes musical and textual quotes, as well as its title, from a song by the same name in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1958 Broadway musical, *Flower Drum Song*. The original “I Enjoy Being A Girl,” an ode to white femininity, normative gender presentation, gender roles, and heterosexuality, was actually performed and recorded in cabarets by Christine Jorgensen, who introduces it as “this wonderful tune which became my theme song.”<sup>82</sup> As Emily Skidmore writes, white trans women such as Jorgensen “were able to articulate transsexuality as an acceptable subject position through an embodiment of the norms of white womanhood, most

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<sup>81</sup> Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto.” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 10, no. 2 (1992): 150-76.

<sup>82</sup> Christine Jorgensen, “I Enjoy Being A Girl.” In *I Enjoy Being A Girl! (Live Cabaret Recording)*. iTunes, 2006, MP3.

notably domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality.”<sup>83</sup> Linda Low, the character who sings this song in the original Rodgers and Hammerstein version, is asked about her ambitions and responds with the following before launching into song; “I want to be a success as a girl. Oh, it’s nice to have outside accomplishments like singing, cooking or first aid. But the main thing is for a woman to be successful in her gender.”<sup>84</sup> It is easy to see why Jorgensen felt such a connection to this song. After her medical transition, the media constantly analyzed every detail of her femininity, her attractiveness to the heterosexual man, and consequently, her “success as a girl.” Racial specificity of casting guidelines for *Defiant, Majestic, and Beautiful* and the implications thereof are something that Solomon is still struggling with, but it says “in my ideal world, the S track is not played by a white actor.”<sup>85</sup>

The framework for Solomon’s adaptation of “I Enjoy Being A Girl” is the Rodgers and Hammerstein song of the same title from *Flower Drum Song*. In adapting the song, Solomon borrows the end motif “I enjoy being a girl,” as well as the key and the opening accompaniment from the Rodgers and Hammerstein original. The main chord progression that Solomon uses is the same as the one in the Rodgers and Hammerstein model, while the main melody is different.

In terms of the larger structure of Solomon’s song cycle, it explains that “*DMAB* is constructed in an arch cycle,” where the first song maps onto the last, the second to the penultimate, and so on and so forth. “I Enjoy Being A Girl” is the “keystone of the arch, ”

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<sup>83</sup> Skidmore, Emily. “Constructing the ‘Good Transsexual’: Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press.” *Feminist Studies*, 2011.

<sup>84</sup> Leslie Bow, “To Enjoy Being a Girl: Sexuality and Partial Citizenship.” In *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature*, 37-69. Princeton, Oxford; Princeton University Press, 2001.

<sup>85</sup> Each of the songs in *DMAB* belongs to a track of songs sung by characters with the same first initial, to allow for more or fewer actors based on production size.

demonstrating how the “cis gaze distorts the stories we are trying to tell.” How did solomon come to use this Rodgers & Hammerstein song as a model? It was first exposed to *Flower Drum Song* in grad school, when the show came up in the context of short story adaptations.<sup>86</sup> The aggressive performance of “1950s suburban white femininity” in “I Enjoy Being A Girl” seemed to solomon like a fitting mold for showing what transfeminine people often have to perform to access medical transition.

The Rodgers & Hammerstein original and solomon’s satirical adaptation share a starting key (D Major, then moves to g minor), as well as the same starting accompaniment. The *DMAB* version also borrows the chord progression from the Rodgers & Hammerstein model for the main theme, although it has a different melody than the original. Figure 1 outlines the form of both versions of “I Enjoy Being A Girl.” In solomon’s first ABA’ section, Sonya begins by recounting her earliest childhood memories of her femininity and emphasizing that she has *always* been a girl, accompanied by a boom-chick pattern in the piano that proves increasingly unsettling as the song progresses. In C, she sings “I’ve read all your guidebooks, I know all my lines. I know what you’re checking when you’re searching for signs. I’ve practiced my story, I know what to say. So write me my letter<sup>87</sup> and I’ll be on my way.”

In the second ABA’, she recounts a failed teenage attempt to date as a gay man to prove that she is attracted to men, but as a woman.<sup>88</sup> In theme D, after learning that the psychologist wants to meet with her for another month, she reacts “When will you be satisfied? When will

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<sup>86</sup> The musical *Flower Drum Song* was adapted from a novel of the same name by Chinese-American author C. Y. Lee.

<sup>87</sup> One or more letters are often required for trans people to access anything from hormones to surgeries.

<sup>88</sup> Heterosexuality was an official requirement for transition for several decades.



you say I'm legit? It's starting to be hard to hide how much I think you're full of —" in a melody that is mirrored by inversional symmetry in the accompaniment. In the third recurrence of the B theme, Sonya reproduces the narrative of body dysphoria and disgust over her genitals<sup>89</sup>, and in the fourth B theme, she insists she wants to carry children but will settle for adoption. In theme E, Sonya sings "I am your puppet – pull on my strings! I'll dance how you tell me, and say the right things. I'll fit to the model they taught you in class, where my deepest desire is only to pass. Who cares if that model ignores our real lives? Who cares about nuance when your practice thrives? Yes, when people like me come and sit in this chair, you sure provide the model of compassionate care!" This is followed by the performance designation in the accompaniment "Slightly faster than humanly possible. Begin at about 95% accuracy and slowly disintegrate."

In the F section, a direct musical quote from the Rodgers & Hammerstein original, Sonya sings "So make me a female female, so my future can someday be in the home of a cis, straight, free male who'll enjoy being a guy having a girl like me!"<sup>90</sup> Comparing the two versions of "I Enjoy Being A Girl," Solomon's composition emerges as recognizably inspired by the Rodgers & Hammerstein original, but with its own spin and a witty, sardonic commentary on access to medical transition.

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<sup>89</sup> Distaste towards one's own genitals has also historically been a criterion for transition, especially for trans women (see Harry Benjamin's original work for more details)

<sup>90</sup> The Rodgers & Hammerstein lyrics are: "I'm strictly a female female, and my future I hope will be in the home of a brave and free male who'll enjoy being a guy having a girl like me."

I Enjoy Being A Girl (R&H)	I Enjoy Being A Girl (solomon)
Intro: four melodic phrases that are very similar (the last of which is more different to better lead into the A theme)	A: two melodic phrases that are similar, one melodic phrase, followed by two different melodic phrases, the last of which is the same as the from the R&H version (this whole sequence gets repeated)
A: three melodic phrases that are similar followed by one that is different (this is then repeated)	B: one melodic phrase that gets repeated, then two new melodic phrases (the last of which becomes increasingly similar to its parallel in R&H's B throughout the iterations of this section)
B: three melodic phrases that are nearly identical, followed by one that is different	A': first three phrases are the same as A, last phrase differs and is longer.
A': three melodic phrases that are similar followed by one that is different	C: Four phrases that are similar to one another, then modulation (half step up)
A B A'	A B A
	D: marked as "manic," first notable departure from R&H style, four (or two, depending on perspective) short phrases that get cut off by a modulation (whole step up)
	A B A'
	E: second major harmonic departure, although the melody is more stylistically similar to those in A and B. Eight similar phrases, then a final modulation (half step up)
	A B
	F: the entirety of this section is a direct musical quote (although the lyrics are slightly changed) from R&H ending

**Figure 1.** An analytical comparison of brin solomon and Rodgers and Hammerstein's versions of "I Enjoy Being a Girl."

### 3.2. “The Body” from *Wonder Boy: the musical* by Jaime Jarrett (he/they)

In terms of gender, Jaime Jarrett explains, “I generally identify as a trans guy...I’ll say man, but I still feel some aversion to it for some reason.” He also describes himself as queer or bisexual, relatively binary, white, Jewish, 5’5, a New Yorker (specifically a Brooklynite), and a writer. Jarrett’s musical inspirations include Mal Blum, Greenday, Bruce Springsteen, men who were tenors but singing high in a subversion of masculinity, and musical theatre composer William Finn, as well as Billy Joel — “the way he told stories was always so exciting to me,” Jarrett says.

Jarrett reflects, “I think part of how being trans and queer relates to my process as a composer is...I don’t like to take any rule that’s been handed to me and just go like, and that’s the rule and that’s how it works, and that’s how music works, the end. I’m very into questioning the rules and I think it directly relates to the fact that, like I was given so many rules as a kid about what I needed to be, how I needed to act and words that were not my words were thrown onto me.” He relates gendered assumptions in his upbringing to his musical process today, telling me, “I don’t want to take any rule just because it was taught to me – especially most of these rules are being handed to me by like cis straight white people...often..men. A lot of music is like ‘this needs to be really easily understood’ and I have an aversion to the concept of ‘this must be easily understood,’ because I’m like, well...it feels like that’s what people say about transness, like, they’re comfortable with trans identities that are easy to understand.”

His transness and his music also intersect “whenever I’m writing something with vocals.” “Specifically,” he elaborates, “I was a soprano when I was a child. And then I kind of became an alto who...couldn’t belt anymore when I went through my first puberty. And now after chatting

with some folks...I've learned that there might have been like some kind of traumatic situation where I was going through [a] puberty that personally didn't feel aligned with my identity and that might have been part of why my range completely shrunk for a good four to five years, and then I kind of became an alto, and then when I started T, became a very limited tenor, and then dropped into baritone land. I've been all over, and so I feel like I have this ability to sort of think about what a soprano might feel comfy singing and what a baritone might feel comfy singing.”

As to writing for trans voices, Jarrett says, “We have to...write awesome music for women basses and boys who have really high voices. And I think that even like as more non-binary people are coming out, people are starting to associate with non binary people have to look and sound like and let's also mess with that — like we're really comfortable with, a trans masc person who is white and thin and can sing a beautiful mezzo range, we're obsessed with that person. But I'm like, we have to understand that there are going to be like non-binary baritones and non-binary tenors.” Jarrett likes to ask each vocalist he works with “Well, where do you feel comfy singing, where do you actually want to sing?” While Jarrett's process of writing for trans voices is heavily based on his own experience of vocally transitioning, he also has discussions with his vocalists — asking them to send him songs they like to sing — he is always ready to change keys or rewrite notes as needed, and believes musicals should be built to be flexible.

According to Jarrett's website,

*Wonder Boy* tells the story of Jackson, a young man navigating his identity as a trans man and as a superhero. Jackson's super genius twin sister, Peyton, creates a mysterious super drug, and Jackson steals it, consumes it, and transforms into Wonder Boy. Jackson gains the ability to fly, super strength, and automatic self healing powers. As Jackson saves the day (but in a feminist way) on campus, he learns that his self healing powers may mean he has to put his gender affirming surgery on hold indefinitely. Meanwhile, Peyton experiences severe memory loss and begins to lose her identity. *Wonder Boy* explores the dissonance we all feel

between our bodies and brains, and the connections we make with our loved ones to survive this dissonance.<sup>91</sup>

Jarrett tells me that his song “The Body” falls at a moment in the musical where Jackson already knows he can fly and has superhuman strength, but he has just realized his body can’t get cut, because he heals up automatically, which takes top surgery off the table. The song is pensieve, yet oddly upbeat for one dealing with such a magnitudinal setback, although after all, Jackson is singing about something that is having a negative personal impact on him, but is still a superpower. Jackson asks in the highest part of the song, providing a melodic as well as emotional climax, “So is this saved? Or am I stuck in a body I thought one day I could forget?” (Fig. 2) Jarrett’s generous use of harmonic suspensions creates a sense of emotional suspension, and the cessation of rhythmic movement illustrates the sung word “space.” (Fig. 3) His use of suspension forces the listener to sit in the unresolved space of the Bb/C chord in mm. 44-45 before the previous energetic accompaniment returns. In “The Body,” a song set mostly in F major with a D minor introduction, this “space” is illustrated by a dominant that falls short of providing a half cadence, in part due to the missing third and the added subdominant in the right hand of the accompaniment.

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<sup>91</sup> Jaime Jarrett. “Wonder Boy.” Jaime Jarrett, accessed March 13, 2021. <https://www.jarrettwritesmusicals.com/wonder-boi>

30

So is this saved? Or am I stuck in a bo-

dy I thought one day I could for-get.

B $\flat$  B $\flat$ /G B $\flat$ /E $\flat$  B $\flat$ /C

30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37

9/11/20

**Figure 2.** Musical and emotional climax of the song.

38

Tune out the bod - y, tune out what it needs. 'Cause if

— you list-en you'll on - ly feel an emp-ty space. The

B $\flat$  B $\flat$ /G B $\flat$ /E $\flat$  B $\flat$ /C

38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45

**Figure 3.** Climax continued, text painting of “space” in the piano accompaniment.

In an interview for the *Musical Theatre Factory*, Jarrett asserts that “Superheroes are incredibly similar to trans people in that we have...different relationships with our bodies than what is the norm. I love that with superheroes, their differences and their quirkiness, their quirky bodies...are empowering for them, whereas for trans people, I feel like a lot of times we’re told that the differences in our bodies are negative. It’s so easy to...talk about being trans in a negative light. I constantly hear...’he was born in the wrong body’ and I don’t want to see my body as wrong. I’m really glad that I have my body, it’s just that the way I have to navigate it is a little bit different than how a cisgender person has to navigate their body, and it does mean that I require different things medically, and maybe that’s okay, maybe that can actually be a positive thing.”

Jarrett wishes to create representation of trans people who are “fighting for happiness,” representation he wishes he’d had growing up. He also mentions how discomfort or hatred of one’s own body isn’t necessarily unique to being trans.<sup>92</sup> I asked Jarrett if he intended for his musical to be about disability as well as transness, and although Jarrett isn’t disabled and didn’t intend this connection, I believe it might be worthwhile to use the way Jarrett describes (some) trans bodies as needing different medical things than cis bodies as a route to thinking about the possible intersections between gender-affirming medicine, trans rights, and disability law.

Lawyer and activist Dean Spade uses one example from his legal history, the *Jean Doe v. Bell* case, as a framework for debating the utility of disability law in trans cases. Spade’s team sued the Administration for Children’s Services to seek a change in policy over a young trans woman in foster care who was not allowed to wear dresses or skirts in her group home facility,

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<sup>92</sup> Musical Theatre Factory. “MTF Makers Profile: Jacob Jarrett.” YouTube, February 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYWuf6N4xdo>

“and brought claims based on gender discrimination, the First Amendment, and disability descrimination.” Spade was wary of the precedent that applying disability law set, but he writes,

There were some aspects of our New York disability claim that eased my misgivings a little. The positive aspect of the ‘impairment’ requirement was that, unlike the federal disability statutes and some state statutes, we did not need to plead that Jean was ‘substantially limited in a major life activity.’ New York’s disability discrimination coverage is broader, allowing individuals with diagnosable impairments, even if they cannot prove limitation in a specific major life activity, to be considered ‘disabled’ for purposes of the statute. This meant simply demonstrating that Jean had been diagnosed with GID<sup>93</sup> was enough to get her covered under the law and to force the court to look at whether she was being discriminated against by the dress code policy. Nonetheless, I was very concerned about relying on GID in our claim. We won the case, and the court chose disability discrimination as the claim upon which we would prevail. The court’s decision establishes a basis for challenging discriminatory treatment of trans youth in foster care in New York, a pervasive problem, and also strengthens claims about discrimination against trans people in other contexts.<sup>94</sup>

Spade counters his own argument here by discussing the arguments against trans reliance on disability law. He points out that the gut reaction of trans people not wanting to be seen as disabled is based in ableism, and says that this is typically resolved by explaining that disability rights and law are not based on the idea that disabled people are flawed, but instead

that disabled people are capable of equal participation, but are currently barred from participating equally by artificial conditions that privilege one type of body or mind and exclude others. Similarly, trans people could use the disability rights framework to argue that we are fully capable of participating equally, but for artificial conditions that bar our participation. Examples of such conditions include gender-segregated facilities or dress codes administered according to birth gender. Like others in the disability rights movement, trans people are fighting against entrenched notions about what “normal” and “healthy” minds and bodies are, and fighting to become equal participants with equal access and equal protection from bias and discrimination.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Gender Identity Disorder diagnosis, now generally coded as Gender Dysphoria.

<sup>94</sup> Dean Spade, *Resisting Medicine/Remodeling Gender*, 18 *BERKELEY WOMEN’S L.J.* 15 (2003).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*



Spade is much more concerned about the need to rely on a diagnosable condition, namely GID, in order to make his claims, since these diagnoses and their associated treatments are regulatory (sometimes even still misused as rationale for involuntary psychiatric treatment), “promote a regime of coercive binary gender,” and are not accessible to many low-income people. Although Spade acknowledges the argument that there is an ethical obligation to plead claims however they are winnable, he is worried about legitimizing harmful practices through legal overreliance on the medical model of transness. On the other hand, he recognizes that many

trans people’s lives are entangled with medical establishments, and for those people, it would be beneficial to prove that sex reassignment related treatments are ‘medically necessary’ and should be covered by Medicaid and private health insurance. Attorneys and advocates working for trans equality have to skate this delicate line, de-medicalizing legal approaches to gender identity where we can, educating medical providers on how to provide medical services to gender transgressive people in ways that respect and encourage individual expression rather than conformity to binary gender, and also fighting for increased access to medical care for all people.<sup>96</sup>

Spade adds that the clients he works with often have to exist within the constraints of racist, anti-poor institutions such as “prisons, foster care, public benefits programs, juvenile justice, and the like...These same institutions more often than not are gender-segregated and operated through violence, harassment and intimidation that particularly impacts people whose bodies and expressions violate binary gender norms.” He concludes that

Sometimes it is possible to use victories for single plaintiffs to expand rights for a broad group, but it is always important to be careful that the fight for a single plaintiff’s rights does not curtail rights for a broader group. For example, I do not want to plead cases for clients who have undergone medical procedures in ways that will lead to a victory where the rights of trans people hinge on undergoing those procedures.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Dean Spade, *Resisting Medicine/Remodeling Gender*, 18 *BERKELEY WOMEN’S L.J.* 15 (2003).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

How to present a trans issue without implying universality is an ongoing struggle across disciplines, from Spade's work to this thesis to trans musicals. In my interview with Jaime Jarrett, he and I also discussed how it was difficult for him to figure out how to talk about surgery without falling into cis-perpetuated tropes about trans people and their bodies. As Jarrett says, surgery "has always been an arc throughout the show that has been kind of tricky because especially when there's so few trans narratives, there's a lot of pressure on this one to talk about surgery gender affirming surgery in a way that is useful and not harmful. And I wanted to be like, how do we tell this story and make it really about Jackson, specifically what he wants and make the whole story not about getting gender affirming surgery but about something else. But it did feel important to talk about the pain that is present in feeling dysphoria in your body and feeling like you kind of know what the answer is, kind of, and there's just so many roadblocks in your way. And I think I'm still on the journey of figuring out how to share that, like, this isn't the only answer. And it also isn't an answer that solves every problem that an individual has." Despite the nuances of this issue, and although the character Jackson is attempting to fit a dominant transition narrative when it comes to medicine, by introducing self-healing powers, Jarrett uses the idea of a transition without surgery as a way of challenging the dominant narrative.

### 3.3. “Fishmouth” from *Behind the Wallpaper* by Alex Temple (she/her)

Alex Temple tells me that her elevator pitch for her compositional style is that she’s into “narrative, surrealism, postmodernism, polystylism, queerness, cheesiness, shininess, and major seventh chords.” She elaborates, “I have referred to my music as genrequeer in the past, but I don’t identify as genderqueer anymore. I did for three or four years, maybe from like 2009-13 or so, but I still kind of like the framing. I mean, I feel like my approach to genre does involve a certain kind of standing outside of the semiotic assumptions that a lot of people have and you know, recognizing that things can be reinterpreted and repurposed.” Temple’s inspirations range from Robert Ashley (“English is diphthongy!”) to Kurt Weill, Brecht, Sondheim (especially *Sweeney Todd*), Tom Lehrer, Laurie Anderson, Frank Zappa, and Angela Morley.

Temple describes herself to me as a “queer polyamorous femme trans woman, Ashkenazi Jewish, white, U.S. citizen, composer, performer, writer, educator.” She tells me, “I’ve written some pieces that are either directly or indirectly about trans and queer stuff. So *Behind the Wallpaper* is one of the more explicit ones, although it’s a metaphorical treatment of transition in which the protagonist undergoes a sort of science fiction transformation into something possibly an alien. It’s implied, never stated outright, and a lot of the images in that piece — which I wrote the text for myself — were in some way inspired by my early transition experiences.” Temple spoke to a sense of alienation she experienced pre-transition and early in her transition which is reflected in *Behind the Wallpaper*, and more specifically one of the movements, “Fishmouth.”

*Behind the Wallpaper* is for voice, string quartet, and electronics, and was premiered in 2015 by Julia Holter and Spektral Quartet. The lyrics to “Fishmouth” are reprinted below:

When you walked in the door, they were waiting.  
They confronted you with the evidence.  
You'd been practicing in the mirror.  
They caught you off guard. You weren't ready.  
If they'd waited another day, you would have been fine.  
But when you attempted to speak:  
Whole fish flopping from your mouth,  
Wriggling on the floor,  
Gasping for air.  
Ocean water everywhere,  
staining the carpet and running out the door.  
"So that's your secret?  
You've been swallowing live fish?"  
You weren't listening  
You were trying to get the taste from your mouth.  
All over the city, you'd noticed people spitting on the sidewalks.  
You'd always just thought of them as rude,  
but now you wondered:  
Did they try to explain a disconcerting situation to[o] soon  
and end up with the ocean in their mouths?  
You could still taste the salt two weeks later.  
You could still feel the friction of the scales in your throat,  
And your teeth were slowly dissolving.  
All the dentists you saw shrugged their shoulders.  
They couldn't figure out what was happening.  
And bit by bit, you retreated from your daily life.

Temple tells me that "Fishmouth" is about transformation as well as "about trying to come out and not being ready." This latter interpretation is perhaps most clear in the beginning (Fig. 4); "You'd been practicing in the mirror. They caught you off guard. You weren't ready. If they'd waited another day, you would have been fine." The final few lines of "Fishmouth," remind me of countless interactions that my loved ones and I have had with cisgender doctors who, even if well-intentioned, don't know enough about trans bodies. The lyrics read, "All the dentists you saw shrugged their shoulders. They couldn't figure out what was happening. And bit by bit, you retreated from your daily life." (Fig. 5) Temple's setting of her own text is perky but

creepy, alternating between brusque, staccato gestures and lush, melodic waves. The sweeping melodic lines with lush harmonic underpinnings such as those on the words “speak” and “dissolving” in Figures 4 & 5 provide a stark contrast to the detached notes in the vocalist’s description of the mouth-fish (Fig. 6). Temple uses violin harmonics and heavy chromaticism throughout “Fishmouth” to create the uncanny effects that support the lyrics.

**Figure 4** (below). Expositional lyrics in “Fishmouth” and example of sweeping melodic gesture.

The image displays two systems of a musical score for the piece "Fishmouth".

**System 1 (Measures 27-31):**

- Vocal Line (Soprano):** Lyrics: "If they'd wai - ted a - no - ther day, you would - 've been fine." The melody is sweeping, starting in 2/4 time, moving to 3/4, and ending in 3/4.
- Instrumental Accompaniment:** Includes piano (p), violin (vln), and cello (cel) parts. Dynamics include *mf* and *sfz* (sforzando).

**System 2 (Measures 32-36):**

- Vocal Line (Soprano):** Lyrics: "But when you at - temp - ted to speak: \_\_\_\_\_" The melody is more rhythmic and ends with a fermata. Time signatures include 6/8 and 3/4.
- Instrumental Accompaniment:** Includes piano (p), violin (vln), and cello (cel) parts. Dynamics include *p* (piano) and *f* (forte).



Figure 6 (below). Narrator's technically detached revelation of an unusual affliction.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system (measures 40-44) features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as  $\text{♩} = 108$ . The vocal line includes the lyrics: "Whole fish, flopping from your mouth, wriggling on the floor, gas-ping for air. O-cean wa-ter". The piano accompaniment includes dynamics such as *p* and *mp*, and articulation like *pizz.* and *arco*. The second system (measures 45-49) features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as *Rall*. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "ev'-ry where, — stai-ning the car-pet and run-ning out the door. —". The piano accompaniment includes dynamics such as *p* and *pizz.*. The score is written for voice and piano, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature that changes from 4/4 to 3/8 and back to 4/4.

Temple also tells me about her work *Switch: A Science-Fiction Micro-Opera*, “which takes place in a parallel universe where left and right-handness is a primary social division and

there's all these analogies with gender and race and other things. Mostly gender, there's this kind of pseudoscientific notion that right handed people are supposed to be rational and businesslike and left handed people are supposed to be creative and artistic but also kind of impractical and need a right hand person to watch over them...The protagonist is trans dexterous, and the first line of the piece is: 'I have a confession to make. I was born right handed, does that shock you?'" Temple continues, "As far as just like gay stuff, it's not necessarily trans-specific, but another piece that I also wrote for Meaghan Burke, *Three Principles of Noir* has a sapphic protagonist. She goes back in time to kill the great-great-grandmother of an academic rival who stole her work and winds up falling for her instead."

She explains further, "I'd written too many pessimistic pieces, including *Switch* and I wanted to give [*Behind the Wallpaper*] a happy ending, but it's a happy ending in future tense. So I am in general a lot more at ease and comfortable gender-wise now than I was when I wrote this piece, and I've sort of found my people much more. So it came true, I guess."



### 3.4. “When the Dust Settles” by Mari Esabel Valverde (she/her)

Mari Esabel Valverde is a Mexican-American transgender woman, and describes herself as fabulous, femme, and heterosexual. One of Valverde’s earliest musical inspirations was Claude Debussy — she first considered composing “as a way to keep participating in choir as an adult without being seen.” She tells me, “Being out has attracted certain artists who want to collaborate with me,” and considers coming out to a room full of choral directors at an ACDA<sup>98</sup> conference in 2015 to have been the unofficial start of her career, as that was when she began receiving commissions. Part of this, Valverde explains, is that there are “cis artists who want trans music – they want to know – what is trans art?”

“Being able to connect with other trans artists can be fire,” Valverde tells me, recounting how she first connected with her collaborator, educator and poet Amir Rabiya, who has now written the lyrics for much of her music. The text of her piece for treble choir and piano, “When the Dust Settles,” resulted from Rabiya’s interview of Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, and many of the lyrics are lifted directly from Miss Major’s words. Miss Major Griffin-Gracy is a veteran of the 1969 Stonewall Riots as well as a contemporary activist for other trans women of color.

“When the Dust Settles” was commissioned in 2018 by the Peninsula Women's Chorus and VOX Femina for a three-year “Trailblazers” project that honored three American women from the past and present, one of whom was Miss Major, the honoree of Rabiya’s text and Valverde’s music. The key of the song is intentional, as Valverde writes in the notes of the score, “The choice of Db major, the key of the earth, hearkens back to “Our Phoenix,” my first collaboration with Rabiya, memorializing the lives of our trans siblings who are murdered

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<sup>98</sup> American Choral Directors Association

across America every year. But now, we celebrate trans lives and mold the relative minor into its parallel major—Bb—carrying along tones of Db major as badges for what we have survived to get to our ‘honeyed’ days.” Mid-piece, the melody ceases in exchange for a whispered line over sustained piano accompaniment. Chillingly, the ensemble whispers, “How many more have to die?” (Fig. 7)

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 4/4 time, key of Bb major, and is marked "breathily articulated, in desperation". The lyrics are "How man - y more have to die?". The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time, key of Bb major, and is marked "sub. p" (subito piano) and "f" (forte). The score includes a circled number 50 at the beginning of the vocal line.

**Figure 7.** Notation of unison speech.

The song is text-heavy, but each line carries such utmost weight and wisdom that comprehension is essential, and thankfully Valverde’s setting of Miss Major’s words through Rabiya’s poetry accomplishes this goal. The word “blooming” is set in a crescendoing unison of the four treble voices, achieving a text-painting effect that evokes the opening of flower petals into a four-part harmony on the following word. “You remind us to dream, to hold tomorrow between our lips, we deserve to kiss without fear,” the four voices announce together, before each vocal line breaks off to independently continue singing, “to grow old, to sway our hips, to wear what we wish, to relish in the pleasure of our bodies.” (Fig. 8) At each recurrence of the titular refrain “when the dust settles,” the “t” in dust is clearly separated from the rest of the word and given an equal emphasis and rhythmic duration for a striking effect (Fig. 9). “To relish in the

pleasure of our bodies” is not just an expression of standard body or sex positivity, it is revolutionary for trans people to oppose a society that both tells us our bodies are limiting and need to be changed in order for us to gain respect, and yet makes it difficult for us to access these changes.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system (measures 63-66) features a unison vocal line that transitions into a four-part harmony. The lyrics are: "mor - row be - tween our lips we de - serve to kiss with - out". The piano accompaniment is marked *p*. The second system (measures 66-70) continues the four-part harmony. The lyrics are: "fear to rel - ish in the pleas - ure of our bo - dies", "fear to grow old", "fear to wear what we wish", and "fear to sway our hips". The piano accompaniment is marked *pp*.

**Figure 8.** The unison to four-part-harmony progression.

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1 beau-ti-ful star when the dus-t set-tles, we'll

2 beau-ti-ful star when the dus-t set-tles, we'll

3 beau-ti-ful star when the dus-t set-tles, we'll

4 beau-ti-ful star when the dus-t set-tles, we'll

*f* *mp poco a poco cresc.*

*f* *mp poco a poco cresc.*

*f* *mp poco a poco cresc.*

*f* *mp poco a poco cresc.*

*f* *mf*

**Figure 9.** Setting of the word “dust.”

Among the commissioned choirs, Valverde tells me that there was a lot of discussion and some trepidation leading up to the premiere of “When the Dust Settles” over whether it was okay to have a choir of cisgender women singing this song. Valverde explains that she changed some of the text to not say “we” or “us,” “so that the people that were singing it weren’t owning a trans narrative, but at the same time,” she counters, “you’re talking about a trans person, the author of the text is trans, and the composer is trans [so] it’s probably okay, but there’s that worry of who’s telling the story and do [they] have permission.” Valverde says, “I want cis choirs to do trans music.” In the final measures of “When the Dust Settles,” the choir announces triumphantly and repeatedly “We are still here,” and so is Miss Major.

### 3.5. “Shout this Love Song at the Mirror” by Xenia St. Charles Gilbert (she/her)

20-year-old Xenia St. Charles Gilbert describes herself as a (trans) woman, elaborating that she hasn't figured out whether the *trans* or the *woman* part is more central to her identity, as well as a musician and someone who is queer in terms of sexuality. She says, “I think my gender relates to my composing in the sense that my gender affects the way that I interact with the world. And the way that the world perceives me. And the way that I interact with the world. And the way the world perceives me affects my composing. So, I guess they have kind of an indirect cause-and-effect relationship in that sense...I think I would say that my music is like specifically queer and specifically trans and that's not because I'm necessarily setting out to write every piece about trans stuff, even though some of my pieces are, but kind of more because being trans has a large effect on how I exist in the world and my composing kind of stems from that.”

Gilbert describes her compositional style and its evolution as one that is steeped in classical tradition (from which she has grown more distant over time), free improv, playing in a klezmer band, and writing pieces with alternative notation. She says that she is constantly asking herself “What's something I haven't done before?” Among her musical inspirations, Gilbert names Soviet-German polystylist Alfred Schnittke and “the way pop and R&B singers ornament, melodically.”

“Shout this Love Song at the Mirror,” a list of disaster scenarios for three lower instruments and megaphone, was originally written for an oboist's master's recital for the more specific instrumentation of oboe, bass clarinet, baritone sax, and electronics (including megaphone). It was supposed to be performed in the spring of 2020, but was canceled due to COVID-19. Gilbert wrote the piece shortly after coming out as trans, and she says that “Shout

this Love Song at the Mirror” was “probably the first piece where within the piece itself I was...really honest about what the piece was about. And I think the timing of that was really important with my coming out...I think I'm glad it happened when it did...Although interestingly, I think I was even kind of pushing back against my own desire to be more open because when I was first writing this I sort of had in mind that I would probably get another trans friend to do the megaphone part.”

Prior to coming out, Gilbert focused more on instrumental music, as she explains, “Writing instrumental chamber music was kind of an excuse for me to write stuff that was about very personal things without needing to tell anyone. And so I could kind of be secretive about what the piece was actually about, or even just like drop hints in people's faces and they never got it. And so like writing purely instrumental stuff meant that I could hide. And then once I was out, I no longer had to hide and also kind of didn't really want to.” Gilbert describes how coming out shifted her mentality from “How can I talk about this thing without talking about this thing?” to “How can I talk about this thing as much as possible?” Before coming out, she wrote a piece for six bassoons titled “\_\_\_\_\_ are only noise; nothing needs to be permanent.” The “\_\_\_\_\_” in the title stood for “names,” but no one knew that at the premiere except for Gilbert and the other trans person that had voiced this sentiment in a conversation about the process of picking a new name. It is clear how far Gilbert has come in her journey of self-acceptance that she is now able to produced work such as the aptly-titled “Shout this Love Song at the Mirror.”

Gilbert tells me that the text for the megaphone in “Shout this Love Song at the Mirror” is essentially her “shouting [her] inner ramblings at the audience.” For Gilbert, the symbolism of the megaphone is varied, calling to mind protests and political connotations, but also the oddly

specific nostalgia of a pick-up line of cars from elementary school. The open instrumentation of the piece encouraged her to keep the parts on the simpler side — lots of parallel triads — and brings the text to the forefront (Fig. 10). One short sentence that is packed with meaning is “But GOD, I need to pee.” Gendered bathrooms are such a prominent trans issue topic in mainstream cisgender society, but as any trans person can tell you, yes, bathrooms can be dangerous and stressful, but at the end of the day, that’s because we just need to pee like everyone else. All of the text in Gilbert’s piece is striking and heart-wrenchingly honest, so I would be lying to call any given sentence particularly so, nevertheless, one such sentence (Fig. 11) reads, “You lost your man-pants superpower. And so then you said, why the hell am I doing this to myself?”

The musical score for Figure 10 consists of five staves. The top staff is the vocal line, with lyrics: "brain was too bus - y com - ing up with ev' - ry pos - si - ble dis - as - ter sce - nar - i - o for an - y sit - u -". The second staff is for Drums (Drn.), showing a simple rhythmic accompaniment. The bottom three staves are for Low Instrument I, II, and III. Each of these three instrument parts plays a series of parallel triads. The dynamics for these parts are marked as *f*, *p*, *mp*, *mf*, *p*, and *mp* across the measures. The time signature is 12/8, and there are 4-measure rests in the vocal line.

**Figure 10.** Parallel triads in instruments.

The image displays a musical score for a song, divided into three systems. The first system (measures 98-100) features a vocal line (Mega) with lyrics: "Disaster scenario number ninety-eight: You lost your". The vocal line is marked *pp* "stage whisper" and *p* "ugh". The accompaniment includes a drum line (Drn.) and three low instrument lines (Low Instr. I, II, III). The second system (measures 101-103) continues the vocal line with lyrics: "man-pants superpower.". The vocal line is marked *mf*. The accompaniment includes a drum line and three low instrument lines. The third system (measures 104-106) continues the vocal line with lyrics: "And so then you said, why the hell am I doing this to myself?". The vocal line is marked *f* "angry". The accompaniment includes a drum line and three low instrument lines. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (*pp*, *p*, *mf*, *f*), articulation (*stage whisper*, *ugh*, *angry*), and performance directions (*poco accel.*, *poco rit.*, *a tempo*).

**Figure 11.** “You lost your man-pants superpower...”

According to Gilbert, this refers to the idea that (especially pre-coming out) she could choose how she would be viewed in public on any given day, but had the complicated option of dressing masculinely to hide. Throughout the piece, Gilbert uses the word “fuck” in abundance, though the effect is not diminished by its frequency. Gilbert’s use of expression markings is also



colorful, such as “having none of your shit” (Fig. 12) and “as if doing the voiceover for an aspcia commercial.”

The image shows a musical score for "Interlude II (24") in 8/8 time. It features four staves: a vocal line (Mega.) and three low instrument parts (Low Instr. I, II, and III). The vocal line has two main sections: a first section starting at measure 16 with the dynamic marking *pp* and a second section starting at measure 8 with the dynamic marking *mp*. The lyrics for the second section are: "having none of your shit" and "You have this cool superpower where everyone seems to think you're a man whenever you're wearing pants." The instrumental parts consist of sustained notes with dynamic markings that change from *mp* to *pp* towards the end of the piece. The score is marked with measure numbers 16 and 8, and a final measure number 12.

**Figure 12.** Colorful expression markings.

The sentiments conveyed by “Shout this Love Song at the Mirror” are raw and an honest reflection of Gilbert’s internal monologue, one of great self-doubt, but in the end, love. Her program notes for the piece are succinct, yet radical, and speak to her journey of self-acceptance that we discussed in our interview, they read “I love you; you should love yourself too.”

### 3.6. *Migrations* by Nebal Maysaud (usually they/them, sometimes she/her)<sup>99</sup>

Nebal Maysaud is a Lebanese, Druze, queer composer who explains, “I started getting really into Arabic music as a way to decenter the whiteness of contemporary classical music...It was my way of reclaiming my identity and making it my own.” They continue, “I say [my music] is Arabic style, but at the same time, it’s this kind of collage of different theoretical techniques and compositional techniques and inspirations that I’ve gathered over the years to create an aesthetic that’s my own.” When asked about their gender, Maysaud tells me, “My gender is a hard thing to figure out; I’ve described it as something that is lost due to colonization.”

In terms of inspirations, Maysaud says they’ve recently been listening to the vocal music sung by Abdel Halim Hafez and composed by Baligh Hamdi, and also that they can’t deny a heavy Bach influence in their music, elaborating that among the things they like to do in their music are “applying counterpoint techniques to Arabic maqam” and ending pieces in fugues.

*Migrations*, a five-movement work for solo alto saxophone was one of Maysaud’s first commissions, and they worked with saxophonist Joe Connor in developing the piece. Maysaud explains that they tried to make their “process as collaborative as possible while also tending to personal needs for expression, what we ended up making was a piece that stylistically fit Joe very well while also making a statement about immigration to the U.S.”

Maysaud tells me, *Migrations* “is dedicated to my uncle, who earlier this year has received an invitation to interview<sup>100</sup> - that relates to the part four of the piece. The form is based on the process to immigrate to the U.S. from the perspective of someone like my uncle, a brother

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<sup>99</sup> “Very situational.”

<sup>100</sup> He had already been going through the process for six years at the time the piece was composed.

bringing your sibling over, it's a process of documented immigration, to show how it's very unfeasible for so many people, while also trying to play on the emotional toll, the quarter/third of a lifetime process it takes."

When I first listened to *Migrations*, particularly the first movement, I kept looking in the score for any notes about a second instrument because I didn't realize the saxophone could produce half of the sounds I heard Joe Connor make. The first movement incorporates many percussive key clacks and breathing through the instrument; the score calls for "as much air as sound." This movement in particular is highly influenced by Marcos Balter's *Wicker Park*. Maysaud writes in the program notes, "Mainly, I wanted to express the feeling of being unable to release your voice. The active suppression of one's own life in a country without opportunity."

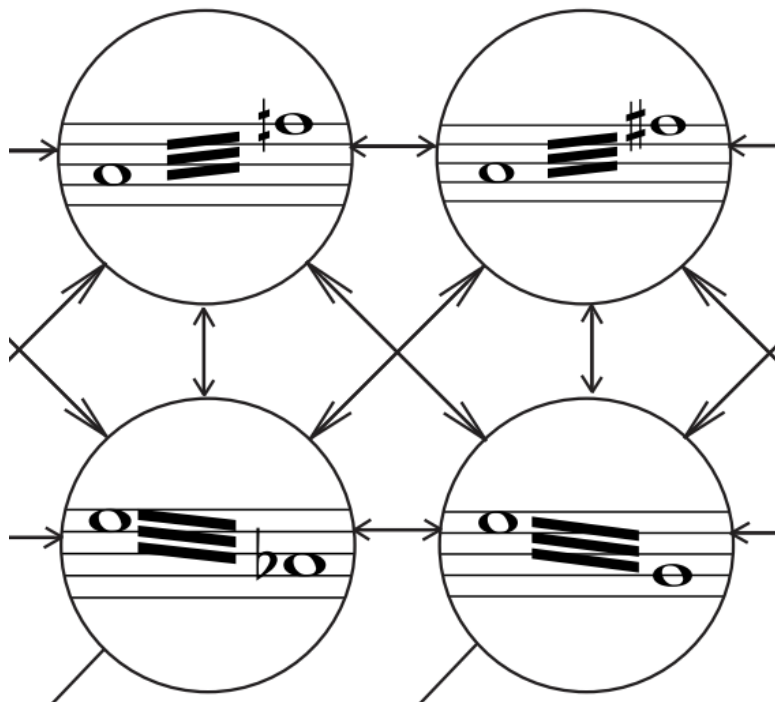
Maysaud tells me they wanted to create "an effect of pushing through something that's almost impossible to break through." They elaborate, "I did want to incorporate A hint of maqam <sup>101</sup> melody...still has that essence of a way that is sort of authentic, it's not entirely like an Arabic melody on its own but it's also not just putting in an augmented second and saying 'this is music of the desert.'" Maysaud emphasizes that they "don't want to be recognized as someone who knows Arabic music theory, because I don't, you need about ten years of training. Right now, I'm a student at best, I incorporate it into my music...So many folks in contemporary music pretend to be masters of something they're not, and that's especially true for Arabic music where we have a major problem of ethnomusicologists studying under one Fulbright and coming back and applying really bad theoretical concepts to our music." They continue, "But at the same time, I do want to encourage a lot more people to study Arabic music as if it's just as good literature as

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<sup>101</sup> Maqam is the system of melodic modes used in Arabic music.

anything else. I learned more about vocal music from one lesson — because it’s a vocal genre — than I ever did studying Schubert, and it’s similar concepts too, just blocks of five notes at a time makes singing easier.”

When studying Maysaud’s score, I kept looking at the second movement and thinking about how the notational style of the cells and arrows reminded me somewhat of Neo-Riemannian transformations (e.g., parallel, relative, leading tone exchange). I asked Maysaud how they decided on this form of notation or if the concept for the technique led them to this notation (excerpted in Fig. 13 below).



**Figure 13.** Cell notation in Nebal Maysaud’s *Migrations*.

Maysaud explains, “Sometimes I like to sketch music by just kind of drawing things,” and that in the case of the second movement of *Migrations*, “I drew a circle, and I was like ‘what

if I had many circles’...[the circles] reminded me of the bureaucracy we had to go through for my uncle....I wanted to create...confusion and difficulty of getting from the beginning to the end of that.”

The third movement of *Migrations* is slow, drawn out, and repetitive in order to evoke the 6-23 year wait from initial petition for U.S. immigration to the interview at the embassy, represented by the fourth movement, which is meant to be “Hectic. Slowly building towards clarity.” The fifth and final movement of *Migrations* describes what happens after a successful interview when, Maysaud writes, “you can leave for the U.S. and with all the problems this country has (and there are many), it can still be the first opportunity for one to sing their own voice.” Reflecting this, the last movement is an impassioned, freely flowing melody with the least extended technique of any of the movements in *Migrations*.

The possibility of a gender lost to colonization, as Maysaud puts it, is one that is certainly under-investigated in this project. In selecting certain criteria for inclusion — for instance, by requiring a score to analyze, I have inevitably skewed the conversation towards certain genres of music and away from others. That is, my inclusion criteria are inherently exclusionary because to some extent, I am still operating within the framework of Western music theory which, as I have outlined earlier, is a white, Eurocentric, and male field by nature. Fred Maus uses feminist and queer music theories (outlined in my section *What if Music Isn't Sex?*) to suggest that the male theorist attempts to maintain pseudo-objective, “masculine” discourses is an attempt to regain a position of power that is lost by the “feminizing” position of listening.<sup>102</sup> Nothing about this project should suggest that there exists such a thing as an objective truth in music analysis. To

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<sup>102</sup> Fred Everett Maus, “Masculine Discourse in Music Theory,” *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 2 (1993): p. 264, <https://doi.org/10.2307/833390>.

each of us, our truths are real. Another point of possible exclusion here could be the very choice to center transness as the common-thread identity, which runs the risk of implying that transness is the most important identity for the participants, and while this may be true for some, it is certainly not true for all. Like a song cycle, these thematically intertwined vignettes are intended to stand both alone and together. I hope both that each vignette can be read to learn more about one of these artists and their work, but that the additional context of the surrounding, and sometimes contrasting, narratives provides a deeper understanding that trans composers and trans musics<sup>103</sup> are not a monolith.

In the future, I would first and foremost like to see more commissions and programming of trans composers, both those included in these pages and the many spectacular artists beyond the scope of this project. In my own future work, I would like to trace more trans music and musicians through history by using archives, and I also hope to interview older trans composers to preserve their oral histories. Trans musicology is still a relatively underdeveloped field, and I would love to see more work, ideally by trans women, on the rich history and contemporary culture of trans women in electronic music (briefly touched on in section 1.4) that extends beyond Wendy Carlos. So many works on transness do as much harm as good by presenting one archetypal experience as universal, and I hope if nothing else, this project communicates that transness isn't something that can be summed up in one single story, but that centering personal narrative leads to a more nuanced and insightful understanding of a work.

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<sup>103</sup> Again, not all trans composers write trans music. Not all trans music is about transness. Even perhaps, not all music about transness is trans music — I would argue it rarely, if ever is, when made by cisgender composers — but for brevity's sake, I will leave the reader to ponder this one on their own.

## CHAPTER 4 EPILOGUE

These six featured vignettes of trans composers are by no means intended to be a comprehensive overview of trans music, nor even of the slice of trans existence that is contemporary notated trans composition in the United States. When speaking with the composers, I used certain conversations to tie into other trans issues such as medical care or disability when the connections seemed appropriate, still others stand alone, yet together. In settling on a vignette style of presenting these analyses and interviews, I realized that it was important to present them as both separate but interconnected. For instance, I included two musical theatre songs (in 3.1 and 3.2) that each critically engage with the trans medical narrative in some way, but they do so from very different perspectives.

While most of the musical works examined here are explicitly about transness, some are not — I decided to embrace this variety, although I did intentionally prioritize pieces about gender in some form. This was a complicated decision, as marginalized artists are far too often only celebrated for work on their axes of marginalization and trauma, and trans artists are no exception. Artists should not be confined to making art about their marginalized identities, and trans composers write incredible music that is not about gender. On the other hand, too many cisgender artists have made art or written about the trans experience, only to receive greater platforming than their trans contemporaries producing art on similar themes. However, considering that this project is about trans identity in composition, it seemed appropriate to focus primarily on music about gender.

I refuse to say that trans works should be studied in one specific way, because everyone's going to have their own vantage point and life experiences, and to do so would be to reduce transness to something two-dimensional that exists in a vacuum, which it does not and should not. Thus, instead of proposing a definitive methodology, what I can say unequivocally is: uplift trans and other(wise) marginalized voices and make sure these stories keep getting told.

I started this project with a focus on challenging the intentional fallacy, but then as my approach changed I realized that this impulse came from a place of feeling that I needed to make excuses for including trans composers' stories and personal anecdotes. I am not sure whether my initial instincts were a result of internalized transphobia or what I have been taught is a divide between the academic and the personal, but when I challenged that expectation within myself, I came to understand that the goal of my project was to center and celebrate stories instead of making excuses for their presence in my analyses. Although my methodology shifted slightly from my initial trial interview with Grant and their "Drones" piece, my central thesis remains the same, that dismissal of the personal experience in music analysis ignores the potential for an enhanced expressive context afforded by composers' own assessments, as well as to contributing to the silencing of already othered voices, such as in the case of transgender composers.



**APPENDIX**  
**Composer Websites**

Xenia St. Charles Gilbert || [Youtube](#)

Grey Grant || [www.greygrant.com/](http://www.greygrant.com/)

Jaime Jarrett || [www.jarrettwritesmusicals.com](http://www.jarrettwritesmusicals.com)

brin solomon || [www.brinsolomon.com](http://www.brinsolomon.com)

Nebal Maysaud || [www.nebalmaysaud.com](http://www.nebalmaysaud.com)

Alex Temple || [www.alextemplemusic.com](http://www.alextemplemusic.com)

Mari Esabel Valverde || [www.marivalverde.com](http://www.marivalverde.com)

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