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**"You are safe. You are calm. You are in control."**

Carly Erst

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“YOU ARE SAFE. YOU ARE CALM.  
YOU ARE IN CONTROL.”

for solo viola, four strings and fixed media

by Carly Erst

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
**Master of Music in Composition** in the School of Music  
Jordan College of the Arts, Butler University, Indianapolis, IN USA

COMMITTEE

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Date (final approval): 12-17-21 Advisor



**“You are safe. You are calm.  
You are in control.”**

for solo viola, 4 strings, and stereo fixed media

duration: ~10 minutes

carly erst

## Performance Notes

Piece MUST have a viola soloist and any combination of four bowed orchestral string instruments (violin, viola, cello, bass) for a total of five players.

The top line of music is what should be played by the performers. The bottom line is a simple map of what is heard in the audio.

A cell is delineated by the timestamps shown. A cell ends when a double bar line is reached.

Repeat cells as needed to last the time duration indicated.

Rests may be any length. If no rests are indicated, there should be no silence during the cell.

May use cell phone (or any other inconspicuous item) on your stand as a way of timing. Alternatively, players may share a large screen such as a laptop displaying a timer.

There should be NO breaks between the movements. The piece is continuous.

Cells should meld together; there should not be any obvious breaks or sudden switches in dynamic, style, register, etc. unless indicated.

Sections of improv may be arco, pizzicato, con legno, harmonics, over the fingerboard, etc. as long as the specified notes can be heard.

“Kick it” at the end of the 1:10-1:23 cell means at the very end of the pitch, the player should pull their bow fast creating an accent at the tip of the bow at the end of the held pitch

When the viola soloist is playing “Happy and You Know It” (2:22-2:35), they should be listening intently to the track. Whenever the child on the track talks, treat it as an interruption, stop playing, and then start over. Use a theatrical face, and look annoyed each time you are interrupted. At the end of the cell time, look defeated as if you give up.

The “Jesus Loves Me” cell (7:48-8:12) should be played in unison. Look to the soloist to begin the cell together, and to end the cell together. Repeat as needed to fill the given time duration. Finish the written melody before moving to the next cell (if this means the next cell begins slightly later than the time given that is okay!)

During the final cell that is marked with percussive sounds, players may:

- Knock on their instruments
- Stomp their feet
- Pound their stand on the floor
- Lift and crash their chairs on the floor
- Kick their stand
- Scream (only in short loud bursts)
- Do anything else the player can think of to make loud, tantrum-like sounds or movements

During this cell, players should start with smaller, more rhythmic gestures, moving to larger, more excessive gestures to look as if they are throwing a tantrum. Players should interact with each other and their surroundings.

## **Program Note**

*"You are safe. You are calm. You are in control."* was written during the composer's time working at a daycare. All of the sounds in the track are recordings of actual children at the daycare. This piece uses a string quintet, which acts as the voice of the teacher against the electronic track acting as the voice of the children. The piece was written as a social commentary on the life of the average student in higher education - working a full time job while also being a full time student to make end's meet. The piece was written at a time of mental and emotional exhaustion for the composer and was used as a coping mechanism to poke fun at her mental state at the time.

## **Attributions**

"Happy and You Know It" written by Joe Raposo, 1971.

"Jesus Loves Me" written by Anna Bartlett Warner, 1860.

"Hush Little Baby" recorded by HooplaKidz, 2014.

Instrument and vocal sounds used with permission.

**Duration:** ~10 minutes

### **Instrumentation:**

Solo viola

4 bowed string instruments (violin, viola, cello, or bass)

# "You are safe. You are calm. You are in control."

Carly Erst

## I. Where is Harper's Paci?

**0:00-0:20** **0:20-0:40**

*p* *ff* *sul ponticello*  
*at frog*

"ow ow ow" "ow ow ow" Higher pitched crying...more noise

"It really hurts"

**0:40-1:10**

*f* *Manically switch between pizz. and arco*  
*No specific notes, follow shape* *p* *f*

Lots of background noise coughing cry

"I don't wanna do it!" "STOP calling me a crybaby..." "Stop looking at me!"

**1:10-1:34**  
*Violins and violas only*

*mf* *ff* *p* *Kick it*

*Change chords at will,*  
*play any or all notes presented* "NO!" "Never never" "NO!" *IMMEDIATELY cut off after*  
*4th "NO!" that is heard on the track*

Singular voice crying never never!!!!!" "NO!" "NO!" "Never never  
never never!!!!!"

**1:34-1:57** **1:57-2:09** **2:09-2:19**

*Improv using the given pitches*  
*Slow, menacing, angry*  
*Varying dynamics*

"No no no" "Never never" Screaming decrescendos Background crying  
never never!!!!!"

Misc. screaming One voice talking

## II. Incident Report: Jakob bit Blakely

2:19-2:50

Viola Solo

*swing*

Lots of background noise

"Owen's not nice to me"

"Owen's not nice to me"

"STOP calling me a crybaby..."

"STOP calling me a crybaby..."

2:50-3:20

*mp* *fff* *p* *mf* *mp* *f*  
Extreme Dynamics

Lots of background noise

Heavily effected prominent scream

3:20-3:40

Violins and violas only

*ff* *pp* *n*  
Sustained pitches.  
Change chords at will,  
play any or all notes presented

Heavily effected background noises

Scream x3



### III. I took his giraffe because he was throwing it, and then he threw a chair...

3:40-4:35 4:35-5:45 *No Solo Viola*  
*Choose one note and hold until*  
*"Buy you a billy goat"*

*mf* *No vibrato*

Snoring Music starts . . . "HUSH" Music starts again

"No" . . . and stops "Hush little baby -- buy you a billy goat"

5:45-6:30 *dolce*  
*espressivo*  
 Viola Solo

*f*

3 Snoring  
4 Backwards music

Snoring  
Backwards music

*Begin to play a few pitches out of tune*  
*Continue through the end of solo*

Snoring  
Backwards music

Snoring  
Backwards music

"You are safe. You are calm. You are in control."

**6:30-6:51**  
*No Solo Viola*  
*Hold one pitch through 7:09*  
*Slight Vibrato*

*pp* *mp*

Snoring

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It shows a long, sustained note starting at a piano (*pp*) dynamic and gradually increasing to a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The note has a slight vibrato indicated by a wavy line above it.

**6:51-7:09**

*Viola Solo*

*Gliss randomly, following line*

Snoring

A musical staff in bass clef. It features a wavy, irregular line representing a glissando. The line starts on a middle note and moves up and down across the staff. Below the staff, there are two horizontal lines that rise and fall in a similar wavy pattern, representing snoring.

**7:09-7:48**

IV. Do not throw your shoes! That is not safe.

*p* *ff*

*Manically switch between pizz. and arco*  
*No specific notes, follow shape*

Background talking begins (*ppp*)

Talking gets louder... ...and louder

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It shows a series of notes with stems pointing down, indicating pizzicato. The notes are grouped into several clusters. The dynamic starts at piano (*p*) and increases to fortissimo (*ff*). Below the staff, there are two horizontal lines that rise and fall in a wavy pattern, representing background talking.

**7:48-8:10**

*Improv using the given pitches*  
*Slow, menacing, angry*  
*Varying dynamics*

Lots of background noise

Crying begins

A musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It shows two chords: a triad of G4, Bb4, and D5 in the first measure, and a triad of G4, Bb4, and D5 in the second measure. Below the staff, there are two horizontal lines that rise and fall in a wavy pattern, representing background noise.



“You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.” - Carly Erst

*“You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.”* is a multi-faceted piece for string ensemble and fixed media designed to accomplish several goals. These goals include making the audience uncomfortable, making the audience laugh, commenting on the life of a musician that is unable to use music as their sole income and therefore must have a “real” job as well as composing, and the mental health effect that may have on that musician. In this piece I employ several techniques to make the audience uncomfortable and in doing so, those uncomfortable people become part of a dark joke for those on the “inside;” that is, those who find humor in the caricature that is created with the soundscape of young children screaming in apparent pain, throwing a tantrum, and crying. The ideas conveyed here - audience discomfort, amusement at the expense of those uncomfortable audience members, and commentary on life outside of music - are not new and can be compared to several pieces of recent years and of the distant past. In this paper I will explore where this piece fits with similar compositions, how the piece was constructed, and why I believe it will maintain social relevance in the future.

*“You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.”* was composed to be a dark joke that people might view in the same way that I did. I knew that some would find the piece distasteful and potentially disturbing, which is where the piece became more than a one-dimensional gag. While composing this piece, the joke was initially in the absurdity - the over-the-top effects, the “in your face” opening, the prolonged sections of time with either too much screaming, or not enough “music” to make the audience, and even some of my compositional peers and teachers, feel comfortable. But after it was displayed to an audience of peers and usual concert-goers, the humor became multi-faceted. No longer was it just funny in its absurdity, it was funny to watch

the people who do not see the humor become uncomfortable with it. Those who do not get the joke are now a part of the punchline to those who do get it.

This phenomenon, where people who are not “in” on the joke become integral to the overall effect of the piece, is not new. Mozart often did this in his operas particularly with male and noble characters and even in smaller settings with his piece that is aptly known as *The Musical Joke* (K522). In K522, the point, the joke, may be lost to one who is not a music scholar. While the piece still sounds “nice,” there are several intentional compositional errors that are meant to make musicians snicker. For example, the phrasing is very awkwardly disjunct. M. 4 acts both as the final bar of phrase 1 (mm. 1-4) and the first bar of phrase 2 (mm. 4-7).



*The Musical Joke*, K522, mm. 1-7

This may be felt by the average audience member, but Mozart goes on to do more to muddle the lines between a pleasant piece and a musical joke. In mm. 21-24 Mozart adds an Alberti bass



*The Musical Joke*, K522, mm. 21-24

figure in the highest voice of the ensemble and makes it the most interesting part of the music for those measures. There are plenty more examples of witty musical jokes that Mozart uses in this piece that only further solidify the humor of the piece. The joke is not only in the humorous arranging that is done, but also at the expense of those in the audience who do not catch the jokes that are blatant to those that are privy.

Another example of this technique of audience exclusion can be found in Barbara Strozzi's *Lagrima Mie*. This piece, written in the late 1650's, is a joke at the expense of the men for whom it was initially performed. While there is not extensive research on this particular piece, it is known that Strozzi performed many of her works for her father's intellectual group called the *Accademia delgi Incogniti* who were known for their belittlement of women, going so far as to publish a pamphlet questioning whether or not women had souls.<sup>1</sup> In her piece, Strozzi took the lyrics of *Lagrima Mie* from Pietro Dolfin's poem of the same title.

Lagrima mie, à che vi trattenete,  
Perchè non isfogate il fier' dolore,  
Chi mi toglie'l respiro e opprime il core?

Lidia, che tant' adoro,  
Perchè un guardo pietoso, ahimè, mi donò  
I paterno rigor l'imprigionò.  
Tra due mura rinchiussa stà la bella innocente,  
Dove giunger non può raggio di sole,  
E quel che più mi duole  
Ed accresc' il mio mal, tormenti e pene,  
È che per mia cagione prova male il mio bene  
E voi lume dolenti non piangete!  
Lagrima mie, à che vi trattenete?

Lidia, ahimè, veggio mancarmi, l'idol mio,  
Che tanto adoro!  
Stà colei tra duri marmi per cui spiro  
E pur non moro.  
Se la morte m'è gradita,  
Or che son privo di spene,

Tears of mine, why do you hold back,  
why don't you wash away the pain  
which takes my breath and crushes my heart?

Lidia, whom I adore,  
Because she gave me a pitying glance,  
Has been imprisoned by her severe father.  
The innocent girl is locked up within walls  
Which the sun's rays cannot penetrate,  
And what pains me most,  
And increases my torment,  
Is that I am the cause of my beloved's suffering.  
And you, my eyes, are not weeping!  
Tears of mine, why do you hold back?

Alas, how I miss my Lidia, my idol,  
I love so much!  
She is shut up within marble walls and I sigh  
but I do not die!  
If death might be granted to me  
now that I have no hope,

<sup>1</sup> Ellen Rosand, "Barbara Strozzi, 'virtuosissima cantatrice': The Composer's Voice," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer, 1978) 247-248.

Dhè, toglietemi la vita  
(Ve ne prego) aspre mie pene!  
Ma ben m'accorgo, che per tormentarmi  
maggiormente, La sorte mi nega anco la morte.

Se dunque è vero, o Dio, che sol del pianto mio.  
Il rio destino ha sete.

take my life,  
(I beg of you) oh my sufferings!  
But I am well aware that in order  
to torture me even more.

Fate even denies me death, it is true then, oh God,  
that destiny desires only my tears.

The poem was written nearly 100 years before Strozzi was even born and was written in the same timeframe as madrigals that humorously use death and dying as a metaphor alluding to sexual acts such as Arcadelt's *Il bianco e dolce cigno*. Based on the performance setting and Strozzi's well-known use of wit both in and out of a musical setting, I contend that Strozzi was making a joke that was intended to "go over the heads" of those that were in the intended audience. The lyrics of *Lagrima mie* are stylistically similar to the madrigals that used death and sorrow to allude to sex, using the same buzzwords that everyone knew as innuendo in the 1400's and 1500's. Based on the many reviews of the piece from the initial performance even through to present day analyses, it seems that Strozzi's joke has been lost with the passage of time. The piece was, and still is, seen simply as a beautiful and heart breaking lament of love unrequited while showcasing the voice and virtuosity of the performer.<sup>2</sup>

While my piece "*You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.*" is meant to be funny and joking in nature, its inspiration was not a funny situation. It is a piece that was written from a place of deep mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. At the time of composition, I was working full time at a daycare with 4 and 5 year old students, as well as being a full time student myself. While I absolutely adored every single one of my students at the daycare, there were extenuating circumstances that made working there nearly impossible. The administration was

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Beer, "Strozzi," in *Sounds and Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women of Classical Music*, (London, England: Oneworld Publications, 2016), 68.

not helpful with students who were causing major issues in the class, there were far too many students in the class, there was not enough support for the students who clearly were having more issues than I was capable of helping or diagnosing, and the expectation of what I was supposed to be teaching was almost laughable because the students in the class were so out of control. All of these things caused me to feel like I was a horrible teacher and person for losing my patience with the students several times per day.

The instruction that I was given through the administration at this daycare was to use a method of calming the students through positive reinforcement called Gentle Guidance. While this sounds wonderful in theory, according to Gentle Guidance a teacher's biggest defense against a complete meltdown from a four year old was to tell them things like "You are safe. You are calm. You are in control." Four-year-olds see through this tactic about as easily as adults see through it. This method did not stop the tantrums and did not help the students who had issues that were likely undiagnosed at the time that they were in my class. Teachers often said that they wished that they could record the students and show it to their parents so they would see how out of control the classroom was at any given moment. And with that sentiment, the piece was born.

The idea of a piece being written around a situation that was mentally or emotionally difficult has been done many times throughout history. While some composers may draw inspiration from beautiful visions such as landscapes or warm feelings of love and admiration, there are times when composers also draw from unpleasant and difficult situations. There are a vast range of unpleasant situations from which composers have drawn inspiration; from very serious and dire historical moments such as Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7* (Leningrad Symphony) and Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* to Schelle's *Extraction No. 9* which depicts a dental surgery while the music is being played. While the situation under which my



piece was written was obviously not as earth-shattering as Shostakovich or Messiaen's, my piece is similar to Schelle's inspiration for *Extraction No. 9*. A dental procedure is routine and various procedures are performed daily. However, the procedures are very uncomfortable and many people have an aversion to dental work and dentists in general. Showing graphic images of these procedures is purposefully making the audience uncomfortable, which was the composer's intent. Similarly, the work of a daycare teacher is not uncommon, and many people have done it. However, the screaming, crying, and tantrums that are depicted in my piece are sounds that people do not want to listen to. After receiving audience feedback from performances of the piece, it seems that parents were particularly vulnerable to experiencing higher levels of discomfort. Distress and discomfort was my intent. I wanted my audience to be uncomfortable while listening to this piece.

I find humor and satisfaction in making the audience uncomfortable with my music and several techniques are employed to accomplish this within "*You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.*" I recorded the kids in my class having major meltdowns, playing, snoring, and other various sounds I heard throughout a regular day at work. As I recorded, I went on with my responsibilities as normal, calming the children and helping them through each meltdown, but my efforts are not portrayed in the track used in the piece. This creates an effect in which there are very unhappy, uncomfortable or hurt children that are simply crying without the comfort or help of an adult. Some sections of the piece are heavily affected either by common effects such as reverb and flangers or by manually manipulating the sound clips. The piece opens with a young girl screaming "ow ow ow" and "it really hurts" which is heavily affected by a flanger which mixes two audio signals together, one of which is delayed by a small and changing period. This effect is often used in classic rock and 80's rock such as the intro to Rush's "Spirit of

Radio”<sup>3</sup> or Heart’s “Barracuda.”<sup>4</sup> The effect is very well known and easily recognizable to anyone who knows it. This creates an auditory dichotomy for the listener, whether it be subconscious or conscious. There is a juxtaposition between the familiar, potentially nostalgic flanger effect and the sound that the flanger is effecting - a child in distress.

In movement 3, *I took his giraffe because he was throwing it, and then he threw a chair...* I layer a version of the lullaby “Hush Little Baby” that was often used in our classroom. There are 3 versions of the clip all pitched slightly differently and playing simultaneously creating dissonance compared to its original state. This is a device that is often used in horror movies; taking a well known song, especially a children’s song, and manipulating it to sound much more ominous. In this piece, the manipulation of the lullaby is done in such an obvious and over the top way. It is nearly the only sound heard and the players are only playing a single drone note which is a strong juxtaposition to the constant sound that has been heard before, forcing the audience to acknowledge it.

Along with these overt ways of causing discomfort to the audience, I incorporate more subtle ways of maintaining discomfort throughout the piece. All sections of the music are intentionally too long. The goal was for the audience to be uncomfortable at the beginning of the piece. But after a point, that discomfort becomes “the norm” and the audience settles into the chaos that is happening in the piece. To reiterate the discomfort, the sections continue far past what I believe to be their natural expiration point (which is subjective, but there is almost an unspoken rule in music to move on after so long in a section). The wall of sound that happens from about twenty seconds into movement 1 all the way through the end of movement 2 is nearly

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<sup>3</sup> Rush. *Permanent Waves*. Anthem Records 1, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Heart. *Little Queen*. Portrait Records 1, 1976.

ceaseless. It is loud, with only a slight break near the end of movement 1 only to return to a loud “wall of sound” again at the beginning of movement 2.

At the beginning of movement 3, we go to near complete silence only hearing snoring; the players are silent. The music starts and stops a couple of times and we hear the word “hush.” The players then play a single note for nearly one minute. This lack of visual and auditory input forces the audience to just sit and listen to the distorted children’s song for nearly 2 minutes. By the time the viola soloist plays the solo, the audience is relieved to hear something new, although even the pleasant Brahms lullaby played by the violist becomes distorted with a performance note dictating that the player should begin to play notes out of tune and incorrectly. This movement slowly gives way to the same wall-of-sound-chaos that was happening before. During this movement, the players finally play the same thing at the same time, for the first and only time in the piece - an excerpt of “Jesus Loves Me.” The violent and harsh way that the players are instructed to perform this excerpt and the fact that they are supposed to repeat it multiple times leads to more discomfort from the audience.

Finally, for the last minute of the piece, we watch the players “throw a fit” on stage. They are no longer playing their instruments, they are simply stomping, kicking, yelling, and anything else they imagine could be included in a child’s tantrum. This is also uncomfortable and likely humorous to the audience because they are watching adult players act like children. At the very end of the piece, the players find a final spot to stand and they freeze in place. This leaves the audience to listen to the final sound on the track, which is the unfiltered crying of a child. It isn’t loud crying or tantrum-like screaming. It is simply crying. This fades, and the players stay frozen until the audience is forced, through societal expectation, to applaud after hearing a sadly crying child. This is the final stake in the audience discomfort that is felt throughout the piece. The

applause becomes a part of the piece and the piece is not complete without it. This manipulation of the audience, making them applaud at something that really should not have applause, is something that may not be consciously registered to them. However, the feeling of unsure-ness is present and the hesitancy with which audiences have applauded at the recent performance of this piece proves to me that the discomfort is there.

In *“You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.”* the string ensemble is treated as secondary to the track. They are the less important musical aspect of this piece. While writing the piece I thought of the ensemble as the “teacher” in how they respond to the track. Because they are typically less influential, present, and powerful compared to the track, this shows a bit of helplessness that I felt while trying to work with too many students at once. I was talking to students often throughout the day, but felt like I was rarely, if ever, heard by them. This perception of my role in my own classroom as a teacher led to how I wrote the entire string part of the piece.

This piece was conceived with the viola as the solo instrument because of its mellow and dark timbre. After much deliberation, I chose a flex ensemble simply because there was no particular reasoning for specifying which string instruments to use. I wanted to use strings because of their ability to do specific effects in music such as tremolo, smooth glissandi, the difference in timbre between pizzicato and arco, and their ability to hold a note without needing to take a breath or reattack the note. The piece was also intended to be easily accessible to a string quartet. Only needing to find a single additional player. I also wanted to make this easily accessible to any string player who wanted to perform it with their friends or colleagues. It does not require a large number of players, making it easy to assemble the group, and it has nearly the

same effect whether it is played by 4 bassists and a violist or 4 violinists and a violist, and the music itself does not take much rehearsal time.

The notation for the piece was written to be simple to read. Each cell has a clear time duration and in the program notes it is indicated that the players should use a stopwatch to keep time with the track. This eliminates the need for a click track or any sort of complicated way of listening to the track through an earpiece. Along with the timestamps above each cell, there is a secondary line on the music that gives a simple indication of what is happening in the track at that time. This is a visual way to help the players know where they are within a cell based on the track alone in case something were to happen to their stopwatch. While writing this piece, I explored several notational options from various sources, but decided that I wanted the piece to be extremely intuitive to read. I did not want to have multiple pages of program notes at the beginning of the score explaining every single cell and how it should be played. Rather, each cell is written as simply as possible, and short specific notes for a section can be found in the score where they are needed. While there may be other ways of notating the music presented, the piece has been rehearsed with four different groups and very few questions have arisen. When questions do come up, I make a note to myself and edit the score accordingly in order to maintain clarity with the notation.

This piece relies heavily on improvisation which further reinforces the role of the string part as the “teacher.” One must always be ready to improvise when teaching a class, especially when the students are four years old. As teachers in the daycare were given prompts to help calm a child (various flash cards for many situations) so I gave the players a set of notes or a line to follow and they can make their decision of how and what to play given the performance

instructions. One example of this is timestamps 1:34-2:19 in movement 1 (because there are no conventional measure numbers, sections will be referred to as their timestamp in the piece).

<b>1:34-1:57</b>	<b>1:57-2:09</b>	<b>2:09-2:19</b>
<i>improv using the given pitches</i> <i>Slow, menacing, angry</i> <i>Varying dynamics</i>		
<b>"Never never</b>	<b>Screaming decrescendos</b>	<b>Background crying</b>
<b>"No no no" never never!!!!!"</b>	<b>One voice talking</b>	
<b>Misc. screaming</b>		

The players are given a set of notes for each timestamp and they are told the overall feeling/effect that they are supposed to achieve (slow, menacing, angry). They are then in control of how fast or slow they want to play, which notes they would like to play, and how they would like to achieve the portrayal of anger to the audience. Each chord was chosen based on its overall sound and the ability to make intriguing melodies given the notes within the chord. Each of these cells are written as a block chord rather than several consecutive notes, because I did not want the players to see the notes in a sequence and think that they were supposed to play a line of music similar to what they saw on the page. If given simply a block note chord, as shown, the player simply sees the notes and then it is up to them to make musical choices.

Throughout the piece, simple children's tunes are used that will catch the ear of the listener and provide an architectural foothold. These were songs that I frequently sang with the class in hopes of getting all of the students to be focused on one activity, even if it's only for a minute (this is a feat in a classroom of four-year-olds). These songs are never presented in their entirety or in their original form. The first example of this is the viola solo at the beginning of movement 2 (timestamp 2:19-2:50).

2:19-2:50

Viola Solo



**Lots of background noise**

**"Owen's not nice to me"**

**"Owen's not nice to me"**

**"STOP calling me a crybaby..." "STOP calling me a crybaby..."**

In the performance notes at the beginning of the piece, the violist is instructed to play this as if being interrupted and to start the line over several times. The player is instructed to act as if it is a struggle to make it to the end of the phrase. This comes at a section of very loud noise from the track. The violist may be mostly covered up by the noises heard from the track, but that simply adds to the feeling of insignificance that is supposed to be portrayed by the strings. In movement 3, the violist plays an excerpt from Brahms' Lullaby which we listened to at naptime every day at the daycare. This comes as a refreshing change after the distorted "Hush Little Baby" that is played on the track immediately before. However, the violist begins to distort the music as well, tying it to the sounds heard on the track.

Near the end of the piece at timestamp 8:10-8:34, the entire ensemble plays a small segment of "Jesus Loves Me." This particular song was chosen because it is what my boss, the leader of the daycare, always tried to sing to the kids when I asked for her help. She would come into the class, make the kids sit on the floor, and she would talk about what is "helpful behavior" and what is "not helpful behavior." Then she would sing this song to them. As she sang, they would begin to get out of hand (hence the track being very loud and overpowering) and she would try to sing more loudly and insistently. The players are instructed to play *sul ponticello* and all at the frog for this section, making it sound angry and not very calming.

The conclusion of the piece begins with the players essentially throwing a fit. They are instructed to start small with examples of knocking on their instruments and then grow into a full meltdown - kicking chairs, stomping feet, yelling, etc. This shows how I felt at the end of every work day. I was exhausted and wanted to throw a fit just like the kids did. The stage theatrics of this section are something that is not expected by a typical concert goer. Watching adults do things that we see kids do often can be slightly uncomfortable, but also funny. I wrote this section knowing that it would be the funniest part of the piece to watch. It is something completely different than what had been done in the previous 9 minutes of the piece. Because I knew that this would be the section that got the most laughs, the piece ends with the juxtaposition of simple crying. I chose the clip of crying that concludes the piece because I remember the circumstance under which it was recorded. A little boy in my class was just having a bad day. He had been destructive, hurt other students, kicked and spit at me, and he was just not doing well. The recording happened when I sat him down and told him that I needed to message his mom about his behavior that day and that I really wanted to help him and find out what was making him so distressed. He just sat at the table and cried. It was a very sad cry. It was not a tantrum, or an attention-seeking cry; it was simply sad. The piece ends on this clip, which is the least distorted or caricatured sound heard in the entire piece. It is uncomfortable to hear and the emotion that was on this boy's face is portrayed through the sound of the cry. The audience then must decide when to clap at the sounds of a little boy crying.

The title of the piece and each movement title also play into the joke of the piece. Each title is long and amusing in nature. The title came from flashcards that we were given to help us practice Gentle Guidance. These flashcards had a scenario written on them and what an appropriate response would sound like, along with some suggestions of responses. One that was



often used was the phrase “You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.” which the child was supposed to, but almost never did, echo back to themselves. The movement titles were phrases that were said in the classroom that were frequent sayings, such as “Where’s Harper’s Paci,” (a shortened word for pacifier) “Jakob bit Blakely,” and “That is not safe.” The title of movement 3, “I took his giraffe because he was throwing it, and then he threw a chair...,” was something that I told my assistant teacher regarding a child’s behavior during naptime and we both laughed at the absurdity of the sentence.

*“You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.”* is a piece that provides social commentary on many issues that young people are facing and it is approached in a humorous and satirical way. I believe this piece has and will maintain cultural relevance. We are living in a culture that values and shares memes on the internet. These memes can range from political in nature to depression related to simply absurdism but all have the theme of humor. Many people react to these memes and often share them on various social media platforms. Memes relating to depression are often shared as a way to cope with the feelings the sharer is dealing with.<sup>5</sup> The age-old saying that people often deflect their feelings with humor is proving to be true on the Internet with people of all ages. *“You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.”* could be grouped into this subsection of memes. I was mentally and emotionally exhausted with the job that I had and the situation that I had to put myself through every single day. I reacted to that the best way that I knew how, which was to write a funny piece about it. It helped me to express my frustration, it helped me satirize the sounds that I heard that drove me crazy every day, it helped me express my helplessness, and many more helpful coping mechanisms.

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<sup>5</sup> U. Akram, “Exploratory study on the role of emotion regulation in perceived valence, humour, and beneficial use of depressive internet memes in depression,” doi.org, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-57953-4>

In June of 2021, comedian Bo Burnham released an unannounced special on Netflix called *Inside*<sup>6</sup>. Bo Burnham is known for portraying his comedy through songs and occasionally stage theatrics. The entire special was recorded from inside Burnham's home during Covid lockdowns. The special deals with a wide array of relevant subjects: finding a place for comedy in a broken world, racial issues, cancel culture, the ultra rich, and most prominently depression. As the special goes on, the songs and skits between the songs become less and less objectively funny and more dark and introspective. Burnham discusses the feeling of not wanting to finish the special because then he will have to "be done with it," showing that he is using it as some sort of coping mechanism. The humor resonated with millions and the deep introspection was something that many, including myself, felt during the quarantine due to Covid and because of this, it will remain a culturally relevant and possibly even a sort of artifact of the time. There are plenty of similarities between my piece and Bo Burnham's special. The discomfort the audience is faced with is possibly one of the strongest. Throughout his special, Burnham talks about suicide extremely bluntly with lines such as "in 2030 I'll be 40 and kill myself then" from the song "30", the opening statement welcoming the audience to the special and how it will hopefully "distract me from wanting to put a bullet into my head with a gun," and several more bleak, harsh statements. While my piece does this in a different way, without lyrics, the idea is the same. There is an overarching sense of discomfort in the piece like there is a sense of discomfort throughout *Inside*. This is something that audiences seem to be more willing to accept if what is being said is relevant.

*"You are safe. You are calm. You are in control."* is a commentary on the inability for a student to simply be a student. I needed to make money in order to pay rent and eat food, therefore I needed a job that offered a reasonable pay and would be willing to work with my

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<sup>6</sup> *Inside*, directed by Bo Burnham (Netflix, 2021).

school schedule. This seems to be a reality for many students across America and I would consider myself relatively lucky in that I could have a small amount of financial help from my parents if I was desperate; this is not so for a large number of students. I was working myself to exhaustion with a 35 hours per week job along with 9 graduate credits. This exacerbated my depression and anxiety and drove me into a place that was not healthy. This is something that many students in academia are feeling with the current student debt crisis. Students are overworked and exploited by companies by being paid a horribly low starting wage. Since “*You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.*” is a piece deeply seeded in a situation that is so culturally relevant, it is well understood by other students, musicians and non-musicians alike, that have heard the piece. In the feedback I received from its two performances, they feel a resonance with it even through the discomfort, much like many Americans felt a resonance with the Burnham special *Inside*. I feel that this is a very valid and wide reaching medium through which to speak to audiences. Meme culture and the brand of humor that comes with it is heavy and poignant in my piece and in many artistic mediums and will be around for the foreseeable future.

While “*You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.*” is a piece with a sound world that is unique and harsh but the ideas used are as old as music itself. The piece expresses frustration and mental and emotional exhaustion through the use of humor. The joke may be lost upon some audience members because the piece exploits children that are in apparent agony. Those people become part of the comedic effect of the piece overall. The piece falls into a category of culture that is booming right now - memes. It is a funny piece with a niche message about depression and the feeling of being overworked. While my piece is perhaps too niche to reach the same audience as “*Inside*,” the music follows the same patterns as depression memes and was

influenced by the wide range of acceptance of memes relating to topics such as mental and emotional exhaustion, frustration with one's job, and frustration with the lack of money or job opportunities for those who have completed or are studying in higher education. "*You are safe. You are calm. You are in control.*" is a social commentary on current events with a brand new soundscape while simultaneously being heavily rooted in practices and ideals of musicians past.

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