

Improvising *Compose Yourself*

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The post–World War II era in the USA saw the emergence of an intense new strain of composing music, begun by Milton Babbitt (1916–2011) and students collected around him, at Princeton University. This high–modernist project also produced writings about music aspiring to the verifiability or corrigibility of scientific discourse, embodying the then–latest developments in science, philosophy, and linguistics. By the 1960’s Princeton was the American center of avant–garde music composition, or, by extending to include electronic music and a certain geographical imagination, Princeton and Columbia Universities and uptown Manhattan—comparable to Darmstadt in the cultural imagination. Supporting the composition was the theory and a discourse purportedly rid of subjectivity, and projected through the journal *Perspectives of New Music* (1962–current). The notion of there being such a thing as “Princeton Theory,” as distinct from other forms of music theory, has been with us for many decades, for Kerman (1963: 152–4) defined and problematized a “Princeton School”; Blasius (1997, 2) reports Godfrey Winham’s (1934–1975) unfortunately undated response to “a prospective ‘Princeton issue’ of the *Journal of Music Theory*”; and Kerman’s (1985, 60–112) critique can be read largely as a response to the composer/theorists working at Princeton—Kerman’s own *alma mater*. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Princeton Theory’s writings for a vigorous engagement with the image of music (theory) as a science, with musical discourse purified of “incorrigible” personal criticism, hermeneutics.

But around 1970, something happened. The sustaining premises of music theory as a scientific pursuit were challenged by some of Babbitt’s own students and writers for *Perspectives of New Music*: prominently, Elaine Barkin, Benjamin Boretz, J. K. Randall, and, eventually, some of their students. A drastic Turn occurred, a Turn away from the scientific ideals of the previous discourse, from Enlightenment rationality, and towards a phenomenological discourse; a motion towards first–person narratives; towards pragmatism; towards the feminine, queer; towards language as a music; towards a leveling of the distinction between creation and criticism; towards improvisation; a search for poetics; towards, in short, the experimental.

Perhaps the single most decisive moment in the Turn was J. K. Randall’s publication of the first few sections of *Compose Yourself—A Manual for the Young* ([1972] 1995) serially in *Perspectives of New Music* from 1972 to 1973. A highly experimental document, *Compose Yourself* includes a kind of poem

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of coming-into-being; a phenomenological yet didactic reading of a scene from *Götterdämmerung*; a study of computer generation of phonemes across world languages; a kind of extended memory of a train ride; a discussion of multiple theoretical contexts for a baseball game; and a trippy script for a television show probing the boundaries of music composition's role in the potential revolution.

What follows takes place in two parts: the first offers a transcription of portions of Randall's drafts for *Compose Yourself*, housed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and a quotation by Randall from a DVD interview with Dorota Czerner, also housed at the NYPL. Drafts have never been published, and they show a less abstract, more concrete, conception of *Compose Yourself*. The interview excerpt is crucial because, to my knowledge, it is the only time in a recorded medium that Randall has himself offered an explanation for *Compose Yourself* and his experimental writings. During the longer part two, I offer my own improvisatory, experimental analysis or close reading of sections of *Compose Yourself*. The goal, as always, is to encourage readers unfamiliar with this work to explore it and other writings by Princeton Theorists after the Turn, and to shed further light on an important document in the history of American experimentalism.

At one point in the drafting process *Compose Yourself* was also subtitled, "Echoes & Mirrors of Revolutions." In the drafts, Randall begins Part I: Dedication in the Form of a Prelude, with an inverted T. S. Eliot quote from "East Coker" from *Four Quartets*:

Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.

Home is where one starts from. (Eliot 1943 [1971], 31)

reference to Mozart: "as a sound arises wrapped in Mozart"

more physical in drafts: eye, teeth, lips, ear, tongue

*in draft: "(the Revolution can wait: and starts now from here)"

*in draft it was in one version *smoke* that arose

"Open with me smoking cigar."

"keep it faintly sarcastic"

"printed language be read 'out loud' with attention to rhythm and tone of voice" (Randall 1970-71, b. 39 f. 4 and b. 40 f. 3; see also, Snyder 2012, 8)

My writing looks peculiar, you know, like why did I do all this? And I remember that in working to describe music well, and as I think I've said plenty I was a real fanatic for analyzing music but that at the same time feeling that, "gee wait a minute, I haven't yet found a way that's really getting at what this is going on," so that caused me not only to write a little funny but to write sometimes with the conscious idea that, wait a minute, how about writing like music, instead of writing about music. Well there's obvious mileage in that notion that others than me have also pursued with great results and I've pursued that from time to time. I think, yes, early on in *Compose Yourself*, like the baseball story and the Revelstoke story, well in fact the whole thing I mean, it is clearly a question there of using words and meanings . . . by the way that was one thing that really did strike me that when we talk about musicalizing words that means to some people getting rid of their dictionary meanings—out of the way, deal with them for their sonic value. Well, to me, their dictionary meanings are precisely part of their sonic value, like when you say, "Amore," that's, the dictionary meaning of that is part of the sound of it. Least of all did [musicalizing words] mean to me getting rid of grammar. A lot of people figure that, "hey, the way to do that is, you know, sort of make words that are lists," and not that I don't like to do that from time to time, but to me the sound of grammar is one hell of a sound, and that I don't want to get rid of. On the contrary, I like to sort of pursue it and elaborate upon it. (Randall 2011, disc 3, c. 44:39)

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Compose Yourself—i.e., “get it together”; don’t talk about composition,

Go home. Write. Compose . (Williams [1948] 1992, 84)

Am I young, anymore?

I don’t care much for baseball, “get the water hot!”

—of an answer to that question?

*printed poem literally fills out in time and space while reading it.

*^k“a manual for the young”: all things begin, all things end

—how musical?

1—voice exchange lines 5–7: you/ours; I/mine

2—voice exchange lines 7–8: mirroring/mirrors; thought/thought

3—symmetries: 7: internal symmetry

4—octave/12 divisions with axis point

- ˘ / - ˘ - / ˘ - ˘ , - a

1 “wrapped in sound”

or: ˘ - / ˘ - ˘ / - ˘ -

or: ˘ - / ˘ , - ˘ / - ˘ / -

1—static; beginning without creation? axiom: here, now/space,
time

—allusion to logical system building

1—active

1—“now, here” accented, down, pauses; “arose”, rises

up

filling-out space from initial point (axiom): here/space

down

1—simple present

2—present

filling-out of time from initial point (axiom): now/time

6—“tongue”: body/only physical in a poem of ephemeral

12—answering: present tense (?)

13—*possible world, not this world; if this world, it is dying.

—“death” but no “birth”; subject “arises” not born; the subject is a
question: aporia. “Das Gegebene ist subjektlos.”

*“death” vs. “starting” qualified with arise/life–subject

—anthropomorphized vs. non-natural

—qualifies a subject

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- 1 beginning
- 2 wrapped
- 3 refrain
- 4 refrain
- 5 you/arise: beginning microcosm
- 6 talk/arises/close/wrapped/talk
- 7 mirroring mirrored/arise/I
- 8 ?
- 9 refrain?
- 10 refrain?
- 11 framing echo/arise/now & here
- 12 things distant/arise/framed/answering
- 13 some world/death: end/macrocosm
- 14 end/death
- 15 wrapping/ed
- 16 refrain
- 17 refrain

refrain falls/most of the surrounding lines rise/11–14 die/fall

*mirroring

1&11: now & here: octave framing of 6: tritone axis point

6:

*or?

7:

9: center of poem:
up & down/
left & right/
time & space/
beginning & end

present
non-simple location/
revises earlier
statement which
is now retro-
spectively
altered.

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now

expansion of first gesture

time

juxtaposition of traditional dichotomy

space

—seeing in time

future

past

*possible not actual

here

space

juxtaposition of traditional dichotomy

time

—hearing in space

elsewhere

not here/possible world

starting from a possible world

—from here, all possible:
if “most nicely”
—mirrors
—echoes
“most fully”
—contains

Me, My, Mine, I:

—self-assertion: there’s a prelude, & towards

the end of it

the curtain went up & then the

moon came out

plötzlich.”

—sounds a standard Babbitt
ending in the face of
self-assertion

plötzlich:

: has abrogated bounce & snap.

- 1: Focal for both
–([before for a
(& ~b) v before
- 2: for b (& ~a)]
^ after for a
(& ~b) v after
for b (& ~a)
- 1 (with cycles of One lock Midcycle to cycles of the
Other, Focal for one was Focal for the other.)
- 2 (—: each focaltime referential for Before in one &
for After in the other —)
- 3 (, —each mergingtime Referring To after in one &
To before in the other)
- 4 (; —Sense of reference distinct, cycle spanning;)

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