

Alex Taylor

PhD Dissertation Recital

Tuesday, March 12, 2024 at 5:00pm
Conrad Prebys Music Center | Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

A Handful of False Starts and Dead Ends (2020)

I. | II. | III. | IV. | V.

Wilfrido Terrazas, flute
Ellen Hindson, oboe
Grace Talaski, clarinet

David Savage, bassoon
Kyle Adam Blair, piano
Tasha Smith Godinez, harp

Myra Hinrichs, violin
Peter Ko, cello

Steven Schick, conductor

Agee Songs (2023)

I. The fathers of families | II. The noise of the locusts | III. But the men by now

Susan Narucki, soprano
Kyle Adam Blair, piano

Obtuse Strategies (2023)

I. Satie, A Ladder | II. Compartments | III. Meander | IV. Recapitulations | V. Memory Palace

Henry Wong Doe, piano

– *Intermission* –

Interviews (2024)

I. A Lithen Lumber | II. Tableau I | III. Interlude I | IV. Each Tightly Coiled Flashing
V. Tableau II | VI. An Amethyst Remembrance | VII. Interlude II | VIII. Mille Regretz | IX. Tableau III

Wilfrido Terrazas, flute
Ellen Hindson, oboe
Grace Talaski, clarinet
Kosuke Matsuda, percussion
Kyle Adam Blair, piano

Amir Norouz Nasser, violin
Ilana Waniuk, violin
Myra Hinrichs, viola
Peter Ko, cello
Matthew Henson, bass

Natalia Merlano Gomez, voice
Miguel Zazueta, voice
Alex Taylor, voice

Steven Schick, conductor



A Handful of False Starts and Dead Ends

octet

c. 12 minutes

Commissioned by Ensemble Proton Bern

- I.
- II.
- III.
- IV.
- V.

A Handful of False Starts and Dead Ends is one of a series of pieces exploring simple forms of linear motion. The musical language is deliberately flat, even two-dimensional, and utilizes materials that seem to have become disused or left behind in a post-tonal contemporary context: diatonic scales and simple chords. The title suggests failure, giving up, botched attempts at progression or growth, problems without solution, the intractable and irreconcilable, and especially inertia or stymied momentum. The work is in five movements: three lethargic distant mirages intercut with two brief moments of pedantic immediacy.

Agee Songs

voice and piano

c. 10 minutes

Commissioned by Susan Narucki

- I. The fathers of families
- II. The noise of the locusts
- III. But the men by now

James Agee's fantasia-like *Knoxville, Summer of 1915* was published posthumously as a prologue to his novel *A Death in the Family*. Drawing on memories of childhood just before the death of his father, Agee takes the reader back to the porches and lawns, the smells and sounds and familial dynamics of a lower-middle-class neighborhood in the early twentieth century.

Samuel Barber's famous setting of *Knoxville* used only selections – about one-third – of Agee's text; here my *Agee Songs* takes a second pass at that original source material, scavenging what Barber left behind – a remainder rich with metaphor and nostalgia.

I was particularly drawn to Agee's sensitive but hazy rendering of his own and other's fathers: they are "nearly anonymous", "ghostlike", "fishlike pale", their faces exhibiting a "sober mystery", as if behind glass, quietly embedded with the mundane but ethereal task of hosing their lawns. To me Agee's text has the quality of a reverie, ecstatic in the sense of being outside of itself, trance-like; and at the center of it these recurring images of mysterious, distant, paternal ghosts.

At one level these songs respond directly to Agee's text: creating a musical space that plays with transparency and opacity, a vessel for the words and memories to speak. But they also respond to Barber's intense and heartfelt embodiment of that text: creating a musical language that is in dialogue with his idiosyncratic harmonies, his deceptively simple lyricism, his clever evocations of musical pasts.

I would like to thank the wonderful Susan Narucki for commissioning this work, and for all of her substantial support of my music throughout my time here at UCSD.



Obtuse Strategies

piano solo

c. 13 minutes

Commissioned by Henry Wong Doe

- I. Satie, A Ladder
- II. Compartments
- III. Meander
- IV. Recapitulations
- V. Memory Palace

The piece's title is borrowed (bastardized) from Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies*, a pack of cards for addressing creative blockages: aphoristic suggestions like "use an old idea" or "work at a different speed". My *Obtuse Strategies* is not so different from that in principle, but perhaps with a slant towards difficulty, frustration, an obstructed passage, attempting something again and again, a strategy not in fact working so well. *Obtuse* here is not used in the sense of dumb or dull, but from its Latin root *obtundere*, "to beat against, make dull", or even further, from *tudes*, a hammer.

Each of the five movements involves some kind of musical strategy, and employs a spatial or directional metaphor. Where the first movement winds itself gradually upwards, the second movement jumps abruptly between registers or "compartments". The third movement is stuck in suspended motion, meandering downward beneath an uneasy oscillation, while the fourth is again ascending, recalling the first movement but at breakneck speed. The fifth movement again arrives at a kind of stasis, expanding and contracting a slow repeated tolling chord, stretching out in every direction. I see these pieces as a series of everyday – but meaningful – structures, attempts to find direction, however unsuccessful or trivial or obfuscated: little mundane rituals we hung on to amidst the malaise of a pandemic.

Interviews (for Trish)

thirteen players, and prerecorded sound

c. 40 minutes

- I. A Lithen Lumber (*text by Kyle Adam Blair*)
- II. Tableau I
- III. Interlude I
- IV. Each Tightly Coiled Flashing (*text by Alex Taylor*)
- V. Tableau II
- VI. An Amethyst Remembrance (*text by Emily Dickinson*)
- VII. Interlude II
- VIII. Mille Regretz (*attributed to Josquin des Prez*)
- IX. Tableau III (Coda)

Stylistically, *Interviews* resembles a collage: materials borrowed from Josquin, spectralism, Leonard Cohen, high modernism, elevator music, the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Kyle Adam Blair, Appalachian folk singing, bits recycled from my own pieces, the recorded voice of my mother, my own songs and poems. But collage is generally creating something new out of things that come from different places, disparate things; this feels more like a multifarious reflection of my own musical and personal world – things that all come from, or at least have been absorbed into, the same place, a musical inheritance or accumulation. I've always felt slightly unsure of the relationship between all of the many aspects (personas?) of my music making – sometimes they feel far away from each other, held in different compartments – but here I feel I've found a way for many of them to coexist in one place.

Conceptually, I think of *Interviews* as more concerned with storytelling than with aesthetics. Or at least, *Interviews* represents an intersection between musical and personal concerns. In the early stages of the



Covid-19 pandemic, I undertook ethnographic research as part of my PhD coursework. For this I interviewed both my parents, Vicki and Trish, asking them all kinds of questions about their lives: what it was like for them growing up, how they came to terms with their sexuality, what it was like living through the politically tumultuous 1980s in New Zealand, how they went about starting a family, how it was for them when I came out.

At the time, this was a really rewarding process of discovery and documentation, a way to learn new things about my family and where I'd come from, a way to feel connected to them across the Pacific during the enforced separation of the pandemic. Now, those interview recordings have other resonances. Trish was diagnosed with early onset dementia several years before we made the interviews; by the time we recorded them, her dementia had started to really affect her short term memory. Now, nearly four years later, her dementia is quite advanced, and many of those memories are gone for her. Looking back, the documentation of those memories is precious.

The making of this piece has been both a way for me to hold on to that preciousness, those past perfect moments of connection, but also a way to process grief, the ongoing present of loss and change. In many ways *Interviews* occupies a threshold, between looking back and looking forward; it is both at once, acknowledging the messiness and multifacetedness of memory, not singular, smooth, or linear. I also see it as a small way of showing gratitude for both of my devoted, supportive, sensitive, beloved parents, and of celebrating Trish's life.

Acknowledgements

To all the performers tonight, thank you. You have given so much of yourselves not only in preparing this concert tonight, but in supporting my work over my five years at UCSD, in sharing your unique musical talents, and in contributing so richly to our community here. Steve, Susan, and Henry, thank you for commissioning and performing my work – your advocacy means a great deal to me, and I feel immensely privileged to count you as treasured collaborators and mentors over the past years and going forward. Thank you for believing in me. Kyle, you are not only a dear friend, but also one of the most generous people I know. Your involvement in so much of tonight's music speaks to how crucial your support and your keen musicality has been to my development. You know my music so well and know how to make it sing. Peter, Myra, Willy, Ellen, Grace, Tasha, David, Kosuke, Miguel, Natalia, Amir, Ilana, Matthew – thank you all for bringing my music to life. It is a joy to work with each and every one of you.

To my teacher Lei Liang, thank you for pushing me to develop a cohesive vision for my work, for all the opportunities you provide your students, and your thoughtfulness and generosity as a mentor. And to all the other members of my committee – Rand Steiger, Susan Narucki, Amy Cimini, Myrta Leslie Santana, Emily Chin – thank you for your insights and encouragement.

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To the UCSD community, thank you for listening and helping me to grow.

To my family, even though you are far away, your love and support sustains me here.

And to my husband, Alex Stephenson, the kindest, smartest, hardest working person I know, I would never have got through this without you. You bring out the best in me, and in my music.

