Report from the Field(s): Music of Place in the Hudson Valley

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Author Bio

Joshua Groffman is a composer, music theorist, and Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford. Recent performances include those with Vital Opera, American Composers Orchestra, Ensemble Laboratorium, Aspen Contemporary Ensemble, New York New Music Collective, Poné Ensemble for New Music, Delaware Valley Chorale, Ars Musica Chorale, Duo 231, and the Bard College Vocal Arts Program. His scholarly work focuses on student engagement and active learning in the music theory classroom and issues of form and temporality in the French spectralist repertoire.

Abstract

This paper examines "place music" through the lens of *An Arrow Pointed Down*, a multiartist audiovisual collaboration inspired by the Hudson River Valley and staged by One Quiet Plunge, a new music group I founded in 2014. Artistic and scholarly work that responds to a specific locale and the human experience in that locale are increasingly ubiquitous; through a "report from the field," I seek to describe what makes place music seem particularly relevant to me and fellow artists in our historical moment. The discussion is prefaced by examples from the history of place-based art that frame a discussion of different techniques by which composers create place pieces. Through analysis of *An Arrow Pointed Down* works and interviews with the artists involved, the project is shown as a wide-ranging index of our contemporary preoccupations and how the idea of "place" informs our view of ourselves and our world.

Key Words:

place music, contemporary composition, multimedia

> Our personalities and our cultures, our individual and our collective identities are fundamentally shaped by the places we inhabit. But in recent times we've lost many of our deepest connections with place. And as we've forgotten where we are, we've also forgotten *who* we are. (Adams, 2009, p. 101)

The idea of the "local" is in the air. Eat locally, we are told. Buy locally. Such exhortations carry two assertions with them. First, that physical place matters. So much of our communication, commerce, and daily experience are now located online (which is to say: no place at all) that actions which are rooted firmly in geographic specificity gain allure. Second, the idea of the local asserts that there is value in what is unique about a physical location. That one can eat a McDonald's hamburger in any town in America, and Paris, and Shanghai, is so commonplace a feature of modern life it scarcely merits remark; but it is an occurrence unique in human history. As the daily experience of life the world over becomes increasingly homogeneous, placeless, an oppositional need arises to assert the importance of place—to find out what may still be unique about those American towns, or Paris, or Shanghai.

One Quiet Plunge, a group founded for the promotion and performance of new music in New York's Hudson Valley, began for me as an effort to find out what might still be unique about an area I knew well. It was predicated on the idea that there was such a place as the Hudson Valley, and that it mattered: that the common thread of physical geography—the Hudson River—that binds together the communities between the cities of New York and Albany also creates common threads of human geography, too. One Quiet Plunge seeks to investigate, through commissions, performances, and collaborations across artistic disciplines, what those threads might be.

An Arrow Pointed Down was such an investigation. In the project, four area composers, including myself, created new works responding to visuals made by fellow Hudson Valley artists, as well as a text by the poet Sarah Heady, another native. The resulting multimedia

production made for a wide-ranging index of our contemporary preoccupations and how the idea of place and the local informs our view of ourselves and our world.

In this paper, I examine how the composers and their collaborators created a sense of place unique to the Hudson Valley, drawing in the artists' own accounts of their aesthetic, emotional, and ideological responses to place-based art. I preface my discussion with examples from the history of place-based art that frame a discussion of different techniques by which composers create place pieces; I explore, too, how the resulting pieces may be understood to reflect shifting notions of place, human identity, and our relationship to nature. Ultimately, I intend this paper as a kind of "report from the field," an attempt to describe what makes place music seem particularly relevant, even necessary, to me and fellow artists at this moment in time.[1]

Techniques of Place Music

My usage of the term "place music" is consistent with Daniel Grimley's (2006) description of the landscape music of Edvard Grieg. Such music, Grimley says, "is not merely concerned with pictorial evocation, but is a more broadly environmental discourse, a representation of the sense of being within a particular time and space" (p. 56). Holly Watkins (2011) situates the growing scholarly interest in place music since the 1990s under the rubric of musical ecology, "a term that encourages exploration of music's many modes of being in place as well as how music constitutes a virtual environment related in subtle or overt ways to actual environments" (p. 405). Similar investigations are variously placed under ecomusicology, acoustic ecology, sound art, and sound studies, the growing profusion of terms a useful index of the way place and the "local" are increasingly of interest for music and musicians. And if, as

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Watkins notes, composers have created musical depictions of place since at least the 19th century, they do so presently at the highest levels of the field and with increasing recognition: John Luther Adams (2009), quoted above, has slowly gained recognition for his many works portraying the Alaskan wilderness in sound and received the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in music for his *Become Ocean*. Julia Wolfe's *Anthracite Fields,* a musical depiction of Pennsylvania coal country, received the same prize in 2015.

Place music has its origins in the conventions of instrumental program music, which in the 19th century became sufficiently well-developed to allow for the creation of a piece like Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830/1900), with its elaborate portrait of opium visions, ballroom dances, pastoral landscapes, and a hellish witches' orgy. A by-product of this was new possibilities for the depiction of specific locales. Techniques for doing so grew to include mimicry of physical aspects of the natural world, like the rustling of tree leaves in the opening piano passage of Schubert's *Der Lindenbaum* (1828/1895); quotation of national songs, dances, or musical styles, as in the polka music accompanying the peasant wedding in Smetana's *Die Moldau* (1874/1930); the use of timbre and instrumental associations (drums and horns evoking war, for instance); and various "exotic" harmonies, including the pentatonic, whole-tone, and octatonic scales to situate a piece in an otherworldly (or simply Other, i.e., non-Western) setting.

Place music emerges at the intersection of a composer's reaction to a physical landscape and the human experience of that landscape. In the various examples of place-music discussed here, composers vary in saying whether their approach is essentially descriptive or affective: whether they set out to recreate the physical and aural attributes of a location or the feelings those attributes create for the human observer. In the event, most place pieces do both: by combining programmatic techniques with the limitless shades of affective meaning associated

with the tonal and/or posttonal harmonic systems, place music often evokes both the specificity of place and the nuance of human feeling that inhabit that place.

The broadest distinction one can draw in place music is between works in which the place portrayed is one with longstanding associations for the composer and those in which place is a marker of the unfamiliar or exotic. Mendelssohn's *The Hebrides* (1830/1874) is an early example of the latter, an attempt to engage with the specificity of a unique locale and the powerful impressions made upon the composer during a walking tour of Scotland. During his trip, Mendelssohn recorded what he saw and felt in letters, drawings, and musical sketches. But his perceptions were also colored by his status as a first-time visitor to the Highlands; in particular, he brought powerful preconceptions of the place with him derived from his reading of Sir Walter Scott and the epic Ossian poems of James Macpherson (Todd, 1993). *The Hebrides* thus partakes of the Romantic vogue for the unfamiliar and transcendent, using place as a conduit for exotic experience.

A sketch Mendelssohn made shows the Hebrides from the West coast of Scotland with a castle in the middle ground, dwarfed by water, sky, and rocky islands. The image powerfully evokes a sense of romantic isolation, presaging how nature and the human element will be intertwined in *The Hebrides*. In a letter home, Mendelssohn wrote, "In order to make you realize how extraordinarily the Hebrides have affected me, the following came into my mind here" (as cited in Todd, 1993, p. 27), at which point he transcribed the first theme of what was to become the overture.

The theme (See Appendix, Example 1) is a masterful example of how 19th century music can evoke place within a few bars. The widely-spaced open fifth forms a vast and empty "horizon" (Taylor, 2016, p. 197) against which the subsequent music unfolds. The melody in m.

1 mimics the motion of waves, plunging steadily downward in fluid motion before rising up to repeat in subsequent measures. Around and amongst this mimicry of the physical world, Mendelssohn creates the human subject reacting to the landscape. Root motion by third, with its association of wonder and the uncanny, is used first in m. 3 (from b minor to D major) and again in m. 5 (to f# minor). The brightening in m. 7 with the arrival of B major suggests a sudden thrill, an intake of breath at the surge of emotion caused by this newly-discovered landscape.

Charles Ives's *Three Places in New England* (1929) uses a similar toolkit to Mendelssohn's, updated to suit a modernist ear, in depicting place; but instead of supplying exotic experience, here place becomes caught up in Ives's conception and construction of his own identity as a New Englander and American.

The third movement, "The Housatonic at Stockbridge," provides an interesting comparison with *The Hebrides*. It also mimics the physical motion of water, a flowing, meandering atonality suggestive of the gentle course of the Housatonic River, the dissonance a ready metaphor for untamed nature. As with Mendelssohn, the genesis for the piece was a walk, taken by Ives in the summer of 1908. Unlike the wilderness hike in Scotland, however, the locale portrayed here is the New England countryside which Ives had known all his life. And again, both nature and humanity-in-nature are present. As he walked with his wife, the strains of music from a church service across the river were audible, and Ives introduces this into his depiction via the hymn tune *Dorrnance* by Isaac Woodbury (Burkholder, 1995), its tuneful pentatonicism contrasting with the atonal water music.

The piece grows from soft beginnings to a thunderous climax, water music and hymn tune intertwining throughout the second half of the piece in a continuous crescendo. Von Glahn (2003) sees in this a process of "conciliation," a melding of nature and religion: "God, as

represented by Woodbury's hymn tune, is immanent in nature, in American nature, in the American place" (p. 89).

In the other two movements of *Three Places*, the idea of a specifically "American" place is more pronounced still, incorporating patriotic tunes, the sounds of an Independence Day celebration, and musical meditations on historical figures. Intensely proud of his New England heritage and American identity, Ives's music harkens back to Wagner, who saw his compositions as focal points for establishing German national consciousness.[2] Ives in turn sought a break with the "courtly muses of Europe" (as cited in Von Glahn Cooney, 1996, p. 284). His depictions of places which he saw as both personally significant and historically important were central to his attempt to fashion a uniquely American musical identity.

Harrison Birtwistle's music is representative of how, as the 20th century progressed, place music acquires a newly elegiac quality that acknowledges how fraught questions of human identity and place can be. Place music as well becomes increasingly skeptical of the possibility of an Ivesian conciliation between humanity and nature.

Landscape is a frequent inspiration for Birtwistle. His use of the image "of walking through a town, seeing it from various perspectives and gradually building up an idea of it as a whole, but never being able to see it all at once" (Hall, 1988, p. 15) as an organizing principle for musical material allows him to confront the inherent tension of depicting that which is spatial (place) via a medium that is inherently temporal (music). His landscapes are often, in his term,

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[2] Wagner's notions of national identity, of course, are tainted by the racism that runs throughout his work. Von Glahn Cooney (1996) notes that Ives's musical nationalism is similarly marred by a project to define American identity in specifically White Anglo-Protestant terms to the exclusion of the immigrants arriving in the early 1900s. The link between music of place and nationalism was common in the early and mid-20th century: Benjamin Britten, for instance, sought a uniquely English opera tradition and created, in works like *Peter Grimes* (1945)*, Albert Herring* (1947)*,* and *Owen Wingrave* (1970)*,* nuanced, multifaceted evocations of British locales and society.

"imaginary landscapes," that nevertheless can bump up against real ones in his native England, as in the piece *Silbury Air* (1977), named for the Neolithic monument Silbury Hill in Wiltshire.

The Tree of Strings (2007) for string quartet grew from the years Birtwistle lived in northern Scotland, taking as its subject the Clearances: the forcible depopulation of much of the native farming population of the Scottish Highlands in the 18th and 19th centuries to facilitate the enclosure of common land for sheep raising. In the piece, Jonathan Cross (2013) hears an impersonal landscape, empty of physical human presence. Even so, the human condition is depicted, as ghostly memory:

> The desolate horizon sounds...suggesting vast grey seas and skies, punctuated by the wild calls of birds ricocheting off distant mountains. Against this backdrop the work begins slowly to open outwards, as ghostly individuals begin to find the voices that have remained silent for so long. Lyrical lines speak, passionately, but just as quickly fall back into the stutterings and silence of memory. (p. 87)

Birtwistle's presence is felt, too, meditating on much the same landscape Mendelssohn observed some 175 years earlier to very different effect. Cross (2000) finds in many of Birtwistle's pieces an engagement with the British tradition of the "pastoral": the human subject in pristine nature, surrounded by benevolent mythical creatures, shepherds, and other rustics. *Tree of Strings* is a darkened pastoral landscape: the shepherds recast as the sinister beneficiaries of the Clearances, the nymphs and sprites now human ghosts, the empty land itself re-imagined not in a pristine pre-human splendor but a post-human barrenness.

Multimedia Connections

Two further trends in the second half of the 20th century had important consequences for place music. The first is the increasing ubiquity of electronic and computer music technology. In

addition to opening up new possibilities for sound creation via electronic instruments, recording technology allowed composers to capture and reproduce environmental sound directly. This development accompanied (and accelerated) the widening definition of what types of sound might plausibly be considered music.[3]

A second important trend in the late 20th century is the rise of multimedia, principally the combination of musical sound with visual art.[4] One final work will serve to show the possibilities of both electronic sound and multimedia in depicting place, John Luther Adams's *The Place Where You Go to Listen* (Unviersity of Alaska, 2015). The work uses sonification, the process of "rendering non-sounding phenomena as aural material" (Kinnear, 2012, p. 230). An installation permanently on display at the Museum of the North in Fairbanks, Alaska, *The Place* processes real-time streams of data concerning activity of the sun, the moon, cloud cover, geomagnetism, and seismic activity and translates these data into music and visuals. Adams uses electronically generated "pink noise" and frequency filters to shape the sound in response to changing natural conditions. Different bands of colors are projected on glass panels and change with cloud cover and the course of the sun and moon (Kinnear, 2012). The result is an experience of the land that changes with the land. Says Adams (2009):

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[3] Today, the term "sound art" broadly describes the field of experimental and electroacoustic music that seeks to capture, document, and meditate on environmental sound (Bianchi & Manzo, 2016). R. Murray Schafer's (1993) ideas laid out in *The Tuning of the World*, and the World Soundscape project that grew from his work, were generative projects in this field. Born of Schafer's concern for increasing levels of noise pollution in the developed world, Joel Chadabe (2016) writes that Schafer's "concept of a soundscape as a representation of a particular place opened up into a myriad field of different ways of thinking about sound and the environment" (p. vi). Today, the aims of artists working with soundscapes often overlap with environmental activism, focusing on raising awareness and preserving the uniqueness of places that are threatened by development, pollution, or degradation. Sound art thus keys in on the same sense of loss that is pervasive in other contemporary place musics; like Birtwistle, they memorialize and highlight landscapes that are threatened or vanishing.

[4] In fact, several "multimedia" connections have already been apparent in the works discussed: both Mendelssohn and Ives relied on the written word in private and public communications about their work to create a sense of place, and Mendelssohn also used his sketches of the Hebrides to aid his compositional work and communicate his aims in evoking the wonder of place to his inner circle. But technological advances in photography, film, and lighting make multimedia depictions of place increasingly common in the late 20th century.

> The omnipresent atmosphere of sound and light is shaped by the arcs and rhythms of day and night. The fields of tone and color are always changing. But since things happen in real time, the rate of change is usually too slow to be perceived. Yet over the course of hours, days and months, the changes are increasingly dramatic. From day to night, from winter to summer, *The Place Where You Go to Listen* may look and may sound like two very different places. (p. 6)

Although it is intimately tied to place, *The Place Where You Go* is highly abstracted; built from pink noise and bands of color, it contains far fewer tangible representations of the visual or aural details of the place it portrays than most works of place-based art. This is a deliberate attempt on Adams's part to reconceive of his music from "a vehicle for self-expression" to "a mode of awareness." Motivated throughout his career by concern for the environment, including the threat of climate change, Adams's early works evoked the landscape itself before changing to an approach in which he tries to "evoke the experience, the *feeling* of being in a place, without direct reference to a particular landscape" (Adams, 2009, p. 2). In *The Place Where You Go,* Adams sees "a means of receiving messages *from* the world," a way of listening to the Earth itself, in an attempt to understand and live more harmoniously with our environment.

Although *The Place Where You Go* demonstrates that visuals need not be representational to be effective in evoking place, visual art does, of course, possess the ability to depict the everyday, tangible details of place, and this can create valuable expressive possibilities for working in multimedia. As well, it allows multimedia works to engage with historical traditions of place-based visual art. Of this very large group, two examples particularly pertinent to the Hudson Valley are discussed below: the Hudson River School of the 19th century and the work of the 20th century film-maker Peter Hutton.

Many of the same aesthetic currents that run through the history of place music are discernible in the history of visual art. Like Ives, the Hudson River School painters approached landscape as a means to foster a sense of American identity. Thomas Cole, the progenitor of the movement, sought a "uniquely American landscape style" (Driscoll, 1997, p. 13) and recognized in the sparsely settled lands that lay north of New York City along the banks of the Hudson River the distinctive landscape necessary for such a unique style.

As with both Ives and Mendelssohn, landscape is portrayed in Hudson River School works as a locus of transcendent experience, which springs to life in Alvan Fisher's *A Storm in the Valley* (1830). The painting shows a calm lake in the middle ground giving way to magisterial, forested mountains in the background, all laid out beneath radiant sunlight in one half of the sky, while storm clouds lower in the other. Alone amidst the expanse, the human condition is represented by a lone rider straining to drive a trio of cattle up the hill and into cover ahead of the storm. Fisher's work is representative of the "grand opera style" (Novak, 2007) of landscape painting which saw in the undisturbed vastness of the American wilderness a metaphor for the limitless sense of possibility of 19th century America. *A Storm* hums with the belief "that nature had religious, therapeutic, and/or didactic values" (Driscoll, 1997, p. 9) and that to live, strive, and thrive in such environs was to be imbued with purpose and virtue.

Filmmaker Peter Hutton made place-based films in many locations, but he reserved a special focus in his output for the Hudson Valley, where he lived from the 1980s until his death in 2016. Of his work, he said:

> The experience of my films is a little like daydreaming. It's about taking the time to just sit down and look at things...I think when you have the occasion to step away from agendas—whether it's through circumstance or out of some kind of emotional

> necessity—then you're often struck by the incredible epiphanies of nature. These are often very subtle things, right at the edge of most people's sensibilities. My films try to record and to offer some of these experiences. (As cited in Macdonald, 2001, pp. 73-74)

Hutton's (2000) film *Time and Tide* offers us some of these "incredible epiphanies." Presented to the viewer as a purely visual experience without any sound, *Time and Tide* is in many ways an updating of the themes and techniques inaugurated by the Hudson River School painters (though as a temporal art form, *Time and Tide* has the advantage of presenting the Hudson to us in all its variety, juxtaposing imagery of ice flows (02:28) with shots of the riverbank in verdant summer colors (16:10)).

In Hutton's version of the Hudson Valley, humanity is no longer dwarfed by the vastness of nature. This reflects the facts of life as they stand in the late 20th century: the Hudson River Valley is no longer an expanse of untrammeled wilderness but a storied part of American history, a jumble of residential, commercial, and industrial development. Hutton incorporates the 1903 film *Down the River*, black and white and "quoted" in *Time and Tide* at greatly increased speed to suggest the "turn-of-the-century excitement with modernity's exploitation of this natural resource" (Macdonald, 2001, p. 85). His use of industrial imagery throughout the film reflects an attitude shift, too. Though he celebrates the river, Hutton is aware that humanity's relationship with nature is more complicated, and often more destructive, than the idealized harmony Fisher suggests.

Hutton's larger project thus resonates deeply with Luther Adams's (2009) idea of "receiving messages *from* the earth." If it is possible to draw generalized distinctions between depictions of place in the 19th and early 20th century, as opposed to later works, it is that for Mendelssohn, Ives, and Alvan Fisher the landscape is something in which we lose ourselves,

nature and humanity merging in transcendent experience. The place-based artworks of the late 20th and early 21st century grow from the aesthetic traditions and techniques of earlier place-based works. But for Birtwistle, Luther Adams, and Hutton the essential optimism of the earlier works is nuanced by an acknowledgment of our human capacity for cruelness towards each other and the natural world. In the works of *An Arrow Pointed Down*, a similar awareness remains; but, as I hope to show, it does not preclude a palpable sense of wonder and delight at the beauties the human and natural world offer us as well.

The Hudson Valley and *An Arrow Pointed Down*

As a geographical entity, the Hudson River Valley encompasses the counties lying east and west of the Hudson River along the 150 mile stretch from Albany to New York City. It is traditionally divided into three segments, the Lower Hudson Valley, an exurban/suburban extension of the New York metro area, the Mid-Hudson Valley, containing a mixture of rural and suburban settlement and the cities of Poughkeepsie, Beacon, Newburgh, and Kingston, and the Upper Hudson Valley, the communities lying around the state capitol at Albany.

The area has seen pockets of dense development since the 1800s, encouraged especially by the construction of the Erie Canal; running across the state from Albany to Buffalo, the canal also increased the importance of the Hudson as the main route between it and New York City. The state-sponsored tourism website (Travel Hudson Valley, n.d.) describes the Hudson Valley as "steeped in history, natural beauty, culture, and a burgeoning food and farmer's market scene." Such billing is calculated to reinforce some of the same tropes of untrammeled nature and serenity traded upon by the Hudson River School. Yet mention of "culture and a burgeoning food and farmer's market scene" emphasize the Hudson Valley's growing attraction in recent years for migrants from New York City driven north by soaring property values in the five

boroughs. Communities such as Beacon, Hudson, and other river towns throughout the region find themselves newly trendy and with an influx of primarily wealthy residents. Ironically, a recent article in *The New York Times* (Post, 2016) noted that development now threatens to mar the bucolic landscapes that draw people to the region in the first place.

An Arrow Pointed Down was the second project undertaken by One Quiet Plunge, a multimedia collaboration between myself, fellow composers Bob Lukomski, Ryan Chase, and Eric Somers, and visual artists Keiko Sono, Tona Wilson, and Lori Adams, all of whom responded artistically to a text by poet Sarah Heady:

> The Hudson is an arrow pointing down (though it flows both ways). The City is a poured-concrete floor onto which all things land, and sometimes break. You can hold—with your hands raised above your head, with a system of pulleys, with a net, standing on a ladder—your life and all its parts in the air.
>
> But there is the fact of gravity.

Of her text, Heady says:

> In this particular excerpt…the physical embodiment of the region's connection to the City is the Hudson River…The intimate individual experience—which encompasses personal and political history as well as the unfolding experience of the present moment—can be mapped onto the near-vertical "arrow" that is the Hudson River…As is the case in every place and for every human being on earth, internal life is inextricable from external circumstances—and, I believe, external circumstances can nearly always be traced to geography. In exploring the specifics of a place (the Hudson Valley) for one specific person (me), this work obeys Joyce's maxim that "in the particular is contained the universal." It is my hope that my personal lens expresses broader truths about what it

> is to call the Hudson Valley home, and also that it might be relatable to any human being who calls any place home. (S. Heady, personal communication, December 4, 2016)

In responding to the text, each composer worked with a visual artist to create two multimedia segments of approximately 7 minutes each. The resulting eight segments were staged as a single hour-long event at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz in April 2015. Taking advantage of the ability to project video on multiple walls throughout the gallery, each artist used two or three separate projectors to display their images and chose a separate space within the gallery, creating separate "stations" for their segments. The audience moved between stations throughout the performance, blurring the lines between a concert and gallery exhibition.

The videos presented here are single-screen edits of the original video segments.

Bob Lukomski (Music) and Keiko Sono (Video)

Keiko Sono's first image recreates the "net" from Heady's text, expanding outward to overwhelm the screen. Bob Lukomski's music is inharmonic and harsh at the opening, its echoing quality suggestive of space and vastness. At the moment the river first appears, so does true harmony, in the form of a broadly-spaced chord. The sudden harmonicity overlain on the river visuals creates an almost serene beauty. But the edgy timbres remain: throughout the work, notions of conventional, generic beauty are problematized in both music and visuals.

Specific meanings are kept at arm's length, implied but not defined. Amidst the eerie currents of the soundscape are human voices speaking isolated fragments of text, audible but unintelligible. At 03:35, we see the striking image of a man in a swimsuit, motionless next to a large metallic object that is jagged, industrial-looking, and unidentifiable. The relationship to the

river is obvious, but the precise meaning of the image—of the man, his shoulders slumped, and this vaguely unsettling object—remains unclear.

In creating her video, Sono responded to the changes in the Hudson Valley's population, a situation she sees as essentially positive: "[people] end up flowing upwards to our area, constantly mixing in with the generations who came before them, sometimes contentiously but mostly harmoniously" (K. Sono, personal communication, January 10, 2017). Amidst these currents, she seeks to depict what makes the area special. She explains the man in his swimsuit is a friend of hers and that the imagery for her showed the "unique quality of our arts community, with its idiosyncrasies and fierce resistance to conformity." Sono's visuals, rooted in specificity and uniqueness, contrast with tourist literature that generically invokes "culture."

Sono notes, too, the influence of Hudson River School painters John Kensett, Asher Durand, and Thomas Cole, saying, "I wanted to convey the blissfulness of the land." Yet the blissfulness is threatened: Sono says that place-based art has been central to her focus for 15 years, a period in which she has been motivated by a sense of loss in the face of climate change: "the focus [of my art] was on the experience of being there, taking in as much as possible before our world changed for good" (K. Sono, personal communication, January 10, 2017).

Lukomski's music also responds to loss, in his case, of the physical experience of daily life:

> Because we live in an increasingly virtual environment, I think that creating place-based work...is a response to the ideology of consumption. We live in a rapid-fire media landscape, so place-based work is an aesthetic challenge to the prehender to slow down and engage...Much place-based art often comes along as an imposition on a space...My

> compositions in this area seek to reaffirm and expose what is already there. (B. Lukomski, personal communication, January 11, 2017)

To that end, in performance Lukomski feeds the voices of the audience through a computer, using them to control one of the layers of sound; each performance is unique, emanating from the people and place in which it was staged.

At 05:13, the music, which has been continuous and rhythmic, building in urgency, suddenly clears away, creating a powerful resolution to stillness. Sono presents us with three shots of the river and we are left to appreciate the beauty of the river in the sudden calm.

Such moments are powerful focusing mechanisms for the viewer. Both artists seek presence through a critique of generic representations of the riverine idyll. Their art prods us to take notice of what is unique about this time and this place with the awareness that change—of the climate, of the demographic of the Hudson Valley, of the very physicality of life—may soon wash it away. Imagery and sounds that are almost, but not quite, legible pull us in, forcing us to sit up, to listen up, and say, "What is that?" In that moment of engagement, we are present.

Joshua Groffman (Music, Video Editing) and Rachel Bishop,

Kathy O'Connor, and Rebecca Van Tassell (Video Footage)

In my own compositional work, place crept up on me almost before I realized it consciously. My home turf in the Hudson Valley was for a long time just that: a familiar bit of land, unmarked as special, the feeling of the everyday. Geographical and temporal distance allowed me to re-see familiar surroundings. Leaving the area for education and professional commitments, I found myself re-examining sights, sounds, and even smells I had known all my life each time I returned, beginning to understand what might be unique about the area. Curious about the possibilities but with no real plan, I began making field recordings when I travelled in

the area, eventually incorporating them into *Landscapes* for piano and electronics in 2013. The finished work clarified for me how crucial place had become to my sense of self as an artist.

In contemplating my own contribution to *An Arrow Pointed Down* and how it fit with my previous work with place music, I wanted to generate the video portion by sourcing contributions from multiple people. More than anything else, the diversity of experience in the Hudson Valley had struck me upon my return: the extreme wealth of Westchester County and the grinding poverty on display in cities like Newburgh and rural Sullivan County; pockets of vibrant multiethnic diversity and others of near-total homogeneity; the rolling horse country of Dutchess County and the traffic and density, the "poured concrete floor," of Yonkers. For me, such profusion was energizing, but also mystifying: how could all this diversity be lumped together under the same moniker, "the Hudson Valley"? Seeking video from many points of view seemed one way to ask (and maybe, answer) this question.

As the videos came in, I settled on locomotion, all the different ways of moving up, down, and across the river, as the guiding principle for organizing them; for it is through these locomotions that we move between the different kinds of experience that shape the area. Musically, I limited myself to two distinct timbres, that of the clean electric guitar and distorted synthesizer. Both play the same material throughout, a continuously repeating harmonic progression that unfolds in descending thirds from a hollow perfect fifth to a widely-spaced, resonant 13th chord. As electric instruments, both guitar and synthesizer evoke modern existence; their contrasting timbres define a continuum that confronts that existence with equilibrium or angst.

In syncing music to image, I tried to avoid easy associations; the guitar's contemplative sound is introduced over an image of the gentle flow of the river (01:11) but it continues when

the visual cuts to jittery footage of a crossing of the Tappan Zee Bridge in heavy traffic. Juxtaposing the calm and the frenetic across different parameters of the work seemed to bind together all of the different kinds of experience in the Hudson Valley as crisscrossing points of a journey through this terrain.

Ryan Chase (Music) and Tona Wilson (Video)

In his sound design, Ryan Chase says a "process is set in motion and eventually reaches its inexorable conclusion" (R. Chase, personal communication, January 14, 2017). The process is one of descent, an "arrow down" that controls the overall motion of the music throughout the piece. Registers descend and then leap frog over each other, creating an M. C. Escher-like quality of constant falling.

The work is broadly shaped into three large musical gestures, each with a different basic motion (Table 1). The opening gesture hangs in stasis, microtonal inflections around the initial double octave (A5-A7) creating wobbling, shimmering vibrations. All at once it gathers steam at 00:49; lower octaves down to the bottom of our hearing are activated and a dense chord builds up, threatening to overwhelm us before dissolving, leaving us with a pulsating major third (F5-A5).

The energy generated by this initial gesture dissipates slowly over the remainder of the piece. The second large gesture is again one of stasis, the music fixated on a microtonal cluster between F5 and E♭5. In gesture 3, downward *glissandi* are introduced which shape the rest of the music. The middle register that formed gesture 2 disappears, leaving a gap in which low and high registers pull apart. Mellow low tones begin to slide into dark, watery depths, while the stratospheric upper notes float gently downward. In gesture 3b pulsed F#4s reintroduce the

middle register, lengthen, and become continuous as all registers fall in earnest now, fading away as the visuals disappear.

Despite the simplicity of his basic concept, the "arrow down" process as Chase fleshes it out is nuanced and complex, reminiscent not of an artificial, man-made descent, but the meandering, entropic forces of nature. Citing the ecological concerns of John Luther Adams as an influence, he noted, "[i]n many ways, I sought to remove myself from the piece entirely. I wanted to convey a sense of the landscape, pure and undefiled" (R. Chase, personal communication, January 14, 2017).

Tona Wilson was the only visual artist who chose to use Heady's text as image in her work. She does so in conjunction with other "static" images, animated two-dimensional images of a boat, human figures, and a map. Juxtaposing these with the dynamism of video footage creates a feeling of the present laden with a sense of history; so, too, does the muted color palette, invoking black and white footage.

In contrast to Chase's music, humans and their personal histories are at the heart of the visuals. Wilson recalls the river in vividly personal terms, trips along its banks to New York City as a child and teen. For her, the link between the physical look and feel of place is intimately connected to the human history that inhabits it. She recalls,

> As an art student in the 70s, I told my painting teacher I wanted to convey what it looked, felt, smelled, and sounded like to be inside the factory where I had worked the summer before, prompting him to tell me I should go into social work instead of painting. In retrospect, I was, rather, even then, looking to do artwork that conveyed a sense of place (and time, and situation). (T. Wilson, personal communication, December 4, 2016)

In Wilson's video, her personal history of the river melds with broader historical ideas. The interface between personal experience and historical currents is made explicit in the zoom-in sequence created at 02:46, when the image of the steamer ship gradually focuses in on a family group. Wilson explains that the sequence of swimmers beginning at 04:18 recreates a feature of life along the river in the 1940s, when passengers on the Hudson River Day Liners would throw coins wrapped in paper from the boats for swimmers on-shore to retrieve.

As a multimedia entity, visuals and music suggest the contradictions inherent in humanity's relationship to nature. Chase's music portrays impersonal nature, changing at its own pace and in its own way, alongside and amongst which so much human activity occurs. Tied up in our personal stories, humans often assert that we are "in charge" of our environment. This is certainly true to an extent—we can ply the waters with steamer boats, build great cities—but as Chase notes, nature is hardly a mere canvas for our ambitions:

> [Heady's] quote seemed to convey a sense of humanity's fragile futility as it relates to nature, both locally in terms of the river but also on a grander scale, thinking of the cosmos at large. The word "gravity" evokes a force we are able to compute, but still not fully understand. (R. Chase, personal communication, January 14, 2017)

Eric Somers (Music) and Lori Adams (Video)

Both Eric Somers and Lori Adams use highly abstract techniques in responding to Heady's text and the idea of place. Somers notes that his compositions have often "created sound to give the feeling of specific environments...not literal soundscapes but designs intended to capture the *feeling* of a space" (E. Somers, personal communication, November 2, 2016). Similarly, Adams says her aim "was less about a specific place visually, than common sensations

that everyone may have relative to a place they know well" (L. Adams, personal communication, November 3, 2016).[5]

The parallel to John Luther Adams's approach in *The Place Where You Go To Listen* is apparent. Adams (2009) writes, "As the philosopher David Abram observes, each distinctive place provokes its own state of mind, so that as we travel from one place to another we travel from one state of mind to another" (p. 101). It is this "state of mind" engendered by the Hudson Valley that the artists make tangible in their collaboration.

Lori Adams used light-writing photography—light-emitting devices placed against a black frame and captured by camera with a long exposure—to create the luminous still images in her visuals. Adams intercuts these stills with video filmed as the shapes were being "painted" by her assistants in a darkened room, the occasional arm or head visible as they move the light devices. Thus, we see both the process of creating the stills and the finished result.

Against the visuals, Somers creates a repertoire of sound textures which are modified and recombined throughout the work (Table 2). The work is sectional, creating vignettes in which image and music fade in and out together in careful synchrony. While Adams maintains the basic opposition of the still "finished" images and the moving images-in-process throughout, the different sound textures move over a larger emotional terrain. The imagery is thus continuously recontextualized by the changing soundscapes. As the work proceeds, Somers layers together the different textures that were presented separately initially, creating a dramatic sense of accumulation.

Adams's inclusion of the human figures at work creating the light-writing invites us to reflect on the human creators who are behind the abstract imagery. As the music creates a

[5] Adams, however, does also create direct references to the Hudson and Heady's text in the flowing lines of her imagery, reminiscent of the bends and curves of the river, as well as the image of the arrow seen at the opening.

shifting kaleidoscope of moods and soundworlds, the visuals become about the process of creation itself. Adams is acutely conscious of the opportunity she has to create her work: "I respond with a basic economic perspective, as everyone does. Without financial resources to commit time to try to convey ideas, there would probably be no shared art from me. In that way, I feel privilege" (L. Adams, personal communication, November 3, 2016). As we see the artist paint the feeling of place, the work affirms the possibility, and the privilege, of transforming the everyday world into artistic experience.

Conclusion

In *An Arrow Pointed Down,* the idea of place—a common location, the facts of everyday life—becomes a lens through which to view the various challenges of our contemporary moment: the changing economic and social conditions of late-stage capitalism, climate change and environmental degradation, the burdens of history, the pitfalls of an increasingly digitized existence. Beating against these currents, the artists acknowledge the beauty, both natural and human, that still surrounds us.

Artists in all disciplines have long viewed place-based art as a means to speak to and for all of humanity. William Faulkner believed that setting his novels in Yoknapatawpha County, a lightly fictionalized version of his "own postage stamp of native soil" in Oxford, Mississippi allowed him access to much more than parochial concerns: "I like to think of the world I created as being a kind of keystone in the universe; that, small as that keystone is, if it were ever taken away the universe itself would collapse" (Stein, 2006, p. 57).

I believe this discussion has shown that the idea of the local as keystone seems particularly relevant at this particular juncture in history. If we make art fundamentally as an

attempt to understand who we are, it would seem that, as Luther Adams (2009) notes, for the moment that quest must often lead us first to *where* we are.

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Appendix

Reduction of Orchestral Score to Mendelssohn's *Die Hebriden,* mm. 1-10

Example 1. Reduction of Felix Mendelssohn, *Die Hebriden,* mm. 1-10

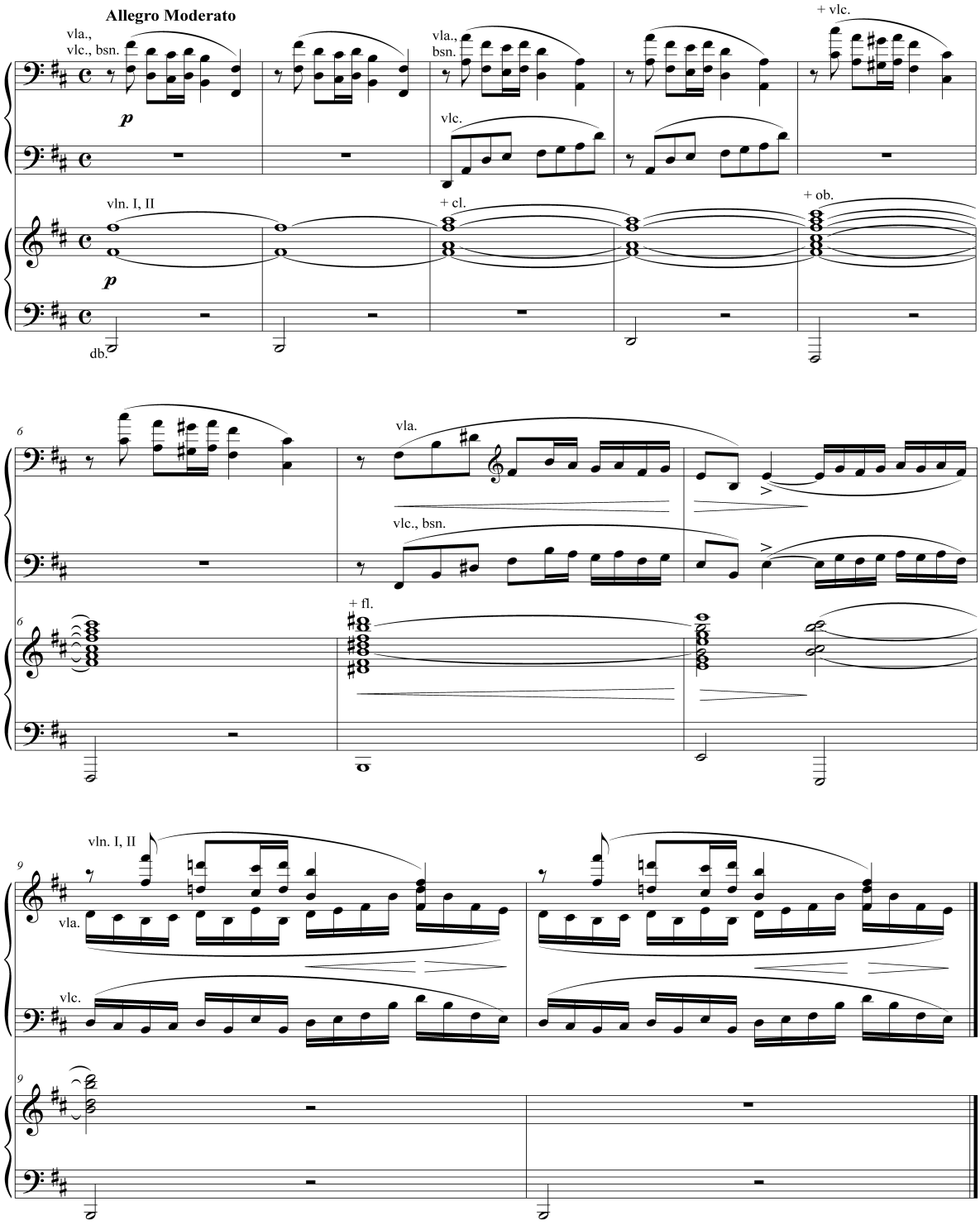

Table 1. Sound gestures in Ryan Chase's music for *An Arrow Pointed Down*

Gesture	**Timepoint**	**Basic motion of the music**	**Visual cue**
1	00:00	stasis	visual "canon" with Heady text
1b	00:49	unfolding chord	(no change)
2	01:48	stasis	two-dimensional images of steamer boats
3	03:38	downward glissandi in lower and upper registers; middle register empty	two-dimensional images of divers and paper-wrapped coins
3b	05:25	middle register reintroduced, all registers glissando downwards	visual canon reappears

Table 2a. Sound textures in Eric Somers's music for *An Arrow Pointed Down*

Sound Texture	**Description**
1	percussive impulse with delay
2	sonority based on open 5ths, pure timbre
3	sliding sawtooth waves in contrary motion
4	*"*chirping*"* impulse with delay
5 (*)	rhythmic, dance-like texture
6	wind sounds
7 (*)	thick choral texture, moving progression with sawtooth wave timbre
8	long tones with *"*crystal goblet*"* timbre
9 (*)	dissonant sonority, clangorous, bell-like timbre

(*) Texture is used only once.

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Table 2b. Combinations of images and sound textures in Eric Somers and Lori Adams' segment for *An Arrow Pointed Down*

Timepoint	**Image**	**Sound Texture**
00:00	static: arrow	1 + 2 (added @ 00:21)
00:57	moving: creating the arrow	3
01:10	static: arrow	3 + 4
01:43	moving: creating flowing lines	5
01:59	(no change)	6
02:42	static: repeating wave shape with flowing lines	7
03:53	moving: creating a helix	1 + 8
04:29	static: helix in flowing lines	1 + 8 (becomes thicker)
04:41	moving: creating a second helix	8 + 3
04:57	static: sharp-angled lines + helix	2 + 3 + 4
05:21	static: repeating wave shape with square corners	2 + 3 + 9
05:50	moving: creating square-cornered lines	1
06:13	static: second repeating wave shape with square corners	1 + 4 (soft attack) + 8 (lower, softer)
06:21	moving: creating square-cornered lines + flashing lights	1 + 8 fade, 4 remains
06:52	static: third repeating wave shape with square corners	6