

“Listen broadly, compose intuitively,” is a word of advice I received from Alvin Singleton, a friend and informal mentor of mine. I am always drawn to music that is taut and has that undeniable spark of immediacy - music that feels driven by personal instinct. My journey towards writing such music has relied heavily on the habits of a curious listener. The open-minded embrace of musical terrain far beyond one’s compositional tendencies are what cause those tendencies to evolve.

My origins as a composer go back to middle school when I was playing guitar and listening to post-rock bands like Sigur Rós and Explosions In the Sky. Around then I formed a band in that vein which I played with until I started college. Through a bizarre series of events, I ended up studying harp at the beginning of high school and adopting that as my primary instrument. It was through the harp that I was propelled into the world of classical music, first latching on to Debussy and Ravel, then exploring outwards in both chronological directions. In retrospect, it was my affinity for the lush sonorities in post-rock music that led directly to a connection with the harmonic worlds of Pärt, Reich, John Adams, David Lang, and Nico Muhly. This affinity soon found a sort of antithesis when I heard the music of Webern. I ended up writing an undergraduate thesis on Webern’s *Symphonie Op. 21, movt. I*, where I argued that there is a timbral narrative in the piece which adds an extra dimension to the unfolding twelve-tone double canon. Schoenberg’s idea of *Klangfarbenmelodie* was what originally sparked the project; I wanted answers for why I was so enthralled by beautiful combinations and progressions of instrumental color. I became enamored by Lachenmann, Druckman, Nørgård, and others whose use of timbre amounts to something akin to abstract poetry.

Part of the reason I really dove into classical music in high school was that I was growing bored of the post-rock medium (ambient, subtly voiced chord progressions and drones that often meander without developing). I wanted to hear and write music that journeyed; I wanted a surface to the music that obfuscated the underlying harmonies and grabbed the attention of the mind’s ear. That sentiment has remained with me ever since, although my post-rock beginnings left a (probably permanent) mark on my harmonic DNA. Ethereal harmony and scintillating timbres ended up becoming like two primary poles of my musical interest.

Considering my resulting tendency to write lush, ambient music with an underlying modernist impulse, it’s not surprising that I immediately took to the music of Donnacha Dennehy upon first discovery in early 2014. Hearing the music on the *Grá agus Bás* album, particularly the Yeats songs, ended up being one of those marking moments one has as a listener which provides a sort of frame for the next few years of musical exploration. I felt that although he had an obvious background in spectralism and European minimalism and was embracing a newfound lyricism in that particular period of output, he wasn’t concerned so much with how one tradition meshed with another as he was with simply being *musical*. I loved the way his music sounded comfortable in its own skin, freely conflating disparate styles in a way that exuded a passion for each without being pastiche. It seemed as if his time studying spectralism informed and strengthened his lyrical tendencies and vice versa. The prospect of studying under Professor Dennehy is one of the many reasons I am drawn to Princeton.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The writing sample I’ve included in my application is a paper I wrote on Dennehy’s song “Her Anxiety” from *That the Night Come*. The paper was an assignment in a seminar called Song Analysis which explored/celebrated the complex interface between text and music. I provide a possible reading of the text as Dennehy sets it and examine his microtonal techniques which informed the way I approached microtones in my piece *Sift*.

I met Helmut Lachenmann at a festival this past summer and he made a remark that has lingered in my mind ever since. He said, “don’t let your garden become a prison.” The proverbial “garden” is the collection of sonorities, processes, and approaches to composition that any one composer holds dear and has developed into a personal sound world. These gardens, of course, are all well and good; but they should be kept in check so they don’t hinder the imagination. The music that I am currently writing has put more focus on actual harmonic exploration. I’ve found that sometimes these moments of ambient harmonic purity that I love are most powerful when they bloom forth unexpectedly out of more chromatic material. Wherever my voice develops, I have my aim set on that healthy balance where I nurture my personal voice and embrace the array of passions I have accumulated over time while also maintaining a curious ear and a voracious hunger for more. I certainly plan on being a perpetual student whose curiosity never dies out, even in the wintering years of life, but I think there is something special about one’s twenties - it’s a time to be humble, to listen, and to explore.

My assumption is that self-motivation and voracious curiosity (musical, intellectual, and otherwise) are common attributes among the composers who have thrived most at Princeton. I am excited by the prospect of taking my ability to time-manage and coupling that with a raw desire to create, explore, and grow in Princeton’s composition community. I have long cherished the mentor/apprentice dynamic with teachers or older friends whose life and work I admire; but during my masters, I’ve added to that a love of peer camaraderie in regards to music making. Exploring and composing in community has become one of my life’s great joys. The space, time, and community Princeton provides for composers to nurture their craft is certainly unique and I would steward the opportunity well.