Experiential Time: The Special World of Music Therapy Composition

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This thesis is dedicated to Joanna Schneier and owes its existence to her unwavering support.
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In thinking about you, and in thinking about your future as music therapists, I am thinking about how absolutely necessary it is for you all to become musically cultured people. I could go even further and say how important it is that you become cultured people: that you know the great poems, the great novelists, the great painters. Because the more you feed into your own inner life, the richer that inner life is going to be—the more you’re going to have to give from within that rich inner life to the children who come to meet you. That will all become part of you. If it’s part of you, it’s part of the musical you; if it’s part of the musical you, it’s part of the music you have to bring to a child.

—Paul Nordoff, Healing Heritage
Table of Contents

Abstract............................................................................................................................................. 5
Experiential Time............................................................................................................................... 6
  Statement of Purpose....................................................................................................................... 6
  Compositional Improvisation......................................................................................................... 7
  Let Me Introduce Myself................................................................................................................ 9
  The Special World of Clinical Improvisation............................................................................... 9
  Musical Archetypes....................................................................................................................... 10
  Nordoff-Robbins: The Next Generation....................................................................................... 11
Compositions................................................................................................................................... 13
  Reharmonization.......................................................................................................................... 13
  Three Recompositions.................................................................................................................. 17
    Contrafact.................................................................................................................................. 18
    The Characteristic Piece........................................................................................................... 22
    Musical Recombination............................................................................................................. 25
A Song Is Born.................................................................................................................................. 31
Conclusion......................................................................................................................................... 43
References.......................................................................................................................................... 44
Abstract

Paul Nordoff challenged music therapists to compose original clinical music informed by works of master composers such as Mozart, Schumann, and Debussy. Nordoff’s understanding of idioms was derived from Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophical conception of musical archetypes. The notion of idiom as musical archetype is reframed here according to a cultural rather than mystical framework, to appeal more widely to music therapists of all orientations. This cultural worldview allows the identification of a new clinical idiom based on the gentle jazz piano style associated with children that emerged in American popular culture during the 1960s. Original compositions by the present author were created following Nordoff’s process of absorbing music of the past. The new works are modeled on an updated canon of 20th-century American composers including Joplin, Copland, Evans, Guaraldi, Newman, and Waits. The emotional and psychological effects of various compositional procedures—including reharmonization, contrafact, the characteristic piece (Charakterstück), and musical recombination—are analyzed. A case report recounts in detail the creation of a therapeutic song in a clinical setting.

Keywords: archetype, composition, contrafact, idiom, improvisation, Nordoff, reharmonization, Steiner
Experiential Time

Statement of Purpose

In 1974, the composer and pioneering music therapist Paul Nordoff gave a series of lectures that were later compiled into a book titled *Healing Heritage: Paul Nordoff Exploring the Tonal Language of Music* (Robbins & Robbins, 1998). The primary message of the book is that creative music therapists ought to make an ongoing effort to absorb the great compositions of the past. Nordoff’s lectures consist primarily of musical analyses of masterworks—by composers such as Mozart, Schumann, and Debussy—broken down to their most elemental components to demonstrate the emotional, psychological, and therapeutic effect of intervals, chords, idioms, and the like.

In the book, Nordoff makes explicit the process that was no doubt in operation, although unstated, when he sang the “Good Morning Song” to Anna—a famous case recounted in *Creative Music Therapy* (Nordoff & Robbins, 2007, pp. 50-58).

In playing a pentatonic tune, characterized by leaps on the black keys doubled in octaves, was Nordoff channeling—consciously or unconsciously—the last measures of Debussy’s “Hommage à Rameau?”
The present work is an attempt to pick up where Healing Heritage left off. In so doing, I update the canon to include more recent composers who existed outside of Nordoff’s frame of reference. What follows is a collection of clinical compositions that draw their inspiration from the 20th-century American master composers Scott Joplin, Aaron Copland, Bill Evans, Vince Guaraldi, Randy Newman, and Tom Waits. Each work is accompanied by text that shares insight into the process of composing music with clinical intent.

**Compositional Improvisation**

One of the original works included here is a song in the technical sense of the term in that it features lyrics. The rest are instrumentals. A main reason is that my primary goal here is to focus on the emotional impact of purely musical components. A second reason has to do with the nature of therapeutic composition, which is perhaps a misnomer. In the world of music therapy that Nordoff conceived, composition and improvisation exist on a continuum. As the jazz musician Wayne Shorter said,
“Composition is just improvisation slowed down, and improvisation is just composition sped up (Mercer, 2007, p. 140).” Shorter was not talking about musical tempo; he was referring to the time it takes to compose versus improvise a piece of music.

Another way to describe the interconnectedness of the two activities is that improvisation is composing in real time. The term *compositional improvisation* (Guerrero, Marcus, & Turry, 2015, p. 129) captures the in-between nature of composition in therapy. Unlike preparing a score for a concert performance, therapeutic composition is a fluid, emergent process. Nordoff’s clinical songs, as with much of the Nordoff-Robbins repertoire that followed, emerged in a clinical context. The written versions came after the fact. Nowikas (1999) wrote “Simon’s Bells,” for example, for a real, live boy named Simon who attended music therapy sessions. Those scores were collected as a memorial to a clinical process, and the very nature of recreating music from notated scores means that they have become fixed. The downside to publishing that repertoire as sheet music is that it enforces a museum-like reverence for and ossification of the material. For that reason, the compositions presented here exist primarily without lyrics because they are meant to keep evolving according to new clinical contexts. With one client, a composition might get a set of lyrics that would then be discarded in favor of something more appropriate for a different client. The melodies might conceivably change to accommodate those new lyrics. Therefore, any score presented here is *one version* of a piece from a particular moment in time, not a monument etched in marble. The music that follows is a collection of ideas—a therapeutic improviser’s kit bag, as it were—that can be deployed in various ways depending on the clinical context.
Let Me Introduce Myself

There are elements of Paul Nordoff’s biography that resonate with my own. As I finished my undergraduate education in the early 1980s, I wanted very much to continue on in graduate school as a composer. I was discouraged from doing so by the same modernist orthodoxy that had shunned Nordoff. The prospect of carving out a space for myself as a composer of so-called accessible music in a conservatory setting was simply too daunting.

Instead of pursuing musical composition I entered the world of public radio, working for years as the arts and culture correspondent for NPR News in Washington, DC. I noticed over time that my radio features functioned as a kind of proxy for the creative output I wished I had been making. I approached each story as a musical composition, thinking first and foremost about overall structure (usually A-B-A song form), the timbre and rhythm of a speaker’s voice, the tempo of the final mix.

And so midway through the journey of life, I return to the path I abandoned as a young man. It seems somehow meaningful that at the moment I present these works for a master’s degree in music therapy, I am one year older than Paul Nordoff was when he earned his Bachelor of Music Therapy from Combs College of Music in Philadelphia.

The Special World of Clinical Composition

Why should music therapists go to the trouble of writing original clinical compositions? Nordoff hints at the answer, in passing, when recounting therapy with a child named Barton: “At the closure of every session, the transition from the special world of his music to the environment of the day-care milieu was made through Goodbye!” (Robbins & Robbins, p. 161).”
Popular songs exist in the milieu of our daily lives. Art music written with clinical intent creates a *special world* that even operates according to its own time—what Nordoff calls *experiential time* (p. 65).

I do not mean to claim that recreative methods should be banished from music therapy. I do worry, however, that next to the relative ease of singing Beatles songs with a guitar, the composing of clinical art songs will eventually vanish.

**Musical Archetypes**

After lecturing on various elements of music and their therapeutic properties, Nordoff switches gears and discusses musical idioms in light of Rudolf Steiner’s concept of musical archetypes. He refers to Steiner’s thinking on intervals as “a universal, not a personal, concept,” “a basic fundamental human concept—a psychospiritual one, if you like (Robbins & Robbins, p. 42).”

Anthroposophy, as Steiner conceived it, is a spiritual belief system and as such might be anathema to music therapists from more positivist orientations. I believe it is possible and indeed worthwhile to try to translate Nordoff’s mystical ideas into more universally accepted language.

Imagine how a non-believer might take in this particularly extraordinary statement by Nordoff, who tells a student she is wrong to discuss archetypes in terms of culture “because the archetypes go back so many thousands of years—actually to the beginning of time and the creation of the world, some of them (Robbins & Robbins, p. 137).”

Nordoff goes on to recount an incident as if it could only be explained in mystical terms.
Why should the son of an American respond as he did to a Middle Eastern scale, so consistently and extraordinarily that he actually in one session ... began dancing with his hands held above his head like this [moving in a style directly suggestive of a sinuous belly dance] (Robbins & Robbins, p. 137)?

Here is one possible reason why. Nordoff gives an answer to his own question when he mentions belly dancing—a remark that is followed by an editor’s note explaining that in the mid 1970s, “virtually the only Arabian music heard in the West ... originated in restaurants offering Middle Eastern cuisine and featuring female dancers performing what was popularly known as belly dancing (p. 180).” It is totally conceivable that a child with autism would be taken to such a restaurant, and it is absolutely within the realm of possibility that such a child would absorb and hold on to this cultural association.

Then there is the matter of memes. Long before Dawkins (1976) coined the term (in his book The Selfish Gene), Warner Bros. was in the business of purveying memes of this sort via its long-running series of Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoon shorts that started appearing in movie theaters in 1930. These short films were among the many cultural channels that helped to enforce a cliché that sinewy, gapped scales are the expected accompaniment for belly dancing.

**Nordoff-Robbins: The Next Generation**

My goal here is to translate Nordoff’s ideas for music therapists outside of the Nordoff-Robbins tribe and to expand with ideas of my own. It is a process parallel to the work going on in the world of cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy, many variants of which take Buddhist principles and strip them of their spiritual trappings so as to make
the elements of mindfulness more widely available as a form of therapeutic treatment.

Where Nordoff sees archetypes, I see the emotional content of music that is communicated through culture. I wish specifically to identify an idiom of music, ostensibly for children, that was spread by television in the 1960s and 70s.

In 1965, the Charlie Brown television specials made their debut. Three years later, the first episode of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* hit the airwaves. *The Muppet Show* started airing in 1976.

These cultural phenomena profoundly shaped the landscape of so-called children’s music in America. Instead of condescending in the mode of, say, Raffi or Barney, they spoke to children in an adult voice. In the Peanuts world, small children talked about adult things, and Vince Guaraldi’s instrumentals captured that incongruity, applying grownup music to scenes from childhood. These programs refracted children’s experience through the rearview mirror of adulthood, and they were accompanied by a new, distinctly jazz-inflected soundtrack for the music child in everyone.

For those of us who experienced these programs as children, gentle jazz piano became established as an archetype of childhood, and it stays with us as we move toward older adulthood.

Jazz possesses certain qualities that make it especially suitable for music therapy. Copland (1960) believes jazz suggests “a colloquialism of musical speech that is indigenously delightful, a kind of here-and-now feeling ... with an immediacy and vibrancy that audiences throughout the world find exhilarating (pp. 49-50).” That here-and-now feeling is, I believe, what Nordoff means when he talks about experiential time.
**Compositions**

What follows is a series of musical pieces I have composed with particular clinical intent. Various procedures are employed, including reharmonization, contrafact, and what I call *recomposition*. The final section consists of a detailed case study that shows the clinical genesis of a song.

In no instances did the music spring fully formed from my brow, which is the commonly held belief about, for example, Mozart’s compositional process. Instead, I pursue a dialectical approach: I take apart already existing pieces of music, examine their salient components, keep whichever components are useful, develop and adapt them, and put everything back together in a new way. In this way I follow in the footsteps of Copland, who told an interviewer, “I don’t compose. I assemble materials” (Pollack, 1999, p. 11).

**Reharmonization**

Reharmonization carries with it a potent psychological effect. It is a way of recontextualizing musical material. Adding new harmonies to a familiar melody helps us to perceive the world differently.

Take, for example, “O Tannenbaum.” The familiar Christmas carol borrows its melody from a traditional German student song, “Lauriger Horatius,” that dates to the 16th century.

Here is a classic chorale arrangement of the song, for tenor and bass voices, dating from 1856:
This iconic carol is in itself a sort of musical archetype, replete with associations of family gathering around a Christmas tree, drinking wassail, and perhaps memories of an innocent time.

As reimagined by Guaraldi (1965), reharmonized in a jazz setting, the carol acquires a new dimension. A new layer of knowing hipness is added. Suddenly there is an energy that is generated by the juxtaposition of Romantic-era Germany with present-day popular culture. Guaraldi’s reconception of the song becomes a commentary of sorts, a contemporary American gloss on old Europe.

I composed “Born with the Sun” for a Chinese woman living in the United States. It is a contemporary American vernacular reharmonization of “Jasmine Flower,” a traditional Chinese song, and as such it represents the intersection of two cultures.
The clinical goal was to create a musical bridge between her home world and her current country of residence. If we accept the melody as a stand-in for the client, the reharmonization represents the new social context of her adopted culture.

For this reharmonization, I chose what is known among contemporary jazz musicians as nonfunctional harmony. It has its antecedent in Debussy, who Nordoff says “was primarily the one who freed chords from the relationships of the traditional harmony of the past (Robbins & Robbins, p. 68).” Instead of serving a harmonic function of moving the music forward in time horizontally, these vertical sonorities serve as “independent, expressive tonal entities (p. 114).”

In this particular case I chose a series of minor 7th chords that are consonant in isolation. Stringing minor 7th chords together in this way creates an effect that is
simultaneously mournful and unmoored, floating in space and lacking a sense of forward motion.

I have notated this piece as a lead sheet. A pianist trained in jazz and other contemporary styles will know how to realize the chord symbols, which are in essence a modern descendant of Baroque figured bass.

Born with the Sun

Traditional melody
reharmonization
by Dean Olsher

The rationale for the decision to notate this piece as a lead sheet is to communicate that the interpreter is free to pursue any number of options. A pianist might choose florid arpeggios. A guitarist might strum or play fingerstyle.

Here is one simple piano realization of this song’s chord symbols. It features spare, minimal accompaniment.
Three Recompositions

The compositional procedure used here is the contrafact, which is the creation of a new melody over an existing harmonic progression. Charlie Parker (1945) used this method extensively. A notable example is “Anthropology,” in which he built a new song
by stringing a new melody over the chord changes from George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm.”

Contrafacts possess a double nature. They are a dialectic between the past and present. The pre-existing harmonic structure evokes memories while the newly composed melody creates a commentary on those memories. Psychologically, contrafacts push us to relive the past but to experience it in a new context.

**Contrafact**

The creation of this contrafact took place in two steps. The first was to reharmonize the famous Joplin (1902) piano rag “The Entertainer.” My goal was to reconceive the piece by slowing it down, turning it from what it has become—an ice-cream truck jingle—into a melancholy, gospel-inflected mood piece.

**The Entertainer**

---

**Slow gospel blues**

Cut out the page with the sheet music.
The second step was to use this new chord progression as the basis for a contrafact. The piece went through several iterations before finding its current form, first as a waltz titled “The Darkest Day,” which is an attempt to capture the tension between innocence and experience—the bittersweet nature of nostalgia—that recurs in the songs of Tom Waits.

**The Darkest Day**

Dean Olsher

```
C     C9     F     C/E  G7

C     E#     F7     Em7  D7     Dm7  G7

Gm7   C9     Fmaj7   Em7  Dm7  G7  Gm7  C7(9)

F#7   Fm7    Em7    Am7  Dm7  G7    C
```

In situations calling for a certain emotional ambivalence, this waltz could be used in a clinical setting as is. To create other clinical opportunities, for situations that require more ingenuity, I decided to make another contrafact. This involved working from what is known as a scratch lyric, a set of words that serve as a place holder until a final lyric is decided. For example, until settling on “Yesterday,” McCartney (1965) famously, and to humorous effect, sang the words “Scrambled eggs, oh, my baby, how I love your legs (Miles, 1997, p. 202).”
In the case of the following song, I used the words to “Let Me Introduce Myself” by Turry and Beer (1999) as a scratch lyric: “Let me introduce myself / My name is _____ [repeat] / Here we are in music [three times] today.” Those words led to the creation of a new melody, below, that conforms to the prosody of English speech.

Let Me Introduce Myself

Dean Olsher

The piece conforms to the A-B song structure. At some point in the future it will have new words attached to it. The new lyrics will, in the best case scenario, arise from some clinical situation. At that point the title of the song will change to reflect the new lyrics.

One possible future for this composition is that it might be used as an activity song for a child with special needs. In such a case, the words might be: “First you take
the stick and beat / The drum like this.”

   It could be used as a prompt to engage an older adult with early-stage dementia: “Tell me all about the things / You did today.”

   If desired, the composition could use used as the basis for a goodbye song: “Now it’s time to say goodbye / Goodbye! Goodbye!” In that eventuality, the therapist might be inclined to slow the tempo.

   The harmonic movement tells a story built around the movement from the dominant (I) to the subdominant (IV), a mainstay of American popular music. If the tonic is “home,” the subdominant is the neighbor’s house. Moving to the subdominant creates a feeling of having gone somewhere.

   The third measure moves cautiously into the subdominant and then immediately steps back to the tonic. The second attempt to move to the subdominant (m. 11), represents more of a commitment. The movement from F7 to Em7 is a substantive change. The third movement to the subdominant (m. 19) carries with it the feeling of release into the Fmaj7 chord. Harmonically speaking, the story is about three attempts to leave home, each more successful than the attempt preceding it.

   Deceptive cadences appear three times (mm. 14-15, mm. 16-17, mm. 22-23) through a gradually melting chain of ii-V progressions. Each time, instead of resolving to the tonic, the V7 turns instead into its parallel m7 chord, thus transforming into the ii of the next subdominant in the chain. This effect produces a feeling of ever-decreasing tension.

   The piece uses what is known among jazz musicians as a Lydian ending, which starts with a half-diminished chord built on the raised fourth step of the home key and
descends to the tonic. This is the harmonic progression Porter (1932) used in “Night and Day” (“In the roaring traffic’s boom...”). Its use by Guaraldi (1965) in the ubiquitous “Christmastime Is Here” elevates it to the level of a kind of archetype in the idiom of children’s jazz.

**The Characteristic Piece**

The next piece is intended as a musical analogue to what T. S. Eliot described in literature as the objective correlative. The music was composed to capture a particular emotional state. In this case, my attempt was to convey the feeling of solace that arises whenever I see the rays cast by a low sun over a meadow in late summer. Even though there is no way that specific imagery would ever be transmitted to a listener without some textual prompt, the emotion arising from that image will, if I am successful, be communicated.

“The Golden Hour” is an example of a Charakterstück (characteristic piece)—a solo piano composition intended to capture an emotion or an aspect of personality, in the vein of Schumann or Mendelssohn. Nordoff devotes his analyses to several such pieces, including Schumann’s *Davidbündlertänze* and piano works by the 20th-century Catalan composer Federico Mompou.

If my speculation is correct, “The Golden Hour” arose in a way similar to the “Good Morning Song” that Nordoff sang to Anna (Nordoff & Robbins, 2007, pp. 50-58). Whereas Nordoff’s debt to Debussy was perhaps subconscious, “The Golden Hour” is an example of intentionally channeling a piece of music from the past. Specifically, it is a recomposition of the music Copland (1940) wrote for the film version of the Thornton Wilder play *Our Town*. 
This time, instead of creating a contrafact, my compositional procedure was looser. I decided to absorb several qualities from Copland’s composition without following a particular series of chords in a literal fashion.

The first element adopted from the “Our Town” score is the use of spread voicings—intervals of a fifth or more—which Copland often used throughout his catalogue to evoke vast spaces in the American landscape, in particular the open prairie.

In m. 3 I have stacked two open fifths, which creates a sense of bitonality—the superimposition of one harmony on top of another. This is another quality borrowed from Copland’s music that conveys a particular emotion of expansiveness. When two chords are sounded simultaneously, the mind perceives both as separate entities and also as a composite harmony. Whereas the contrafact has a double nature of a temporal sort—we hear the past differently through the perspective of the present—bitonality has a doubleness in the present moment.

Bitonality recalls a famous quote by Fitzgerald (1936): “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function (p. 36).” Sonorities such as these force the listener to sit up and pay attention.
I have injected harmonic ambiguity into this composition by choosing chords that avoid the key-defining third step (mm. 3-4, 7-8, 10, 12, and 14). This strategy creates a sense of being simultaneously tonal and atonal. The vertical sonorities are consonant, but the absence of a major or minor third conveys a sense of uncertainty—of not being clearly identified. This lack of musical definition has an emotional and psychological effect. The impact is a perception that solid harmonic ground is attainable, but we have not established foothold.

The Golden Hour

One element that creates a feeling of relaxation is the downward whole-step motion in the bass. It is an extension of the Mixolydian cadence found often in Celtic and Appalachian folk songs and fiddle tunes. Each downward step brings a deeper sense of release.

This composition lends itself to being used as an accompaniment for progressive muscle relaxation.
Musical Recombination

This next piece took a long time to gestate and is indeed still searching for its final form. The reason is that it was composed outside of a clinical context. Often I find that a fragment of music comes to me at all hours of the day or night. The German word *Ohrwurm* (*earworm* in English) describes this phenomenon of music that takes hold of a person’s imagination and replays itself to the point of distraction. Whenever this happens, I take it as a sign that something about the music is speaking to a part of me that needs to pay attention. I respond first by listening to a recording, finding a score whenever possible, and then playing the music myself. Once the music is in my hands, at the piano, my musical imagination will change the piece in some way, to make it my own.

Such was the case with the opening measures of Mahler’s valedictory ninth symphony, which that possesses qualities that might best be described as transpersonal. According to Schoenberg (1950), in this symphony Mahler “hardly speaks as an individual any longer (p. 34).” Instead, the symphony consists of “objective, almost passionless statements of a beauty which becomes perceptible only to one who can dispense with animal warmth and feels at home in spiritual coolness (p. 35).”

Written at the end of the composer’s life, the opening phrase, played by the second violins, almost seems to be uttering (to an English speaker) the words *goodbye, farewell.*
Symphony #9

Andante comodo \( \frac{4}{4} = 80 \)

mm. 5-16

Gustav Mahler

reduction by Dean Olsher

Winds & Brass

Strings

horn

viola

harp

clarinet

bass
As I played this passage again and again, there were two elements that immediately demanded my attention. One is a special chord in the second half of m. 13; jazz musicians would call it A7sus b 9. This is an example of modal interchange—the borrowing of a chord from a different harmonic context.

The other is the harmonic motion that rocks gently between the tonic and not-quite dominant chord. Over time, I found myself altering Mahler’s accompaniment at
the piano, alternating between the Imaj7 chord and the V7sus4 chord. The suspended (sus) chord feels simultaneously dominant and tonic. The seventh step of the scale is dominant, but the fourth is an anticipation of the note that will become tonic when the chord is resolved. The sus chord has a double nature, two halves tugging at each other. It is simultaneously resolved and not yet resolved. Each return to the tonic creates a feeling of arriving home without truly having left.

Now I had two ideas two work with: goodbye, and ambivalence.

A subconscious musical process led me to this harmonic pattern. Eventually I realized where it came from. It was a characteristic vamp used by the jazz pianist Bill Evans, who deployed it not once but three times on recordings he made in 1958 and 1959: in his compositional improvisation titled “Peace Piece” (Evans, 1958); in his rendition of the show tune “Some Other Time” (Bernstein, 1981), a goodbye song that he first recorded in 1958 during the “Everybody Digs Bill Evans” sessions; and in the accompaniment he provided for “Flamenco Sketches” on Kind of Blue (Davis & Evans, 1959). Evans returned to the figure in 1977 when he accompanied Tony Bennett singing “Some Other Time.”

One can trace a direct lineage from Mahler to Evans, since Bernstein, the author of “Some Other Time,” was a devoted interpreter of Mahler’s music. It is conceivable that Bernstein had Mahler in mind when writing his song, just as he channeled the slow movement of Beethoven’s fifth piano concerto when writing “Somewhere” (1957).

My contrafact now had two sources, and I needed to decide which elements to maintain from each piece. Mahler’s opening gesture was compelling, especially since I had come to hear the word goodbye every time I played it. Instead of borrowing the
opening motive wholesale, I tweaked it so that the first iteration is transposed down one whole step, resolving from the supertonic to the tonic. I held on to the chord progression from “Some Other Time.”

I now had the first four measures, and a scratch lyric presented itself:

```
And now it's time to say so long.
```

```
F#m7  B7(#13)  Em7  A7(#9)sus  Dmaj7  A7sus  D7sus  A7sus
Un - til the next time.
```

Even if these lyrics are eventually discarded, they have been useful in helping to suggest a melody that fits the requirements of English prosody.

The second phrase emerged subconsciously.

```
Slow \( \text{\textfrac{4}{4}} \) = 60  Dmaj7  A7sus  Dmaj7  A7sus  D7sus  A7sus
```

This line had the feeling of inevitability to it and serves as a kind of hook, a musical device that catches the listener's ear. For this reason I have used this lyric as the title of the song. Originally I felt the need to compose a phrase that lasts four measures, to create symmetry with the first line. Because of the meaning of the words being sung at this moment, however (“until the next time”), I became attracted to the unfinished quality and decided to leave the phrase as it is.
Until the Next Time

Dean Olsher

Following the structure of “Some Other Time,” “Until the Next Time” is in A-B-A
form. The A section is elegiac and melancholic.

The bridge has a contrasting mood that is hopeful and forward-moving. The use of the F7♯5 chord carries a nostalgic, raggy feel redolent “You’ve Got a Friend in Me,” which Randy Newman wrote for Toy Story. For the sake of motivic variation, I delayed the opening gesture one beat. Whereas in the A section, the motive was characterized by an anacrusis, in the bridge it is heard on the downbeat.

In its current iteration as a piano composition, this rocking alternation of chords is especially effective when used for music-assisted breathing. At some point it may be deployed in a different clinical context and acquire lyrics. The unresolved nature is attractive to me, which is why the piece in its current, written form ends on the dominant, without resolving to the tonic. If in a live session it should seem clinically inappropriate to end in this unresolved manner, then I will bring the piece to resolution.

**A Song Is Born**

The remainder of this thesis is a detailed account of the genesis of a clinical composition. Therapeutically, it is an example of musical composition as countertransference.

The piece is in the A-A-B-A song form.

**Background**

This is the story of Marian, who underwent 18 music therapy sessions between October, 2014 and April, 2015.

Marian was born in 1928 and presented with advanced Alzheimer’s-type dementia.

Assessment included one-on-one improvisation with Marian, observation of her
response to music, and a biographical interview with Marian’s daughter, Daphne. Daphne said that when she was young her mother bought a piano and that Marian always liked to sing.

Marian grew up in the Deep South. Some traumatic elements of antebellum plantation life remained part of the rural black experience well into the Jim Crow era. Marian was beaten and whipped regularly by her father. She ran away to Florida, where she met Daphne’s father, and then she ran from him. Daphne said about her mother: “She’s a runner.” Marian brought her five children to New York City, where she cleaned houses, earned her GED, and became a nurse.

Marian alternated between two vocal behaviors. The first sounded like an agitated distress call, including appeals for help as if she was under attack. The second was an extended improvisation in a mode that folklorists call “field hollers”—blues-inflected call-and-response patterns sung by slaves and sharecroppers. Approximately 20 minutes into the assessment, after a long stretch of singing, there was an abrupt shift in Marian’s affect. Suddenly, with a terrified look on her face, she looked me directly in the eye and shouted fearfully, “Mama, please help me! Please!”

Music poured out of Marian like a waterfall. Clearly music was central to her being, and at this point at the end of her life it may have been the only remaining avenue to her Self.

My treatment procedure was to take what Marian said and sang and to reflect it back to her in my own singing and piano playing. Consistently this turned into a minor modal chord progression alternating between i7 and IV7. In our early sessions Marian would initiate a spoken or sung statement, I would reflect it back to her, and she would
continue as if I were not there. After three weeks, there was a steady decrease in
Marian’s agitated outbursts to the point where they stopped occurring.

Additionally, a deep musical connection arose between the two of us. Even
though she did not know my name, Marian became more and more comfortable in our
sessions. She soon came to look me in the eye and respond to things I said and to the
music I initiated.

After two months of sessions, we fell into a regular groove. As I quietly played
blues chords—for example, alternating between Bm7 and E7—Marian narrated the
recurring themes that typically emerged. In our early sessions she would speak these
narrations in prose. After several weeks she started to sing them melodically, as if they
were recitatives in the opera of her life. She told stories in improvised song, and she
entrained her melodies to the harmonies that I played.

On some occasions we improvised together for the entire 30-minute span of our
sessions. I started to understand our sessions as a kind of Nordoff-Robbins music
therapy for older adults. Singing was at the center of Marian’s being, and being in music
with her was perhaps the only self-actualization available to her at this point at the end
of her life. There also developed what could best be described, in psychoanalytic terms,
as musical transference and countertransference.

Musical Transference

In my sessions with Marian, a habitual pattern developed: Marian sang variations
on “Wade in the Water” as I accompanied her on piano, often rocking between i7 and
IV7, reflecting her musical output instrumentally and vocally.

The song, first published in a book of spirituals made famous by the Fisk Jubilee
Singers (Work, 1901), is associated with the Underground Railroad. One legend is that Harriet Tubman used the lyrics of the song as an encrypted escape route northward for African Americans as they fled slavery.
On occasion this would unleash a torrent of words. At times these words seemed to be memories from her earlier life, and occasionally she directed comments of a very overtly sexual nature at me. She spoke more than once about her own genitalia, using a common sexual slang term, and professed her love for me. On one occasion there was menace mixed in when she said, “I love you. I’ll cut you.”

This response was a musical version of transference, which, in traditional psychoanalysis, typically describes the redirection of a client’s childhood emotions onto the therapist.

**Musical Countertransference**

Countertransference refers to a therapist’s emotional response to the client’s transference. I came to identify with Marian, and over time I came to understand how much she exerted an influence on my life outside of our work together. I incorporated my countertransference into our therapy sessions in two stages. The first was completely spontaneous and unintentional on a conscious level. In the middle of a session, while Marian was singing a variant of “Wade in the Water,” I intuitively started to accompany her by playing “When I Am Laid in Earth” on the piano. This is Dido’s dying lament from Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*. The aria had worked its way into my individual practice routine. Musically there is no doubt that the song presented itself to me because its chord progression has an affinity with blues harmony: The aria, like the chord progression I had been playing for Marian, moves from i7 to IV7.

The aria’s lyrics are consistent with the theme of being a runner, which is how Marian’s daughter had described her. Dido sings her lament after her lover, Aeneas, leaves her, and she plans to kill herself. She exhorts the listener to remember that she
existed, but at the same time we should forget how she died. At its most fundamental level, the subject matter of the lyrics is memory—specifically, which things should be remembered and which should be discarded.

When I Am Laid in Earth

Henry Purcell

from Dido and Aeneas

arr. by Dean Olsher

Larghetto \( \text{d} = 60 \)

When I am laid, am laid in earth, may my wrongs cre

ate no trouble, no trouble in thy breast.

member me. Remember me. But ah! Forget my
Mashup

If only surface features are considered, my decision to play a Baroque aria could not have been more incongruous for this client. And yet Marian’s response was the opposite of what one might expect. She responded by fitting her musical material—variations on “Wade in the Water”—into the structure I was providing, and she did so in a musically sophisticated way. Her phrases matched the structure of Purcell’s aria. She sang harmonies that were completely consistent with American vernacular chord extensions. And the words she sang were about long, loss, abandonment. We had created a mashup between English Baroque opera and 20\textsuperscript{th}-century rural blues.
At this point I still did not know that our merged improvisations would lead me to compose an original song. I did have an intuition, however, that delving more deeply into this material would yield creative fruit.

Using a method outlined by Aigen (2009) in his proposal to apply schema theory to musical analysis of therapeutic improvisation, I transcribed a portion of this remarkable event. Working from the reference recording made at the time of the session, I made a musical transcription of the words and melodies that Marian improvised over the musical ground that I provided. The transcription reflects two schemas as identified by Aigen: the verticality of the relationship between the vocal line and the container provided by my accompaniment.

Aigen’s goal in applying this type of musicological analysis to therapeutic improvisation is to explore music-based methods of understanding clinical outcomes, as opposed to borrowing from non-musical disciplines such as psychology. In this instance, the process of transcribing this improvisation led eventually to the composition of a song that I came to understand as an extension of my musical countertransference.

I have notated this transcription using chord symbols that reflect Marian’s extension of the bass line harmony.

By necessity, the transcription is approximate. Our sense of time was flexible, not metronomic. Marian’s sense of pitch was consistent with rural blues convention and therefore did not fall within the equal tempered scale.
Oh ______ Luth-er ______ please come home to me, 'cause my

mo-ther come back oh please ba- by ______ I love Luth-er man ______

I love you [unclear] ______ Wade ______ in the wa- ter ______
Forget I Was Ever Here

The final stage of this musical countertransference was my composition of an original song that bridged our two musical worlds. Working with the idea of forgetting the protagonist after she had died, I reversed the idea. Instead of exclaiming, “Remember me!” the speaker of my song begs the listener: “Forget I was ever here.”

Musically I borrowed the descending chromatic bass line from Purcell’s aria and used it as the foundation for a blues progression. I composed lyrics that drew inspiration from the literary voice of Tom Waits.

The first part of the song that became solidified for me was the final line: “When I’m gone / Just carry on / And forget I was ever here.” I arrived at it working intuitively. It was a rare moment of inspiration. Constructing the rest of the song that leads up to this line reflects the effort of my conscious mind.

The subtitle is a reference to “Wakefield,” a short story by Hawthorne (1835) about a man who one day, without explanation, leaves his wife and takes up residence, secretly, in a nearby house. After 20 years he decides, again without explanation, to return home to her.
Dear, I wrote this good-bye note. It's your only souvenir.

Here's your key. Don't follow me. I just want to go and disappear.

Tear apart old photographs. Burn this letter, too.

Wipe away the memory of the pain I brought to you.

Listen, friend, this is the end. Please don't shed a tear.

When I'm gone, just carry on and forget I was ever here.

I played this song for Marian in one of our final sessions. It was during a day when she was not singing, but at the same time she was not withdrawn. She listened closely and, with a playful smile, said she thought the song was pretty. After I finished
singing the first line, she nodded her head and quietly murmured “Mm-hm.” After I sang, “Don’t follow me,” she opened her mouth in astonishment and then asked, “What’s the name? That’s the name of it?” When I answered yes, she asked, “Where would we get that?” I said, “I’ll sing it for you.” As I proceeded with the song, she smiled and looked directly at me. When I finished, she said, “Oo-ee!” I had never witnessed this level of engagement with the present moment in any of our other sessions.

**Conclusion**

My intent in writing this thesis is to do more than present a collection of my compositions. In addition, my goal is to shed light on the process of composing music for therapy. In so doing, I am taking a stand on behalf of the clinical benefit of therapeutic music composition as a meaningful and worthy endeavor.

There is reason to believe that among music therapy methods, instrumental composition has been eclipsed by songwriting (Gardstrom & Sorel, 2015). If this is so, I believe our field is diminished.

Music therapy, as Paul Nordoff conceived it, is a creative collaboration between clients and clinicians. The quality of that collaboration is deepened when therapists take up Nordoff’s challenge to develop rich inner lives of our own to share with our clients. After reading this thesis, my hope is not that you will reproduce my compositions but that you will be moved to create some of your own.
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