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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Performer/Co-Composer: A self-analysis of performer-contributed compositional choices in microcosm and macrocosm as relevant to the interpretation of four solo piano works of Stuart Saunders Smith

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

in

Contemporary Music Performance

by

Kyle Adam Blair

Committee in charge:

Aleck Karis, chair
Eva Barnes
Charles Curtis
Seth Lerer
Susan Narucki

2018

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2018

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VITA

- 2006 Bachelor of Music, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
- 2011 Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in American Contemporary Music,
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
- 2013 Master of Arts, University of California San Diego
- 2018 Doctor of Musical Arts, University of California San Diego

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Contemporary Music Performance (Piano)

Professor Aleck Karis

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Performer/Co-Composer: A self-analysis of performer-contributed compositional choices in microcosm and macrocosm as relevant to the interpretation of four solo piano works of Stuart Saunders Smith

by

Kyle Adam Blair

Doctor of Musical Arts in Contemporary Music Performance

University of California San Diego, 2018

Professor Aleck Karis, Chair

In a number of Stuart Saunders Smith's pieces, he calls upon the performer to compose dynamics, articulations, and phrasing atop the rhythms and pitches he provides. In my preparation of four of these pieces, namely *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, *Thicket*, *Palm Sunday*, and *Among Us*, I chose to fashion my compositional process around placing myself in the role of a listener.

This involved the creation of a sequence of self-recordings. Beginning with recordings of the pieces devoid of musical nuance, I would listen back, take notes on what my ear desired in terms of dynamics, phrasing, and articulation, put those thoughts into practice, and record the pieces again. I repeated this process until I achieved interpretations of Smith's works that I was satisfied with as a listener.

Given the numerous compositional possibilities Smith allows for in these circumstances, I was curious as to *why* my ear made the decisions that led to the final versions of these four pieces. The process I employed seemed highly intuitive, but I found it difficult to discuss the nuances of my choices from an analytical perspective. This dissertation is an attempt to self-analyze my compositional process in these works. Through study of the final recordings against the scores, I hypothesize about the inherent facets of Smith's music that influenced my compositional decisions.

These discussions orbit a number of larger thematic considerations. Firstly, I write about nuanced compositional decisions influenced by my ear's desire for main voice or *Hauptstimme*, and the impact that the density of Smith's counterpoint, implied pitch and rhythmic hierarchy, and pianistic choreography have on the sounding results of the pieces at a microcosmic level. Secondly, I discuss macrocosmic compositional concerns regarding resemblances to classical musical forms, Smith's calling upon prolonged use of the sustain pedal, the implications of repetition, and the evocation of changing tempo when such

shifts are aurally difficult to discern. Finally, the dissertation concludes with theorizing on the impact of one's own education and performance background on the compositional process and results, relating Smith's pieces to mirrors that reflect individual musical values back onto the performer.

Introduction

My experiences interpreting and performing Stuart Saunders Smith's music before commissioning *Palm Sunday* were twofold.

Firstly, in the spring of 2011 at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, I participated in an ensemble Smith led during his final semester of his 37-year tenure as a member of the university's composition faculty. This ensemble focused on two methods of music making; Smith coached improvisation, as well as the interpretation of nontraditionally notated works that tasked performers with the contribution of compositional ideas to complete ensemble realizations of the written prompts. In line with the focus on nontraditionally notated works, Smith introduced the ensemble to his *Shadows, Fires and Cadences*. This marked my first experience with Smith's "task notation" system, usually utilizing a gridded layout of symbols denoting variable amounts of time and musical or artistic "tasks" to be completed in a certain sequence.

The following summer, inspired by my experiences with Smith during the previous academic year, I resolved to prepare *Pinetop*, his first published piano solo. Composed in 1977 on a traditional staffed score complete with dynamics, articulations, and phrase markings, the learning of *Pinetop* marked my first foray into rhythmically complex music, and required a tremendous amount of overhead practice away from the piano to make sense of the constantly shifting polyrhythmic counterpoint.

Smith and I kept in frequent contact through handwritten letters and phone conversations after my work with him at UMBC. The growth of our personal relationship, combined with my acknowledgement of the useful skills gained in learning *Pinetop*, led me to decide that commissioning a piece from him would be a logical next step in continuing to engage with him and his music.

Smith happily agreed to compose a piece for me. Before its composition, we had not spoken at length about what the piece might be or look like so I, perhaps naively, expected that Smith would write seven or eight-minute solo with a traditionally notated score in a similar vein as *Pinetop*. A few short months later, I received *Palm Sunday* in the mail, a solo in four movements that totals nearly 23 minutes in duration.

Given my experiences with *Pinetop*, many aspects of *Palm Sunday* fell in line with my expectations. A superficial glance at the score revealed the type of rhythmically complex counterpoint that I became accustomed to in *Pinetop*, though in *Palm Sunday* the counterpoint seemed even denser at times. Smith also included humming, singing, and spoken text alongside the piano music, a new aspect of performance for me.

My first glances also revealed one notable and unanticipated facet of the score. Smith penned no dynamics, articulations, or phrase marks in the manuscript, only pitches and rhythms. At first, upon this discovery, I considered the possibility that I might not have received the completed piece, perhaps only a rough draft, until my eye caught a phrase that I had missed in my eagerness to

peruse the score. At the top of the first page of *Palm Sunday*, Smith wrote, “dynamics, articulations, and phrasing are to be composed by the performer.”¹

The specific task of composing these musical “modifiers” on top of given notes was a new exploration in music making for me personally, but the task Smith imparted was not wholly surprising. Having experienced Smith’s coaching of his own nontraditional notation systems, I was keenly aware of the importance Smith places on the *planned* utterance in his works, even in the face of the indeterminacy introduced by the inclusion of performer-composed musical aspects.

Smith knows well and endorses methodologies of improvisational practice. I became familiar with his high regard for both notated music and improvisation during our ensemble work at UMBC. In the cases of *Palm Sunday* and other pieces of his that contain undetermined musical elements, I surmise that his emphasis on the *composition* of performer-contributed musical content stems from the concept of “rehearsability”. Given the thorough rehearsal necessary to articulate the intricacies of Smith’s complex counterpoint with clarity, there is a tangible essence of decidedness and affirmation in a performance borne of such careful preparation. Taken further, one can easily say that such decidedness should carry past the assuredness of the accurate performance of pitches and rhythms and continue wholly into the realms of articulation, dynamic color, and phrasing clarity. If precise, careful rehearsal is the source of the definitive

¹ Stuart Saunders Smith. *Palm Sunday*, 1.

performance of Smith's complex rhythms and melodic interplay, then it stands to reason that focused practice is also the source of the decided performance of other musical parameters. If that is true, then those musical parameters *must* be composed and not improvised in order to be properly replicable in the rehearsal process.

To be clear, this author is not claiming that improvisation is somehow inferior to planned performance. However, one can reason that the in-the-moment creative practice of improvisation differs from the type of careful preparation required of Smith's notated counterpoint, and that composition (and not improvisation) of the dynamics, articulation, and phrasing leads to the type of determined utterance that Smith's rhythms and melodic lines not only imply but require.

I premiered *Palm Sunday* in January 2014 with Smith in attendance. Having had discussions with him over the phone in the preparation process, and having coached with him in person in the days leading up to the concert, I was made aware of the origins of his impetus to leave dynamics, articulations, and phrasing to the discretion of the performer in some of his pieces.

Smith often refers to himself as a "jazz composer"², and he sometimes describes his scores as complex "lead sheets". Jazz musicians frequently use these in the learning and/or performance of traditional standards. Within a lead sheet, a song or standard is visually reduced down to a melody annotated with

² John P. Welsh, *The Music of Stuart Saunders Smith*, xxiv.

chord symbols indicating the harmonic context associated with the main melody. A group of musicians, all reading from the same lead sheet, could formulate a performance from this reduction with a member or members performing the notated melody while a rhythm section, traditionally some combination of piano, guitar, and/or bass, could either plan or improvise accompanying music based on the chord symbols given. These lead sheets provide just enough musical information in order to recreate a particular standard, so the melody and chord symbols usually exist without the nuances of dynamics and articulation included in many traditionally notated Western classical music scores. In summary, the notated melody is only task-oriented information provided to musicians on a lead sheet, while dynamics, phrasing, and even the manner of executing the harmonies implied by the chord symbols are left to the performers to deduce and create based on their own aesthetic preferences.

In our conversations, Smith often lauded the capacity for lead sheets to elicit vastly different performances of the same standard in the hands of different musicians. In turn, even though Smith does not often include chord symbols in his notations of rhythms and pitches, he imagines a similar paradigm in which, given a certain amount of interpretive freedom, different performers will approach his scores with different expressive priorities and produce varied versions of the same piece, still recognizable as such given the specified rhythmic and melodic content.

Regarding his pieces with unspecified dynamics, phrasing, and articulations, Smith expressed to me personally that he thought such composed contributions from the performer should be musically “natural” and not deliberately systematized or somehow antagonistic to the implications of the pitches and rhythms provided. In advance of the premiere of *Palm Sunday*, these sentiments left me with questions. What could my musically “natural” contributions to his pieces be? How should I come about making those decisions?

I prepared a version of *Palm Sunday* for its premiere in 2014, and although Smith was pleased with my interpretation of the piece, I felt that I had not yet composed the vivid musical performance I was capable of. Later, in the summer of 2015, Smith offered me the opportunity to record *Pinetop* and *Palm Sunday* as well as three of his other piano solos, *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, *Thicket*, and *Among Us*, for an upcoming album release. Excited about the opportunity, I accepted, as I was not only being given a second chance to interpret *Palm Sunday*. *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)* (1997), *Thicket* (2010), and *Among Us* (2012) also require similar compositional input from the performer, offering me a chance to refine the methodology by which I make compositional decisions in Smith’s music on a larger scale.

General Practice

Smith composes much of his piano music in a contrapuntal framework. That is to say, rather than a clear melody being accompanied by chords, Smith composes numerous moving lines to be performed simultaneously, bearing a closer structural resemblance to Bach's Preludes and Fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* than to the Piano Sonatas of Beethoven or the Nocturnes of Chopin, for example.

My initial attempts to compose dynamics, articulations, and phrasing in *Palm Sunday* involved my playing each component line of the counterpoint independently of the others, getting accustomed to its melodic characteristics, and applying musical modifiers that helped to highlight the inherent character of each voice. I employed this methodology in an effort to realize Smith's music as an interwoven tapestry of wholly independent threads, rather than a simple textural composite of the lines.

The results of these first efforts included numerous small hairpin *crescendi* and *decrescendi*, dynamics which largely existed in the realm of *mezzo piano* and *mezzo forte* with exceptions for particularly poignant moments, and extremely detailed articulations with a variety of accents, weights of touch, and highly specific phrase groupings.

Initially, I was very satisfied with the level of detail I achieved through a highly rigorous compositional process. I was disappointed, then, to listen back to recordings of *Palm Sunday* after the premiere and hear that much of the detail I

thought I achieved seemed inaudible. I theorized that the combination of several independent lines, each moving in very subtle and nuanced ways, might have inundated the sound spectrum with flux such that the sounding composite of all the voices actually seemed *static*. Perhaps a piano trio or string quartet would have greater success with achieving contrapuntal clarity in music composed this way, with the different timbres of the instruments and different human beings playing them lending distinctive independence to each line. However, my solo performance of *Palm Sunday* at the piano did not satisfy me as a listener, and I grew to find my compositional process suspect.

The opportunity to record *several* pieces that required this type of composition led me to analyze the process by which I made these musical decisions so that I might be more pleased with the tangible *sounding* results, and not just the aesthetic ideals of what I thought it should *feel* or *look* like to compose in this way.

Realizing that I was most concerned with the scrupulous coloring of each independent line in my first experience with *Palm Sunday*, it stood to reason that the sounding whole of the component lines being performed together did not culminate in a manner I had anticipated, largely because consideration of the composite was never a part of my process to begin with. It no longer made sense for me to engage in any compositional process that did not take the final sonic image into account. After all, that final sonic image would be the one I presented

to audiences, not only as a piece that Smith composed, but also one that I had a pivotal role in shaping.

I took this second opportunity to shift the physical location and means by which I composed. Sitting at the piano with a pencil at the ready seemed to inject the physical idioms required to perform the music into the composition process. I decided that I wanted to remove my hands from any compositional decisions, and give my ears that responsibility.

Thus, I devised a simple compositional practice that depended almost entirely on listening and also took the complete sonic image into account, not just individual contrapuntal lines. After having rehearsed each movement to the point at which I could play it cleanly, accurately, and at the performance tempo, I would record the music in a manner as *devoid* as of dynamic, articulation, and phrasing nuance as possible. In other words, I attempted to capture accurate performances of the materials Smith provided, recorded at medium dynamics without any articulation extremes and without grouping any notes together in a deliberate way.

I would then listen back to the recordings, away from the piano, making sure to give myself a substantial distance of space and time between the recorded performance and perusal of the result. I left this gap in an effort to prevent the bias of memory or self-judgment to enter into the process, attempting to approach the review of the recordings as if I were listening to someone else's performance for the first time.

I listened repeatedly to these musically “flattened” recordings to allow my ear to make microcosmic and macrocosmic decisions, both instantaneously and retrospectively, regarding the ways in which the material should be altered with regard to dynamics, articulation, and phrasing. For example, perhaps my ear was drawn to a certain melodic fragment in a particular moment, or perhaps after listening to an entire longer movement I would have aesthetic preferences for altering my performance in such a way that larger formal structures could be more audibly apparent.

I took notes on the score both during and after the listening of each movement. These annotations were sketches in line with my interpretive thoughts, and provided me with a plan of compositional ideas to work into performance during my next rehearsal. I would put these ideas into practice, record those altered results, listen back again later, take notes on my thoughts, and repeat this whole process until my ear was ultimately satisfied with the momentary and overarching sounding results of each performance. In a way, this felt like a kind of sonic whittling or sculpting, gradually picking away at a bulk of material until a desired, more detailed form was achieved.

This process felt highly intuitive and natural, especially since the musical decisions were made from the same perspective as an audience member, or perhaps as a producer in a recording studio adjusting the perception of a performance through dynamic alterations and subtle adjustments of musical articulations.

After the completion of the mastering portion of the recording process, I was left with questions as to *why* my ear made the particular decisions that led to this set of performances. I wanted to understand in a more analytical way the potential reasons behind this seemingly intuitive compositional process in order to better understand why I, or another performer, would make any singular musical decision over another given the countless possible versions of these particular works.

With regard to these four pieces, the desire to understand a personal compositional approach might have been made clearer if I were able to peruse other performers' interpretations. However, at the time of this writing, I am aware of no other recordings of these pieces; it seems that my performances of *Family Portraits: Self, Palm Sunday, Thicket, and Among Us* are the only versions I am able to study, if not the only ones that exist.

This writing, then, is a sort of self-analysis of my own recordings of these four pieces. I want to use an analytical gaze to better understand the parameters and principles by which my ear and aesthetic preferences led me to these particular versions of Smith's pieces. The considerations below can be grouped into three major thematic areas to be explored throughout the essay: 1) The extraction or creation of a main melody from a contrapuntal fabric, and the impact that Smith's pitches, rhythms, and textures have on that process, 2) the ways in which the physical demands of playing Smith's music at the piano might affect the resultant performances at different points in the process, and 3) the impact

that larger formal structures, repetition, and variations in tempo might have on compositional decisions.

My discussions will begin with a focus on microcosmic levels of detail in the case of *Family Portraits: Self*, and will continue with considerations of dynamic, articulation, and phrasing composition at the macrocosmic level in the cases of *Thicket*, *Palm Sunday*, and *Among Us*, concluding with thoughts about Smith's pieces as aesthetic mirrors, reflecting one's musical values and experiences back on the performer-as-composer.

In Microcosm: *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*

The fourteen Stations of the Cross undoubtedly inspired Smith's *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 stations)* in title and general form. The movements within are all relatively short, each between roughly 10 seconds and a minute in length, and possess a fleeting character, perhaps akin to Prokofiev's *Vision fugitives*.

Given that some of the pieces seem to end as soon as they begin, one can almost get the sense of hearing them all at once, similar to the way in which one can view an image. That being said, brevity by no means implies simplicity in *Family Portraits: Self*. To the contrary, among the four pieces discussed in this writing, Smith's counterpoint is at its densest and most intricate within these movements.

With this piece in particular, the brief durations of the movements combined with an abundance of musical material lead my ear toward refined

details at a very minute level, especially concerning decisions regarding dynamic balance and clarity between and amongst the densely interwoven contrapuntal lines. All of these things considered, *Family Portraits: Self* provides the perfect theatre for a case-by-case analysis of the small-scale decisions made by my ear in the service of composing dynamics, articulations, and phrasing in Smith's music. The analysis below of these minutiae specifically relate to *Family Portraits: Self*, but the analytical conclusions reached with regard to this piece also apply to compositional refinement at the microcosmic level in *Thicket*, *Palm Sunday*, and *Among Us* as well.

I.

Smith casts the first movement of *Family Portraits: Self* in three staves all bearing treble clefs, rather than the traditional two staves (treble and bass) to which pianists might be most accustomed. It is to the great benefit of the pianist that Smith frequently notates with additional staves, as were he to notate all his contrapuntal lines on two staves, the melodic lines' frequent crossings would make the score visually difficult, if not impenetrable. The first movement is reproduced below.

Stuart Saunders Smith

$\text{♩} = \text{c. } 60$

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with three staves. The notation is complex, featuring numerous accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) and dynamic markings. Rhythmic values are indicated by numbers above notes, such as 5:♩, 3:♩, 7:♩, and 3:♩. The score includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks. The overall style is characteristic of contemporary classical music, with a focus on intricate rhythmic and melodic patterns.

Figure 1.1: Stuart Saunders Smith's *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, page 1

All three of the first movement's component lines inhabit the same, relatively narrow pitch range (specifically, nearly two octaves from C4 to B5). Given that all three lines have active rhythmic material through much of the movement, and given that Smith notates sustain pedal usage throughout (this is the only movement in *Family Portraits: Self* in which Smith specifies this), the material Smith offers in this movement runs the risk of being unclear in terms of contour, especially with all three lines sharing a condensed register.

To my ear, these potential impediments to melodic clarity make dynamic contrast between the lines critical. Although one could play this movement in such a way that the lines blended together into rhythmic texture and harmonic fields, my ear tends to search for a *Hauptstimme* or "main voice" in music composed of interwoven strands. In order to achieve the performance of a prioritized melodic voice, I not only had to choose which lines and which moments were primary, but also relegate other voices to a more secondary role (namely, contributing to the harmonic context beneath the primary melodic voice). This is not to say that those secondary lines should be hidden. Rather, the separation of lines or fragments of voices into different dynamic realms can assist in the capacity to aurally parse them in a contrapuntal context.

There are certainly historical precedents for this type of concern. For example, this methodology bears similarities to the way a pianist might approach a Bach fugue, or some other Baroque-style polyphonic contrapuntal piece. Traditional performance practice of a fugue holds that the main melodic impetus

of the piece, often called the *subject*, is generally the most important melodic activity when it is posited at the outset of fugue and intermittently throughout the piece. When the subject is present, the other voices are secondary in importance, generally leading to a performed dynamic structure in which the subject is slightly louder than the other voices.

Early versions of my dynamic schemes for *Palm Sunday* were borne of my playing individual lines at the piano, deeming some of them “melodic” in nature and trying to play them louder than the surrounding lines. My ear was never completely satisfied with the results of this type of isolated melodic planning, so I decided to let my ear choose a primary sounding voice in the context of the lines being played simultaneously, rather than individually.

After recording versions of the movement in which all the dynamics were flattened, and after letting my ear choose moments that seemed to warrant being highlighted dynamically, I was surprised to find that what my ear desired in terms of *Hauptstimme* was not specifically the top line, the middle line, or the bottom line at any given point. Instead, my ear created a *Hauptstimme* from fragments of all three. A second reproduction of the first movement is included below with circular annotations signifying the path of my ear’s desired composite melody through the three given voices:

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)" by Stuart Saunders Smith, page 1. The score is written for piano and is annotated with red circles and brackets to highlight a selected composite melody. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = c. 60$. The score is divided into three systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 10, the second system contains measures 11 through 20, and the third system contains measures 21 through 30. The melody is primarily in the right hand, with some instances in the left hand. The notes are circled in red, and brackets indicate the overall melodic line across the systems. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The score includes various rhythmic values, including eighth, quarter, and half notes, as well as rests. The annotations highlight a specific melodic path through the piece, showing how it is constructed from various rhythmic and pitch elements.

Figure 1.2: *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, page 1, annotated to highlight selected composite melody

Analyzing what my ear was drawn to, the composite melody tends to include higher pitches occurring locally at any given time, without regard for the line in which they might appear. This is not altogether surprising, given that in a substantial amount of music, across many genres, prevalent melodic material tends to be set at a higher pitch than contextual harmonic material. Like many, I am accustomed to hearing music constructed in this common paradigm, so even if skipping between lines to create a composite melody might be unnatural from a rational or visual perspective, it seems to be a relatively natural task for my ear.

Further analysis of this composite melody in context reveals an apparent importance of rhythmic placement to my ear's selection process. There are no time signatures notated in *Family Portraits: Self*, and measure lines do not function to divide time in a metrically obvious way. Instead, Smith seems to use measure lines to parse movements into larger musical ideas in a similar way that a phrase mark might denote a long melody in Romantic-era repertoire, such as in passages of Liszt or Chopin.

In the absence of time signatures or metrically obvious measures, the only true rhythmic signifier within this movement is the regularity of the quarter note pulse. Described at the top of the score as roughly 60 beats per minute, the importance of the pulse and the particular pitches that help to define it seem to have affected the way my ear crafted a main voice.

For example, six of the melodic notes within the first eight pulses of the movement occur on a beat, leaving only one "on-the-beat" note out of the

composite melody. Throughout the rest of the movement, 14 of the melodic notes occur directly on a quarter-note pulse, while there are only three instances of notes occurring on the beat that are not included in the melody.

It stands to reason that my ear was drawn to these particular notes since they not only help to define the perceivable tempo of the movement, but provide the only veritable rhythmic scaffolding against which the numerous irregular subdivisions of beats employed by Smith can be perceived as such. In short, it makes sense that my ear would desire to hear the pulse as clearly as possible, being the only method of parsing time in this movement, and would prioritize the inclusion of pitches that assist in that endeavor.

While my ear's tendency to consider higher pitches and include notes of rhythmic significance explains most of the selections within the composite melody, repetition also plays a peripheral role in the melodic selection process. This is recognizable and noteworthy in both the first four beats of the movement, as well as the end of the second system with the alternation between an E5/G5 dyad and a D5/F#5 at the top of a triad catching my ear.

II.

The music of the second movement is composed on two, then four, then three staves. In contrast to the first movement, rather than all the music existing in a relatively narrow pitch range, each voice exists within one of two distinctly separate *tessiture*, a low octave-and-a-quarter register from B1-D3, and a high

octave-and-a-quarter register from B5-D7. Either one or two lines of music inhabit each of these *tessitura* at any given time.

Given the pitch space between the two registers, the general selection of what my ear considered to be melodic material was made somewhat simpler than in the first movement. Once again intuitively drawn to a model in which low pitches provide harmonic underpinnings atop which higher material seems melodic in nature, my ear chose music in the higher *tessitura* to prioritize with regard to dynamic balance.

However, Smith's setting of two lines in the same high register complicated my efforts at refining melodic clarity from a listening perspective. Furthermore, discrepancies between the ear, eye, and hand made this process all the more difficult. The second movement is reproduced below.

Musical score for guitar, titled "Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations), page 2". The score is written for guitar and includes a tempo marking of quarter note = c. 66. It features a double bar line labeled "II" and various musical notations such as chords, accidentals, and fingering numbers (7, 5, 3). The score is organized into systems with multiple staves for guitar.

Figure 1.3: Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations), page 2

Differing characteristics of the material in the top two voices lead me to conclude that the top stave should be melodically prioritized over the other treble stave when it is present. Smith notates a wide variety of pitches and intervallic content in the top stave, mostly in single notes. Frequent rhythmic fluctuations, combined with a scarcity of rests, contribute to an active musical contour.

The lower treble stave, where present, largely consists of broken and chordal dyads. Each dyad persists for a time before shifting to another. For example, a C5/B5 chord, broken at first, is repeated through the second bar of the second system before shifting to an E5/C6 simultaneity that continues until the end of the line. With only a few exceptions these dyads are not performed in line with any regular quarter note pulse, but instead are mostly played “off-the-beat” and are never rhythmically tied into the next quarter note span.

With Smith referring to himself as a jazz composer, seeing this type of syncopated harmonic repetition calls to mind the practice of “comping” chords. Within the jazz tradition, “comping” generally refers to the performance of a set of specified chord changes underneath a melody or solo. However, these harmonies might not necessarily be performed in a rhythmically standardized manner. Instead, different performers engaging with the same set of chord changes might approach the act of accompanying a melody with a variety of rhythmic approaches, usually in the service of providing harmonic context to the main melody without upstaging it.

From a visual analysis, the rhythms and pitches of the top two treble staves might support a reading in which the lower staff's harmonically static, syncopated nature supports the more active contours in the upper staff in a kind of melody and "comping" paradigm. However, Smith's setting of these two staves in the same narrow register presents obstacles that might make hearing the top lines in this way difficult.

If the harmonies in the lower treble staff were transposed down an octave or more, the top line might more clearly be heard as a melody atop a set of chords. Instead, the interjecting "comped" chords distort the clarity of the potential melody by presenting pitch material both in a similar range and at times higher than that of the top staff.

Furthermore, if the two treble staves were to be performed by different instruments, or by two different pianists, or even with two different hands, a timbral or dynamic distance between the lines could be achieved such that a listener might more easily distinguish a prioritization of the music in the top staff. Since Smith requires the pianist to perform musical material in the lower register of the piano throughout the movement, the right hand is made responsible for the performance of both of the treble staves.

A dynamic differentiation between the top two lines might be desired given my analysis of the movement, and would produce an ideal sounding result which embraces polyphonic clarity from a listening perspective. The technical challenges of creating that distinction at Smith's desired tempo are considerable,

namely the quick changes in touch required to perform two disparate dynamic fields in single hand with an active composite rhythmic landscape. Given these challenges, the “comped” chords might occasionally distract from the top staff being heard as a clear melody. It is possible that Smith intended a resultant ambiguity by deploying music that could be defined as “melody” and “accompaniment” in close rhythmic and registral proximity.

III.

The three staves of the third movement place all the pitches in the bass register of the piano, spanning a two-and-a-half octave range from F1 to B3. Consisting of much sparser rhythmic content than the first two movements, nearly all the pitches of the third movement seem melodically important given the brevity of the movement and the scarcity of attacks.

One has Smith’s permission to compose a variety of dynamic and articulative responses to this material, and after trials involving different musical approaches I found that the lower *tessitura* and the spaciousness of the music benefit from a louder, more accented delivery.

The lower strings of the piano are much longer and thicker than those in the middle and high registers. The increased mass of the string affects the initial sounding of the low pitches when struck by the hammer, such that quieter dynamics performed on the low strings generally result in slightly less distinct attacks than the same dynamics on higher strings.

For the sake of melodic and rhythmic clarity, my ear desired for the attacks in the low register to be as crisp as those in the middle or high registers of the instrument. To achieve this, I approached the movement with a firmer, perhaps more rhetorical touch.

This approach enhanced clarity from an attack perspective. However, the durations of Smith's pitches presented an additional wrinkle to my dynamic solution: many of the pitches ring through successive attacks in other voices. The third movement is reproduced below with boxes that highlight portions of the music in which three or more pitches amass at a given time.

The image shows a musical score for two staves, likely piano and bass. The score is divided into three systems, each marked with a Roman numeral III. The first system includes a tempo marking of quarter note = c. 72. Red boxes highlight specific measures where three or more pitches are sounded simultaneously. In the first system, the first measure of the first staff is boxed, and the first measure of the second staff is boxed. In the second system, the first measure of the first staff is boxed, and the first measure of the second staff is boxed. In the third system, the first measure of the first staff is boxed, and the first measure of the second staff is boxed. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and articulation marks.

Figure 1.4: Excerpt from page 3 of *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, annotated to highlight sections in which three or more pitches sound simultaneously

Each new box in the diagram represents a moment in which the resonance of previous pitches “resets” to zero, and begins to build again with consecutive attacks. In this movement, since Smith’s durations result in the creation of harmonic fields, and since the sparseness of attacks make many of the notes seem important rhythmically, in my hearing of the movement each successive pitch in a harmonic area must be played louder than the last in order to sound above or through the resonances of previous attacks.

Each note my ear hears as “melodic” in this movement seems to require a certain amount of temporal space in order to be clearly heard. This is a product of the rich overtones particularly present in the low register of the piano, combined with the resonant durations Smith composes. I have highlighted the composite melody I hear in the third movement in the reproduction below. Notes left out of the composite melody are labeled “A” through “F” in order to facilitate a discussion of their omission.

In many of his works Smith uses different subdivisions of beats to create polyrhythmic tension between voices. When listening back to my initial recordings of this movement, however, I find that I do not always intuitively hear attacks in close proximity as two separate lines with rhythmic differences. Instead, at times, I hear a composite of the two lines in which one note seems primary and another sounds like an embellishment, such as a grace note.

For example, the first attack I left out of the composite melody is labeled “A”, a G₂ in the middle stave. Rhythmically, that G occurs very quickly after the C#₃ in the top line. Given the resonance of low pitches on the piano, it becomes difficult for my ear to distinguish both pitches as melodic when their onsets occur in close temporal proximity. With the quarter note pulse being the sole source of rhythmic clarity in *Family Portraits: Self*, the placement of the C# firmly on a beat implies greater rhythmic meaning than the G immediately following it, leading me to melodically prioritize the C# over the G.

Omitted notes at “B”, “D”, and “E” result from similar scenarios in which the relative proximity of two notes causes my ear to choose one as primary and another as secondary. Upon realizing this situation I wondered if, in this movement, an aural threshold exists in terms of the temporal space between attacks, beyond which my ear might deem the space sufficient enough to hear both notes as primary in nature. In the cases of “A”, “B”, “D”, and “E” I calculated the space between the omitted note and the nearest melodic pitch in fractions of a beat.

“A” – 0.125 beats
“B” – 0.2 beats
“D” – 0.0666 beats
“E” – 0.1071 beats

Scheme 1.1: Distance (in beats) between notes related to annotations in Figure 1.5 describing specific scenarios in *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, movement III

These calculations imply that perhaps, in this movement, two notes being one-fifth of a beat or closer in proximity might result in one pitch sounding like an embellishing tone to another, rather than both notes being part of a primary melodic scheme. This theory fails, however, to explain the other two non-melodic notes in this movement, labeled “C” and “F”.

The A2 near the end of the movement, labeled “F”, is 0.2666 beats away from the nearest melodic pitch. Although one might say that 0.2666 beats is not far from my proposed threshold of 0.2 beats, there is another moment near “C” in which my ear considers the same 0.2666-beat difference as being a valid melodic proximity.

I theorize that the difference between those two scenarios lies in the top staff above “F”, specifically that there are two attacks that define the second and fourth quintuplet subdivision of a half note, respectively. When a performer is required to execute polyrhythmic material, one often creates a composite rhythm such that one set of subdivisions is consciously counted while the other(s) fit within and amongst the counted rhythm.

Since there are two attacks that define the quintuplet subdivision of a half note in this case, it seems sensible that the quintuplets would be consciously counted while the single instance of a triplet subdivision of the half note would fit into that rhythm secondarily. If performed as written with this execution in mind, the quintuplet attacks would ideally sound audibly rhythmically regular while the triplet might seem irregular in terms of timing, perhaps more akin to an interjection. I propose that the ear might be drawn to rhythmic *congruence* such that more frequent instances of a particular subdivision within a polyrhythmic structure might influence a listener's sense of primacy of that particular rhythm over any sparser subdivisions present.

Neither a rhythmic proximity threshold nor primacy of polyrhythmic subdivisions explain case "C", in which my ear omits the E2/G2 dyad in the bottom staff even though it is 0.4 beats away from the nearest melodic attack, in rhythmic congruence with the quintuplets in the top line, and occurs firmly on a quarter-note pulse. All of these characteristics would point toward its inclusion in the composite melody given the discussion above.

I surmise that it is difficult to hear that particular dyad clearly, specifically since it occurs immediately after the build-up of four low, resonating pitches. When lifting a key, the muting of the lower piano strings by the felt dampers tends to take slightly more time than higher strings, mostly due to the increased mass and size of the lower strings. As a result, even if the notes are physically released on time, the resonant mass of the four pitches bleeds into the following

beat slightly before the dampers can truly silence the low strings. This bleeding over into the following beat distorts the attack of E2/G2 dyad just enough to make it less clear, while the following C#3/F#3 chord in the top line, being further removed from the clearing out of past resonance, is much more easily heard in context.

IV. and V.

I have grouped discussions of the fourth and fifth movements together, as both share qualities that led me to approach the composition of dynamics, articulations, and phrasing structures in similar manners.

Once again, these movements each consist of three lines coexisting within narrow pitch registers (C4-E5 in IV, just an octave and a third, and A4-E6 in V, just over an octave and a half). These movements are particularly dense rhythmically with quick subdivisions occurring in all three voices. Smith sets these movements at relatively fast tempi (roughly 80 beats per minute and exactly 76 beats per minute respectively), compounding issues of attack density and making both the performance of and listening for contrapuntal clarity exceedingly difficult as independent lines blur into composite texture.

I would be remiss if I completely discounted the potential of technical considerations to enter into my melodic selection process, especially in these particular movements. Although the *modus operandi* of my dynamic composition in these pieces prioritizes the removal of personal physical idioms from the

process by making decisions with my ear, the fact remains that pianistic concerns of performance could have introduced some small amount of unintended bias into my prototypical recordings from the start.

The performance of three lines of complex rhythmic counterpoint at a brisk tempo, when all three staves contain pitches in an extremely narrow register, requires the pianist to carefully choose his or her choreography in order to execute the given pitches and rhythms accurately. More specifically, the most important choices to be made in order to physically produce my original recordings involved deciding which pitches to play with my left and right hands. Below I include a reproduction of the fourth movement in which I annotate the sections of music I perform with my left hand.

IV

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piece titled "IV". The first system includes a tempo marking of quarter note = c. 80. The second system concludes with a "3" indicating a triplet. Red rectangular boxes highlight specific counterpoint passages in the left hand of both systems.

Figure 1.6: Excerpt from page 3 of *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, annotated to highlight the portions of the counterpoint performed with the left hand in the author's interpretation.

In my choreographic interpretation of the fourth movement the right hand is entirely responsible for the top staff, the left hand for the bottom staff, and both hands alternate responsibilities for performing the middle staff at different times. Many pianists who perform Western art music are accustomed to voicing melodies in their right hand, as melodies are often deployed in the treble register of the instrument. I have been trained in such a fashion, and so it is possible that my right hand, also my dominant hand, might naturally perform musical material in more melodic way than my left in a given scenario.

It is possible that this physical result of classical training impacted my prototypical recordings in such a way that melodic bias was introduced from the beginning of the process. For the sake of exploring this, I have provided an annotated score below which highlights the composite melody that my ear selected from the music of the fourth movement, with notes performed by the right hand surrounded by circles and ovals, those by played by the left hand highlighted with squares and rectangles, and annotations “A” through “D” included to discuss specific choreographic situations.

IV

The musical score is presented in four systems, labeled A, B, C, and D.

 System A: Features a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = c. 80$. The right hand contains several melodic phrases, some of which are circled in red. The left hand provides accompaniment, with some notes highlighted by red squares and rectangles.

 System B: Continues the melodic and accompanimental lines from system A.

 System C: Includes a 4-measure rest in the left hand, indicated by a large bracket. The right hand continues its melodic line.

 System D: Concludes the excerpt with a final measure, marked with a '3' at the end of the staff.

 Annotations: Red circles and ovals highlight specific melodic notes in the right hand. Red squares and rectangles highlight specific melodic notes in the left hand.

Figure 1.7: Excerpt from page 3 of *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, annotated to highlight the selected composite melody, with circles and ovals highlighting melodic notes performed by the right hand, and squares and rectangles highlighting melodic notes performed by the left hand

Through cross-referencing my choreography against the composite melody it is clear that the right hand is responsible for much of the music that my ear deems as primary. Material performed by the left hand is included in the composite melody at times, making it difficult to ascertain absolutely that the resultant line is affected by choreography. However, I feel comfortable stating that the pitches performed by the right hand are more frequently included in the melody, and thusly it is possible that the dispersion of music between the two hands might have had an impact on the pitches selected within the composite melody.

Considering choreography further, I find it interesting that the right hand performs uninterruptedly for larger portions of the composite melody than the left hand. Stated another way, it seems that the left hand's interjection into the performance of the *Hauptstimme* usually involves quick hand-offs with the right hand while the opposite is not necessarily true. I've labeled these situations "A" through "D" in the above reproduction, and preface further discussion of these particular moments with an acknowledgement that many of the theories presented in previous movements apply in these cases as well.

Annotation "A", found at the end of the first measure of the fourth movement, is included to highlight the first of these passages in which the left and right hands contribute to the composite melody in quick and alternating succession. In this specific scenario, all three voices exist within the same rhythmic paradigm of nine subdivisions existing within the span of a half note.

From a listening standpoint, the three voices coexist in a rhythmically congruent manner that alleviates the polyrhythmic tension of dissimilar subdivisions of beats, allowing for the pitches to be heard more easily as being related given a sense of temporal regularity.

The second measure is annotated with “B”, and the inclusion of the left hand in this melody is best ascribed to my ear’s desire to prioritize higher pitches as melodic in nature. Here the Eb5 and Db5 in the left hand occur immediately after an E5 in the right. In this case, intervallic proximity and relative pitch height likely contribute to my ear deeming them melodically important.

Location “C” is found near the beginning of the second system. At this particular location the second staff contains only a tied, ringing A4, so rhythmically active material only exists within the top and bottom lines. Given that this is the only moment in the movement in which fewer than three contrapuntal lines are active, my ear concludes that both lines can be heard as melodic, even given the fleeting nature of the music. Were the second staff as active here as it is throughout the rest of the movement, this might not be so.

Finally, annotation “D” is found in the last measure of the movement. Here, a single A4 in the bottom stave is highlighted betwixt right hand melodic utterances in the top stave. This particular A4 occurs directly on a quarter note pulse, aligning itself categorically with the relative importance placed on pitches performed on regular beats. Once again, my ear finds discernible pulse extremely important given the density of polyrhythmic material and the lack of

sonically perceptible measures or metrically consistent bar lines in this particular piece.

VI.

The sixth movement of *Family Portraits: Self* shares a unique distinction with the tenth piece in the set. These are the only two movements in which all of the component contrapuntal lines exist within isolated pitch ranges, never crossing one another. Below is a reproduction of the sixth movement.

VI

The image displays a musical score for guitar, labeled 'VI'. It consists of three systems of music, each with a treble clef and a 2/4 time signature. The first system features a series of chords and melodic lines, with a final chord marked '5:0'. The second system continues the sequence, with chords marked '3:0', '7:0', and '6:0'. The third system concludes with chords marked '7:0' and '7:0'. The score includes various musical notations such as stems, beams, and accidentals, along with fret numbers and chord diagrams.

Figure 1.8: Excerpt from page 4 of *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*

Given the registral independence of the three component lines, the aural selection of a primary voice can more easily be isolated to a single line in this movement than in others within the set. My attention was immediately drawn to the middle line from a sonic and visual perspective, as it contains all the pitches of a pentatonic scale based on Gb until the A4 slightly past the halfway point of the movement.

Pentatonic scales, common in many types of traditional and folk music styles, consist of the first, second, third, fifth, and sixth degrees of the Western diatonic major scale, omitting the strong “tendency” tones of the fourth and seventh, and lending to a particular melodic flavor. Many well-known traditional tunes, such as “Amazing Grace”, utilize this scalar disposition. I chose to highlight the nearly pentatonic middle line of the sixth movement based on its potential to imply a pitch-based vernacular that might be easily understood by a particular group of listeners, whether consciously or subconsciously.

From a technical perspective, the highlighting of the middle staff correlates easily with the choreographic demands of the movement. The middle staff is closer in pitch to the bottom line than the top, making it sensible that the left hand is responsible for the lower staves while the right hand solely performs the music in the top line. The left hand, being responsible for two lines of music in separate registers, needs to jump quickly back and forth between *tessitura*, making the left thumb responsible for nearly all the notes in the middle staff.

The thumb accounts for a large portion of the mass of the hand from an anatomical perspective. For pianists, the additional mass associated with the thumb can present challenges of melodic balance at times, as attacks with the thumb tend to be slightly heavier than those of the other four fingers. In the case of this movement, quick jumps to notes performed with the heavier thumb result in a natural accenting of the middle line in cooperation with my ear's desire to highlight the pentatonic material within.

VII.-XIV.

Many of the nuanced situations that tend to incur particular microcosmic compositional solutions in Smith's *Family Portraits: Self* have been discussed. A quicker description of most of the remaining movements can occur at this juncture, emphasizing the similarities between compositional decisions made therein and those made in previous movements.

Movements VII and XII have qualities in common with movement II in terms of construction, difficulties, and resultant compositional approach. All three of these movements consist of two staves in a higher register than the rest, and these two particular staves tend to compete for the ear's attention in terms of melodic primacy. In VII and XII, the bottom of these treble lines resembles the "comped" chords that I described in the discussion of movement II. Persistent dyads in the lower treble staff melodically cross and rhythmically interject into a more active upper staff in all three cases, none more poignantly than in

movement XII when one staff contains only a Db6/C7 dyad throughout the entirety of the music. In movements VII and XII, just like in II, Smith's voice crossing and rhythmic placement of the dyads can distort the clarity of the single notes in the top staff at times, try as I might to downplay the "comped" chords.

I mentioned movement X in my discussion of movement VI, stating that those are the only two movements in the piece in which none of the voices cross into the *tessitura* of another. In the case of movement X this certainly enhances the potential clarity of individual contrapuntal lines, especially since X is composed on only two staves instead of the usual three or four Smith employs in the bulk of *Family Portraits: Self*. The issues of resonance and attack clarity are similar to movement III though, as both of these staves are set in lower registers of the piano. Like within III, most of the pitches in the movement sound melodic, with some of the particularly close rhythmic attacks between voices causing one of the pitches to sound like an embellishment to the other, especially when I tend to favor louder attacks when all the voices are set in a lower *tessitura*.

I approached movements XI and XIV in a similar fashion to movement I. In all three cases, voice crossing of fluctuating lines in similar registers leads my ear crafting a composite melody consisting of pitches from multiple staves as discussed before. That voice crossing is at its most extreme in movement XIV, where an extremely large composite *tessitura* makes choreography and even the reading of the score difficult. In XI, one of the three component staves is in a much lower register, but the other two consist of constantly changing material at

the top of the treble staff, leading my ear to create a composite melody consisting largely of the highest pitches across the two upper voices.

Movements VIII, IX, and XIII have been left out of this consolidation of the remaining movements, as they exhibit interesting characteristics that warrant further discussion.

The eighth movement of *Family Portraits: Self* has always been one of the most difficult to perform, as the distribution of the registers and clefs is not from highest at the top to lowest at the bottom, as in most cases. Instead, the clefs read treble, bass, treble, bass, from top to bottom, perhaps appearing more like a piece for two pianos than a solo work. Movement VIII is reproduced below.

VIII

♩ = c. 48

48

53

Figure 1.9: Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations), page 6

The bottom two staves largely consist of music played simultaneously with both hands, resulting in a set of chords with members numbering between two and six. The top two staves consist entirely of music rhythmically independent from one another and also from the bottom two staves.

Many tend to think of melodies as “tunes” or, going further, as “singable” lines that are either explicitly musically posited as a series of single pitches or are perceived as such through a cognitive process of “boiling down” chords by selecting particular notes to prioritize.

In this case my ear melodically prioritized the top two staves containing single notes over the chords in the bottom two staves. To me, in a hearing perhaps resulting from my conditioning as a pianist, such harmonic material seems to be secondary, contextualizing other moving lines in a melody-and-accompaniment paradigm that runs counter to much of Smith’s contrapuntal music. This compositional priority of single-note lines over chords governed my choices in movement VIII, regardless of *tessitura* and choreographic disposition of the hands.

Movement IX introduces the pianist’s singing voice into the sound world of *Family Portraits: Self*. Although this is not entirely uncommon in Smith’s *oeuvre* (*Palm Sunday* also calls for extensive use of the pianist’s voice as I’ll describe later), it might be a notable moment for the listener, as Smith does not dictate that an audience be knowledgeable of this part of the performance beforehand, and much of the canonic repertoire associated with the “solo piano” genre does

not require that the pianist vocalize. The score for movement IX is reproduced below.

Given the relatively uncommon nature of the singing pianist in Western art music, it seems critical to my ear that the vocal line is heard clearly. From a recording standpoint this balance can be achieved easily through mixing in post-production, but when performed live greater consideration is required. In most recital situations the piano is situated in such a way that the lid opens towards the audience, necessitating that the performer face profile, perpendicular to those listening. Without amplification, the voice will naturally sound much quieter than the piano, given both the size of the instruments in question as well as their dispositions on stage.

For the sake of clarity, I chose to dynamically highlight the voice part to ensure its being heard atop the piano music. My singing voice sits in the lower baritone register, so in order sustain the notes for their long specified durations at pitch (without transposing down an octave), I decided to sing these pitches in *falsetto*. Against a relatively quiet *falsetto*, the piano music underneath the voice in movement IX needs to be performed very softly to achieve my desired balance, at least until the singing part ends at the beginning of the second system.

Movement XIII, reproduced below, is the only movement of *Family Portraits: Self* in which Smith notates any dynamics and articulations. Even then, these musical markings are employed to instruct the performer to loudly accentuate six low notes in the bottom staff, highlighted below with circles.

XIII

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)" on page 10. The score is written for piano and includes various musical notations such as treble and bass clefs, notes, rests, and dynamic markings. A tempo marking at the top left indicates "♩ = c. 56". The score is divided into systems, with the first system containing measures 1 through 10. Red circles are drawn around specific notes and chords throughout the score, and the letter "f" is placed below several of these circled elements to indicate forte dynamics. The score includes complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth-note runs, and features a variety of chord voicings. The piece concludes with a final chord marked with a fermata and a "10" at the end of the line.

Figure 1.11: *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, page 10, annotated to highlight *forte*, accented notes and chords

The compositional approach in this movement was a simple one, based mostly on my hearing but also, in part, on semantic reasoning. For my ear to hear the accents as “loud”, a comparative term in essence, the rest of the music must be performed more quietly than those six *forte* instances in order for them to be properly heard as “loud” in comparison. That scheme requires that the other notes in the left hand be played particularly softly, as not to sonically disrupt the perception of *only* those six instances being heard as loud. The high treble notes in the right hand are in a register so isolated from that of the low accents that they tend not to obfuscate the loud notes, but an effort is made to perform them as softly as possible in order to further facilitate the hearing of the six instances as truly *forte* and accented.

In Macrocosm: *Thicket, Palm Sunday, and Among Us*

The formal structure of the Stations of the Cross, being based on a particular series of events, implies that one should peruse the images in a linear progression from the first to the fourteenth. This sequence of images mimics the forward motion of time-based art in ways that visual art need not necessarily adhere; save for that in this particular case the images represent a history marked by consecutive occurrences.

Similarities abound between the perusals of a set of sequential visual images and a piece of music composed of multiple independent movements. When instructed by a composer or artist to consider *together* some number of

their potentially autonomous pieces of art, I have never balked at the idea. I instead, rather unconditionally, believe the artist's assertion that those pieces *belong* together. Being relieved of that particular duty of consideration by the composer, I am free to ponder characteristics of the set such as the space between its component parts, or over-arching programmatic intent, or potential through-lines, or differences in content, etc.

Many differences reveal themselves, however, when one considers the acts and means by which an individual peruses a *single* image or movement. For the sake of the considerations presented here I will limit the media to specific forms, namely visual art and concert music in and of themselves. Art forms such as opera, theatre, dance, installation art and performance art often involve the use of mixes of various media to facilitate the creation of a multi-sensory whole. Though the acts and means by which one peruses such complex art fascinate me thoroughly, I will leave such considerations for later writings.

I use the term *means of perusal* to refer to the way one uses a sense or senses to absorb the physical characteristics of artwork. Most simply put, one, generally speaking though not exclusively, uses one's hearing to absorb musical information and sight to view still visual art, though some sculptors might also allow the witness to use touch as a means of perusing their sculptures.

My process of reviewing a series of self-made recordings toward the goal of a desired performance of each movement involved placing myself in the role of the listener. This particular methodology places primacy on the ideal sounding

result, making any work at the instrument a somewhat secondary necessity in producing the desired performance. This might be a shift of focus of sorts as, especially in complex and/or “virtuosic” music, the primary focus of a rehearsal process might sometimes be placed on the physical demands required to execute the piece, with the sounding result seeming to be a byproduct of the tasks required of the performer.

The frequent listening required of my chosen compositional process, given that I heard individual recordings several times over, allowed me the opportunity to peruse the piece with my ear in a variety of ways. I consider this metaphorically similar to the way one uses the eye to examine an image. One can focus one’s gaze on very fine details of a small portion of the image, or “zoom out” to look at a larger section, or soften one’s gaze to view the image in its entirety without focusing as intently on local nuances. These methods of viewing generally cannot all be used simultaneously, as a singular focus tends to relegate the rest of the field to periphery. However, the composer of the image must take all the possible viewing levels into consideration when crafting the image as a whole, as the viewer can choose a variety of methods to employ during perusal.

These considerations exist in my compositional process with Smith’s pieces as well. The main difference between a visual image and dealing with sound lies in a viewer’s ability to spend a desired amount of time perusing the image, while in music, being a temporally-based art form, that amount of time is

limited to the duration of the piece itself. Recordings, like the ones I made in the compositional process, allow for a specific sonic image to be scanned again and again in different ways. Live musical performances, though, require that the listener absorb and remember smaller facets of the piece in order to mentally reconstruct the larger form in retrospect, given the inability to autonomously backtrack through a temporally consecutive form.

Family Portraits: Self consists of very short musical moments, and their brevity, in a way, alleviates the concerns of composing dynamics, articulations, and phrasing with a discernable larger form in mind. The options that a listener has in terms of perusal are made fewer by the small forms themselves, so the composer can be more solely concerned with fine details of each movement.

Family Portraits: Self, then, provides a perfect venue for the discussion of the nuances of my compositional process.

Thicket, *Palm Sunday*, and *Among Us* consist of larger forms that require me, as a composer, to take into account the listener's ability to discern or recreate a macrocosmic view of each movement. Concerns of nuance and fine detail were certainly present in the compositional process of these pieces as well as in *Family Portraits: Self*. However, given the need to consider the larger forms present within these three pieces in particular, they provide the impetus to discuss my compositional process at a more macrocosmic level.

Thicket

Smith composed *Thicket* to be performed on either a piano or a set of orchestra bells. The piece utilizes the entire range of the glockenspiel but only about a third of the piano, with the notated pitches falling in a roughly two-and-a-half octave span between G3 and C6.

Smith calls for the sustain pedal of the piano to be depressed through the entirety of the five movements of *Thicket*. Musically, this places the resonance of the piano in line with the continuous ringing sound that the orchestra bells produce. By depressing the sustain pedal, one lifts the dampers on all the strings of the piano allowing each pitch to ring until the strings stop vibrating naturally, similar to the way in which notes struck on the bars of the glockenspiel resonate until they are either dampened or decay.

The constant depression of the sustain pedal amplifies previously mentioned concerns regarding resonance and its impact on the clarity of melodic voicing. In movement III of *Family Portraits: Self*, especially, the time it took the dampers to completely stop the resonance of the low pitches caused certain notes to blur the attacks of others in close rhythmic proximity. Here, all the performed notes resonate for a much longer time, causing musical material to constantly co-exist with the residue of music played several seconds before.

The open resonance Smith calls for forces one to consider dynamics and articulation extremely carefully, as the louder one performs a particular pitch, the longer that pitch extends into the future of the piece, thus impacting more music

with its presence and incurring further decisions about balance. At times, with the sustain pedal down, louder music causes a type of dynamic “snowballing”, since in order for a pitch to be heard clearly it needs to be performed at a louder dynamic than those still ringing, and the next one even louder, and so on. Even when stark dynamic differences are employed, such that notes deemed secondary are performed extremely quietly, any louder primary notes of a “main voice” tend to blur with one another.

With the sustain pedal depressed, the composite loudness of the music is not solely affected by the performer’s compositional choices. Rather, perhaps more pertinently, the number of strings resonating at any given time also directly impacts the listener’s perception of a dynamic level. In other words, the more pitches Smith writes, and the closer together they are performed, the louder the music will seem when compared to sparser sections that utilize fewer individual pitches. My large-scale compositional choices within the five movements of *Thicket* rely on this concept heavily in order to embrace the natural sounding characteristics of Smith’s composed music.

The first of these five movements is by far the longest (nearly six minutes in my interpretation), introducing meandering musical material in a perpetual stream set at an *andante* tempo. The other four movements, much shorter in comparison, develop material taken from the first movement at the same *andante* pace, though in very different manners. *Thicket*, in a way, unfolds in a loose theme-and-variations form, albeit one in which the opening “theme” is much more

extensive than the “variations” which consist of smaller “character pieces”, perhaps resembling the *Fantasiestücke* of Schumann or the *Lyrical Pieces* of Grieg.

The first page of the first movement of *Thicket* is reproduced below.

Handwritten musical score for *Thicket* for B.B. on piano by Stuart Saunders Smith, page 1. The score is written on a grand staff with two staves per system. The tempo is marked *Andante* and the performance instruction is *PP. Down for piano throughout*.

The score consists of several systems of music, each with various annotations and markings:

- System 1:** Starts with a tempo marking *Andante* and a performance instruction *PP. Down for piano throughout*. The first staff has a *7:1d* marking. The second staff has a *3:1d* marking. The system ends with a *7:1d* marking.
- System 2:** The first staff has a *6:1st* marking. The second staff has a *5:1st* marking. The system ends with a *7:1d* marking.
- System 3:** The first staff has a *7:1d* marking. The second staff has a *3:1d* marking. The system ends with a *7:1d* marking.
- System 4:** The first staff has a *5:1d* marking. The second staff has a *3:1d* marking. The system ends with a *5:1d* marking.
- System 5:** The first staff has a *5:1d* marking. The second staff has a *3:1d* marking. The system ends with a *5:1d* marking.

The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings, along with specific performance instructions like *PP. Down for piano throughout*.

Figure 2.1: Stuart Saunders Smith's *Thicket*, page 1

Smith uses explicit time signatures in *Thicket* as well as *Palm Sunday*, while he only uses expansive unmeasured measures in *Family Portraits: Self* and the bulk of *Among Us* as a means of organizing large groups of pitches. Although perhaps only to this particular performer, the very presence of meter (however irregular) introduces a hierarchy of beats into the sound world of *Thicket* and *Palm Sunday* that is not present in *Family Portraits: Self* and *Among Us*. In stating this, I do not necessarily imply the presence of particular dispositions of “strong and weak” beats common to pieces consistently set in duple or triple meters. Rather, at the very least, it seems to me that the implications of the *downbeats* expressed by the metered measures carry a more frequently occurring rhythmic weight than that of Smith’s unmeasured music.

The importance of discussing the presence of meter in my compositional choices relates directly back to the perusal of prototypical recordings. To restate, the goal of these recordings was to capture Smith’s provided materials without any “performer-provided” musicality, in order to create a neutral, baseline sonic image in order to allow my ear to make any and all further compositional decisions.

Through analysis of my final recordings, the extra weight or emphasis implied by downbeats of expressed meter (in contrast to a relatively non-hierarchical string of beats in the unmeasured *Family Portraits: Self*) is an inextricable part of my performance of Smith’s provided materials. I understand that an argument can be made stating that such an emphasis could be

considered a compositional choice on my part. However, I find it nearly impossible to execute the time signature changes present without acknowledging the downbeats in a particular way. Perhaps my performed response to annotated meter blurs the line between Smith's compositional realm and my own. I leave it to the reader to consider whether a downbeat performed in a particular way in response to a written meter is the result of the composer's intent or the performer's conditioning. In any case, I raise this point as a macrocosmic compositional issue, given that the presence of meter, irregular or otherwise, persists throughout the piece as a whole and provides a contrasting momentum to Smith's unmeasured music that affects my compositional practice differently.

Generally, the contrapuntal material in the first movement of *Thicket* is less dense than that of *Family Portraits: Self*. Were the sustain pedal not down for the entirety of the movement, one could perform the component voices extremely clearly and independently without obfuscation. However, the compounding resonance of the different pitches being played affects the overall clarity of voicing even before the performer makes any of the compositional choices Smith calls for.

Soft dynamics can be difficult to attain given this accumulation of sound. Smith allows moments for the resonance to clear in the first movement by including measures of rest periodically throughout the music. During these moments the piano sound decays without the injection of new pitch material into the accumulated resonance, creating a natural *decrescendo*. Within *Thicket*, the

best moments to attempt the more difficult composition of soft dynamics occur at the end of these measures of rest. As such, I treat these moments as dynamic “resets” of sorts in which I re-establish quieter playing after each. These rests punctuate the first movement in the following proportions, expressed in systems with accompanying timestamps referencing my recording of the piece.

8 systems of consistent music (0:01-3:00)

5/4 measure of rest

3 systems of consistent music (3:05-4:04)

3/4 measure of rest

2.5 systems of consistent music (4:07-4:54)

2/4 measure of rest

2.5 systems of consistent music (4:56-5:44)

Closing resonance (till 5:53)

Scheme 2.1: Proportions of consistent music and rest in *Thicket*, movement I, referencing the score and the author’s recording

To my ear, these moments of rest allow a natural formal structure to develop; one that clarifies a longer movement by using Smith’s written music and the piano’s natural tendency in its construction. The macrocosmic result of my composition in this movement consists of four sections that begin softly and gradually get louder as pitches and resonance accumulate, while the successive measures of rest allow the sustained pitches to decay, allowing for the next quieter beginning.

I considered the other four movements in two pairs, based on overarching sonic characteristics. Firstly, III and V include periodic measures of rest similar to the first movement, while II and IV contain consistently composed music throughout. Secondly, Smith utilizes the assertion of the open fifths and octaves

predominantly throughout II and IV, while the voices of III and V are simultaneously more consonant and chromatic. These characteristics profoundly affected my compositional choices.

Movement II is reproduced below.

(5.)

Handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Thicket, page 2". The score is written on multiple staves and includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The score is divided into two main sections, labeled "II." and "III.". The notation includes complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines, with some measures containing multiple notes and rests. The score is written in a style that suggests it is a working draft or a composer's sketch. The key signature and time signature are not explicitly stated but can be inferred from the notation. The score is written on a page that is oriented vertically in the image.

Figure 2.2: *Thicket*, page 2

Smith composed no measures of rest in the second and fourth movements; performed pitches persist throughout the music. Given that the pedal is down throughout, this means that sound will gradually accumulate from beginning to end without interruption, allowing fewer opportunities within the movement for perceivable soft dynamics against the persistently increasing resonance.

The left hand of this movement consists of a gradual semitone ascent of perfect fifths, sometimes broken and sometimes embellished. The initial fifth, C4/G4, persists through the end of the second system. C#4/G#4 lasts until the middle of the third, D4/A4 and Eb4/Bb4 through the end of the third, and E4/B4 till the middle of the fourth when F4/C5 takes over till the end of the movement.

To my ear these pedal points ring as extremely profound and present, and their gradual ascent seems to imply an increase in energy throughout the movement. This persistence, compounded with the lack of resonance-reducing measures of rest, led me to compose louder, more assertive dynamics in this movement compared to the first.

Instead of the perfect fifth, Smith makes the persistent interval the octave in movement IV, places it in several voices throughout, and once again includes no measures of rest for the resonance to decay. Thusly, I composed the fourth movement macrocosmically in a loud, assertive fashion similar to the way in which I approached the second, given the unimpeded accumulation of sound throughout.

In movements III and V, however, Smith again composes moments of repose during which the piano can naturally, over periods of rest, approach a softer dynamic level. The first page of movement III of *Thicket* is reproduced below.

Handwritten musical score for "Thicket" on page 3. The score is organized into four systems, each consisting of two staves. The notation is highly detailed, featuring complex rhythmic patterns, slurs, and various fingerings. Key annotations include:

- System 1:** Starts with a circled number "6." and a circled "III.". The first staff has a tempo marking of $48:58$. Fingerings like "5 16" and "3:1 d" are present. A circled "6." is at the end of the system.
- System 2:** Continues the rhythmic complexity with slurs and fingerings such as "5:1 d", "3:1 d", and "7:1 d".
- System 3:** Features a circled "7:1 d" and a circled "5:1 d". The notation includes many slurs and complex rhythmic groupings.
- System 4:** Ends with a circled "7:1 d" and a circled "5:1 d". The final staff shows a circled "5:1 d" and a circled "7:1 d".

Figure 2.3: *Thicket*, page 3

A glance at this first part of the third movement reveals moments of rest in measures 2 and 3, the 5/4 bar toward the beginning of the second system, the 8/4 measure toward the beginning of the third, the end of the 9/8 bar at the beginning of the fourth system, and the 3/4 measure at the bottom of the page. These all provide opportunities for the reestablishment of quiet dynamics following the decay of accumulated sound. These opportunities, combined with greater emphasis on less assertive non-perfect intervals and the positioning of this movement between the naturally bolder II and IV, led to me to focus on softer sounds within this short movement to take advantage of its construction.

Smith only provides two short moments of rest in movement V, dividing it into three sections of consistent musical performance. However, it predominantly consists of single note passages and chords that are repeated, creating the opportunity to embrace a naturally softer dynamic field, thus leading to my overall construction of *Thicket* as a succession of four short character pieces in a “loud-soft-loud-soft” progression prefaced by a longer, more organic opening movement.

Palm Sunday

Of all Smith’s piano works, *Palm Sunday* comes the closest to emulating the broad formal disposition of a four-movement piano sonata. A lengthy first movement, a fast *scherzo*-like second, a lyrical slow movement, and a *Largo*

finale call to mind the formal variations of the piano sonata since the Classical era.

The first movement of *Palm Sunday* unfolds in similar fashion to the first movement of *Thicket*. A long, gradual exposition and evolution of musical material characterizes this opening in which the pedal is depressed throughout, though only one measure of rest allows for the dissipation of resonance. Here, the overall compositional scheme I employ parallels the gradual momentum accrued by Smith's writing throughout, beginning with slower, repeated material and continuing with faster, through-composed material in its wake. The first page of *Palm Sunday* is reproduced below.

Palm Sunday

for solo piano

commissioned by Kyle Adam Blair

Stuart Saunders Smith

♩ = andante
Pedal down throughout movement

Piano

I.

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Sharon, Vermont

Figure 2.4: Stuart Saunders Smith's *Palm Sunday*, page 1

The opening systems of the first movement of *Palm Sunday* contain three sections of repeated material. Even though the sustain pedal is down, the assertion of specific set of pitches multiple times over without the introducing of new ones allows for past harmonic residue to fade. Thus, the beginning of *Palm Sunday* still offers an opportunity for softer dynamics. Over time, these brief moments of repetition become more infrequent, as the next four pages only boast two sets of repeated measures. A moment of rest finally occurs on the fifth page of the piece. Facilitated by a global feeling of acceleration caused by briefer time signatures and more frequent downbeats, the piece accumulates resonance quickly after the first two pages. Below, I offer a timing chart of my interpretation of the first movement of *Palm Sunday*, cross-referencing Smith's provided materials against the resultant resonance and my large-scale compositional response.

Three repeated opening passages (0:00-0:54)
Long global *crescendo* with local nuance (0:55-5:34)
Moment of rest (5:34-5:43)
Global *crescendo* with local nuance (5:44-7:24)
Closing resonance (7:24-7:46)

Scheme 2.2 – Outline of interpretive formal structure of *Palm Sunday*, movement I, referencing the author's recording

Smith stylistically crafted the fast second movement after the great jazz pianist McCoy Tyner, a prominent soloist and member of the John Coltrane Quartet for a number of years. Smith emulates Tyner's playing in this movement by composing a long modal line in the bass register, featuring and embellishing

perfect intervals (fourths, fifths, and octaves) which strike me as both a sturdy, reinforced harmonic foundation and melodic in nature. The right hand performs fast, quicksilver motives in the very high treble register of the instrument for the much of the movement, in stark contrast to the lower contrapuntal voice not only in terms of register, but also with regard to rhythmic character. The beginning of the second movement of *Palm Sunday* is reproduced below.

III.

♩ = fast

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a piano part (treble and bass clefs) and an organ part (treble clef). The piano part is marked *fast*. The organ part features various ornaments and fingerings, including 3rds, 5ths, 7ths, 9ths, 10ths, 11ths, 12ths, and 13ths. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into measures by bar lines, with some measures containing multiple notes and ornaments.

Figure 2.5: Palm Sunday, page 6

Structurally, the movement is cast in three sections, all of which are repeated, creating an AABBC form. The relatively large-scale repetitions (larger, at least, than those found in the rest of the *Palm Sunday*) call to mind the repeated binary forms of Bach's keyboard suites, or Classical-era minuet-and-trio forms.

Debates exist within Western performance practice regarding the treatment of extended repeated passages found in the printed music of the Baroque and Classical eras. Some arguments center around which repeats are critical and which are extraneous, while others question whether a 21st-century performer needs to perform any of these repetitions at all.

The more interesting inquiry, to me, is *how* one might approach performing the second instance of material when a larger formal repetition is composed. In Classical-era music, dynamics, articulations, and phrasing markings are often composed into the score. However, even when the composer provides instructions regarding these parameters, verbatim repetitions of larger passages seem only to occur occasionally in practice, given that many performers take the opportunity provided by the repetition to inflect the material slightly differently than the first time through. This is perhaps even truer in the aforementioned keyboard suites as, according to the available *urtext* editions, Bach did not pen dynamics, only occasional articulations and phrase groupings. Performers might feel more comfortable composing their own dynamics into a *French Suite* or an

English Suite given this lack of explicit instructions, but questions still remain about how one musically treats the second performance of a repeated passage.

Smith, giving the interpreter autonomy in these concerns, alleviates external debates and questions surrounding the performance practice of repeated material, allowing the individual to answer those questions for themselves and compose musical responses in line with their own aesthetic inclinations.

As a performer, personally, I find that if I am given the opportunity to play a passage a second time, especially a longer passage, my ear is drawn to the notion of performing it in such a way that the repetition is musically *warranted* somehow and not simply *mandated* by the notation. More often than not, this leads me to play the repetition of a larger section slightly differently than the first time through. This, in my opinion justifies the repeated performance as the music becomes something more than a simple restatement. Stated another way, this variety in performance, to me, provides a satisfactory answer to the question “*Why is this music repeated?*”

My compositional approach to the second movement of *Palm Sunday* embraces the opportunity to vary the focuses of dynamic and articulation across repeats. The two vastly different contrapuntal lines of this movement, as well as a notable drop in right hand *tessitura* at the beginning of the third section, provide ample opportunities for this exploration. I have charted my simple compositional scheme below, accompanied by timestamps relating to my recording of the

movement. The second time through each section is marked with the prime symbol (′). Bold font is used only for the ease of the eye, not for emphasis.

- A (0:00-0:22) – Treble focus, bass background**
- A′ (0:23-0:45) – Bass assumes focus, loudly and boldly
- B (0:46-1:31) – Bass retains focus, treble decoration**
- B′ (1:32-2:17) – Treble focus, overall lighter dynamic and feel
- C (2:18-3:02) – Treble and bass in balance, overall softer**
- C′ (3:03-3:48) – Treble and bass in balance, overall loud

Scheme 2.3 – Interpretive formal structure of *Palm Sunday*, movement II, referencing repetition of major sections and timestamps as related to the author’s recording

To provide more clarity of process to this summary, when listening back to my initial recordings my ear was immediately drawn to the fast, raucous right hand figurations at the outset of the movement, so I embraced that voice as the focus of the first performance of the A section. Having highlighted that particular music the first time through, I used the repeat as an opportunity to present the bass voice as the *Hauptstimme*, utilizing accents and *tenuto*-like articulations to support the natural heft of the piano’s low register. Continuing into the next section, my ear was attracted to the idea of tracking the bass melody further into the first performance of the B section, as the slower rhythm of the lower stave seems songlike in contrast to the rapid fluctuations of the treble material. Once again using the repeat as an opportunity to shift focus, I highlight the treble voice in B′, lightening the touch and attempting to clarify smaller, more detailed phrase groupings that were perhaps not as aurally present the first time through.

The right hand drops down to a baritone-like register at the beginning of the third section. Given its sudden proximity to the lower bass voice, it seemed to my ear that if these lines could inhabit a similar *tessitura*, then they could also inhabit a similar dynamic landscape. With that in mind, I strove to balance the hands with one another, and embrace the sudden register shift as an opportunity to bring the overall dynamic down to a softer level. The second half of the C section, though, has Smith once again placing the right hand at the very top of the piano, boldly increasing the energy level at the end of the passage. My ear desired for this upsurge in cadential energy to continue into the repetition, so I perform the second instance of the C material in a very bold, heavy way to contrast the more mellow beginning of its first hearing.

The third movement of *Palm Sunday* is an *adagio* vocalise in two parts, requiring the pianist to hum and play a long melody (ambiguously set in either D or G minor depending on how one hears the cadences), and then fully sing a nearly identical version of the melody, all while accompanying himself or herself with counterpoint evoking complex harmonies. The first page of the movement is reproduced below.

III.

♩ = *adagio*

Hum and play circled notes

Singing Voice

The musical score is written for piano and singing voice. It consists of three systems of staves. The piano part is in the upper staves, and the singing voice part is in the lower staves. The tempo is marked as *adagio*. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and ornaments, with specific instructions like "Hum and play circled notes" and "Singing Voice". The score is divided into three systems, each containing multiple staves for the piano and one staff for the singing voice. The piano part features complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines, while the singing voice part provides a vocal accompaniment. The score is marked with various ornaments and fingerings, and includes a tempo marking of *adagio*. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into three systems, each containing multiple staves for the piano and one staff for the singing voice. The piano part features complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines, while the singing voice part provides a vocal accompaniment. The score is marked with various ornaments and fingerings, and includes a tempo marking of *adagio*.

Figure 2.6: Palm Sunday, page 9

Here, the voice (at first doubled at the octave by the piano in my interpretation) seems to me to be the primary melodic line both in terms of melodic content and timbre, perhaps a result of the conditioned importance that song repertoire and popular music places on the clarity of the vocal line atop accompanying music.

Certain recordings of the enigmatic Glenn Gould capture him humming or singing along with his own piano playing, even though such a vocal performance is not required in his chosen repertoire.³ This particular recording phenomenon was an inspiration for my composition of dynamics in the third movement.

The performance of the vocal line shifts from humming in the first half to full singing in the second half. In my initial recordings, the timbre of the vocal performance seemed to isolate the humming from the piano in an interesting way, such that even if the piano's dynamic overtook the vocalise, the melody in the middle staff was still audible.

This property of the opening led me to balance the dynamics in such a way that the humming seemed to be an involuntary performance aside the piano music, similar to the way I hear Glenn Gould's recordings. To my ear, the greatest interest lies when the humming is present but on the brink of being "accidentally" captured, in the same way that the audible breathing of a performer might be mixed into a recording.

³ Glenn Gould. *Bach: Variations Goldberg & Concerto pour clavier no. 1*, Diapason, 2009.

This required that the piano music be played softly, but not too softly. In the second half, when the voice projects normally through singing, the piano dynamic is adjusted to allow the vocalise to assume the role of *Hauptstimme*, though the overall composite sound is louder and fuller than the first time through.

The fourth movement begins with dense four-voice counterpoint, gradually simplifying over the course of the music. The first page is reproduced below.

IV.

11

The musical score consists of four staves. The first staff is marked with a tempo of *adagio* and a quarter note equal to 60. It begins with a triplet of eighth notes. The second staff continues the melodic line with various slurs and fingering numbers (3, 5, 7). The third staff provides harmonic support with chords and slurs. The fourth staff features a more active melodic line with slurs and fingering numbers. The score concludes with a *rit.* marking and a final chord.

Figure 2.7: *Palm Sunday*, page 11

The movement utilizes three large measures of rest that naturally subdivide the music into sections. Those measures of rest get longer over the course of the movement, while the counterpoint becomes less dense. The movement closes with spoken text accompanied by the piano, followed by a brief repeated coda. An formal outline of the movement is below, annotated with timestamps relating to my performance of the piece.

4-voice counterpoint (0:00-0:58)
5 beats of rest
3-voice, then 2-voice counterpoint (1:04-2:37)
13 beats of rest
2-voice counterpoint (2:51-3:19)
21 beats of rest
2-voice counterpoint with humming (3:41-4:32)
Spoken text without and with piano accompaniment (4:33-5:41)
2-voice counterpoint coda 5:42-6:54

Scheme 2.4: Formal outline of *Palm Sunday*, movement IV, referencing density of counterpoint, presence of spoken text, and intermittent periods of rest with timestamps as related to the author's recording

A combination of many factors led to my composition of this movement as a global stepwise decrease in dynamic from beginning to end. The density of the counterpoint at the beginning of the movement contributes to the music seeming naturally louder to start. As the voices become fewer, the music becomes less active.

The periods of rest gradually get longer throughout the movement as well. Although Smith does not call for the pedal to be down throughout this movement, he does call for the resonance of the piano to continue through the rests by

notating “l.v.”, meaning “laissez vibrer” or “let vibrate”. As in the first movement of *Palm Sunday*, the resultant decay in sound acts as a natural decrescendo. Given that after each period of rest the counterpoint tends to be less active than before it, my ear is drawn to the sound of each new instance of music being generally softer than the last in parallel with the recurring, lengthening resonant *decrescendi*.

The primary focus of the penultimate section is the human voice, and in order to balance the piano music to the spoken text, the piano is played softly in order for the text to be heard clearly without shouting. Taken as a whole, the movement, to my ear, begins very actively and densely, gradually boiling down to simpler counterpoint, and concluding with spoken text. My macrocosmic dynamic composition parallels the natural lessening of energy throughout the movement is bringing the entirety of the four-movement *Palm Sunday* down to a soft ending with text that colors not only the fourth movement but, retrospectively, the entire piece at large. The last page of the piece is reproduced below.

Spoken Voice

Palm Sunday — the beginning week, the beginning week of the ending week — leaves, donkey, poverty, the whole peace parade.

Pedal down throughout

Jesus into the jaws of the city. Ascending high above the clouds, Ascending to His home; and after all this, He still says, "Be not afraid."

♩ = andante

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system shows a spoken voice part with the lyrics: "Palm Sunday — the beginning week, the beginning week of the ending week — leaves, donkey, poverty, the whole peace parade." Below this is a piano accompaniment with a "Pedal down throughout" instruction. The second system continues the spoken voice with the lyrics: "Jesus into the jaws of the city. Ascending high above the clouds, Ascending to His home; and after all this, He still says, 'Be not afraid.'" The piano accompaniment continues. The third system shows the piano accompaniment with various ornaments (3., 5., 7.) and a final cadence. A tempo marking "*♩ = andante*" is present.

Figure 2.8: *Palm Sunday*, page 14

Among Us

The final piece in this collection, *Among Us*, is the longest piece of uninterrupted music presented here and consists of a single movement. The first page of *Among Us* is reproduced below.

Among Us

for solo piano

Stuart Saunders Smith

To my friends:
Paul Hoffmann
Joseph Kubera
Thomas Moore

♩ = introspective Pedal down throughout. Dynamics composed by the performer (*pppp* - *mf*). Phrasing composed by the performer.

The musical score for "Among Us" by Stuart Saunders Smith is presented in five systems. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The music is written for solo piano and features complex, often chromatic, melodic lines and dense harmonic textures. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above or below notes. Pedal markings are present throughout. Dynamics range from pppp to mf. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and accents. The piece concludes with a final chord in the bass clef.

Figure 2.9: Stuart Saunders Smith's *Among Us*, page 1

Smith indicates at the top of the score that the performer should compose dynamics within a range of *pppp* and *mf* (very, very, very soft and medium loud). This implies that the piece should sound relatively quiet overall, as “loud” and “very loud” dynamics are omitted from the viable dynamic spectrum while the softest extremes are included.

My initial recordings of the piece revealed challenges with regard to compositional approach in *Among Us*. The rhythmic counterpoint within this piece is much slower than in the previously discussed works, with many of the polyrhythmic tuplets and single pitches spanning multiple beats instead of just one. The slow voice leading, the generally soft dynamic spectrum, and the piece’s length of nearly 12 minutes caused my ear to get lost in the white-note harmonic language of *Among Us*, especially since Smith once again asks for the sustain pedal to be depressed throughout the performance. In order to amplify a sense of internal structure, I turned to Smith’s indications of meter and tempo to provide scaffolding for my compositional approach.

Smith uses unmeasured notation heavily in *Among Us*, relying on a quarter note pulse as the rhythmic unifier for performing the counterpoint composed, save for two brief moments in which he presents explicit irregular meters. These moments of metered music align with two of the tempo changes Smith calls for throughout the piece. An outline of those changes in tempo is included below, annotated with the number of systems to which each tempo applies, and the timestamps at which these tempo changes occur in reference to my recording of

the piece. Bold typeface is used to emphasize the metered sections of music, while the unmetered sections utilize normal font.

(Quarter note = introspective) – 6.5 systems (0:00-3:03)
“Faster” – 1 system (3:04-3:26)
“**Much faster**” – **1 system (3:27-3:51)**
“A tempo” (introspective) – 1.5 systems (3:52-4:26)
“Faster, push time—a feeling of rushing” – 12.5 systems (4:27-10:32)
“**Much faster**” – **1.5 systems (10:33-10:56)**
“Even faster” – 2 systems (10:57-11:49)

Scheme 2.5: Formal outline of tempo structures in *Among Us*, referencing the score and the author’s recording

From a listening perspective, it is difficult to ascertain that the general speed of the music has increased from one tempo to another, given the presence of longer and shorter note values in all the various tempi. This obfuscation of pacing is compounded by the nature of Smith’s rhythmic composition, as the frequent irregular subdivisions within and across beats make the identification of regular pulse or tempo difficult to pinpoint.

In music that utilizes more regular subdivisions of beats tempo is made more obvious to the listener, and an instruction in a score to get faster often translates to both the performer and the audience that the music has in fact *gotten* faster. When Smith’s music is unclear in this way, making notated tempo fluctuations difficult to discern for the listener, it begs the question as to whether an instruction to get faster is meant solely for the performer to execute the music in a “faster” way, or whether the music is supposed to *sound* faster.

It is possible that Smith does not intend for an audience to perceive a change in tempo in these moments. However, my large-scale compositional approach in *Among Us* embraces the notion that the music should *seem* faster or slower when indicated, even when Smith's rhythmic composition makes that discernment difficult.

I utilized a scale of dynamic and articulation considerations that corresponded to Smith's notated tempo changes. In general, I composed quieter dynamics and softer articulations atop music at the slowest tempo, and slightly louder dynamics and firmer touches for each faster tempo gradation. My final recording of *Among Us* uses this macrocosmic concept though momentary deviations from this approach occur, direct related to the microcosmic issues raised in the discussions of *Family Portraits: Self* and other pieces above.

The formal approach of relating louder dynamics to faster tempi depends on the notion that both parameters share the capacity to evoke a sense of *urgency*. This might be a purely personal correlation, but there is a certain energy that binds faster music and louder music. To me, a faster tempo elicits a certain kind of physical response that might be related to a quickened homeostatic pulse or a particular type of unrest. Louder music can invoke a sense of effort and musculature in contrast to the calm of certain quieter music.

Although such a compositional system might depend on illusion and simile, my use of generally louder dynamics in faster sections of *Among Us* attempts to instill Smith's notated changes in tempo with a sense of increased

energy and momentum, such that changes in pace might be felt even when the rhythmic characteristics of his counterpoint make different tempi to temporally perceive.

Conclusions

Smith's calling upon the performer to compose dynamics, phrasing, and articulation incurs a unique responsibility. When preparing and presenting such works, the performer contributes a tremendous amount of tangible musical experience to the piece that an audience hears, whether or not the listener is aware of the compositional tasks that the performer has undertaken. In many ways the performer and composer are *always* dually responsible for the sounding result of musical performances, but in the works of Stuart Saunders Smith presented here, I can say with confidence that the performer's responsibility is even more profound, as their contribution to the work extends beyond interpretation into the realm of co-composition.

The microcosmic and macrocosmic approaches to composition that I have discussed here can be reduced to two overarching considerations: the musical and pianistic implications the materials that Smith has provided, and the quality of the pieces acting as aesthetic mirrors for the performer-as-composer.

Smith's writing enacts certain sounding results even before the performer's compositional contributions, whether it be the density of his counterpoint, the resonant qualities of pitches in very high or very low registers,

or his penchant for instructing the performer to depress the sustain pedal throughout a movement. It is then the performer's task to work *with* or *against* these natural sonic tendencies in their compositional contribution to the final performance. Although working against these tendencies is a possible choice, it seems to me that decidedly composing against the implications of Smith's writing might seem antagonistic or unnatural.

Embracing the natural sounding qualities of Smith's composed music as an impetus for the performer's compositional process is in and of itself an aesthetic choice. The desire for a primary melodic voice or *Hauptstimme* amongst Smith's dense counterpoint is another aesthetic decision that reflects my personal musical tastes, as these pieces could be played more texturally in the hands of another performer. Many of the microcosmic decisions in *Family Portraits: Self* reflect this desire for primary melody, though the composite melodies created by my ear reveal the importance of higher notes, rhythmic disposition, and sometimes even performance choreography to my musical intuition.

The length of the movements themselves and their natural sounding properties impact the composition of macrocosmic, formal gestures. To me, the longer movement lengths required larger compositional brushstrokes, but those decisions take into account moments of rest as punctuation in movements when the sustain pedal is constantly down, or large repetitions as opportunities for

variation, or changes in tempo as opportunities to utilize dynamic shapes in the service of highlighting formal structures.

Through my compositional process and the self-analysis of the results in these four pieces of Stuart Saunders Smith, I have been able to reflect on many facets of musical choices that I value both as a listener and as a performer. Perhaps some of these aesthetic values are inherent, but it seems even more likely that these pieces reflect *learned* principles and tastes. My approach to these pieces as a listener and performer would likely change dramatically had my musical education been different, or if I had never heard certain songs or pieces before.

I hope that other performers come to these four pieces, or others like them, and experience the same opportunity to reflect on their personal musical values, and consequently their musical past. Perhaps in the hands of another performer, their compositional choices will hint at a different musical lineage, or a different set of experiences that led them to hear and play Smith's music in their own unique way. This is, I think, what prompts Smith to open the door for performers to contribute so palpably and materially to his music. He clearly respects performers as not only interpretive, but also *compositional* minds. Through preparing these works, I felt as though I was communing with Smith as a co-composer, using latent musical intuition in the collaborative creation of performances that could not possibly sound they way they do without me and my individual aesthetic values.

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