Philadelphia and the Essence of Light

“A Nomenclature to Underlie the use of Light as a Fine Art”

“A Secularized Theology”: Adorno on Steuermann

Experimentelle Musik 2003: AB Duo in Munich

“Speaking of Apropos”: An Analysis
Philadelphia and the Essence of Light

by Mark Germer

A curious and unexplored affiliation in the University’s past has to do with the early 20th-century keyboardist Mary Hallock Greenewalt. Now a nearly forgotten resident of Philadelphia, she was once a flamboyant and seemingly ubiquitous proponent of the aesthetic coordination of music performance with projected light. In addition to establishing a reputation as a performer of the standard recital repertoire, she also encouraged the exploration of music’s therapeutic and recuperative powers, and saw the synaesthetic experience of the spectrum and music as the awakening of biological forces. Her presence was a colorful one (the pun is unavoidable). Around the turn of the last century, at a time when electrical lighting could still be experienced by many as relatively novel, Greenewalt campaigned tirelessly for financial and technological support of her “light-color playing” as well as construction of the “color-consoles” she designed.

Greenewalt had earned a reputation as a concert pianist by the early 1900s, having graduated from the Philadelphia Musical Academy in 1893, and eventually performing as soloist with the newly founded Philadelphia Orchestra after the turn of the century. Born in the Lebanon Mountains in what was then Syria, she traced her somewhat obscure origins to the cosmopolitan communities of the Levant. She was apparently educated in Europe before traveling to the Americas in 1882. Her varied interests, especially those having to do with the simultaneous stimulation of the senses of hearing and sight, would be hard to appreciate without reference to this background. A popular guest speaker and player on the “color organ”, she was not without recognition in her development of “illumination as a means of expression” (Rohrer 1940, 107).

“Color-hearing” is one of various, presumably related sensory experiences subsumed under the term synaesthesia. Despite wide general interest dating back to the 18th century, and a rapidly accumulating clinical bibliography, the phenomenon remains incompletely understood. Much recent literature has addressed literary synaesthesia, in which subjects report unevoked color associations with the sounds of letters or syllables; writers such as Baudelaire and Nabokov have left well-known descriptions of such experience (Cytowic 2003, chap. 15). But documentation of musical sound-color synaesthesia has also boasted famous adherents. It is difficult, in fact, to find discussions of the music of Skryabin or Messiaen that do not contain references to these composers’ attempts to incorporate synaesthetic experience into their music scores. In the 1920s, the Hungarian composer Alexander László promoted the idea of a generic innovation he called “color-light-music”(Farblichtmusik). Many artists and composers who did not claim to be “synaesthetes” themselves -- Bartók, Schoenberg, Kandinsky, among others -- nevertheless found themselves intrigued with simultaneous sensory stimulation and incorporated versions of it into some of their most experimental works.
Greenewalt’s early embrace of the subject, however, as evidenced in the 1918 lecture excerpted below, was reasonably sophisticated by comparison with that of Skryabin, for instance, whose prescription for a “tastiera per luce” (in the score of Prometei [1911]), would have provided unmodulated projections. It was always a part of Greenewalt’s vision that nuances of fluctuating, diminishing, intensifying, and merging colors could be calibrated to comparable nuances of musical modulation and expressive articulation.

As a neurological phenomenon, synaesthesia has been approached through two principal avenues of inquiry: as a pathological behavior involving perceptual confusion, owing to the collateral experience of sensitivity in a modality that has not been stimulated during the perception of one that has; and as a universal physiological potential for simultaneous processing in all sensory modalities, hyperexpressed in some individuals (Ternaux 2003). One tentative supposition holds that the process of neurophysiological maturation may include a kind of “sorting out” of the modalities of perception, so that “retention” of sympathetic sensation by certain individuals may be in some way vestigial. However, a long road lies ahead before neurobiologists will have sufficiently accounted for the myriad variables involving brain pathways and receptors, the neural mechanisms of attention and memory, to say nothing of the internal and external environmental stimuli that have bearing on sensory perception, in order to advance a comprehensive theory.

The revelations of brain research unfolding today, owing to image scanning and other technologies, could not, of course, have been imagined several decades ago, to say nothing of Greenewalt’s time. That multisensory stimulation had an uplifting or cleansing, even a spiritual dimension, however, did seem borne out by experiential evidence, if her considerable written legacy is any testimony. Late in life she published a monograph entitled Nourathar (Philadelphia 1946), a word of her own coinage (from Arabic), meaning “essence of light”. In addition to her musings there -- a mixture of performer’s memoir, technical schematics, practical admonition, and spiritual counsel, with the only accessible fragment of an actual light score -- some 18 linear feet of unsorted correspondence and other documents are reported to lie in the vaults of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/0800.htm). There are also legal briefs on deposit in the Archives of the Library of Congress. The excerpts offered here, from a single paper, are meant only to suggest that a peculiar chapter of Philadelphia history awaits further, well...., illumination.


“A Nomenclature to Underlie the use of Light as a Fine Art”

by Mary Hallock Greenwalt

A hieroglyphic, a symbolism, a denotation designed for the orientation of artists is [a] necessary adjunct to any art of succession.

A nomenclature underlying the use of light as a fine art similar to that used on the music page for recording music is necessary to this art’s perpetuation and growth.

Compactness, care of the line space, the width space, is necessary. These marks may be called upon to wedge between the staves on the music page as an accompaniment to the music or they may underlie the dramatic line for similar reasons.

To begin then: the main attributes of an art made up of light alone are: brightness, hue, saturation, time—as time must be a speaking part of any art of succession—and space, as light is a thing for sight.

Since hue and saturation lie, as it were, in the lap of brightness, such a nomenclature must take care of the dynamics of light: the bright, the dark, first.

A table of brightness, from the threshold of vision to a high light yields twelve space numerals. From one hundred lamberts or one hundred thousand millilamberts to the one ten thousandth of a millilambert we get the unit and eleven ciphers—100,000,000,000. Such an array of spaces may well be made use of to hold much that may be needed by the occasion. It makes a base carrying within itself a certain amount of definite fact regarding the medium to be used.

Decimal places and their figures can, in conjunction with a calibrated and similarly marked resistance slide placed conveniently at the manipulator’s disposal, give any intensity desired. But as a nomenclature for the art, symbols that represent hue and saturation must be added not to mention still more cunning marks of expression.

We will therefore turn the ciphers into squares to give them four-cornered room, as well as [to] be easier on the following eye, and mark the decimal commas and periods in such a way as, without dropping beneath the line, they will allow the elision of those ciphers or squares, not at that point needed, for giving either the quantity of light or its color.

We then get the following:

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    I ⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠ
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So sensitive must this use of intensities be that though the increment of least perceptible brightness has been measured at even varying intensities of white light and the spectrum of colors, expressing with light, like expressing with time in music, will come with nuances which can be felt, but scarcely measured.

Whilst colors, like notes, are of distinct and definite demarcations from one another, the attribute inseparable from light’s power for emotional speech lies in its capacity for an insensible increase and decrease in brightness. It is so that the
The play of increase and decrease in light is the indispensable attribute of an art made up of light. For this reason, there will be many variations of the forked lines, which are all considered sufficient for the crescendo and decrescendo of music.

HUE

Hue is brightness broken up into its component rays. Let our square ciphers and their forked lines then be as cups to hold—not only the intensity, but the color denotation also.

The primary colors are three. It is well known that any hue may be matched by combining the three primary colors [in the field of optics]: red, green and blue in proper proportions. But let us take the six chief spectral colors: violet, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red so doubling this primal quantity and build up our color indicators on them. Our marks governing the intensities of light became of use through their conjunction with a controlled and similarly marked resistance slide.

Colors complementary to each other, do
not make a new color when mixed. Not only this, but the spectral color available in artificial illumination is not unlimited. The tungsten nitrogen-filled lamp has comparatively speaking much red and very little violet. The ratios are as follows: 751 of red to 233 of yellow, 103 of green, 68 of blue and 39 of violet or circa: one of violet, to two of blue, to three of green, to seven of yellow, to 21 of red. The violet of even a very strong light is only just perceptible. A variety of proportioned symbols for violet, for example, need give but little trouble.

Let us now go back to our squares and conceive of them as divided, if necessary subdivided, each division colored to denote a hue. Three of the squares could give all manner of four combinations to the three colors and twelve squares, not to mention the forked lines, would thus certainly give the necessary symbol space for getting at the twenty-two hues which the eye can recognize irrespective of brightness and saturation change.

It is also to be remembered that it is not a question of painting forms, but of tinting brightness.

Since color printing is expensive, let us use arbitrary symbols in black and white as a possible substitute in place of actual color.

We will also keep the graceful names of these colors; symbols and names as follows:

Supposing now a change of color were wanted in the midst of a growing light intensity, the forked lines can carry the same symbols as follows:

mean that as the intensity changes one color is to gradually displace the other.

It is right here that stress must be laid on the fact that color sensations do not reach their full value immediately on application of the stimulus. It is for this reason that a rotating disc made up of several colors will give the impression of one color. It is only for this reason that the notes of music meant to act on the dot of time can never suffice for a stimulus of leisurely growth. Our forked lines give ampleness of time for color change.

SATURATION

The least trouble need be experienced from the need for lessening the saturation made by the addition of white. White will turn red into pink, dark blue into paler blue, etc.

It will be difficult to isolate absolutely a spectral monochrome so as to be devoid of white. The filter cannot be prevented from fading.

It will be difficult to keep all vagrant light from filtering into the auditorium by some means or other.

We know that red will show about 90 shades of saturation. This represents results in accurate and minute scientific research on a restricted circular surface of red paper. A difference in color was noted every 4 degrees of the 360 degrees or about one percent.

We know that color systems of notation have taken account of but 10 shades and that increase of brightness will bring a lessening of saturation automatically with it.

In addition to all these ways by which saturation will be lessened, little pilot lights of white added to the powerful lights can furnish measured units of white to pale
the color as needed.

ENSEMBLE IN LIGHT PLAY

It goes without saying that where one or more light effects are to be used as a foil one to the other, that two or more complete symbols will be placed one over the other, as the scores of music for different instruments playing simultaneously are tiered.

SPACE LIT

It is quite within the realm of conception that patches of variously colored lights will be wanted, as, let us say, purple over the cellos, while blue plays over the violins. In this case, the written word must give this direction. A colored light falling on a background of a different and supporting light suffusion would also need a special noting and will refer, naturally, to a resistance slide operating independently.

The beginning [and] the cessation of a given color must, of course, always be carried on the intensity mark.

Such directions as “gently”, “violently”, must, as in music, be given in words.

In all this, it is to be understood that every nomenclature underlying an art is but a skeleton around which the artist must build his creation. It is so with the notes of music. It is so with the dramatic line. Not the finest of computed brightnesses will be all sufficient for the artist. Only his instinct, his practice, his taste, will bring him where the light of his soul leads.

Mary Hallock Greenewalt
Wildwood Crest
7 September 1918

“[Greenewalt] at one of her Light Color Play Consoles that were produced in number” (Greenewalt 1946)
The pianist and composer Edward Steuermann, who taught at the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music from 1948 to 1962, has the distinction of being remembered as the actual manifestation of an almost mythic archetype: the exceptional artist of great intellectual and personal integrity. Many portray themselves so, but few would have earned the regard of so sharp an observer as the German social theorist and writer on music Theodor Adorno, who offered his recollections of Steuermann in the Süddeutsche Zeitung after the latter’s death in November 1964. The sketch here leans heavily on this memorial, in a translation by the fellow pianist Konrad Wolff found in typescript in the Music Library. (The cited passages do not necessarily appear in the order of the original.) A different translation, following an apparently revised German text in the collected edition of Adorno’s writings, is available in The Not Quite Innocent Bystander, ed. Clara Steuermann (Lincoln 1989), 240-46.

Having emigrated from Germany in 1934, Adorno’s transcontinental influence in the fields of social philosophy and aesthetics has been as profound as it is controversial. Even after his death he attracts both fierce advocates and detractors. But his writings, including his critiques of music as social text, still serve as points of return and reflection. He wrote from the position of the questing insider, even taking composition lessons from Alban Berg. It was through his association with members of the circle around Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna and Berlin that he became acquainted with the Polish piano student.

In Edward Steuermann’s makeup, Art as such, and seriousness about aesthetics, came before the special media of talent, but this seriousness, in turn, forced him to apply extreme concentration on these media.

I met Steuermann in 1925 through Berg and took piano lessons from him. The friendship then born has continued ever since. No words can describe how much I owe him. Once, when I played the B-minor Capriccio of Brahms for him, he drew my attention to a motivic connection which I had not perceived and therefore not made clear [in my playing]. At that moment I was made to realize fully that correct rendering of music in performance depends on the articulate knowledge of the score by the performer, so that he is able to analyze it.

His education as a pianist began with Vilém Kurz in Lemberg (Polish Lwów, now Ukrainian Lviv). After moving to Berlin he studied with one of the city’s most stellar personalities, the Italian composer and keyboard virtuoso Ferruccio Busoni.

By the time he reached Berlin, a few years before World War I, he must already have been quite ad-
vanced as a pianist and composer... [At first, the composer Engelbert] Humperdinck was to have become his composition teacher. In the first lesson, Humperdinck asked him whether he preferred to be instructed in the manner of composing of Wagner, or in that of Brahms. Steuermann was so shocked by the lack of artistic moral standards revealed by this question that he never went back.

Busoni introduced him to Schoenberg. He became Schoenberg’s pupil, and much more, for his own spiritual and musical identity crystallized itself as a result of the relationship with Schoenberg.

His exceptional pianistic quality made him appear predestined for the role of authentic interpreter of the Schoenberg School. While preserving a complete natural independence, Steuermann was impregnated with the conception of new music developed by this, the Second Viennese School, and this immediately also transformed the relationship with Central-European music of the past, and indeed revolutionized interpretation of music in general. No pianist of that epoch was closer to the great production that took place now. Steuermann did not just have an open, receptive mind for the modern radicals, but he was part and parcel of their very existence, and embodied the refutation of the fatal habit of regarding actual composing as something separate from traditional music-making.

In 1912 Steuermann took part in the first performance of Schoenberg’s famous cycle Pierrot lunaire, and premiered many works of the early twentieth century. He was the pianist for the Verein für Musikalische Privataufführungen (Society for Private Performances), founded in 1918 by Schoenberg and as such introduced works by Scryabin and much new French music to Vienna. He was often the pianist for the incendiary journalist Karl Kraus’s readings and recitations. Anton Webern dedicated his only work for solo piano, the Variations, op.27, to Steuermann. (Much later, in 1957, Columbia Records issued Steuermann’s Schoenberg: Complete Piano Music (ML 5216) to public and critical acclaim. He continued his identification with this repertory throughout his life, editing the solo keyboard music for the composer’s Collected Works edition shortly before his death.)

It is tempting to compare Steuermann’s role in the music of the second Wiener School with that of Hans von Bülow for Wagner. But Steuermann must have had greater creativity, wider humanity, and even better understanding of the great music of the past. [...] His insight in musical construction was formed through Schoenberg’s workshop. Steuermann’s severity in rendering scores without compromise was part of his artistic credo which excluded any giving in to the predominantly hedonist music market of the time. He was adamant in opposing all compromise directions such as replaced true modern music in the epoch between the two world wars to an extent that young musicians of today can hardly imagine.

In his article on Steuermann for the second edition of The New Grove
Dictionary of Music and Musicians (London 2001), Michael Steinberg writes that Steuermann’s “Beethoven recitals in New York in the early 1950s were, with their structural clarity and pianistic beauty, among the most remarkable events of that time.” Adorno attributed these attributes to Steuermann’s ability, born of analysis, to locate individuality within tradition, and to make virtuosity expressive.

The concrete individuality of the very piece which is being analyzed, though it may be extremely anchored in the more general musical idiom, is what matters. Steuermann’s use of analysis in interpretation is connected with modern composing, inasmuch as here, too, the identifying features of each piece obtain against the outdated generalities of tonality. This experience of modern art also penetrated the approach to tradition. For a long time already, the music of the past had indeed been a battlefield for the war between the here-and-now of composing on the one hand, and [stylistic] generalities on the other. This new direction in score analysis has incalculable consequences for the interpretation of music. [...] It is, however, true that the discipline and control that this kind of performance exacts from the performing musician, is more than unusual and approaches the unbearable. Steuermann increased this ability to the point of a magnificently defeatism of Kafka[esque] proportions.

His expressionist impulse was equally strong: as a pianist, Steuermann freed musical expression in agitated eruptions from its taboos. Both these manifestations of his personality—analytic penetration and forceful expression—were grounded in his inexhaustible and constantly self-generating imagination that was equally dedicated to expressing the musical meaning and to discovering its traces and traces of the relationship of each detail to the whole, in the dry symbols of musical notation. [...] The mechanism of his playing was strong and very virtuosic, yet he never indulged in virtuosity. In the interest of expression and structure, he renounced the kind of smoothness that would have been very easy for him to produce, and never made concessions for the sake of a possible effect.

Maintaining a relentless teaching schedule, including decades of summer seminars in Salzburg and Darmstadt, Steuermann nevertheless always strove to return to composition. His music clearly demonstrates its allegiances to the Second Viennese School, mixing freely atonal and serial techniques. Michael Steinberg (op. cit.) judges them “of economical, fastidious workmanship, imbued always with a keen feeling for instrumental style and sonority, and bearing, in their sensuousness, traces of his involvement with Debussy and Scryabin.” Without question, Adorno believed, “the source of his strength was his ability to compose.”

Steuermann was not to be distracted from composing by anything, and it was his principal concern during his late years. [...] [His works] are not conveniently classifiable. Much of what he wrote decades ago anticipates the future, through a predominance of a very meticulous mosaic of structure—as complex as a handwriting in which
successive lines run together—over the so-called melodic inspiration, but also through their dark and nocturnal tone, like the foundation block in a piece of graphic art. His works are objective, but they attain this quality not by borrowing external forms and rules, but by transcending their subjectivity, in a process of continuous, productive self-criticism. Steuermann had the primal strength, the faculty of hearing a thing through to its logical end, of disappearing as a subject in the consistency of the carrying-out of the original conception. This music was a secularized theology. [...] His hidden nature was to be one of the just men of music.

Some works by Steuermann available for examination in the Music Library include: *Vier Lieder für eine hohe Frauenstimme* (1943); *Brecht-Lieder* (1945); *Seven Waltzes for String Quartet* (1946); *Piano Trio* (1954); *Variations for Orchestra* (1958); *String Quartet no.2, “Diary”* (1961); *Dialogues for violin solo* (1963); *Suite for Chamber Orchestra* (1964); and *Auf der Galerie*, cantata for chorus and orchestra (with a text by Kafka, 1964).

Back in Philadelphia, Steuermann’s keen engagement with the world of new music and devotion to teaching earned him something close to reverence. Upon his loss, in November 1964, the director of the Musical Academy, Hendrik Drake, spearheaded the founding of an Edward Steuermann Memorial Society, among whose sponsors were Artur Rubinstein, Rudolf Serkin, Vladimir Horowitz, Leopold Stokowski, and of course Adorno himself.

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After Theodor W. Adorno, “Nachruf auf einen Pianisten” (Recollections of a Pianist), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 28-29 Nov. 1964
Experimentelle Musik 2003: The AB Duo in Munich

In the Fall of 2003 the drummer (and UArts alumnus) Brendan Dougherty and I performed in a series of concerts in Berlin, Cologne, Paris and Munich under the moniker AB Duo. We presented improvisations on trumpet, drum set, and two computers. The highlight of this series came on 13 December in Munich, as we were part of the festival called Experimentelle Musik 2003. Stephan Wunderlich has organized this Bavarian institution for more than 20 years. The festival is described as a “six-hour international festival of experimental music” and it truly is a marathon. All of the performers are situated in a very large room in a circle facing out to the audience, with reasonable distances between them. Audience members move around to each musical station throughout the evening. Stephan has successfully created an evening length program of performers with varying ideas about the new music of our time.

The lights came up on the first group, Das PHREN-Ensemble—a group from Munich playing four string instruments and a helicon (a kind of tuba). Michael Kopfermann has played viola and directed the ensemble since 1968. The string scratches and squeals were occasionally supported by low blasts by the helicon as the ensemble members explored the technical limits of their instruments—a recurring theme in music of the last century. After an hour-long performance by this ensemble the lights dimmed and came up again across the room on another group. The audience of about 200 individuals quietly moved into this area and sat. The composer Cornelius Hirsch presented his work Vom Hörensagen that is scored for three female voices and tape. Each performer had a portable audiodisc player with a tape containing parts of an electronic composition by Hirsch. They simultaneously started the tapes and began to vocalize based on what they heard. After this version of the work, Hirsch invited three members of the audience up to the stage to attempt a “chance interpretation” of the same tape.

Next came a series of pieces by three eminent masters of the German avant-garde, Heinz-Klaus Metzger, Rainer Riehn, and Hans Rudolf Zeller. Metzger and Riehn have been editors of the monograph series Musik-Konzepte since it began in 1978. Metzger was involved in the famous Darmstadt Ferienkurse in the late 1950s and early 1960s and his associates included the Frankfurt School social theorist Theodor Adorno, among others. On this night Metzger began by reading an original text on sound and music with Riehn sitting across a table from him taking notes. Zeller followed with a twenty-minute electronic work for samplers, sound generators and tape machines that he called Protocol and Résumé. This sound blitz led to a linguistic improvisation on words from Metzger’s text by Riehn. The audience then moved across the space to hear the work of Aleks Kolkowski, a veteran of the improv scene, having performed and recorded with John Tilbury, Evan Parker, Bill Dixon and Tony Oxley. He presented a “portrait in shellac”—a solo performance for
Stroh (metal horned) violin, gramophone and phonograph players. His music was a subtle blend of acoustically amplified tones from the skeleton string instrument and sound effects from old 78rpm discs. It was a remarkable performance. Following Kolkowski the Berliner Ignaz Schick filled the room with ambient sound created with a no-input mixing board, contact microphones and signal processors.

Our Duo followed, presenting completely acoustic improvisations with me on trumpet, fluegelhorn, and mutes, and Brendan on drum set. One of the motivations behind the music of the AB Duo is the exploration of noise in its technical definition of unwanted sounds. “Unavoidable” sounds of the instruments have led us to become more careful with the sounds that are presented. The early drum set, for example, was an assortment of small and large percussion instruments that were clamped, lashed and screwed together in an often-haphazard manner. This naturally created many smaller sounds each time a part was struck. Also, the trumpet or fluegelhorn can be utilized unconventionally in a variety of ways to accentuate the noises created by the clanging of brass against brass, the clicking of mutes, or the pinching of the embouchure. These small sounds are of supreme interest to our duo because, for one reason, these are sounds that helped to differentiate jazz from other music.

After our performance came another icon of modern music, Michael von Biel, who was one of the first Europeans to make contact with Morton Feldman in America in the late 1950s. He presented “On the Impossibility of Understanding Sound”—a difficult performance in which Biel spoke very quietly, without a microphone, reading from photocopied pages containing information on acoustics. The performance, at first a bit off-putting, was eventually revealed as an incredible statement as members of the audience, in an attempt to understand what he was mumbling about, gathered close around him. This was one of the highlights of the evening. At the end of the entire evening we were able to talk with Biel about his work and ours. He has always found improvisation intriguing and believes it performs a very important cognitive function in composition as well as performance.

After Biel’s intimate reading the lights went out and we were assaulted by brass blasts from the three members of HAORNY led by the composer Otfried Rautenbach. With lights strapped to their heads the players moved about the room grabbing various brass instruments and blatting huge sounds that reverberated throughout the space.

The Italians were next with Luca Miti from Rome presenting his work Electronic Music for G.R. that originally was a “sound design” commission for the ring on a mobile phone. In the version for the Munich Festival it went in a different direction, focusing on the “impossible” in performance: “the concept of the ‘mistake’ (the limitation) of the electronic machine is overcome by the ‘impossibility’, due to [the] technical limitation of the machine, to ‘respect’ the composer’s rule” (Luca Miti, from the festival program notes). Miti was then joined by composer Albert Mayr from Florence and an uncredited assistant in a performance of Mayr’s Jacobus. Mayr played bass recorder very softly while walking around the space, Miti periodically rang combinations of a number of different bells and the other performer wrote Latin text on a large paper flip chart with a marker. The delicate
sounds of the recorder, intermittent bells, squeaky marker and occasional page flip created a unique sound world that blended musical and everyday sounds.

The night concluded with two works by the host, Stephan Wunderlich and his partner Edith Rom. Duo was a multi-media work for film and slide projectors, lamps, sine-tone generator, guitar, snare drum and spoken text. The piece is a sonic and visual tug of war between the two performers. For Lichtspiel, Miti and Mayr joined Wunderlich and Rom in a twenty-minute silent light show produced on a huge screen with four flashlights. The performers had a series of rules to follow which determined when and how to shine their light on the screen. The serialized patterns eventually created an exciting mood among the audience—the silence being as powerful as any sound heard earlier. Applause shattered the silence and our evening was complete. The event was a true meeting of different musical philosophies collected under the umbrella of Stephan Wunderlich’s rare vigilance and support of experimental aural culture.

Reproduction of the placard designed by Stephan Wunderlich for Experimentelle Musik 2003. The design of the image shows the relative placement of each participant for the evening.
Upon analyzing one of my own compositions for big band I felt a mix of curiosity and terror, as I have not consciously composed music with theoretical categories in mind. My writing has a stream-of-consciousness approach, even with respect to melody and harmony, and I have not been trained in, or taken particular interest in theoretical explanations. Therefore this project has presented me with the opportunity to seek out, to the best of my ability, any “subconscious method” (or the complete lack thereof) that I may be employing.

When composing “Speaking of Apropos” I initially wrote the melody and harmonic structure as an independent body, keeping in mind my intent to keep the melody accessible and the underlying harmonies more complex. As far as the “head” is concerned, I have consciously disregarded traditional harmony and focused on two pedal-points which undermine independent chordal movement. It is fair to say that the core composition is largely rooted in two tonalities, C minor and F minor. It bears an AAB form, each A-section containing 16 measures and the B-section (which in this context does not constitute a “bridge” since it does not tie two sections together in the overall form) filling 12 measures, making the tune 44 measures.

The original chordal content of the A-section is largely dependent on the particular voicings, which I have specified in notation. In fact, the chords were notated first, and their emergent qualities established later. The melody of the A-section chiefly employs the dorian mode. The addition of some chromaticism gives the impression that we are straying from the C dorian tonality for a moment but the conclusion of the A-section melody implies an altered-dominant sonority, gravitating back to the tonal center. The contrasting tonality of the B-section suggests F minor, but the melodic structure is largely chromatic, and somewhat serial in nature. This concludes the form of the “stand-alone” core composition.

I chose tenor saxophone and harmon-muted trumpet to carry the melody as well as serve as the locus of improvisation. Adding the mute alters the timbre of the trumpet to an extent where, combined in unison with the tenor saxophone, its sound becomes starkly alien from that of the saxophone and therefore becomes more distinguishable, especially since the melody is written within the range of both instruments such that neither voice has to be displaced to another octave.

The section beginning at rehearsal letter D serves as a transitional section. At the finish of the B-section, immediate development, or an intensified pace would feel overwhelming, or harried, and so I’ve allowed for some breathing room, both literally and figuratively.

The tenor saxophone solo follows at the section marked E, which is initially played through “clean” with no background figures, and then revisited three more times. With each pass, a new background layer is added. I find that building the underscoring in this way provides
added energy for the soloist from which to “feed,” and the build-up becomes mutual between the ensemble and the soloist. For the climax of the section, and the solo, the layered backgrounds compound until the major release of energy at letter F, the beginning of the trumpet solo.

The section marked by rehearsal letter I introduces a long, Gb pedal-point and abandons the form of the initial composition altogether. What follows are independent, chromatic sequences by the three horn sections, coming together in measure 201, forming a dense altered dominant voicing.

Moving to the new tonality, and introducing these seemingly unrelated chromatic ideas sets up the freely improvised section at rehearsal letter J. The featured tenor saxophone and trumpet improvise without pre-direction, the pedal-point being the only constant. This section is repeated openly until the soloists begin to draw to a climactic close. The following section is then cued, bringing in different combinations of instruments, providing different colors for the backgrounds. The pedal-point continues, as does the improvisation. After an implied continuation of the sectional independency at letter I, the pedal shifts up a half step to the dominant degree, implying that we are returning to the original tonality.

The climax for both the soloists and the remainder of the band is now brewing. A series of independent entrances between the sections lead into the climactic diminished whole-tone scale climb and soaring trumpets. The soloists then fizzle out and the ensemble returns to the pivotal riff. A dal segno brings us back to letter A and the original form until just before C where we jump to the coda.

I believe that it is very important, in order for an arrangement to work, to consider the general balance of the arrangement. Some old LP recordings of big band music used to feature a graphic chart which illustrated the different textures and densities throughout the chart, and though that idea may have seemed gratuitous for the general listener, it is not a bad visual to keep in mind. In the case of “Speaking of Appropos,” the introduction starts out moderately reserved but half-way through we are jolted by a tutti shout that is harmonically dense and expressively engaging. We are subtly introduced to the general spirit of the music and then blatantly made aware that this arrangement will embody some stark dynamic contrast.

So commences the subtle texture of the rhythm section with the melody simply stated on top. As the end of the melody becomes apparent, the tutti is repeated from the introduction, reminding us again that we may expect excitement later on. The tutti drops down to just the trombone section mimicking, at a lesser harmonic concentration, the shout-like nature of the tutti. The melody is repeated, and the shape stays the same, providing a feeling of consistency and familiar ground.

The B-section is a little trickier. It doesn’t exhibit as distinctive a profile as the A-section, but it is musically much more complex, so in this sense, the textures of the B-section demand as much of the listener as does the A-section. The conversation between the soloists and the low-end instruments contrast with the earlier parts of the arrangements by foregrounding the bass register of the band as a melodic entity. The B-section builds slightly to a climax, immediately dropping down to the subtle pivot-point riff. This “down-time” allows listeners to digest what has just happened, as well as realize that the melody has finished and we are moving
ahead to the next development.

The tenor saxophone solo starts in this context, and with each repeat, a texture is layered on top, bringing the energy level up bit by bit until the last pass when the ensemble ever so slowly crescendos to a larger climax, signaling the solo’s finale. The trumpet solo begins immediately, because here I judge that the listeners, as well as the ensemble, have experienced such an effective build that dropping the level completely again would inhibit the momentum. So, the energy level is now shifted to the rhythm section, which morphs the style into a more driving, linear kind of playing. The bass plays a “walking bass” line over the chord progression, which is simplified and stretched out metrically. The saxophones enter in the background at letter G, seemingly at the second pass of the form (which is deceptive, since neither solo is mapped after the original form of the tune). At the end of the trumpet solo, layers accumulate again, first trombones, then trumpets and saxophones respectively, and finally the whole band exploding into a dense, rich altered-dominant chord which rounds off the trumpet solo and leads into the next section.

Now that the soloists have shown what they can do, I allow the band to shine a little. This is where the shout chorus comes in. Letter H marks the beginning of a conversation between the saxophones and the brass, based on the chord progression used for the solos. The energy level is fairly high coming out of the trumpet solo, and it is sustained through the calls and responses between the sections. The short saxophone solo section acts as a deceptive denouement. When the brass comes back in and the sections are more or less integrated, we start the real denouement, thwarting expectations of a grand climax. The sustained chord at letter I sounds mysterious and implies that perhaps something alien is lurking around the corner.

The development of that chord grows slightly, then sighs back into the collective improvisation between the two soloists. The rhythm section gets involved in this free improvisation too, without losing the steady pulse or the pedal point. The open improvisation section is designed to increase in energy somewhat, but not too much. As the energy level has reached an appropriate level, the backgrounds (letter K) are cued.

The backgrounds are layered, recalling the anticipation of the shout chorus, and the band swells to another small climax after which the pedal drops an octave: the pitch remains, but the shift in register is felt. There is another sequence of layered backgrounds before the modulation which sets up the gradual build to the ultimate climax with the trumpets soaring. After peaking, the horns “fall off” their notes, perhaps implying the need for relaxation and digestion.

A brief moment of relaxation follows, but before we forget what has just happened music of the initial introduction recurs, announcing the original melody. I have used the device of the dal segno instead of re-writing the melody and backgrounds, perhaps out of convenience, or perhaps because I felt that all sources of further development had been exhausted. And in a way, it brings about a feeling of familiarity, almost like returning home from an adventure.

After the B-section, instead of climaxing again, which would feel redundant, I opt for a rather opposite effect. I envision a drummer finishing a solo and, rather than finishing with a crash and boom, just dropping his sticks aimlessly and walking
away from the drum set. That is largely the effect of the coda. The soloists, saxophones, and the rhythm section strike the downbeat and fall off while the brass acknowledge the downbeat and sustain a moderately quiet, ambiguous minor-major tonality, voiced densely in seconds and thirds, until cut off by the conductor.

In summary, as the piece was composed largely intuitively, and the arrangement was fleshed out measure by measure as well, I am surprised to find this much structure and formal cohesion that could just as easily have been overtly intentional. Perhaps this shows that, in the context of a controlled vocabulary, the unconscious mind adheres to principles, even as one consciously explores new approaches.

On a practical note, performing “Speaking of Apropos” brings much more to the table than I have discussed. Given the innovative nature of the improvised sections, the composition becomes temporarily collective and the soloists display a power of energy-control and musical development, however much this stems from the composed material. The improvisations really make this piece come alive, and each performance achieves a slightly different finished product.

For a closer look, Speaking of Apropos (CD4659) and Collected Compositions for Large Jazz Ensemble (M1366 .H132 2004) are in the Music Library collection.