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### Riffs On Riffs

Steven Lighty  
*Rhode Island College*

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# RIFFS ON RIFFS

by Steven Lighty

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Master of Arts in  
The Department of English  
The School of Arts and Sciences  
Rhode Island College  
2012

For  
the tuneful MaryAnne

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## I. Ancient Times

In the Beginning

there was nothing  
not an idea for an egg, or for dust, or for granite  
no earth, no sea, no sky  
only an absence of sound

gods grew anxious with all the nothingness  
so they gathered in counsel  
one without name  
proposed:

“There should be sound  
Sound starts in waves  
Ripples on the silvered plain  
Grow into giants  
Bounding from edge to edge  
And end to end of the universe  
Spreading its wings it soars  
Shouts untempered satisfaction  
At the immensity of the sounding board  
Light of the firmament  
Voices chime first in unison  
Then in polyphonic multitudes  
More voices than all the atoms  
Echoes echo off echoes  
A procession of glorious ratios  
Shake the yoke of unbirth  
The newly born cry to the dawn  
Youths slip melodies into ears  
Under shade trees and the aged  
Shiver off their mortal coils  
Singing an ode to joy  
To inhalation and exhalation.”

the nameless god glowed in the final seconds of silence  
then:

the faintest sound  
into the windless sea  
a wave rises  
it forms a mountain  
and black space

a fleck of dust falls  
stirs a ripple  
and folds upon itself  
it claps a thundercloud  
knows quiet no more

## The History of the Major Scale: Part One

Mugh stepped from  
the maw of the cave  
grabbed a log  
from the fire pit  
he seethed with the  
fury of a bear  
chased from the comb  
by honey bees

Uta had lain with Drull  
giggling slurping  
all through the night  
sleep for Mugh was  
elusive as a roe deer

he slammed a log  
hard on a tree  
his hands stung  
but strange vibrations  
pleased Mugh's ear  
he swung again harder  
further up the trunk  
Mugh knew nothing  
of pitch but he heard  
notes ringing higher  
and he heard notes  
rising above notes  
the difference between  
an ant and an eagle  
is obvious

Mugh then thwacked  
the base of the tree  
and felt a throb in  
his feet and calves  
and in his thigh bones  
like he did when  
Uta collected  
water at the spring

Mugh found overtones  
he would have had to live



but on that first evening  
while the children  
slept by the fire  
Mugh invented  
songs for Uta  
a new voice  
born from  
the sound of  
tree stone wind  
and bird

later in the cave  
Mugh and Uta  
giggled until  
dawn

## By Rote

what's to learn  
by rote  
by rote

waves break and wet the sand  
listen to the sea roll its stones

hear the rattle  
as they roll

white foam's hiss  
spits on the shore  
spit from the sea  
drowned in a rumble

listen to it reel  
as the sea sings  
its hunger

sand fleas and  
bladderwrack  
know the crack  
of rocks  
in the cells  
of their souls

a doe down  
from the dune  
seeks sea rocket  
her hooves make  
crescents in the sand

she listens to the roll  
as she chews  
the rattle never shakes  
her white tail

what's to hear  
in the rote in the rote

a marimba made from whale's ribs  
and the ocean's deep-lunged song

## Flute Maker

40,000 years ago  
a hunter  
rests on a steep  
mountain footpath

he pulls dried ibex  
from a leather pouch  
chews it slowly  
his hands cradle  
the leg bone  
of a griffin vulture

wind taunts  
the mountain  
as a raven alights  
on a stubby pine

from a rope scabbard  
the hunter pulls a knife  
fashioned from flint  
held fast to a stick with  
strops of leather

he bores a hole  
in the bird's leg bone

wind or devil or rat  
unlooses a stone  
from the hillside  
he grips the knife  
as his cold blue  
glacier eyes scan  
for movement  
an exposed mountain  
is no place for a  
lone hunter

nothing stirs

a nub for a pinky  
and fingers crooked  
as tree branches

he bores five more holes  
in the flute's end  
he notches a crescent  
like his thumbnail  
or a sliver of moon

he listens for a time  
to the wind before  
he blows a note  
mountains never  
heard such sounds  
ascending  
descending  
like passing from  
peaks to dales  
his next run  
reaches higher  
than the white peaks  
on the horizon

the sun is sinking low  
into the leather  
pouch goes  
the flute  
he must make  
the high pass  
before dark  
a hunter can't  
play music on the  
side of a mountain  
forever

## Hollow Reed

on a midnight pond  
flute fixed from a hollow reed  
he plays silent tunes

fingers dance the holes  
inhaling the wisps of time  
sounds stirred by the wind

in bullrush and cattail  
peepers give glory to night  
a toad a toad—splash

the kingfisher hangs  
beats its wings in place over  
schools of silversides

a reed for its leg  
the egret waits unwary  
for striped killifish

sawgrass shakes the rattle  
spikelets rake and rustle  
twinkling stars aglow

he hefts the brown jug  
sips the wine and gives a wink  
to the constant moon

when the jug meets the damp ground:  
a muddy kiss— O springtime

away goes his flute  
it can wait for the silence  
of the old straw hut

## Six Work Songs

Move that dirt, fella, move that dirt  
Break your back with some hard swinging  
Smash the clods where you plant your feet  
When you're dead you can take a seat  
Are you gonna let that old earth beat ya?  
Keep on digging or we'll never reach China  
Move that dirt, fella, move that dirt

Stack those stones, son, stack 'em up high  
Drag 'em to the top of that Ziggurat  
Your heart's gonna burst, so, better hear ya sing  
You're just ant bones to the mighty king  
If your arms start to fail, then drag with your teeth  
Pull 'em up to Heaven, beat the Sun to its zenith  
Stack those stones, stack 'em up high

Pull those oars, bully boys, pull those oars  
Heave to your chins 'til your backbones break  
That rascally old sun sinks o'er the sea  
He's winking and thinking he's gonna escape me  
I'll plant a harpoon in his soft yellow cheeks  
Strain those sinews 'till your elbows break  
Pull those oars, bully boys, pull those oars

Rattle them chains, gang, rattle them chains  
You're soul's the property of the county farm  
You had careless love, but you don't any longer  
Those links on your leg say you're a done bounder  
The blacktop's hot, yup, but the electric chair's hotter  
You can't work no more? Mr. Winchester thinks you oughta  
Rattle them chains, gang, rattle them chains

Haul on the bowline, boys, pull on the sheets  
The wind don't stop to hold its breath  
If your arms wear out, better find some new ones  
Swim with the sharks if you think you're 'bout done  
King Louis laughs, he thinks you've no spunk  
His 42 pounders say: "Get ready to be sunk"  
Haul on the bowline, boys, pull on those sheets

Dig those diamonds, dig right deep  
Dig those diamonds, deep deep deep  
A back so fair's gonna hate twenty lashes  
Some sad lady sighs as she sits in the city  
Her ears lack shine and adornments too pretty  
Young bride, for shame, with a finger so naked  
You hear her cry? Dig! It's for gems she's waiting  
Dig those diamonds, dig right deep  
Dig those diamonds, deep deep deep

## The History of the Major Scale: Part II

There lived a boy in the city of Thrace;  
Its walls could not contain his exuberance.  
He left the city and wandered the woods;  
His mother's voice tired from singing him home.  
One day the boy heard whistles in the trees:  
*My sweetie ... My sweetie ...* notes from a thrush.  
He sat on a stump and whistled back  
A call and response, all through the day.  
When the west donned a purple cloak,  
He made a bed from piles of leaves and  
Slept deeper than the pools of the nearby stream.  
A melody more ancient than the tall pines  
Rose from the waters, and the boy fell to dream.  
The mink and fox, the fawn and the lion  
Came to the water to slake their thirst,  
But the boy did not stir to their footfalls.  
The stream sang on as the moon ascended  
And did not cease when the morning star fell  
To the horizon.

For four days the boy lived by the waters:  
Air was his food, the earth his pillow;  
That stream sang all the songs that could be sung.  
One morning the boy awoke to a bobcat  
Standing over him; its jaws held fast  
A shard of flint. The cat rolled on its back  
To bare the soft underfur of its belly.  
The boy knew what he would have to do.  
As he stroked the guard hairs on the cat's chin  
A sharp cry pierced the air of the forest.  
Clouds sailed the sky; the cat's eyes drifted grey;  
Its heart slowed to nothing.  
With bloody hands he pulled the intestines,  
Rinsed them in the water, and dried them in a tree.  
To a tortoise shell he yoked a bridge,  
And when they were dry he strung the strings  
And listened to the melodies of the stream.  
He plucked just one note and the blood slowed  
In the veins of all creatures; grasses paused  
To hear, halting their climb to the sky;  
The breeze blew itself out, and the sun blinked.  
For many more days with the lyre in hand

He learned all the tunes that there were to know.  
He played with the thrush, and sang to the wind,  
And composed laments to the dead bobcat.  
One day he thought he heard his mother's voice.  
The people of Thrace took note of his song  
In the air long before he reached the gates.  
Straight he went to see his mother, but  
Quickly the elders to her hut came calling.  
His songs were needed at temple vespers.  
Young mothers came next to plead with him:  
Couldn't he sing their babies asleep?  
A bejeweled prince promised a pile of gold  
If the boy's strums would help woo a lover.  
Bearded men bawled for back-country songs  
Played loud and fast all night in the taverns.  
O how they roared and banged their cups  
As they flung fleshy girls up up in the air.

The boy never married, and of course  
He could not stay young; his whiskers grew  
Longer than the strings of his lyre.  
One quiet morning when the town slept,  
The princes dreamt of rings and ladies,  
While hooded priests whispered to eternity;  
The tavern stood shuttered to dawn's slow creep.  
An old man stepped through the gates of Thrace  
And kicked pebbles along an overgrown path.  
He whistled to a thrush, the thrush whistled back;  
He walked for days and he slept under stars  
Until he found the swift and silvery stream.  
On creaky knees he bent and sipped the waters;  
He raised his eyes to the tallest trees:  
Away they swayed against the stolid sky.

Now he makes his bed from leaves and branches  
And swaddles his trusty lyre in ancient arms.  
As the leaves fall they swath his chest and beard;  
Moss grows in his toes, and watercress from his ears,  
But on and on he sings a counterpoint  
To the million melodies of the stream.

## Pythagoras in the Smithy of the Harmonious Blacksmith

My thick-armed blacksmith friend,  
with besmeared and blackened face,  
the music of your smithy formed of  
intervals and ratios sings proof to

the order of  
the universe.  
Take a grip of  
that hammer,  
the size of a fist.  
Strike the anvil  
hear that ring  
O strike it again.

Now grab that other,  
the handle hewn from ash,  
twice as large as the first.

Drop it on the anvil  
drop it again  
*C l a w n g*  
drop it again.  
Rings deeper.  
Twice as deep  
to be exact.

Hear them together;  
strike 'em both at once.  
Takes a bit of muscle  
to heft two  
such hammers.  
How many tones  
do you hear,  
two or one?  
One and two:  
The octave,  
high and low.

Take that third hammer.  
How much does it weigh,  
About five to a talent?  
Made for stubborn steel.

Strike it with the  
first, and we hear  
Discord. If that's  
the chord of Dis,  
I'll wish for  
deafness in death,  
but we've no time  
to speculate; we  
measure truth.

That third hammer's  
inharmoniousness  
strikes at our nature.

Our souls  
seek solace  
in equal  
harmonies;  
discord  
destroys  
good health,  
puts man at  
opposition  
with pure  
thought.

Well I see you have a  
a team of horses to shoe,  
a gate to mend,  
piles of  
swords  
that need  
sharpening.  
So thanks  
for your  
brawn and  
inspiration.

*Pythagoras in the street:*

The harmonious blacksmith bender of  
hot metal sings a crude tune and knows  
the imperfection of temporal things:  
hammers, flesh, the weariness of arms  
laboring for hours in the smithy.

Blow after blow, he strikes his dread anvil,  
but a truth rings from the clarion clatter.

To the shaper of hot steel the order of  
the universe sings perfect, invariable  
harmonies.

## II. The Modes

### Ionian

a column of notes  
goes on march  
past grape  
vines and  
olive trees  
t r o m p i n g  
the hard dirt  
s t o m p i n g  
paths too steep  
for most feet  
resolves stiff  
throats parched  
on they climb  
craggy hills  
dry & lofty  
s w e e p i n g  
heights a view  
wave blue sea  
notes bend  
m a r s h a l  
dumb troops  
no time sig-  
nature of  
e q u a l  
temperance  
they quench  
fires reign in  
wild steeds  
whip angled  
passion into  
parallel lines  
straighten a  
path to end  
time rest  
on goes the march  
a column of notes

## Dorian

cretans swill the mud green bilge water  
and drunken sailors burp one more song

when a ship leaves port  
at last there's no sight of land  
panic flutters in the breast  
like a chick in the nest alone  
its mother gone hunting  
the captain could heave to  
and make wake back to port  
but he never does

prow cuts through water  
and the greenhorns  
yip with delight  
*the dolphins dance and play*  
grave portents never wore  
so permanent a grin

smile on sooty  
shearwater

the ship arrives in Harfa  
or some other port  
at the edge of the world  
where daughters  
are sold at market  
and in saloons  
stump-handed players  
roll on the tiny piano  
keys fashioned  
from human molars  
don't the scent  
of cinnamon smell so sweet?

if you don't make it home again  
never worry  
we'll bake your bones  
into sacrificial bread  
with the dust of some other dead heroes  
that first step may not be the longest  
but do not forget—

it leans like an *appoggiatura*  
toward the great abyss

## Phrygian

Phrygian wild haired  
born on the  
highlands of Anatolia

your second note  
shakes the scrub trees  
bark thick  
by frost scored

so close to the tonic  
and wrinkle faces pucker

carve  
around the eyes  
lemon juice sluices  
hits a soft scab

the crow caws  
as he swallows  
the eyeballs of  
a little  
mountain  
goat  
a  
friend  
to  
snakes  
your tongue  
ferments  
the bitter  
roots and berries

scale  
mountain  
bereft  
of bush  
so bounteous  
in storm and hail

far  
below  
yokels  
from their  
lower jaws  
HOWL  
as the clouds  
blanket the  
mountaintop  
they dare not  
drink  
water from the  
tar black sea  
more  
fodder  
for  
the  
night  
birds

## Lydian

why do you allow the birds a duet?  
sparrows sing a sprightly tune  
but unaware their compositions  
follow the rules of harmony

if he chooses the jay could sing  
bluer than his feathers  
but he would rather cackle for corn  
and mimic the wail of dying gulls

Lydian, I hear you in the forest  
and see how the birds shaped your melody  
I dreamt you an odalisque plush and supine  
on a settee humming a song of smoke

so pour the wine and I'll lie in your arms  
while you reminisce of early days when you  
sucked song from the paps of the she-wolf  
your voice pulled the earth warm around my neck

tunes flit about my ears and all my fight is gone  
I no longer yearn to sharpen my dagger  
or cut my teeth on roots and continents  
let the jays retch outside the flap

I'll stay in the tent and listen to the splatter of raindrops  
as they bounce in time to your grass-fed flute

## Mixolydian

the prince to the potentate  
deference to the king  
only adds to your  
August splendor  
you are no usurpator  
the king holds power  
but you hold sway  
(that was Creon's  
argument anyway)

a half step the distance  
between the crown  
and your fingertips  
we worship at your chinks  
your tiny diamond flaw glints  
the mighty maple minus  
its topmost leaf  
cold nose sniffs  
the frozen  
air poking from  
a toasty bedroll  
the prima ballerina  
with a pimple

if you lose the fight  
to stifle your yawn  
All hail the sky of Ionia  
but still we'll rave to your  
perfect cadences

## Aeolian

when a fish caught along the beach  
is pulled from the tumbling surf  
and strains its cartilaginous jaw  
in its new medium— air—  
the mouth froths a final moment  
the fisherman stares at his quarry  
its black eye cataracts to palling grey  
he smiles: food to adorn his table  
he frowns: the fish smacks its tail  
one last time against the cold wet sand  
so the sounds of Aeolia greet my ear

Aeolus so full of bluster and smiles  
when he wed six daughters to six sons  
at the month long banquet  
the hired singer plucked a few lemons  
but the dozen feet dancing the *ballos*  
never stopped their scud across the cloud floor

scarlet apples and pomegranates  
smoked fishes and sad wine  
adorned the banquet table  
not once in a month needing replenishment  
while Aeolus's salt tears turned vapor  
under each noonday sun

but didn't his wife look so pretty  
in her thirty brocaded dresses

## Locrian

I once relished long ascents  
even when I fell flat in the  
bare-foot streets where old ladies  
peed in the mud and grinned without  
a tooth among them  
humming songs of abandonment

I trekked on through  
the high mountain grasses  
above tree line; my steps  
slipped in the shale  
but at last crunched  
through the ice and snow  
of white-mountain glare  
I passed the secret dens  
of snow leopards

the final ridge a knife edge  
like a crab I scurry the last few feet  
triumphant the summit  
but still a step short  
“here we plant flags at the base”  
the chamois hunter tells me

so still higher I must climb  
to be sooner home  
at the bottom of the mountain

### III. Humanism

The Music of the Spheres

Sing on Sun

Whoever first plucked your  
Strings set others in motion.  
You hum across space  
To light the dust that floats  
About our ears.  
You drone the tonic  
While a planetary retinue  
A choir of perfect globes  
Complements with spherical melodies.

Mercury

Up the scale with bounding leaps, sure footed and swift like a randy  
mountain goat, you zip past the arrows of time;  
that slippery-noted song quickens the heart and arouses more thirst,  
more speed.

Venus

Like love, the morning star rings constant.  
Her love abides in the truisms of waves  
and notes around like plumb spheres.  
As sure as the rain cloud wind tide ocean,  
whole tones without waver: no rise, no fall  
just an infinite paeon of elliptical bliss.

Rare Earth:

Ocean & clay, air & fire  
your scales rise terribly like the Alps,  
but slow with the patience of the ages.  
A bump protrudes from the water  
and in the blink of an eon's eye,  
all a glittering, a snow-capped mountain.  
Songs of ice, and steaming volcano,  
giant trees, slow in time, you stir a fright  
in quick-living man.  
The song rests in the head, throat, and chest  
and in whalebones at the bottom of your ocean.

most tempting Moon,  
ever there when gone;  
your melody and rabbit-  
grey face pull waves  
across the sea meadow,  
at day, dusk, night, dawn

Mars

Bloody angel rising  
from the depths to the eagle-heights of the stratosphere:  
your

siren

screams

its orbit

The kettle drum stretched with lion skin beats out death.  
An out of tune battalion of tenors screams a requiem  
And scores of sopranos wail the loss of 10,000 boys.

Jupiter

Sky king, storm giant, gas breather, lover of many moons,  
Stately in orbit, you whirl at a regal pace, with your

fiery

red

eye

A tyrant who one day may obliterate the chains of  
Heliocentricism to start a kingdom on the skirts of nowhere.

Saturn

Why so far from center?  
Did the Sun tweak your beard?  
Will notes, barely rising, barely  
falling, someday emerge like a leviathan  
and curse the tempest that drowns the drone?  
Why so beautifully beringed  
but lacking all greatness  
of what once was?

For lack of air, the pluperfect harmonies of the universe sing  
A mute song. Perhaps tonight, when the wind sleeps in the trees,  
We'll raise our eyes to hear the twinkling harmonies of the  
Heavenly motions.

*Diabolus in Musica*

In the Dark Ages  
the Devil was easy to find.

His existence was measurable  
and could be represented  
by a ratio: 7/5.

Split an octave in two  
and there sits the Devil  
known in musical circles  
as the tritone  
or *diabolus in musica*.

He stands on the keyboard  
with cloven hoofs and  
manicured fingernails  
one key south  
of the dominant.  
How a harmony so  
near to perfect  
could reek like  
the breath of pigs.

The organ master  
at the parish  
avoided *diabolus*.  
Scarcely would he  
even glance  
at the interval—  
the space between  
six keys.

What sounds the  
screams of hell?

With the bishop  
gone to comfort  
a bereaved widow  
the organist  
alone in the choir  
lets a C hang in the air  
like incense  
from the censer.

His fingers slip  
over the F#.  
“Just a passing tone,”  
he would argue  
if the deacons  
ever heard.  
“On its way  
to the dominant,  
the perfect fifth:  
a G.”

Never would  
the organ master  
allow both notes  
to sound simultaneously.  
The devil  
may reside on  
the keyboard  
but he need not abide  
in one’s heart.

Past the cemetery  
across the meadow  
over the stone wall  
and next to a corral of goats  
the peasant plays a flute.  
A jug at his feet  
he bends the notes  
with his whiskey lips.  
The melodies slither  
like the brown snake  
that lives beneath his cottage.  
Whole tones blown  
off tune and over  
the thatched roof,  
he slips his wind  
between half tones.  
The music bows  
like wheat in the wind  
it dips and rises  
like smoke.

A dog barks at  
hoof prints  
a menuet in the mud  
but He who left them  
just barely startled a faun  
and already strides  
deep in the forest.

At the tune's end  
the peasant  
laughs a tear  
from his eye.  
Like rye whiskey  
on the glottis  
the notes  
soothe and burn.  
Before his next frolic  
the peasant chuckles.  
He knows the cold arms  
of the earth wrap around  
his *once* true love  
the love he has just newly  
laid in the dirt  
deep in the pines  
far from the parish  
buried  
with a borrowed  
silver spade.

## Minstrel Memories

an icy footpath  
in the Tientei Mountains  
pilgrims sip rice wine  
and listen to the zither  
wolves cave in the highlands  
where Han Shan scrapes  
poems in his granite cell

peasants chew  
hard bread and soft cheese  
and sway to the melody  
of his lay he's no  
Bernart de Ventadorn  
but the lord's best man  
cheeks wet with tears  
gifts the troubadour  
a sparrow hawk

at a crowded labor camp  
the dusty old dust  
settles for the night  
women children men  
gather round the stew pot  
their homes lost  
to wind and sand and greed  
an Okie singer  
strums a battered box  
his voice as smooth  
as dirt roads  
and a black vulture's  
guano stained legs

in a roadside joint  
the neon sign's abuzz  
he bangs an old Martin  
*Hank done it this way*  
the steel guitar wails as  
semis barrel by gaining speed  
in the crystalline darkness

this song plays anywhere everywhere  
and yesterday it turned 40,000 years old

## The Ear

the ear  
most grotesque  
& maligned appendage

thoughts of cauliflower  
they spawn admiration  
for their pragmatism  
the benefits they  
offer daily living  
marvels of  
engine  
earring

but what poet  
has extolled the  
the ear's virtues?

*her lobes caused a riot  
among rival suitors;  
the curve of her pinna  
sings to my heart?  
if only bats  
or owls  
could write  
blazons*

## Inspiration for the Groundlings

Arise ye starlings, juncos, and finches,  
Take wing and sing to the sky;  
Don't spend your notes on dirt and gravel.

The crow feasts on rancid dinner and  
Knows the ground a place for silent  
Supping on the spent entrails of dogs.

But when it's time, he flings  
*Caw-caws* across the valley  
Like an ancient yodeling to the herd.

Glory's belly need not rub the ground;  
Send your chirps and peeps  
To reverberate in the mountains.

Crack the thunderheads with your  
little songs. Hail the birth of spring.  
Set a pair of lovers to weeping.

Stay put purple-headed starling;  
Screech your cacophonies as you  
shake the lice from dusty feathers.

Don't mind the chatty mockingbird;  
He jests, and levels puny criticisms  
And never sang a lick of his own.

Stick-legged junco with hops and skips,  
You play the scullion for crumbs  
busking unawares for the cats and snakes.

Piebald little finch squeaks in the bush  
Frittering with notes— the cones and  
needles pine for something sweeter.

Pinion your tunes to passing clouds.  
Lift your songs to the atmosphere  
before the days of silence dawn.

(The rhythmic beat of the owl's wing,  
so soft in the ear, talons gorged  
it settles atop an evergreen.)

A final peep, inverted,  
the sun's rising; the chill of the air  
sends the last song skyward.

It's not as if you were not warned.

## The Ballad of Henry Thoreau

Old Henry likes  
to blow his flute  
in the woods around Concord.  
He walks to muse  
through broad-armed oaks  
and catalogues the plants and birds.

He blows a riff  
on a five-holed flute  
to the larks in the bush and tree;  
with the hermit-thrush  
he shares a theme  
and a taste for huckleberry.

O Blow your flute Henry  
through woods up near and far;  
O Blow your flute Henry  
till we see the morning star.

Henry knows how  
to make pencils  
and a farm he can survey,  
but he'd just as soon  
walk to Wisconsin  
than trade some pay for the day.

Once for a night  
they stuck him in jail;  
he just couldn't pay his taxes.  
But hear him now,  
he whistles free:  
there's no toll on borrowed axes.

O Blow your flute Henry  
through woods up near and far;  
O Blow your flute Henry  
till we see the morning star.

On warm evenings  
he'll drift in a boat  
and play to the charm'd perch.  
Henry gives accord  
to everything:  
now that's a virtue running scarce.

He swings that axe,  
and plants those peas,  
writes songs in the shade at noon.  
At night he sips  
from the Milky Way  
and transposes a nightingale's tune.

O Blow your flute Henry  
through woods up near and far;  
O Blow your flute Henry  
till we see the morning star.

## IV. Modernity

Charles Ives's Father

Charles Ives's father  
(his name was George)  
used his ears  
simultaneously and independently.

He didn't mind when  
wee little Charles  
banged out drum parts  
on the piano  
in the parlor.  
"Fists are made of fingers" he'd say.

Nor did he cringe  
or lecture  
when a tone deaf  
stonemason  
sang *Aura Lee*  
quite off key.  
Instead he told  
wee Charles  
"look into his face and  
hear the music of the ages."

George knew the  
path to heaven  
wasn't a path at all  
but a ride on a wave.  
Sometimes the wave  
curls perfectly  
like a champagne flute.  
Other times it  
splits and sputters  
and loses  
a trillion  
droplets  
as the wind  
blows off its crest.  
Either way the wave  
reaches shore.

Yankee tinker George  
ran experiments with his brass band  
after the Civil War.  
He asked some players to march down Main,  
while others strode up Elm.  
The trumpets bounced  
off sousaphones  
trombones blasted  
other trombones  
clarinets needled saxophones  
and since George had told  
Charles from an early age  
“there are no wrong notes  
as long as you know what they are doing”  
Charles inhaled brass  
and exhaled woodwinds.

Danbury’s Postmaster must have  
never believed he’d hear  
a more terrible sound than  
the cannons at Antietam.  
The blacksmith thought  
only scores of anvils  
and hammers  
could make such a  
polyrhythmic din  
as notes bounced  
willy-nilly  
past the gazebo  
and caromed off the  
clock tower.  
The pastor at  
the Second Congregational Church  
wore out his  
knees in prayer  
hoping he’d never  
hear such notes  
on the new church organ.

George would sometimes  
take Charles  
to Ball Pond  
and sit him in the sun  
on the pine needles

and direct him to listen  
to the chickadees.

George walked to the  
shady side of the pond  
with his horn.

Lost in the two notes  
Of the black capped bird  
Charles would startle  
as the trumpet blew  
in ripples across  
the pond.

It sounded like a  
an oak tree  
and the leaf litter  
and the wind  
and a cloud  
and a falling acorn  
but most importantly  
it sounded like possibility.

12-Tone Row

***Allegro***

slide  
feather  
tones  
amplify  
the blue savage  
harp  
where?  
in string dozen

***Adagio***

where ... where ... where  
intones the savage dozen  
slide harp string  
amplify  
blue blue  
feathers

***Scherzo***

stringin' blue  
a m p  
the d o z e n  
l i f y t o n e s  
feather wear  
the s a v a g e  
the harp slide

***Rondo***

feather feather  
slide  
tones tones  
amplify  
blew the harp savage  
Where? Where? Where ?

in  
String-----String

Do  
Zen

## Tin Cylinder

Next month  
in July of 1877  
Thomas Edison creates  
the phonograph cylinder

But for now  
an old man  
sits with his parlor guitar  
in a blue paint-chipped room  
he sweeps a lovely air  
across the steel strings  
His wife from the kitchen  
hums along  
but not another living soul  
hears a note

A portrait in sepia  
he wears a crisp white shirt  
a plain brown tie  
clipped with a gold pin  
a song he has played  
off and on since  
his ears first  
started budding  
those two old cabbages  
don't hear like they used to  
but his song can still make  
a mourning dove coo

The guitar stops  
and his wife coughs  
he sits and listens  
to the thump in his chest

Henry the VIII  
Played all day  
And nothing would he lose  
For sat in his employ  
A deft little boy  
Who scribbled  
The king's good tunes

But only royalty can  
afford such luxuries  
A few more specks of paint  
fall and gather in the  
corners of the room  
A dozen more coughs  
waft from the kitchen  
Outside the window  
a murder of crows  
pass to roost  
in an oak tree  
A million particles of dust  
float in the sunlight

The man starts  
to strum  
a new tune

Hurry Mr. Edison  
that old man is lost  
lost in a paint chipped room  
right nearby in Piscataway

## Rainbow Bridge

Did Hendrix hear the whales from Haleakala?  
Electricity cascades down the slopes of Mauna Loa  
Humpbacks make song in the Alalakeiki Channel  
Messages of love sound deep in the trenches

Electricity cascades down the slopes of Mauna Loa  
His Flying-V mirrors the whale's tail  
Messages of love sound deep in the trenches  
The whales' song lasts for thirty minutes

His Flying-V mirrors the whale's tail  
Sound travels seven times faster underwater  
The whales' song lasts for thirty minutes  
Tunes mimed and then refined to woo a mate

Sound travels seven times faster underwater  
Blue leviathan breathes riffs exhales waves  
Tunes mimed and then refined to woo a mate  
*This one's for the girl in the purple underwear*

Blue leviathan breathes riffs exhales waves  
Song cycles sung at the end of migrations  
*This one's for the girl in the purple underwear*  
Feedback scrapes the sky an offering to Pele

Song cycles sung at the end of migrations  
Humpbacks make song in the Alalakeiki Channel  
Feedback scrapes the sky an offering to Pele  
Did Hendrix hear the whales from Haleakala?

## The Art of Improvisation

1. the purple horizon offers an impossible destination  
but soap bubbles, a raging fire, gas leaks, and drabs of quinine  
serve as suitable vehicles for the ride
2. a Fender Twin Reverb plugged into an ungrounded outlet  
by the Niagra-flowing-quickly-rising-clawfoot-bathtub  
leaves the canary crying for a migraine
3. don't fuss over tone knobs, wang bars, reeds, valve oil,  
slide oil, rosin, plectrums, snare heads, mallets, Mel Bay,  
tempos, modes, scales, tunings,  
or for that matter your instrument
4. lose your key & roll naked on the front lawn  
laugh when the neighbor yells over to offer assistance  
say: "Haven't you ever seen a fugue?"

## The Bakersfield Sound

Roy picked guitar in a Western band  
at the best honkytonks in Bakersfield.  
He made pretty good cash so he bought  
a '61 Impala with the Big 409 V-8.  
Some afternoons he'd grab a 6-pack,  
roll into the desert, past the derricks  
and strip clubs, the buzzards soaring  
in the updrafts, and he'd pin it south toward Needles.

When the motor ran hot for an hour  
it would start making strange noises:  
*Oughta get that checked*, Roy'd think,  
but he was a picker, not a mechanic.  
Three short notes and a prolonged hum.  
Sometimes with the radio off, he'd tap  
his foot with the mechanical rhythm.  
The diamond desert burned hot but the  
Impala kept running, making that noise,  
and when three beers were downed, Roy  
spun her around and gunned it back to Bakersfield.

Long past midnight at the Blackboard,  
on stage the singer has it in the pocket,  
and the band clicks like a perforator;  
couples on the dance floor hug a little  
tighter to songs of swinging doors.  
When it's time to solo his fingers  
ply the strings of his blonde Telecaster,  
but Roy's mind rides the road to Needles.  
He hits a lick, three staccato bursts, and  
then he bends the low E string into a moan.  
Condensation rains down longneck bottles;  
a hole bores through the club's smoky curtain.  
Flummoxed women run to the powder room  
for a fresh application of lipstick.  
The men wipe their brows with red bandanas.

A quarter mile down Route 99, a jackrabbit  
stops on the shoulder, too scared to cross the road.  
Those big rabbit ears twitch and think for damn sure  
that a '61 Impala is barreling down the lost highway.

When I Heard the Learn'd Leonard Bernstein

When I heard the learn'd Leonard Bernstein deliver his Norton Lectures,  
When the Chomskyan deep structures were laid before me in their tree charts,  
When I was shown the diatonic and chromatic ambiguities with all their  
    tritonic implications,  
When I heard the maestro's breathy illustrations punctuated on the keyboard  
    and applauded by enraptured collegiates,  
(O Leonard, graying Apollo in a houndstooth sportcoat!)  
How soon I became woozy and stumbled from the lecture hall,  
Into the night-air, clear and crisp as tonic water, and from a short rest,  
Look'd up to the synesthetic roar of the stars.

What?

the eyes sovereigns of the senses  
a tongue tempts with slippery perambulations  
the nose a marvel of architecture  
skin the satin queen of undetectable brushstrokes

ears seldom hear praise  
pugilists spit them in the gutter  
Van Gogh hated his  
spewer of hair and wax

but what cheer  
to bask in all this silence  
and listen for the pattering  
of my true love's feet

we'll thrill as she arrives thick in songs and whispers  
to break the quiet with prayers and hymns and vespers

## Strains of a Violin

From bed I hear strains of a violin  
sounds from across the dark green sea  
where your grandmother fiddled with her kin  
kitchen fire warm smells of bread and whiskey

Music shakes the cosmos: you saw at the earth  
from rosin and bow and string and bridge  
notes clear my head and leap the roof  
to a land where the bright ears live

Dirt will someday swallow this performance  
and man will have no, or different ears  
but now Kerry's tunes bear the firmament  
reels and jigs and polkas count the years

Ice on the window, wrapped in flannel and sound  
Come to me when the fiddle's put down

## Paeon to Sound

In infancy the microtones scored me to my atoms  
I screamed through tears in the crib at pin drops  
the grind of tectonic plates and snowflakes falling in the hush  
the minuteness the immensity and the infinite variations

Then in '73 a Capital Records logo pinwheeled deep grooves  
into my brain *goo goo g'joob* and I pledged to play my own  
trombone ukulele jaw harp harmonica piano bamboo flute  
I picked guitars and gigged at the worst dives in New England

and there I met you. On many summer nights  
we croon to the bell buoy and coo to baby herring gulls  
Now I know that sounds sound sweeter with you as we carol  
with fiddler crabs the most luminous waves and a multitude of grasses

It seems unsure a finale looms inevitable  
But if so we can sing *Ode to Joy* all through the funeral

