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Riffs On Riffs

Steven Lighty

Rhode Island College, lighty70@yahoo.com

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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

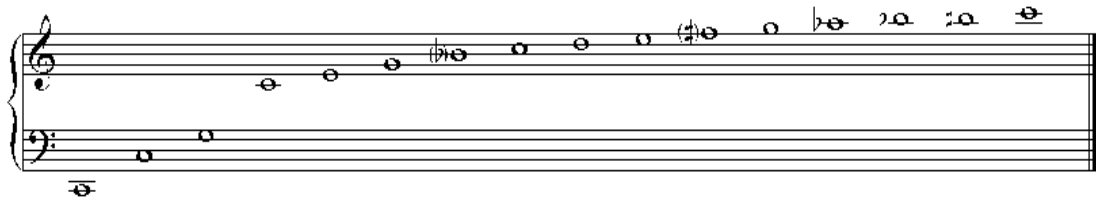
Uta had lain with Drull
giggling slurping
all through the night
sleep for Mugh was
elusive as a roe deer

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

for millennia in order
to see them written in
standard musical notation (*like this*)



nonetheless
the overtones
rooted in Mugh's brain

then the clouds
took the shape
of lions' heads
and Mugh thought:
I moved clouds
into the shape of
lions' heads
he began to sing
a few children
tired of chasing frogs
gathered round Mugh
and aped his sounds
they slapped the ground
clacked stones
and squealed like
unweaned piglets
glee roused Uta
from the cave
she smiled
when she saw
Mugh singing
with the children

in a month
Mugh was dead
dead in the dust
skewered by a mammoth
Drull had failed to warn
Mugh of its charge

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 ing
the hard dirt
s t o m p ing
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
intoned 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

Paean 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

