

Though I had encountered the idea of “the end of history” before, what made me really feel it was the Biden administration’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and the accompanying realization that I had no memory of a time before the war began. There is a sense, seemingly shared by anybody else with no recollection of a pre-9/11 world, that everything is locked into its current doomed trajectory (climate change, a gradual slide toward fascism, etc) with any interventions only as moments of acceleration (Trump, COVID, Ukraine, now Gaza). In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher talks about “reflexive impotence”, that staring down all of this tends to inspire paralysis rather than anything constructive. The same book quotes the famous assertion that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world rather than the end of capitalism”. Replace “capitalism” with whatever social deformation you will—you likely don’t see it going anywhere soon either.

I am biased, but I think art has an important part to play in this. I will occasionally walk away from a really effective performance of music in a state of positive disorientation, in the most extreme cases lasting hours or even days before I finally return to reality. In these moments, I am in unfamiliar territory, making far fewer unconscious assumptions about the world around me. All of the aforementioned stuff that bears down so hard begins to feel just as arbitrary as anything else. Slipping in and out of the world of a piece of music brings with it the reminder that the real world is itself not so absolute. It bears down hard just the same, but you begin to look for places to redistribute the weight.

The more time I spend in this state, the more time I am outside of the reach of reflexive impotence. In other words, I see aesthetic value and utopian ideals as two sides of the same coin, and I think this experience is far from anecdotal. Marianna Ritchey, in *Composing Capital*, makes a case that this correlation must consciously be realized in artistic practice, that we need to deliberately attempt to “imagine differently”, figuring out how to overcome our default tendency to artistically reproduce the material conditions stealing our future. To focus on simply making something new is to be an “entrepreneur”, ensuring that the results can be commodified, reinforcing the logic of neoliberalism that got us here in the first place... a logic of newness that, paradoxically, is no longer new. Therefore, I see the “new” as an unproductively productive subset of the “different”.

For me, this necessitates a rejection of musical modernism. The neoliberal economy is predicated on a neverending upward trend: growth for growth’s sake. In my experience as a composition student, we are governed by the same logic: looking at people like Beethoven, Stravinsky, and Cage (all people who would hate the comparison), constructing a line of “progress” from then to now, and “innovating” to continue the tradition forward without pausing to consider why. I can’t stand this—I’m not going to compose out of uncritical submission to the same thought that might make this the last century of human history.

The idea of “something different” needs to be disentangled from “something new”, but how can we have one but not the other? Here are some research directions:

- Foregrounding the spontaneous, experiential aspects of music-making: improvisation, collaboration, leaving things up to chance—that which is different every time by definition.

- Dissolving the presence of style, eliminating the ideas of expectation and movement-building while opening up the space to experience sounds how they are. This implies an eclectic practice, not staying in one place and “developing”.
- Looking back for material, into the liminal spaces between various practices, or looking for material so elemental as to defy association. Constructing a unique, self-consistent syntax out of that material. Imaginary life should be imaginary, but to be oppositional it should also be clear.
- Employing elements loaded with style only as a way of putting “difference” in relief, taking musical elements handed down by tradition or standing as symbols for things in the real world and making them appear weird and arbitrary. If imaginary life should be clear, reality should be made to appear more confusing.
- Importantly, a skepticism of irony/postmodernism, insofar as they act as attractive substitutes for not putting forward anything different of their own.

My interest is in evaluating the strength of these possible avenues, enumerating more, and resolving the contradictions between them. In my early experiences of narrowing down my intention, this has led me to produce work with an amount of critical distance, as well as pose alternative conceptions of musical expression (redistributing creative agency between “performers” and “composers”, strictly defining certain parameters and leaving others relatively free, performing my own music). Doing this at Juilliard has been extremely informative as I have been able to bounce my ideas off of one of the institutions most dedicated to the *grand old tradition* of classical music.

However, I now want to continue in an environment where this train of thought is directly encouraged rather than proven through contradiction. The composers at Princeton, both the ones that teach there and the ones that come out of it, all have radically different conceptions of what art they should make and how to make it. If Juilliard is pushing in one direction, then Princeton is pushing in all directions. I want to be in a space of multiple different practices, not only to understand how to craft a lateral practice of my own, but also to observe how a culture of lateral practices operates on a small scale—Princeton’s practice of intentionally selecting a cohort where each helps the others grow is a great example of this. Further, the material dedication that Princeton displays to its students and the strong commitment to research in addition to craft are additional large motivations for my desire to study there.