A HAMMER IN PERPETUAL MOTION / THE KEYBOARD IS THE WORLD

by

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Bachelor of Music, University of Victoria, 2003

PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

In the
School for the Contemporary Arts

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Spring 2011

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ABSTRACT

Documentation of a hybrid performance-lecture featuring the music and ideas of "Larry Brown," a fictional composer and Marxist, presented at Simon Fraser University on Jan. 15-16, 2011. The score of "Brown's" piano work A Hammer in Perpetual Motion is reproduced in its entirety. The musical work incorporates musical and biographical references to African-American singer and activist Paul Robeson and the Chilean communist singer-composer Victor Jara. The accompanying text, The Keyboard is the World, adapted from its original performance, examines A Hammer in Perpetual Motion as a political artwork in terms of its instrumentation as material means of production and its incorporation of historical and biographical material into compositional method, as well as the varying readings and usage of political artists and their work to create cultural currency for audiences, states, and other artists.

Keywords: avant-garde; political artwork; political music; piano music; composition; music theory, perception of music; reception of music; instrumentation, material means of production, cultural currency, fictional composers; cultural heroes; socialist artists; communist artists; Paul Robeson; Chile; Victor Jara; Salvador Allende, Bruce Springsteen
DEDICATION

To Bill Livant (1932 – 2008)
for asking the right question
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Great thanks are due to Frederic Rzewski and John Tilbury – and through them, to Cornelius Cardew – for the inspiration to begin this work.

I wish to thank Henry Daniel, Judy Radul, Arlene Sullivan, and Owen Underhill for their support, guidance, and great patience.

I offer many thanks to friends and colleagues who have provided support and inspiration, notably (but by no means only) Larry Brown, Marc Couroux, Wally Craver, Dylan Cree, Janet Danielson, Giorgio Magnanensi, Ken Morrison, Gordon Mumma, eldritch Priest, Stefan Smulovitz, and Jonathon Wilcke.

Most of all, I thank Femke van Delft, my perfect reader, for helping me to make this project real.

“Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas” incorporates material from the songs “Venceremos” and “Manifiesto” by Victor Jara (SCD, administered by Songways, New York).
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ARTIST STATEMENT

A Hammer in Perpetual Motion / The Keyboard is the World is a performance work that contains original music and a commentary on the music. The musical portion of the work, A Hammer in Perpetual Motion (henceforth AHIPT), is attributed to the fictional composer “Larry Brown.” The Keyboard is the World (TKITW), the commentary section, provides a musical analysis as well as historical and political context for the music, purporting to represent “Larry Brown's” ideas while delivering thoughts on the political signification of the piano, the history of racism and oppression in the Americas, the relationship between artist and state, and the role and usage of music and musicians in the political realm. As the creator of the work, I can confirm that these thoughts are my own.

This brief essay will frame the methodology of AHIPT/TKITW as an example of critical metapractice and explore its selected theoretical underpinnings from literary criticism, visual arts, and theatre.

The work involves practices that cross disciplines and sub-disciplines: music (composition and performance) and text (writing and its ‘performance,’ whether in spoken or written form). However, this combination of methods is already contained within the disciplinary practice of music and its sub-discipline of musicology: the lecture-recital is a standard form for musicologists, music historians, and theorists to present their research. I would define this work, after Susan Melrose, as a critical meta-practice of music. In discussing performance-
based work, Melrose defines as critical meta-practice that which maintains practices "specific to the discipline … while challenging and/ or interrogating certain of its practices." (Melrose 2) In developing *AH!PT / TK!TW*, I wrote the following:

> What would a critical meta-practice of music involve? I will argue that it should challenge not only the practices inherent in the discipline but also factors which may be considered extramusical: the social and economic factors which influence music’s dissemination and use and which may determine how aspects of a musical work are produced. This is because among the arts music may be both the most ubiquitous in daily life and the most mutable in its function ... The critical meta-practice of music then interrogates those functions and in the process, engages larger social and political issues: for example, a work that problematizes the role of live performance as background music to a meal may both embody and contribute to a debate about alienated labour.

Challenging the practices of a discipline is arguably an inherently political action; doing so from within the discipline is to engage in an immanent critique, revealing fractures between received ideas of the nature and practice of the discipline and their results in action. To reveal the structures in and around an art practice is also to reveal its social entanglement with capital and politics. *AH!PT / TK!TW* models a unspiralling process of disciplinary concealment revealing itself: the compositional methods gradually reveal themselves over the progress of the music, and the commentary expands that revelation to correlate the compositional methods to biographical, historical, and political references.¹

¹ To be consistent with the rubric of critical metapractice, *TK!TW* has been adapted between its spoken and written forms to perform an appropriate methodology for its respective presentations. While the spoken presentation of *TK!TW* was performed as an informal talk - vernacular and discursive - the written presentation has been streamlined stylistically and expanded in analytical detail to perform the methodology of an academic paper.
manifestly political artwork (containing an analysis of itself as a manifestly political artwork), AHIPT / TKITW is based on the premise that art can add dimensions to our knowledge of the world, which may in turn inspire action. I believe this is a means to create work which is neither obviously didactic, nor polemic, but which serves to illuminate a relationship of causes and effects of which the audience has a choice of readings.

With all this said, the central framing device of the fictional “Larry Brown” - as an initial concealment within the world of the work - may seem incongruous. The device of “Larry Brown” has several intended functions: the first, as aporia, to provide a detail that, paraphrasing George Steiner, would be incommensurable with experience in the world. In performance, “Brown” was introduced with the premise that the audience was already familiar with the composer. In this respect, “Brown” is intended as a device to undermine the reliability of the work’s narrative, introducing a false note as if inviting the audience to read the presentation critically, explicitly problematizing the reception of the work by the audience and turning the critical agency of the performance over to them.

Apart from “Brown,” the text of TKITW drops several initial clues to its (un)reliability: Grove’s definition of “perpetual motion” followed by its immediate contradiction, or the reference to the quotation popularly (though probably inaccurately) attributed to Brecht: “Art is not a mirror ...”

“Brown's” second function is related and perhaps more complex. AHIPT/TKITW is in large part an examination of two Marxist “cultural heroes,”
Paul Robeson and Victor Jara. Musically, AHIPT consciously evokes a historical, Romantic style with the intent to reflect a contemporary response to historical events as myth. The nostalgic use of style also reflects a contemporary perception that the Marxian political struggles described in the work are closed, historical narratives. TKITW's written presentation explicitly problematizes the mythopoetic nature of the 'cultural hero' by examining the posthumous myth of Victor Jara and how the image of his hands, broken during torture, is used by other artists as a metonym for the victims of Augusto Pinochet's junta.² Presenting “Brown” on equal terms with two historical figures places the fictional composer in an indexical relationship to the real artists. The intended embedded question is: how much of the perception of 'cultural heroes' is mythic? Finally, the use of a fictional composer - presented as a recluse or cipher, with no personal information - is intended to sidestep a tendency to situate a critical response in biography and identity. All that is 'known' about “Brown” is inferred, even the fact that his work reflects a left-wing politic. The subjectivity of those inferences is intended to problematize the uncertainty inherent in research as knowledge creation, and, again, the way that personal details around iconic figures can conflate into myth.

George Steiner begins Real Presences by proposing “a society in which all talk about the arts, music, and literature, is prohibited.” (4) This is the introduction to what might be called an investigation of creation and secondarity.

² This is presented with the intended retrospective understanding that “Brown's” music, in the conclusion of "Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas," has performed exactly that action.
In Steiner’s republic, "all serious art, music, and literature is a critical act," (11) and the purest act of 'critical' work consists of the interpretation and performance of an existing text and its array of influence and reification into a new creative work. At the same time, Steiner problematizes “the ethics of ... reception” of art and literature and the possibility for art to contain and filter our relationship to the world:

Are the resources of production, display and reception expended on the arts in a given political structure and economy justifiable ...? Do the identifications with fictions, the inner, tidal motions of pathos and libido which the novel, the film, the painting, the symphony unleash within us somehow immunize us against the humber, less formed, but actual claims of suffering and of need in our surroundings? Does the cry in the tragic play muffle, even blot out, the cry in the street? (144)

Steiner's argument informs the concern with reception and meaning addressed in TKITW, both in the mutability of meaning of an artwork or the use of 'engaged' artwork as a vector for cultural currency for artists, audiences, and states. More generally, Steiner's work has influenced the creation of AHIPT/TKITW in its focus on 'primacy,' granting a sort of permission to state as authorial intention: this work is essentially about Chile in the 1970s (for example) and not a distillation of theories about repetition and memory (which might be an equally accurate description). In addition, in seeking theoretical affinities to underlie my own work, I have attempted to stay as close to practice-based sources as possible.

TKITW contains a lengthy section about the 'materiality' of the piano and the political implications of the work's music problematizing the instrument. This argument draws in part on the writing of Minimalist artist Robert Morris. As a
sculptor, Morris’ early work is noted for its use of industrial materials such as aluminum I-beams in geometrically simple constructions (Untitled, 1967); other works such as Box With the Sound of its Own Making (1961) create a self-referential awareness of their own process of production. While Morris was influenced by the Duchampian readymade, his concepts of materiality are connected to political as well as aesthetic grounds. In “Notes on Sculpture 4: Beyond Objects,” he writes that “To begin with the concrete physicality of matter rather than images allows for a change in the entire profile of three-dimensional art: from particular forms, to ways of ordering, to methods of production and, finally, to perceptual relevance.” (884) Morris’ hierarchy of change includes problematizing the ‘methods of production’ as a step toward reordering the ‘perceptual relevance’ of a work to the audience. The barely-mediated use of industrial materials is a revelatory act, influencing the barely-mediated use of the piano’s mechanism in AHIPT. Morris draws an object such as an I-beam from an unseen role as background or structure and brings it into the scrutiny of the spectator in a radically different role. Such an act of revelation interrogates the etiology of the material itself, incorporating a critique of industrial production and its relationship to society and, by extension, to art.

AHIPT contains gestures that are described in the commentary as “theatrical:” the crossing of the pianists’ hands to an unusually large interval, or the concluding, disintegrating quotation of Víctor Jara’s “Venceremos” with its action-directed affect of distress. The incursions of these gestures into an informal recital-lecture, featuring largely tonal piano music, are intended partly as
Brechtian alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*, hence V-effect): Brecht's preconditions for the V-effect require the mise-en-scene to be “purged of everything 'magical','’ creating the “illusion of watching an ordinary unrehearsed event.” (Brecht 99) By writing to the limits of the piano's mechanical capability (cf. “Que morira ... “ mm. 114-119) the piano itself is subject to an uncanny transformation, akin to the V-effect's transformation of character: “Characters and incidents from ordinary life ... being familiar, strike us as more or less natural. Alienating them helps to make them seem remarkable to us.” (103) That the music composed for the work contains a large amount of tonal material, and that it is almost entirely devoid of 'extended technique,' enables the perceptual shift for the listener.

As a critical meta-musical work, *AHIPTITKITW* is grounded in the discipline of music and uses the discipline as a framework for self-critique and a critique of music in use and reception. The work draws from theory and practice across disciplines; it is also designed in part as an open work, containing elements intended to invoke a critical audience response - its omissions and aporias are as much a method toward that response as its content. My feeling is that the work will continue to develop as new “discoveries” toward “Larry Brown's” “works” and methods “come to light.”
A HAMMER IN PERPETUAL MOTION
A Hammer in Perpetual Motion

For Piano

i.  He must know something but he don’t say nothing (Paul Robeson)
ii. Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas (Victor Jara)

By Larry Brown

Non Copyright
i. He must know something but he don't say nothing (Paul Robeson)
i. He must know something but he don't say nothing (Paul Robeson)
i. He must know something but he don't say nothing (Paul Robeson)
i. He must know something but he don't say nothing (Paul Robeson)

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Repeat measure ad lib – minimum 30 seconds
Diminuendo through repeats to quietest possible sound

accel.
i. He must know something but he don't say nothing (Paul Robeson)

[f] [f]

FREIZE

Repeat measure ad lib. - minimum 10 seconds
Hold pedal through repeats
Diminuendo through repeats to ppp

[j = 60]

Allongando

Crescendo poco a poco

Play M.D. and M.S. as written

(Cross Hands)
Coda Instructions:
The pattern below is to be transposed and played in every octave in ascending order from lowest to highest - duration approx. 4'.
M.S. pitches (square white noteheads) may be indeterminate but should be confined to the set of C, D, E, G, A.
M.D. pitches are to be played as written but may be embellished below the written pitches from the set of Gb, Ab, Bb, Db, Eb.
Begin in the lowest octave as quietly as possible, using U.C. ad lib.
With each rising octave the dynamic is to increase slightly. The highest octaves should be played FF and greater.
Pedal is to be held down for the entire coda.
Upon reaching the highest C on the keyboard stop abruptly. Mvt ii attaca.
ii. Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas (Victor Jara)

Tempo: $= 160$, tenue, energetic

احترم المرمرات إلى الوراء.
لا تمر مرورًا، مرورًا 15 ثانية.
الانغماس.

no damper pedal until indicated

Chord pitches and voicing within the motion of each hand may be altered ad lib.
from measures 20 to 48

hold pedal to m. 36

Repeat measure ad lib. minimum 15 seconds.

Final pedal to m. 48
Que morir cantando las verdades verdaderas (Víctor Jara)
ii. Que morira cantando las veredades verdaderas (Víctor Jara)
ii. Que muriendo cantando las verdades verdaderas (Víctor Jara)
Que mueran cantando las verdades verdaderas (Víctor Jara)
ii. Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas (Víctor Jara)
ii. Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas (Victor Jara)

Highest Octave - Play with fist rubato.

Lowest Octave - Diminuendo to middle.

Hit side of piano with fist.
THE KEYBOARD IS THE WORLD

Political Engagement in the Piano Music of Larry Brown

The chess-board is the world, the pieces are the phenomena of the universe, the rules of the game are what we call the laws of Nature. The player on the other side is hidden from us. We know that his play is always fair, just, and patient. But also we know, to our cost, that he never overlooks a mistake, or makes the smallest allowance for ignorance. To the man who plays well, the highest stakes are paid, with that sort of overflowing generosity with which the strong shows delight in strength. And one who plays ill is checkmated - without haste, but without remorse.


Composer Larry Brown is an enigmatic and reclusive figure in the world of new music. The details of his biography are so scant as to be practically non-existent; all that is known is gleaned from the small handful of works attributed to him. As a composer, he can be considered in the tradition of mavericks such as Charles Ives or Conlon Nancarrow, working apparently in isolation on music that is distinct from the prevailing contemporary practice, both technically and aesthetically.

A Hammer in Perpetual Motion is perhaps Brown's best-known composition. The 25-minute solo piano work is in two movements, each dedicated to a musician associated with a political struggle. The first, “He must
know something but he don’t say nothing (Paul Robeson),” is based on a dialectical opposition between black and white keys. The second, “Que morirá cantando las verdades verdaderas (Víctor Jara)” incorporates music of the Chilean communist singer-composer into a struggle between melody and mechanical dissonance.

Brown’s piano writing exploits the material properties of the instrument, almost entirely without using 'extended technique.' The piano becomes its own problematic; it is made to reveal itself as the means of production of the music, becoming not only the instrument of the music but also its self-conscious framing device, a Brechtian theatre. As a commonplace, accessible instrument the piano often stands in for other instruments, just as in popular reception icons such as Robeson or Jara become symbols for the larger social and political movements of which they are a part. This essay explores Brown’s use of the materiality of the piano and its role as a musical ‘stand-in’, relating that role to the idea of the ‘cultural hero.’

The intention of an artist in creating a political work is subject to readings and misreadings. The act of reading and / or misreading determines the way in which political artwork and the biographies of artists themselves are used, reified, and incorporated into competing agendas. This essay examines in part the

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3 E.g. using ‘preparations’ or playing directly on the strings.
4 In the sense of the artifice of the drama and the apparatus of its production being deliberately obvious to the audience, after Brecht’s “epic theatre.” “‘Epic’ was the general term ... for all those technical features of a Brecht production - the use of a spare stage, white lighting, half curtain, masks, emblematic props, selectively authentic costume, tableaux, and acting style - which contributed to its analytic narrative perspective. If it were to succeed in its political function a performance would gain assent to this perspective, ‘alienating’ its audience from conventional forms of identification and clichéd modes of perception and misunderstanding.” (Brooker 213-214)
biography of Paul Robeson as an individual artist acting against a state, the
history of Chilean socialist Salvador Allende’s government and Víctor Jara's role
as an artist in a revolutionary state, and how the details of these narratives are
reflected in Brown's compositional methods. Finally, this essay explores the
varying usage and readings of political artists and their work to create cultural
currency for audiences, states, and other artists, and demonstrates how the
value of political art as cultural currency may be problematized.

**Perpetual motion (1): The Frame that Frames Itself**

*A Hammer in Perpetual Motion* contains levels of self-conscious circularity
in its nested subjects: the two left-wing, revolutionary artists of its dedications, the
struggles with which they were involved, the creation and role of cultural heroes,
and the creation of political art.

The image of a hammer in motion evokes the iconography of Marxism: a
symbol of labour. It also recalls a popular quotation associated with the early
20th-century avant-garde and attributed to both Bertolt Brecht and Vladimir
Mayakovsky: “Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to
shape it.” Of course, the piano also has a hammer for each of its keys; Larry
Brown's title is both a thematic and descriptive framing of the means of sound-
production of his own work.

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5 These words are widely attributed to Brecht, though apparently rarely with an accompanying
citation. A verse accompanying Mayakovsky's *The Bathhouse* (1930) reads “The theatre is not
a mirror that reflect / but a glass that magnifies.” (Russell 127) The most common formulation
is reproduced here.
While ‘perpetual motion’ is part of the formal vocabulary of classical music, Brown's work does not use 'perpetual motion' in the historical sense. There is constant motion in this music but it is not there to add flourishes or virtuosic gestures to a melody; rather, it is a constant, relentless, mechanical presence. Brown's ‘perpetual motion’ recalls the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's definition of tragedy: Whitehead writes, “the essence of dramatic tragedy is not unhappiness. It resides in the solemnity of the relentless working of things.” In these terms, the basic opposition in “A Hammer in Perpetual Motion” is a tragic one: the opposition between expression and relentless process. Compositionally, the opposition is between folk melody and mechanical, process-based minimalism. Brown casts this opposition as an unequal conflict, and the piano and its operator anatomize the premise of opposition - and eventual oppression - over the narrative arc of the work.

Each of the two movement titles is thematically associated with their namesake and subject. The first, Paul Robeson (1898-1976), is famous for his bass-baritone voice, but during his lifetime he was equally famous for his socialist politics: a strident critic of American racism and a vocal supporter of the Soviet Union, Robeson was outspoken about connecting the struggle of African-Americans to post-colonial liberation movements and Marxist movements around the world. (Chambers 28) The title “He must know something but he don’t say nothing …” is one of the opening lines of the song “Ol’ Man River,” from the 1927 musical Show Boat by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein - a song

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6 See Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* 17 (1948), qtd in Hardin 1244
indelibly identified with Robeson. (9) At the peak of his career, he was the highest-paid concert artist in America, but by the time of his 1956 appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities he was effectively blacklisted. Robeson performed and worked only sporadically from then until his death in 1976. (32)

The second title is from the song “Manifiesto,” by Víctor Jara (1932-1973), which forms the basis for much of Brown's second movement: “Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas” translates literally as “the one who dies singing real truths.” Originally trained as a theatre artist, Jara turned to music to support Salvador Allende's socialist Unidad Popular (Popular Unity) movement, and was the most influential musician in Chile during the short term of Allende's government from 1970 to 1973. Allende’s government was toppled by the U.S.-abetted coup that installed military dictator Augusto Pinochet on a date that has become loaded with historical irony: September 11, 1973. Jara himself was one of thousands imprisoned and tortured in the aftermath of the coup, and was murdered in detention by the Chilean military in the first days of the new regime. (Gonzales, “Jara”)

George Steiner describes art-making as “counter-creation,” an act that is “not mimetic … but radically agonistic. The source is that of loving rage.” (204) Steiner’s words could just as well describe a certain basis for political dissent. Brown’s music turns that “loving rage” on left-wing cultural heroes of the 20th century, on the piano as means of production and staging, and on the mechanisms in which knowledge and meaning are created around art and
politics. Paul Robeson, who refused to 'name names,' was both the speaker and subject of the words “he must know something but he don't say nothing.” Víctor Jara, as a national artist of a progressive and controversial government, murdered for the threat in his message, was the speaker and subject of the words “the one who dies singing real truths.” Brown's titling is in part an enciphered invocation: the oblique, nested references to Jara and Robeson’s art and lives let pass “fellow travellers” who already know the stories contained in the work while remaining cryptic to others. As the first information given to the audience, as words on a programme, the titles also prefigure the work's self-conscious approach to the means of its own production: as this essay will explain, Brown’s approach involves turning the sound of the piano inside out.

The Machine in the Machine

Even before the first note of a piece has been played, the presence of the piano gives us signs of certain musical aspects of the piece: it tells us that the work is connected in some way to the historical European tradition and its use of the Western, tempered scale. But the piano also signifies on things that are external to the music being played. For example, the presence of a grand piano can be seen as an indicator of wealth: not only in the price of the instrument, but also in the space needed to house it. The piano requires infrastructure.

On one hand, the piano is associated with incredible virtuosity, through the compositions of Beethoven, Liszt, or Frederic Rzewski, or the performances of Vladimir Horowitz, Glenn Gould, or Cecil Taylor. Piano skill is culturally connected to specialization, training, and status. On the other hand, the piano is
ubiquitous in our culture: at least some level of training or play at the keyboard is extremely commonplace. The piano is both at the pinnacle of solo instruments and the universal accompanist. It is both elitist and populist. Because the piano is such a commonplace instrument, it's also perpetually standing in for other instruments. As the pianist and critic Andy Hamilton writes,

[It can be argued that] the perception of 'piano' is metaphorical not literal and that the content of perception is culturally mediated ... Keyboard music of the Classical and Romantic eras - from Haydn up to Bartok in fact - which has so shaped our perception of the piano, is so concerned with the projection of a legato sound that it makes us forget that true legato is impossible on the instrument. The gestures of the pianist reinforce that perception ... The sound of the piano is perceived metaphorically, as akin to a string sound, even though, on reflection, listeners recognize that the instrument cannot really produce this sound. This phenomenon is one of the profound mysteries of Western art music. (107-108)

In other words, the way in which we perceive the sound of the piano is often at odds with the way those sounds are actually produced: a hammer strikes a string with a definite attack and a decay which is the property of the vibrating string and the mechanism of the damper and pedals.

However, we are able to hear singing, or the sound of violins, horns, or timpani in the sound of a machine of the early industrial age. To invert Hamilton's argument: there are also mechanical properties of the machine that are habitually filtered out of the perception of the listener - to hear a sustained line in a piano melody is also to un-hear the mechanical attack of each note. The gestures of the pianist, which may add a metaphorical, performative layer to the perception of a flowing line, may also communicate labour, struggle, or awkwardness. These qualities are noise to the signal of 'music' as it is heard: unwanted, even
subversive information. It is these qualities that Brown brings to the foreground. The action of the piece is therefore to change a culturally held perception by revealing the structure that maintains that perception. This is, in itself, a critical act that functions as a metaphor for political action.

**The Segregated Keyboard and the Theory of Everything**

Imagine looking at a piano keyboard for the first time: in "He must know something but he don't say nothing (Paul Robeson)" Brown's pianist performs as if navigating an unknown geography. The basic compositional strategy of the first movement is a simple one: the right hand only plays black keys, and the left hand only plays white keys. Each hand is limited to one of two pentatonic scales - C major, on the notes C, D, E, G, A, and G flat major, on the notes Gb, Ab, Bb, Dd, Eb. These notes are derived from Paul Robeson's attempts to create a universal theory of music based on pentatonic scales, as this essay will explain further: this is the foundational reference to Robeson in the movement and the framing device for telling his story through the music.

The movement is structured as a series of episodes, as repeated iterations of similar material, without the typical thematic development of classical music. Rather, the movement's fragmentary references to Robeson's music are played against a background of noise – against information that is extraneous to the 'content' or 'message' of the communication. Through a formalized use of

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7 Brown’s use of pedaling is connected to this concept: where the composer has specified the use of pedal, it is generally for extended durations – sometimes several minutes – specifically to add noise that obscures the pitch content or rhythmic attack of individual notes, essentially turning a multiplicity of individual notes into a homogenous field.
Robeson's pentatonic theory, Brown's music demonstrates the oppositions that are functionally basic to the piano keyboard: the divisions between black and white, right and left, high and low.

The concept of perpetual motion informs another dichotomy in the first movement. The first six measures of the piece alternate between rapid motion and stasis in cycles of rhythmic diminution and augmentation and the expansion and contraction of a range of pitches; these cycles are repeated and extended throughout the piece. The dramatic arc of the movement comes from the compulsion toward motion: Brown's perpetual motion is immanent; in the words of the poet Langston Hughes, “a dream deferred.” The composer's initial use of rapid gestures and pauses is sleight of hand, perceptually distracting the listener from the basic problematic of the work: the opposition between black and white.

Brown uncouples the pianist's hands from the symmetrical figuration that begins the movement with an extended chorale section at m. 50. Here the first recognizable quotations from Robeson's repertoire emerge: this section appears to be based on two songs that Robeson performed and recorded; the spiritual “Down By the Riverside” and the song “Going Home,” derived from the slow movement of Anton Dvořák's 9th symphony, “From the New World.” The chorale is derived from alternating fragments of the spiritual and Dvořák's melody. In the next section, at m. 69, the opposition between rapid motion and chorale is then collapsed in time and split between right and left hands. This section also

provides the first clear outline of the two pentatonic scales that are the pitch sources of the movement.

As Robeson's career in the 1950s began to collapse under the weight of American anti-Communist sentiment, he turned with obsessive attention to music theory. Robeson believed that the pentatonic scale was a universal constant in music of the world and the key to unlocking a universal music theory. The critical consensus is that Robeson's theories were metaphorical rather than scholarly: biographer Martin Duberman writes, “The universality of the pentatonic scale ... in folk music around the world is a “discovery” as indisputable as it is unoriginal.” Moreover, the obsession with which Robeson pursued these ideas is believed to be a sign of his imminent struggle with depression and bipolar disorder. (438)

Paul Robeson Jr. describes his father's theoretical explorations in more detail, as related during a period in March 1956 bookended by two events that must have been significant for Robeson. The first of these was political: Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin. The second event was personal and artistic: the cancellation of a concert tour.

He explained that there were two pentatonic scales on the piano - one on the black keys beginning on F-sharp⁹ and the second beginning on C on the white keys ... indicating how the diatonic scale is interwoven with the two pentatonic scales. His demonstrations on the piano accompanied his explanation.

After a while, I asked what had spurred him to study music theory so extensively. He replied that the approach he was working on

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⁹ In the score, Brown has written the F# pentatonic scale in an enharmonic respelling as Gb. This is most likely to avoid duplication of written pitches between the two hands in order to make the music easier for a performer to read. We may infer from this that Brown prioritizes practicalities over a dogmatic adherence to theory.
constituted a general theory of music that linked classical Western harmony to the universal pentatonic scales of folk music. He was intent on proving this connection in classical theoretical terms...

In response to the cancellation of his Canadian tour, Paul intensified his study of the pentatonic folk-music scale. His preoccupation was intense to the point of obsession. While there was considerable musical evidence to support his ideas, it became apparent that proving his theory to skeptics had become a means of self-validation. Over the next few weeks he tried out his theoretical ideas on anybody who would listen. Composers Marc Blitzstein and Herbert Haufrecht heard him out politely and concluded he needed psychiatric help. (247-248)

Robeson’s idea may be considered formally incomplete as music theory, but its attempt to address “folk” music and European “classical” music on equal terms is a functional metaphor for social equality, erasing the division between European and world identities. Robeson had always courted a universal audience, preferring to work internationally and interculturally against the contemporary emphasis on autonomous African-American art. (Chambers 10) By 1956 Robeson’s politics had cost him a large part of his audience, his freedom of movement, and his health. The turmoil within his idealized Soviet Union – this was also the year of the suppressed Hungarian uprising - surely must have cast doubt on the worth of his own sacrifices. If the tide of public opinion could not be turned by speeches about justice and solidarity, or the affective power of performance in the service of that agenda, what was left? Perhaps Robeson reached for an indisputable, unoriginal aspect of the medium itself as an argument in favour of musical equality, metonymic to racial and social equality.

Brown has used Robeson’s theory as the framing device of a work dedicated to the singer. While Robeson may have conceived of the relation of
pentatonic scales as social metaphor for solidarity, Brown has presented a rendering of the theory itself. By limiting the pitch set of the music to two five-note scales, the attention of a listener is shifted toward gesture and formal development: the dramatic tension in the first movement comes from gradual revelation of the compositional method. Each hand plays material that is gesturally connected but harmonically dissonant. The combination of two scales initially produces bitonal harmonies (e.g., m. 12); as the motion of the piece becomes more constant, the discrete materials of each hand overlap to outline a chromatic scale (mm. 86-91). This is a perceptible change for the listener that does not require knowledge of Robeson’s theory to realize that a process of change is taking place. The initial premise of the method – the segregation of the keyboard – is restated with a unique material that occurs just before the concluding section, effectively, the dramatic climax of the piece before a coda. At m. 111 there is a static chordal repetition and crescendo to ff that collapses into an allargando run of chords in contrary motion, outlining the two pentatonic scales of the movement. In this gesture, the pianist's hands are required to cross over each other, ending five octaves apart: a performance note in the score reads, “PLAY M.D. [right hand] AND M.S. [left hand] AS WRITTEN.” The instruction clearly directs the pianist to make a physically difficult gesture. The gesture is inevitably theatrical and functions as the ultimate revelation of the binary between black and white keys that is the primary method of the movement. In using Robeson’s theory in a perverse way, emphasizing separation over unity, or contrary way, Brown has created a gesture that is
perhaps understandable by any audience member, without the benefit of pitch recognition or music theory: a theatrical statement of conflict, illustrating the metaphorical opposition of the piece, using the material properties of the piano and the pianist.

**He must know something but he don’t say nothing**

Larry Brown’s critical approach to the materiality of the piano functions as political metaphor: as action that dispels a cultural perception to reveal a controlling structure. The title of the first movement is a nested reference to Paul Robeson that can be read as analogous to Brown’s compositional approach, conflating Robeson’s transformation of Kern and Hammerstein’s “Ol’ Man River” from dirge to defiant protest song with his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

In *Show Boat*, “Ol’ Man River” is sung by Joe, a character who serves as the chorus of the play: the song contrasts the hardships of African-Americans working on the Mississippi river to the river itself which implacably “keeps rolling along.” Robeson first sang Joe in 1928, repeating the role for several productions and James Whale’s 1936 Universal film, and the song became a signature piece during his career. Robeson refused to sing the written word “nigger” after his first production, and continually made lyrical alterations in his own recitals to turn a fatalistic dirge into a song of defiance: the first documented example is from a 1937 benefit for Republican Spain, where he altered the concluding lines from “I’m tired of livin’ and scared of dyin’” to “I must keep fightin’ until I’m dyin’” to tremendous applause. (Duberman 214)
Robeson had been under surveillance by the FBI since 1941 for his visits to the U.S.S.R. and contacts with American communists. (Chambers 27) His passport had been confiscated in 1950, leading indirectly to one of his most famous performances two years later at Vancouver’s Peace Arch border crossing, singing from the American side of the border to a crowd on both sides of the line. (32) On June 12, 1956, Robeson was summoned to Washington to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Robeson held a law degree and had a performer’s stage presence; Duberman writes that he “performed with élan.” (440) When initially asked the ritual question whether he was a member of the Communist party, Robeson replied, “What is the Communist party? As far as I know it is a legal party …“ Asked a second time, he responded, “Would you like to come to the ballot box when I vote and take out the ballot and see?” (440) Robeson’s strategy was shared by other “hostile witnesses” to the Committee, questioning the legality and constitutionality of the basic premise of the hearings. (Navasky 82)

Though “Ol' Man River” furnishes the title for the song, it is only referenced at the movement’s conclusion, where Brown uses the contour of the song to shape a cluster-based, percussive crescendo that covers the entire range of the keyboard, from its lowest to highest notes. This material, which takes up almost four minutes of the movement’s 12-minute duration, begins ppp with almost no individual pitches discernible; as well, the pedal is held down for the entire section, further obscuring the attack of individual notes. It’s only in the middle register of the piano at a dynamic of mf, approximately two minutes into
the gesture that the outline of the song begins to be perceptible. As the tremolo increases in volume and rises into the highest octaves of the keyboard, the perception of pitch becomes unfocused again, dissipating into a percussive cluster where the written pitches become obscured by the sound of the keyboard action. The movement concludes abruptly, with the suggestion that the music continues beyond the edge of the keyboard.

Brown’s treatment of “Ol’ Man River” in this section enfolds multiple meanings connected to Robeson’s story and to the processes of political action. “Ol’ Man River” became a refrain in Robeson’s musical life that was adapted to his politic. Nevertheless, it remains a problematic text. Brown evokes this dichotomy by having the song recur constantly and by reducing it to a rhythmic motive or percussive gesture with variable pitches. By these two techniques, it remains the implacable framing device for this section of the music.

These concluding gestures are an effective example of Brown’s politicized approach to problematizing the materiality of the piano. Here, the 'musical' content of the work is subaltern to properties of the instrument itself as well as to the player’s interaction with the instrument, composing physical stresses that provide tension in live performance. It's unusual for a pianist to cross right and left hands as far as m. 114 requires, or to maintain a single, aggressive gesture for the duration taken up by the movement's concluding section. Both of these examples are also physically difficult to execute. While Hamilton writes that the gestures of a pianist in performance may reinforce the metaphorical perception of ‘impossible legato,’ Brown calls for the pianist to do exactly the opposite: the
perception the composer reinforces is that of a person performing uncanny actions to operate a strange machine. Of course, this problematic is also addressed in the sound of the music itself: Brown's compositional strategies are based in the material properties of the instrument as artifact, and the movement's use of “Ol’ Man River” in its conclusion exemplifies Brown's metaphorical relation of musical material to its mechanical frame.

**As Time Goes By**

Paul Robeson was one of many artists and public figures to be harassed by the American government, attacked in the media, or blacklisted by employers during the anti-Communist “Red Scare” of the 1940s and 1950s. Their identities and stories are well documented elsewhere, exactly because they had public lives - whereas the stories of, for example, every set carpenter or electrician whose career was finished by the Red Scare remain private. Outside of the cultural industry, the stories of every shop steward, tradesperson, or clerk who lost a job because of rumour, gossip, or harassment also remain, essentially, private. Those stories are significant to the people to whom they had a personal connection - in the words of singer-activist Phil Ochs, to “a small circle of friends”\(^\text{10}\) - but not to the general public.

At the same time, Robeson’s story – like those of the Hollywood Ten or other public figures – may have had value simply out of being public and iconic: to the ‘private’ victims of the Hollywood blacklist, Robeson’s commitment in the

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face of repression may have provided a sense of solidarity and validation. By the late 1940s, he had announced publicly that he would only perform on behalf of causes that he believed in: (Chambers 28) Robeson brought an added dimension of action to his artistic practice by explicitly connecting his repertoire, choice of venues, and public representation to a political agenda.

The choice of *action* - in Hannah Arendt’s definition as the process by which a social politic is created through collective discourse (179) - is based on public disclosure of the individual; this in turn entails vulnerability if the mode of action goes against what is socially normative. That vulnerability may be literal, as when an artist directly experiences state repression or violence, but to make an artwork public is also to make it vulnerable to the subjectivity of meaning and memory.

It may be hard to conceive, after the fact, that in the first half of the 20th century the Left occupied a greater place in the political culture of the United States and Europe than it does now – at least, a greater one than its American marginality after the *de facto* criminalization of the Left during the Red Scare. Along with that criminalization followed an institutional prejudice against trade unions.\(^\text{11}\) This war on trade unions has continued to the present; as evidenced by the state of Wisconsin’s passing of a bill to abolish public sector collective bargaining. (Bauer) For that matter, it may be hard to conceive, for those born

\[^{11}\text{This last may be one of the reasons that American youth and student protests failed to ignite the larger population in 1968, while student protests in France the same year touched off a powder keg: “A one-day general strike called by the Communist Party trade-union bureaucracy (the pretext was a protest against police brutality, the motive a wage increase) became an open-ended general wildcat strike of ten million people” that forced the De Gaulle government to flee Paris. (Marcus 428)\]
after the events, of the experience of living in nuclear detente, or that there was a time when women could not vote, or that there was a time when, not quite a hundred years ago, an African-American university student was a pioneer and only one generation removed from slavery.

**Interlude: The Visible Invisible Hand**

As the U.S. and Soviet Union waged cold war over the second half of the century, post-colonial, post-oligarchic, and pro-independence movements around the world worked to a version of the ideology that Robeson and his political contemporaries idealized: a movement, at least in theory, toward electoral democratic socialism. A very brief overview of Salvador Allende’s Marxist Unidad Popular coalition and Chile’s conflict with U.S. government and corporate interests is provided here to contextualize the motivic illustration of conflict and dissonance in the second movement of *A Hammer in Perpetual Motion*.

Latin American states have a long – and continuing – history of resource-based export economies. Even though Chile gained independence in the early 19th century, the country and its neighbours remained in an economic relationship to foreign powers that preserved the mechanisms of colonialism. (Qureshi 19) Castro’s 1959 Cuban revolution shook both foreign investors and Washington policy-makers: historian Lubna Qureshi writes that Richard Nixon - as vice-president, then as president - bore an almost personal grudge at the rise of Marxism in Latin America. “What probably intensified [Nixon’s] paranoia about Allende’s Unidad Popular and other Latin American nationalist movements was the most successful one of all, Castro’s Cuban experiment. If Cuba could
relinquish its status as a U.S. client, what would stop her sister states from doing the same?" (11)

Chile’s was not the first or last government change in Latin America abetted by Washington. A lifelong socialist, Salvador Allende was further radicalized by a 1954 CIA-supported coup in Guatemala; by the time of his candidacy in the 1958 presidential election he led the Popular Action Front (FRAP) coalition of Socialist and Communist parties. (Qureshi 23) Allende and FRAP lost the 1958 campaign, as they did in 1964, by which time the U.S. Johnson administration had put a vast amount of money into supporting the centrist Christian Democrats – estimated at $3 million - and the CIA had sponsored an anti-communist propaganda campaign connecting Allende to Communist atrocities in the USSR and Cuba. (33)

As Allende’s coalition - recast as Unidad Popular - gained momentum into the 1970 election, so did the efforts of the American government and private sector to undermine the movement. Allende won a slim majority in September 1970; at 36.3 per cent of the popular vote, he was just over one percent ahead of the conservative National Party's candidate. In the interim period before the presidential inauguration, the CEOs of U.S.-based multinational corporations with Chilean holdings – including International Telephone and Telegraph and PepsiCo – lobbied Nixon to intervene against Allende’s succession. (Cockcroft 84, Qureshi 51)

This was the situation of Unidad Popular at the end of 1970: a minority government with a superpower as an enemy, with an agenda of social and
economic justice in a state struggling out of a colonial economy. Allende voiced a public concern to avoid the violence and repression of the Soviet and Cuban revolutions, telling an interviewer in 1971:

We make the claim, and I say this in all modesty, that we are creating a different way and demonstrating that it is possible to make the fundamental changes on which the road to revolution is built. We have said that we are going to create a democratic, national, revolutionary and popular government, which will open the road to socialism because socialism cannot be imposed by decree.\(^{12}\) (Qureshi 72)

\(\textit{Unidad Popular}\) relied on artists to spread its message and build solidarity for its agenda. Daniel Party writes, “Allende's socialist program actively utilized music to promote its message ... Musicians of the Chilean political song movement \textit{Nueva Cancion}\) such as Víctor Jara, Angel and Isabel Parra, and groups like Inti-Illimani and Quilapayun became ambassadors of Allende's political ideals.” (Party 73) At Allende’s inauguration, the new president stood under a banner that read: You can’t have a revolution without songs. (Chambers 155)

\textbf{You Can’t Have a Revolution Without Songs}

The second movement of \textit{A Hammer in Perpetual Motion} brings a contrast in method to the work. Whereas where the first movement, inspired by Robeson's story and his incomplete system of music theory, is process-based and theoretical, proceeding from concept to organized sound, “Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas (Víctor Jara)” is traditional, even Romantic in its approach to the subject matter; essentially a tone poem that encompasses the

history of Chile from colonialism through the end of the Allende era, told through variations on Jara's music.

A key to the shift in Brown’s method in the two movements may lie in the relationship of their respective referent artists to the state: Robeson, rebelling against state oppression, struggled to make his message heard, while Jara, as cultural ambassador of an embattled revolutionary government, was supported in his message in the face of opposition that eventually silenced the music. The most important difference in Brown’s method may be a conceptual one, drawn from the biographical: “He must know something but he don’t say nothing (Paul Robeson)” is built on a theory – inchoate and unpublished - whereas “Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas (Víctor Jara)” is based on “Manifiesto” and “Venceremos,” from Jara’s existing work. The tragedy of both artists is, in Whitehead’s words, based on the “relentless working of things.” In Robeson’s case the tragedy is in what failed to happen; in Jara’s, that a political achievement was destroyed and overwritten by history.

The second movement begins attaca from the first, immediately following the rising clusters that stop abruptly at the highest extreme of the keyboard. “Que morira ...” begins with a related gesture, an A-minor ostinato that is introduced pp and then expanded in dynamic and range to the outer extremes of the keyboard, playing the highest and lowest notes on the piano at a ff dynamic. The effect is as if the conclusion of “He must know something ... “ has circumnavigated the piano and is re-entering from the bottom register.
The second movement’s opening gesture of eighth-note figuration is continued for almost the entire piece; as a literal treatment of 'perpetual motion,' Brown emphasizes the “relentless working” of the steady rhythm in contrast to aesthetically conventional expressive, melodic material. The relentless rhythm is initially played against a folk-inspired material in the highest octave that references aspects of traditional Andean music in its diatonic, major tonality and implied three-against-two cross-rhythm (m. 7), presenting a metaphorical opposition between a 'national' material and an implacable, mechanical, material force.

In a kind of retrograde inversion of the conclusion of the first movement, Brown brings these elements together in a long, decrescendo section of contrary motion, maintaining the rhythmic figuration of the material while blurring the initial diatonic harmony (Brown has notated an octatonic descending scale in the right hand and chromatic clusters in the left, though a performance instruction allows the performer to alter pitches ad lib.); this is another section where Brown specifies pedal to be held for the length of the entire gesture. At m. 60, Brown introduces a melody that is a collage of phrases from Jara’s “Manifiesto,” played against a dissonant row of seconds, thirds, and fifths; the first full instance of the row occurs descending from A in m. 70. These two materials are used motivically throughout the movement, representing Unidad Popular as a “heroic” theme and its secondary material associated with “opposition.”

Brown introduces the composite Jara melody in F minor but immediately obscures the tonal centre through a series of modulations and deceptive
cadences, (mm. 65-) alternating between lyrical and percussive, martial textures (m. 76). Brown cycles between these textures in increasingly rapid succession through mm. 81-95, giving the dissonant row more prominence and developing into an explosive restatement of the “Andean” theme as an aggressive, rhythmic string of sixteenth-note clusters (m. 97). As with the ending of the first movement, Brown uses an extreme register and extremes in dynamics to foreground the mechanical sounds of the piano. This is another instance of the music problematizing its instrument, examining the framing of the narrative of the music and its means of production as the sounds of the piano action begin to overshadow the pitch content of the music. The texture Brown uses between mm.114-119 is extraordinarily aggressive, evoking the sounds of warfare: automatic fire, helicopter engines, marching feet.

The first 119 measures of “Que morira ...” function as an overture that establishes the themes for the rest of the music - both musical and narrative. This first section can be read as a capsule history of colonialism in Chile from the first European contact to the initial struggle for independence and the growth of nativism and economic nationalism in the mid-20th-century, enacting the dialogue and conflict of the history up to that point. As Qureshi has described, Chile and other Latin American countries remained subject to economic colonialism after gaining independence, giving popular legitimacy to Marxist factions and spurring conflicts in the region up to the present day: Brown enacts this cyclic recurrence by expanding on this initial, conflictual material in the main body of the work, from mm. 120-327.
All of the melodic material in this first section is constructed of fragments of “Manifiesto,” distorted and out of sequence, as if the music were always present but unready and inchoate; waiting for the right moment. With the concluding gestures of the section at mm. 112-119, Brown uses an aggressive, tense material to turn the attention of the audience to the music’s apparatus of production, revealing the limits of what can be said with the tool at hand, and perhaps even suggesting that the narrative of this music is limited by its medium, and that the narrative is to be questioned: the work itself becomes self-critical by revealing its method.

**Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas**

At the time of his death, Víctor Jara was the most celebrated creator of *Nueva Cancion* in Chile. *Nueva Cancion* is considered to have originated in Chile with songwriter and folklorist Violetta Parra, who established the genre as not only the study and performance of traditional material, but the continuation of that tradition with original songs. (Gonzales, “Parra”)

*Nueva Cancion* is a politicized folk music, but its artists worked in a different way from their American contemporaries. For example, Phil Ochs or the early Bob Dylan wrote songs that were often ‘ripped from the headlines’ and could be didactic or satirical, as in Dylan's “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” or Och's “Outside Of A Small Circle of Friends.” By contrast, *Nueva Cancion* focused on personal, everyday narratives that reflected the conditions and concerns of working-class life. (Fairley)
Working-class life was something Jara could write about well because his own life had crossed so many class lines in contemporary Chilean society. He had come from a poverty-stricken rural family and lost his parents by his early teens; the local church enrolled the orphan in a seminary. At sixteen he ran away and spent two years in the military. As a young adult, he was drawn to theatre. Though he hadn't finished high school, he passed the entrance audition for the University of Santiago's theatre school. By the mid-Sixties, he had become a theatre instructor at Santiago's Technical University and one of Chile's most distinguished directors. It was only as an established artist that he turned his focus to music, with the purpose of supporting Allende and Unidad Popular: among many songs on the themes of labour and social justice, Jara composed Unidad Popular's party anthem, “Venceremos” – “We will win.” (Chavkin 220-221) After Allende took office in 1970, Jara organized and taught music and theatre groups for Chile’s trade unions. (224) Jara's own experience was emblematic of the promise of Unidad Popular, with its agenda of social justice and economic justice. His history made him an ideal ambassador for Allende's movement. When the military coup happened in September 1973, he became a target. (220-221)

On September 11, Jara was on the campus of the Technical University when the military seized control of the city. The campus was attacked by soldiers and tanks. Early the next morning, Jara was one of 600 students and teachers taken to the Estadio Chile sports stadium. Eyewitness accounts collected by Joan Jara say that Víctor was recognized at the stadium and immediately
beaten; he was isolated with other 'important' prisoners and singled out for torture. His ribs and the bones of his hands were broken: some accounts say that the torturers taunted him to play his guitar with broken hands. Other eyewitnesses say that in the middle of a public beating, an officer screamed at Jara, “Sing now, if you can, you bastard!” Jara responded by singing “Venceremos.” On the morning of September 16, Jara’s body, along with five others, were found beside a railway line outside the stadium; all had been machine-gunned to death. (Jara 33-36)

Brown begins introducing “Manifiesto” into the movement at m. 129, repeating its B natural-minor introduction in several registers and reintroducing the “opposition” secondary theme row at m. 151 on a high F#, descending and crossing over the melodic line of Jara's song. The development of this section temporally collapses the material juxtaposition of the overture; rather than alternating between materials, Brown has them appear simultaneously, with the “opposition” row beginning on the same notes as the pitches of 'Manifiesto' and descending through the ambit of the melody between mm. 167-181.

At m. 183, Brown presents a full statement of the verse-chorus form of the Jara song; it appears only once in the piece. “Manifiesto” is stated as a neo-Romantic piano anthem reminiscent of, for example, a Chopin ballade (e.g. Op. 47), though with the ‘opposition’ material continuing to wind through the accompaniment textures.

The work concludes with an extended section similar to the ending of the first movement: the music pauses on a high tremolo and Brown introduces a
fragmented collage of Jara’s “Venceremos,” the Unidad Popular anthem. Each successive phrase of “Venceremos” is transposed up a fourth, while the tremolo material descends on indeterminate, clustered pitches: the material therefore comprises another example of oppositional themes in contrary motion. These two themes overlap on the keyboard at the chorus of “Venceremos,” blurring the pitch content of the music. From this point on, the contour of “Venceremos” is outlined by indeterminate clusters, played rubato, as the tune moves up to the highest register of the keyboard, in a brutally direct evocation of Jara’s broken hands and final days of torture; the piano serves as both the personification of Jara’s torture and the instrument of its torture. As with the conclusion of “He Must Know Something ...,” Brown continues the rising motion of the “Venceremos” to the edge of the keyboard and, in this case, beyond: in the only use of extended technique in the work, the music concludes with the pianist striking the case of the piano with a fist. This is done with the pedal down, so that the last sound in A Hammer in Perpetual Motion is the barely perceptible resonance of a blow.

Re(s)training the Refrain

The participation of Jara and other Nueva Cancion artists in Unidad Popular’s political agenda was almost certainly based on a belief in the power of music to effect social change. Musicians and critics alike embrace that belief. Journalist Samuel Chavkin describes the potential power in Jara's music as follows:

In many ways Jara ... [was] more of a threat to the anti-Allende forces than the oratory of its political opponents or even armed resisters. A speech can rouse hundreds and thousands - it can
become central in the national political debate. But with time it becomes an echo. When published, it becomes a document. A machine gun is as good as its supply of bullets. Without ammunition, it is useless, dead. But a song that catches fire or a poem that takes wing can stir people indefinitely. Music and verse can become part of a continuing present. They can be hummed or recited in the privacy of one's home or among friends. And the images they bring to life each time can inspire and reinforce personal dedication. In effect, even posthumously, Jara and Neruda were able to reach over the heads of the Junta generals and catapult their message of defiance to those chafing under the repression of the Pinochet regime. (213)

Chavkin's description contains an important truth about the power of music to inspire and motivate. Belief in that power is based on the assumption that the intended meaning of an artwork will be clear in its reception, and that there will be solidarity between artist and audience.

A conservative estimate puts the number of Chileans murdered or disappeared under the Pinochet regime at 3000. The number of people detained and tortured may be ten times that. (Chavkin 10) Just as the arc of Jara's life made him an icon of the promise of Unidad Popular, the circumstances of his death make him a public symbol of the repression of the dictatorship and its casualties. Jara's first public memorial was held 36 years after his death in 2009 and attended by thousands including then-president Michele Bachelet, herself a former political prisoner under the Pinochet regime. (Long)

For Chileans, Jara may be a symbol of solidarity and reconciliation; he is almost certainly the only victim of Pinochet's junta to be memorialized by Western songwriters and rock stars. What happens when the representation of
Victor Jara as political artist, revolutionary, and martyr is disseminated beyond its original context?

Arlo Guthrie and Adrian Mitchell’s “Victor Jara” is a tribute to the singer that, like Brown’s second movement, uses Jara’s broken hands as a central image. Details from Jara’s biography are alternated with the chorus “His hands were gentle, his hands were strong;” the last stanza’s opening line of “They broke the bones of both his hands” provides a retrospective understanding of dramatic tension. (Guthrie & Mitchell) Jara’s hands signify on the signifier of the man who, in turn, signifies on the suffering of an entire nation under a dictatorship.

“Washington Bullets” from the Clash’s 1980 album Sandinista! contains one verse on Chile in a catalogue of American interventions: “As every cell in Chile will tell / The cries of the tortured men / Remember Allende and the days before / before the army came / Please remember Victor Jara / In the Santiago stadium … “ (Mellor et al.) In this case, there is only the appeal to “remember” events outside of the frame of the artwork. The danger is of “Chile” becoming a signifier of political affiliation and of identity for artists and audience, separated from its original context and erasing the details of its original narrative.

Note that this possibility exists in the use and signification of a political narrative by artists who support the politic. There are also stories that reveal how politically engaged artworks can be recuperated and repurposed in direct opposition to the intention of the artist. One such story is about an American man from a small town in decline. As a young man, he gets in trouble with the law, and is given the choice of going to jail or joining the army; he chooses the army.
This takes place in 1967, and he’s sent to Vietnam. His experience there is that of an entire generation of working-class American men. He experiences, and perpetrates, terrible violence, but also has experiences that make him question his role: for example, his best friend and a Vietnamese woman fall in love. He comes home to the recession of the 1970s and can't find work; his hometown begins to seem like a prison. And there had been a refrain running through his story that becomes a call for values, identity, and a place in the world that have now lost their meaning. The refrain of that story is “Born in the U.S.A.,” and the story is a populist, archetypal fiction created by Bruce Springsteen. (Springsteen) While it may seem unlikely that a protest song about the alienation of Vietnam veterans could be appropriated by a ruling conservative government as a patriotic anthem, that is exactly what happened in the life of the song.

During the fall of the 1984 U.S. election campaign, the late conservative columnist George F. Will wrote the following about a Springsteen concert:

I have not got a clue about Springsteen's politics, if any, but flags get waved at his concerts while he sings songs about hard times. He is no whiner, and the recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful affirmation: "Born in the U.S.A.!” (A19)

On September 19 - quite likely at Will's suggestion - Reagan made a campaign speech in Hammonton, NJ in which, according to a New York Times' Francis X. Clines, he “hailed the affluent younger voter, praising the "message of hope" in the rock lyrics of "New Jersey's own Bruce Springsteen." Clines added that “The President's press office could not immediately say what Springsteen tune might be Mr. Reagan's favourite.” (B20) Music critic Greil Marcus, who had followed
Springsteen's career from its beginning, later told *Time*, “Clearly the key to the enormous explosion of Bruce's popularity is the misunderstanding of that song. He is a tribute to the fact that people hear what they want.” (Cocks 70)

In *Lipstick Traces*, Marcus traces a 'secret history' of politicized art and counterculture from Dada through Situationism to the first wave of punk in 1977. Marcus writes explicitly of performance as a “laboratory for change,” a space in which to articulate a social critique. However, bringing the critique into the space of artistic performance also opens the possibility of containing the critique:

“I suppose I am drawn to the performing space because ... as a laboratory of change it seems as good as any other; because I have found out that what is said there is sometimes said with more clarity and more mystery than what is said anywhere else; because I know that one can leave a nightclub with the feeling that nothing can ever be the same. But as I move off to a long look at those things that were, for a short time now long past, brought to bear in a few performances, performances played out on small stages or in the pages of obscure publications, it is worth attending to a version of the performing space as a place where revolution goes to die, where its spirit, to use a favourite situationist word, is “recuperated”: where the shout of what should be is absorbed into the spectacle of what is, where the impossible demand is brought back into the fold of expectation and result, where the disease of collective vehemence is cured; where “revolution” means a moment in which people say no, enter into festival, are then in one way or another pushed out of history, their moment dropped down into a footnote, or left to float free as an anarchist myth.” 151

To bring a political idea into an artwork is to risk containing the idea unless that work is part of a greater context of action.13 The action may be as individual and subjective as an act of memory – hence the Clash’s call to “remember Allende.” As a signifier of identity, “Chile” becomes the means for assigning cultural

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currency to the political artist and to the artist’s audience – the “fellow travellers” who can decipher the embedded references of the work. The mutability of meaning renders an artist’s intention vulnerable to other agendas, but can also be used in the service of a critical agenda: Robeson’s alterations to “Ol’ Man River” provide an example. An Adornian critique of “Washington Bullets” might ascribe the collapse of a larger context for the song’s references to the formal qualities of commodified popular song; however, it could also be argued that the Clash’s incommensurability of intention and form is in itself a critical act.

Brown’s treatment of Jara and Robeson as musical and narrative sources cannot be categorized as easily as a tribute in popular song. The first movement is not a musical portrait of Robeson but a conceptual and affective response. The second movement is not an arrangement of “Manifiesto” and “Venceremos,” nor does it meet the classical definition of the variation-based form. A song memorializing Victor Jara in a different style from Jara’s own – such as Guthrie’s – is a secondary narrative of biography. A suite of variations on Robeson’s “greatest hits” would be a secondary narrative of form. Brown’s approach to the source material of A Hammer in Perpetual Motion is more transformative and tangential than these examples. Rather, Brown has signified on the different levels of source material – history, biography, music theory, musical quotation – in ways that are self-conscious and self-critical of the act of signification itself. The result is a critical meta-narrative, an exploration of formal and material affinities between art and political action.
Perpetual Motion (2): Demanding the Impossible

Considered together, the stories of Paul Robeson and Víctor Jara may contain Brown's message about the relationship of the artist to the state. The details of Robeson's life and early career are almost mythic; one speculates that if he hadn't embraced socialism, he might have been a successful American politician. Trained as a lawyer, he was articulate enough to argue his HUAC interrogators to a standstill. As an early civil rights activist, his positions were validated in following decades by a mass movement that achieved at least some of its important goals. In short – his story began by doing all the right things, but this may not matter if the state does not live by its own rules and values. Víctor Jara carried the utopian, socialist dream much farther than Robeson: his revolutionary ideal was realized, and Jara became a national artist in a socialist state.\(^{14}\) The caution in Jara's story may simply be this: even states do not have tenure.

At the risk of invoking what might become the cliché of the current century, I need to tell you what I was doing on September 11, 2001. Or at least, I'll give you one detail: one of the people I talked to that morning was the composer Gordon Mumma, and I remember him saying: “This will make people forget about the other September 11.”

I had to ask him what he meant - and he replied, Chile. From my own interest and self-study - and because the attempts to prosecute and extradite Pinochet had been in the news in the late 90s - I knew a little about that period

\(^{14}\) Perhaps begging the difficult question: What happens when a revolutionary artist becomes a state artist?
and about the history of Allende's government and the coup. I knew the year was 1973, but I certainly didn't know the date: for me, the date was not yet a significant date. And I have to ask myself - did the story of Chile become much more important to me after that day and after that conversation? I would have to say yes. Faced with such an overwhelming and problematic fact as the response to 9/11, what does it mean that there's an 'other;' a story that proves there's an exception to the rule: that “September 11” has more than one meaning? And how is that story used?

What does it mean when an artist invokes the suffering of an other? There is potential power for change in the message of an artist, though we can't take it for granted that the artist can control the message. And does the artist gain cultural capital as the conduit of 'outsider' knowledge, of a 'political,' or 'subversive,' or 'critical' message? We would be naive to think otherwise.

The condition of 'accurate' reception of a political artwork, like the utopian (no-placed) ideal of revolution, is at the heart of the central metaphor of *A Hammer in Perpetual Motion*. Perpetual motion is a physical impossibility, an impossible demand: it is the framing device enfolding all the nested 'impossible' demands of *A Hammer in Perpetual Motion*: those placed on the piano, on the pianist, and contained in the stories of Paul Robeson, Victor Jara, and Chile. The work connects 'perpetual motion' to the 'impossibility' of transcending power structures as anatomized by the relationship between the pianist, the text of the music, and piano as apparatus of production. However, demanding 'impossibilities' must always be the starting point of profound social change, and
this is the broadest metaphor of *A Hammer in Perpetual Motion* - whether that change begins with a material, manifestly political demand, or through the conjuring of a work of art.

**Postscript**

In the interest of clarity: Larry Brown is my creation, and I am the composer of Larry Brown’s music. “Larry Brown” is a pseudonym I have used since the mid-2000s, chosen in part for its resistance to Internet searches. Of the many real musicians named Larry Brown, there is one (1893-1972) connected to Paul Robeson: Larry Brown was Robeson’s collaborator, pianist, arranger, and close friend. I have let this coincidence stand, with no invidious intent, in the spirit of mystery and gentle confusion.
APPENDIX

A Hammer in Perpetual Motion / The Keyboard is the World audio documentation CD

The attached compact disc forms a part of this work. The disc is an audio CD created with Apple iTunes. The disc can be played on an audio CD player, a DVD player, or a computer with a CD/DVD drive.

The disc contains audio documentation of the Jan. 16, 2011 performance of A Hammer in Perpetual Motion / The Keyboard is the World at Simon Fraser University's World Art Centre in the Goldcorp Centre for the Arts.

Track listing
01: AHIPT i. He must know something but he don’t say nothing (10:00)
02: AHIPT ii. Que morira cantando las verdades verdaderas (13:30)
03: TKITW Intro (07:25)
04: TKITW The Piano (10:19)
05: TKITW Paul Robeson (05:11)
06: TKITW As Time Goes By (06:23)
07: TKITW Victor Jara (07:20)
08: TKITW The Artist and the State (08:11)
09: TKITW The Other (04:27)
10: TKITW Larry Brown (04:04)
Total playing time: 72:00
BIBLIOGRAPHY


