

The Rise and Fall of “Indie Classical”: Tracing a Controversial Term in Twenty-First Century New Music

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Abstract

In its inaugural 2007 press release, New York-based New Amsterdam Records announced its mission to “foster a sense of connection among musicians and fans in this ‘indie classical’ scene.” New Amsterdam’s publicity apparatus brought “indie classical” into widespread media circulation, but by 2013 the label had ceased using the term. In the intervening years, the meaning of indie classical had been hotly contested by the community of musicians it was meant to champion. Drawing on more than fifty interviews, archival research, and reception history from traditional publications and new online sources, I recreate the rise and fall of indie classical as it transpired over a decade. Tracing the background of the composers and performers who first labeled themselves as indie classical, unveiling the origins of the term and how it was disseminated, and examining the debates that surrounded it and its subsequent decline reveals how the aesthetic discourse of new music is constructed in the twenty-first century.

In a December 2007 press release, New Amsterdam Records proclaimed a bold mission: “To provide a haven for the young New York composers whose music slips through the cracks between genres.”¹ An upstart record label newly launched by three youthful composers, New Amsterdam proposed to represent “music without walls, from a scene without a name.”² But among the journalists and critics who received this notice, careful readers might have detected a puzzling inconsistency. The release announced the creation of an accompanying website in order to “foster a sense of connection among musicians and fans in this ‘indie classical’ scene.”³ Within a single text, the nascent record label asserted itself as part of a “scene without a name” and then, paradoxically, named this scene. Underlying this contradiction was a question whose effects would be strongly felt for the next decade within this purportedly nameless scene: what exactly is—or was—indie classical?

For close observers of recent American new music, the term “indie classical” carries a set of associations: New York-based composers such as New Amsterdam founder Judd Greenstein and Nico Muhly, music strongly influenced by minimalism and rock, ensembles including Eighth Blackbird and Roomful of Teeth, performances in club venues resembling Manhattan’s (Le) Poisson Rouge, and up-and-coming record labels like New Amsterdam and Bedroom Community. As music critic and consultant Greg Sandow said in an August 2016 interview with the

Many, many thanks to Mark Katz, Andrea Bohlman, Mark Evan Bonds, Tim Carter, Benjamin Piekut, and Nicholas Tochka for reading earlier versions of this article, and to the anonymous readers of the journal for their insightful comments.

¹ Steven Swartz, “New Amsterdam—label launch at J Pub HC,” December 6, 2007. I am grateful to Steven Swartz for providing me with this and seventeen other New Amsterdam press releases.

² Swartz, “New Amsterdam—label launch at J Pub HC.”

³ Swartz, “New Amsterdam—label launch at J Pub HC.”

International New York Times, “Indie classical is a larger phenomenon—it’s ways of doing classical music that are not the old ways. ... Certainly and deliberately it has overtones with indie rock that are homemade, new and out on the edge. It is the response of the younger classical music world.”⁴

But in fact, in the decade before Sandow was interviewed, members of the younger classical music world vociferously disagreed as to what the phenomenon of indie classical represented. Although New Amsterdam first brought “indie classical” into wide circulation in 2007—and subsequently became one of the most prominent new-music record labels in the United States—by 2013 the organization had distanced itself from the phrase; in the intervening years, indie classical had been strongly resisted by participants in the very community that the record label initially sought to describe. And, even as indie classical has continued to be utilized by musicians and critics to elucidate recent trends, it carries its history of resistance alongside. The term has remained unsettled, a source of debate that can be reignited each time it appears in print.

Rather than consider indie classical as a matter of fact—an established micro-genre within the world of contemporary concert music—this article treats it as a matter of concern: the subject of a heated controversy within an emergent new-music scene. I examine the heterogeneous group of composers, performers, publicists, bloggers, journalists, and critics who created the term indie classical, disseminated it online and in mainstream publications, fought vehemently (and whimsically) over its meaning, and ultimately facilitated its abandonment by the music scene it was originally meant to describe. I argue that, rather than being defined as a repertory of works informed by a particular aesthetic, or as a method of music distribution in opposition to the classical music recording industry—its two most commonplace definitions—indie classical is instead best understood as a controversy.

In analyzing indie classical as a disagreement and scrutinizing the frameworks through which it was disputed, this article reveals how a wide swath of actors constructs the aesthetic discourse and public sphere of contemporary music in the United States today.⁵ Both the rise and fall of indie classical were predicated on the pathways through which the phrase traveled and the authority of those who employed it. New Amsterdam’s publicity strategy, the particular nature of its scene, and its lively Internet presence at first guaranteed the success of the term but

⁴ Greg Sandow, quoted in Gianne Brownell Mitic, “Bringing Classical Music to the Club Scene,” *New York Times*, August 23, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/arts/international/bringing-classical-music-to-the-club-scene.html>.

⁵ My approach draws on actor-network theory, a sociological toolkit recently introduced to music studies by Benjamin Piekut and Eric Drott. Drott has utilized actor-network methods in order to study how musical categories are constructed among variegated actors; as he writes, “genre is not so much a *group* as a *grouping* ... something that must be continually produced and reproduced. Genres, in other words, result from acts of assemblage, acts performed by specific agents in specific social and institutional settings. ... their legitimacy depends on how many people recognize them, take them up, and thereby reproduce the specific configuration of texts and contexts that they establish.” Eric Drott, “The End(s) of Genre,” *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 1 (2013): 10. See also Benjamin Piekut, “Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 11, no. 2 (September 2014): 191–215.

consequently led to its decline. The story of indie classical’s semantic drift demonstrates the power of institutions within a contested public online. And, as such, it is a familiar one that resonates historically with Monteverdi’s use of “seconda pratica,” Liszt’s deployment of “Programme-Music,” and numerous other instances in which composers have invented pithy slogans to distinguish themselves in the musical marketplace.⁶

I begin by outlining the background of the group of musicians who would come to define indie classical and their founding of New Amsterdam Records. I uncover the origins of the term indie classical itself, track how it was disseminated via New Amsterdam’s publicity apparatus into the new-music blogging community and mainstream press, and examine pushback against the phrase among musicians. I then focus on the peak usage of the term circa 2012, and follow its rapid decline after encountering strong resistance from composers within the scene. Drawing on fifty-one interviews, unpublished press releases, the complete digital archives of New Amsterdam Records—not previously studied by any scholar—and reception materials including both traditional publications and new online sources, I recreate the rise and fall of indie classical as it transpired over the course of nearly a decade.⁷ I also trace the effects of my own role in adjudicating some of these debates online, addressing tensions that may emerge when scholars participate in public dialogues about their research. The indie classical debates nuance mainstream characterizations of this generation of musicians in the United States today; a January 2016 *New York Times* article, for example, described the “fuzzy warmth of the current all-embracing new-music scene,” one that has “given up on labels and in which different styles coexist.”⁸ In a world supposedly devoid of labels, indie classical unveils the tensions at the heart of naming a community.

Origins

The cohort of musicians that came to describe itself as indie classical first gathered together in 2002, at the inaugural Bang on a Can summer festival for contemporary

⁶ See Claude V. Palisca, “The Artusi–Monteverdi Controversy,” in *The Monteverdi Companion*, ed. Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (London: Faber, 1985), 127–58; Tim Carter, “Artusi, Monteverdi, and the Poetics of Modern Music,” in *Musical Humanism and Its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Claude V. Palisca*, ed. Nancy Kovaleff Baker and Barbara Russano Hanning (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1993), 171–94; and Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷ Between 2014 and 2017, I spoke to the following composers, performers, administrators, publicists, and music critics. In most cases, interviews were conducted in person. I am very grateful to those I interviewed: Timo Andres, Hideaki Aomori, Darcy James Argue, Martin Bresnick, William Brittle, Caleb Burhans, Patrick Burke, Gabriel Cabezas, C. J. Camerieri, Michael Daugherty, Michael Gordon, Jayson Greene, Judd Greenstein, Michael Hammond, Ted Hearne, Clarice Jensen, Gabriel Kahane, Allan Kozinn, David Lang, Travis Laplante, Andrea Lee, David T. Little, Matt Marks, Missy Mazzoli, Matt McBane, Michael Mizrahi, Lisa Moore, Gayle Morgan, Kate Nordstrum, Shara Nova [formerly Worden], Joseph C. Phillips Jr., Todd Reynolds, John Rockwell, Alex Ross, Norman Ryan, Sam Sadigursky, Kenny Savelson, John Schaefer, Steve Schick, Nadia Sirota, Sarah Kirkland Snider, Alex Sopp, John Supko, Steven Swartz, Mark Swed, Julia Wolfe, Jeffrey Young, and Evan Ziporyn.

⁸ Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim, “Composers’ Collectives Offer Creativity and Challenges,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/18/arts/music/composers-collectives-offer-creativity-and-challenges.html>.

music in the Berkshires.⁹ Located at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, the Bang on a Can institute houses composers and performers for several weeks each summer, where they work with David Lang, Michael Gordon, and Julia Wolfe, the founders of the collective.¹⁰ Students at the first festival included composers Greenstein, Missy Mazzoli, Matt McBane, Tristan Perich, and Mark Dancigers, all of whom participated in subsequent New Amsterdam projects. In a 2008 blog post, Greenstein wrote:

The first year's Festival itself really laid the foundation for so many of the current elements of my musical life, both in terms of how I approached music thereafter, and in the people that I met and befriended. ... I think I can speak for most of the people who attended, it was a ridiculously important, perhaps seminal event in our lives.¹¹

The festival brought together musicians who shared like-minded aesthetic concerns, and the organizers encouraged them to collaborate, form ensembles, and build their own institutions.

Following the Bang on a Can institute, Greenstein subsequently attended the master's program in composition at Yale. "Michael [Gordon] said, 'You should go to Yale, study with Martin Bresnick: he'll help you find your voice,'" Greenstein recalled in a 2015 interview. "I remember him specifically saying those words." But Greenstein instead felt dissatisfied with what he perceived to be a conservative atmosphere; he said his Yale experiences felt like "a step backwards in time," a "space where things were pulled into the classical tradition."¹² At Yale, Greenstein and fellow master's student composer Patrick Burke co-founded NOW Ensemble, a chamber quintet with an instrumentation similar to Bang on a Can's All-Stars: flute, clarinet, bass, piano, and electric guitar (played by Dancigers).¹³ Burke cited

⁹ Since an initial 1987 marathon concert in downtown New York, Bang on a Can has expanded into a robust nonprofit that advocates for new music. It presents marathon concerts every year; launched its own All-Stars new-music ensemble in 1992 for national and international tours; started the People's Commissioning Fund, which pools individual donations to fund new compositions; and created its own record label, Cantaloupe Music, in 2001. The collective's co-founders—Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe—serve as artistic directors, and also maintain a six-person staff and an office in downtown Brooklyn. For a history of Bang on a Can, see Julia Wolfe, "Embracing the Clash" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2012).

¹⁰ As a planning document in Bang on a Can's archives shows, the organization had imagined an institute to mentor young musicians at least as early as 1995: "Young composers sometimes need more than just a single performance; they could profit from a program that offers hands-on activities, feedback from established composers, workshops with performers and intense discussions within a community of their peers." "PLAN," THREE-YEAR PLAN_ADVANCEMENT, October 5, 1995, Bang on a Can institutional archives. Printed with permission from Bang on a Can. David Lang describes the origins of the summer festival in his 2012 Yale oral history. See David Lang, interview with Libby Van Cleave, July 19, 2012, Yale Oral History of American Music: Major Figures in American Music: 185 w-y.

¹¹ For websites that are no longer active, I have used the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine to provide links that were stable and accessible at the time of this publication; unfortunately, given the instability of the platform, these links may not remain functional in the long term. Judd Greenstein, "Banging," *Judd Greenstein: Why?* (blog), July 29, 2008, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080921065036/http://www.juddgreenstein.com/why.html#banging2008>.

¹² Greenstein, interview with author, April 26, 2015.

¹³ The All-Stars' instrumentation comprises clarinet, cello, electric guitar, bass, piano, and percussion.

Steve Reich and Musicians and the Philip Glass Ensemble as models, making explicit that NOW’s institutional lineage belonged less to academia than to minimalism.

In November 2005, Greenstein and composers Mazzoli and David T. Little organized Free Speech Zone, a scrappy tour that included concerts at Manhattan’s Knitting Factory, Brooklyn’s Galapagos, and venues in New Haven and Boston. A response to the reelection of President George W. Bush, the tour featured NOW Ensemble and Little’s group, Newspeak, in performances of politically themed music by Greenstein, Little, and Mazzoli. The tour was captured in director Stephen S. Taylor’s documentary *The End of New Music* (2007), in which the musicians explained their frustrations with the new-music world, their desire to communicate to an audience outside its purportedly limited academic purview, and their belief that the traditional concert hall was a stultifying setting: a budding indie classical ethos. Mazzoli described her dismay that she wasn’t “taught practical things about what it means to really be a composer” at school, and questioned what paths were available to composers outside of teaching in academia.¹⁴ Little discussed his longstanding love of 1980s power ballads and that, until recently, he had felt constrained by the new-music world: “I wasn’t *not* being true to myself, but wasn’t letting everything out: I was filtering me, because of what was ‘appropriate’ in certain settings.”¹⁵

By the time that Taylor’s documentary was first screened in New York—and covered by the *New York Times*—Greenstein had already launched New Amsterdam Records.¹⁶ NOW Ensemble sought to record its first album, but lacked an outlet for producing, distributing, and marketing a record. Given his close relationship to Bang on a Can, Greenstein had reached out to Cantaloupe, its in-house label, but they were not interested. He realized that:

No one will release our music, therefore there is a gap in the music world. And if it applies to us, it probably applies to other people. And it turned out that it applied to many people ... it was born of the tangle needs of the people who were involved in its creation.¹⁷

As a subsidiary of NOW Ensemble’s nonprofit structure, New Amsterdam was operational as early as 15 December 2006, when the label’s website first appeared. In February 2007, New Amsterdam released its first album, cellist Jody Redhage’s *All Summer in a Day*.¹⁸

Greenstein had crafted a specific ethos for New Amsterdam, one deeply tied to the perspective that he and his colleagues had developed on the Free Speech Zone

¹⁴ Missy Mazzoli, quoted in Stephen S. Taylor, *The End of New Music* (Brooklyn, NY: American Beat Films, 2007), DVD, 2:02.

¹⁵ David T. Little, quoted in *The End of New Music*, 39:10.

¹⁶ For an article previewing the film, critic Steve Smith interviewed the Free Speech Zone composers about the documentary, foregrounded the political significance of the tour, and described how the musicians attempted to “forcefully reject the standard conventions of concert halls and academia.” Smith, “Rebel Composers on a Rock Tour of Sorts,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/04/arts/music/04end.html>.

¹⁷ Greenstein, interview with author, April 26, 2015.

¹⁸ An alumna of Bang on a Can’s summer institute and freelance musician, Redhage had initiated a commissioning project while attending the Manhattan School of Music, asking thirty of her friends to write works for her voice and cello, which became the basis for the record.

tour, and which he had also worked out publicly on his personal blog.¹⁹ A “music without walls” rhetoric was present in the earliest New Amsterdam materials; in a note accompanying Redhage’s album, Greenstein wrote:

It’s hard to say what kind of music this is. Is it what we might call “new music,” that nebulous term that applies to music that’s written down but doesn’t sound like old classical music? Is it an offshoot of the so-called “freak folk” scene, where a classically trained harpist like Joanna Newsom can become a rock star? Is it something new and different and impossible to pin down?²⁰

Subsequent early releases included albums by composer Andrea Mazzariello, jazz composer and saxophonist Sam Sadigursky, and NOW Ensemble.²¹ Although New Amsterdam had not yet employed a publicist, major voices in the press including *New York Times* critic Steve Smith and *New Yorker* critic Alex Ross were soon aware of the endeavor. In a March 2007 post on his blog *The Rest is Noise*, Ross noted the arrival of the label and connected it to a new scene and generation that embodied “pragmatism—music beyond ideology.”²²

Not long after Greenstein released the label’s first albums, he was joined in his endeavor by composers Sarah Kirkland Snider and William Brittelle. Although Snider played piano and cello in her youth and dabbled in composition, she majored in psychology and sociology in college at Wesleyan; after graduating in 1995, she moved to New York, began pursuing composition seriously, and took classes at Juilliard, Mannes, and New York University. She subsequently attended the master’s program at Yale alongside Greenstein, where they considered each other allies against an academic culture that they felt to be restrictive.²³ Brittelle approached Greenstein at a NOW Ensemble concert in 2007; after studying

¹⁹ See Greenstein, *Judd Greenstein: Why?* (blog), archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070704172734/http://juddgreenstein.com/why.html>. A relatively early adopter in the new-music world, Greenstein posted regularly on his blog between November 2004 and fall 2009; he discussed national politics, chronicled developments in the new-music scene, and critiqued the culture of classical and contemporary music.

²⁰ Greenstein, “Jody Redhage: All Summer in a Day,” New Amsterdam website, January 11, 2007, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071118221945/http://newamsterdamrecords.com:80/jody-redhage.html>.

²¹ Mazzariello’s album *sexy/violent girls/war*, produced under the name Massey, is the only early New Amsterdam album that was not also released when the label re-launched, so it is no longer in the catalog. When the label partnered with Naxos in 2009 and re-released its previous records for international distribution, Redhage decided to remove her album from the catalog and replace it with a new one that she was working on, *of minutiae and memory* (later released in 2011), because she was no longer confident in the quality of the first release. Jody Redhage, interview with author, December 12, 2015.

²² Alex Ross, “The New Pragmatism,” *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), March 18, 2007, http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/03/the_new_pragmat.html.

²³ In a 2017 essay, Snider also addressed how she felt the environment at Yale to be difficult because of her gender, where in her first year she was “the only woman in the department.” Snider, “Candy Floss and Merry-Go-Rounds: Female Composers, Gendered Language, and Emotion,” *NewMusicBox*, May 17, 2017, <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/candy-floss-and-merry-go-rounds-female-composers-gendered-language-and-emotion/>. For further discussion of how Snider’s experiences as a woman composer shaped her aesthetic development and her New Amsterdam albums *Penelope* and *Unremembered*, see Robin, “A Scene Without a Name: Indie Classical and American New Music in the Twenty-First Century” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016), 142–153.

composition in undergraduate at Vanderbilt, Brittelle had moved to New York to attend CUNY’s Graduate Center and work with composer David del Tredici. But he was more attracted to the rock world in the city and dropped out of school to play guitar and sing in bands. After several years working as a rock musician, he blew out his voice, and “decided it was time to try to reconcile all my different musical interests into one sound.”²⁴ The trio met for a long evening of conversation over Thai food in New York City in March 2007, where they suggested ideas for the label and decided to combine their efforts as artistic directors. It was then, Greenstein said, that “New Amsterdam as a true entity was born.”²⁵

“I’m realizing that hierarchy and power are two things that really stifle creativity and don’t belong in the NAR [New Amsterdam Records] world,” Brittelle wrote in an April 2007 “Brainstorm” of concepts for re-launching the label as a partnership. “I really want to remain on a peer to peer level with our artists, I want to have a ‘we’re all in this together’ feeling.”²⁶ The founders had bold plans for the structure of the label and its place in the new-music community, ones that deliberately evoked historical DIY precedents from the world of punk and new wave:

a new record label model, particular to the composer-in-the-21st century situation. let’s be the most artist friendly record label in history. a label that focuses on the clear-cut goal of allowing our artists the freedom to create and develop their ideas (and eventually make a living from doing so), a label that pays our artists as much as possible, and helps fund their projects. kind of an official and formally organized version of the CBGB punk scene (or any other collectively creative scene of the past 200 years).²⁷

The “Brainstorm” also suggested establishing a robust website to act as the scene’s “home base,” with a storefront, blog (“talking about what Alex [Ross] and Steve Smith are talking about”), podcasts, and a community calendar. For its artists, New Amsterdam would provide a web platform, funding support for CD production and distribution, support for tours, and access to in-house staff including a publicist, designer, and mastering engineer. The label would put together showcase concerts in New York and build them into tours once they established a strong national presence.

For publicity, New Amsterdam hired Steven Swartz, an established intermediary in the new-music world. Swartz had studied composition with Morton Feldman at

²⁴ William Brittelle, interview with author, September 5, 2014. See also Steve Smith, “Agonized Return to a Voice and a Vision,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/arts/music/01brittelle.html>.

²⁵ Greenstein, interview with author, April 26, 2015.

²⁶ “BRAINSTORM BRITTELLE,” April 2007, New Amsterdam institutional archives. Printed with permission of New Amsterdam.

²⁷ “BRAINSTORM BRITTELLE,” New Amsterdam institutional archives. In a subsequent document, Brittelle expanded further on this communal mentality: “label should be an organization which creates the opportunity for the artists on the label the room and opportunity to develop their ideas, get their ideas to the public, and make money doing it. a totally non-competitive, non-hierarchical environment. all composers/performers with the same goal. when one artist achieves something, it helps everyone else along. starts in NY, music motivates the NYC base, get all students and our generation of classical composers involved and thinking ‘this is the place to be.’” Brittelle, “loose thoughts,” likely dated April 9, 2007, New Amsterdam institutional archives. Printed with permission of New Amsterdam.

the University of Buffalo and worked as a publicist for the New Music Distribution Service label in the 1980s, subsequently spending sixteen years as director of publicity at the publisher Boosey & Hawkes. After leaving Boosey in 2006, he opened dotdotdotmusic, a boutique firm specializing in publicity for new-music projects; New Amsterdam was his first client.²⁸ In a fall 2007 article for *MUSO Magazine*, Swartz had identified the Free Speech Zone tour composers as a promising generation that epitomized the idea that the “style wars are over.”²⁹ He said that, in comparison to his early career in graduate school—in which “we were all fighting proxy wars for our teachers: you were uptown, you were downtown, you were a neo-Romantic”—Greenstein’s cohort appeared to lack aesthetic baggage.³⁰ Having cultivated connections with the classical world at Boosey, Swartz was a suitable member of the older guard to reintroduce New Amsterdam to the press.

The New Amsterdam directors crafted a new mission statement, which Swartz drew on for a December 2007 press release that announced the “official launch” of the label in January 2008. This re-launch, with the label now under the purview of its three directors, included the reissuing of NOW Ensemble’s debut album and a new record from the band itsnotyouitsme; the redesigned and expanded website; and a concert at the downtown venue Joe’s Pub. The label received significant early press coverage, including an interview with Greenstein and NOW clarinetist Sara Budde on John Schaefer’s WNYC program *Soundcheck*. Swartz attributed the success of the sold-out Joe’s Pub concert to the press campaign, describing *Soundcheck* as “the perfect target for this listenership constituency.”³¹

New Amsterdam continued to obtain notable press coverage in 2008, including a central role in a feature on the NPR program “All Things Considered” and positive write-ups in *New York Times* articles by Smith and Allan Kozinn.³² Perhaps the most significant result of this attention was that it attracted Naxos—the largest distributor of independent classical record labels in the world—to partner with the organization for international physical and online distribution beginning in October 2009.³³ And as the label gained prestige, New Amsterdam found itself

²⁸ Since 2007, dotdotdotmusic has expanded to a two-person firm, with Swartz and the publicist Sarah Baird Knight. Its clients have included composers Anthony Braxton, Bryce Dessner, David T. Little, and Missy Mazzoli; ensembles Alarm Will Sound, Eighth Blackbird, and Kronos Quartet; and festivals 21C Liederabend, Avant Music, and MATA.

²⁹ Swartz, “After the Style Wars,” *MUSO Magazine*, Autumn 2007. *MUSO* is now defunct; I obtained this article as a PDF from Swartz.

³⁰ Swartz, interview with author, March 6, 2015.

³¹ Swartz, interview with author, March 6, 2015.

³² “A New Label for Music’s New Blood,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, May 29, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/2008/05/29/90951497/a-new-label-for-musics-new-blood>; Smith, “Independent Labels Embrace a D.I.Y. Ethos,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/21/arts/music/21stev.html>; Allan Kozinn, “For New Music, Cross-Pollination and Big Crowds,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/21/arts/music/21kozi.html>.

³³ Label manager Michael Hammond recalled in an interview that while he was an intern in 2009, “I came in one day and Judd and Bill were saying, ‘Oh we got distribution!’ It was this big deal.’ We’ve been with Naxos ever since. They distribute physical and digital: physical only in the US and digital worldwide. It’s nice to not have to worry about that side of things, and just have a contact where if someone’s going on tour, you can work with individual locations and send them the tour dates and they can handle distributing. Obviously right now it’s a really tough time for physical distribution, so that’s becoming less and less of a relevant thing. But they’ve been doing business for years and years so they have a lot of great contacts around the country.” Hammond, interview with author,

participating in a controversy around a term that it had introduced into the world of new music.

Definition, Dissemination, and Contestation

For the January 2008 re-launch of New Amsterdam, the three directors prepared a mission statement for the label:

New Amsterdam Records was formed as a haven for the young New York composers and performers whose music slips through the cracks between genres. There’s an exciting scene that’s developed in our city over the past few years, as a set of strong-minded young musicians have taken their art in highly personal directions, speaking not just to the traditions that have spawned them but also to the varied musical culture in which they all live. They make music without filters, bringing the breadth of their listening experience and the love they have for many different kinds of music into their own playing and writing and producing. This is music without walls, but also without an agenda, and without an organizing principle. The records we sell will paint a certain picture of that scene without a name, without trying to give it one. We hope that New Amsterdam develops as quickly and as broadly as the scene itself, capturing the best that people in it have to offer along the way, and touching the outer edges where musics meet.³⁴

Though it initially intended not to provide its scene with a name, New Amsterdam offered one not long afterwards. In a December 2007 press release announcing the label’s re-launch, Swartz drew on the mission statement but also noted:

To foster a sense of connection among musicians and fans in this “indie classical” scene, New Amsterdam is set to launch a new version of its website.³⁵

The term indie classical used to appear occasionally in *Billboard* magazine, dating at least as far back as 1950, to refer to small-scale classical music record labels.³⁶ But its more recent definition—and its centrality in the aesthetic discourse that emerged within New Amsterdam’s scene of composers, performers,

March 5, 2015. Darcy James Argue said of his first release on the label, the 2009 big band album *Infernal Machines*, that “I was just selling them at gigs and NewAm was selling them from their website. It was early enough that they didn’t even really become a proper record label until the fall of 2009 when they began to be distributed by Naxos and Infernal Machines was officially released.” Darcy James Argue, interview with author, October 9, 2015.

³⁴ “New Amsterdam press release—source material copy.” This mission statement was strongly informed by how Greenstein first described New Amsterdam in a December 2006 blog post: “I formed New Amsterdam Records as a haven for the great artists I know who make music that slips through the cracks between genres. There’s an exciting scene that’s developed in New York over the past few years, as a set of strong-minded young musicians have taken their art in highly personal directions, speaking not just to the traditions that have spawned them but also to the varied musical culture in which they all live. They make music without filters, bringing the breadth of their listening experience and the love they have for many different kinds of music into their own playing and writing and producing. This is music without walls, but also without an agenda, and without an organizing principle. The records we sell will paint a certain picture of that scene without a name, without trying to give it one. I hope that New Amsterdam develops as quickly and as broadly as the scene itself, capturing the best that people in it have to offer along the way, and touching the outer edges where musics meet. And I hope that you enjoy the music that we offer.” Greenstein, “What I’ve Been Doing,” *Judd Greenstein: Why?* (blog), December 15, 2006, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20061218175304/http://juddgreenstein.com/why.html#secretlabel>.

³⁵ Swartz, “New Amsterdam—label launch at J Pub HC,” December 6, 2007.

³⁶ An October 1950 *Billboard* article, for example, described plans for Phillips Industries to increase its activity in the recording business in the United States by “angling to buy outright one of the

and institutions—can be traced to April 2007. Both Greenstein and Matt McBane have taken hesitant credit for inventing the term: each is confident that he used it first, though neither is particularly enthusiastic to claim the title of its originator.³⁷ (As of 2016, neither continued to use the term in his own publicity).

McBane had befriended Brittelle at the Aspen Summer Music Festival in 2000, and became close with Greenstein while attending the first Bang on a Can Summer Festival in 2002. In 2006, he moved to New York and formed a group to perform his music. In an April 2007 press release for this new-music ensemble—which he emailed directly to Alex Ross—McBane wrote:

The Abstraction is a five-piece indie classical band ... part of a growing scene in Brooklyn and lower Manhattan of musicians finding spaces between the genre cracks and enthusiastic audiences to meet them there. As such, it recently joined the newly formed New Amsterdam Records label that is creating a home for this scene.³⁸

indie classical labels as an initial move into the disk business here.” “Phillips Nears Expansion Deals in US, France,” *Billboard*, October 21, 1950, 13.

³⁷ There is a third potential originator of the term, although I have not been able to corroborate his specific involvement. In January 2017, Greenstein forwarded me an excerpt from an email that he believed he had received at some point in 2007 (he could not recover the original email or date it more specifically). Todd Reynolds, a new-music violinist, founding member of the string quartet Ethel (1998–present; Reynolds left the quartet in 2005), and a regular collaborator with Bang on a Can—he has been on the faculty of the summer institute since its founding—had written a message to Greenstein that included the following text: “Also nice to see you joining in the support of the ‘indie-classical’ moniker. I’ve been using that for awhile and it seems to resonate with folks.” Todd Reynolds, quoted in Greenstein, email to author, January 13, 2017. Printed with permission. In interview, Reynolds could not confirm the suggestion in the email that he had been employing the term prior to Greenstein’s usage in 2007. He said, in hindsight, that the term might have been used in relationship to Ethel’s programming and presentation: “We were more focused on popular music, and having our concerts be more like a rock show than a classical recital type thing.” But he could only speak hypothetically about having potentially using the term prior to 2007: “If we are talking pre-2005—to the time of the quartet—I’m saying that if alt-rock or indie rock was a thing then, then you can bet that we would have been talking about it and saying, ‘Well, I guess we are in line with the indie classical thing.’” Reynolds, interview with author, January 25, 2017. An examination of previous instantiations of Reynolds’s website, artist bio, and blog from 2001 to 2017 did not reveal any usage of the term; similarly, a survey of the Ethel Quartet’s website from 2001 to 2017 appears to indicate that the ensemble did not begin using indie classical to describe its activities until 2016. See <http://toddreynolds.com>; <https://toddreynolds.wordpress.com/>; <http://ethelcentral.com>; and <http://ethelcentral.org>. (I used the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine to examine previous versions of their websites.) Ethel has used the term more recently; 2017 promotional material described the ensemble as a “post-modern, indie-classical quartet.” See “Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation Provides Funding to Bring Three Artists to The Grand this Spring,” *Broadway World*, February 17, 2017, <http://www.broadwayworld.com/delaware/article/-Mid-Atlantic-Arts-Foundation-Provides-Funding-to-Bring-Three-Artists-To-The-Grand-this-Spring-20170217>. Given Reynolds’s involvement in the Bang on a Can summer institute and his relationship to Greenstein, it is possible that there is a connection between him and the term that is not clearly visible in the documents that I have examined. Regardless of this potential additional point of origin, however, it is clear—as I describe below—that the main impetus for the term’s dissemination was New Amsterdam Records.

³⁸ McBane, email to Alex Ross, April 16, 2007. (McBane forwarded this email to me; it is printed with his permission.) By the time it released its first album on New Amsterdam in 2008, The Abstraction had been renamed Build. McBane’s allusion to a “hipper approach” is one of many comments among these musicians that stake the claim for indie classical as an artistic vanguard; such declarations resonate with Eric Drott’s definition of the avant-garde as a “particular structural location within the social space of the artistic field” in which “rhetoric and self-presentation contribute as

McBane said that he did not at first have an entirely developed sense of what he meant by indie classical. He wanted a quick designator for describing the kind of music he made to a non-specialist audience as well as the press:

I had been frustrated with the lack of a decent genre name for the music Build [McBane’s ensemble The Abstraction, later renamed] and like-minded musicians were making. The existing options were “contemporary classical,” which lumped us in with music we had nothing in common with, and “new music,” which was impossibly vague. So I wanted to find a shorthand description of the kind of music we were making and how we were making it. In indie rock and indie film (although obviously those terms have long been coopted and beaten to death), the “indie” implies both a more artistic and hipper approach than their non-hyphenated brethren, and a social and economic model working outside of the mainstream organizations. So I came up with “indie classical” as a name for our genre for promotion and booking as we started out.³⁹

That same month, Greenstein wrote a blog post lamenting the closure of the music venue Tonic in downtown New York: “These are the spaces that are now the backbone for the developing indie classical community. ... If they all go, I’m not sure what will rise to fill their void.”⁴⁰ Greenstein has written extensively over the years about his specific definition of indie classical. In a representative 2010 comment, he described it as:

an ethos, a spirit of doing-it-yourself and controlling the production chain of our artistic output, in response to the generally hierarchical and highly limited/limiting world of classical/contemporary music in which our art has historically been presented.⁴¹

Although Greenstein did not desire indie classical to represent a specific “sound”—he believed the music of New Amsterdam was too diverse to be summarized by a term—he did not explicitly avoid the aesthetic implications of the phrase.⁴² Primarily, the composer utilized indie classical to stand for a DIY institutional spirit, similarly to how “indie” had augmented “rock” in the 1980s to indicate a particular music-industry configuration.⁴³

The re-launch of New Amsterdam provided the structure for indie classical’s dissemination. McBane’s press releases and Greenstein’s blog posts might have helped the term gain circulation among a small audience of readers and critics, but the weight of a new institution with a well-connected professional publicist lent it

much to the articulation of a particular artistic position as do aesthetic, ideological and/or stylistic factors.” Drott, “Spectralism, Politics, and the Post-Industrial Imagination,” in *The Modernist Legacy: Essays on New Music*, ed. Björn Heile (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 42 and 44.

³⁹ McBane, interview with author, September 19, 2015.

⁴⁰ Greenstein, “Tonic,” *Judd Greenstein: Why?* (blog), April 4, 2007, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070704172734/http://juddgreenstein.com/why.html#tonic>. I asked Greenstein if he could locate any of his prior uses of the term, but he could not.

⁴¹ Greenstein, comment on Colin Holter, “Overtaken by Alt-Classical,” *NewMusicBox*, August 17, 2010, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/Overtaken-By-AltClassical/>.

⁴² In a 2008 essay, for example, Greenstein described a set of “values” of the indie classical scene: an emphasis on community, history, and a new kind of virtuosity that resulted from a rejection of distinctions between musical genres. Greenstein, “What is the New New Virtuosity,” *MATA Festival* (blog), November 11, 2008, <http://matafestival.org/2008/what-is-the-new-new-virtuosity/>.

⁴³ See David Hesmondhalgh, “Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre,” *Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 34–61.

significant cachet. Swartz's December 2007 press release was part of a broader media blitz for New Amsterdam, with a local and national focus. He first planned to send information to New York media outlets including daily newspapers, weekly magazines, and radio stations; and he would then focus on national publications "including major-market dailies, music magazines (classical and crossover), NPR, blogs, etc."⁴⁴ Among the objectives of that campaign was "Branding: launch label, define its identity in the marketplace."⁴⁵ Swartz recalled a series of emails with the New Amsterdam founders in which they discussed appropriate terms to describe the label. He said that he advocated for indie classical specifically: "I thought that 'alt-classical' was very '90s, and that 'indie' didn't only refer to an aesthetic sensibility but to a structural one as well—that this is independent, and that was an important part of it: people making careers outside of the academic structure, the usual ladder."⁴⁶

Indie classical entered the media almost immediately. When Greenstein and Budde spoke with radio host John Schaefer on *Soundcheck* in January 2008, the broadcast began with the host questioning Greenstein about the term mentioned in the press release:

Schaefer: Let me ask you about this debut album of yours on the New Amsterdam record label, sort of being billed as "indie classical." Judd, what does that mean?

Greenstein: Well, I like indie classical because, like everybody else, I listen to music that's mostly indie in whatever genre it's in, and I sort of think of indie classical as having nice connections both vertically and horizontally: horizontally, I mean to other indie musics out there, and then vertically also to the classical tradition. It's a nice thing that people can relate to, if they're fans of indie music or classical music.

Schaefer: The central tenets of indie music—whether we're talking indie rock, indie classical, whatever, is a kind of DIY, do it yourself approach? Would that be fair to say?

Greenstein: Sure, I think so—it means an open field. You can really do what you want to do, and then trust that there's going to be an audience for it, as long as you're doing it in the right way.⁴⁷

Indie classical became the first question raised of New Amsterdam by an influential and longstanding member of the new-music press; the term had done remarkably successful and quick work as a brand.⁴⁸ Indeed, Schaefer became a main

⁴⁴ Swartz, "New Amsterdam: PR proposal," December 3, 2007, New Amsterdam institutional archives. Printed with permission from New Amsterdam.

⁴⁵ Swartz, "New Amsterdam: PR proposal."

⁴⁶ Swartz, interview with author, March 6, 2015. Swartz's historicization of "alt-classical" (see below) tracks with the history of indie rock; as David Hesmondhalgh wrote in 1999, "'Alternative rock' is the term which has generally been used in the United States for what in Britain was known as indie or 'independent' rock or pop. Lately, the term indie has become more widely used in the US." Hesmondhalgh, "Indie," 58n13.

⁴⁷ "The Now Ensemble," *Soundcheck*, January 8, 2008, <http://soundcheck.wnyc.org/story/40359-the-now-ensemble/>.

⁴⁸ Since 1982, Schaefer has hosted the radio program *New Sounds* for WNYC and played a significant role as a tastemaker for new music in New York; see John Schaefer, *New Sounds: A Listener's Guide to New Music* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

proponent of the term, grouping several of his curated radio programs under the title indie classical. As he said,

As marketing terms go, this one annoys me a lot less than most. It says something—not about the music—but about the people making it, which I think is a fair thing for that name to do ... it suggests a kind of working outside conventional, organized mainstream musical forms, whether that be record labels, concert halls, compositional techniques. It suggests this kind of enterprising, freewheeling, oblivious-to-boundaries approach to classical music, which, if someone had coined that term back in the '80s you might have applied to Bang on a Can; and if someone had coined it back in the early '70s, you might have applied it to the minimalists.⁴⁹

And indie classical continued to spread through the public sphere of new music. Between 2008 and 2010, it was taken up by several major publications, including *Time Out New York*, NPR, and the *New York Times*, as a shorthand to refer to musicians who participated in New Amsterdam projects or explicitly blurred boundaries between classical and popular music. As New Amsterdam expanded, it continued to brand albums and concerts as indie classical: a poster described its May 2009 series Undiscovered Islands as “a full month of new indie classical world premieres and record releases”; an October 2009 press release from dotdotdotmusic advertised “fall shows spotlight label artists and co-conspirators from NYC’s ‘indie classical scene’”; and an August 2011 release referred to “New Amsterdam Records, the hub for the most inventive and prophetic in indie classical music.”⁵⁰

But indie classical soon became a source of contention online. Among the many animated discussions that emerged within the classical and new-music online community was a focus on naming.⁵¹ In a 2004 *New Yorker* article, Ross proclaimed “I hate ‘classical music’: not the thing, but the name”; he feared that the genre designator alienated audiences, constructed a “cult of mediocre elitism,” and marginal-

⁴⁹ Schaefer, interview with author, December 2, 2015.

⁵⁰ See poster reprinted by Andrew Friscano, “Undiscovered Islands—An ‘Indie’ Classical Series in May @ Galapagos in Princeton & More,” *Brooklyn Vegan*, May 5, 2009, http://www.brooklynvegan.com/archives/2009/05/undiscovered_is.html; Swartz, “NewAm Archipelago series fall 09 FINAL copy,” October 4, 2009; and Sarah Baird Knight, “yMusic + Itsnotyoutisme 3DM press release_v3,” August 31, 2011, New Amsterdam institutional archives.

⁵¹ In the early twenty-first century, composers and performers started blogs to contextualize their music with their opinions, which joined web platforms including *NewMusicBox*, *ArtsJournal*, *Sequenza21*, and *I Care If You Listen*. Larger institutions such as radio also turned towards participating in an Internet new-music ecosystem, with the founding of online station Q2 Music (a subset of New York’s WQXR) and the classically focused NPR blog *Deceptive Cadence*. Music critics—including ones who wrote regularly for prominent publications such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and *New Yorker*—maintained blogs of their own. Some new-music composers and performers believed that blogs would allow them to reach a readership without the intervention of journalists or critics. In a 2009 post on his personal blog, Greenstein identified this shift as “a replacement of mediation-by-Media ... with mediation-by-self.” Greenstein, “Feeling Good in a New Decade,” *Judd Greenstein: Why?* (blog), June 15, 2009, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091216134431/http://www.juddgreenstein.com/why.html#feelinggoodinaneewdecade>. This public sphere participated in a broader digital classical music landscape. In a 2007 *New Yorker* article, Ross described the recent appearance of hundreds of specialist blogs, writing that “Classical-music culture on the Internet is expanding at a sometimes alarming pace.” Ross, “The Well-Tempered Web,” *New Yorker*, October 22, 2007. For a partial list of blogs affiliated with new music from this period, see references.

ized living composers.⁵² In a January 2005 newsletter, Bang on a Can had asked for suggestions to “help us come up with a name for the kind of music that Bang on a Can plays, since we’re not so fond of the ones it’s been given so far,” and compiled eighty-three of the 221 recommendations on its website, from “Adventure Classical” to “Church Bingo Chance Music” to “Where-Are-The-Dancers-With-The-Garbage-Can-Lids Music.”⁵³ For a June 2006 post on his blog *The Rest is Noise*, Ross jokingly suggested he had decided to rename classical music “Awesome Music”; echoing Ross, in September 2007, New Amsterdam mounted an artist showcase that it labeled “Awesome Music Live.”⁵⁴

These jokes notwithstanding, other more serious names have been proposed for the scene in which New Amsterdam participated.⁵⁵ But none reached the widespread usage of indie classical. The closest terminological relative to indie classical was alternative, or “alt-classical,” popularized by Greg Sandow on his *ArtsJournal* blog.⁵⁶ He had employed the term regularly since 1997 to refer to contemporary

⁵² Ross, “Listen to This,” *New Yorker*, February 16, 2004; reprinted in Ross, *Listen to This* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

⁵³ Bang on a Can, “Name These Tunes,” February 2005, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050215061041/http://www.bangonacan.org/namecontest1.html>.

⁵⁴ See Ross, “Welcome to the Noise,” *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), June 20, 2006, http://www.therestisnoise.com/2006/06/welcome_to_the_.html; and Ross, “Awesome Cage Birthday Agenda,” *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), September 5, 2007, <http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/09/awesome-agenda.html>. In 2005, Ross also lightheartedly suggested that the music of the Look & Listen Festival—curated by Snider, and featuring New Amsterdam artists including NOW Ensemble and So Percussion—be labeled “Lower Midtown Music.” Ross, “Lower Midtown Manifesto,” *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), April 13, 2005, http://www.therestisnoise.com/2005/04/lower_midtown_m.html.

⁵⁵ One such term was “mixed music,” invented by composer Joseph C. Phillips Jr. on his blog in 2009 and subsequently theorized in his 2011 master’s thesis. As Phillips wrote in 2009, “mixed music: music that goes beyond the rigid definitions of a singular genre to organically fuse multiple styles into something completely different (think how children of mixed race couples are neither one yet both of the races of their parents). ... Other terms for this type of composition in the classical world are alt-classical or post-classical, but I think my term mixed music best describes this trend in music because it can reflect many different hybrids of styles: from the jazz world (groups such as the Bad Plus and Darcy Argue’s Secret Society mixing the jazz and rock/alternative worlds; Robert Glasper’s work with Q-Tip, Kanye West, Mos Def, and Maxwell or Roy Hargrove playing with D’Angelo or most of MeShell Ndegeocello’s output all working the jazz and creative black popular music angle (sometimes with a decidedly Prince-ian eclecticism and élan); contemporary classical and pop or electronica (Nico Muhly or the new *In C Remixed* recording) or my own compositions with Numinous, which fuses elements from contemporary classical and jazz to other more popular forms).” Joseph C. Phillips Jr., “Mixed Music—Stylistic Freedom in the Aughts: Composer Salon Live,” *Numinous Music* (blog), November 25, 2009, <http://www.numinousmusic.com/the-numinousum-blog/mixed-music-stylistic-freedoms-in-the-aughts-composer-salon-live>. See also Phillips, “The Music Composition ‘Miscère,’ the History of Mixed Music and New Amsterdam Records in the Contemporary New York City Mixed Music Scene” (MM thesis, Stephen F. Austin State University, 2011). Mixed music was significantly broader in purview than indie classical, and emphasized the hybrid work of African American musicians that discussions of indie classical typically overlooked. In 2015, New Amsterdam released Phillip Jr.’s album *Changing Same*, inspired by Amiri Baraka. Although the term raises provocative questions about the intersections of genre-crossing and race, it was not widely adopted outside of Phillips’s usage—unlike alt-classical—and thus did not intersect strongly with debates over indie classical. The limited influence of mixed music as a term might be tied to the prevailing whiteness of this new-music scene, as I address later in this article.

⁵⁶ Sandow appears to have first used “alternative classical” in a 1997 *Wall Street Journal* article in which he described popular contemporary music that had reached an alternative audience to that of classical music, including artists such as Philip Glass, the Kronos Quartet, Henryk Górecki, and Bang

music that appealed to audiences who might not ordinarily attend orchestral or opera performances, and first described New Amsterdam as “alternative classical” in a 2009 column in the *Wall Street Journal*.⁵⁷ *Washington Post* critic Anne Midgette similarly utilized alt-classical in an October 2009 article to identify the trend of new ensembles that played in club venues, and were also increasingly programmed by mainstream presenters.⁵⁸

Discussions over alt-classical frequently drifted into addressing indie classical.⁵⁹ In 2010, a blog post on *NewMusicBox* described alt-classical as contemporary music that sounded like pop.⁶⁰ Commenters weighed in on both the validity of the term and the validity of its definition. Composer Christopher Cerrone described his “desire to shoot a fiery arrow in the face of the next person who uses the obscenely overhyped phrases ‘alt-classical’ or ‘indie classical.’” Greenstein himself clarified that “‘indie classical’ is specifically not about the sound of the music that I am, or anyone else is, making”; instead, he and New Amsterdam used it to “describe the approach to disseminating that music, and framing it for potential audiences.”⁶¹

As a result of such disagreements, in several 2011 chat forums hosted by writer and critic Olivia Giovetti, the online new-music radio station Q2 Music asked participants to reflect on appropriate terms for describing the scene. In one, David T. Little—who, since the Free Speech Zone tour, had released an album on New Amsterdam in 2010 with Newspeak—wrote: “I like ‘indie classical,’ as long as it describes how we do what we do, and not what it sounds like.”⁶² For these figures, indie classical could summarize activity, but it should not summarize compositional output or musical style; Greenstein and Little desired a name that would not stick to the sound of their music in the way that minimalism had to that of composers in the 1970s, favoring a discourse that would not overtly label their individual aesthetics.

on a Can. Greg Sandow, “Pickin’ and Grinnin’ at Lincoln Center,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 28, 1997, A20. He first used “alternative classical” on his blog in December 2007; see Sandow, “Making a Living,” *Sandow* (blog), December 5, 2007, http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2007/12/making_a_living.html.

⁵⁷ Sandow, “A Young, Hip, Classical Crowd,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB123819267920260779>.

⁵⁸ Anne Midgette, “Classical Musicians Are Experimental with New Venues and New Music,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/13/AR2009101303565.html>.

⁵⁹ See, for example, a debate over alt-classical that unfolded on the blog and comments of composer Matt Marks, who was himself responding to other discussions of alt-classical online. Matt Marks, “Pop-O-Matic Trouble,” *Matt Marks Music* (blog), April 28, 2010, <http://mattmarksmusic.com/2010/04/28/pop-o-matic-trouble/>. See also a pushback against Sandow utilizing the term alt-classical in the comments section to his blog. Sandow, “Labels,” *Sandow* (blog), November 25, 2009, <http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2009/11/labels.html>.

⁶⁰ Colin Holter, “Overtaken by Alt-Classical,” *NewMusicBox*, August 11, 2010, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/Overtaken-By-AltClassical/>.

⁶¹ Holter, “Overtaken by Alt-Classical.”

⁶² David T. Little, quoted in chat forum, WQXR, “We Got Next,” *The New Canon*, Q2 Music, May 9, 2011, <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/127811-we-got-next/>.

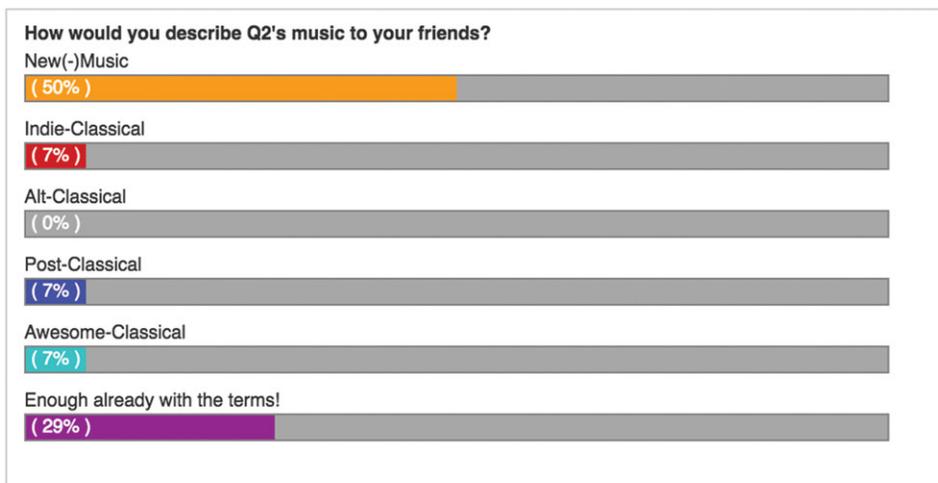


Figure 1. (Color online) Screenshot taken 6 June 2016 from chat forum, WQXR, “Hear Color, See Sound,” *The New Canon, Q2 Music*, 16 May 2011, <http://www.wqxr.org/story/133750-hear-color-see-sound/>.

In another 2011 Q2 chat forum, listeners were polled as to their preferred term for how to “describe Q2’s music to your friends” (see Figure 1).⁶³ Although the poll did not reveal how many actual people voted in each category, it does register the presence of a debate: a preference for “new music” as an umbrella designator; some support for “indie classical”; a lack of support for “alt-classical”; the use of “post-classical”; “Awesome Classical,” perhaps a continuation of Ross’s “Awesome Music”; and the desire for closure and an end to the process of naming (“Enough already with the terms!”).⁶⁴

As a graduate student and music critic, I had my own doubts about indie classical—until my dissertation research began in 2014, I was not aware that the term originated with Greenstein and New Amsterdam—and occasionally played the role of firebrand on Twitter, the popular social-media platform launched in July 2006. Twitter had become an online home for the new-music world by spring 2010; I started an account in June 2010, @seatedovation, first to keep up with tweets by composers including Muhly and Greenstein, and then to voice my own thoughts.⁶⁵ In December 2011, I tweeted “Just heard the words ‘indie classical’ and ‘alt classical’ come out of my speakers. Vomited a little.”⁶⁶ First to reply was Steven Swartz,

⁶³ WQXR, “Hear Color, See Sound,” *The New Canon, Q2 Music*, May 16, 2011, <http://www.wqxr.org/story/133750-hear-color-see-sound/>.

⁶⁴ Based on the breakdown of percentages, it is likely that there were twelve respondents to the poll.

⁶⁵ The Twitter account was an outgrowth of my blog *Seated Ovation*, focused primarily on classical music news and criticism, which I started in 2009; see William Robin, *Seated Ovation* (blog), <http://seatedovation.blogspot.com>.

⁶⁶ Robin, Twitter post, December 12, 2011, 5:51 p.m., twitter.com/seatedovation. Unfortunately, I do not recall what the circumstances of the tweet were, or where I heard the terms. I have not been able to relocate the original tweet, but its contents are quoted in a subsequent tweet by Maura

who wrote “Open to your non-vomitose suggestions for another term...”⁶⁷ The conversation on Twitter subsequently alternated between jest and seriousness, with composers, performers, publicists, music critics, arts administrators, and even the account of New Amsterdam Records itself weighing in.⁶⁸

In the midst of graduate school coursework—and perhaps overly concerned with issues of periodization and genre—I wrote that: “I’m okay with naming things, with 2 conditions: 1) specificity of meaning, 2) no implicit/covert values.”⁶⁹ In hindsight, the naiveté of my perspective is quite clear; is there any musical name that is both specific in meaning and absent covert values? As an alternative to indie classical, Ross suggested “swingin’ on the flippity-flop”; New Amsterdam subsequently tweeted “I guess we should plant our flag. ‘New Amsterdam, the first swingin’ on the flippity-flop record label, thusly branded in 2011.’”⁷⁰ On a more serious note, Greenstein wrote that “It’s not like we have any control over whether people use terms to describe music. The choice is between terms we create or terms others do” and “We can’t have these conversations divorced from the real world, in which people make up all kinds of nonsense when left to their own devices.”⁷¹ Greenstein and New Amsterdam, of course, had significant control over “whether people use terms:” indie classical is the one that the label chose and introduced to the world. Snider clarified that indie classical was a term that New Amsterdam used from its origins to suggest “small, independent, DIY—which is an important distinction from the ‘alt’ barfness.”⁷²

The conversation died away less than three hours after my initial tweet. Like a typical Twitter discussion, it was at once ephemeral and permanent: unlike other social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter is a searchable, public archive, and anyone hoping to re-litigate the controversies of indie classical could find these posts. And this moment, if brief, represented a quintessential example of how the

Lafferty; see Maura Lafferty, Twitter post, December 12, 2011, 7:02 p.m., <https://twitter.com/mlaffs/status/146379448525144064>.

⁶⁷ Swartz, Twitter post, December 12, 2011, 6:25 p.m., <https://twitter.com/dotdotdottweet/status/146370107130658817>.

⁶⁸ In my dissertation, I reproduce these Twitter posts in full; see Robin, “A Scene Without a Name,” 256–64.

⁶⁹ Robin, Twitter post, December 12, 2011, 7:01 p.m., <https://twitter.com/seatedovation/status/146379107205267457>. At the time, I was immersed in a seminar on Haydn with Mark Evan Bonds, in which we questioned the need for periodization and read Janet Levy’s work on covert values in music writing. See Janet Levy “Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings about Music,” *Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 3–27.

⁷⁰ Ross, Twitter post, December 12, 2011, 7:06 PM, <https://twitter.com/alexrossmusic/status/146380341370830849>; New Amsterdam Records, Twitter post, December 12, 2011, 7:11 p.m., <https://twitter.com/newamrecords/status/146381605202702338>. In an email, Ross pointed out that “this silliness is a reference to a hoax list of grunge slang that people got it into the *New York Times* at the height of the grunge period—another instance of a subculture expressing unhappiness with how the mainstream media labels them.” Ross, email to author, May 29, 2016. Printed with permission. See Rick Martin, “Grunge: A Success Story,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/15/style/grunge-a-success-story.html?pagewanted=all&mcubz=1>.

⁷¹ Greenstein, Twitter post, December 12, 2011, 7:27 p.m., <https://twitter.com/juddgreenstein/status/146385689418792960>; Greenstein, Twitter post, December 12, 2011, 7:32 p.m., <https://twitter.com/juddgreenstein/status/146386984993165313>.

⁷² Snider, Twitter post, December 12, 2011, 8:14 p.m., <https://twitter.com/sksnider/status/146397692753494016>.

aesthetic discourse for new music was constructed in the early twenty-first century: an online platform that brought together such diverse actors as musicians, critics, publicists, record labels, and even musicologists to define and redefine indie classical in real-time debate. The “public square” aspect of Twitter—anyone who “followed” these accounts could have viewed the conversation—meant that this discussion played out among stakeholders and was also visible to others interested in the worlds of classical and contemporary classical music. Those who read the tweets would learn both who was invested in the definition of indie classical—not only the New Amsterdam composers but also their spokespersons as well as music critics who had advocated for their work—and also the terms of its debate.

Peak and Decline

In February 2012, the “scene without a name” received a particularly prominent naming, one that laid the groundwork for the most significant controversy in the history of indie classical as a term. In “Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical,” an article published in the popular online music magazine *Pitchfork*, critic Jayson Greene explicitly played up the connection between indie classical and indie rock:

the new generation is pouring in: eager, collaborative, as invested in indie rock as they are in the nuts-and-bolts arcana of composition. Lately, it's become hard to even tell an indie rock musician and a composer apart.⁷³

In his framing, Greene shifts indie classical definitively from a method of distribution informed by the institutional model of indie rock to a vaguely defined style of music informed by the aesthetics of indie rock. The indie classical scene, according to Greene, encompassed ensembles with “stamped-up genre passports” such as yMusic, rock musicians including Radiohead’s Jonny Greenwood and My Brightest Diamond’s Shara Nova (formerly Shara Worden), independent labels like New Amsterdam and Cantaloupe, composers such as Muhly and Mazzoli, and “a round-the-clock PR department.” Targeting *Pitchfork*’s rock-centric readership, Greene framed his article around this generation’s cross-fertilization: “For anyone trying to sort through genres to assign team jerseys, it’s a mess, and often a glorious one.”⁷⁴ Greene said that indie classical functioned as an “effective shorthand for communicating to publications” why they might want to cover new music.⁷⁵

⁷³ Jayson Greene, “Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical,” *Pitchfork*, February 28, 2012, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/8778-indie-classical/>.

⁷⁴ Greene, “Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical.”

⁷⁵ Greene, interview with author, November 24, 2015. Greene said that he had asked *Pitchfork* for the opportunity to write a regular column that would address the budding liminal space between classical, contemporary, and popular musics, but his editors did not believe the column would draw sufficient reader attention. Instead, he wrote the “Making Overtures” article to cover some of these issues; he said that “I was never going to get a column solely about indie classical music.” Greene, “Making Overtures: The Emergence of Indie Classical.”

Pitchfork strengthened the grouping of indie classical by broadening it to encompass many artists—including rock musicians such as Sufjan Stevens—granting it a history as a successor to the downtown of the minimalists and Bang on a Can, and consecrating it in a prestigious and popular outlet. Indeed, in September 2016, the top search result on Google for “indie classical” was Greene’s article.⁷⁶ The article represented the belated realization of one of New Amsterdam’s original goals: in April 2008, Greenstein had written an email to *Pitchfork* introducing New Amsterdam and explaining that “indie classical is our current choice for sub-sub-genre.”⁷⁷ *Pitchfork* rarely covered classical or new music, and dotdotdotmusic had been trying to convince the outlet to address the indie classical phenomenon for several years.

This strengthening, however, led to substantial social media disagreement. Although many musicians—including the New Amsterdam directors—posted online in favor of the article, a debate emerged on Twitter. Critic George Grella tweeted that “*Pitchfork* definitely getting in on the tail-end of this one, ‘indie classical’ is already the new Establishment.”⁷⁸ Composer Christian Carey added that “I find the danger in ‘Indie Classical,’ much as I like it, is that it keeps composers working in other styles out.”⁷⁹

And though it was invented and originally marketed by composers themselves, others attributed the term to critics or publicists; *Pitchfork*, which did not specialize in classical music, appeared as an outside interloper. Carey called it a “gross misrepresentation, but again seems to be a curation problem, not the artists’ idea at all”; composer Matt Marks, who had blogged about alt-classical in 2010, retorted “What are you talking about?? I woke up this morning and said to myself, ‘Today is a great day to go write some indie classical!’”⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Before 2017, Greene’s article was occasionally the second-highest search result on google.com for indie classical; it alternated with an article written for the website *ClassicFM* that describes indie classical as “where the coolest indie rock musicians turn their hand to classical composition, and where classically-trained forward-thinkers turn to the indie underground for inspiration.” Because it was published in August 2014, well after the indie classical debates took place—and possibly also because *ClassicFM* is not necessarily within the purview of the new-music online sphere—it seems to have been overlooked as a possibility for re-igniting controversy. Daniel Ross, “10 Great Indie Classical Artists to Discover,” *ClassicFM*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.classicfm.com/discover/music/best-indie-classical/#e11fdp3L6wtyoWK.99>. In February 2017, however, the second-highest google.com search result—after Greene’s article—had become “What Is Indie Classical,” an interview that I gave about my dissertation research with the online publication *VAN Magazine*; see below. Jeffrey Arlo Brown, “What Is Indie Classical?” *VAN Magazine*, October 5, 2016, <https://van-us.atavist.com/indie-classical>.

⁷⁷ Greenstein, “Pitchfork letter,” April 2, 2008, New Amsterdam institutional archives. Printed with permission from New Amsterdam.

⁷⁸ George Grella, Twitter post, February 28, 2012, 3:31 p.m., <https://twitter.com/gtra1n/status/174592498826620929>.

⁷⁹ Christian Carey, Twitter post, February 28, 2012, 3:32 p.m., <https://twitter.com/CBCarey/status/174592753718669312>.

⁸⁰ Carey, Twitter post, February 28, 2012, 4:39 p.m., <https://twitter.com/CBCarey/status/174609682357432320>; Matt Marks, Twitter post, February 28, 2012, 4:42 p.m., <https://twitter.com/mattmarks/status/174610443346788353>. Greene said that he was mostly unaware of the controversy; as a music critic who covers many genres, he knew that the online community that might respond negatively to an article about contemporary classical music was significantly smaller than ones that could react to discussions of hip-hop or hardcore punk. He said, “I was reporting on something

But the strongest backlash to indie classical was yet to come. In May 2012, the Australian *Sydney Morning Herald* published an article by critic Harriet Cunningham about the “indie classical movement.”⁸¹ Mentioned in the piece was Muhly, who had become the poster child of indie classical for many writers, as an established young American composer with an international reputation who also worked with rock musicians such as Sufjan Stevens and Björk. In response to the article, he tweeted “oh man what am I going to do about this indie classical shit. If another person says it I am gonna wet myself.”⁸² Still unaware of indie classical’s origins, I subsequently tweeted “The thing is with indie classical: at least minimalism was coined by a critic/composer.”⁸³ In a subsequent blog post addressing the issue on *NewMusicBox*—titled “Who Cares If You Call It Indie Classical?”—composer Isaac Schankler mused as to why the label was “uniquely distressing,” writing that “A common complaint is that it describes cultural practices—a certain DIY aesthetic and entrepreneurial spirit—rather than musical qualities.”⁸⁴

Following the Twitter discussion, Muhly and publicist Maura Lafferty agreed to each blog about indie classical on their respective websites. Drawing on her professional experience—and what she perceived as the importance of artists creating a perfect “pitch” or brand—Lafferty considered the term appropriate and useful.⁸⁵ In response, Muhly strongly rejected the idea of branding:

I did a show in London that I thought was pretty great, and then online it was all indie classical this and indie classical that...Nothing is gained by that description, even if it makes the PR people’s jobs easier. It attracts haters and lumps people together in a way that belies how actual communities of musicians function.⁸⁶

that the vast majority of the readers of *Pitchfork* didn’t know existed, period. They didn’t have any opinions on whether I did it well or right, they were just interested in the idea that it was there.” Greene, interview with author, November 24, 2015.

⁸¹ Harriet Cunningham, “Listen to This,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 12, 2012, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/listen-to-this-20120509-1ydnh.html>. Cunningham wrote the article in advance of the VIVID Live festival in Sydney, which included performances by Muhly (his *Planetarium*, a collaboration with Bryce Dessner and Sufjan Stevens) and My Brightest Diamond; she connected these American musicians to such local developments as the Australian Chamber Orchestra’s ACO Underground series, which juxtaposed classical and popular music.

⁸² Nico Muhly, Twitter post, May 11, 2012, 6:49 p.m., <https://twitter.com/nicomuhly/status/201081499657830400>.

⁸³ Robin, Twitter post, May 11, 2012, 7:29 p.m., <https://twitter.com/seatedovation/status/201091681414680576>. I had in mind composer-critics Michael Nyman and Tom Johnson, both of whom have claimed that they first used the term “minimalism” in a musical context.

⁸⁴ Isaac Schankler, “Who Cares If You Call It Indie Classical?” *NewMusicBox*, May 16, 2012, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/who-cares-if-you-call-it-indie-classical/>. Schankler also attempted to identify musical signifiers of indie classical, including an engagement with pop; a pervasive optimism in its desire to transcend genre; and a sense of “privilege” that, in stepping past the issue of genre, composers believed that they might communicate seamlessly to new audiences.

⁸⁵ Maura Lafferty, “In Defense of ‘Indie Classical,’” *Maura Lafferty* (blog), June 19, 2012, archived with Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120825123409/http://mauralafferty.com:80/2012/06/in-defense-of-indie-classical/>.

⁸⁶ Muhly, “Hindi Classical,” *Nico Muhly* (blog), June 21, 2012, <http://nicomuhly.com/news/2012/hindi-classical/>. In March and April 2012, Muhly participated in concerts at The Barbican in London; on 16 March 2012, the premiere of his Cello Concerto with soloist Oliver Coates as well as the music of Mazzoli, Owen Pallett, and the 802 Tour, a project with artists from Bedroom Community; and

In his blog post, Muhly dismissed indie classical on two fronts: he wrote that such buzzword terminology was itself meaninglessly limiting (he advocated, instead, that “musicians should be able to describe the universe in which their music exists”); and indie as a designator was questionable given his own participation in classical music’s institutional apparatus (at the time, he was preparing for the Metropolitan Opera premiere of his opera *Two Boys*, and had already released three albums on the label Decca). Muhly had gained significant press and institutional support from early in his career—when New Amsterdam launched in 2008, he had already received the *Two Boys* commission—and could afford to willfully misrepresent the role that publicists and journalists played in strengthening the position of his peers. He had experienced indie classical as a pejorative term leveled against his music; he did not need the brand, and could thus forcefully and publicly repudiate it.

Since the *Pitchfork* and *Sydney Morning Herald* articles placed the definitional weight of indie classical among critics rather than composers, Muhly could also attack the term without directly attacking his colleagues: he could chastise publicists and journalists rather than Greenstein or New Amsterdam, attributing indie classical to “PR people” rather than the musicians who first negotiated its meaning. And because Muhly may be the most widely publicized American composer of his generation—and participated in many additional interviews in advance of *Two Boys* at the Met—his blog represented a strong and enduring point of contention, seemingly standing as the definitive take on indie classical from the perspective of artists themselves. In subsequent discussions of Muhly’s music, journalists connected him to his dislike of the term, keeping it in use but as a negative qualifier.⁸⁷ Indie classical had become a tarnished phrase, invented by critics and publicists to narrowly and incorrectly define a scene that did not need a name: it stood for

on April 9, 2012, the *Planetarium* project. I have not found any reception of these performances that refers specifically to indie classical; Muhly was likely alluding to a negative review of the March concert in the *Telegraph* by critic Ivan Hewett, who wrote that “I’d heard a rumour there was a new genre out there called ‘alt-classical,’ and last Friday I had my first knowing encounter with it. . . . The first thing I discovered about alt-classical is that it’s achingly hip. Every piece was greeted with ecstatic whoops from the young audience. In every other respect it was curiously indefinite, like a watercolour landscape smeared while still wet.” Ivan Hewett, “Nico Muhly Premiere, Barbican, Review,” *Telegraph*, March 20, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalconcertreviews/9155281/Nico-Muhly-Premiere-Barbican-review.html>.

⁸⁷ An August 2012 article for the *CBC* featured a graphic with a picture of Muhly next to the phrase “What the *#@% Is Indie Classical,” and quoted Muhly’s Twitter and blog complaints. See Michael Morreale, “Indie Classical: New Label, or PR Hype?” *CBC*, August 15, 2012, <http://music.cbc.ca/#!/blogs/2012/8/Indie-classical-new-label-or-PR-hype>.

An interview about *Two Boys*, in advance of the Met production, opened with Muhly critiquing the concept of indie classical and declaring “It doesn’t get any less indie than the Met.” Hillary Weston, “Nico Muhly’s ‘Two Boys’ Brings the Internet to the Opera,” *Blackbook*, November 5, 2013, <http://bbook.com/uncategorized/nico-muhlys-two-boys-brings-internet-opera/>.

And in another article in conjunction with *Two Boys*, an interviewer asked Muhly his opinion about “indie classical” and he offered a similar response. See David Graver, “Interview: Nico Muhly,” *Cool Hunting*, October 2, 2013, <http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/interview-nico-muhly-two-boys>.

controversy, not consensus. As the *Guardian* headlined a blog post in November 2013, “Just don’t call it indie classical.”⁸⁸

Since those 2012 debates, indie classical has faded from prominent usage, although it still remains in circulation.⁸⁹ New Amsterdam ceased publicly using the label in 2013; in November 2014, Greenstein told an interviewer that “‘Indie classical’ was a term we used a lot in the early days of New Amsterdam ... since people started describing the music in reductive ways, I’ve been shying away from using that term, instead using ‘post-genre music.’”⁹⁰ As Greenstein said in 2015, “People were just using it to mean the sound, and we didn’t want to feed that fire.”⁹¹

The replacement of indie classical with post-genre suggests the maturing of an organization that no longer needs to actively “define its identity in the marketplace,” as Swartz originally put it. For New Amsterdam, post-genre is a reflexive term that is not meant to suggest a “new” genre, but allow the label to continue to represent, as its website described in January 2016, “highly skilled composers and performers whose work does not adhere to traditional genre boundaries.”⁹² Former intern and current label manager Michael Hammond said that “I think I prefer post-genre to indie classical, but I don’t use that when I’m talking to people: I don’t say ‘We’re a post-genre label,’ I say ‘We represent newly composed music.’”⁹³ As Britelle described post-genre, “It’s not another genre, it’s ‘Let’s just stop having this conversation’ ... the movement is best served by some kind of term that undermines the notion of genre itself.”⁹⁴ That said, in 2015, Britelle expressed interest to me in writing a book that would focus on the idea of “post-genre” as an aesthetic current in contemporary culture. And though Snider preferred the term, she also raised qualms about the exclusionary implications of post-genre: “I imagine most

⁸⁸ Selim Bulut, “Just Don’t Call It Indie Classical,” *Guardian*, November 1, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/nov/01/neo-classical-nils-frahm>. Bulut instead described the music as “neo-classical,” apparently unaware of that term’s historical baggage.

⁸⁹ Prior to the July 2016 publication of my dissertation (see below), the last major discussion over indie classical on Twitter took place in November 2012, following composer Christopher Cerrone’s negative response to a *New Sounds* radio broadcast on WNYC, hosted by Schaefer, that grouped him among “New York Indie Classical” composers. Cerrone, Twitter post, November 3, 2012, 10:13 a.m., <https://twitter.com/chricerrone/status/264731998088753152>; WNYC, “New York Indie Classical,” *New Sounds*, program #3392, first aired November 23, 2012.

⁹⁰ Greenstein, quoted in Greg Salisbury, “A Classical Genre on the Brink of Change,” *Jewish Exponent*, November 19, 2014, <http://jewishexponent.com/culture/2014/11/a-classical-genre-on-the-brink-of-change>.

⁹¹ Greenstein, interview with author, April 26, 2015. The decline of indie classical’s cultural cachet is perhaps best reflected by a statement in October 2015 from producer Kate Nordstrum—who curates the series Liquid Music in St. Paul, Minnesota, a partnership with New Amsterdam—in which she described new-music violinist Miranda Cuckson: “She is an enthralling musician and wise practitioner, commissioning so much music for herself; she’s really in control of her career and focuses. Even before I heard her play, I was inspired by the way she navigated the new music terrain. In many ways she’s been a quiet leader in the ‘indie classical’ movement. That phrase is no longer in vogue but Miranda actually does embody it.” Kate Nordstrum, quoted in “SPCO’s Liquid Music Series to Present Miranda Cuckson in ‘Sun Propeller,’” *Broadway World*, October 21, 2015, <http://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwmusic/article/SPCOs-Liquid-Music-Series-to-Present-Miranada-Cuckson-in-Sun-Propeller-20151021>.

⁹² New Amsterdam Records, “About,” <http://newamrecords.com/about/>.

⁹³ Hammond, interview with author, March 5, 2015.

⁹⁴ Britelle, interview with author, September 5, 2014.

composers would bristle at the idea that their music is classifiable by a certain genre. So, to say that some music is ‘post-genre’ implies that other music doesn’t have a host of influences informing it, which isn’t the intention. Like most shorthands, it’s relative.”⁹⁵

The idea of post-genre echoes New Amsterdam’s original “music without walls” ethos, but it presents the same conundrum as indie classical: one could imagine post-genre gaining currency as a term, stabilizing a set of sonic associations, and becoming prescriptive, controversial, and weighted with fraught definitional status. Categorizing an attempt to de-categorize is ultimately a fruitless endeavor. The benefit of post-genre for New Amsterdam in 2016 is that the label has already spent nearly a decade defining itself, and no longer needs to brand itself as actively as it did in the era of indie classical. Post-genre instead demonstrates a consistency of values within the institution itself, one in which labeling and anti-labeling have existed in a productive contradiction since its origins, and in which a record label consistently tried, and ultimately failed, to control the specific message that accompanied the music it released into the world.

In my interviews with composers, performers, and administrators affiliated with New Amsterdam, I asked them what they thought of indie classical and similar terms such as alt-classical. Some were deeply skeptical of their efficacy. As violinist, guitarist, and composer Caleb Burhans—half of the duo *itsnotyouitsme* that had performed at the Joe’s Pub concert in 2008—said, “People need to have labels for record stores—oh, wait, record stores don’t exist anymore.”⁹⁶ Others thought terms were useful, but were wary of mission creep: Mazzoli said that “I think there’s a short jump to be made from those labels and these super-annoying discussions about ‘bridging the pop and the classical.’ I hate talking about music that way.”⁹⁷ Violist Nadia Sirota noted that “At the end of the day, what you want is something recognizable. I find indie classical really frustrating for a number of reasons, but if it catches on, that’s great.”⁹⁸ No composer or performer that I spoke to said that he or she would purposefully continue to use the term: McBane acknowledged that he now prefers to refer to Build as an “instrumental band”; Mazzoli was comfortable identifying herself as simply a classical composer, feeling that it was the primary cultural tradition in which she participates.⁹⁹ Music critics John Schaefer and Allan Kozinn, however, were content to continue using the term; they felt that labels were important to the profession of criticism, and that indie classical was a useful and evocative summary of New Amsterdam’s world.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Snider, interview with author, April 26, 2014.

⁹⁶ Caleb Burhans, interview with author, April 18, 2015.

⁹⁷ Mazzoli, interview with author, November 10, 2015.

⁹⁸ Nadia Sirota, interview with author, November 17, 2014.

⁹⁹ McBane, interview with author, November 19, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Indeed, since Kozinn left the *New York Times* in 2014 and moved to Maine, he has newly reengaged with the term as a classical music critic for the *Portland Press Herald*; in a May 2016 review, for example, he defined indie classical as “a corner of the new-music world in which young composers and performers who are comfortable in both pop and classical music blur the lines.” Kozinn, “Concert Review: Classical? Pop? Both, from Jherek Bischoff and Mirah at SPACE,” *Portland Press Herald*, May 10, 2016, <http://www.pressherald.com/2016/05/10/concert-review-classical-pop-both-from-jherek-bischoff-and-mirah-at-space/>.

The Fall?

Indie classical was created by specific agents for the purpose of branding a scene to a mainstream press and new audiences, a purpose temporarily achieved thanks to the strengths of its sponsors and particular nature of its public sphere. Because it had both the support of insiders who advocated for it, and a means to distribute the term to outsiders through a specific apparatus, from composers to institutions to publicists to critics to the world, it gained discursive strength. Despite Muhly's protestations, indie classical as a descriptor gained quite a bit for its scene; even though composers might resist the idea that the term suggested an aesthetic, its strong resonances with indie rock allowed critics such as Greene to introduce it to new audiences. Because it was originally defined by composers, indie classical could be accepted by other musicians as a valid term, but one whose definition had to be circumscribed to refer to a means of distribution, not a sound. But because it was promoted by publicists and accepted by journalists—with its origins obscured—indie classical could *also* be dismissed as outsider PR jargon. In the end, the cultural capital that indie classical as a brand helped its community gain—the success in reaching a *Pitchfork* demographic, the success of Muhly as a spokesperson for his scene, and the way in which the term's controversy overtook its original meanings—ultimately undermined that strength and led to its abandonment.

But if indie classical rose, did it in fact fall? New Amsterdam's rejection of its own term might initially appear to mark the "death of indie classical." But such a "decline" is one reflected only among the central actors of New Amsterdam and its affiliated scene, and does not necessarily represent the reality of institutions or spokespersons tangentially or not at all related to it, who might not have followed the term's disputes or taken after New Amsterdam's abandonment.

When the University of South Carolina presented the ensemble yMusic in 2014, for example, it labeled the concert "Indy [*sic*] Classical Innovation."¹⁰¹ The streaming service Spotify maintains a regularly updated, curated "Indie Classical: Composed in 21st Century" playlist that features a work by Greenstein as its opening track.¹⁰² And journalist Ginanne Brownell Mitic's August 2016 *International New York Times* article that interviewed Sandow about indie classical described the movement as tied to "classical music clubbing" in London and other major European cities. Mitic reported on "a larger movement called indie classical, which also can incorporate everything from contemporary classical concerts in clubs, with mash-ups including drum beats and electronica, to classical raves at festivals."¹⁰³ In May 2016, musicians including the Swiss conductor Etienne Abelin and London composer Gabriel Prokofiev founded an "indie classical network" at the Classical: NEXT festival in Rotterdam that produced a festival in 2017, C3–IC, to "push

¹⁰¹ "Southern Exposure 2013–14 Series," University of South Carolina, http://www.sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/music/concerts_and_events/southern_exposure/southern_exposure_2013_14.php.

¹⁰² See https://play.spotify.com/user/spotify/playlist/51lgGoMbd6Oto4rcq2UOqn?play=true&utm_source=open.spotify.com&utm_medium=open.

¹⁰³ Mitic, "Bringing Classical Music to the Club Scene."

forward the club and electronic subset of the Indie Classical scene in particular.”¹⁰⁴ Here we see the term drift transnationally into a network of musicians and institutions mostly distinct from the original New Amsterdam community, forming its own associations with a European club culture that may reinvent indie classical—absent its US-centered debate—overseas.

Indeed, if we turn from the scene that New Amsterdam sought to define, the term has not faded at all: the record label represents just one single “site” where indie classical can be observed—or in this case, no longer observed. One could similarly study indie classical as a participant in Spotify’s culture of curation and data analytics; as a quick designator for hipness in the certain circles of classical music journalism; or as a brand that, after being strongly established by New Amsterdam, became valuable for other new-music institutions outside the United States. These disparate practices testify to the multiplicity of the term, and how a label can continue to flourish even after it is abandoned by those responsible for its original dissemination: the “death” of a genre may in fact mean that its usage has instead simply shifted from an initial group of actors into other contexts and settings.

And, perhaps unsurprisingly, since first publishing my examination of the history of indie classical in my dissertation in July 2016—which I made publicly available, and distributed to my Twitter followers and the musicians I interviewed—the term has seen a minor uptick in usage and, of course, online debate.¹⁰⁵ In July 2016, composer and singer–songwriter Gabriel Kahane—who had frequently been grouped under the label in the past because of his work in multiple genres—wrote a series of tweets that I will compile here into a single paragraph:¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Classical: Next, “Tell Us More About You! Indie Classical Network Kick-Off,” https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfPW1KuEczCRWK-zqNX4jhrnU_c8WbTtgxFGKmdzL7dPQ6ALw/viewform?c=0&w=1.

An online sign-up to participate in the “indie classical network” offered its own extensive definition for the term: “Indie Classical (IC) is a mindset and approach that leads to the creation of meaningful musical experiences based primarily on music of Western tradition that reflect the ‘mash-up,’ mixing and mingling of information and influences which are a huge part of our lives today. The active participants of this type of music-making have their fingers firmly on the pulse of today’s reality and reflect it in their music and programming.

The IC mindset ...

- includes an independent and nimble approach to music-making and presenting;
 - displays openness in its bending and blending of genres and disciplines;
 - consciously welcomes a world-wide mosaic of artists and fans;
 - displays the desire to combine artistic substance with communicative appeal to connect with audiences and fans using compelling and meaningful experiences as core drivers;
 - embraces education and community-building as key activities;
 - often, but not always, includes the way of working, imagining and doing business - the independent and free artist/presenter/ensemble, not tied to any traditional institutional framework or modality.
- In addition, some use the term Indie Classical aurally to describe contemporary classical blended and intermingled with genres such as pop, rock, world, electronica and jazz, either (self-) composed or improvised. Other labels applied to this emerging approach include ‘alternative classical,’ ‘post-classical,’ ‘post-genre,’ ‘cross-genre’ or ‘hybrid music.’”

¹⁰⁵ Robin, Twitter post, July 14, 2016, 11:08a.m., <https://twitter.com/seatedovation/status/753607077680058370>. See Robin, “A Scene Without a Name.”

¹⁰⁶ Kahane had strongly protested such labels in the past; in a 2013 interview, he said that “indie-classical ... is a word I wish did not exist.” Anne Midgette, “Gabriel Kahane, A Genre Bender Musician,” *Washington Post*, March 29, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/gabriel-kahane-a-genre-bender-musician/2013/03/28/e06db746-96f7-11e2-814b-063623d80a60_story.html.

Brief twitter flurry on the occasion of @seatedovation's dissertation. In the 90's, indie rock was both an alternate economy, but also often evinced an aesthetic less immediately accessible than mainstream pop. indie classical, by contrast, with its strong ties to post-minimalism, seems to be MORE immediately accessible than its establishment foil. My point is simply that from an aesthetic standpoint, "indie" seems to denote conflicting ideals in these two uses. And those aesthetic differences have economic implications vis a vis consumption ... (lights fuse, leaves room).¹⁰⁷

Kahane's tweets align with some of the previous debates that had already taken place around the term, but also raise different questions; indeed, it was clear that he had not necessarily engaged with (or read) my dissertation specifically but was instead voicing a personal critique of the music of his peers. Conversations around indie classical often serve as a litmus test for whatever musicians may want to criticize in their scene, whether it be aesthetics or branding. A handful of responses to his tweets resembled the stakes of past arguments over the term; Greenstein tweeted that "plus, contra Gabe, not all 'indie classical' sounds the same and some, like Newspeak FE, is similarly confrontational."¹⁰⁸

Subsequently, the online classical music magazine VAN interviewed me about my research, and as of November 2017, the resulting article, "What Is Indie Classical?" had become the second-highest search result for the term on Google.¹⁰⁹ I had anticipated the potential for this kind of online activity while working on my dissertation and, since my 2014 tweets criticizing the term, I had come to realize that my objective as a musicologist was to serve as a historian—rather than adjudicator—of indie classical's meaning. But the response to my dissertation confirmed the fact that, even as the term itself seemed to have faded, the community of musicians surrounding it were still engaged in the stakes of what it meant.

The story of indie classical's rise and fall provides an overview of a singular moment in the aesthetic discourse and public sphere of American new music. Since the peak of the "indie classical debates" circa 2012, the blogging community for new music has significantly shrunken; of the twenty-one blogs that I list in my bibliography, only four are still updated with regularity. The intense textuality of the blogosphere that shaped the emergence of indie classical a decade ago—one that allowed composers to fiercely debate what they should call themselves—has mostly disappeared. Although this evidence is anecdotal, it is part of a larger decline within blogging practices since around 2011, one primarily shaped by the rising presence and prestige of Facebook and Twitter.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Gabriel Kahane, series of Twitter posts, July 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/gabrielkahane/status/755049878263361536>.

¹⁰⁸ Greenstein, Twitter post, July 18, 2016, 5:09p.m., <https://twitter.com/juddgreenstein/status/755147422322556929>.

¹⁰⁹ Brown, "What Is Indie Classical?"

¹¹⁰ See Verne G. Kopytoff, "Blogs Wane as the Young Drift to Sites Like Twitter," *New York Times*, February 20, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/technology/internet/21blog.html>; and Jason Kottke, "The Blog Is Dead, Long Live the Blog," *Nieman Lab*, December 19, 2013, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/12/the-blog-is-dead/>. Indeed, when Greenstein updated his website and removed his blog in 2013, he wrote that "most of my writing attention has been given over to feeding

And, as the blogosphere has eroded, so too has the world of professional music criticism. In April 2015, *Time Out New York*—an early utilizer of the phrase indie classical—drastically cut its extensive classical music listings into a handful of events in a small column. Two of the strongest proponents of indie classical in the press, Steve Smith and Allan Kozinn, have left the *New York Times*: in April 2014, Smith began a position as assistant arts editor at the *Boston Globe*; Kozinn took a buyout in December 2014 and has moved to Maine. In 2006, the *New York Times* had three full-time classical music critics; now it has one.¹¹¹ Two years after Smith started his position, the *Boston Globe* cut nearly all of its freelance music criticism, and in August 2016 Smith left the *Globe* to direct an arts-focused journal run by the Brooklyn performance space National Sawdust.¹¹² Smith wrote to me that “it’s interesting to contemplate my small role in having helped to foster a musical movement, at a time when the conventional media are increasingly abandoning cultural coverage. It was a bright, shining moment—and happily the baby has its own legs to stand on.”¹¹³ Alex Ross said that he “sometimes feels as though I belong to a dying profession while covering a dying art.”¹¹⁴ These major shifts suggest that whatever the next debate over a term may be, it will take place in a very different public sphere, one no longer shaped by a strong dialogue between traditional media and long form online writing.

Debates over indie classical also reveal much about the priorities of a new generation of American composers and performers. These discussions around terminology might seem insular and petty, but they participated in a longer tradition of composers attempting to resist categorization—classic cases include Debussy’s rejection of the term Impressionism, and Philip Glass refusing to be labeled a minimalist—that reassert Eric Drott’s claim that “the continuing instability of genre categories within this repertory is their furious denial within the aesthetic discourse of new music, which takes it as an article of faith that the only relevant context for comprehending a composition is furnished by the composition itself.”¹¹⁵ But indie classical is also distinctive in that it was invented by composers to explicitly brand themselves in a musical marketplace, attesting to what might represent a new configuration of the relationship between concert music and capital in the twenty-first century. That New Amsterdam chose post-genre to replace indie classical testifies to its directors’ desire to defy classification, but also possibly their desire to benefit from a post-genre current in the aesthetics of recent popular music.¹¹⁶ In a landscape increasingly shaped by the curatorial practices of

the 140-character Moloch,” a reference to Twitter. Judd Greenstein, “Website 2.0,” *Judd Greenstein*, April 19, 2013, <http://www.juddgreenstein.com/website-2-0/>.

¹¹¹ Staff critic Bernard Holland took a buyout in 2008; the only remaining full-time classical critic is Anthony Tommasini.

¹¹² See BMIInt Staff, “To Dispossessed Freelancers BMIInt Offers a Megaphone,” *Boston Musical Intelligencer*, May 23, 2016, <http://www.classical-scene.com/2016/05/23/globe-no-freelancers/>.

¹¹³ Smith, Facebook message to author, June 29, 2016. Printed with permission.

¹¹⁴ Ross, email to author, May 29, 2016. Printed with permission.

¹¹⁵ Drott, “The End(s) of Genre,” 15.

¹¹⁶ See Robin James, “Is the Post- in Post-Identity in the Post- in Post-Genre?” *Popular Music* 36, no. 1 (January 2017): 21–32.

platforms such as Spotify and Pandora, “music without walls” might be an ideal selling point.

And the ideology of “music without walls” raises questions of race and cultural mobility that I have thus far left unaddressed. In their attempt to stake a claim for a music without boundaries, these rhetorical gestures resonate with what Lloyd Whitesell criticizes as a symbolic emptiness within the avant-garde, one that reinforces whiteness.¹¹⁷ This language is problematic given the racial homogeneity of New Amsterdam’s roster: only two black composers have recorded albums for the label.¹¹⁸ As George Lewis and Michael Dessen have carefully documented, stylistic hybridity is often celebrated when performed by white artists while black musicians engaged in similar practices are ignored, overlooked, or critiqued; the mobility that is heralded among white musicians who extend their work out from the classical tradition is one that has been historically denied to African American artists.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the privileged capacity of indie classical’s creators to successfully invent and disseminate a term—and subsequently withdraw it, in part, from circulation—is one not necessarily afforded to black composers, who may have to contend with their music’s identity being determined externally and shaped by race. As Lewis put it in a 2017 interview, “With regard to the post-genre strategy, you can say that for yourself, but quite a bit of the time, genre is imposed upon you from the outside.”¹²⁰

The limits of the idea of “music without walls” become clearer when the “indie”-ness of indie classical is situated within the specific circumstances in which its practitioners rose to prominence.¹²¹ Many of the origin stories of these musicians center on institutional settings that they found to be cloistered or confining, from which they subsequently extrapolated ideas about “the academy.” As Mazzoli says in *The End of New Music*,

As a composer, you go to school for composition. It’s rare to go to a place where you’re taught practical things about what it means to *really* be a composer. And for me, I couldn’t see myself thriving in an academic world. So what does composer do if they’re not teaching other people how to be composers? What does it mean to be active, writing composer in the world today?¹²²

¹¹⁷ Lloyd Whitesell, “White Noise: Race and Erasure in the Cultural Avant-Garde,” *American Music* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 168–89.

¹¹⁸ As of November 2017, New Amsterdam included eighty-three albums on its list of releases; see <http://newamrecords.com/albums>. The “artist” for any given album is typically either a single composer or ensemble. Jace Clayton’s *The Julius Eastman Memory Depot* (2013) and Phillips Jr.’s *Changing Same* (2015) are the only two albums of music by African American composers, although there are black performers in several ensembles that have recorded for New Amsterdam, including Roomful of Teeth and Janus Trio.

¹¹⁹ Michael Dessen, “Decolonizing Art Music: Scenes from the Late Twentieth-Century United States” (PhD diss., University of California at San Diego, 2003); and George Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹²⁰ Lewis, quoted in Alexander K. Rothe, “An Interview with George Lewis,” *VAN Magazine*, June 22, 2017, <https://van-us.atavist.com/boundaries>.

¹²¹ For a more extended discussion of the curatorial parameters of New Amsterdam specifically, see Robin, “A Scene Without a Name,” 139–59.

¹²² Mazzoli, quoted in Taylor, *The End of New Music*, 1:55.

For Mazzoli, “school for composition” insulates musicians from “the world today.” Academia is imagined as an Ivory Tower, implicitly identified with the legacy of Milton Babbitt’s essay “Who Cares If You Listen?” and the idea of the university as supporter of elite art music that lacks a social function.¹²³

But it is another of Babbitt’s academic legacies, the Princeton PhD program that he founded in 1962, that Greenstein, Little, and other indie classical composers found to be hospitable to their work.¹²⁴ Indeed, after early success as the creator of his own ensemble and music festival—an entrepreneurial career fitting for a composer who helped create the term indie classical—McBane entered Princeton’s PhD program in 2015. “As a freelance composer, you have to work based on commissions which may not always be the projects you most want to do, or take other work that distracts from your artistic goals,” he said. “The institutional support of the PhD gives the gift of time both to focus on the projects I most want to create, and for musical study and artistic growth.”¹²⁵ Since 2013, Mazzoli has taught as a lecturer at The New School’s Mannes College. New Amsterdam has sought university partnerships for its artists, and has released albums by tenured professors including Princeton composer Steve Mackey and Lawrence University Conservatory of Music pianist (and NOW Ensemble founding member) Michael Mizrahi. Indie classical musicians have received significant financial support from their alma maters: cellist and composer Jody Redhage funded her 2007 record on New Amsterdam—the first album that the label released—with a \$15,000 Hertz Fellowship from the University of California at Berkeley; in 2009, Caleb Burhans received the Leonore Annenberg Fellowship from the Eastman School of Music, a two-year grant totaling \$153,000.

That these musicians have deep ties to an academy that they have critiqued is not surprising: it is indicative of the combination of rhetorical distance and institutional nearness that has defined indie classical’s relationship to both new music and classical music. But what does need critical nuance—and what can be dangerous in the discourse of these musicians—is that, despite the variety of musics that the university has historically supported, it is often constructed as a singular “type.” Academia is rendered a static object, unable to escape the influence of Babbitt’s model (which was never as widespread or singular as he or his critics might have claimed). The university becomes an Ivory Tower “Other” against which the careers of these composers can be productively contrasted, even as their actual careers rely on academic patronage. Such discourses participate in what Andrea Moore has described as an increasing demand for self-driven music projects that have naturalized rhetorics of entrepreneurship in arts curricula.¹²⁶ When careers of such

¹²³ This narrow image of the university resonates with David K. Blake’s point that “Both Babbitt and his detractors have consequently assumed that no other music exists within institutions of higher education. The debates over the university’s patronage of contemporary art music since ‘The Composer as Specialist’ have effectively disbarred public musics, especially popular music, from consideration as a part of university life.” David K. Blake, “*Bildung* Culture: Elite Popular Music and the American University, 1960–2010” (PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2014), 2–3.

¹²⁴ Greenstein and Little entered Princeton’s doctoral program in 2004; Little graduated in 2011, and Greenstein has not yet graduated as of November 2017.

¹²⁵ Matt McBane, interview with author, September 19, 2015.

¹²⁶ Andrea Moore, “Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 1 (February 2016): 33–53.

“self-starters” as Greenstein and Mazzoli are used as models for such programs—without necessarily telling the “full story” of their musical backgrounds—it can misleadingly valorize entrepreneurship, perpetuate false narratives of replicable success, and echo the logics of neoliberalism.¹²⁷

Finally, tracing the controversies that surrounded indie classical offers an example of how musicologists might approach other aesthetic labels that carry similar historical baggage. In considering clarifying or theorizing such terms—as has been done with scholarship on categories such as minimalism and spectralism, and also critiqued in studies of experimentalism—scholars might also highlight the controversies that have arisen around them.¹²⁸ Those controversies may unveil that it is not only composers who have strong stakes in the meanings of these terms, but also performers, critics, publicists, and administrators—not to mention musicologists. Rather than adjudicate their definitional status, we might serve as witnesses to their emergence, while still aware that our own acts of documentation affect the communities that we document. Treating indie classical as a matter of fact elides difference, perhaps disingenuously summarizing a set of distinct musical practices; treating indie classical as a matter of concern instead reveals, to refer back to Nico Muhly, how actual communities of musicians function.

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¹²⁷ Mazzoli was invited to Yale by the School of Music’s coordinator of career strategies, Astrid Baumgartner, to offer advice to students as one of “today’s music entrepreneurs”; see Astrid Baumgardner, “The Mindset of Success: Four Pillars For Today’s Music Entrepreneurs,” *I Care If You Listen*, December 19, 2013, <http://www.icareifyoulisten.com/2013/12/mindset-of-success-four-pillars-for-today-music-entrepreneurs-part-2/>. Greenstein is a member of the advisory board for the DePauw School of Music’s 21st-Century Musician initiative, “a complete re-imagining of the skills, tools and experiences necessary to create musicians of the future instead of the past—flexible, entrepreneurial musicians who find diverse musical venues and outlets in addition to traditional performance spaces, develop new audiences, and utilize their music innovatively to impact and strengthen communities.” See <http://music.depauw.edu/21cm/>. Blake has identified similar rhetorical gestures in recent musicological scholarship that implicitly reinforce neoliberal attacks on liberal arts and the university; see David Blake, “Musicological Omnivory in the Neoliberal University,” *Journal of Musicology* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 319–53.

¹²⁸ Definitional discourse surrounding the term “minimalism” has been robust and controversial. See, for example, Jonathan Bernard, “The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music,” *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 86–132; Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Timothy A. Johnson, “Minimalism: Aesthetic, Style, or Technique?” *The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 741–73; and Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll ap Siôn, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

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