Balance Problems: Neoliberalism and New Music in the American University and Ensemble

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“It’s your song!” exclaimed the graduate student deferentially. “It’s your arrangement,” retorted the famous rock musician. On the stage of Duke University’s Baldwin Auditorium in April 2015, the chamber sextet yMusic had just finished rehearsing Scott Lee’s orchestration of singer-songwriter Ben Folds’s 1999 song “Army.” Folds was singing and playing piano alongside yMusic, and wanted to ask Lee, a PhD student in composition at Duke, if he could try something different. To Lee, it was an unusual request: of course the author of a hit song could make any changes to it that he desired.

Together with Folds and percussionist Sam Smith, yMusic formed the “band” for Folds’s album So There, to appear that fall. Lee’s orchestration of “Army” for yMusic—a new-music ensemble that consists of flute, clarinet, trumpet, violin, viola, and cello—added pizzicato strings, lithe woodwind melodies, and subtle rhythmic complexities to Folds’s piano and vocals. So There represented the first collaboration between yMusic and Folds, and songs from Folds’s back catalog had been assigned to Duke doctoral students to arrange for the ensemble as an exercise.

In his 1958 polemic “Who Cares If You Listen?” Milton Babbitt imagined the American academy as “a home for the ‘complex,’ ‘difficult,’ and ‘problematical’ in music.” What has changed since Babbitt’s infamous essay, such that a collaboration between doctoral composition students and a rock musician was regarded as neither outré nor extracurricular, but was instead officially sponsored by the music department of an elite university? This article

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proposes that such a moment reflects major shifts in the university and the new-music ensemble, two institutional formations central to the American postwar musical avant-garde. Indeed, yMusic’s residency at Duke—in which the ensemble collaborated with graduate student composers to workshop, perform, and record new compositions over two years—is representative of the transformation of these two institutions from a technocratic Cold War paradigm to their contemporary status under the market- and branding-oriented logics of neoliberalism. The music written by the Duke composers was directly affected by these broader changes, as the students grappled with yMusic’s brand in creating new works for the ensemble. In accounting for the impact of these institutional developments on the production of musical works, I argue that the economic and ideological practices of neoliberalism have discernible aesthetic consequences for American new music. Although my ethnography of the yMusic residency is a specific case study, it provides insights into the way the contemporary music landscape in the United States has been reconditioned by neoliberalism.

The first half of this article compares the Cold War role of the ensemble and university as supporters of new music to their present-day status under the conditions of neoliberalism. Rather than provide a comprehensive history of these institutions, I offer a brief comparative overview that draws on existing scholarly literature to show how the postwar cultural context for contemporary music in the university and the ensemble in the United States differed from that of the present day. Within the university, the faculty-governed

3. The Duke residency took place between fall 2013 and spring 2015; the abovementioned rehearsal was held on the last day of the residency, which also marked the end of two years of fieldwork in which I observed yMusic’s collaboration with Duke graduate students in composition, and conducted twenty-five interviews with students, faculty, administrators, and ensemble members. In addition to those cited in the notes below, these include interviews with the following: Gabriel Cabezas (April 23, 2015), Ben Daniels (February 11, 2015), Jamie Keesecker (February 11, 2015), Scott Lindroth (August 27, 2014), Andrea Lee (November 16, 2014), Owen S. Richardson (August 27, 2014), Vladimir Smirnov (February 11, 2015), Alex Sopp (November 18, 2014), John Supko (September 3, 2014), and Yahn Wagner (February 11, 2015). See also Robin, “Scene without a Name,” 178–245. As a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a PhD program located nearby, I participated in many activities with the Duke student composers including concerts, conferences, and informal gatherings. I consider them to be colleagues as well as research participants; that we were in similar career positions in similar fields offered me, I hope, additional insights into their circumstances. My relationship with yMusic extends further back. In February 2012 I wrote a feature article about the sextet for the New York Times, interviewing its performers as well as composers and songwriters with whom they had collaborated: William Robin, “Bridging Genres and Generations on the Fly,” New York Times, February 5, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/arts/music/ymusic-to-bring-its-versatility-to-ecstatic-music-festival.html.

4. I follow David Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade”: Harvey, Brief History of Neoliberalism, 2. See also Blake, “Musicological Omnivory,” and Taylor, Music and Capitalism.
research agenda of the 1960s that designed the PhD program in composition has given way to a market-oriented and administrated neoliberal academy, of which the recent expansion of university arts presenters is a characteristic phenomenon. Whereas specialized new-music ensembles arose during the Cold War as transparent advocates for composers, twenty-first-century ensembles explicitly foreground their own branded identities in order to compete in a crowded marketplace. The backdrop for yMusic’s work at Duke was formed by the new importance of both the branded ensemble and the university arts presenter—the residency was sponsored by a partnership between the doctoral program and presenter Duke Performances—which I address in the second half of the article. I investigate the way in which the dialogue between student composers and professional performers was guided by yMusic’s brand, including its idiosyncratic instrumentation, its sound and repertory, and its collaborative ethos. Given the key role of ensembles and universities in shaping American new music, the issues raised by my analysis have significant implications for contemporary music in the twenty-first century, and for the way composers work in the United States and beyond.

This article builds on recent critical studies of the relationship between contemporary art music and neoliberal capitalism, and contributes both to the literature on the university as a site for the production of musical culture and to an emerging body of scholarship on ensembles. My methodological approach is also influenced by the anthropologist Stephen Collier, who questions whether neoliberalism can serve as a “macro-structure or explanatory background against which other things are understood”; rather than treating neoliberalism as a structural or contextual backdrop for the analysis of musical works, I see institutions as crucial mediators between neoliberal ideology and the individual decisions made by the composers I examine. An institutional lens provides the opportunity to situate present-day practices within a longer history of avant-garde music in the United States and to

5. See Moore, “Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur”; Pippen, “Toward a Postmodern Avant-Garde”; Quillen, “Winning and Losing”; Ritchey, “Amazing Together”; and Rutherford-Johnson, Music after the Fall. For studies of music and the modern American university, see Blake, “Biddung Culture”; Kingsbury, Music, Talent, and Performance; Nettl, Heartland Excursions; Pasler, Writing through Music; and Wilf, School for Cool. Georgina Born’s Rationalizing Culture, although an ethnography of IRCAM in Paris rather than a study of an academic program in the United States, most closely represents the relationship between composers, institutions, and new-music culture that is the focus of this article. For scholarship on ensembles, see Adlington, “Organizing Labor”; Chapman, “Collaboration, Presence, and Community”; Deaver, “Group for Contemporary Music”; Dromey, Pierrot Ensembles; Lewis, Power Stronger Than Itself; Moore, “Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur”; Pippen, “Toward a Postmodern Avant-Garde”; Shank, Political Force of Musical Beauty; and Taublieb, “Arthur Wiesberg’s Contemporary Chamber Ensemble.”

connect the organizational conditions of the twenty-first century to the Cold War networks that have been extensively studied by other musicologists.  

It is not my aim here to identify the students and faculty of Duke, or the performers of yMusic, as “neoliberals.” Rather, I see moments in this residency as symptomatic of fundamental changes in American contemporary music, and draw on my fieldwork to reveal the way they shape the creation of new musical works. These shifts may not be pernicious: the fact that student composers are being encouraged to work with popular musicians such as Ben Folds represents a response to the critique of the university composition program as an “ivory tower” that has, in Susan McClary’s framing, “sought to secure prestige precisely by claiming to renounce all possible social functions and values.” According to those whom I interviewed, the yMusic residency was a success, by which they meant that it had generated a fruitful and productive dialogue between composers and performers, allowed for professional and pedagogical student development, and facilitated concerts and recordings executed at a high level. But I also highlight tensions within and limits of the residency experience, which demonstrate the musical effects of the way the ensemble and university have been transformed in the twenty-first century.

The Cold War Institutional Past

Founded in 1992 and 2008 respectively, the Duke composition PhD program and yMusic are the modern-day heirs to a network of contemporary music institutions that emerged during the Cold War. Formally established in the United States during the 1960s, the composition doctoral program and the new-music ensemble ensemblematicized Cold War ideologies of technocratic expertise, while drawing on Cold War systems of patronage. As Roger Geiger, Stuart Leslie, Rebecca S. Lowen, and others have established, new conceptions of American scientific expertise were key to the formation of the Cold War research university; Eduardo Herrera and Michael Uy have similarly revealed the central role of expertise in shaping foundation, academic, and state-sponsored music patronage in this period. Both the university and the ensemble participated in the cultural Cold

7. See, for example, Beal, New Music, New Allies; Girard, “Music Theory in the American Academy”; Shreffler, “Ideologies of Serialism”; Taruskin, Music in the Late Twentieth Century, 103–73; Uy, “Big Bang of Music Patronage”; and Vandagriff, “History and Impact.”

8. McClary, “Terminal Prestige,” 62, 60. For a critique of McClary’s article, see Heile, “Darmstadt as Other.”

9. Geiger, Research and Relevant Knowledge; Leslie, Cold War and American Science; Lowen, Creating the Cold War University; Simpson, Universities and Empire; Herrera, “Rockefeller Foundation”; Uy, “Big Bang of Music Patronage.”
War by promoting American domestic expertise in composition and performance.10

The advent of the university as a key supporter for contemporary music in the late 1950s and early 1960s was predicated on what Michael Denning has called a “new Cold War higher education regime,” one that strongly emphasized and funded research.11 As many scholars have documented, in the wake of the “Sputnik” moment that directed significant state and private resources toward research, university composers repositioned their work as a method of scientific inquiry, articulated in Babbitt’s notoriously titled article “Who Cares If You Listen?”12 The first doctoral program in composition, created by Babbitt and his colleagues at Princeton in 1962, presented composition and music theory as forms of specialized and professionalized research: graduating students were required to compose a large-scale musical work and write an analytical thesis.13 In establishing composition as a field comprising professional experts, Babbitt drew on existing Cold War ideological frameworks and subsequently tapped into new forms of academic patronage.

The doctoral program helped to secure the university as a home for the serious composer, demonstrating that composition, as Babbitt and his colleagues described in a memo, “belongs here not as a second-class citizen, but completely.”14 The PhD also solved a practical concern for university composers. As Aaron Girard has shown, the research focus of the Cold War university obliged faculty members to hold doctoral degrees; a PhD in composition allowed composers to reassert their influence in programs increasingly guided by musicologists holding doctorates.15 The founding of the composition PhD thus reflects the importance of technocratic faculty governance in the Cold War academy, a newfound power for professors that was obtained in part because of the substantial funding they helped to acquire for their departments: patronage and expertise were deeply intertwined.16

12. See, for example, Brody, “Music for the Masses”; Girard, “Music Theory in the American Academy”; Taruskin, “Afterword: Nicht blutbefleckt?”; Taruskin, Music in the Late Twentieth Century, 103–73; and Vandagriff, “History and Impact.”
13. A memo coauthored by Babbitt, Edward T. Cone, and Arthur Mendel advocating for a new PhD in composition argued that the modern composition student “must be equipped to understand and contribute to contemporary musical theory, to resist informedly the intimidations of pseudoscience as well as to profit from the contributions of genuinely scientific theory”: quoted in Girard, “Music Theory in the American Academy,” 410.
14. Ibid.
The institutionalization of specialized new-music ensembles arose from similar concerns. In the United States, the earliest such groups were the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble (hereafter the CCE; founded 1960) and the Group for Contemporary Music (hereafter the GCM; founded 1962). Bassoonist and conductor Arthur Weisberg’s stated goal in founding the CCE was to establish new high standards of performance for contemporary music, bringing together freelance musicians who could perform the music “better than almost any one had ever heard before.” Composer Charles Wuorinen, cellist Joel Krosnick, and flutist Harvey Sollberger formed the GCM for similar reasons; as Wuorinen commented in 2002, “We thought that composers should have greater direct control over their performances, because we felt at that time an awful lot of performances of new music, well intentioned though they were, were very slovenly and not particularly comprehending.” Although they operated within different patronage networks, the emergence of composer-led minimalist groups in the late 1960s, such as Steve Reich and Musicians and the Philip Glass Ensemble, also reflected a perceived need for a new class of expert performers. Glass has stated that “[t]he language that I was working in, I wasn’t able to find people to play it. The whole creation of the Philip Glass Ensemble was really an instrument for me and has remained that way. At the time, when I began, no one would play the music but the Philip Glass Ensemble.” And Reich has written, “In 1966, I simply had musical ideas that I wanted to try and these were my friends who were interested in what I was working on.”

The founders of such ensembles positioned the groups as transparent mediators of the intentions of composers. As Wuorinen wrote in 1966,

The increasing demand of composers for control over those aspects of their environment which affect the production of their work is the main reason for the recent flowering of contemporary music performance activity in the

17. I define the new-music ensemble as a chamber group—ranging in size from a duo to a small orchestra, and often in a configuration considered “alternative” to traditional formats such as the string quartet—explicitly dedicated to performing repertories from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and commissioning and advocating for new work.


20. Philip Glass, interview with David Dubal (undated; transcription), “American Music Series,” Yale Oral History of American Music, 218 n, 4; Reich, Writings on Music, 143. Glass’s and Reich’s ensembles were formed from a shared rehearsal band in the late 1960s; see Chapman, “Collaboration, Presence, and Community.” This apolitical rhetoric of necessity distinguishes many early US ensembles from their explicitly political counterparts in Europe, including British radical groups such as Scratch Orchestra as well as the culture of democratic ensembles that emerged in Amsterdam as a result of Marxist debates over labor relations in the 1960s; see Adlington, “Organizing Labor.”
university. In this respect, the composer-directed and composer-oriented new music performing groups on American campuses is similar to the expanding movement to establish university-based electronic music studios. In both cases, the motivating force is the desire of composers to exert as much direct influence as possible over the realization of their work.21

With the exception of the minimalist groups, ensembles of the 1960s were also predicated on what their creators perceived to be an important preexisting canon of modernist music, for which they could provide newly exacting interpretations, and upon which new commissions would build.22 Weisberg examined major twentieth-century works in order to determine the configuration of the CCE, deciding upon “one of each of the basic orchestral instruments, which resulted in fourteen players.”23 Basing ensemble instrumentation on landmark repertory also facilitated the international codification of the “Pierrot” ensemble in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which included the US groups Da Capo Chamber Players (1970) and New York New Music Ensemble (1975).24 Like the creators of the composition PhD, Wuorinen, Weisberg, and other ensemble directors believed that the culture of contemporary music would improve with the advent of specialized ensembles comprising experts in their field.

That ideological framing was shaped by new forms of economic support. Central to the American new-music ensemble was the existence of a robust Cold War patronage system that represented a partnership between universities and foundations. Founded at Columbia, the GCM was initially funded by the university’s Alice Ditson Fund, and subsequently by a $24,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation; in 1965 the Rockefeller Foundation awarded a grant of $265,000 to place the CCE in residency at Rutgers University.25 Although these partnerships were not necessarily successful in the long term—Rutgers chose not to renew the CCE residency after its initial three-year period, and the GCM departed from Columbia for the Manhattan

22. According to Wuorinen, “There was a great backlog of music, including even such things as respectable performances of Pierrot Lunaire or music of that period that people simply didn’t know—and certainly didn’t know a really good performance”: Wuorinen, interview with Ingram Marshall, 30.
24. Susan Deaver identifies the Da Capo Chamber Players—as well as Speculum Musicae, Parnassus, the New Music Consort, and the New Jersey Percussion Ensemble—as a second “generation” of ensembles indebted to the work of the GCM: Deaver, “Group for Contemporary Music.” The “Pierrot” trend began in Europe with the Pierrot Players in Britain (formed in 1967 and reconstituted as the Fires of London in 1970) and the Schoenberg Ensemble in Amsterdam (1972). “Pierrot” ensembles are chamber groups typically consisting of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, drawing on the instrumentation of Arnold Schoenberg’s pioneering Pierrot Lunaire of 1912 but often replacing its vocalist with a percussionist. See Dromey, Pierrot Ensembles.
25. See Uy, “Big Bang of Music Patronage.”
School of Music after Wuorinen and Sollberger were denied tenure in 1971—they illustrate the fact that the creators of these ensembles both desired and obtained a noncommercial space for their institutions. Ensembles were meant to serve the same ideal purpose as the university that hosted them, as a retreat from the marketplace. As Wuorinen wrote in 1966, “the non-commercial circumstances surrounding most university groups generally allow them to devote such time to preparation that they have been able substantially to raise the overall performance standard for new works in the United States.”

These two institutional formations, the PhD and the ensemble, were part of a larger network of Cold War organizations such as the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center and the journal *Perspectives of New Music* that codified a new support system for new music, strongly underscored expertise, and were backed by university and foundation patronage. And though minimalist ensembles like those of Reich and Glass were neither housed within universities nor involved in Cold War patronage networks, they similarly maintained noncommercial aims for their work. As David Chapman details, it was not until the mid-1970s that Glass began to seek out a larger audience for his ensemble beyond the small community of downtown artists who initially attended his performances in SoHo. The original conditions for those ensembles that subsequently achieved commercial success, then, still aligned in part with the agenda of university-based institutions such as the GCM.

**The Neoliberal Institutional Present**

One of the most significant differences between the American landscape for new music in the 1960s and that of the present day is the transformation from a climate of scarcity—in which musicians founded ensembles simply to obtain competent performances of contemporary music—to one of abundance. In 2007 the *New Yorker* critic Alex Ross wrote that between 1967 and 2007 the number of “full-time new-music ensembles” in New York had grown from two to more than forty. And in the decade since, that number has only increased, as steady employment in traditional institutions such as symphony orchestras and opera houses has precipitously declined, and prestigious groups formed around the beginning of the twenty-first century—such as the International Contemporary Ensemble, Alarm Will Sound, So Percussion, and Eighth Blackbird—have served as models imitated by

younger composers and performers. Institutions have arisen to study these developments, such as the Eastman School of Music’s Paul R. Judy Center for Applied Research, and prominent composers have identified this proliferation as a meaningful and recent improvement in new music.29 As John Adams commented in 2017, “It’s a much better time for composers than when I was in my 20s. There’s much more support now for commissioning new work. And there are all kinds of ensembles such as ICE [International Contemporary Ensemble], and Eighth Blackbird and various groups in L.A. dedicated to keeping contemporary composers in front of the public.”30

In this crowded marketplace, simply performing specific repertory at a high level of execution may not be enough to justify an ensemble’s existence. In order to remain competitive, ensembles turn toward a practice that is increasingly common under the conditions of neoliberalism: branding.31 As John Pippen has shown, contemporary groups such as Eighth Blackbird construct brands “that members can circulate and exploit for symbolic, cultural, and economic capital within classical and new music networks.”32 yMusic trumpeter and cofounder C. J. Camerieri made this explicit in interview:

We all grew up with this entrepreneurial spirit, because you had to have it. There wasn’t a way to make a living if you just were a person who could play your instrument, because there aren’t gigs for that anymore—at least not fulfilling gigs, either for your soul or for your pocketbook. . . . You have to build your own house. And so this entrepreneurial spirit, that’s what yMusic found. We found these six individuals who were creating their own brand for what they did, and they were similar enough that we decided to codify it into one brand. . . . The present-day musical landscape is such that if you create your own gig, or you create your own brand, you create your own way of making a mark on music, you’ll be rewarded for that.33

Camerieri’s perspective mirrors Andrea Moore’s argument that contemporary freelance performers have deliberately refashioned themselves as entrepreneurs.34 The nimble, small-business structure of the new-music ensemble may

29. See Wozniak and Judy, “Alternative Ensembles.”
31. Timothy Taylor writes that “branding has become a more intense, frequent, and dominant strategy in neoliberal capitalism. Every commodity in neoliberal capitalism is treated as a brand or potential brand, for this is the only way a consumer economy knows how to introduce products to mass audiences and manage them”: Taylor, Music and Capitalism, 54.
32. Pippen, “Toward a Postmodern Avant-Garde,” 47.
33. C. J. Camerieri, interview with the author, November 16, 2014. Pippen finds similar rhetoric around branding in an interview with Kyle Vegter, Eighth Blackbird’s office manager: “We talk about branding all the time, and we talk about image all the time. . . . I think of eighth blackbird as a brand. And I think that we’re pushing towards more [branding]. And we’re trying to make them [Eighth Blackbird] more identifiable as such”: Pippen, “Toward a Postmodern Avant-Garde,” 55.
34. Moore, “Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur.”
represent an ideal vehicle for musicians who no longer seek a place in classical music’s institutional culture and traditional labor market. As yMusic cofounder and violinist Rob Moose remarked in an interview in 2012, “Major orchestras are really their own culture. In my eyes, it’s one of the closest things you can do to having a desk job in like a 1950’s insurance company.”

And while the GCM certainly publicized their performances and recordings in the 1960s, contemporary ensembles consciously brand all aspects of their identities, crafting an omnipresent and distinguishing ethos that shapes artistic practices. This culture of entrepreneurial branding exemplifies ideological transformations between the Cold War era, in which ensembles foregrounded expertise, and that of neoliberalism, in which ensembles foreground marketability and distinctiveness. Whereas groups in the 1960s positioned themselves as proponents of high standards of performance—and transparent mediators for the composers and modernist canons for which they advocated—twenty-first-century ensembles emphasize their own identities. (That said, branding practices in music, as Mark Samples has shown, date back at least as far as the nineteenth century, and twenty-first-century branded ensembles have clear precedents in the work of the Kronos Quartet (founded 1973), as well as in the composer collective Bang on a Can (founded 1987) and its All-Stars ensemble (founded 1992), organizations that have explicitly drawn on the marketing techniques of popular music to seek out a broad, nonspecialist audience.)

The most obvious example of such branding strategies can be found in the names of contemporary ensembles. yMusic’s name instantiates a brand: it was designed to identify the ensemble’s six performers as members of Generation Y, thus indicating a common spirit within the group that they might share with their ideal youthful audience. Whereas the names of the CCE, GCM, Da Capo Chamber Players, and Speculum Musicae indicate a general concern with a specific musical genre—and the names of Steve Reich and Musicians and Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble associate the groups with their founding composers and repertory—names such as Eighth Blackbird, Wet Ink, and Alarm Will Sound are quirky, catchy, and not immediately

35. Royce Akers, “Rob Moose from yMusic Seems Friendly and Smart Like You’d Expect,” Vice, November 20, 2012, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mvp4by/rob-moose-from-ymusic-seems-friendly-and-smart-like-you-d-expect. Such rhetorical tensions between the orchestral and ensemble worlds became a reality in February 2013, when yMusic was scheduled to perform a concert as part of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra’s Liquid Music Series during a period in which the musicians of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra were locked out by the orchestra’s administration, in the wake of failed labor negotiations. Local 802, the Greater New York chapter of the American Federation of Musicians, told yMusic that playing the Liquid Music concert would constitute crossing the picket line—and result in fines and expulsion from the union—and yMusic canceled the performance. See Robin, “Scene without a Name,” 159–76.

36. Samples, “The Humbug and the Nightingale.”
evocative of contemporary music. They might even be mistaken for the names of rock groups—a deliberate gesture for many ensembles that describe themselves as similar to bands. Such names point inward toward the distinctiveness of the specific group, rather than outward toward the repertory or composers to which they are dedicated, and demonstrate the centrality of marketing and publicity to the present day.

If the technocratic ideology of the Cold War era allowed institutions to tap into emerging foundation and university support, twenty-first-century branding instead serves to facilitate purposeful competition in the very commercial sphere from which the GCM sought to escape. Moore has documented that members of recent ensembles have adapted themselves to a freelance market determined by flexible, portfolio careers rather than the full-time, unionized labor of symphony orchestras. One of the most public proponents of this entrepreneurial ethos has been the founder of the International Contemporary Ensemble, Claire Chase, who in a widely disseminated convocation address at Northwestern’s Bienen School of Music in 2013 encouraged young musicians to embrace entering the marketplace.

\[y\text{Music}\] represents a particularly extreme example of a market-oriented ensemble, as its members have chosen to structure the group as a for-profit LLC rather than the nonprofit 501c3 typical of new-music institutions. In a 2017 profile, violist Nadia Sirota described this decision to critic Justin Davidson as strategic: “She points out that the chamber group she co-founded, \[y\text{Music}\], is a business, not a nonprofit. ‘So many music organizations start

37. This is even the case for ensembles dedicated to the music of a single composer. Missy Mazzoli’s group—which she has described as indebted to the work of Steve Reich and Musicians, the Philip Glass Ensemble, and the Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble—is titled Victoire, rather than the Missy Mazzoli Ensemble: Missy Mazzoli, interview with the author, November 10, 2015.


with the assumption that we’re not going to sell enough tickets or CDs to make a go of it. And I think, why can’t we?" An inherent contradiction of this notion, however, is that the economies of prestige and funding that allow these ensembles to flourish still rely on classical music’s traditional, nonprofit structures. Although yMusic’s self-organization may be for-profit, many of the organizations that hire the group, publicize its activities, and sell tickets for its performances—such as Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, and the Kaufmann Music Center—are not. The ensemble simultaneously acquires cultural capital through distancing itself rhetorically from classical music and economic capital through continuing to align with many of the institutional practices of classical and contemporary music.

yMusic’s marketplace positioning is further complicated by what is perhaps the strongest continuity between ensembles of the 1960s and those of the present: the reliance on the university as a principal source of support. Pippen writes that “residencies are a major part of professional life and economic livelihood” for many ensembles: they provide crucial financial backing, equipment and rehearsal space, performance and recording venues, and time to develop new projects. Although yMusic would not identify the GCM as a model for its activities—in interviews, members cited the Kronos Quartet and Bang on a Can as influences—the concept of the university residency as established by Cold War patronage continues to play an essential role today. Even popular music projects may depend in part on the university: yMusic’s tour with Ben Folds, for example, was rehearsed and launched on the Duke campus.

But if the university has served as a continuous sponsor for ensembles for a half century, its culture has shifted considerably since the era that created the composition PhD. As numerous scholars have shown, the corporatization of the American university over the past thirty years has created an academy that operates under neoliberal logics of marketization in which, as Denning writes, “education has been largely refigured not as a public good but as a private investment in scarce cultural or human capital.”


41. Additionally, in June 2016 yMusic was selected as part of the initial cohort of the organization NewMusicUSA’s New York City New Music Impact Fund, a program sponsored by a $495,000 grant from the Scherman Foundation Axel and Katherine Rosin Fund to provide general operating and residency support as well as marketing assistance.

42. This combination of rhetorical distance and institutional nearness is indicative of the broader “indie classical” scene in which yMusic participates, as I have analyzed elsewhere: Robin, “Rise and Fall of ‘Indie Classical’” and “Scene without a Name.”


As David Blake describes, “Under a neoliberal paradigm, business logics and values come to infuse all functions of the university. Aspects of university education previously conceived of as public goods, such as the study of the liberal and fine arts, are now evaluated as commodities through such quantitative measures as return on investment metrics or impact factors.”

One emblematic development of the neoliberal academy is the dramatic expansion of the institution of the university arts presenter. Widespread today in American universities, arts presenters first proliferated during the 1960s as concert series that hosted visiting musicians and artists to perform on college campuses. But in the early twenty-first century these institutions have grown into key stakeholders in the American academy. They own and operate campus facilities, participate in major fundraising projects, and help to govern the role of the arts in the university. Just as the emergence of the composition PhD reflected the priorities of the Cold War university, the expansion of the arts presenter aligns with the neoliberalization of the American academy. First, presenters are fundamentally market-oriented. Although they serve a student constituency, the primary mission of these institutions is not educational: they produce performances aimed toward a wider public, and thus prioritize ticket selling and fundraising. Second, presenters are typically staffed by non-faculty arts administrators, who often

45. Blake, “Musicological Omnivory,” 327. See also Bousquet, How the University Works; Donoghue, Last Professor; Lye, Newfield, and Vernon, “Humanists and the Public University”; and Slaughter and Rhoades, “Neo-Liberal University.”

46. Though presenters that brought guest performers to university campuses date back to the late nineteenth century—with the establishment of the University of Michigan’s University Music Society in 1880—many major presenters at American universities were founded between the mid-1950s and early 1970s. Duke’s Institute for the Arts, the precursor to Duke Performances, was established as an informal concert series in 1956. Other presenters or presentation venues established in this period include the Pennsylvania State University Arts Series (1956), Dartmouth College’s Hopkins Center for the Arts (1962), the University of Illinois’s Krannert Center for the Performing Arts (1969), Stanford Lively Arts (1969), the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts (1971), and the University of Iowa’s Hancher Auditorium (1972).

47. Major twenty-first-century transformations in the field of university arts presenters have included the 2002 founding of Major University Presenters, a consortium of seventeen institutions established to “more effectively align with the education, research and public engagement missions of their universities,” which hosts conferences and publishes studies to measure the impact of the arts on campuses: see “Member Universities,” Major University Presenters website, 2018, http://majoruniversitypresenters.com/member_universities/. In dialogue with this new initiative, several new major presenters have been founded since 2000, while others have been dramatically transformed, rebranded, and expanded. New presenters include the University of Maryland’s Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center (2001), Montclair State University’s Peak Performances (2005), and the University of North Carolina’s Carolina Performing Arts (2005); transformed organizations include Duke Performances (2004), the rebranding of the university’s Institute for the Arts; Stanford Live (2012), a rebranding of Stanford Lively Arts; and the University of Florida’s Performing Arts (2000), the result of a merger between several campus arts organizations.
report directly to university upper management. 48 This mirrors what sociologists Tressie McMillan Cottom and Gaye Tuchman have identified as a recent shift of authority from the professoriate to a managerial and administrative class; similarly, Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades describe as central to the neoliberal university an increased managerial control of faculty alongside an expansion of non-faculty support professionals who are closely linked to management.49 Third, university presenters play a major role in guiding new campus construction, including the building or remodeling of concert halls and arts centers. They thus participate in what Carol Stabile has identified as the importance of development in the neo-liberal university, which relies on capital campaigns and partnerships with private industry, often with the goal of boosting student enrollment by offering new facilities as an incentive.50

Duke University offers a representative example of this new role for the university arts presenter. The 2004 launch of arts presenter Duke Performances anticipated “Arts at Duke,” a strategic plan initiated by the university in 2006 that has since stimulated nearly $100 million invested in new arts buildings, programs, and faculty.51 Such strategic plans centered on facilities, fundraising campaigns, and an expanded curricular role for the arts have become increasingly common in elite American universities in the

48. For example, Aaron Greenwald, director of Duke Performances, previously produced programming for the Museum of Jewish Heritage; Emil Kang, executive and artistic director of Carolina Performing Arts, previously served as president and executive director of the Detroit Symphony; and Matías Tarnopolsky, former executive and artistic director of Berkeley’s Cal Performances, was previously vice president for artistic planning at the New York Philharmonic. (In March 2018 the Philadelphia Orchestra announced that it had appointed Tarnopolsky as its next president and chief executive officer.) In 2017 Michigan’s University Music Society named as its president Matthew VanBeisen, the outgoing president of the New York Philharmonic. The expansion of non-faculty administration is complicated by the fact that professors often also act as administrators; composition professor Scott Lindroth, for example, serves as Vice Provost for the Arts at Duke. But critics have argued that the neoliberal academy’s focus on STEM fields has also pressured humanities faculty to work as entrepreneurial fundraisers and administrators in order to keep their programs afloat; see Stabile, “Who’s Sitting in the President’s Box?”


50. Stabile, “Who’s Sitting in the President’s Box?”

51. The initiative has included the renovation of Baldwin Auditorium, the concert venue where yMusic residency rehearsals, recordings, and performances took place; the creation of the position of Vice Provost for the Arts, which is held by Lindroth, who helped to facilitate the yMusic residency; and in 2015 a gift of $25 million by philanthropist and chairman of the university’s board of trustees David M. Rubenstein toward the establishment of the Rubenstein Arts Center, a new $50 million “headquarters for the arts” opened in 2018 that includes rehearsal, performance, classroom, and mixed-use spaces. See “$25 Million Gift, $50 Million Center to Elevate Arts,” Duke Today, October 4, 2015, https://today.duke.edu/2015/10/artscenter; and Eric Ferreri, “The Duke Arts Renaissance,” Duke Stories, January 23, 2018, https://stories.duke.edu/duke-arts-renaissance.
past decade. Presenters may ultimately play a greater role in raising funds and attracting attention for such initiatives than faculty-led arts and music departments: because of their established relationships with prominent performers, presenters can leverage their resources to help make the arts “visible” on campus to major stakeholders. Whereas the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s music department cannot necessarily afford to bring Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Ensemble to campus, for example, presenter Carolina Performing Arts can sponsor its concerts (and, perhaps equally importantly, post-performance receptions with donors and administration). Such activities may also reach broader constituencies than those students enrolled in arts coursework, and presenters may thus be rewarded with additional resources for demonstrating their cross-campus impact to market-focused administrators. These shifts have direct consequences for the institutional culture of contemporary music at the university. For composition, university presenters may provide funding for prestigious outside ensembles to visit and work with students, as well as facilitating publicity and marketing for performances of works by faculty and student composers.

Like the faculty of the 1960s, the administrators of the twenty-first century have sought to position the arts as an important stakeholder in the university. Indeed, as composition professor and Vice Provost for the Arts Scott Lindroth wrote in a *Washington Post* op-ed about Duke’s new initiative, “I am more convinced than ever that the success of arts at a research university depends on the continual integration of artistic practice with academic development.” Representative examples are provided by the expansion of administrated arts presenters at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Stanford University. UNC’s Carolina Performing Arts was established as part of the renovation of the university’s Memorial Hall, a major concert venue that reopened in 2005; the resources of the presenter and refurbished venue could newly sponsor prominent touring orchestras such as the Chicago Symphony and Vienna Philharmonic, who might not otherwise visit North Carolina. By 2015 Carolina Performing Arts had received more than $13 million in revenue from ticket sales and almost $20 million in private donations, and announced its creation of the Core@Carolina Square (later renamed Current), a new off-campus, mixed-use facility described as an “arts innovation lab, studio, and theater space.” See “The Core@Carolina Square Facility Advances Fusion of Arts, Academics and Community,” University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill News, May 27, 2015, http://uncnews.unc.edu/2015/05/27/the-corecarolina-square-facility-advances-fusion-of-arts-academics-and-community/. In 2016 director Emil Kang was named Special Assistant to the Chancellor for the Arts, a cabinet-level position tasked with leading a university-wide arts initiative; in October 2017 the university announced “Arts Everywhere,” a venture capital fund that aims to raise $350 million for the arts by 2022 and is a key component of the university’s $4.25 billion capital campaign. The Stanford Arts Initiative launched in 2006 with “the goal of making the arts a fundamental part of a Stanford education and building the resources and programs required to realize that vision”; it has included the 2012 rebranding of presenter Stanford Lively Arts into Stanford Live; new faculty positions, graduate fellowships, and arts-focused curricular requirements; a new administrative position of Vice President for the Arts; and the creation of an “arts district,” a $227 million investment including new and redesigned buildings. See “About Stanford Arts,” Stanford Arts, accessed June 10, 2018, https://arts.stanford.edu/about/.
inquiry.” But the context in which they do so is markedly different. Babbitt and his colleagues advocated for a composition PhD within a Cold War university that prioritized technocratic expertise, in the form of research and faculty governance; Duke Performances and other presenters advocate for resources within a neoliberal university predicated on market values and governed by non-faculty administrators. Although the Duke composition program is an inheritor of Cold War ideology, the fact that it partnered with Duke Performances for the yMusic residency was directly shaped by the increasing power of the arts presenter in the modern-day university.

Residency Origins

In February 2008, violinist Rob Moose and trumpeter C. J. Camerieri played a concert with rock group the National at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. At a party following the performance, they spoke with colleagues about their dismay at the absence of camaraderie or musical cohesion among the freelance musicians who accompanied prominent indie bands. Moose recalled that he was just doing a lot of freelance gigs with bands and songwriters, and feeling like there wasn’t an organization designed to take it seriously or support it, and that every time it was a slap-together experience. Some people who were there playing liked it, and other people, it was just a gig. Just thought that there was a movement and a general interest in combining the chamber musicky world with the band world, and felt like that was where I lived, and wanted to create a group.

Moose and Camerieri developed the idea for yMusic over the following weeks. They selected members not on the basis of a predetermined instrumentation but in an attempt to bring together what Camerieri called the “right people,” musicians they felt most strongly about working with: violist Nadia Sirota, flutist Alex Sopp, clarinetist Hideaki Aomori, and cellist Mike Block. Each of the freelance musicians had a conservatory background in


54. Rob Moose, interview with the author, November 12, 2014.

55. Camerieri, interview with the author. Block left the ensemble in late 2008 and by January 2009 cellist Clarice Jensen had joined in his place. Jensen remained a fixture of the ensemble for several years and recorded on its first two albums. In 2014 she departed and was replaced by cellist Gabriel Cabezas. Apart from these changes of cellist, the personnel of yMusic has remained intact since its founding. Both Jensen and Cabezas worked with the Duke composers, as well as substitute cellist Andrea Lee, who filled in for Cabezas as a result of scheduling conflicts in the 2014–15 residency.
classical or jazz performance, and had experience in collaborating with rock musicians.

In subsequent years, yMusic continued to work with indie bands including My Brightest Diamond, Bon Iver, and the Dirty Projectors, but also turned toward building its own repertory, commissioning works from established composers such as Sarah Kirkland Snider and Nico Muhly as well as rock musicians new to writing for an instrumental ensemble. By 2011 it had collected a repertory large enough to release *Beautiful Mechanical*, a debut album on New Amsterdam Records featuring works by seven composers.

With the release of this album, together with its accompanying marketing and publicity materials, yMusic manifested a clear musical brand, comprising its instrumentation, its repertory, and its collaborative ethos, which I will address in subsequent sections. And it was this strong act of branding that facilitated the project at Duke.

Launched in fall 2013, the yMusic residency participated in a recently established partnership between Duke Performances and the music department’s “Encounters: With the Music of Our Time,” a series established in 1982 that invites guest artists to perform on campus and collaborate with composition graduate students. Unlike schools such as Princeton or Yale—whose locations make it easier to foster connections between campus composers and New York–based ensembles—Duke lacks a robust local new-music presence to draw upon outside of the university. “Encounters” thus represents a significant pedagogical opportunity for students to workshop new music with specialized experts, build relationships with reputable ensembles that could lead to future performances, and create a portfolio of professional scores and recordings.

The collaboration with Duke Performances and its director Aaron Greenwald—as well as the recent expansion of the arts at Duke, including Lindroth’s position as Vice Provost for the Arts—facilitated a new direction for “Encounters” from 2011. Whereas past “Encounters” typically entailed a single visit from a professional ensemble that featured concerts and a session in which the performers read through student works, Greenwald envisaged what he called “sustained, multi-visit engagement . . . an iterative conversation about the music that was being written.” yMusic thus made three visits to Duke in each of the two academic years it was in residence, developing social and musical relationships with the student composers that would shape the works they wrote.

56. For the 2013–14 yMusic residency, the Duke music department contributed $8,100, Duke Performances $10,000, and the Vice Provost for the Arts $15,000.
57. No full-time ensembles dedicated to contemporary music are resident in the area, though the department works with local and university-based musicians.
59. In the 2013–14 academic year, yMusic made three trips to the Duke campus: on November 3–5, 2013, it recorded a dissertation composition, workshopped three pieces by
In partnering with “Encounters,” Greenwald had specifically looked beyond the kinds of ensemble that might typically work with graduate student composers. The first Duke Performances affiliation with the composition program featured the Bad Plus, a jazz trio that engages with new music but does not typically collaborate with outside composers. For the next “Encounters”/Duke Performances residency, Greenwald suggested yMusic to the composition faculty. He was interested in yMusic’s work with popular musicians and in what he called “the notion of a chamber ensemble having a very specific identity, and commissioning for, in yMusic’s case, both that identity and the musical configuration, and kind of curating their own musical lives.”

In other words, Greenwald was drawn to yMusic’s brand, and the opportunity for the graduate students to write for it. Given the key role of the arts presenter and the importance of branding in this context, we can see how the neoliberalization of the university and the ensemble helped to set the institutional agenda of the yMusic residency project. Adopting Samples’s definition of branding as a “dynamic, designed system of signs that mediates the relationship between producers and consumers,” in the following sections I will show how different aspects of yMusic’s brand were consumed by the Duke composers and subsequently rearticulated in the musical works they produced.

The Instrumental Brand

The title of yMusic’s second album alludes to the ensemble’s unusual instrumentation and identifies a central aspect of its brand. Balance Problems, released on New Amsterdam in 2014, is named after a work by Nico Muhly, whose relationship with several yMusic players dates back their undergraduate years together at Juilliard. Muhly’s titles frequently make cheeky allusions to the original performers of a work; in this case, Balance Problems is a not-so-oblique reference to the difficulties of writing for an ensemble comprising flute, clarinet, trumpet, violin, viola, and cello. And although the album

graduate student composers, and played a concert of its own repertory at Casbah, a rock club in downtown Durham; on March 2–3, 2014, it rehearsed and recorded graduate student compositions; and on March 23–25, it rehearsed and performed student works at Motorco, another downtown Durham venue. In 2014–15 yMusic also visited Duke three times: on November 15–18, 2014, it provided the soundtrack for director Sam Green’s “live documentary” The Measure of All Things and workshops early versions of graduate student works; on March 1–2, 2015, it rehearsed graduate student works and played them at Motorco; and on April 19–22 it recorded two graduate dissertations and worked with Ben Folds.

60. Greenwald, interview with the author.
61. Ibid.
63. The title also refers to the sonic signature of the album as a whole, for which yMusic granted producer Ryan Lott (also known as Son Lux) a large degree of creative control and authorial voice, as in the production of a rock album. As Lott commented in an interview, “Our
was released after the Duke residency began, its title serves as an apt metaphor for one of the principal challenges faced by the student composers when composing for yMusic’s brand.

Instrumentation was an incidental by-product of yMusic’s formation, but one that became a strong component of its brand. Members have frequently described how the sextet was assembled not on the basis of a specifically desired set of instruments but rather on that of a specifically desired set of collaborators. Although it was not at first clear how this unusual setup might sound, yMusic now insists that its commissions must be written for all six members. Moose referred to the instrumentation as “our signature”: “If you add anything or take anything away, it’s not the group anymore. It feels foundational.”

Sirota differentiated yMusic from the American Contemporary Music Ensemble and Alarm Will Sound, two other ensembles in which she has performed, by its “fixed and bizarre instrumentation.” This emphasis on distinctive instrumentation—or what I call yMusic’s instrumental brand—has been foregrounded in the ensemble’s publicity. A 2011 press release for Beautiful Mechanical described its instrumentation as a “unique composite of sound” that “has sparked a burgeoning repertoire of commissions from some of today’s most important artists.” The ensemble often performs the connection between its social ethos—the relationship between its players and with the composers with whom it regularly collaborates—and its instrumentation. At a yMusic concert at New York Live Arts in downtown Manhattan in December 2015, cellist Gabriel Cabezas told the audience that the ensemble’s unusual configuration meant that “you have to reach out to people to write your music, and so you ask your friends.”

As Camerieri told the Lansing City Pulse in April 2018, “We didn’t form yMusic because these six instruments made any sense together. We formed it because of these six people. It’s not a string quartet. It’s not a traditional ensemble of any kind. It’s our six favorite people.”

64. Moose, interview with the author.
Many twenty-first-century ensembles similarly highlight their idiosyncratic and fixed instrumentation, such as loadbang’s juxtaposition of trumpet, trombone, bass clarinet, and baritone voice, NOW Ensemble’s combination of clarinet, flute, bass, electric guitar, and piano, or Gnarwallaby’s clarinet, trombone, cello, and piano. Such distinctive instrumentation requires a group to build its repertory from scratch—the opposite approach from 1960s ensembles such as the GCM and CCE, which evolved from existing modernist canons—and thus create its own unique sound. In describing the origins of Bang on a Can’s All-Stars ensemble, composer and cofounder David Lang made explicit how its individualized instrumentation—cello, bass, piano, percussion, guitar, and reeds—might give the group an edge in a crowded marketplace: “We’re not going to be able to make our way with an ensemble that plays music that other people play. If we set the ensemble so that it had its own unique instrumentation, it would have its sound. If we made music specifically for it, it would have its own repertoire that nobody else would have.”

The Duke students’ grappling with yMusic’s instrumental brand is thus also representative of broader issues in the new-music landscape. In April 2013 the Duke faculty announced to the graduate students which ensembles would visit for residency workshops, and which students would write for them. I spoke with the seven students asked to work with yMusic in 2013–14 about preparing to compose for the ensemble. They had varying levels of familiarity with yMusic’s activities, from being wholly unaware of the sextet to having listened to its recordings repeatedly. Research marked the first preparatory phase: composers browsed the group’s website, listened to recordings (at that time, the album Beautiful Mechanical and videos available on YouTube), and read reviews. Planning to write for yMusic meant acquiring mediated information; unlike the ensemble’s close friends such as Muhly, the students were essentially learning about yMusic by studying its brand.

The initial overriding concern among the Duke students was the presence of the trumpet. Few small ensembles include a single brass instrument that

69. David Lang, interview with the author, January 19, 2016. In describing the similarly idiosyncratic Silk Road Ensemble, Tim Rutherford-Johnson has critiqued the narrowness of such groups’ missions: “Very few opportunities exist for the Silk Road Ensemble’s commissioned works to be performed by groups other than the Silk Road Ensemble itself. It and its repertory exist in an almost exclusive symbiotic relationship, which raises the question, to what extent are its activities really promulgating a new kind of musical creativity as opposed to assuring the continuation of a particular ‘brand’?”: Rutherford-Johnson, Music after the Fall, 127.

70. In 2013–14 Duke composers also worked with the Hilliard Ensemble and Imani Winds, for readings of works written for them, though in short-term visits distinct from the yMusic residency; in 2014–15 similar short-term residencies took place with the Da Capo Chamber Players and New York Polyphony.

71. It emerged from my interviews that other orchestrational challenges have included yMusic’s lack of a chordal instrument (such as piano or guitar) and the overall middle range of the ensemble (the cello and bass clarinet, rather than a double bass, providing the lowest end).
is not a French horn, and the composers puzzled over how to navigate the trumpet’s typically cutting sound within an otherwise softer timbre of woodwinds and strings. According to Scott Lee, “The main challenge of the group, anybody will tell you this, writing for them, is the trumpet. It doesn’t really fit—you have string trio, flute and clarinet, and then you have this loud brass instrument.”72 Some composers hoped to avoid the issue entirely: as student Vladimir Smirnov recalled, “Several times I thought, ‘Oh, maybe I don’t have to write for the trumpet—maybe I can just ask him to sit out.’”73

Once yMusic had visited campus for the first time in November 2013, the Duke students became more confident about the presence of the trumpet, specifically as played by Camerieri. The ensemble rehearsed early versions of two student pieces and performed its own repertory at the off-campus rock venue Casbah. Hearing Camerieri perform clarified that balance would not, in fact, be a problem. As Lee commented, “He’s great, he can play anything, but still you have to be totally aware of that”; that awareness resulted from Lee’s personal experience with the ensemble.74 Another composer, Ben Daniels, was reassured by colleagues who attended rehearsals: “First thing they said was, ‘The trumpet: he’s unbelievable. He can play anything. He can play a whisper; he will play anything. The guy is a monster, they’re all monsters. But in particular—don’t be worried about the trumpet.’”75 Even though the composers had researched the individual musicians, they were not sure how to manage yMusic’s instrumentation until they heard the ensemble perform live.

Just as Muhly’s Balance Problems draws on yMusic’s instrumental brand, so too the presence of the trumpet shaped what the Duke students wrote. In the first movement of his Liftoff, Lee integrates the trumpet within the ensemble texture, as the instrument introduces repeated gestures that are imitated by violin, clarinet, and flute; the second movement, however, features a prominent trumpet solo at its center. That decision was motivated by Lee’s early concerns over the way the trumpet fitted into the ensemble, and followed his actual experience of working with Camerieri over the course of the rehearsal period: “I loved hanging out with him [Camerieri] the first time, and he’s a great player, and so the second movement he gets to shine. I did that because I knew that he could play anything I put in front of him, and also because the trumpet doesn’t fit in.”76 Each of the seven composers of the 2013–14 residency confronted a similar challenge. Without knowledge of the yMusic performers as people, rather than as instruments, they relied on mediators such as bios and recordings to grasp the implications of the

73. Vladimir Smirnov, interview with the author, August 20, 2014.
74. Lee, interview with the author.
75. Ben Daniels, interview with the author, September 3, 2014.
76. Lee, interview with the author.
trumpet. Lacking an understanding of what Moose described as the “foundational” importance of all six musicians performing together as yMusic—its instrumental brand—they were doubtful about the instrument’s inclusion. Experiencing rehearsals mitigated those concerns. And it crucially allowed the Duke composers to treat what was at first a hurdle as a compositional artifice, a structural device around which a piece of music could be conceived; they could play with the brand, etching it into their works rather than trying to avoid it.

A separate balance problem arose during the 2014–15 residency. In an attempt to draw the Duke composers’ attention to the way the ensemble perceived itself, yMusic told the Duke faculty that four of its instrumentalists were doublers: Moose plays electric guitar as well as violin, Camerieri plays French horn and trumpet, Aomori plays both B-flat and bass clarinet, and Sopp plays a variety of flutes, from piccolo to alto flute. Works written for yMusic often ask the players to switch instruments in the middle of a piece, and composers who collaborate with the sextet regularly draw on multiple configurations of its sonic palette. But the faculty’s attempt to convey this information to the graduate students complicated yMusic’s request. In May 2014 students received an e-mail from composition professor John Supko:

The faculty recently had a conference call with yMusic & one of the things they brought up was the fact that they play other instruments & want you to consider writing for them. Here’s the full list of possibilities:

- Violin, acoustic & electric guitar (same person)
- Viola
- Cello
- Flute, piccolo, alto flute (same person)
- Clarinet, bass clarinet (same person)
- Trumpet, French horn (same person)

On the basis of this list, students could easily circumvent the aforementioned trumpet problem—and, implicitly, yMusic’s core instrumental brand—if desired. Sarah Curzi, for example, wrote for alto flute, bass clarinet, French horn, and strings, placing all three wind players on secondary instruments.

In a preparatory rehearsal that I attended in November 2014—an evening meeting without the composers present, before the year’s first residency

77. Though the musicians are doublers, these other instruments are considered secondary. Camerieri learned French horn only after studying trumpet through college. Aomori purchased a bass clarinet after joining yMusic, when the ensemble realized how “treble-heavy” its original combination of instruments was; he acknowledged, “I definitely learned how to play the bass clarinet by being forced to play in yMusic”: Hideaki Aomori, interview with the author, November 16, 2014.

78. John Supko, e-mail to Duke graduate student composers, May 19, 2014. Quoted by permission.
workshops began the next day—yMusic members expressed concerns about the instrumentation of the new Duke repertory. Camerieri noted that he played trumpet in only one of the pieces, and substitute cellist Andrea Lee remarked that some Duke composers had said they were worried about balance, and had thus opted to write for horn. Sirota suggested that the ensemble tell the composers that, while it was appreciated that they had thought about writing for these instruments, they were essentially auxiliary, and the ensemble did not sound as good playing them. She recommended that yMusic perform some of its own repertory in a subsequent rehearsal to “show the composers what we do”: to demonstrate yMusic’s instrumental brand.79

Here, we see Duke students attempting to avoid a balance problem and thereby unintentionally presenting the ensemble with a problem of its own, imposing an instrumental brand that was not what the players regarded as their norm. The burden had shifted from the composers’ attempts to address instrumental balance to the performers’ attempts to address instrumental technique. This result of a series of small miscommunications and several levels of mediation of yMusic’s instrumental brand—from the ensemble to the faculty to the graduate students—ultimately embedded itself in the works written for the ensemble, articulating a different kind of balance problem.

For the Duke composers, yMusic’s instrumental brand also raised professional complications. Since 2011, the ensemble’s repertory has consisted entirely of works written specifically for yMusic, many of which have been released on its albums.80 yMusic keeps these compositions in its active touring repertory, and assumes a certain degree of ownership over them.81 This runs counter to the way many new-music ensembles function, in which works are commissioned, developed, premiered, and recorded, and often subsequently discarded as the group moves on to new projects. yMusic’s approach, according to its members, hews closer to the model of the rock band. As Camerieri observed, “We treat our repertoire like a band treats their repertoire. We’re not going to commission for a concert at Zankel Hall

79. To my knowledge, the suggested conversation and proposed rehearsal/performance did not take place; and the instrumentation of these works did not change.
80. Members of the ensemble in fact discuss the creation of Beautiful Mechanical as the result of obtaining a large enough repertory to record an album; when I asked Aomori why the ensemble had released its first record, he replied, “Because we had enough pieces. We were like, ‘Now we can make an album, because all of these add up to fifty minutes’”: Aomori, interview with the author.
81. This ownership is not necessarily official, and is guided to a certain extent by the publishing status of the composers in question. Judd Greenstein’s Clearing, Dawn, Dance, written for yMusic, is available for purchase from his publisher, Good Child Music, and is frequently performed by other ensembles and pickup groups. Annie Clark—better known as the leader of the band St. Vincent—does not have a publisher, as she does not have a career as a composer in the classical world; her yMusic piece, Proven Badlands, is thus implicitly exclusive to yMusic.
and rehearse it four times, and then perform it, and then move on to our next project. . . . [We] treat it like it’s pop music, we always say, ‘We’re going to play the hits.”82 The music will thus remain in regular circulation for the near future, existing on New Amsterdam recordings and appearing regularly in yMusic performances—including rock concerts with major acts such as Paul Simon and Ben Folds, attended by audiences likely larger than any that these composers would otherwise obtain. “The hits” allow yMusic to consider itself as much a band as a new-music ensemble; “the hits” are also central to yMusic’s repertory brand, as I discuss in the next section.

The Duke compositions, however, did not become part of yMusic’s touring repertory. Members of the ensemble had expressed interest in possibly incorporating one or two of the pieces into their regular performances, or recording them in the future, but as of March 2018 they had not done so.83 This is not particularly unusual: residencies are a standard part of the concert season for many ensembles, and there are no guarantees that a student composition has a future with an ensemble after it leaves campus. But it reveals the distinction between yMusic’s position at a university and its position in the rest of the world. The ideals of the group as maintaining an active repertory of “hits” and working exclusively with long-term friends—part of the ensemble’s self-perceived, distinctive brand that foregrounds its status as a “band”—are discarded in the practices of the residency, in which it functions like the other ensembles from which its members frequently distinguish it.84

Previously, Duke students had typically worked with ensembles of more conventional instrumental configurations. Other short- and long-term residencies had featured Wet Ink, a septet that can be set up in multiple formats (composers do not have to write for all seven players); the Da Capo Chamber Players, a standardized Pierrot ensemble; and Imani Winds, a woodwind quintet. Even if an ensemble does not incorporate a student piece into its repertory, composers can seek further performances by submitting to competitions, putting together an ad hoc group themselves, or sending scores to similar groups. But Greenwald and Duke Performances had specifically sought out yMusic because of its distinctive instrumentation. In fact, several

82. Camerieri, interview with the author.
83. In an e-mail of September 2015, yMusic members wrote, “I would say it’s not impossible that we might record one of the pieces, depending upon how future recordings shape up, but it isn’t part of core planning”; yMusic Mgmt, e-mail to the author, September 16, 2015. yMusic’s touring repertory did, however, include the four Ben Folds orchestrations by Duke graduate students (see below).
84. One key ingredient of Duke ensemble residencies and the “Encounters” series is that visiting groups participate in recording dissertation compositions written by graduating PhD students, and these major works are often written for larger ensembles. For the recording sessions for three dissertations in 2013–14 and 2014–15, a Duke faculty member conducted a small orchestra comprising yMusic members and local musicians; yMusic’s instrumental brand was thus subsumed into the practical necessities of the residency.
Encounters”/Duke Performances collaborations have included nonstandard ensembles: the piano, bass, and percussion trio of the Bad Plus; the sextet of yMusic; and in 2015–16 the Deviant Septet, an ensemble based on the instrumentation of Stravinsky’s *L’histoire du soldat*. Greenwald felt particularly inclined to structure residencies around these unconventional instrumental brands, explaining to me, “I like the idea of forcing the composers to write for configurations of musicians that they might not normally. I think that Deviant—like Eighth Blackbird and yMusic—is committed to commissioning for a certain configuration.”

yMusic’s idiosyncratic instrumental brand, and particularly the presence of the trumpet, might limit future professional opportunities for the students. Duke composers told me that they would likely have to seek performances from a larger ensemble, which might request music for a mixed instrumentation selected from its pool of musicians. Similarly, the specific identity of the performers—initially an asset for the Duke composers, when they realized that Camerieri was a gifted player who could easily handle any balance issues—could represent a future setback. As Justin Tierney commented, “C. J. [Camerieri] is one of the founders of the ensemble—he really blends well with all of the other instruments, and he has so much experience doing that. They were founded in 2008, I think, and having that many years playing together, if I tried to pull an ensemble, getting random players to play my music, I’m not sure if it would work that way.” This restriction is not insurmountable, and it would not be unusual for a student composer to rework a score for different instrumentation. But it does emerge as a distinctive challenge that students encountered when navigating yMusic’s established instrumental brand.

The Repertory Brand

Just as the Duke students’ compositional choices were shaped by yMusic’s instrumental format, so they were informed by the ensemble’s preexisting

85. Greenwald, interview with the author.

86. Other new-music practitioners have criticized the professional implications of writing for ensembles with idiosyncratic instrumentation, which demand additional labor for composers without necessarily offering more value. As composer Alex Temple wrote in a satirical Facebook post in 2013, “Exciting opportunity for composers! Write a new piece just for our competition, for free, for a weird instrumentation that no other existing ensembles use! (We reserve the right not to pick a winner. Piece’s existence must be completely unknown to all other sentient beings in the Milky Way. Winner must attend and must pay travel cost. Application fee: $6,000)” : Alex Temple, Facebook post, August 15, 2013. Quoted by permission.

87. Justin Tierney, interview with the author, August 27, 2014. Tierney proposed several options for the future of his yMusic work: he could make it part of a larger, multimovement piece, change the orchestration and adapt it for other ensembles, or, possibly, “never look at it again.”
Several spoke of a particular yMusic “sound”: a sonic identity linked to and performed in the ensemble’s repertory. D. Edward Davis, for example, referred to interlocking, multilayered rhythms as a “yMusic-y thing, whatever that means—my own perception of what I think that they can do.” Works written by two Duke students—Davis and Ben Daniels—drew on such “yMusic-y things,” or what I call the ensemble’s repertory brand. For Daniels, yMusic represented a particular sound and repertory that resonated strongly with his preferred musical style; for Davis, yMusic’s commissions were distant from his own aesthetic, but he emphasized one perceived sonic aspect of the ensemble in a work that otherwise differs dramatically from its “hits.”

Members of yMusic are conscious of the idea that there might be a “yMusic piece” or “yMusic sound.” The ensemble first gained wide recognition when it released Beautiful Mechanical on New Amsterdam in 2011. The seven works that appear on this debut album have aesthetic similarities—all are tonal, rhythmically vibrant, and relatively brief—which gives Beautiful Mechanical the semblance of a coherently defined ensemble sound, and a kind of brand. This aesthetic consistency was emphasized in the marketing materials for the album itself. As a 2011 sales sheet created by New Amsterdam Records reads, “The compositions are assured and fervent yet tender and humane, the performances delicate yet fiercely virtuosic, making for a cohesive album that stands as a manifesto of what music-making in the 21st century can—and should—be.”

But yMusic members were also wary that such a repertory brand could be perniciously prescriptive, as future composers might see Beautiful Mechanical’s sound as a guide to what to write for the ensemble. According to Sirota, that possibility was evident in the 2013–14 Duke residency: “There are holes that people have fallen into, especially after our first record with so many sort of groove-type, hockety pieces. And our first year of the Duke residency, we got two more of those, and we were like, ‘Oh shit, man, people are really writing a yMusic piece, whatever that means.’” Though the performers did not name specific Duke composers who seemed to have written “yMusic pieces,” one particular student might be identified by his enthusiasm for the ensemble’s repertory. Entering his second year at Duke when he was asked to write for yMusic’s 2013–14 residency, Ben Daniels had not previously heard of the ensemble: “I ended up over the summer listening to some of their recordings, and I was like, ‘Oh man. This is the group that

88. As the ensemble’s second album Balance Problems was released in September 2014, it did not influence the composers of the 2013–14 residency. And it may have come out too late to initially influence the composers of 2014–15, given that rehearsals started in November 2014.
91. Sirota, interview with the author.
does my thing. . . . I don’t want to say, ‘I do this and they do only this,’ because they’re obviously well-rounded musicians and they don’t only play, you know, whatever . . . but I felt like whatever it is I do, that they were really going to bring an authenticity to that.” 

yMusic members might have assumed that students were simply mimicking its repertory in writing “yMusic pieces,” but Daniels had rather discovered an ensemble that specialized in the type of music he was already composing. X, the work he wrote for the ensemble, develops on Daniels’s own trajectory—“my thing”—and also strongly resonates with the ensemble’s brand.

Like several pieces on the Beautiful Mechanical album, X is composed in a postminimalist idiom and builds a layered, polyrhythmic texture from the staggered entrances of the six instruments. But the strongest signifier of yMusic’s repertory brand in X is the hocket. The work opens with solo piccolo arpeggiating C minor seventh and B-flat major chords in short, shifting groupings of eighth notes separated by rests (see Example 1). At measure 13 the bass clarinet enters and begins filling in many of the rests with its own eighth notes. As subsequent instruments join in with their own rhythmic cells, which move on or off the beat every few measures, a cumulative melodic line emerges. Daniels occasionally breaks the line with a rest, or articulates it more strongly through several instruments playing the same note together. The collective effect is a hiccupsing, hocketing groove and evenness among the melodic voices, as Daniels avoids placing any single instrument in the spotlight (see Example 2).

Sirota described a characteristic early yMusic commission as a “groove-based piece with a lot of hockets.” On Beautiful Mechanical, this is epitomized in the stratified lines of Judd Greenstein’s Clearing, Dawn, Dance. Hockets are also a part of yMusic’s collaborative vocabulary, as demonstrated in the April 2015 Ben Folds workshop at Duke. When the group

Example 1  Ben Daniels, X, mm. 1–5. Used by permission.

92. Daniels, interview with the author.
93. The music examples in this article are derived from the composers’ own unpublished scores and are used by permission.
94. Sirota, interview with the author.
rehearsed Sarah Curzi’s orchestration of Folds’s song “Zak & Sara,” Sirota and Moose verbally agreed to “hocket it” for a particular passage, dividing between the two of them a single melody originally written for both.

These hocketing effects are by no means exclusive to yMusic’s brand, but extend backward through a longer new-music tradition. One foundational work is Louis Andriessen’s 

*Hoketus* (1975–77), part of the repertory of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, whose commissions often employ hocketing techniques inspired by Andriessen and other minimalist composers.95 (Daniels attended Bang on a Can’s 2015 Summer Festival at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.) Hockets have become a part of the indie rock world in which yMusic participates, most strongly associated with the band Dirty Projectors (with whom yMusic has performed and recorded).

yMusic performs in a semicircle, amplified, with the trio of strings on the audience’s left and trio of winds on the right (see Figure 1). The staging helps to balance the ensemble dynamics and also creates a visual effect in concert, as musicians lean toward each other or make eye contact across the arc for particular passages. These gestures provide a kind of performative confirmation of the importance that yMusic places on its social ethos, making clear the

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95. See Williams, “Hoketus: Of Hierarchy and Hiccups.”
connections between the personal and the musical. Hocketing is a particularly effective method for performing those relationships. At the beginning of a rendition of Greenstein’s *Clearing, Dawn, Dance*, Aomori and Sirota might lean toward each other or make eye contact as their parts lock in sync. The music becomes as much about the musicians playing with each other as about their playing the notes on the page, making visible for the audience the ensemble’s collaborative spirit as a group of close friends: yMusic’s repertory brand becomes entwined with a social brand. During the premiere of the Duke composers’ works at the club Motorco in downtown Durham in March 2014, Daniels’s hockets were similarly performative (though the musicians were more focused on reading the new score than they might be when performing Greenstein’s music). X opened the concert, allowing Daniels’s hockets to further resonate as a kind of unofficial introduction to the Duke/yMusic partnership.

If X represents a work squarely within yMusic’s wheelhouse—a veritable “yMusic piece” in which its repertory brand clearly resounds—then

96. It might also represent an example of the “friendly virtuosity” that Pippen has analyzed in choreographed performances by Eighth Blackbird: Pippen, “Toward a Postmodern Avant-Garde,” 49–109.
97. Although the photograph shown in Figure 1 was taken at World Cafe Live in Philadelphia rather than Motorco, it shows yMusic’s typical stage setup during the Duke residency.
D. Edward Davis’s *karst* offers a strong counterexample. Davis’s music draws on the experimental practices of the composer collective Wandelweiser, which explores the relationship between sound and silence, as well as on composers who engage with the environment, such as John Luther Adams and Pauline Oliveros. His works frequently probe the boundaries of silence, blending live instruments, electronics, and field recordings that transform the concert hall into an unfamiliar space.

Unlike Daniels, Davis had previously been familiar with yMusic’s work. When I asked him for his impressions of the ensemble, he responded,

> I write music that’s very different from what they tend to do; they have—at least to me—they have a very recognizable kind of style, or the pieces that they tend to play are similar to each other in some significant ways. . . . My first reaction was one of a creative crisis: “Do I write a yMusic piece, or do I write something that’s what I do that’s not what they do? And how would they react to that?”

Davis recognized yMusic’s repertory brand, and was acutely concerned about placing himself in dialogue with it. He explained that this type of miniature crisis is characteristic of his compositional process; when writing for ensembles, he often struggles with navigating the difference between the way they appear to identify themselves aesthetically and the kind of music he may want to write. In working with the esteemed Hilliard Ensemble earlier in the academic year, Davis believed that he had strayed too far from his own voice, and “resolved that for yMusic, I would not make that same mistake again. . . . I ended up doing something that’s closer to my own interests, rather than trying to write just a straight yMusic piece.”

Written for standard yMusic instrumentation (with bass clarinet), *karst* also incorporates digital playback, with a laptop running a Max patch connected to an onstage PA system. The cellist triggers the electronic sounds with a foot controller during performance, guided by notated cues corresponding to different pedals. Playback consists of an intermittent series of sine tones that sound either with yMusic or while the ensemble rests. Davis asks in the score that the PA system be “extremely quiet, so that each of the laptop sounds is nearly lost in the ambient sounds of the performance space.” This approach is typical of Davis’s music, examining what he called the “relationship of composed sound to environmental sound.”

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98. Davis, interview with the author.
99. Ibid.
100. Max is a programming language frequently employed by composers for live electronics and recording. A patch is a user-created subprogram that performs a particular function (in this case, digital playback).
102. Davis, interview with the author.
The interplay between composition and environment was particularly powerful at the Motorco premiere. *karst* concludes extremely quietly: the viola sustains a soft, brittle note followed by a rest, trailed by the trumpet playing a *pianissimo* gesture while the strings hold a *sul ponticello* note marked “**pppp** barely audible.”

Throughout this passage, the electronics contribute a particularly low and soft drone. In the context of a rock venue in downtown Durham—surrounded by city life and traffic, and without soundproofing—it was not clear to me if the lingering, muted sound was coming from the speakers or from outside. Davis saw this as ideal: “Some people came up to me afterwards and said, ‘It’s too bad about that car that was outside at the end, with its bass going.’ I was pleased with that—that was something about the success of the piece—that those sounds became so much about the environment that it made people wonder whether that was even part of the piece or not.”

Even as *karst* falls wholly within Davis’s own compositional interests, it also nods to a particular musical trait that the composer associated with *yMusic*. The sextet consistently alternates in each measure between playing and resting; sometimes the electronics are present while *yMusic* is silent, and occasionally a single instrument continues to play a soft passage through the rest (which might be seen as a peculiar kind of hocket). While the alternation between sound and silence is certainly not representative of *yMusic*’s repertory, the actual rhythms that the ensemble plays are, in fact, an allusion to its style. Davis commented,

> A lot of the pieces of theirs that I’ve heard have these multilayered—they have lots of rhythms happening at the same time, interlocking or overlapping, or they have simultaneous different tempos or polyrhythms. . . . [I decided that] what I’m going to write for *yMusic* is these, sort of, repeated rhythm, ostinato, with several different tempos happening at the same time. . . . My experience of working with them was that it was simple for them to do.”

*karst* opens with a series of staggered entrances, as each instrument plays a distinct rhythm that articulates a single D, spread across several octaves (see Example 3). The music is extremely quiet, the parts ranging from *ppp* to *piano*, and Davis blurs the instruments and electronics together, the muted trumpet and extended string techniques creating a unified but also unstable ensemble blend. When all six musicians finally enter together in measure 11, Davis divides a 7/4 measure in six ways, each instrument playing a different subdivision (from flute playing two against seven to cello playing seven against seven).

Unlike the performative hockets of Daniels’s *X*, the sonic effect of these polyrhythms is almost imperceptible. I hear, instead, a tiny amount

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104. Davis, interview with the author.
105. Ibid.
of “beating” in the pitch that seems more timbral than rhythmic, enhanced by Davis’s request that the six Ds be played not necessarily in tune (he writes in the score that “notated ‘unisons’ need not always sound as a perfect unison”). It is a technique that yMusic can execute effortlessly, as Davis inferred from its repertory, but one that is not otherwise found in its works. The cumulative effect is pulse—which Davis acknowledges as an aspect of yMusic’s expertise—but without groove, which does not align with his own stylistic concerns. yMusic’s repertory brand is visible in Davis’s score, but would not have been audible to its audience.

In X and karst we see the musical effects of navigating yMusic’s brand, as Duke composers craft a dialogue with what they perceive to be the ensemble’s sonic strengths. They construct yMusic’s identity through a conception of specific stereotypes drawn from its first album—for Daniels, “my thing,” and for Davis, “simultaneous different tempos or polyrhythms”—and reconstruct it through drawing on those “yMusic-y” characteristics, differently, in

106. Davis, karst, “general performance notes.”
their works. In *X*, the hocket represents a musical technique with historical resonances and performative social implications; in *karst*, a polyrhythmic notational artifice sits comfortably within the ensemble’s domain, while its sounding result is wholly distinct. In the former, yMusic’s repertory brand is clearly perceptible; in the latter, it is present, but muted.

The Collaborative Brand

Whereas Daniels and Davis both stage a deliberate encounter with yMusic’s repertory, Sarah Curzi’s *to form an idea of size or distance* avoids such resonances. Written for alto flute, bass clarinet, horn, and string trio—an auxiliary instrument configuration of yMusic—Curzi’s work begins with the full ensemble playing soft, slowly winding lines that overlap to create a murky texture (see Example 4). The horn is muted, the strings play *sul ponticello* and legato, and the alto flute unfurls an ascending line that Curzi amplifies so that it emerges within the hazy sextet balance. The first section is titled

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**Example 3 continued**

\[ \text{Fl.} \]
\[ \text{B. Cl.} \]
\[ \text{Tpt.} \]
\[ \text{Va.} \]
\[ \text{Vc.} \]

\text{Drone} (continued)
“The journey through endless dusk,” and the appropriately shadowy, chromatic music stands in contrast to yMusic’s generally bright-hued repertory. The broader impression of to form an idea is understandable given the way Curzi approached working with yMusic. Like some other Duke composers, she had not heard of the ensemble before being asked to compose for the 2014–15 residency as she entered her first year of the Duke program. Curzi researched the individual performers, investigated yMusic’s website, listened to recordings, and watched videos. But unlike that of her colleagues, this research did not lead her to draw on yMusic’s repertory brand: “I just honestly started writing. I wasn’t trying to fit it to specific pieces or write in a certain style . . . mostly I just wanted to write a piece that was special enough that I could feel good handing it over to musicians that are that good.”107 She instead drew on another key component of yMusic’s brand

when creating to form an idea: its collaborative process. For Curzi, yMusic at first represented a compositional challenge, but it evolved into a set of specific people as she worked with them over the course of the academic year. She ultimately composed to form an idea in dialogue with what I call yMusic’s collaborative brand, guided by a developing social rapport between composer and performers.

When observing yMusic rehearsals of Duke compositions in November 2014 and March 2015, I was struck by the degree to which Curzi engaged in dialogue with the ensemble. In both residency years, conversations between Duke students and yMusic performers primarily addressed questions about notation, performance practice, and rehearsal strategies for difficult passages. Ensemble members frequently offered their own advice on how to notate certain gestures, better achieve instrumental effects, or navigate technical issues regarding amplification and balance. Rehearsals focused on the

Example 4  Sarah Curzi, to form an idea of size or distance, “The journey through endless dusk,” mm. 1–4. Used by permission. A recording of Curzi’s to form an idea is included in the online version of the Journal.
accurate translation of the composers’ intentions: a student might suggest methods for yMusic to faithfully execute his or her score, or yMusic might ask a composer to clarify what his or her notation meant. Curzi, however, seemed particularly drawn to experimentation in the rehearsal process, creating her music on the stage of Baldwin Auditorium in real time. Less reliant on the text as mediator, Curzi frequently ignored her score in favor of recommendations from the players, or asked them to explore different gestures to see how they might affect her music.

yMusic members regularly cite this back-and-forth, collaborative ethos as an attribute specific to their ensemble in marketing materials and interviews with the press. As Sirota told me when I interviewed her for a *New York Times* feature article on yMusic in 2012,

> People get so involved in, “The process is meant to go this one way, and if it doesn’t go this one way, you’re an amateur and this is bad music making.” . . . That process is: You have a score, you read every single little detail on the page, and you interpret that. There’s so much music that is wonderful that is not being made because people only want that process to work. What’s really enjoyable about this group is that we’re all in it for music enough that all sort of different processes are fair game.109

Sirota appears to perceive collaboration as a form of resistance against an enduring ontology of the work concept.110 Foregrounding multiple working processes is certainly not unique to yMusic as an ensemble, nor is it historically unprecedented. But the musicians emphasize collaboration in an attempt to differentiate yMusic from other ensembles in the new-music marketplace—and, in its implicit resistance to what Sirota sees as a score-based, standardized component of music making, to differentiate yMusic from classical music writ large—and thus identify it as a component of the group’s brand. The importance that the ensemble places on its collaborative brand can be seen in its decision to quote an extract from my *Times* article at the top of its “Press” page online, as well as in a 2013 Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign for *Balance Problems*, in which I wrote that “the performers act as co-conspirators in the compositional process, interacting with the music as a living document, not an abstract ideal.”111 Similarly, the 2011 press release for *Beautiful

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108. Although I employ “his or her” here, I do not wish to suggest that the Duke program is gender-balanced: Curzi was the only female composer to work with yMusic, and one of only two female PhD students in composition at Duke between 2013 and 2015 (out of fourteen students in total). The gender balance of the program shifts from year to year but is strongly skewed toward men. (The three composition professors at Duke are also men.)


Mechanical characterized the group as a “ready-made collaborative unit for artists interested in expanding their sonic palette on recordings and in performance”; a Pitchfork review of the record described yMusic as “broad-minded, ambitious, eagerly collaborative.”¹¹² This collaborative brand frequently plays itself out in yMusic’s work with pop musicians, in which the ensemble might assist in producing instrumental arrangements of a band’s songs, but it is also embedded in several of the group’s repertory works. Annie Clark’s Proven Badlands, for example, began as a MIDI sound file that the rock musician sent to Moose; he notated and orchestrated it for yMusic, and the work continued to evolve as the sextet performed it.

For the November 2014 workshop Curzi submitted two disconnected sections, titled “Excerpt 1” and “Score,” for her future piece. (Student composers had been asked to prepare approximately half of the work that would be performed in March.) The horn part in “Excerpt 1” asked the player to “employ pitch bends, growling, tuning fluctuation, or other techniques to capture a raw, out of control sound.”¹¹³ Camerieri attempted to realize this part in rehearsal, but did not achieve the effect Curzi had in mind. She asked him to try a flutter-tongue technique and disregard the pitches she had written; instead, he could improvise in a manner that felt comfortable while giving the desired impression of being out of control. Camerieri subsequently suggested playing in a particularly high register to provide the necessary rawness, and discussion then moved to other members of the ensemble, who offered additional solutions for creating the preferred sound. In the same excerpt, Curzi asked substitute cellist Andrea Lee to try to make a particular cello episode sound louder and grittier. A conversation ensued among the performers, as Sirota suggested possibilities for different techniques that might achieve a rougher effect; Curzi told Lee that she could “toy with color,” and change the bowing technique throughout the passage to create a shifting range of timbres.

Ultimately, “Excerpt 1” did not become part of Curzi’s final piece in March 2015; “Score” became the opening of the first section of to form an idea, and Curzi wrote the rest of her material in the fall and winter. But aspects of the timbral experiments of the November rehearsal of “Excerpt 1” ended up scattered through the new material, while a modified version of the cello passage appeared later in the work. Perhaps more significantly, Curzi explained to me that those interactions had made her more comfortable with the ensemble. “It was just nice to have their guidance regarding the timbre in that section,” she said.¹¹⁴ Echoing the sentiments affirmed by

¹¹⁴. Curzi, interview with the author.
other Duke composers in their interviews, Curzi was particularly satisfied with the working methods of yMusic and the openness the performers displayed in receiving and offering suggestions: the collaborative brand proved effective for her process of music making.

I would like to conclude by returning to the Ben Folds collaboration with which this article began, in order to briefly scrutinize a final component of yMusic’s identity, one that raises essential questions about the present-day status of the ensemble and the university: its cross-genre brand. yMusic’s relationship with popular music is perhaps the most important aspect of its identity—as articulated by both its members and the press—and was essential to Greenwald’s selection of the group as a participant in the “Encounters”/Duke Performances residency partnership. yMusic originated to provide a stable and skilled cohort of freelance musicians to work with indie rock bands, and its current biography describes it as a “group of six New York City instrumentalists flourishing in the overlap between the pop and classical worlds.”

In the twenty-first century, such a positioning is far from extraordinary. Collaborations between contemporary music and rock have flourished in the United States in the past decade, guided institutionally by cross-genre festivals such as the Ecstatic Music Festival and MusicNOW, as well as by record labels such as New Amsterdam, which have participated in an “indie classical” vanguard movement of American composers and performers.

If yMusic has helped to create a model for working with popular musicians, other established groups have quickly followed suit. Eighth Blackbird, for example—one of the most prestigious new-music ensembles, having won four Grammys and several major classical music awards—originated as a student sextet at Oberlin Conservatory in 1996, configured as a Pierrot ensemble similar to the Da Capo Chamber Players. More recently, however, it has refashioned itself to strongly emphasize a cross-genre identity, such that a 2015 biography described the ensemble as “one of the most vital bridges between the contemporary classical and pop worlds.” It has played music by Bryce Dessner and Richard Reed Parry, two composers (and yMusic collaborators) better known for their roles in rock bands the National and Arcade Fire; it has added fully instrumental arrangements of songs by bands such as Bon Iver to its repertory; and it has accompanied singer-songwriters.

Similarly, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble was founded in 2005 by cellist (and later yMusic member) Clarice Jensen—who studied at Juilliard with GCM founder Joel Krosnick—as a spiritual heir to groups such

116. See Robin, “Scene without a Name” and “Rise and Fall of ‘Indie Classical’.”
as the New York New Music Ensemble, dedicated to post-serial modernist music together with minimalist and postminimalist repertory. But it has also moved toward collaborating with nonclassical figures including alternative rock band Blonde Redhead, metal guitarist Mick Barr, and the late film composer Jóhann Jóhannsson. Such changes are tied to the boom of new-music ensembles in the twenty-first century. As groups jostle for attention in a crowded field, and attempt to compete in the marketplace, alliances with established bands can strengthen their brands and expand their reach.

Like the yMusic residency as a whole, the Ben Folds project was representative not only of a developing culture within new music, but also of the role of Duke Performances. In an attempt to better attune the second year of the residency to the ensemble’s cross-genre brand, yMusic and Greenwald had decided that the Duke composers would write instrumental arrangements of preexisting songs by a local rock musician, which yMusic could rehearse and record as the songwriter’s “band.” Duke Performances and yMusic approached Mac McCaughan, a solo artist, founding member of the band Superchunk, and co-owner of the Durham-based indie label Merge Records. A rehearsal and recording session were planned for the April 2015 visit; McCaughan would provide Duke with recordings of songs, for which selected composers would write accompanying orchestrations that the sextet could perform with him.

In early 2015, however, yMusic and Ben Folds realized that their upcoming tour required several days of rehearsal and preparation, and that it made the most sense to initiate it at Duke. Duke Performances thus added a Ben Folds concert to its series, and scrapped the McCaughan collaboration. The same activity would take place, but with Duke composers working with Folds rather than the Durham-based musician. Given that Folds had not arranged many of his older songs for yMusic, this collaboration would provide the ensemble with additional material for the tour. And the composition faculty was enthusiastic about the opportunity to provide the Duke students with valuable professional experience in an area that was becoming increasingly important for contemporary music, and to lay the groundwork for potential future relationships.

The Ben Folds concert that concluded the ensemble’s residency began with yMusic alone on the stage of the newly renovated Baldwin Auditorium—it had reopened the previous fall, as part of the $100 million “Arts at Duke” initiative—playing one of its signature works, Ryan Lott/Son Lux’s vivacious Beautiful Mechanical, for which its debut album was named. After this piece, Folds joined them for a set of his songs. Later in the concert, Folds left the stage and the sextet played Andrew Norman’s Music in Circles, another yMusic commission. When he returned, Folds quipped to the audience, “You can

118. Clarice Jensen, interview with the author, April 18, 2015.
see why I had to work with this band when I heard them.” To conclude the concert, Folds turned to student Scott Lee’s orchestration of “Army,” fervently anticipated with cheers from the capacity crowd. The original recording of “Army” includes a prominent brass section; at Duke, Folds introduced the song by explaining that although his band did not include a horn contingent, “C. J. plays with the strength of ten men.” Lee’s peppy arrangement was a rousing success, as an assured Camerieri played the trumpet-heavy bridge and Folds subsequently led a sing-along with the audience, many of whom knew all of the song’s lyrics.

But at times during the concert, yMusic seemed to overshadow the works it performed. Although the audience appeared attentive and engaged during Beautiful Mechanical and Music in Circles, they were not told the names of the compositions or their composers. The printed program did not list these instrumental works, and yMusic members did not introduce them from the stage. When Folds joined the sextet after Music in Circles, he heralded the ensemble’s virtuosity, not Norman’s piece. Imagining yMusic as a band rather than an ensemble, Folds and, implicitly, the Baldwin Auditorium audience attributed its “hits” to the group itself. yMusic’s repertory—the labor of the composers who had written for it—had been absorbed into yMusic’s brand. Of course, there is nothing historically new about performers outshining composers; those familiar with bel canto opera, for example, would certainly find nothing out of the ordinary here. But placed against the Cold War institutional origins of the new-music ensemble—whose founding ethos was steeped in what Wuorinen called “the desire of composers to exert as much direct influence as possible over the realization of their work”—the marked visibility of yMusic at Baldwin Auditorium is historically significant.

That said, while it is tempting to assign substantial meaning to this moment, appearances by charting singer-songwriters in composition graduate studios are still relatively rare; and yMusic itself has not participated in any other large-scale university residencies of the scope of the Duke partnership. Even as American new music undergoes a “post-genre” turn, entrenched forces in academic departments may continue to maintain boundaries between serious and popular music that would preclude a visit by a musician like Ben Folds. But at the same time, adjacent and increasingly powerful organizations such as the university arts presenter may provide otherwise unforeseen opportunities for collaboration across musical genres. Further musicological attention to current institutions and additional ethnographic case studies are needed in order to fully understand how these developments will change contemporary music in the United States and the rest of the world.

And while the Folds collaboration may have initially seemed a noteworthy moment within the modernist histories of the university PhD and the
new-music ensemble, I would argue that it was the quieter moments of the Duke residency—the interactions between student composers and a professional ensemble, as they musically negotiated yMusic’s brand—that point toward broader transformations in contemporary music. As ensembles continue to proliferate, the importance of branding will likely grow: groups will continue to position their instrumentation, their repertory, their sound, and other characteristics as distinguishing markers in a crowded market. As arts presenters continue to expand, they may take after Greenwald and seek collaborations with such branded ensembles. University music departments and composition faculty may be understandably eager to forge partnerships with such influential organizations, who can offer financial resources and public exposure for both their students and their programs. Composers within and outside academia may thus continue to grapple with these new institutional conditions, and face similar challenges to the Duke students when writing for these ensembles’ brands. These challenges are not necessarily unfavorable: they provide composers with opportunities for creative solutions. But when ensembles build idiosyncratic and unique repertories—if every group maintains its own stable of “hits”—it presents professional complications for composers, and more broadly raises questions as to whether and how this music might be canonized.

In the run-up to the Ben Folds concert, the Duke composers who had written for Folds were told that their orchestrations would be on the set list, and the program listed the four songs and their arrangers. But at the last minute Folds changed his mind, and only Lee’s “Army” was performed. Rather than credit Lee, Folds introduced “Army” by praising Camerieri’s strength as a trumpeter. Subsequent concerts on yMusic and Folds’s tour that summer included the student arrangements, though Duke composers discovered that their songs had been played only by reading online reviews or looking up recordings that had been uploaded by fans to YouTube. And the Duke concert was likely the only venue on the tour to print a program in which the students were listed. Unlike the yMusic pieces discussed above, which remained in the students’ compositional and professional portfolios but did not have a clear future with yMusic, the Folds arrangements were entirely out of their authors’ hands.

Whereas Folds’s above-quoted comment to Lee “It’s your arrangement” suggested a deference to the Duke composer’s labor, in practice Lee’s music became the property of the ensemble and singer-songwriter. And the social capital that New York–based composers such as Nico Muhly gain from being one of yMusic’s “friends”—a long-term collaborator whose music can become one of the “hits” it performs regularly in concert—was never obtained by the Duke students. Indeed, when yMusic sought instrumental arrangements for a new collaboration with Paul Simon at the Eaux Claires music festival in June 2017, it turned not to the Duke students but to Muhly
and other composers who had written works for its first two albums. Though it is understandable that the ensemble would continue to work with colleagues it had cultivated in the past, this also reveals the limits of the kinds of professional opportunities that Greenwald and the Duke faculty had hoped to see facilitated by the residency.

One historical change that marks the difference between the status of new music in the 1960s and its place among twenty-first-century institutions is that of power. At the university level, Greenwald and the arts presenter had significantly influenced the residency experience; in turn, yMusic’s commitment to its brand had significantly influenced the Duke students’ compositional efforts. This shift of power away from the composer and toward other stakeholders is rooted in the neoliberalization of the academy and the ensemble. For those composing in this new musical landscape, that balance might be a problem.

Works Cited


119. This collaboration is described in an episode of Sirota’s podcast, and the ensemble has since joined Simon on “Homeward Bound,” his 2018 farewell tour; see Nadia Sirota, “Paul Simon’s Curious Mind,” July 10, 2017, Meet the Composer, podcast, New Sounds website, 52:00, http://www.wqxr.org/story/paul-simons-curious-mind/.


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Abstract

Between 2013 and 2015, the ensemble yMusic collaborated with graduate student composers in a residency at Duke University. This article positions the residency as a result of the transformation of the university and the new-music ensemble from a technocratic Cold War paradigm to their contemporary status under the market- and branding-oriented logics of neoliberalism. The works written for yMusic by the Duke composers were deeply informed by the ensemble’s musical brand, including its idiosyncratic instrumentation, preexisting repertory, collaborative ethos, and relationship to popular music. In accounting for the impact of these institutional developments on the production of musical works, this article argues that the economic and ideological practices of neoliberalism have discernible aesthetic consequences for American new music. Given the key role of the ensemble and the university in the contemporary music landscape, the issues raised by my ethnographic and historical analysis have significant implications for new music in the twenty-first century, and for the way composers work in the United States and beyond.

Keywords: new music, neoliberalism, ensemble, university, Cold War, branding